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### Sealsfield's Texas: Metaphor, Experience, and History

Implicit in Charles Sealsfield's seemingly irrepressibly optimistic *Cabin Book* (*Das Kajütenbuch*, 1841) is a quality that Sealsfield calls "high-minded adventure."<sup>1</sup> While the episodic novel unfolds as a series of allegories in which setting is able to speak and act—to be understood as well as felt—corresponding metaphors in *The Cabin Book* unify the frame cycle and reveal a moral aesthetic in which destination and process converge. These strings of metaphors may also reveal something—in the manner of Leon Edel's "figure under the carpet" or "evidence in the reverse of the tapestry"—about Sealsfield's concepts of history and literature.<sup>2</sup>

*The Cabin Book* argues the possibility, even the need, of forecasting the future in a way that reconciled social myth with change. If *Progress*, the theme of the Great Exhibition in 1851 in London, was the dominant myth of the nineteenth century, then evolution and revolution were primary modes by which change was expected to take place. Writers and scientists and explorers therefore engaged in a re-creation, or reevaluation, of "natural history" as a general frame of reference in order to uncover symbologies more relevant to what they perceived as a radically changing reality. Much in the manner that this historicism introduced a dynamic and potentially relativistic way of understanding change, Sealsfield's novel about the southwestern frontier points to both good and bad in the alternately exciting and burdensome task of proving that "social dreams could become things of flesh and blood."<sup>3</sup>

Sealsfield cultivated the rhetoric of the New World as a metaphor of adventure, abundance, and good fortune. The frontier flourished and blossomed under his pen, and he populated it with romantic rebels like himself. But *The Cabin Book* reminds one repeatedly that Eden precluded the Fall (35) and that experiments in democracy remain high-stake gambles for those who want freedom from worn-out homelands, from taxes and debts, from the law and the past (9, 24, 77, 99, 165, 251).



Sealsfield's aspirations for America focused on Texas when he wrote *Das Kajütenbuch* in 1841—five years after the Battle of San Jacinto and five years before Texas entered the Union. His novel about the "birth and resurrection" (212) of Texas life in the 1830s suggests an "enchanted" (14, 26, 29) land inhabited by legendary men, where "you sow nails at night, and find horseshoes in the morning" (15). No other early writer so richly captured the mystique of Texans as they have ever liked to see themselves: bigger than life, better than most other people, mavericks, strutting around and crowing rambunctiously, thoroughly uncompromising about their freedom and dignity, sometimes cheats and tricksters at least in the stories they told, and courageous if not downright foolhardy. Sealsfield's Texas is equally loud and flamboyant: a golden land where sensitive plants grow six feet tall and where the oaks are the tallest on earth.

*The Cabin Book*, named after a plantation house built to look like both an ark and a battleship, unfolds as the personal reminiscence of a young Texas colonel whose tales of great valor on the Jacinto Prairie entertain a circle of "grandee planters" (7) gathered near the Mississippi River. Sealsfield reminds us frequently that these tales of daring and adventure in Texas are set only five years earlier in the middle of the 1830s, but the listeners' rapt attention tells us that these events already belong to a legendary past. Occasionally the guests break in. They want the colonel's true opinions, and the colonel never fails to satisfy their curiosity as he weaves a history together.

The Texas Revolution becomes an allegory, the first of several, as the colonel narrates a story of manifest destiny: the Davids of Texas overcoming the Goliath of Catholic Mexico. But the story is not simple. Like heroes of Homer's *Iliad*, these Texans and Mexicans are flesh and blood mortals garbed in the forces of time. Young and old listen to the colonel's voice. Through his eyes, they watch the Alamo and San Jacinto grow into the eternal struggle to create and to dream.

Sealsfield adorns the epic with tall tales. Not only do mimosas tower in the air, but they are so delicate and pure that they cower before the approaching hoofbeats of a horse and rider. "It is only when you have ridden some distance, that, tremblingly and fearfully," they raise themselves again, "reminding you of a lovely maiden who, touched by some rude hand, terrified and blushing, lets her head sink in her arms, and only ventures to raise it when the danger is past" (32). Sealsfield tells us that the Texas prairies are like a prayer. They inspire a newcomer with "an indescribably, but pious, childlike confidence" (31). Riding these prairies the first time, the narrator remembers how awed he was by their divine majesty. "The God of Moses, who spake out of the burning brush, did not appear comparable to the God who here appeared to me pervading everything, in the clear, immeasurable world" (31). In comparison with the land, Sealsfield's picture of most of the early Texans seems negative. The climate robs people of their ability to think, the author suggests (23, 28, 36). Many Texans are scoundrels running from a shady past. But, he argues, "for such a country, even outcasts and dregs are necessary" (77). The aristocrats, merchants, and



gentle churchgoers of the East Coast have no place in an emerging Texas. Such people, the colonel pauses to puff his cigar, have "too much piety and respect for authority." They "would cringe, bend, submit to everything rather than defend themselves, or rise up and fight. They "are much too orderly." They "love peace and quietness too well." What Texas demands, he concludes, are "restless heads, heads with a cord round their neck, a brand on their body, who do not value their lives more than an empty nut-shell, don't inquire long, and have their rifle always in their hand" (77).

Texans are always a mixed bag. While many seem to be "rabble"—people who could not make anything of themselves anywhere else and drifted westward—Texans are likewise "never satisfied" (55) and that is what makes them a race apart. That is what guarantees their success—to the degree that anything is ever guaranteed. They are heirs of Europe's past. From the Normans they have a bold example in history of an inferior race that won a new land (79, 97). From the Swiss and Greeks they inherited "strategic genius" (141). From the English they have beliefs in inalienable human rights (121). From the Germans, Sealsfield worries, they have the dreams but not the fortitude to hold their heritage together (86). They possess a "grandeur of character": things in Texas stand out in strong relief (99). But whether they can ride their mustang into the future depends on how well they balance their strengths and weaknesses. In many ways, Sealsfield seems to predict, their future is as glowing—and as ambiguous—as the colonel's sunsets. When Texans walk the earth, the ground shakes. "Lands and kingdoms are not won like birds, through mildness, patience, gentleness, modesty, but with power, might, and daring" (84). So legendary Texans ought to win. But Sealsfield is not blind to their faults. To them, freedom is like water to fish (121). They are scarcely conscious of how much they need freedom. Yet they cannot exist without it (121). They cannot live within institutions. They cannot fight from fortresses, and they seldom cooperate well together (155). Texans are made from strong, coarse marble and granite. "No people on earth," the colonel muses, "the ancient Romans perhaps excepted, have had this intense energy, this enduring and almost terrible strength of will" (152). And like Americans, Texans "never lose sight of the great end" (145).

Clearly, Sealsfield knows what will sell to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet behind his rendition of legendary greatness he always discovers deeper meaning: a purposeful dynamism that rises to the occasion, seldom greater than the demands placed on it but always capable of surpassing its shortcomings. That is the heart of *The Cabin Book*, and that message unites "The Jacinto Prairie" with the other stories.

"The Jacinto Prairie," first and most popular of the beautiful novellas that comprise this frame narrative, outlines Sealsfield's myth of history and his concept of the social covenant. In a recent monograph, Walter Grünfzweig underscores the ethical significance of this novella to the whole of the novel when he writes that Texas is "needed in order to reform the American character and to inspire the country's return to the



original values of the founding fathers"—"this principle, this Ariadne's thread" (73) that the grandee planters who listen to this and subsequent novellas have forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

While unfolding Sealsfield's historical consciousness, these seemingly ingenuous tales hark back to two writers most influential on Sealsfield—Goethe and Scott—with a curious twist that gives Sealsfield his singular position. Sealsfield was intent upon exploring what Jerome Bruner calls the "alternativeness of human possibility."<sup>5</sup> And having pondered alternatives, Sealsfield wrote to do battle for the future—his future—armed with an understanding for the *utility* of history akin to that of Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) and Scott's *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818). In examining historical subjects, Goethe and Scott, and similarly Sealsfield, were well aware of the limitations or shortcomings of the past and—in Sealsfield's case—of the future. But the historical arena gave Goethe and Scott the opportunity to correct "values of the human spirit" in the present and Sealsfield to address values of the future.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, for instance, Scott presents a memorable image of progress when he writes, in the opening, of the highflyers and rapid mailcoaches that "thunder" across a then modernizing Britain, rivaling all else in "brilliancy and noise." "Now and then, to complete the resemblance," Scott continues, "it does happen that the career of these dashing rivals . . . meets with [an] undesirable and violent termination." The ancient ways were "slow and sure," Scott muses; when an accident occurs, one rues "the exchange of the slow and safe motion" of old conveyances. A fast-moving lifestyle brings with it, he suggests, the risk of being "smashed to pieces with the velocity of [a] vessel hurled against the breakers, or rather with the fury of a bomb bursting at the conclusion of its career through the air."<sup>7</sup>

Scott ends with a decidedly negative tone, corresponding perhaps with his regret for the passing of the old. But Sealsfield sees boldness and speed as the order of the day. Without advocating "brilliancy and noise" for their own sake, he reminds readers in *The Cabin Book* that the Norman conquest of Britain and the Texan conquest of the future resound with the noise of road-building and empire. The bones of the rowdy Normans paved the way into Britain. And recurring to the metaphor of the marriage of the right men to the right land, Sealsfield adds, "faint heart never won fair lady" (138).<sup>8</sup>

This wooing of destiny sounds much like a *Bildungsroman* for society. Wulf Koepke's explanation of Sealsfield's affinity for Scott's fiction helps explain also the argument of what emerges here as Sealsfield's moral aesthetic. "Sealsfield found his master in Walter Scott, the only famous writer whom he was anxious to meet in person." But unlike Scott and unlike James Fenimore Cooper, Sealsfield "did not write historical novels, but used the *form* of the historical novel, as developed by Scott, to write 'contemporary novels.'"<sup>9</sup>

Sealsfield incorporates, albeit somewhat ambivalently, the strain of aristocratic paternalism found in both Goethe and Scott. Although he theorizes a vaguely Pestalozzian and Comtean religion of humanity<sup>10</sup>



that accrues from democracy, he acknowledges a kind of natural aristocracy (71-73) in practice. But he is far less ambivalent with regard to paternalism, the second aspect of Goethe's and Scott's selective recollection of the past. Somewhat like mysterious runes that whispered their sounds to the attentive reader who learned to "hear" what the letters wanted him to amplify, Sealsfield's Texas awaited reading by legendary men whose story would stand for the new order envisioned timidly by Goethe and apprehensively by Scott. The alcalde and the sea captain are two of several characters in *The Cabin Book* who, having achieved positions of responsibility and judgment, use power vested in them to facilitate history's natural or "vegetable" (263) growth. As Koepke further points out, "Sealsfield saw society in a perpetual process of formation and renewal. He presented alternate models for society and the novel as a genre, which may later have degenerated into adolescent fantasies, but nevertheless should be taken seriously."<sup>11</sup>

Not only in "The Jacinto Prairie" but throughout *The Cabin Book*, which Grünzweig calls a "'Western' with global dimensions,"<sup>12</sup> Sealsfield portrays both beginning and pattern for the human progress that was a major ethical concern of his time. One dominant metaphor in Sealsfield's world is focused on grafting highly developed European culture onto healthy rootstock of the New World where, in fertile soils and free from disease, the best of the Old World could secure a new lease on life. Yet Sealsfield consistently cautions readers to shape substance into idea: to see setting—time and place—as an ambivalent force. Such a setting, he reminds both continents, can be staging ground for a new kind of social history. This environment predisposes a certain behavior, it levels and it democratizes, and it forces people to define themselves in new ways.

Another metaphor, in which Sealsfield develops the ambivalence more clearly, shows the old order riding into the future on the wild mustang that is Texas. In an "enchanted" (25-26) land where nails grow overnight into horseshoes, Sealsfield seems to compare winning the West with taming spirited horses: dangerous not only to the trainer but cruel to the horse as well (18-19). When a runaway mustang leads him almost to his death, young Morse senses that both the prairie and the animal defy him. Both are "beasts" (20) that rob the unwary of a sense of direction, Morse recalls. Only an accident saves Morse's life. When we remember that a horse is a beast of burden and a symbol of freedom, the nature of Sealsfield's emblem becomes clear: Westering Texans try to capture something they have lost, a runaway that promises to take them far. This metaphor of destination and process unites the novellas of *The Cabin Book*.

Sealsfield's Texas is virgin wilderness and virgin time: the new stage for an age-old drama of human history, cheap like the mustangs but full of "strength and rage" (20), land of endless horizons and endless futures, a West Coast of the 1840s. Sealsfield always emphasizes not the going but the coming to terms with the arrival when he cautions that only bold people can court and master these possibilities. Texas may seem a place "where love affairs are got up overnight and become



marriages in the morning" (238), and it may well be a place where wildflowers stand so tall and so thick that a mustang pony has trouble walking (25, 33) through "a flower-garden . . . in which there was scarcely anything green; but the most variegated carpet of flowers—red, yellow, blue, and violet" (25). But this effulgent, almost perverse, "prairie" cautions trespassers to question survival on a diet of blossoms, however promising of seed. Elsewhere Sealsfield warns that the prairie is a sea of flux<sup>13</sup> "rolling in uninterrupted waves" (13), a dancing "vegetable world" (28), a "sea of Bengal fire" (27), a "fire ocean" (29) dotted with oak mottes that look alternately like a "bower" (21) or a "serpent which coils itself to spring upon its prey" (25). Little wonder that virgin Texas is a place where rational people lose their way (35), succumb to a phlegmatic climate (110), and starve amidst plenty (26, 38–39). Texas seems to hold all things for all people—infinite space in a finite world—but Sealsfield's young colonel is old enough to have wondered whether the golden sunsets are blessings or mirages.<sup>14</sup>

"Sealsfield's exaggeration of Romantic images in his description is a warning," adds Koepke in an essay that argues Sealsfield's place in German literary history.

Neither ecstatic dreams nor unreasonable anxiety are suitable attitudes toward this virgin land. . . . The Arcadian view of nature and man is thus replaced by a millennial perspective: nature and society are what humans make out of them through strenuous effort and struggle. Paradise is not the state of this earth, but a goal.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Sealsfield's Texas is not an end, but a means to an end. The transition from "The Jacinto Prairie" to "Kishogue's Curse" widens the scope of the novel. Now the subtitle, *National Characteristics*, assumes significance as Sealsfield compares the "birth" of Texas with the "resurrection" of "whole peoples" elsewhere in the world. The story of unfortunate Kishogue, a gem about a stolen horse, leads into tales of derring-do set outside Texas. Here, in relation to other American liberation movements, Sealsfield tells readers what a "glorious" thing it is to witness the emergence of new nations.

Verily, it is a glorious period for a philanthropist, when it is permitted to him to celebrate the new birth and resurrection of a whole people. At such a time, all that is low and common disappears—the noble and high-hearted feelings overpower all that are unworthy, and the most miserable slave becomes a hero. (212)

The "birth" of Texas from the wilderness dream and the "resurrection" of the Americas from European imperialism speak not only to Texans and Cubans and Bolivians but also to weary Europeans.

Still, even here as the political significance emerges, the emphasis on love and romance and adventure also rises. Throughout the stories run metaphors of conveyances—whether Kishogue's or Morse's horses or Yankee clipper ships that symbolize both destination and process or Captain Murky's "cabin," the ship-like home from which the novel gets



title and frame—all entwined with the question of a “gentleman’s” responsibility to other people. Should a nice young man like Colonel Morse condone rabble? Should a ship captain break the law in order to serve a higher justice? What kind of a man should win the beautiful young maiden Alexandrine? Will it be the Baron de Marigny or the “new man,” Morse, now already a general?

Morse’s guiding stars are obviously in the ascendancy. A self-made man, still rising, whose heritage and natural abilities combine with hard work and sterling conscience, he is a clear symbol of *Progress*, the theme ten years later of the London Exhibition. Never, Sealsfield must have felt when writing about Morse, had people been more conscious of triumphing over the world around them, but never, he thought, had they careened into the future at such speed and so precariously. The future here is not entirely golden, and it never is entirely golden. However, a vein of picaresque humor is always present: rednecks named Cracker, a general named Burnslow, sea captain aliases like Ready and Murky, and paradises as bizarre as a sixty-by-hundred-foot “cabin.” Yet Sealsfield trusts in the ability of all things, all systems and all organisms, even Murky’s “vegetable” house, to right themselves when guided by good minds. “The wheel of the world is urged on,” he writes, “not by dwarf, but by giant hands.”

In its powerful revolutions it crushes the weak; the strong overcome and guide it. Such strong hands were also . . . busy in Texas . . . men with giant souls, who under rude hats hid the finest heads, under rough buckskin waistcoats the warmest hearts—the most iron will; who, desiring great things and carrying out those great things with the most limited means, have founded a new state which . . . has assuredly a great destiny. (165)

Perhaps easily missed elsewhere in “The Jacinto Prairie,” Sealsfield leaves no doubt at the end of the Texas novella that those strong hands are led by even stronger minds. Morse, a nephew of Faust and cousin of Wilhelm Meister, represents the “high-minded adventuresomeness” required to negotiate dangerous highways.

Balancing the promise and the savagery of regeneration through violence, *The Cabin Book* echoes the Old Testament, the romantic beliefs of the second great age of exploration, and the covenant voluntarily adopted by the American republic. As a “contemporary novel” with what we today might call a moral agenda, this novel unearths the organic forces that led to community and government in the Old World.<sup>16</sup> Sealsfield’s Texas reveals to Europe its own childhood, goads America toward its founding dream, and leads both worlds into the future. Some of the princes of the *Adelsverein* claimed the novel gave them the idea of colonizing Texas. And when other German princes explored Texas and led colonists there in order to win new glory for old crowns, they may have known their roles in part from Sealsfield’s characters.<sup>17</sup> If Sealsfield animated what was implicit in travel books like those of J. Val. Hecke (1820, 1821) and helped princes conjure reality



from myth, his novel probably also prepared frontier intellectuals for what they would see and, in the idiom of the day, perpetuated the words and metaphors they used in their letters home. Whether these German writers favored romanticism or emergent poetic realism, the histories, treatises, geographies, and philosophies they wrote—like the planned communities they built—operate out of the same sense of the anatomy and physiology of society and belief systems that Sealsfield recognized as at once ancient and modern. His myth, purporting to be a model of reality, is perhaps more accurately understood as a model for reality, willingly received and widely practiced by the nobles Heinz Gollwitzer describes in *Die Standesherrn* (1964) as well as by republicans and forty-eighters like Ernst Kapp, the geographer and philosopher of technology.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *The Cabin Book or National Characteristics*, trans. Sarah Powell (New York: St. John and Coffin, 1871; rpt. with foreword by Glen E. Lich, Austin: Eakin, 1985), 79. All subsequent citations from this edition are given parenthetically in the text. An abbreviated version of this paper was read in New Orleans at the annual meeting of the South Central Modern Language Association in 1986.

In addition to comprehensive studies of Sealsfield by Alexander Ritter, recent criticism and reprints of *Das Kajütenbuch/The Cabin Book* attest to new trends in Sealsfield scholarship: Walter Grünzweig, *Charles Sealsfield*, Western Writers Series, no. 71 (Boise: Boise State University, 1985); Wulf Koepke, "Charles Sealsfield's Place in Literary History," *South Central Review* 1 (1984): 54-66; and Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, "Charles Sealsfield: *Das Kajütenbuch*," in *Romane und Erzählungen zwischen Romantik und Realismus: Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Paul Michael Lützel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), 314-39.

There is a recent German scholarly edition: *Das Kajütenbuch oder Nationale Charakteristiken*, ed. Alexander Ritter (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982).

Note on the translation selected for the 1985 facsimile edition by Eakin Press: Sarah Powell's 1852 London translation of *Das Kajütenbuch* so closely matches the style and tone of the German that translators must marvel. Not only is her English a nearly exact rendition, but her familiarity with flora, fauna, geography, and then current events of the trans-Mississippi South is equally impressive. Although the ethos of Sealsfield's German approximates the moral aesthetic out of which Victorian prose operated, her text does not act like a translation by another author, nor has it "aged" as a translation by someone other than the original author usually ages.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Edel, "The Figure Under the Carpet," *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Marc Pachter (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1979), 24-25. See also Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), vii, 1-2, 6-7, 40, 51, 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> James Madison, quoted in Arthur Eugene Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Grünzweig, *Charles Sealsfield*, Western Writers Series, no. 71 (Boise: Boise State University, 1985), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 28.



<sup>7</sup> Walter Scott, *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, Everyman's Library (New York: Dutton, 1978), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 8ff.

<sup>9</sup> Wulf Koepke, "Charles Sealsfield's Place in Literary History," *South Central Review* 1 (1984): 55.

<sup>10</sup> See T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Koepke, 61, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Grünzweig, 26.

<sup>13</sup> This imagery of flux takes an autobiographical twist when one recalls that the pseudonym *Sealsfield*, sometimes rendered as *Seatsfield* and *Sealesfield*, was also given as *Seafeld* and, in German, *Siegefeld*.

<sup>14</sup> Compare imagery in John L. Allen, "The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (1985): 207-20.

<sup>15</sup> Koepke, 60.

<sup>16</sup> On the basis of what he writes into *The Cabin Book*, I judge that Sealsfield's interests were somewhat more those of the historical cultural geographer than those of the anthropologist or sociologist. Compare Terry G. Jordan, *The European Culture Area: A Systematic Geography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 48ff. Sealsfield was also interested in the politico-economic foundations of developing areas.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Giddings Benjamin, *The Germans in Texas: A Study in Immigration* (New York: Appleton, 1909; rpt. Austin: Jenkins, 1974), 25-37.



