

Reading the Book of Nature, Inscribing the Savage Mind: George Catlin and the Textualization of the American West

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European men, institutions, and ideas were lodged in the American wilderness, and this great American West took them to her bosom, [and] taught them a new way of looking upon the destiny of the common man. . . . The very fact of the wilderness appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man's struggle for a higher type of society. . . . [T]he West offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature, into the midst of resources that demanded manly exertion.

—Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1920)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a legion of writers, artists, and naturalists traveled extensively throughout the American West in an effort to represent and therefore “preserve” landscapes, peoples, and ways of life they believed were fast disappearing from the national scene. That the geography and population of the West would be radically transformed by American expansion and eventually erased from the nation’s memory—that so-called “primitive” life would “vanish,” “die out,” or be “ploughed under,” to use the

most popular images of the period—was regarded by most Americans as the unfolding of a providential history that had already been written. The project to collect, classify, and analyze American wilderness before it disappeared, an undertaking invariably allied with a sense of romantic loss and nostalgia, was therefore teleological in its design and historiographical in its motive: primitive lands and peoples were already a matter of the past, but they could be recovered in representations and preserved in amber for the citizen of the future.

However, the scramble to represent the West was aimed at more than simply preserving it for posterity; it was also about ordering it and establishing control over it both materially and symbolically, by way of travel routes, outposts, and forts on the one hand and maps, taxonomies, and works of art on the other. Because “the West” was imagined as simultaneously empty and full of natural resources—it was a “blank page” demanding to be written, and it was a “bountiful” world yielding itself to “manly exertion[s],” according to Frederick Jackson Turner’s celebrated frontier thesis—there developed in the East a collective compulsion to fill up this emptiness and inscribe it with moral, aesthetic, and political values. This “mania for inscription”¹ was a motive force in the exploration and representation of the American West, and it helped to determine how its lands and peoples were to be both conceptualized and ultimately conquered. For those who traveled west carried with them not only the tools of representation—sketchbooks, journals, pens, paintbrushes, and folios—but also a set of beliefs about the symbolic power of those tools to enact physical and epistemological control over the people and places they encountered.

George Catlin (1796-1872), the self-proclaimed historian of “uncontaminated”² American Indian tribes, was the very embodiment of this mania to inscribe the West and its peoples before they “vanished.” Standing on the divide between highbrow and lowbrow culture, Catlin deployed almost every representational mode available to him: he painted and sketched thousands of portraits and landscape scenes (12,000 by his estimation); amassed nine tons of curiosities, mineral samples, and artifacts; wrote several popular books that were part travelogue, part ethnography, and part promotional tract; and finally, acted as both curator and showman for a traveling Indian gallery that toured extensively throughout North America and Europe in the 1830s and 1840s. While literary, cultural, and natural historians have examined the various facets of Catlin’s career and extolled his unique contributions to American thinking,³ none has yet explored how the *range* of his representational gestures and his very *ideas* about representation transformed both the form and content of “the Indian”⁴ and “the American West” as mythic constructs in the national imaginary.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that one encounters a unified, static conceptualization of “the frontier,” “the wilderness,” or “the Indian” in Catlin’s impressive body of work. Instead, one finds multiple frontiers and multiple Indians—noble and ignoble, fully human and patently stereotypical—awkwardly

co-existing. Indeed, the poignancy of Catlin's vision lies in its ambivalence, in the very distance between his actions and his rhetoric and his paradoxical understanding of home and away, self and other. Thus while we might admire the ambitious scope of Catlin's enterprise, his nascent environmentalism, his defense of Indian autonomy, and his efforts to challenge the ethnocentric assumptions of his time, we are simultaneously confronted with an apologist for Indian removal policies,⁵ an adamant supporter of missionary work, and a Barnum-esque profiteer who toured Europe for several years with live Indians on display.

I contend that Catlin's ambivalence is ultimately rooted in two competing symbolic complexes that form the foundation of both his character and his work: the "Book of Nature" and the encyclopedia. On the one hand, Catlin is committed to the tenets of romanticism, with its emphasis on projection and *identification*, and thus he views the West as an uncorrupted chapter of the great Book of Nature, a space that resists inscription or representation insofar as it is already perfectly transparent to the intuitive mind. On the other hand, Catlin's vision of the West is filtered through the lens of the encyclopedic museum he planned to create upon his return to the East—his very own "world in miniature,"⁶ to borrow the phrase Charles Willson Peale used to describe his seminal Philadelphia Museum (opened in 1786)—and thus he is driven by the encyclopedia's emphasis on classification and *objectification*.⁷

When working within the romantic tradition, Catlin's representations of the West are therefore marked by a transcendental desire to regain an immanent connection to nature: to be released from the life of the rationalizing white mind into the life of the idealized, immaculate Indian body. Just as often, however, Catlin assumes the role of the devout scientist and ethnographer, whose romantic desires are repressed and transferred to the tools of representation: his pens, paintbrushes, and canvasses endowed with the power to bring order and discipline to the chaotic fragments of nature. This dialectic of romantic desire and encyclopedic control in Catlin's work results in a vexed yet seamless fusion of romanticism and sentimentalism, sensationalism and natural science, social critique and colonialist apologetics, and manifests itself most clearly in his self-conscious reflections on representation itself, particularly within his notions of writing, literacy, collecting, and painting. Throughout his career Catlin remained a mind divided, his enterprise beset by contradictions; however, in Catlin's hands such contradictions prove intrinsically connected rather than intractably oppositional, his representations, ultimately, articulations of his ambivalent desires, his protean character, and the mutability of his imagined West.

This paper focuses on Catlin's collecting expeditions in the American West and his self-conscious reflections on the act of representation, primarily through an examination of his notions of literacy, his ideas about writing and painting, and the overarching symbol of the book in his work. I begin by tracing the roots of Catlin's ambivalence to his conflicted formulation of the American West as

two different kinds of books. On the one hand, the “undiscovered” continent is Natty Bumppo’s sublime Book of Nature, a boundless space to be experienced in a state of ecstatic reverie. On the other hand, it is a series of entries for the natural scientist’s encyclopedia, reducible to species, specimens, and landscapes to be represented and catalogued by the rational mind. Because Catlin understood Indians as extensions of their natural environment, they are registered with similar dissonance, depicted simultaneously as nature’s freemen and as unruly, illiterate children—as beings whose unmediated relationship with the natural world invites admiration and envy but whose “untutored minds” demand the discipline of civilized values. However, insofar as Catlin could only imagine contact between whites and Indians as a form of disease or contamination, Catlin’s Indians are always in the process of “vanishing;” his desire to uplift and protect them counterbalanced by his will to “embalm” them in memory and preserve their cultures as national treasures.

The Book of Nature and the Nature of the Encyclopedia

Books are, in a great measure, the instruments of controlling the opinions of a nation like ours. They are an engine, alike powerful to save or to destroy.

—James Fenimore Cooper, *Precaution* (1821)⁸

In order to establish the literary and cultural context of Catlin’s epistemology of immanence, rooted in the book of nature, and his corresponding epistemology of representation, rooted in the encyclopedia, I will turn briefly to James Fenimore Cooper’s frontier epic, *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-41),⁹ which Catlin frequently referred to in his writings and lectures. The lives and works of Cooper (1789-1851) and Catlin developed contiguously and within intersecting social, cultural, and political concerns. Both artists’ works examine the mythic structure of the West and the symbolic complex of the Indian within the national imagination. Both operated within and between highbrow and lowbrow cultural forms and fluctuated between sentimental didacticism and romantic skepticism. And both were relentlessly self-conscious about the motive principles behind their work, posing complex questions about the nature of writing and speech, the comparative values of literacy and orality, and the dangers inherent in the art of representation. Between Cooper’s invention of the nation’s first fictional hero of the West, Natty Bumppo, and Catlin’s touring Indian gallery and immense collection of Native American portraits, these two figures exerted tremendous influence both on how the nation imagined and experienced the West and on how other artists came to represent it.

In *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper pits the intuitive wisdom of his illiterate folk hero, Natty Bumppo, against the mania for inscription and the

“twisty”¹⁰ legal rhetoric of a host of “bookish m[e]n,”¹¹ such as the archetypal bureaucrat, Sheriff Jones, in *The Pioneers* (1823), a self-proclaimed reader of “all kinds of books”¹² and Natty’s chief tormentor. Cooper’s West, in fact, is saturated with law books, legal documents, sketchbooks, Bibles, psalm-books, books on architecture, and diaries. Throughout the series, the ambivalent symbol of the book is endowed with the power to “save or to destroy,” at once signifying the inauguration of a divinely ordained history and embodying the sovereign will of the people, but also standing for the rise of a corrosive representational order alienating white America from nature’s moral order.

For the sake of compression, I will focus on the very epitome of “the man of books”¹³ in Cooper’s work, Dr. Obed Bat of *The Prairie* (1827). A disciple of Linnaeus, Bat adopts the ludicrous title “Doctor Battius” and is the chief vehicle of satire in the novel, as he stumbles about a menacing frontier oblivious to danger, searching for novel species of plants, insects, and animals for his ever-expanding natural history collection. The central image associated with the natural scientist is the book, most notably his omnipresent “tablets,” which Bat understands as an extension of himself; indeed, they are the objective correlative of his rationalizing, encyclopedic mind. However, in Cooper’s parodic treatment of the scientist’s Linnaean mission, the symbol of the book is translated into a fetishistic totem on par with the Indian’s “medicine,” as suggested by the image of the “naturalist rais[ing] his tablets to the heavens”¹⁴ for divine consecration. According to Bat, knowledge of God comes through the investigation and representation of nature rather than through direct experience. As he explains to Natty, only through diligent study will man “be elevated to a communion with the Great Master Spirit of All,” perhaps even becoming “equal to the great moving principle,”¹⁵ a conceit that strikes Natty as “wantonly” blasphemous.

Dr. Bat’s character is therefore defined by the compulsive desire to represent, as he continually reaches for his tablets “by a sort of instinct,” and thus his experiences of the world are always mediated by his “book of reference.”¹⁶ Conversely, Natty follows an intuitive path to wisdom by renouncing worldly books and “book l’arning” and embracing the one book open to all, the Book of Nature, which according to Pauline tradition is “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.”¹⁷ In perhaps his most resounding statement on his spiritual allegiances, the emphatically illiterate woodsman declares in *The Deerslayer* (1841):

“My edication has been altogether in the woods; the only book I read, or care about reading, is the one which God has opened afore all his creatur’s in the noble forests, broad lakes, rolling rivers, blue skies, and the winds, and tempests, and sunshine, and other glorious marvels of the land! This book I can read, and I find it full of wisdom and knowledge.”¹⁸

Throughout *The Prairie*, Natty assails “the bookish man” for his use of an overwrought language that obscures rather than clarifies the meaning of nature. In fact, most of Natty’s criticisms of Bat are aimed at the scientist’s “twisty” rhetoric: “Why, man, you are farther from the truth than you are from the settlements, with all your bookish l’arning and hard words.”¹⁹ Cooper’s critique of the “civilized” mind’s frustrated will to knowledge is perhaps most succinctly voiced by the Tuscarora Indian, Arrowhead, in *The Pathfinder* (1840): “paleface too much book. . . . Much book, little know.”²⁰

In Cooper’s epic narrative of the American frontier, contradictory motives and conflicting ideologies are parceled out, personified, and mythologized in distinct characters; however, in Catlin, we see all the ambivalence and antagonism operating in Cooper’s fictional communities and characters distilled within a single consciousness. As he traverses the West, Catlin is at times Natty Bumppo, free from what the woodsman calls the “smothering” conventions of “bookish knowledge,”²¹ immersed instead in the sublime book of nature. Catlin also shares much in common with Obed Bat, as he, too, reaches almost instinctively for his “tablets” and “sketchbooks” whenever something novel arrests his eye, and he is driven by a similar compulsion to represent everything he encounters. Just as often he plays the role of the missionary, resembling the psalmist David Gamut of *Last of the Mohicans* (1826), or later, the quixotic Parson Amen of *The Oak Openings* (1848), men who believe that their books are mystical instruments of conversion and salvation that define the very essence of white, Christian identity. As Parson Amen proclaims:

“Here is the book—it goes where I go, and is my companion and friend, by day and by night; in good and evil; in season and out of season. To this book I cling as to my great anchor, that is to carry me through the storms in safety! Every line in it is precious; every word true!”²²

Catlin also resembles Judge Temple of *The Pioneers*, a model patriarch and national visionary whose forward-looking conception of wilderness often blinds him to the realities of the present. And finally, to the extent that Catlin claims spiritual allegiance to the “vanishing” noble savages he seeks to represent, he is also Uncas of *The Last of the Mohicans*, for Catlin’s own heart, he proclaims on several occasions, “has something native remaining in it yet.”²³

The ambivalent motive inspiring Catlin’s westward adventure manifests itself in his dual conceptualization of the natural world as a prelapsarian Eden he wants to inhabit, and as a chaotic wilderness he wants to inscribe with meaning. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Roderick Nash explains that by the nineteenth century “wilderness” had taken on a “twofold emotional tone”²⁴ in the national psyche. No longer imagined solely as a “howling wilderness,” an alien and threatening space awaiting the subjugation and domination of God’s

chosen people, wilderness was also conceived of as sanctuary, as a recuperative space where one could retreat from the strain and sterility of civilization and revisit the original works of God. While the ethnographer and natural historian imagined the wilderness as a disordered, even indecipherable space *yet to be written*, the American romantic imagined the wilderness as already perfectly written, “the book of nature” and the word of God *waiting to be read*. According to Nash, these competing notions of wilderness created a fundamental paradox in the nation’s imagination, due to the fact that, for white Americans, their “sanctuary and their enemy were one and the same.”²⁵ This paradox is at the very heart of Catlin’s conceptualization of the American West, for while the “untouched” wilderness and its noble inhabitants are a source of pleasure and delight, they are also unlettered, blank spaces demanding the ordering force of his “manly exertions.”

In his travelogues and lectures, Catlin was fond of telling his audiences the story of how the allure of the wilderness enticed him to abandon both urban life and a life of books. As he explains in his renowned travelogue and proto-ethnography, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians* (1844), “The early part of my life was whiled away, apparently, somewhat in vain, with books reluctantly held in one hand, and a rifle or fishing-pole affectionately grasped in the other.”²⁶ Despite his proclaimed love of nature and indifference to books, at the age of twenty-one he followed his father Putnam Catlin’s instructions to attend Litchfield Law School under the tutelage of Judge Tapping Reeve. Litchfield lacked textbooks in 1817; thus, students had to produce their own by copying Reeve’s lectures verbatim. After two years and literally thousands of hours of writing, Catlin had a five-volume, bound book, but after practicing law only briefly, he felt compelled to leave. Catlin writes, “I very deliberately sold my law library . . . converting their proceeds into brushes and paint pots.”²⁷ That the sale of his hand-written books emancipated him from the literal and figurative law of the father would become part of what Roy Harvey Pearce has called Catlin’s “self-fabbling” mythology,²⁸ in which he trades in the symbol of civic authority, his law books, for the tools he would later need for his retreat into the wilderness, where he would study “natural law” rather than civic law and where masculine virtues like independence, ingenuity, and even violence were celebrated rather than discouraged.

After pursuing a career as a portrait artist and miniaturist in Philadelphia for several years, Catlin headed west in 1830 to immerse himself in “the true school of the arts,”²⁹ the American wilderness, hoping to study its inhabitants and preserve them forever on canvas and in his notebooks. In this way, Catlin followed the dictates of his time by pursuing an essentially Cartesian path to wisdom and understanding, one based on individual experience as the measure of authentic knowledge. As Descartes writes in *Discourse on Method* (1637):

[A]s soon as I reached an age which allowed me to emerge from the tutelage of my teachers, I abandoned the study of letters altogether, and resolving to study no other science than that which I could find within myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent my youth in travelling, seeing courts and armies, mixing with people of different humours and ranks, in gathering a varied experience, in testing myself in the situations which chance offered me, and everywhere reflecting upon whatever events I witnessed in such a way as to draw some profit from them.³⁰

In nineteenth-century America, this prescription for the pursuit and production of knowledge through travel, self-reflection, and analysis had become commonplace, with the philosopher imagined as a species of traveler and the traveler a species of philosopher. Thus naturalists, novelists, and even theologians of the period pronounced that in order to read deeply from the “book of the world,” one had first to dispense with the second-hand experience of scholarly writings. Two hundred years after Descartes, Emerson would declare in “The American Scholar” (1837): “Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings.”³¹ In 1848, Louis Agassiz would condense Emerson’s statement into his oft-repeated admonition to his students: “study nature, not books.”³² The rise of American romanticism therefore marks a democratic turn in both the conceptualization of nature and of books themselves, for the sacred texts of the old world, controlled by an elite priestly caste, were being rejected in favor of a dynamic, living relationship between all “readers” and the book of nature.

Paradoxically, the expense and difficulty of travel in the early 1800s meant that most Americans’ experience of nature’s sublime book still took the form of gazing upon or reading from someone else’s representation or translation of it. As Nash explains, “Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding the pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy.”³³ Residents of eastern cities read insatiably from travel narratives and diaries published by explorers, government agents, and professional writers; they gazed upon landscape paintings idealizing American wilderness; and beginning in the early nineteenth century, they even looked with wonder upon Indian delegations touring eastern cities.

Living in Philadelphia in the 1820s, Catlin had actually encountered one of these delegations in 1828, and he was a frequent visitor of Charles Willson Peale’s celebrated museum, which at that time included a vast array of Native American artifacts, scientific materials from the Lewis and Clark expedition, a wax sculpture of Meriwether Lewis in the garb of a Shoshone, and several “lifelike” Native American wax statues.³⁴ According to biographer Mary

Haverstock, “Catlin spent many of his evenings at Peale’s Museum,” enjoying its profusion of “paintings, statues, stuffed birds and animals, fossil bones, Indian spears, reptiles and amphibians pickled in alcohol.”³⁵ Peale clearly influenced Catlin’s notion of the pedagogical function of museum displays, and as Catlin’s direct predecessor, we find a similar interplay between the “book of nature” and the encyclopedia at the foundation of his museum, articulated in both its ideological design and its physical structure. As patrons walked through the south entrance to the museum, they were met with the following inscription: “The book of Nature open / Explore the wond’rous work / A solemn Institute of Laws eternal / Whose unaltered page no time can change, / No copier corrupt.” Complementing this written directive was the visual imagery on the tickets patrons were issued, which showed a radiant, open book, with the word “NATURE” stretched across its pages.³⁶ To enter Peale’s museum was thus to confront an encyclopedic exhibition of the Great Chain of Being in miniature, and as patrons moved imaginatively from west to east through the museum, they “read” the history of human evolution in a hierarchically organized display of inferior, static cultures giving way to the dynamism of white, European cultures. The popularity of Peale’s museum alerted Catlin to the public’s appetite for the fantasy of being immersed in savage landscapes among savage peoples for ostensibly educational purposes. Such fantasies had defined his own childhood in the Wyoming Valley of rural Pennsylvania, which he often described in his lectures and books. Inevitably, he would return to the subject of his “infant mind” filled with “impressions” of the Indians that had formerly resided in the region, his narrative culminating in his formative encounter with “the living figure of a *Red Indian*!”³⁷ As an adult entrepreneur, he realized that the thrill of such confrontations, even when mediated by canvas, museum, or book, could be commodified and converted into a highly profitable commercial resource.

However, to commodify the book of nature and exploit it as a source of wealth was potentially to pervert its meaning and diminish its value. As Carlyle writes in “On History,” “He who reads the inscrutable Book of Nature as if it were a Merchant’s Ledger is justly suspected of having never seen the Book, but only some school synopsis thereof; from which if taken for the real book, more error than insight is to be derived.”³⁸ Thus, throughout his life Catlin would attempt to distance his own project from the efforts of competing artists and writers.³⁹ To this end, he presents his own representational gestures—his books, paintings, and later his gallery—as an antidote to the apocryphal works of both his predecessors and contemporaries, whom Catlin claimed had seen only debased, frontier versions of the Indian or whose personal and political agendas had distorted their vision. “Book-making now-a-days, is done for money-making;” he explains in *North American Indians*, “and he who takes the Indian for his theme, and cannot go and see him, finds a poverty in his matter that naturally begets error, by grasping at every little tale that is brought or fabricated by their enemies. Such books are standards, because they are made for white man’s reading only.”⁴⁰

Similar claims to authenticity were a ubiquitous feature in travel narratives of the time, often appearing in the editor's preface, the writer's introduction, and the publisher's advertisements. However, Catlin's claims are particularly emphatic, and he reiterates them throughout his narrative. Initially, he seems most anxious to convince his audience that his gallery and writings will correct the work of the "sycophant and the scribbler"⁴¹ who have misread, misinterpreted, and misrepresented the Indian precisely because they have failed to experience him in his natural environment:

The writer who would undertake to embody the whole history of such a people . . . must needs begin . . . with those who are *living*, or he would be very apt to dwell upon the preamble of his work, until the present living remnants of the race should have passed away; and their existence and customs, like those of ages gone bye, become subjects of doubt and incredulity to the world for whom his book was preparing. Such an historian also, to do them justice, must needs correct many theories and opinions which have, either ignorantly or maliciously, gone forth to the world in indelible characters.⁴²

Within Catlin's romantic scheme, to misrepresent God's original writing amounts to sin while its faithful translation—if translation is, indeed, possible—is a mark of grace. However, Catlin does more than assert that his writings and paintings are antidotes to the false distortions of others; ultimately, he challenges the very conventions of the ethno-historical writing of his time by accentuating the unique characteristics of his narrative.

Catlin begins *North American Indians* with a humble apology for his book's very existence in an attempt to situate himself outside of a corrupt republic of letters, even as he utilizes its institutions. He writes, "Amidst the multiplicity of books which are, in this enlightened age, flooding the world, I feel it my duty, as early as possible, to beg pardon for making a book at all."⁴³ Anxious to convince his readers of his book's authenticity,⁴⁴ he therefore breaks from natural history's governing generic conventions, particularly the emphasis on scientific detachment and empirical data. Instead, he frames his narrative as a series of dispatches written extemporaneously, a strategy which conceals that he composed the book in London while touring with his gallery from 1840 to 1842.⁴⁵ Many of the fifty-eight "letters" that comprise *North American Indians*, in fact, begin with statements that alert the audience to the book's unique form. For instance, Letter Number Three begins: "Since the date of my former Letter, I have been so much engaged in the amusements of the country and the use of my brush, that I have scarcely been able to drop you a line until the present moment."⁴⁶ Frequently, Catlin interrupts his narrative and asks his readers to imagine him writing the book while still in the wilderness, creating a series of "epistles from

... a strange place," as he puts it, a project made more difficult by the fact that he has "no desk to write from, or mail to send them by."⁴⁷

The act of writing thus becomes an ennobling, even heroic act, a struggle against the savage locale, as he insinuates in one of his many meditations on the process of writing in hostile physical and intellectual terrain: "Since the dates of my other Letters from this place, I have been taking some wild rambles about this beautiful country of green fields; jolted and tossed about, on horseback and on foot, where pen, ink, and paper never thought of going."⁴⁸ What we ultimately discover in Catlin's writings are two heroes coexisting. There is, of course, Catlin himself, the enterprising natural historian and artist of America's wilderness and its "wildest" Indians, but there are also the tools through which he represents and recreates the book of nature. "Pen, ink, and paper," along with his paints and brushes, seemingly take on an autonomous existence as they seek out unknown lands and peoples; the process of representation is thereby transformed into an act of pure translation, while the traveler and his arts become a conduit for the voice of God.

Throughout *North American Indians*, Catlin imagines himself as a reader and interpreter of nature's signs, and he wrestles with the implications of his compulsive desire to paint, translate, and collect every novel subject or object that he encounters. At times he is the romantic traveler with Natty Bumppo's intuitive reverence for the "book of nature;" more often, however, he is the artist-historian who sees before him an encyclopedic text to be read, deciphered, and annotated. For example, after finally reaching the mouth of the Yellowstone River and immersing himself in "the immense regions of the *classic* West,"⁴⁹ Catlin reflects on the convictions that brought him to such a moment: "It has ever been the predominant passion of my soul to seek Nature's wildest haunts, and give my hand to Nature's men. Legends of *these*, and visits to *those*, filled the earliest page of my juvenile impressions. The tablet has stood, and I am an enthusiast for God's works as he left them."⁵⁰ In order to confront "God's works," his own subjectivity must literally be rewritten in transcendental language, for to read from God's "tablet" and open one's soul to its message is to transform oneself into a book with "pages" awaiting the inscription of nature. To read from this book, and to be *written* by it, therefore constitutes the traveler's highest reward. The passage continues:

A journey of 4000 miles from the Atlantic shore, regularly receding from the centre of civilized society to the extreme wilderness of Nature's original work, and back again, *opens a book* for many an interesting tale to be sketched; and the mind which lives, but to relish the works of Nature, reaps a reward on such a tour of a much higher order than can arise from the selfish expectations of pecuniary emolument [emphasis added].⁵¹

Central to Catlin's conceptualization of the natural world was his belief that the work of civilization would soon write over, even erase, the original writing of the creator, that the forces oppressing the soul in the metropolis were in fact the same forces threatening the continued existence of "Nature's original work" in the wilderness. As a number of cultural historians have demonstrated, the signifiers "wilderness" and "civilization" have always been understood as antitheses: wilderness as the absence of order, progress, technology, and the arts, and civilization as the domination of wilderness and the exploitation of its resources.⁵² Catlin's notion of wilderness, and by extension his sense of the "great book of nature," is finally, then, a meditation on the very meaning of civilization and to some degree a reflection on the impoverishment and sterility of modernity. In his nostalgia for a primitive past and his profound sense of modern man's alienation from the sublime beauty of nature, Catlin expresses a desire to reclaim and even invent a primitive identity free from the burden of history.

Catlin's simultaneous desire to recover an authentic, *pre-historic* identity but also to recreate himself as a famous "historian and artist of the Indians" leads to a compulsive wanderlust that drives him into the wilderness and away from domestic life, following the path Natty blazed earlier and preparing the way for such figures as Melville's Ishmael, Twain's Huck Finn, and Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen. Catlin's need to immerse himself in the life of the other clearly bordered on the pathological, nearly destroying his health and leading to a profound sense of alienation from his family, which he attempts to confront and assess in Volume Two of *Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe* (1848).⁵³ His statement, "I shall hail the day with pleasure, when I can again reach the free land of the lawless savage,"⁵⁴ was a refrain throughout his life, and during his seventeen years of marriage (from 1828-1845), he never spent a full year with his wife, Clara, until they arrived in London with his traveling exhibition in 1839. In typical American fashion, Catlin imagines wilderness as both a regenerative force and as a space in which to establish a reputation, secure a fortune, and reclaim an authentic masculine identity.

"Wilderness" and "Nature" are therefore terms that evoke a variety of emotional responses and embody a wide range of psychological values in Catlin's work. At times, he presents himself as the confident scientist, artist, and historian exerting his will over nature in order to create his monumental gallery, but he also depicts nature as a force that can overwhelm the traveler's civilizing arts, stifling them, and rendering him mute. This tension surfaces in Catlin's reverent descriptions of the western landscape, where he often describes the potential of losing one's linguistic and representational skills, and thus the ability and authority to assign meaning to the "book of nature." He writes:

I often landed my skiff, and mounted the green carpeted bluffs,
whose soft grassy tops, invited me to recline, where I was at

once lost in contemplation. Soul melting scenery that was about me! A place where the mind could think volumes; but the tongue must be silent that would *speak*, and the hand palsied that would *write*. A place where a Divine would confess that he never had fancied Paradise—where the painter’s palette would lose its beautiful tints—the blood-stirring notes of eloquence would die in their utterance—and even the soft tones of sweet music would scarcely preserve a spark to light the soul again that had passed this sweet delirium.⁵⁵

In the “far West,” Catlin discovers a prelapsarian Eden where human voice and human arts give way to the “delirium” of Nature’s perfection, which ultimately is sublime silence. Catlin thus betrays anxiety about the human capacity to decipher or translate the book he longs to read, for the tongue, the pen, and the paint brush would seem to lose their representational potency in the presence of nature’s perfect text. Catlin’s encyclopedic will to control, preserve, and exploit his discoveries is therefore counterbalanced by his romantic desire to melt into nature, to be the inscribed rather than the inscriber.

Ultimately, however, Catlin declares his faith in the power of writing and representation, and in a passage reminiscent of the one cited above, he presents himself as being able to resist the enchantment of nature and overcome the exigencies of life in the wilderness:

A traveller on his tour through such a country as this, has no time to write, and scarcely time enough to moralize. It is as much as he can *well* do to “look out for his *scalp*,” and “for *something* to eat.” Impressions, however, of the most vivid kind, are rapidly and indelibly made by the fleeting incidents of savage life; and for the mind that can ruminare upon them with pleasure, there are abundant materials clinging to it for its endless entertainment in driving the quill when he gets back.⁵⁶

Despite the inability to write in the very moment of delight and discovery, Catlin manages to collapse the distance between experience and translation via Lockean psychology, for the mind of a “contemplative mould,”⁵⁷ unlike the “savage mind,” will be “indelibly” impressed or imprinted by the book of the world. In this shift from romantic idealism to materialist empiricism, Catlin maintains the capacity to “drive the quill” of civic authority despite his celebration of nature’s seductive charms.

Inscribing the Savage Mind

I have ever thought, and still think, that the Indian's mind is a beautiful blank, on which anything might be written, if the right mode were taken to do it.

—George Catlin, *North American Indians*⁵⁸

"The pale-faces have made their book, and it lies."

—Onoah (a.k.a. "Scalping Peter"), in *James Fenimore Cooper, The Oak Openings*⁵⁹

As a romantic, Catlin longs to experience sublime nature as the innocent, uncorrupted savage might; however, as an artist and ethno-historian he simultaneously attempts to establish order and control over uncivilized, "unlettered" spaces. In other words, Catlin is at once an embodied subject who physically delights in the natural world and a disembodied recorder who rationalizes and objectifies it through representation. And while Catlin vacillates between these two rhetorical positions, ultimately he privileges the scientific discourse of the encyclopedia over the visionary discourse of romantic identification. As Pearce explains, the desire for the unmediated experience of the other was fraught with anxiety, for it entailed a descent into the "state of nature" and therefore a loss of cultural and personal identity. In the white imagination, the Indian's most powerful function was as a negative instance, meaningful "not for what he was in and of himself, but rather for what he showed civilized men they were not and must not be."⁶⁰ Catlin therefore rejects the pleasure of a body in perfect harmony with nature in favor of the pleasure of representation. We see this most forcefully in Catlin's reflections on his tour of South America in the 1860s, part of which he made with a German botanist. He writes,

Who is the happiest man in the world just at this time? Why, Doctor Hentz, while he is gathering these beautiful plants and lovely flowers, and packing them in his large books. . . . And who the next happiest? Why, I, of course, who am putting these beautiful scenes into my portfolio.⁶¹

Unable to experience the unbounded freedom of the child-like savage, the adult traveler must instead find solace in collection and representation, the world "packed" into books or portfolios and preserved for future use.

Representation, however, is inadequate compensation for the loss of experience, and thus Catlin must convince himself, and his audience, that the

collection of wilderness images and artifacts is on par with the Indian's freedom and independence. We see this in his description of an anticipated meeting between the Comanches and eight hundred mounted Dragoons led by General Leavenworth and Colonel Dodge, whom Catlin accompanied on a tour of the Southwest:

I have become so much Indian of late, that my pencil has lost all appetite for subjects that savour of tameness. I should delight in seeing these red knights of the lance astonished, for it is then that they shew their brightest hues—and I care not how badly we frighten them, provided we hurt them not, nor frighten them out of *sketching distance*. You will agree with me, that I am going farther to get *sitters*, than any of my fellow-artists ever did; but I take an indescribable pleasure in roaming through Nature's trackless wilds, and selecting my models, where I am free and unshackled by the killing restraints of society.⁶²

At one level, Catlin's "pleasure" stems from a wandering life outside the "killing restraints of society," where he is free to express his inner-Indian ("I have become so much Indian of late"), to "delight" in wilderness scenes, and to embrace his appetites. However, such appetites clearly must be controlled, and in an interesting turn of phrase, Catlin ascribes to his pencil, a symbol of representational power, its own autonomous "appetite." The pleasure of wilderness delirium is thus deferred in favor of "models" or specimens that satisfy the adult need for accumulation. Catlin's delight in unbounded wilderness therefore derives not from the pleasure of satisfying the appetites of the body but in repressing them, the conquest of wilderness—as symbolized in the "monument" of his collected words, portraits, and artifacts—instantiating mastery over desires deemed primitive. As Mary Eastman, wife of painter and army officer Seth Eastman, would write in *The American Aboriginal Portfolio* (1853) concerning her life among the Sioux: "The Indian delighting in war and in glorious deeds, is yet ignorant of the greatest victory of which man is capable—the conquest of one's self."⁶³

Writing and painting therefore function as anchors in Catlin's narrative, the act of representation symbolizing the "conquest of self" while at the same time structuring Catlin's ties to civic life, despite his simultaneous longing to escape its institutions. In other words, while Catlin's collection of paintings, writings, and artifacts makes possible his triumphant return to white civilization, it also prevents an unmediated experience of the natural world. Catlin's use of representation as a form of self-control is perhaps made most explicit following his departure from the Dragoons, after nearly dying from an illness that had killed General Leavenworth and almost a quarter of his men. Having faced

annihilation and dissolution in the wilderness and survived, Catlin begins a solitary journey back East with renewed determination to establish his reputation and make his mark on the metropolis with his encyclopedic collection. As he encamps in “one of the most lovely valleys I ever saw,” the sublime beauty of the great book of nature induces thoughts of his own insignificance within a cosmic scheme, thoughts that he must banish if he is to establish his authority back home in the “civilized” world:

I contemplated the incomprehensible mechanism of that *wonderful clock*, whose time is infallible, and whose motion is eternity! I trembled, at last, at the dangerous expanse of my thoughts, and turned them again, and my eyes, upon the little and more comprehensible things that were about me. One of the first was a *newspaper*, which I had brought from the Garrison, the National Intelligencer, of Washington, which I had read for years, but never with quite the zest and relish that I now conversed over its familiar columns, in this clean and sweet valley of dead silence.⁶⁴

The sublime beauty of “dead silence” that had previously muted his voice and palsied his hand has here induced dread and produced a moment of crisis, and Catlin tellingly seizes hold of a newspaper as a talisman to ward off danger. The delight and dread occasioned by the sublime are therefore subsumed into the act of reading, just as before the threat of losing oneself to the “delirium” of wilderness was offset by the act of “driving the quill.” Catlin thus establishes the boundaries between self and other in a way that would help to cement a foundational ethnographic conceit: the civilized observer *consumes* the wild or the exotic, studies it as an object, and takes pleasure in the representation of it, while the other is incapable of representing or objectifying himself as a true human subject.

Catlin’s whole project ultimately depends on establishing his mastery over nature and by extension the Indians bound to it, thereby reasserting his authority over wilderness, self, and other. Thus despite his celebration of the Indians’ masculine power through his attention to their hunting strategies, war stories, athleticism, and self-torture rituals, he still manages to order their world as implicitly feminine through the symbolism of writing: illiterate Indian culture becomes an object to be read, inscribed, and preserved by literate western civilization. While praising the Indians’ harmonious relationship with the book of nature, envying their genius for living within its pages, Catlin simultaneously disparages their inability to harness the power of nature because of their lack of civilized arts. Catlin thus echoes a common conceit of the period, one that was also applied to blacks and other “degenerate” races, for it was often argued that Indian virility of body and innate nobility was counterbalanced by an enfeebled, stagnant intellect incapable of dominating the natural world.⁶⁵

The paradoxical tension created by an “Indian” who was simultaneously innocent and denigrated was relieved by the belief that the failure to subdue Nature was to live perpetually the life of the child, a ubiquitous trope of the period, and one Catlin often deploys in his writings. In his book *Life Among the Indians* (1875), which he wrote for younger readers, Catlin would say of Indians, “they are children—like yourselves, in many senses of the word.”⁶⁶ Similar to the Indians in Cooper’s novels, Catlin’s Indians vacillate between the romantic’s “noble savages,” beings to be admired and appreciated for their innocence and natural nobility, and the liberal reformer’s “unruly savages,” who demand the discipline of a civilized hand and the educational influence of a civilized mind. Catlin writes, “They are without the knowledge and arts of civilized man; they are feeble; they are in ignorance of nature. . . . In their relationship with civilized people they are like orphans. Governments who deal with them assume a guardianship over them, always calling them their ‘red children,’ and they, from their child-like nature, call all government officials in their country, ‘Fathers.’”⁶⁷ As Michael Paul Rogin explains, the stereotype of the Indian as playful, improvident, and anarchic was created as the antithesis of white Americans’ self-concept as hard-working, acquisitive, and organized. It served not only to legitimate dispossession and subjugation, but also became a symbol of the nation’s evolution and progress, the death of the Indian equated with the nation’s passage from childhood into adulthood.⁶⁸

Images of Indians as children living in harmony with nature are a mainstay in Catlin’s work, and just as the virgin landscape invites his “quill” to inscribe her with meaning, he often presents us with a simultaneously picturesque and infantilized Indian summoning forth the artist’s skills, for the primitive’s mind “is a simple one, and easy to be learned and understood.”⁶⁹ For Catlin, to look upon the Indian is also to imagine him as he might be represented, an object of art rather than a complex, autonomous subject. “I find myself surrounded by subjects and scenes worthy of the pens of Irving or Cooper—of the pencils of Raphael or Hogarth;” he wrote, “rich in legends and romances, which would require no aid of the imagination for a book or picture.”⁷⁰ As Michel de Certeau suggests in *The Writing of History* (1988), the body of the other “is a cipher that awaits deciphering,” with race as the key concept determining cultural otherness. He goes on to explain that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *seen* body of the other was imaginatively converted into a *known* body by “the transformation of the body into extension, into pen interiority like a book, or like a silent corpse placed under our eyes.”⁷¹ Thus while the body of the other awaits translation and eventual monumentalization in a book or on canvas, his mind, like that of the Lockean child, awaits inscription. Adopting the missionary rhetoric of the period, Catlin imagines the Indian mind as a “field for the labours of . . . benevolent teachers” and as “a beautiful blank on which anything might be written,” as he informs his readers on two separate occasions.⁷² As the metaphors here suggest, the Indian is a ripe “field” awaiting the enlightened

labors of the husbandman, and a “child” of nature on whose *tabula rasa* will soon be written the codes of civic instruction.

Yet just as ordering the wilderness and subjugating it to the arts of cultivation make it wilderness no more, in Catlin’s eyes so too would civilizing the savage destroy his “Indian-ness,” his primitive nobility. The advent of white incursion spelled the end of “real” Indians living in their natural state,⁷³ and in *North American Indians* the frontier⁷⁴ becomes the symbolic barrier between purity and contamination, where civil meets savage and the present confronts its primitive past. Catlin’s conceptualization of the frontier as a debased region of mongrel races, white savagery, and corrupted Indian nobility was drawn from a wide range of sources but also became extremely influential in its own right. Fellow historians like Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Lewis Cass, and politicians ranging from Daniel Webster to Jefferson Davis, would cite Catlin (either negatively or positively) to evidence their theories on Indian life, American history, and American culture. Furthermore, Catlin’s quest to memorialize and preserve America’s “Wildest Tribes of Indians,” a phrase used in the extended title of *North American Indians*, profoundly affected the narrative of white-Indian relations in America, and his crossing and re-crossing of the frontier is at the heart of his narrative.

In making his journey to the “Far West” in search of the untouched, “uncontaminated” Indian—echoing his contemporary Alexis de Tocqueville’s desire to see America’s “unspoiled” tribes—Catlin would first have to make a Dante-like descent into a frontier inferno:

In traversing the immense regions of the *classic* West, the mind of a philanthropist is filled to the brim with feelings of admiration; but to reach this country, one is obliged to descend from the light and glow of civilized atmosphere, through the different grades of civilization, which gradually sink to the most deplorable condition along the extreme frontier; thence through the most pitiable misery and wretchedness of savage degradation; where the genius of natural liberty and independence have been blasted and destroyed by the contaminating vices and dissipations introduced by the immoral part of *civilized* society. Through this dark and sunken vale of wretchedness one hurries, as through a pestilence, until he gradually rises again into the proud and chivalrous pale of savage society, in its state of original nature, beyond the reach of civilized contamination.⁷⁵

For Catlin, the “light and glow” of civilization could not be divorced from the darkness of “contamination,” with disease operating as the preeminent metaphor for cultural contact and exchange in his work. The possibilities of hybridity and

transculturation, rather than striking Catlin as historical processes that have *always* taken place, were never seriously entertained, and instead he relied on a model of cultural purity in which contact was a “pestilence” leading to the corruption and eventual annihilation of the Indian.⁷⁶

Because of the rapid increase of American expansion into Indian territory in the 1820s and 1830s, aided by Jacksonian policies which culminated in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Catlin saw only a small window of opportunity to experience what he imagined as the “true West” and collect authentic portraits and artifacts of its “vanishing” peoples. As he reminds his readers on numerous occasions:

I cannot help but repeat, before I close this Letter, that the tribes of the red men of North America, as a nation of human beings, are on their wane [...] and that the traveler who would see these people in their native simplicity and beauty, must needs be hastily on his way to the prairies and Rocky Mountains, or he will see them only as they are now seen on the frontiers, as a basket of *dead game*.⁷⁷

The “frontier” Indian, according to Catlin, offers us a glimpse of his destiny as a debased subject for still-life painters, on par with bins filled with fruit, vases filled with flowers, or baskets overflowing with “dead game.” Catlin therefore heroically devotes himself to their last stand: “the production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character of an interesting race of people, who are rapidly passing away from the face of the earth . . . snatching from a hasty oblivion what could be saved for the benefit of posterity, and perpetuating it, as a fair and just monument, to the memory of a truly lofty and noble race.”⁷⁸ By presenting Indians as a powerless, illiterate people destined to “vanish,” Catlin solidifies his position as the instrument of their salvation, for his collection stands forth as the lone antidote to the “disease” of civilization, preserving for “posterity” an Indian “Golden Age.” The trope of the vanishing Indian speaks directly to Catlin’s ambivalence, appealing at once to the fantasy of a primitive utopia in harmony with nature but also suggesting an end to Indian hostilities and the creation of empty, uninhabited lands ready for easy conquest and settlement.

If the Indian must disappear, and if the independent, “innocent” scientist-historian might somehow be implicated in that process, then the cost of his collecting enterprise would at least be redeemed by the profit of a permanent Indian memorial in the form of a museum. Catlin writes:

From England, from France, and the United States, government vessels, in this age of colonization, are floating to every part of the globe, and in them, artists and men of science could

easily be conveyed to every race, and their collections returned free of expense, were there an institution formed and ready to receive and perpetuate the results of their labors.⁷⁹

Catlin's need to establish what Mary Louise Pratt calls "equilibrium through exchange"⁸⁰ ultimately leads to a two-pronged trajectory in his narrative, one tragic and one comic. As Hayden White has argued, historical narratives always contain an element of interpretation, to the extent that data, facts, records, and eyewitness accounts are always arranged in the service of the historian's larger vision. White explains, "[I]t can be argued that interpretation in history consists of the provisions of a plot structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a *story of a particular kind*. What one historian may emplot as tragedy, another may emplot as comedy or romance."⁸¹ In Catlin's chronicle of the fall and resurrection of the Indian, the Indian's demise is emplotted as tragedy, as the loss of savage virtue and primitive nobility to the inevitable spread of civilization. The tragic narrative is therefore inflected by a romantic nostalgia for a primitive past in its identification with the vanquished. However, Catlin's monumental effort to protect and preserve the vanishing Indian is emplotted as comedy, the heroic ethnographer, historian, and painter achieving closure by redeeming civilization's mission and resurrecting a "dead" culture. The comic arc of Catlin's narrative is therefore based in the discourse of the encyclopedia, whereby the scientist-artist creates a taxonomically organized chronicle that mitigates the destructive tendencies of his own civilizing imperatives. There is, then, a paradoxically radical and conservative thrust to Catlin's historiographic interpretation of contact between Indians and white Americans, the tragic plot radical in its social critique of white aggression and its identification with Indian nobility, and the comic plot conservative in its emphasis on Indian deficiencies and the beneficence of an emergent American empire.⁸²

Judging from the success of his gallery and the admiration of his reviewers, Catlin's representation of colonial conquest clearly appealed to the sentimental memory of a liberal democracy eager to memorialize and mourn the Indian's passing. As one critic from London's *Athenaeum* writes, *North American Indians* provides "a pleasant narrative of adventure, and a circumstantial and detailed history of the manners and customs of an interesting people, whose fate is sealed, whose days are numbered, whose extinction is certain. The Americans should make much of Mr. Catlin for the sake of by-gone days, which his books, portraits, and collections will present to their grandchildren."⁸³ Or, as the Senate Library Committee would write of Catlin's gallery during the debate over whether to purchase it with government funds, "our children's children will know nothing of those once numerous families of men except by means of what we of this age may rescue from the wreck and preserve for instruction."⁸⁴ The "wreck" of the Indian had already been made morally palatable by the doctrine of Manifest

Destiny, and it would be further sanitized by the image of scientists, historians, and artists “preserving” Indian culture for the children of the future.

A powerful colonialist trope operating within this narrative structure of tragic fall and comic redemption is that of the traveler’s “magical” arts, which bestow upon the colonial agent, among other things, the supernatural abilities to control nature, imprison souls, communicate with God, and, most importantly, to raise the dead. On the one hand, representation has the very real capacity to shape the nation’s imaginings of the West and its inhabitants; on the other, Catlin symbolically endows the instruments of representation with autonomous will, a force driving the traveler to penetrate unknown lands and give voice to “unlettered” spaces while safeguarding his cultural identity in moments of crisis. But perhaps the most significant form of power Catlin ascribes to the tools of representation (and to himself as their agent) is the ability to perform the Frankenstein-like task of resurrection. Early on in *North American Indians*, he announces his miraculous powers to his readers:

I have flown to [the Indians’] rescue—not of their lives or of their race (for they are ‘doomed’ and must perish), but to the rescue of their looks and their modes, at which the acquisitive world may hurl their poison and every besom of destruction, and trample them down and crush them to death; yet, phoenix-like, they may rise from the ‘stain on a painter’s palette,’ and live again upon canvass, and stand forth for centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race.⁸⁵

Catlin does more here than simply reassert the innocent pose which distances him from the commercial and military objectives of “the acquisitive world;” he claims the power to raise the dead, converting a “basket of dead game” into a “phoenix” rising from the ashes. Because of his intervention, Indian culture will “live again” in his paintings and artifacts as a complex of objects that distill the very essence of the Indian. Thus it is Catlin’s *idea* of the Indian that that will later be on display in his museum, as a collection of incarnations, or more specifically *reincarnations*, of a people unable to contend with history.

Conclusion

Despite his dual pose as an innocent witness of history and a magical reanimator of a “vanished” people, Catlin’s self-consciousness about his “art” reveals his ambivalence about the moral status of representation itself. Throughout his career Catlin remained self-critical of his collusion with commercial and military interests who also sought to profit from the conquest and dispossession of the West’s indigenous peoples. Thus despite his numerous efforts to convince his readers of the purity of his motives and the regenerative powers of his work, Catlin still gives voice to the doubts and suspicions harbored

by his Indian subjects concerning “the *medicine* operation of [his] pencil,” which they often view “with decided distrust and apprehension, as a sort of theft or sacrilege.”⁸⁶ The distrust, even terror, that characterizes some of Catlin’s subjects must be taken seriously, for it marks the very doubts and anxieties Catlin himself betrays about his project. When a Yankton Sioux accuses Catlin of making their food supply disappear by putting “*many of our buffaloes in his book!*”⁸⁷, he in fact draws a significant connection between the diminishing game supply and Catlin’s portraits and his eventual exhibitions. Both are entangled in colonial processes: the game reserves depleted by the very trappers, hunters, and traders who escorted Catlin west, and the value and meaning of Catlin’s “book” and museum actually premised on the Indian’s “vanishing.”

The self-portrait entitled *The Author Painting a Chief at the Base of the Rocky Mountains* helps illustrate Catlin’s ambivalent position and underscores both his nostalgic impulses and representational authority. In it, Catlin is surrounded by dozens of native onlookers as he paints his famous portrait of Mahtotohpa, who poses on the far left of the drawing and whose image is duplicated on Catlin’s canvas. The easel, Catlin’s brush, and Mahtotohpa’s portrait constitute the drawing’s visual center, the eyes of the surrounding spectators trained on the instruments of representation rather than on their subject (Mahtotohpa) or their operator (Catlin). The Mandans’ expressions register a mixture of terror and wonder, the observers in the foreground cowering in fear and those in the background slack-jawed in astonishment. In contrast, the artist-figure in the drawing wears an indeterminate expression—his gaze fixed on his subject, seemingly insulated from the emotional tumult occurring around him.

How, then, are we to interpret Catlin’s pose as the Indians’ artist-historian, as the individual responsible—at least in his own mind—for both preserving Indian cultures but also for introducing them to the “light and glow” of civilization and therefore contributing to their demise and “corruption”? Similarly, what kind of response did Catlin hope to elicit from his white audience, and what lesson would they have been likely to take away from this self-conscious reflection on the painter capturing and collecting his subject for display in his encyclopedic museum? An easily overlooked detail in the drawing sheds light on these questions, for rising above the image on Catlin’s easel is a pictograph etched into a tipi—one of many artificial elements in the work, since Mandans lived in circular huts⁸⁸—which clearly comments on the action taking place below. In the pictograph, two crudely drawn Indians are in the process of an exchange. The figure directly above Catlin’s canvas holds out a rifle to another Indian on horseback, presumably in trade, though perhaps as a peace-offering or gift. That Catlin has included two representational gestures within the sketch suggests two historical actions occurring simultaneously. Foremost, of course, is the Indian’s terrified, awe-struck encounter with the artist-historian’s mystifying “art,” but perhaps just as important is the introduction of guns into Indian economy and warfare. The sketch therefore records the simultaneous appearance

of two technologies on the frontier, the one apparently redemptive and the other destructive. But the drawing's message may not be so elementary, for the artist insists that we consider his subjects' troubling reaction to his work. The Indians' response suggests the tacit violence of Catlin's representational act, which not only undermines his pose as the innocent historian, but also implicates him in the processes of dispossession and conquest heralded in the pictograph.

It is precisely this self-conscious awareness of the vexed status of representation that characterizes the ethos of George Catlin's collecting enterprise in the West. The collection of Indian culture and the representation of Indian bodies had become, in Catlin's eyes, white America's highest moral obligation, but it was an enterprise charged with ambiguities and contradictions. As both a romantic visionary and scientific rationalist, Catlin lays bare such contradictions rather than glossing over them. An outspoken critic of modernity and imperialism, Catlin is at times a prophetic voice who speaks for the sanctity of nature and the nobility of the Indian, claiming that the Indian lives on in his own heart. However, he is also the voice of science, governance, and western culture, his romantic nostalgia for a "primitive" existence freed from the enervating effects of modernity entangled with the need to collect, classify, and preserve in texts ways of life otherwise destined to "vanish." George Catlin's vision of the West is shot through with ambivalent notions of wilderness, Indians, and white identity, and the two faces he shows of each—sublime yet intractable wilderness, noble and ignoble savage, heroic and villainous explorer—point toward the dialectical complexities of his work. His representations of the West are ultimately indicative of a national desire for exoneration and redemption in the Indian's "rebirth" and "reincarnation," but they also suggest an awareness of their own limitations, for the Indian "lives" on only as long as he is repeatedly consumed—in museums, galleries, sideshows, and cigar stores—by a voracious public in a fickle cultural marketplace.

Notes

1. This phrase was suggested to me by one of my anonymous readers in his or her invaluable response to this article. If that person would like to step forward and accept credit for this suggestive term, I would gladly give it. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all three of my readers, who I am sure will recognize their contributions to the revision of this essay, and the editors at *American Studies* for their excellent suggestions and helpful synthesis of my readers' comments.

2. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians Written During Eight Years' Travel (1832-39) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians of North America*, 1844, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1973). Hereafter referred to as *North American Indians*. The full line reads, "it is for these uncontaminated people that I would be willing to devote the energies of my life," 1: 60.

3. For instance, Dale Morgan claims that Catlin essentially "fathered American ethnology" (cited in Marjorie Catlin Roehm, *The Letters of George Catlin: A Chronicle of the American West* [Berkeley: California University Press, 1966], xvi), while Brian Dippie, in *Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1990), credits his paintings with defining "our understanding of a lost America," xvi. Preservationists and eco-historians see Catlin as one of the first Americans to move beyond simply lamenting the destruction of wilderness and to begin to formulate the concept of preserving nature via national parks. See,

for example, Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 108-113, and David Mazel, "'A beautiful and thrilling specimen': George Catlin, the Death of Wilderness, and the Birth of the National Subject," from *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, eds. Michael Branch, et al (Moscow, Idaho: Idaho University Press, 1998), 129-43. Finally, his touring Indian gallery, which at times included live Indians performing dances and rituals, actually predated the "wild west" shows of the late 1800s by some forty years.

4. To distinguish between the real people Catlin actually met and who actually occupied the places he visited and the "Indians" as he imagined them is next to impossible, and for that reason I use the term "Indian" to refer mainly to Catlin's and others' representational construct. Following the practice of such critics as Roy Harvery Pearce, Robert Berkhofer, Bernd Peyer, Richard Drinnon, and Richard Slotkin, I will also be adopting this misnomer to refer to the amalgam of people indigenous to the North American continent. As Peyer has recently pointed out, the word was a political reality for indigenous peoples, whom Europeans came to regard as a uniformly conquered race: "Five centuries of interaction between native communities and Euro-American society, on the one hand, and a continuous intertribal traffic, on the other, have ultimately given etymological gestalt to the semantic anomaly born out of Columbus's faulty sense of geography. Today, the self-designation 'Indian' is as frequently used as any tribal names, whose origins are often no less controversial." *The Tutor'd Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America* (Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 1997), 14.

5. While Catlin has been rightly praised by Thomas Hietala as a "rare voice in 1840s" who "refused to join in the refrain of mindless racism and nationalism," and is even cited occasionally as an opponent of Indian removal policies, his belief that contact always resulted in the "contamination" of Indians was often used as a moral defense for removal. See Thomas R. Hietala, "'This Splendid Juggernaut': Westward a Nation and its People," from *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism*, eds. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 48-67.

6. In his introduction to *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and its Audience* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1995), David Brigham explains that the notion of the museum as a "world in miniature" is reflected in Peale's method of display. In a note (171 n.1), Brigham traces Peale's use of the phrase, which had been in vogue for at least a century, to an address he made to the American Philosophical society in 1797.

7. My argument here was inspired by Mariana Torgovnick's discussion of the competing rhetorics of "desire and control" in anthropological discourse in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990). Her analysis of ethnographic writing leads her to identify two "alternating yet complementary pulsations" in the dominant culture's representations of the primitive: "a rhetoric of control, in which the demeaning colonialist tropes get modified only slightly over time; and a rhetoric of desire, ultimately more interesting, which implicates 'us' in the 'them' we try to conceive as the Other" (245). In my reformulation of Torgovnick's argument, I have assigned specific symbolic values to these two competing "pulsations," which I think adds a much needed degree of specificity to my analysis of Catlin's simultaneously romantic and ethnographic impulses.

8. Cooper, *Precaution: A Novel* (New York: Townsend and Co., 1861), 216.

9. All citations from *The Leatherstocking Tales* are paginated according to The Library of America's two-volume edition of the series, published in 1985 and based on the State University of New York's editions of the novels. I have used the "Darley" edition of all other novels, published by W.A. Townsend and Company (1859-61).

10. Throughout *The Pioneers*, Natty rails against the "twisty laws," "wasty ways," and "book l'arning" of the emergent settler-class displacing him from his forest sanctuary. As a man of action rather than words, Natty's warrior-ethos has made settlement possible. Although he mistrusts the white settlers' "bookish" values and "wasty" patterns of consumption, his racial allegiances compel him to aid them in their struggles in the wilderness.

11. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie; A Tale* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 1: 964.

12. Cooper, *The Pioneers; or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 1: 93.

13. Cooper, *The Oak Openings; or, The Bee-Hunter* (New York: Townsend and Co., 1860), 320.

14. Cooper, *The Prairie*, 1: 956.

15. *Ibid.*, 1: 1082.

16. *Ibid.*, 1: 958 and 1: 965

17. *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 2 Corinthians 3: 3.

18. Cooper, *The Deerslayer; or, The First War-Path* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 2: 899.

19. Cooper, *The Prairie*, 1: 990.

20. Cooper, *The Pathfinder; or, The Inland Sea* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 2: 14.
21. Cooper, *The Prairie*, 1: 1128.
22. Cooper, *The Oak Openings*, 279.
23. Catlin, *Life Among the Indians* (London: Bracken Books, 1996), 302.
24. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 35.
26. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:2.
27. *Ibid.*, 1:2.
28. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 111.
29. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 15.
30. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, Trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin, 1968), 33.
31. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 57.
32. Cited in Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 55.
33. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 44.
34. See Bringham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic*, for a description of Peale's Native American collection, esp. 31-32.
35. Mary Sayre Haverstock, *Indian Gallery: the Story of George Catlin* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1973), 5.
36. See Bringham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic*, 37 and 85, for illustrations of the 1788 and 1813 tickets, respectively.
37. Catlin, *Life Among the Indians*, 29 and 39.
38. Cited in Herbert Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1975).
39. See Brian Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries* for an excellent historical analysis of Catlin's ongoing feud with Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, whose "narrow Presbyterianism," 56, and belief in the Indian's inherent inferiority were in direct opposition to Catlin's "rudimentary cultural relativism" and romantic tendencies. See esp. 47-95.
40. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2: 7.
41. *Ibid.*, 1: 85.
42. *Ibid.*, 1: 5.
43. *Ibid.*, 1: 1.
44. *North American Indians* also contains more obvious authenticating gestures, such as the compendium of "Certificates" that end Letter Number One, written and signed by "men whose lives . . . have been spent, in great part, in the Indian Country," meant to verify Catlin's experiences and document his travels. Perhaps the most important certificate is signed by William Clark, whose name Catlin invokes on several occasions as a testament both to his authority and spirit of adventure, and who writes that Catlin's portraits are faithful renditions of "Indians of my acquaintance," 1: 11.
45. Although many of Catlin's "letters" appeared in newspapers in the 1830s, they were significantly revised before being republished. Thus while much of *North American Indians* was surely composed west of the Mississippi River, as evidenced by his notebooks and these early "letters," the book was completed in London, and according to his own account in *Catlin's Notes of Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe*, he spent two years assembling the illustrations and revising the text for publication. That some of the book was written with the benefit of hindsight rather than as actual "letters" causes awkward moments in the narrative, for while *North American Indians* is generally written in the present tense as something unfolding and organic, it was also meant to serve as an advertisement for his touring gallery, something he had yet to create in narrative time. For instance, after describing the manufactures he collected and the portraits he painted while visiting the Camanchees, he writes, "These and many other paintings, as well as manufactures from this tribe, may be always seen in my Museum, if I have the good luck to get them safe home from this wild and remote region," 2: 68.
46. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 17.
47. *Ibid.*, 1: 191.
48. *Ibid.*, 1: 59.
49. *Ibid.*, 1: 60.
50. *Ibid.*, 1: 62.
51. *Ibid.*
52. See, for example, Thomas Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).
53. See especially Catlin's reflections on the death of his wife, Clara, in Chapter XXVII, and of his son, "Little George," in XXXI, causing a "sudden change [to come] over this pleasing

dream of life; the cheering notes of my little companions were suddenly changed into groans, and my occupations at my easel were at an end." *Catlin's Notes of Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe, with His North American Indian Collection*, 2 vols (London: Published by the author, 1848), 2: 323. Hereafter *Eight Years' Travels*.

54. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2: 35.
55. *Ibid.*, 2: 3.
56. *Ibid.*, 1: 59.
57. *Ibid.*, 1: 59.
58. *Ibid.*, 2: 245.
59. Cooper, *The Oak Openings*, 281.
60. Pearce, *The Savages of America*, 5.
61. Catlin, *Life Among the Indians*, 224.
62. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2: 37.
63. Mary Eastman, *The American Aboriginal Portfolio* (Philadelphia, 1853), iii-iv.
64. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2: 92.
65. As Daniel Clark Sanders, author of *A History of the Indian Wars With the First settlers of the United States* (1812), writes in his treatise on the virtues and limitations of savagery, "The savage state has, no doubt, its advantages. It promotes bodily activity. Few among them are sickly, feeble or deformed. [...] The disadvantages of the savage state are more than a balance. Intellectual improvement will be out of the question. The mind will remain a subject too invisible to be noticed." Cited in Pearce, *The Savages of America*, 102-03.
66. Catlin, *Life Among the Indians*, 19.
67. *Ibid.*, 19.
68. Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 4-13.
69. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 8.
70. *Ibid.*, 1: 80.
71. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, Trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 3.
72. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 184 and 2: 245.
73. In *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978), Robert Berkhofer examines the persistence of the nineteenth-century image of "real" Indians existing only before contact with Europeans, despite centuries of interactions that had changed the conditions of Native Americans in every part of the northern hemisphere. The Eurocentric version of history argues that only whites have a dynamic, progressive history, while Indians are static, ahistorical beings. See esp. 25-31. Johannes Fabian makes a similar point in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), explaining that anthropological discourse is predicated on the "denial of co-evalness," whereby non-European peoples are temporally and spatially dislocated from the anthropologist's own historical time.
74. As a term of concrete, historical reference, "the frontier," like "the Indian," "the savage," or "the European," has little meaning and has generally been rejected as a reductive construct. However, as Gregory Nobles explains in *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and the Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), "the frontier" still retains its symbolic value in the American imagination, and even as a term for regions "in which no culture, group, or government can claim effective control or hegemony over others," it still has value and is certainly less awkward than terms like "inter-group contact situation" or "cultural contact zone," xii.
75. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 60.
76. Catlin's own prejudices and those of his time continue to exert their influence on our sense of Native American culture and its historical evolution. Many of Catlin's early biographers in fact recycle his images of corruption and decay when describing his search for "real" Indians. Perhaps the clearest example of this is found in Marjorie Catlin Roehm's annotated collection of the Catlin family letters (Roehm's grandfather was George Catlin's youngest brother, making her Catlin's grand-niece). In *The Letters of George Catlin*, she writes, "So little was known about these first Americans, so rapidly being shoved into oblivion by the greed of the white men for their lands and furs. The Indians who lived even on the fringe of civilization were tainted—they had forgotten the laws of their tribes and tried to emulate the white people to whom they had at first looked up. They were drunken and dirty, they stole and plundered," 30. Mary Sayre Haverstock's *Indian Gallery: The Story of George Catlin*, contains similar images of "half-crazy," "war-whooping Indians," 2, despite its more Indian-friendly rhetoric.
77. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 10.
78. *Ibid.*, 1: 3.
79. *Ibid.*, 1: 63.
80. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80.

81. Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 58.

82. In his analysis of ethnographic discourse, James Clifford argues that “the very activity of ethnographic writing—seen as inscription or textualization—enacts a redemptive Western allegory” (99), one which mitigates the guilt of the ethnographer, and by extension his audience, and also elides the violent facts of colonization. See “On Ethnographic Allegory,” from *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1986), 98-121.

83. Cited in Catlin, *Eight Years' Travels*, 1: 54.

84. Cited in Dippie, *Catlin and His Contemporaries*, 130. Cited above.

85. Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1: 16.

86. *Ibid.*, 1: 105.

87. *Ibid.*, 2: 194.

88. I should point out here that this drawing is based neither in history nor experience, and is in fact a very deliberate fiction that includes several fabricated elements, not the least of which is the tipi itself. The Mandans, in fact, lived in giant circular huts hundreds of miles from “the base of the Rocky Mountains.” The purpose of the fictional tipi, as I see it, is twofold. First, it is more emblematic of “authentic” (i.e. generic) Indian life than permanent mound structures, suggesting the nomadic qualities generally ascribed to Plains Indians. Second, the tipi provides Catlin with the opportunity to create this meta-narrational pictograph, one which allows him simultaneously to speak *for* the Indian as a ventriloquist and *to* his own work as an artist.