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The Rhetoric of British and American Narratives of Exploration

The assimilation of information about America was a task which involved European culture on many levels, and its complexity is reflected in the exploration reports which were the major documents of discovery.¹ Especially during the period from 1760 to 1845, narrative accounts of exploration were omnibus vehicles which reached a very large audience of many different kinds of readers. They fostered the discovery of specialized forms of commercial and scientific information, and they supplied readers' large appetites for information and images to do with the world at the fringes of their awareness. Moreover, in the early years of the American republic they helped Euro-Americans, who could be neither European nor Indian, find a way of identifying themselves in the New World. The published accounts of such famous travellers as Alexander Mackenzie, Samuel Hearne, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, and John Charles Fremont were self-consciously not abstract compilations of data but the narratized experience of particular observers of America. In telling what happened to them, rather than simply reporting what they found or achieved, such explorer/writers appealed to a wide readership and provided a basis for their stories' surviving the useful life of the information they contained. As the testimony of exemplary travellers in unknown regions of America such narratives became models for Europeans assimilating American experiences, and for citizens of the new republic identifying themselves in relation to Europeans and Indians. It was this more generalized usefulness which accounts for their remarkable popularity and for their influence on more strictly literary writing in America.²

That narratives and not abstract reports were written, and that they were almost invariably written in the first person as the observations of an eye-witness, suggest the extent to which the explorer was a figure with whose activity the public could readily identify themselves. Alexander von Humboldt, for example, after having published seven

volumes of results from his researches in tropical America, maintained that, even so, he was “forced” to take on the task of producing a first person narrative of his journey. In the introduction to the resulting eight-volume work, he explains that “there is such a marked preference for this kind of composition that scholars, after having presented in abstract form their researches on the productions, manners, and political state of the countries they visited, have in no way satisfied their contract with the public if they have not also written their personal narrative.”³ This insistence on a first-hand account of exploratory travel pushed the publishers of such accounts into distinctly literary manipulations of the presentation. John Hawkesworth, a journalist not present on the voyage, wrote the narrative of Cook’s first voyage entirely in the first person, as though Cook himself were speaking. Hawkesworth felt that “a narrative in the first person would . . . more strongly excite interest, and consequently offer more entertainment.”⁴ The official narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition embodies a similar stylistic fiction. It was mostly written by Nicholas Biddle from the copious journals kept by both the leaders. After a brief introductory note the narrative begins: “All our preparations being completed, we left our camp on Monday, May 14, 1804.” The first person is the rule thereafter, but with the wrinkle that it is very often plural. A “We” which implies first-hand observation and involvement presides over much of the narrative: “In the morning we observed one of our men riding on horse back toward the boat, and we were much pleased to find that it was George Shannon, one of our party, for whose safety we had been very uneasy.”⁵

There was a kind of interest in these narratives which was “disinterested,” that is imaginative, in something very like a literary sense. Most readers had nothing directly to gain by spending their money and time on such accounts. Most readers, like the narrators of the journeys, were engaged in imagining a new world whose relation to them was problematic. For the reader, the first-person narrator was a kind of imagining *factotum*, a literary handiman, whose personal experiences in strange environments represented many other imaginative efforts to incorporate the new lands and peoples of the Americas into a European world view.

Early explorers who wrote about their experiences dealt very directly with problems of the European adaptation to North American lands and peoples. Particularly when they came to write about their discoveries, travellers to unknown territories found themselves caught between the expectations and interests of their countrymen, some of whom were their patrons or employers, and the unique character of their experience among new lands and peoples. For certain of the more

careful observers the character of their experiences threatened to transform the terms of their errands, and the writing of their accounts focussed the conflict between loyalty to the places from which they departed and to which they returned and an honest reporting of the actual experiences of the places and peoples they "discovered." In dealing with the inevitable tensions between desires and actualities eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers developed rhetorical strategies for imagining and representing themselves in a North American context. Reading their narratives is most rewarding when we focus on these strategies, for then we are dealing with the difficulties Europeans had in deciding who they were in relation to Europe and America, and we are isolating the stories they told to represent the matter to themselves. As an example of such a reading I shall look at one British narrative, Samuel Hearne's *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* (London, 1795), and one slightly later American one, Lewis and Clark's *History of the expedition under the command of Lewis and Clark, to the sources of the Missouri, thence across the Rocky Mountains and down the River Columbia to the Pacific Ocean* (Philadelphia, 1814), focussing on how they handle the conflict between European and local sources of American identity.

The rhetoric of Samuel Hearne's *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort to the Northern Ocean* depends to a large extent upon Hearne's attempts to deal with the expectations of his employers, backers, and home audience on the one hand, and the specific demands of life and travel in remoter regions of eighteenth-century North America on the other. This tension pervades Hearne's narrative (and others like it) whether he is describing the day-to-day conduct of the expedition, or discussing the formulation of its ultimate goals. Hearne experienced it as he attempted to carry out the instructions he had accepted at the beginning of his journey from modern Churchill to the mouth of the Coppermine River, and he experienced this tension again as he attempted to write his account of his journey, when he had to keep in mind both his initial instructions and what actually had happened.

What Hearne and others like him came to write about their travels, their task was to translate what they had learned from the local environment and peoples into knowledge which was comprehensible and useful to European imperialists. In particular, Hearne had to determine what a source of copper which was important to the local Indians would mean to the Hudson's Bay Company, and whether the Indians' journey to the Coppermine River would be feasible for Europeans. He had to translate his experience of the Indian North into a European "discovery." The vitality of Hearne's narrative springs from

the conflicts between his role as a Hudson's Bay Company employee and his remarkable ability to understand and adapt to the mundane realities of Northern nature and society, quite apart from their potential usefulness as discoveries.

Hearne was aware of these conflicts as he wrote. A fairly straightforward example of such a conflict can be seen in his account of the "Northern" Indians' method of impounding deer. Certain groups of Indians, by driving small herds of deer into a prepared enclosure, were able to support all the members of their community comfortably, in one place, for a good portion of the winter. The problem with this behaviour, from the trader's point of view, was that these Indians had neither the need nor the inclination to hunt fur-bearing animals, and so they had nothing to trade. Hearne was aware of this problem, but his account of these Indians begins with a long and detailed description of the ingenuities of their method of capturing deer. Moreover he observes that this method "is an easy way of procuring a comfortable maintenance in the winter months," and that it is "wonderfully well adapted to the support of the aged and infirm. . . ."6 Hearne clearly admired the wisdom which kept these people comfortable and secure throughout the worst months of the year. He says that, compared to those who organize their lives around the pursuit of fur-bearing animals, they are "by far the greatest philosophers, as they never give themselves the trouble to acquire what they can do well enough without." They are seldom, he says, unable to satisfy their "real wants" (p. 52).

As soon as he brings the Indians' way of life into the context of the fur trade, however, Hearne's tone undergoes a radical shift. "[I]t cannot be supposed," he says, "that those who indulge themselves in this indolent method of procuring food can be masters of anything for trade;" whereas "the more industrious" are able to "procure furs during the Winter to purchase a sufficient supply of ammunition, and other European goods, to last them another year" (p. 51). In this context, those who hunt for furs, disregarding what Hearne has just defined as their own best interests, are suddenly "industrious," while those who were the intelligent "philosophers," careful of the aged and infirm, are suddenly seen as "indolent," self-indulgent, and "unambitious." Similarly, when these latter Indians do make a trip to the trading factory, "with three or four beaver skins," he says they generally "beg and steal" more than the furs they bring in are worth. The "philosophers" of the wilderness become the beggars of the trading post. Hearne's conflicting attitudes toward this one group of Indians reflect his conflicting loyalties. On the one hand he has a role to play in the prosecution of a lucrative trade, and as an employee or "servant"

he is bound to fulfill that role to the best of his abilities. On the other hand, his extensive experience with Indian peoples, and his extraordinary ability to apprehend the logic of unfamiliar cultures (indeed, to imagine himself a part of them), makes him aware that most Indians could best satisfy their "real needs" without recourse to the traders. Hearne's roles as a loyal Hudson's Bay Company "servant" and as an honest, sympathetic observer of the local world conflict throughout his narrative. The reader wonders whether Hearne's is a story about the Europeanizing of America, or the Americanizing of a European. Indeed, Hearne's ambivalent feelings about his role as go-between exposed him to the criticism of some readers who felt he was too adaptable to Indian ways and points of view.⁷

Yet Hearne's adaptability to Indian ways was essential to his success in reaching his goal, the mouth of the Coppermine River. Eighteenth-century Europeans were not technologically able to make this kind of journey in the far north on their own. They could not carry enough food to support themselves; they could not rely on the resources of the land for sustenance; and the Indian population was too sparse and variable to count on as a source of supplies along the way. The actual means by which Hearne achieved his end were, however, troublesome to write about, for the conventional and desirable image of the explorer was that of a man mastering the unfamiliar, uncooperative lands and peoples which lay in his path. Exploration conventionally connoted independence and aggressiveness, the knowledge-gathering process as preparation for outright conquest. Hearne's narrative, in contrast, is full of situations in which he is a passive dependent of the strangers he is investigating. He achieved the ultimate goal of his travels mainly because the Indians themselves had their own reasons for going where he wanted to go. In many ways his role was that of an observer being led to his destination by people who already knew what he wanted to learn.

Hearne concludes the story of the journey to the Coppermine by explaining how he calculated the latitude he assigned to the river mouth and by noting that "for the sake of form, . . . I erected a mark, and took possession of the coast, on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company" (p. 106). The irony of this gesture was probably not lost on Hearne. In going through this ceremony he identified himself with a central image of the European age of discovery and conquest, that of the heroic discoverer planting his flag or cross in the land of which he has taken possession for his ruler and god. This gesture seems presumptuous even when made by a Cartier on the mere fringes of the new land, within reach of his ships and weapons. Here, however, Hearne is beyond even presumption, hundreds of miles beyond any means to

buttress his authority. He is, in effect, the possession of what he pretends to possess. In making this gesture Hearne means to call attention to his original reasons for undertaking the journey, and to the "form" of the story he wants to tell—the journey out, the triumphant discovery, and the return to the context which gives meaning and value to the whole effort. However, when he says that he made it "for the sake of form," he is also clearly aware that his possession of the Coppermine region is merely formal; first, because he has learned that it is effectively beyond the range within which any European power can enforce its will, and second, because he has found nothing of what he originally hoped for, no copper to speak of, and no navigable harbor. The real "contents," as it were, of Hearne's expedition lie in the partially suppressed story of his interaction with the Indians and environment of the region. The plot of this second story, rather than conquest or discovery, bespeaks dependence, apprenticeship, and the adoption, voluntarily or not, of an alien system of values.

Hearne's uneasy balancing of European interests and American experiences was no longer possible when American explorers such as Lewis and Clark came to write of their western explorations. The main difference between their situation and Hearne's was that the nineteenth-century United States was expanding westward, and there was a direct conflict between existing peoples and westering Euro-Americans over possession of the land itself. Hearne's British sponsors were interested in a trading relation with the northern peoples, not in actual possession of the soil. Hearne and other British fur traders viewed the Northern and Western lands essentially as the "Indian Countries."⁹ They experienced the land as part of existing cultures, as already peopled, and they felt themselves to be travellers among foreign nations.

That the land was already inhabited became a grave problem for American explorers. They were representing interested parties like Jefferson, for example, who viewed the existing states as "the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled," and like Timothy Dwight, who looked forward in his poem *Greenfield Hill* to the near day when America's "sons across the mainland roam;/ And claim on far Pacific shores, their home."⁸ With this kind of pressure at their backs, American explorers were restricted, even more than Hearne was, in their attempts to describe the development of relationships with existing cultures.

American explorers had the additional problem of being American, not European, of having to find some way to regard the continent as home and as the locus of their identity. Yet, if they were the Americans, who were these people they encountered when they travelled west into the heart of America? To the extent that Euro-American explorers

rendered a full account of the lives and customs of the peoples they encountered, they erected barriers to their own culture's westering myth. It was difficult to confirm the Eastern American's vision of American destiny in the west when the land so obviously figured in the destinies of other peoples.

One example of the kinds of conflicts which arose between the purposes of exploration and its results was the problem Lewis and Clark faced when they reported good sites for farms and settlements. Good sites for farms were often already recognized and exploited as such by the local inhabitants. In the fertile valley of the "Multnomah" (Willamette) River, near its confluence with the Columbia in modern Oregon, Lewis and Clark describe sixteen different peoples living in close relation with one another. It is this valley, however, which they say is the "only desirable situation for a settlement on the western side of the Rocky mountains" (p.930). This observation comes in the midst of perhaps their most elaborate description of the complex existing Indian culture, and the juxtaposition of the two concerns suggests the contradiction inherent throughout the Lewis and Clark enterprise—that knowledge gained through the sympathetic study of the local peoples will prove as detrimental to Indians as it is useful to the readers of the report. Lewis and Clark portray their relation to these people as that of important guests: for the moment they conform more or less to the local codes of behavior, trying to be friendly, fair, and not too disruptive. They seem to recognize, nonetheless, the threat their vision of westering America constitutes for the existing Columbians.

Such a conflict cannot easily be resolved. What we find in the Lewis and Clark *History* instead of resolution is the development of a way of speaking which, rhetorically at least, detaches the land from its population and thus skirts the problem. Increasingly, as the narrative progresses, Lewis emerges as a specially equipped observer, who recounts his personal responses to the sublime and beautiful aspects of the land conceived as a wild landscape rather than as an inhabited country. In passages describing badland rock formations the language of artifice, the references to "elegant galleries," "parapets adorned with statuary," to "columns," "pedestals," and "capitals," denotes a kind of perception which only representatives of "civilization" could bring to bear on rocks. In another situation, before the Great Falls of the Missouri, Lewis makes clear the significance of such perceptions:

[S]eating himself on some rocks under the center of the falls, [Lewis] enjoyed the sublime spectacle of this stupendous object, which since the creation had been lavishing its magnificence on the desert, unknown to civilization. (p. 365).

Here Lewis positions himself for the sole purpose of taking in the sight. His prose calls attention to this self-conscious and unique act of perception. That “Indians” and a few “Frenchmen” (as he says) have seen these falls before only serves to highlight the significance of this occasion. Lewis’s arrival at these magnificent falls, “one of the most beautiful objects in nature,” is the fulfillment of their creation. Until then, their grandeur had been wasted, because never rightly seen.

In this part of the narrative Lewis has detached himself from the other members of the party and is exploring the falls alone. In a passage that is perhaps the most intense and personal of his encounters with the land, he proceeds upstream past the several cataracts which make up the series known as the Great Falls. The language of eighteenth-century aesthetics continues to mark each encounter with a new sight as a special act of appreciation. The upper cataract, he says, “was indeed beautiful, since, without any of the wild, irregular sublimity of the lower falls, it combined all the regular elegances which the fancy of a painter would select to form a beautiful waterfall.” Finally, at the head of the falls, Lewis notes what must have seemed to him a very significant detail:

Here on a cottonwood tree an eagle had fixed her nest, and seemed undisputed mistress of a spot, to contest whose dominion neither man nor beast would venture across the gulfs that surround it, and which is further secured by the mist rising from the falls. (p. 369).

The eagle—adopted in 1786 as the central motif of the United States seal—here calls attention to the fullest meaning of Lewis’s encounter with the land. It suggests that it is not just a civilized man who has come to fulfill the destiny of the place, but a civilized American, whose totem, the eagle, is also the presiding spirit of the place. The eagle presides like a nurturing deity over the mutual recognition of man and nature, of American and America.

From the eagle’s nest, Lewis ascended a small hill, “. . . and saw from its top a delightful plain, extending from the river to the base of the Snow [Rocky] mountains Along this wide level country the Missouri pursued its winding course, filled with water to its even and grassy banks. . . .” (p. 370). Lewis’s sense of the sublime, his encounter with natural grandeur, ultimately yields this vision of a receptive, “delightful” plain, into which he is ready to move, under the approving eye of the female eagle. Moreover, some months later, when the party reaches what they take to be the source of the Missouri, it is as though their pious attention to the demands of the river has been rewarded by its daemon:

They had now reached the hidden sources of that river, which had never yet been seen by civilized man. As they quenched their thirst at the chaste and icy fountain—as they sat down by the brink of that little rivulet, which yielded its distant and modest tribute to the parent ocean—they felt themselves rewarded for all their labors and all their difficulties. (p. 484).

Here, men and the land unite in a unique moment of discovery, the “chaste fountain” yielding its “modest tribute” to the men, as well as to the parent ocean.

The conceiving of the land as innocent of human associations is a general tendency throughout the narrative, in spite of copious evidence in the narrative itself of native peoples’ having incorporated the land as a part of their culture. These were peoples on whom Lewis and Clark relied for food, information and transportation, and whose unique ways they did not overlook. Dealing with dozens of Indian groups along their way, it required an act of imagination to respond to the land as essentially empty and waiting to be discovered, while daily documenting the lives of its inhabitants and how they incorporated it in their cultures. Lewis and Clark’s description of the West is as copious, precise, and sympathetic as any before or since, but while they valued their role as objective observers, they also gloried in the discovery of what they saw as the essential nature of the place, a nature which transcended the accidents of local Indian societies.

In writing narrative accounts of their explorations Hearne and Lewis and Clark were forced by the actual writing to confront historical conflicts, and each narrative can be seen as the writer’s negotiating of these conflicts. To simplify greatly, in Hearne we see the traveller take up the unstable role of go-between for radically different European and Amerindian cultures. While the cultures remain distinct, and beyond direct competition for the same space, this role remains open to him. He can act as a guide to the curious, and as long as his ultimate loyalty remains clear, he can explore the implications of life lived in Indian terms. For citizens of the United States of America, however, this role vanishes as their Euro-American culture comes into direct competition with existing Amerindian societies over the occupation of the land. Imbued with a sense of American destiny in the West, Lewis and Clark need a way imaginatively to uproot local cultures. Lewis’s personal response to the land is an early example of the way the identification of self and nature would come to serve as a basis of a claim to control the land. Lewis learns to look through Indian history to a timeless, essential America which has remained unrealized until his arrival.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Atlantic University Teachers of English conference, Mount St. Vincent University, October 30, 1984.
2. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, the number of readers of such narratives greatly exceeded the number who were materially interested in the information they contained. For example, the first edition (June, 1773) of the narrative of the first of Cook's three voyages sold out in two months. It was followed by a second and by a serial edition in the same year. The publisher of the first paid John Hawkesworth—who actually wrote it—6,000 pounds. This was more than Cook and all his officers were paid for their services during the entire voyage. The two succeeding voyages were similarly successful. [See J.C. Beaglehole, *The Life of Captain James Cook* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 290]. Compared to this phenomenon, the 200 pounds Samuel Hearne received for his *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort . . . to the Northern Ocean* seems slight, but it was still a remarkable sum when compared to 50 pounds for *The Vicar of Wakefield* and 10 pounds for *Northanger Abbey*. [See Richard Glover, ed., *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort . . . to the Northern Ocean*, by Samuel Hearne (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), pp. xxx and xliii.] Though not an index of literary merit, the value of exploration accounts to publishers is some indication of their widespread interest. In the United States, the Lewis and Clark expedition aroused sufficient excitement for there to be fourteen different editions claiming to represent the events of the journey, before the official account of the expedition was published in 1814. Even so, there were five more editions of the official narrative by 1817. [See Elliot Coues, ed., *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark . . .* (New York: Harper, 1893), pp. cvii-cxxiii, cxxv.] I suggest that such figures can only be accounted for by positing an appeal to public attention which had little to do with direct interest in the results of the explorer's researches, and much more to do with a more basic level of imagination.
3. Alexander von Humboldt, *Voyages aux regions equinoxiales du nouveau continent . . .* (Paris, 1816), p. 48.
4. John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages performed by Commodore Byron, Captain Wallis, Captain Carteret, and Captain Cook* (London, 1773), p. iv.
5. Elliot Coues, ed., *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark . . .* (New York: Harper, 1893), p. 114. Future references to this edition are in parentheses after the quotation.
6. Samuel Hearne, *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort . . . to the Northern Ocean*, ed. Richard Glover (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), p. 51. Future references to this edition are noted in parentheses following the quotation.
7. John Bartlet Brebner, *Explorers of North America* (London, 1955), p. 326. Brebner calls Hearne "timorous."
8. See Alexander Henry (the elder), *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories* (New York, 1809). Ed. James Bain, Toronto: Morang and Company, 1901). This phrase is used frequently by Henry to designate the regions north and west of the Great Lakes. It seems that by referring to a place in terms of the name of an Indian group he implies that the place is inhabited.
9. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 218. Timothy Dwight, *Greenfield Hill: A Poem* (New York, 1794), pp. 52-53.