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## Charles Sealsfield and the Frontier Thesis

When Frederick Jackson Turner in his posthumous study—*The United States, 1830-1850: The Nations and its Sections* (1935)—began to discuss American literature in the Age of Jackson, he noted a name that was doubtless unfamiliar to most of his readers: "Charles Sealsfield, a German writer living in the New Southwest, portrayed the pioneer life of that region in his Cabin books."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately we are not informed how Turner profited from Sealsfield's "Cabin books" or if he read more of Sealsfield's works, since he never mentions Sealsfield again—at least not in his published letters.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the fact that of all the writers who wrote about the Southwest (e.g., Timothy Flint) Turner found it noteworthy to mention Sealsfield perhaps suggests that Turner shared a certain affinity with this German-American writer, who for most Americans had become a forgotten name. At least from our perspective, reviewing the work of both these writers, the affinity seems unmistakable.

Of course, as has been amply documented, the frontier thesis has had a long history of precursors. In retrospect it appears as if an entire cultural narrative had been repeatedly searching for legitimacy, until Frederick Jackson Turner came along and gave it a formal scholarly sanction.<sup>3</sup> It is well documented that the narratives of the West and westward expansion had played a fundamental role in the discovery and development of the United States and were continually interpreted in fiction and other forms of literature up until the time of Turner's writings.<sup>4</sup> Otherwise it would be difficult to understand the enthusiastic reception of such programmatic pronouncements as "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West" or "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."<sup>5</sup> Yet it is more as an expression of a grand cultural saga partaking of a multitude of narratives that the frontier thesis seems interesting to us today. Traditionally, when Americans find their national identity being threatened, they retreat not only into the past, into history, but also into space, into the frontier.<sup>6</sup> James Fenimore Cooper is

perhaps the first American novelist to employ this theme in his works. In attempting to define the essence of the young American commonwealth, he chose to portray in his most significant fiction (the *Leather-Stocking Tales*) its ideological and political conflicts most vividly in the forests and prairies of North America.<sup>7</sup> Nearly three generations later, Frederick Jackson Turner, responding to what Richard Hofstadter has called "the psychic crisis" of the 1890s, attempted to locate American identity in the Mississippi Valley, in the West, in what a later historian was to define as the Garden of the World.<sup>8</sup>

It is almost transcending the bounds of good taste to repeat the platitude that if the frontier did not exist, it would have to be invented. Of course we know today that the ideas of existence and invention are too closely intertwined to admit of any clear demarcation. It is only interesting and surprising at first glance that the frontier and the frontier thesis received a most remarkable expression at the hands of a runaway Moravian monk. Born and raised in an obscure town in the Austro-Hungarian empire, achieving a notable success for a boy from the provinces by becoming the secretary of the monastic order of the Knights of the Red Cross in Prague, Charles Sealsfield appeared to fulfill an American rags-to-riches story in the most archconservative of European countries. However this apparent success story had a bizarre twist that was not contained in the original formula. In the year 1823 the Austrian police began searching for a certain Karl Anton Postl, a high monastic official, who was said to have disappeared without a trace. This same Karl Anton Postl arrived in New Orleans in the same year with a new name, a new passport, and a new profession. It is here that Sealsfield probably discovered in the frontier a vital metaphor to explain his own life.

That Sealsfield could appropriate the frontier and the West in his own writings is further proof that the frontier was not only an American narrative, but was thriving in Europe as well. Especially in the German-speaking world the idea of the frontier developed into a significant cultural narrative that was taken up again and again by novelists and writers of other literary genres.<sup>9</sup> Thus Sealsfield read Heinrich Zschokke and Gottfried Duden. Gerstäcker was familiar with Sealsfield. Balduin Möllhausen read Gerstäcker, and all of these writers in turn were widely accepted by the German reading public.<sup>10</sup>

The frontier thesis, as many critics have pointed out, owes its efficacy more to myth than to historical scholarship.<sup>11</sup> Implicit in the frontier thesis is one particular myth that has obsessed the European imagination up to the present. Humankind can be reborn in America, the myth claims, whether it be a return to the purity or innocence of the primeval self or a development to a deeper, more mature, more liberated self in the sense of citizenship in a republican commonwealth. The credo of a second chance found an ideal symbolic landscape in America. The limits to self,

society, and history could be dissolved, and the individual could be reborn in a virgin land.<sup>12</sup>

How this actually works is also explained by the myth. As Turner states:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick: he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the German mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.<sup>13</sup>

This passage has been traditionally interpreted as an example of Turner's belief in "geographical determinism," or as Turner writes in another essay "the profound influence of the unity of its great spaces."<sup>14</sup> However it also illustrates in almost fairy tale-like form the grand narrative of cultural loss and rebirth in the wilderness with the additional narrative that rebirth leads to progress and a new kind of civilization.

Crèvecoeur made the first significant contribution to this narrative. In his celebrated *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Crèvecoeur shows "how Europeans become Americans."<sup>15</sup> Throughout his work Crèvecoeur finds recourse to such mystical categories as "regeneration," "invisible power," "metamorphosis" to explain this transformation. The result echoes Turner when he writes:

The American is a new man who acts upon new principles: he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.<sup>16</sup>

Crèvecoeur also attempts to offer less mystical explanations. The "laws" of an enlightened state and the "industry" of the new immigrants lead to the

conversion from a European to an American.<sup>17</sup> However, since the "freeholder," who is also of central importance in the Turner thesis, embodies Crèvecoeur's pastoral utopia, it follows that the soil, the land or "the salubrious effluvia of the earth," becomes the primary agent of Americanization.<sup>18</sup> In Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, and later Turner as well as in other representatives of the pastoral ideal, the earth then becomes the actor and the farmer or yeoman is its product. Of course we know that this variant of "geographical determinism" is only of limited value in explaining social change. Yet it is an essential element of the frontier thesis that gives substance to the Turnerian metaphor of the frontier as a "crucible," a concoction of forces—almost magical in nature—which metamorphoses a weary, corrupt European (at least according to the metaphor) into a young virtuous American.<sup>19</sup>

Sealsfield's own story is depicted here in almost formulaic fashion. A Catholic monk, living in the most feudal and despotic of European countries, flees his homeland and becomes Charles Sealsfield, writer, planter, (at least in his passport) Protestant minister, and as he liked to believe, American Democrat. The simplicity of the story and the literal rendition of the myth would perhaps discourage any further interest. However it is the obsessiveness with which the myth is repeated again and again in Sealsfield's work and the close analysis of the process of becoming an American that distinguishes Sealsfield from his contemporaries.

Sealsfield, like Turner, is also fond of gnomic utterances. In his *Lebensbilder aus der westlichen Hemisphäre* (1834-37), the narrator writes: "The European remains blind in America for seven years" [translation mine].<sup>20</sup> The frontier thesis also suggests the metaphor of "blindness," arguing that only those initiated into the mysteries of the land can grasp the essential processes of American culture. Turner's critique of the German-American historian Hermann von Holst develops this argument more precisely. Von Holst, according to Turner, cannot provide an adequate interpretation of American history because

the European inheritance and environment leave their own prejudices—the unitary state, the stationary populations, the rule of classes, bureaucracy, lack of popular activity except in a revolutionary way—these are some of the difficulties.<sup>21</sup>

What Sealsfield invokes as "blindness" is more concretely described by Turner in his essay on von Holst as cultural knowledge.<sup>22</sup> A profound anthropological truth is revealed here which was only to become fully enunciated in the twentieth century: our culture frames our perceptions, or as David Potter has put it, our culture acts as a filter, allowing only

those signs and symbols which carry meaning in it to be recognized and those which are alien to it to be shunted away.<sup>23</sup>

Equally modern is Sealsfield's description of the European's initial encounter with the New World. In his first novel, *Der Legitime und die Republikaner* (1833), he shows how the European—in this case, the young Englishman—suddenly lost in the woods, experiences a kind of existential terror and primal loss: "Nirgends war ein fester Punkt zu sehen. . . . Es war vielleicht dieses Gefühl seines Nichts und seiner Verlassenheit in der ungeheueren Gotteswelt, . . ." <sup>24</sup> That *der amerikanische Wald* is imbued with the spirit of the divine (although this theme also recurs in later works with striking similarity) is less significant than the European's response to the irresistible power of the land. The feeling of being lost, of being "mastered" by nature in the Turnerian sense appears again and again in Sealsfield's fiction. In the novel—*Die Farbigen* (1837)—the narrator informs us:

Der Europäer, dessen Auge an abgegränzte Fluren, Felder, Wiesen und Wälder gewöhnt ist, hat gar keine Idee von der Verwirrung, ja Bewilderung die den Neuling bei seinem Eintritt in diese endlos scheinenden Wiesen und Waldwüsteneien ergreifen. Es ist ein wahrer Schwindel, der ihn befällt—er fühlt, bewundert sinnlos, wenn er allein, oder in Gesellschaft Weniger sie betritt. Es ist ihm, als ob er in die Fluthen des Oceans gestoßen, mit dem die Sinne betäubenden Wellen kämpfte.<sup>25</sup>

Another vivid instance in Sealsfield's fiction of being compelled to reassemble one's perceptions in the new American landscape is in *Das Kajütenbuch* (1841) when Colonel Morse describes arriving in Texas for the first time:

Es ist aber auch eine ganz eigenthümliche Empfindung, nach einer dreiwöchigen Seefahrt in einen Hafen einzulaufen, der kein Hafen ist, und ein Land, das halb und halb kein Land ist. Noch immer schien es uns, als müßte es jeden Augenblick unter unseren Füßen wegschwellen.<sup>26</sup>

The theme of being compelled by the environment to restructure one's identity is often coupled with the theme of regeneration in both Sealsfield and Turner. When Turner writes, "this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society furnish the forces dominating American character," he is also, in fact, defining the influences acting upon Sealsfield's protagonists.<sup>27</sup> In the second book of the *Lebensbilder* saga, *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* (1835), the narrator,

initially an effete Virginian, begins to notice some remarkable changes taking place within him: "Man fühlt sich kräftiger, stärker auf Gottes verjüngter Erde."<sup>28</sup> "Liberated," as Turner said, from "the bonds of custom," the European in Sealsfield's world discovers his individuality amid the imperatives of a radically new environment. In short, the frontier for Sealsfield dissolves all vestiges of privilege and class distinction, liberating the European from what Sealsfield writes on another occasion is the powerlessness of being the monarch's subject and allows him to discover the freedom which only mature citizens can enjoy. The frontier then is a twofold process that enables the individual to rediscover the powers of youth, while at the same time paving the way for citizenship in a democratic polity.<sup>29</sup>

Sealsfield is also fond of explaining how the frontier works. In language redolent of Turner, his narrator in *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* explains:

So berühren sich bei uns die Endpunkte sozialer Stellungen, und runden in steter Reibung, in fortwährend wie im Kreisel umherrollender Beweglichkeit ihre wechselseitigen Härten und Ecken ab. Der Senatorssohn baut seine Hütte auf einem Stück Waldlande, das an die Besetzung des Sprößlings eines schottischen Viehtreibers anstößt; das Weib dieses war vielleicht die Magd der Senatorstochter, die sie nun als Nachbarin begrüßt und ihre kleinen Dienstleistungen mit dankbarfrohem Entgegenkommen annimmt. So befördert bei uns gewissermaßen die Nothwendigkeit jenes republikanische Gleichheitssystem, das im Wesen [*sic*] seine Wurzel ausbreitet, tiefer schlägt, während es im Osten, im Gewühle unserer Seestädte, bereits starke Stöße erleidet.<sup>30</sup>

In almost the same language Turner describes how the frontier works to insure an egalitarian society:

Rather it [the democratic society in the West] was a mobile mass of freely circulating atoms, each seeking its own place and finding play for its own powers and for its own original initiative. We cannot lay too much stress upon this point, for it was at the very heart of the whole American movement.<sup>31</sup>

Both Sealsfield and Turner then invoke the image of a society *in fluidum*, a society that seems to possess an intrinsic resistance to the emergence of privilege and exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

At the core of Sealsfield's fiction as well as of the frontier thesis is the conversion experience. The European comes to America, is exposed to the

frontier environment, and eventually undergoes a profound change and becomes an American. This is in effect what happens to George Howard, Count Vignerolles, Colonel Morse—some of the principal characters in Sealsfield's major novels. They all begin as Europeans or Eastern gentlemen and then as a result of the Western environment and a pioneer mentor who embodies this environment and who initiates them into its secrets, they become true Americans. When Count Vignerolles—the sometimes narrator of the *Lebensbilder* tetralogy—exclaims:

Jetzt merkten wir, daß wir wirklich in einer neuen Welt, unter neuen Menschen uns befanden, deren Cultur, obwohl die Elemente europäisch, durch und durch amerikanische Formen oder vielmehr Natur angenommen hatten, himmelweit verschieden von der der Creolen und unserer importirten Landsleute, die mir in dem Augenblicke, wenn ich es frei gestehen soll, wie zweimal aufgewärmtes Ragout vorkamen,<sup>33</sup>

he is pointing to the central tenet underlying the Turner thesis—the notion of American exceptionalism. America is different, both Turner and Sealsfield would maintain, because the frontier has succeeded in creating a new American consciousness. In one of Sealsfield's most revealing passages, Count Vignerolles already adumbrates Turner's famous discussion of the so-called intellectual traits elicited by the frontier environment:

Inmitten dieser Tätigkeit frappirte es uns zugleich nicht wenig, daß wir anfangen, über Dinge, die vor und hinter uns lagen, auf eine ganz neue Weise zu raisonnieren, auf eine republikanisch amerikanische Weise zu raisonnieren, möchte ich sagen; eine Weise, die mit unserer früheren Sprache und Denkungsart auch nicht im mindesten in Zusammenhange stand. . . . Es ging eine ganze Revolution in unserem Ideensystem vor: . . .—Dieß frappirte uns nicht wenig; es war ein psychologisches Phänomen, und desto unerklärbarer, da wir über diese Gegenstände kaum je mit unsern Squatter-Nachbarn gesprochen, unsere Ideen daher spontaneös waren. . . .—Es schien uns, als ob wir aus einem langen Traume erwacht, der Kindheit, dem Leitbände entwachsen, das uns bisher hin und her gegängelt hatte.<sup>34</sup>

In a frontier society, both Turner and Sealsfield believe, the values of space become preeminent. The East has already succumbed to the forces of history, displaying the usual symptoms of decline and disorder. However as a counterweight to the Europeanized East (which is

synonymous in Turner's thought with the pernicious tyranny of history), there is the West, the frontier, which is characterized by the beneficent tyranny of space. The frontier, as long as it exists, will continue to exercise a tempering influence upon the ultimate rise and fall of societies, preventing the divisions that have traditionally rent European society. Hence consonant with his notion of a society of space, Sealsfield also employs his own "safety valve" theory:

Vielleicht ist es ein Glück für eben diese Staaten, daß sie gewissermaßen dieses fagend\*) an ihrem Lande besitzen, wo die wilden Leidenschaften austoben können; denn im Busen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft dürfen sie viel Unheil anrichten.

\*) Fagend. Dieses unübersetzbare Wort dürfte einer nähern Bezeichnung um so mehr werth seyn, als es häufig gebraucht wird; fagend nennt man das ausgezupfte Ende eines Strickes, das Werthlose an irgend einer Sache; die Canadas z. B. werden ganz richtig das fagend von Amerika genannt. Hier heißen die Steppen zwischen dem Felsengebirge und Mississippi fagend<sup>35</sup> [see "fag end," *American Heritage Dictionary*].

There is a slight shift of emphasis here. Instead of the East being amid an irrevocable process of decline according to Turner, the East maintains its own order and purity by having a frontier outlet for its seemingly dissolute citizens. Sealsfield embraces here a common narrative that was quite persuasive at the time. The best example of this narrative can be found in Timothy Dwight's work, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (1821). Dwight was President of Yale College and an important literary figure in New England, and his views on the West enjoyed a certain popularity. Abiding by the same narrative as Sealsfield, Dwight notes:

All countries contain restless inhabitants, men impatient of labor; . . . Under despotic governments they are awed into quiet; but in every free community they create, to a greater or lesser extent, continual turmoil and have often overturned the peace, liberty and happiness of their fellow-citizens.<sup>36</sup>

It is significant that Dwight's narrative did not go unanswered. Only a few years later Timothy Flint felt it necessary to defend the reputation of the backwoodsman and the meaning of the frontier experience as well. In *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (1826), referring to Dwight directly, Flint deliberately chooses the *persona* of an Easterner who goes West in order to lend more force to his arguments. Traveling throughout the West, unarmed, Flint exclaims, "I scarcely remember to have experienced



anything that resembled insult, or to have felt myself in danger from the people.<sup>37</sup> Rather Flint redeems the frontier experience from a descent into lawlessness into a vindication of the triumph of civilization:

The backwoodsman of the west [sic], as I have seen him, is generally an amiable and virtuous man. His general motive for coming here is to be a freeholder, to have plenty of rich land, to be able to settle his children about him.<sup>38</sup>

Sealsfield's vision of the frontier contains the same ambivalence inherent in the frontier thesis. As Henry Nash Smith wisely says, the frontier is at once a paean to progress and to primitivism.<sup>39</sup> This was, as one literary historian has noted, the central dilemma facing the best minds in America in the antebellum period—the belief in nature as an alternative standard of value to European civilization and the doctrine of progress and material growth.<sup>40</sup> Turner resurrected this dilemma in a somewhat elegiac fashion for an entire generation of Americans who suddenly realized that they had far surpassed Europe in certain dubious aspects of civilization, including frightening urban landscapes. On the other hand, the frontier in Turner's eyes was never meant to pose a serious alternative to civilization. On the contrary, it became akin to a regulating mechanism which guaranteed that America stayed healthy and stable. It was, to use John Cawelty's term, a symbol of "revitalization" for a society that was experiencing the first shocks of modernity.<sup>41</sup> Turner's real dilemma—akin to Sealsfield's—was that, as American society began to enjoy "unparalleled progress," it also began to resemble European civilization, displaying all those signs of malaise, to which America was presumably immune. It also meant that the frontier would cease to exist and hence no longer exert a restraining influence on the inevitable decline of republican civilization.

What Sealsfield and Turner further have in common is that, as they both define the frontier as "a form of society," they also postulate the self-made man ideal. In an essay published after the celebrated essay in Chicago, "The Problem of the West" (1896), Turner writes, "The self made man was the Western man's ideal, was the kind of man that all men might become."<sup>42</sup> This is in fact a simple restatement of Sealsfield's own utopian longings—the fantasy of a society, unlike the Habsburg monarchy, free from the dictates of caste and deference. It is also the idea behind his great character Nathan, the squatter. Contrary to the ideal of the American Adam, which governed the imagination of many of Sealsfield's contemporaries, Nathan became the embodiment of acquisitiveness and manifest destiny, the belief in the ultimate triumph of militant agrarianism.<sup>43</sup> In the cultural dialogue centering on the problems of modernization and the values of civilization versus the values

of nature, Sealsfield gravitates toward the former. His pastoralism is decidedly not of the soft variety, but instead is based on expansion as well as on an uncompromising Protestant work ethic. Hence the two principal symbols in the *Lebensbilder*—the *Embryo-Pflanzung* and *das Vaterhaus*—are based on a state of siege mentality with the land and with one's own psyche. In a sense they suggest many of the attributes of Sealsfield's monastery in Prague.

"I assure you," one of Sealsfield's characters exclaims, that "there is no happier life than that of the American gentleman, who lives in harmony with his neighbor and who is lord and master of his own estate and in his own house. He is the only free man on earth" [translation mine].<sup>44</sup> This resembles Turner's statement in his frontier essay: "So long as free land exists the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power."<sup>45</sup> This is perhaps the most pervasive formula in American political theory. It excludes, of course, those who do not possess economic power from exercising political influence. However Turner believed that the availability of free land would distribute economic power equally and provide democracy with a broad foundation. Sealsfield's notions were more complex. On the one hand, he celebrated the Jeffersonian dictum of a republic of small landowners. In his first book, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (1827), he describes the Ohio Valley in terms strikingly similar to Turner:

Überall blickt ein Wohlstand hervor, der solid ist, denn er ruht auf festem Grunde, dem unerschütterlichen Eigenthumsprinzip des Einzelnen. Der rechtliche, kluge und thätige Mann lebt nirgends so gut, so frei, so glücklich, als in Amerika.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, in his earliest writings, Sealsfield was also attracted to the plantation system of the antebellum South. In his fiction Sealsfield invoked a pyramidal concept of democracy. His "American gentleman" is the patriarch of a large household that is carefully stratified according to family, race, education, language, and taste. As evinced by one of his finest characters—Ralph Doughby—the narrator, who is constantly assessing Doughby, is not so certain of Doughby's suitability to join the gentry class, because of what he regards as his crude frontier origins.<sup>47</sup> Further, in his *Pflanzerleben II* Sealsfield conducts a "Sklaven-Debatte" between what is presented as a naive, idealistic Frenchman who represents the European, Jacobean point of view and the mature, pragmatic (with Burkean sympathies) plantation owner who represents of course the vastly superior American point of view.<sup>48</sup>

The frontier thesis attempted to resolve the dilemma that Americans were habitually confronted with in the nineteenth century as the continent began to be increasingly more settled. Both Turner and Sealsfield would

have found a solution to James Fenimore Cooper's classically liberal treatment of the different kinds of equality:

Equality, in a social sense, may be divided into that of condition, and that of rights. Equality of condition is incompatible with civilization, and is found to exist only in those communities that are but slightly removed from the savage state. In practice it can only mean a common misery.<sup>49</sup>

The frontier acts as a continual guarantor of "equality of condition" and "equality of rights," for as Turner writes, liberty and equality were found on the frontier in degrees unknown to previous societies.<sup>50</sup>

"Thus, in the beginning," Locke said, "All the world was America."<sup>51</sup> This attractive fable was the starting point, both for Sealsfield's and Turner's meditations on what constitutes the good society and the new man. They both shared the belief that a nation that possessed vast tracks of free land harbored a utopian potential. It was only in the rendition of this utopian potential that both sharply differed. For Turner the West became, to use Henry Nash Smith's term, *the Myth of the Garden*. As Turner writes in his essay, "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History" (1909-10), the Mississippi Valley offers the possibility of "an empire of natural resources in which to build a noble social structure worthy to hold its place as the heart of American industrial, political and spiritual life."<sup>52</sup> For Sealsfield, on the other hand, the West is transmuted into *the Myth of the Plantation*, where the American Southwest becomes the setting for his plantation utopia, which he compares to the Garden of Hesperides of classical mythology.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless the frontier thesis molded Sealsfield's and Turner's ideological and personal visions in remarkably similar ways. Both men thought of themselves as liberals and progressives and yet found themselves fighting a rearguard action to conserve a society of the past. Troubled by the Civil War and by the expansion of commercial capitalism, Sealsfield announced the end of the frontier and the beginning of a world which he regarded with disquietude:

Nun ist freilich die transatlantische Welt bevölkert, aber die Elemente dieser Bevölkerung heterogen, verdorben—lasterhaft, verbrecherisch zum Theil—diese Elemente haben zugleich die Crisis heraufbeschworen, eine Crisis aus der das Land gesunder hervorgehen, aber unter der es auch in Theile zerbrochen werden kann. . . .<sup>54</sup>

For Turner, of course, the starting point of his history was the end of the frontier, and the crisis that he continually invokes throughout his

work is the end of American exceptionalism and the fragility of a post-frontier society. Once there is no longer free land, how can nature continue its work of Americanization, its regeneration of American culture? More importantly, like Sealsfield, Turner believed that democracy in the classically liberal sense was in grave danger. The encroachments of collectivization, bureaucracy, socialism, plutocracy—all these forces were threatening to impose upon American democracy a European and hence negative form.

Thus despite their courageous moments of optimism, the ruling emotion of both Sealsfield's and Turner's achievement was quiet desperation. Despite all of Turner's appeals to sectionalism and the state university and the pioneer heritage, he was not able to find a way of transcending the implications of the frontier thesis and create a viable model of the future.<sup>55</sup> In Sealsfield's case as well, as he reached the end of his life, he was plagued by the same insight as Turner: America had finally become Europeanized. This may help to explain why Sealsfield did not publish any more works in the last years of his life. It also explains why Turner published only two books during his lifetime, only one of which was a historical monograph.<sup>56</sup>

Still Sealsfield's work perhaps comes closer to capturing the underlying significance of the frontier. In contrast to Turner, Sealsfield's epic of Western expansion is ultimately based on *Machtstreben*.<sup>57</sup> In this sense Sealsfield's West approximates more closely in temper Turner's contemporary Owen Wister. In his novel, *The Virginian* (1902), the narrator, who resembles Wister himself, exclaims:

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the eternal inequality of man. . . . This is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are the same thing.<sup>58</sup>

This is almost identical with Sealsfield's notion of "the democratic aristocrat." In *Das Kajütenbuch* his spokesman in the novel—the *Alcalde*—compares the Anglo-Americans in Texas with the Norman conquest of England. According to this analogy, the Texans, like the Normans before them, are supposed to sweep the old aristocracy aside and regenerate society. Their only claim to rule, as Sealsfield's mentor figure argues, rests ultimately on their will to power.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, then, Sealsfield is not only an important precursor of the frontier thesis, but in addition an unsettling voice in its ideological deconstruction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and its Sections*, ed. Avery Craven (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith 1958), 582.

<sup>2</sup> Turner shows a great fondness for literature, frequently citing the poets of his day in his important essays. Still his important assessment of Edgar Allan Poe in the work already cited epitomizes Turner's approach to literature: "Perhaps the most original of the American writers of this generation was Poe, whose work was done between 1827 and 1849: [sic] but he was an individual genius, less expressive of his country and his period than some of the writers not so great in fame." See *The United States, 1830-1850*, 581.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Turner's precursors, see Ray Allen Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> The literature on this theme is seemingly inexhaustible. A more recent work of interest, however, which examines travel literature and its relation to the settlement of the West, is Bruce Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature, 1790- 1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1920), 1-38.

<sup>6</sup> Of course cultures usually preserve two dimensions of retreat—both time and space. Frontier societies probably prefer the latter, but are also capable of conjuring up visions of the former. For example, the United States has found solace in the Founding Fathers and the Constitution as one ready example of a retreat into the past. In fact as the dimension of space seems to recede, the dimension of time gains in importance in setting up alternatives to the much maligned present.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Clark, "The Last of the Iroquois: History and Myth in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*," *Poetics Today* 3, 4 (1982): 123-24. See also his later work, *History and Myth in American Fiction, 1823-1857* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Hofstadter's analysis of the 1890s makes clear that the Turner thesis fits into the scheme of *Angst* in "Cuba, the Philippines, and Manifest Destiny," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 184.

<sup>9</sup> This fact has been amply documented by Sealsfield scholars such as Alexander Ritter, Walter Grünzweig, and Franz Schüppen in various essays and monographs. These critics have focused mainly on literary genre (the Western, the pastoral), cultural symbolism (the "middle ground"), and ideology and myth (manifest destiny and the doctrine of progress). For a more recent study of Sealsfield and the significance of the West, see Günter Schnitzler, *Erfahrung und Bild: Die dichterische Wirklichkeit des Charles Sealsfield (Karl Postl)* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1988). Furthermore, two recent publications focus on various aspects of Sealsfield's work, including Sealsfield's relationship to westward expansion. See Charlotte L. Brancaforte, ed., *The Life and Works of Charles Sealsfield (Karl Postl)* (Madison, Wisconsin: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 1993) and Franz B. Schüppen, *Neue Sealsfield Studien: Amerika und Europa in der Biedermeierzeit* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1995). Still, the actual connections between Sealsfield's achievement and Turner's frontier thesis have never been adequately documented.

<sup>10</sup> For studies on the German *Amerikaroman*, see Juliane Mikoletzky, *Die deutsche Amerika-Auswanderung des 19. Jahrhunderts in der zeitgenössischen fiktionalen Literatur* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> There are two principal schools of thought regarding the frontier thesis. One school represented by Henry Nash Smith regards the frontier thesis as an essential part of American mythology. The other school, perhaps best represented by William Appleman Williams, regards the frontier thesis as an effective ideology.

<sup>12</sup> This interpretation of American culture and letters, propounded by such scholars as Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Chase and others, has had an enormous impact

on American Studies. Unfortunately these scholars often substitute ideology and myth for historical criticism, thereby only touching upon the surface structure of American culture and not upon its deeper complexity. For a refreshing critique of this approach, see the above-mentioned work by Robert Clark, *History and Myth in American Fiction, 1823-1857*.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 4.

<sup>14</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History," in *The Frontier in American History*, 180.

<sup>15</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Crèvecoeur, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Crèvecoeur, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Crèvecoeur, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Turner, 23. Of all the metaphors which Turner employs to invoke the frontier, the "crucible" is perhaps the most vivid and illuminating. The "crucible" captures that amalgam of myth and fairy tale underlying the frontier thesis and hence makes it such a persuasive explanation of American exceptionalism. The "crucible" is also present in Crèvecoeur when he writes, "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (39).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *Das Pflanzlerleben II und Die Farbigen* (Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1976), 121.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "Dr. Von Holst's History of the United States," in Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy: Unpublished Writings in American History* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1965), 90. Hermann von Holst (1841-1904) belongs to those German-American historians who once enjoyed a wide following as a result of his tome *Verfassungsgeschichte der Vereinigten Staaten (1876-1892)*, but has since disappeared into oblivion. There are several reasons for this, one being of course the difficulties in reading Holst in the original German and perhaps the other being that his so-called Prussian interpretation of American history violated too many implicit cultural norms in writing American history.

<sup>22</sup> Turner often vacillates between a pastoral interpretation of American history in which the land plays a fundamental role to an anthropological explanation in which culture and learned experience are of crucial importance.

<sup>23</sup> David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 34-37. This is a restatement of what psychologists call today "cultural dissonance."

<sup>24</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *Der Legitime und die Republikaner: Eine Geschichte aus dem letzten amerikanisch-englischen Kriege* (1833; rpt., Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1973), 288.

<sup>25</sup> Sealsfield, *Das Pflanzlerleben II und Die Farbigen*, 231-32.

<sup>26</sup> Sealsfield, *Das Kajütenbuch oder Nationale Charakteristiken* (1841; rpt. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1979), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 2.

<sup>28</sup> Sealsfield, *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* (Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1976), 56.

<sup>29</sup> In his fiction as well as in his travel books, Sealsfield contrasts the citizen of a republican commonwealth with the subject of a monarchy. See, for example, *Die deutsch-amerikanischen Wahlverwandtschaften* (1839-40; rpt., Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1982) for the differences in national character between the Americans, the Germans, and the English. Sealsfield adds an interesting variation to American ideology here, reversing the significance of childhood and adulthood in this schema. Instead of America being, as many Europeans have envisaged it, a place where one returns to primal innocence, in Sealsfield's work it becomes a place where one achieves true political maturity, because, as Sealsfield argues, as long as one is oppressed, one can never develop one's faculties and hence will always remain in a childlike state. See, for example, *Die Farbigen*, 218-20.

<sup>30</sup> Sealsfield, *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt*, 230-31.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, "The West and American Ideals," in *The Frontier in American History*, 306.

<sup>32</sup> Once again the significance of Crèvecoeur for Sealsfield's work is unmistakable. Using almost the exact same syntax and imagery as Sealsfield with respect to social levelling, Crèvecoeur writes about the process of Americanization and nonsectarianism: "and it may happen that the daughter of the Catholic will marry the son of the seceder, and settle by themselves at a distance from their parents" (46).

<sup>33</sup> Sealsfield, *Nathan, der Squatter-Regulator, oder der erste Regulator in Texas* (1837; rpt., Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1976), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Sealsfield, *Nathan, der Squatter-Regulator*, 376-77.

<sup>35</sup> Sealsfield, *George Howard's Esq. Brautfahrt* (1834; rpt., Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1976), 197.

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York in The American Scene: Contemporary Views of Life and Society, 1600-1860* (New York: Bantam, 1964), 269-70.

<sup>37</sup> Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years in The American Scene*, 272.

<sup>38</sup> Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 273.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 257.

<sup>40</sup> For an eloquent restatement of this theme, see Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 4.

<sup>41</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 226.

<sup>42</sup> Turner, "The Problem of the West," in *The Frontier in American History*, 213.

<sup>43</sup> In this sense Sealsfield's frontiersman resembles more the frontiersman found in Timothy Flint's work than in the *Leather-Stocking Tales*. See Flint's description of the pioneers in *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*.

<sup>44</sup> Sealsfield, *Nathan der Squatter-Regulator*, 331.

<sup>45</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 32.

<sup>46</sup> Sealsfield, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, nach ihrem politischen, religiösen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse betrachtet* (1827; rpt., Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1972), 201.

<sup>47</sup> *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* illustrates more clearly than his other novels Sealsfield's confusion concerning what constitutes the American ideology. Ralph Doughby becomes acceptable to the planter society of Louisiana as soon as he acquires property and slaves—but with the reservation that he is not a gentleman.

<sup>48</sup> For one of the most interesting literary treatments of the slavery question, see "Die Sklaven-Debatte" in *Pflanzerleben II* (1837).

<sup>49</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat or Hints on the Social and Civic Relations in the United States of America* (1838; rpt., New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 40.

<sup>50</sup> In Turner's essays both terms appear quite frequently, viz., "the democratic pioneers" and "creative competition." Turner returned to Cooper's arguments when he recognized that America was a frontier society. See, for example, "The Ohio Valley in American History" (1909) in *The Frontier in American History* when Turner talks about "a naturally radical society" (165).

<sup>51</sup> John Locke, "An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government," in Ernest Barker, ed., *Social Contract* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 27.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History," 179.

<sup>53</sup> Sealsfield, *George Howard's Esq. Brautfahrt*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> This citation is taken from a Sealsfield letter in the Albert B. Faust collection appended to his *Charles Sealsfield: Der Dichter beider Hemisphären* (Weimar: Emil Felber, 1897), 272-73.

<sup>55</sup> For Turner's struggle to create a model of a post-frontier society, see Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1973).

<sup>56</sup> Turner's relative lack of productivity has been explained as a personal problem by some critics as well as an ideological conundrum from which he could not escape by others. In his lifetime Turner published a volume of essays, *The Frontier in American History* (1920), in which his famous address to the American Historical Society in 1893 is included and *The Rise of the New West* (1906), along with the work already cited—*The United States, 1830-1850* and *The Significance of Sections in American History* (1933)—the latter two works being posthumously published.

<sup>57</sup> It must be qualified here that Turner's conception of the frontier was also based on power, since he defined the frontier for the most part as "free land" or empty space. As Bruce Greenfield points out, this was an American narrative rather than a European or British one, which by contrast conceived of the West as being populated by native peoples. According to Greenfield, this narrative became discernible in 1842 in John Charles Frémont's account of his expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Greenfield further points out that Turner ignored the earlier meanings of the frontier as boundaries or borders shared with other peoples or "nations." See Bruce Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery*, 72-74.

<sup>58</sup> Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Sealsfield, *Das Kajütenbuch*, 1:127-34.