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THE PLAINS LANDSCAPE AND DESCRIPTIVE TECHNIQUE

ROBERT THACKER

The first European who traveled on the Great Plains was Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spaniard who lost his way as he wandered through the southern plains about 1534. Culturally conditioned to value a varied landscape, he later complained, "We nowhere saw mountains."¹ Several years later another Spaniard, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, traveled into the plains looking for gold but found only grass and bison. What is now Kansas was like nowhere else he had ever been. He was vexed to find that the only way he could keep his party together was by marking the way with piles of sun-bleached bones and buffalo dung. Coronado and his men thus began a process of adapting their European ways to the conditions they found on the prairie-plains; they were creating human landmarks in a region that had been without them. Moreover, the records they left began a parallel process: by providing the first descriptions of and reactions to the land-

scape, they recorded how the first Europeans felt upon finding themselves in a region without landmarks. Pedro de Castañeda, who wrote the most extensive account of the Coronado expedition, clearly shared his commander's frustration over the plains landscape. His feelings are evident in the style, emphasis, and tone of his *Narrative*. The plains of Kansas modified his previous assumptions, and the experience had a marked effect on Castañeda's descriptions.

Castañeda is an early example of a writer who adapted his techniques to accommodate the North American prairie-plains landscape. By looking at the writings of the region in historical perspective, and so considering explorers' accounts, fur-traders' journals, and travel narratives as precursors of prairie-plains fiction, one may argue that authorial technique has been to a high degree affected, and at times directed, by the landscape. Just as Castañeda was both impressed and troubled by the vastness of what is today Kansas and its lack of landmarks, writers of fiction have been similarly influenced by the same landscape. Within exploration and travel accounts, it is possible to isolate reactions and motifs that are directly attributable to the landscape itself. Fiction

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writers later made imaginative use of these same kinds of reactions as a means of defining setting and conveying the experience of the plains landscape.

EXPLORERS, TRADERS, AND TRAVELERS

The absence of usual European landmarks on the plains draws considerable attention from Castañeda: "It was impossible to find tracks in this country, because the grass straightened up again as soon as it was trodden down."² Later in the *Narrative* he returns to this theme and exclaims,

Who could believe that 1,000 horses and 500 of our cows and more than 5,000 rams and ewes and more than 1,500 friendly Indians and servants, in travelling over these plains, would leave no more trace where they had passed than if nothing had been there—nothing—so that it was necessary to make piles of bones and cow-dung now and then, so that the rear guard could follow the army. The grass never failed to become erect after it had been trodden down and, although it was short, it was fresh and straight as before. [Pp. 381–82]

The effect of the landscape on Castañeda is evident in his description; he has exaggerated the size of Coronado's party so as to emphasize the land's strangeness, and his rhetoric emphasizes the effect of the landscape upon his imagination: the question "Who could believe," and his repetition of "nothing" reflect his amazement. Coronado, in a letter to the king, remarks that the land offers "no more landmarks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea,"³ and Castañeda describes the practical effect of the land on the expedition:

Many fellows were lost at this time who went out hunting and did not get back to the army for two or three days, wandering about the country as if they were crazy, in one direction or another, not knowing how to get back where they started from. . . . It is worth noting that the country here is so level that at midday, after one has wandered

about in one direction and another in pursuit of game, the only thing to do is to stay near the game quietly until sunset, so as to see where it goes down, and even then they have to be men who are practised to do it. [P. 336]

Castañeda seems to have had the greatest difficulty in seeing and imagining the apparent absence of distinguishing features in the plains landscape. Thus, when he wrote his *Narrative* some twenty-five years after his return from the plains, his tone is still one of amazement, an attitude that is most evident when he describes bison grazing in the midst of the plains:

The country they [the bison] travelled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs, so that if some of them were at a distance they looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops were joined, and if there was only one bull it looked as if there were four pines. When one was near them, it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. The reason for all this was that the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure, and could see the sky at the edge of it, about a crossbow shot from him, and even if a man only lay down on his back he lost sight of the ground. [Pp. 383–84]

Castañeda seldom uses metaphor in his *Narrative*, yet this passage is filled with vivid comparisons. Apparently he was trying to find a way to make his subject clear to readers who had never seen such a landscape and might have had difficulty imagining one. It is not surprising that Castañeda's metaphors are European in origin; what is remarkable is their singularity within the *Narrative* as a whole. Because of his reaction to the plains landscape—a country of round flatness offering almost no perspective—Castañeda appears to have been compelled to use metaphor; his writing shows that he was perplexed by a landscape that offered both an unlimited line of sight and a horizon line that appeared "a crossbow shot" away. Thus the landscape had a tangible effect on his

description, causing him to exaggerate and to seek comparisons in order to do it justice.

Reactions similar to Castañeda's are frequent throughout the literature of western exploration, both in the United States and in Canada. Not all of those accounts are as articulate as his, but they indicate that the unique qualities of the prairie-plains landscape forced Europeans to adapt to its realities, both practically and imaginatively. Anthony Henday, one of the first Englishmen to see the prairie of western Canada, was as confounded by the flat vastness of the prairie landscape as were his Spanish precursors. Traveling overland during the summer of 1754, Henday notes that he entered the "Muscuty plains" on August 13; his journal records numerous entries thereafter in which he bemoans that he is "still in the Muscuty Country," until he leaves the prairie on October 29.⁴

David Thompson, who traveled throughout the West in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company and later the North West Company, had a similar response. Describing a trip he took overland to the Mandan villages in late 1797, Thompson remarked, "As my journey to the Missouri is over part of the Great Plains, I shall give it in the form of a journal, this form, however dull, is the only method in my opinion, that can give the reader a clear idea of them."⁵ Writing forty years after his trip, Thompson shows here that the effect of overland travel on the plains was still clear in his mind, and his attempts to recreate it represent the only extended use of the journal form in his *Narrative*. This approach was later adopted by Sinclair Ross in *As For Me and My House*, where the narrative is a series of diary entries which, when taken together, comprise the single most tedious and monotonous view of the prairie-plains setting to be found in the fiction of the region.

Alexander Henry the Younger, an employee of the North West Company who was in charge of a fur-trading post at the confluence of the Park and Red Rivers in present-day North Dakota, sought to comprehend the surrounding landscape by climbing above it. A few days after his arrival, Henry had a tall oak tree

trimmed so that he could use it as a lookout. Thereafter he climbed it every day. The following passage reveals his fascination with the boundless scene: "I took my usual morning view from the top of my oak and saw more buffaloes than ever. They formed one body, commencing about half a mile from camp, whence the plain was covered on the W. side of the river as far as the eye could reach. They were moving south slowly, and the meadow seemed as if in motion."⁶

Henry's daily ritual was an expedient way of becoming familiar with the new surroundings; but the habit is also one more example of European man's need to adapt to the prairie-plains landscape. Castañeda sought refuge in metaphor, Thompson recreated the tedium of overland travel in journal form, and Henry climbed a tree each day in his effort to grasp the plains environment. Each of these responses separately attests to the ability of the landscape to affect the European imagination and to influence the descriptive technique of the writers who tried to put their impressions into words.

A survey of the descriptive literature of the nineteenth century reveals that the effect of the land on Europeans is focused on those elements in the landscape that were in sharpest contrast with the familiar scenes of the East or of Europe; hence the many analyses of treelessness, the unlimited line of sight, bison herds, and unceasing winds. The absence of trees and the consequent open view of the surrounding land prompted several commentators to discuss the lack of inhabitants. Henry Marie Brackenridge described his feelings in 1811 while exploring the plains near the Missouri River: "Suppose for a moment, the most beautiful parts of France or Italy should be at once divested of their population, and with it their dwellings and every vestige of human existence—that nothing but the silent plains and a few solitary groves and thickets should remain, there would be some resemblance to the scenery on the Missouri; though the contemplation would produce grief instead of pleasure."⁷

Despite his melancholy over the lack of humanity, Brackenridge later celebrated the

landscape's vastness: "The mind naturally expands, or contracts, to suit the sphere in which it exists—in the immeasurable immensity of the scene, the intellectual faculties are endowed with an energy, a vigor, a spring, not to be described" (p. 92). In a later passage, he describes the battle of buffalo bulls at mating season. After noting the "horror, confusion, and fierceness" of the battling bulls, Brackenridge comments: "I am conscious that with many, I run the risk of being thought to indulge in romance, in consequence of this account: but with those who are informed of the astonishing number of buffalo, it will not be considered incredible" (p. 150). The passage reveals the writer's awareness that, just as he was forced to adapt to the land's demands on his imagination, his readers would be similarly taxed in their attempt to understand a prairie traveler's experiences, and he made a point of addressing their probable incredulity.

Other commentators were less contemplative in their reactions. Edwin James, who accompanied the Stephen H. Long expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819 and '20 and subsequently wrote its report, recorded details that articulate the experience of overland plains travel. Thus he writes of the landscape's effect on the imagination: "The great extent of country contemplated at a single view, and the unvaried sameness of the surface, made our prospect seem tedious. We pursued our course during the great part of the day along the same wide plain, and at evening the woody point in which we encamped on the previous night was yet discernible." Like Henday, James noted the tediousness of overland travel on the plains, but, like Thompson, he provides details as to its causes. Castañeda had observed that on the plains the sky seems as close as "a crossbow shot"; James analyzed the phenomenon and its effects:

Nothing is more difficult than to estimate, by the eye, the distance of objects seen on the plains. A small animal, as a wolf or turkey, sometimes appears of the magnitude of a horse, on account of an erroneous impression of the distance. Three elk, which

were the first we had seen, crossed our path at some distance before us. The effect of the *mirage*, together with our indefinite idea of the distance, magnified these animals to a most prodigious size. For a moment we thought we saw the mastodon of America, moving across those vast plains, which seem to have been created for his dwelling place. An animal seen for the first time, or any object with which the eye is unacquainted, usually appears much enlarged, and inaccurate ideas are formed of the magnitude and distance of all surrounding objects; but if some well-known animal, as a deer or a wolf, comes into the field of vision so near as to be recognized, the illusions vanish, and all things return to their proper dimensions.⁸

Referring to the same phenomenon later, James wrote that he and his party felt "grossly abused by [their] eyesight."⁹ James's analysis of the mirage effect and the vastness of the landscape is a representative example of many other factual accounts in which the strangeness of the scene affected the writers' perceptions and directed the form of the text as they sought to describe their reactions.

While James analyzed his visual perceptions, other nineteenth-century writers sought to recreate the ways in which their imaginations responded to the stimuli of the plains landscape. John Lambert, the topographer for the Isaac I. Stevens expedition in 1853 and '54, reported the cumulative effect of plains travel:

The eye grows weary travelling over the naked outlines of the successive plateaux. . . . It is difficult to convey an adequate idea of these dreary solitudes. Let it be remembered that a few minutes reading embraces sections which require tedious weeks to traverse; and that even travelling over and observing them with the patient labor of months, leaves but a *feeling* of their vastness, which baffles the effort to express it. The impressive silence of succeeding days is broken at rare intervals by the crack of some stray hunter's rifle, or perchance by the yell of painted warriors on a foray; but when the twilight wanes over the peaceful camp, when the evening meal is over,

and the incidents of the march are recounted, then the "drowsy ear of night" is roused to listen to the prolonged and melancholy cry of prowling wolves.¹⁰

Lambert's inability to describe the plains, or even to perceive them, to his personal satisfaction testifies to the effect of the landscape on his imagination. His descriptive technique was virtually dictated by his reaction to the landscape. Scarcely able to comprehend the vastness of the plains and aware of the difficulty of describing them accurately, Lambert conveys the feeling of vastness and isolation by invoking the "impressive silence of succeeding days," broken only by occasional sounds and successive campfires.

Another descriptive writer who revealed his feelings about the plains was Sir William Francis Butler, whose *The Great Lone Land* was one of the most popular travel accounts of the Canadian prairie. In a sequel entitled *The Wild North Land*, Butler drew on his prairie experience in an evocative passage that presents his personal reaction to the landscape. He notes that north of the Qu'Appelle River the view is

so vast that endless space seems for once to find embodiment, and at a single glance the eye is satiated with immensity. There is no mountain range to come across the middle distance, no dark forest to give shade to foreground or fringe perspective, no speck of life, no track of man, nothing but wildness. Reduced thus to its own nakedness, space stands forth with almost terrible grandeur. One is suddenly brought face to face with that enigma which we try to comprehend by giving to it the names of endless, interminable, measureless; that dark inanity which broods upon a waste of moorland at dusk, and in which fancy sees the spectral and the shadowy.¹¹

Faced with such a landscape, Butler acts as a medium: he enumerates those landscape elements which the prairie lacks—to eastern or European tastes—and continues to describe the feelings it evokes in him: the eye is "satiated with immensity," and enigmatic space "stands forth with almost terrible grandeur." Butler

sees the prairie vista as enigmatic and probes the nature of that enigma.

LITERARY TRAVELERS:

IRVING AND PARKMAN

Reactions such as Butler's are common in the travel accounts written by those with a literary bent; they often take the form of a confrontation between the prairie-plains landscape and conventional aesthetic assumptions. For example, in *A Tour on the Prairies*, Washington Irving adamantly refuses to see and understand the landscape in which he is traveling. In typical fashion, Irving places his greatest emphasis on character and incident throughout *A Tour*, but when he treats the landscape the prairie is usually likened to something else. Irving had become accustomed to thinking in literary conventions before he set foot on the prairie, so it is hardly surprising that instead of a prairie he saw a steppe, glen, dell, or glade.¹² He often described the prairie as "champaign country" or compared it to the estate of an English gentleman. Thus Irving tends to summarize the landscape rather than describe it, as in the following:

Here one of the characteristic scenes of the Far West broke upon us. An immense extent of grassy undulating, or as it is termed, rolling country with here and there a clump of trees, dimly seen in the distance like a ship at sea; the landscape deriving sublimity from its vastness and simplicity. To the south west on the summit of a hill was a singular crest of broken rocks resembling a ruined fortress. It reminded me of the ruin of some Moorish castle crowning a height in the midst of a lonely Spanish landscape. [P. 61]

Because of his conventional way of seeing, Irving does not tarry over the landscape; his second sentence is direct and descriptive, but he moves immediately to the rocks in the distance, which allow him to allude to a more familiar—and more "literary"—landscape.

Irving felt threatened by the prairie landscape, and *A Tour* defines the nature of the

threat. As in the passage quoted above, he often moved from a consideration that implies a world in which man is dominated by nature to one in which man dominates. At one point in his journals, Irving extolled the beauty of a prairie scene: "How exciting to think that we are breaking through a country hitherto untrodden by white men, except perchance the solitary trapper—a glorious world spread around us without an inhabitant."¹³ The version in *A Tour* adds, "It was as if a ban hung over this fair but fated region. The very Indians dared not abide here but made it a mere scene of perilous enterprize, to hunt for a few days and then away" (p. 48). Irving apparently could not accept the notion that the land was simply wild—uninhabited according to the practices of the East—and hence he inferred some dire and mysterious reason for the land's bare emptiness that even excluded the Indians from permanent residence. Irving apparently retreated from the prairie landscape into the bosom of his literary conventions and described the land in summary fashion, usually by comparing it to something eastern or European.

Usually, but not always. Despite his apparent aversion to seeing and describing the prairie landscape directly, Irving was forced on one occasion to confront it in *A Tour on the Prairies*. Separated from his companions while hunting buffalo, he became lost. Recounting the episode, he wrote:

I now found myself in the midst of a lonely waste in which the prospect was bounded by undulating swells of land, naked and uniform, where, from the deficiency of land marks and distinct features an inexperienced man may become bewildered and lose his way as readily as in the wastes of the ocean. The day too was overcast, so that I could not guide myself by the sun; my only mode was to retrace the track my horse had made in coming, through this I would often lose sight of, where the ground was covered with parched herbage. [P. 100]

Irving's description of the landscape here is more direct than at any other instance in *A Tour*. Bereft for the first time of human com-

panionship, Irving was forced to confront the surrounding landscape and see it as it is. His reaction in the following passage is much like Butler's:

To one unaccustomed to it there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie. The loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it. There the view is shut in by trees, and the imagination is left free to picture some livelier scene beyond. But here we have an immense extent of landscape without a sign of human existence. We have the consciousness of being far, far beyond the bounds of human habitation; we feel as if moving in the midst of a desert world. . . . The silence of the waste was now and then broken by the cry of a distant flock of pelicans stalking like spectres about a shallow pool. Sometimes by the sinister croaking of a raven in the air, while occasionally a scoundrel wolf would scour off from before me and having attained a safe distance, would sit down and howl and whine with tones that gave a dreariness to the surrounding solitude. [P. 100]¹⁴

Here Irving abandoned his literary conventions and perceived the landscape directly, although he concentrated upon his experience of being alone in the prairie rather than upon the landscape itself. Irving's lapse was only momentary, for immediately hereafter he happened upon a member of his party. All dark thoughts were banished as he returned to society and its conventions.

Another travel book with literary overtones is Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, which is an embellished record of Parkman's 1846 western tour. Unlike Irving, however, Parkman showed a readiness to adjust his preconceptions about the West, which were more informed than Irving's. Whereas Irving tried to impose his own version of reality on the landscape, Parkman tested what he had read against what he saw and adjusted his notions accordingly.¹⁵ Throughout *The Oregon Trail* one finds articulate analyses of the landscape's effect on Parkman's imagination in light of his preconceived ideas. For example, he contrasted the romantic notions of the West fostered by "picturesque

tourists, painters, poets, and novelists" (p. 35), who seldom ventured farther west than the well-watered Mississippi valley, with the grim practicalities of overland travel on the Great Plains.¹⁶ Yet Parkman's boredom was as palpable as Lambert's was. Journeying toward the Platte River, he complained of travel requiring "hour after hour over a perfect level."¹⁷ Like Henry in his tree, Parkman describes his first sight of the long-awaited Platte from "the summit—apparently one vast, level plain, fringed with a distant line of forest—the river ran invisible in sluices through the plain, with here and there a patch of woods like an island."¹⁸ The same scene in *The Oregon Trail*, however, is far more detailed and charged with a subjectivity absent in the journal entry:

At length we gained the summit, and the long-expected valley of the Platte lay before us. We all drew rein, and sat joyfully looking down upon the prospect. It was right welcome,—strange, too, and striking to the imagination; and yet it had not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any of the features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness. For league after league a plain as level as a lake outspread beneath us; here and there the Platte, divided into a dozen thread-like sluices, was traversing it, and an occasional clump of wood, rising in the midst like a shadowy island, relieved the monotony of the waste. No living thing was moving throughout the vast landscape, except the lizards that darted over the sand and through the rank grass and prickly pears at our feet. [P. 65]

Parkman knew that his reaction was strong, but at the same time he was uneasy because he knew that the vista included none of the "features of grandeur" associated with either conventional beauty or the picturesque; likewise, he knew that he was impressed by a landscape that included no living things to animate the scene. While the bare bones of Parkman's reaction are found in the journal, his later embellishment amplifies and shifts the emphasis of his terse journal entry. Parkman's descriptive technique was thus dictated by his reaction to

the outspread scene, which he found unconventionally awesome: "strange, too, and striking to the imagination."¹⁹

FICTION: COOPER AND HIS SUCCESSORS

James Fenimore Cooper, the first fiction writer whose technique was affected by the prairie-plains landscape, never actually saw it; he never traveled west of New York State. While he was writing *The Prairie*, Cooper consulted the *James Account* of the Long Expedition. It was the most up-to-date source available, and Cooper simply adapted passages in the *Account* for his landscape descriptions in the novel.²⁰ Yet Cooper's use of this material hardly constitutes literary theft. In writing *The Prairie*, the novelist effected a transformation of the landscape. In the *Account*, the prairie-plains is a strange land that affected the imaginations of a group of travelers; in Cooper's novel, it has been transformed into literary setting. In the latter case, meaning resides not only in the experience and perception of the characters who are on the prairie, but also in their understanding of the landscape itself. In the descriptive accounts quoted above, the several writers revealed subjective reactions to prairie scenes; the land itself is passive or static. But in *The Prairie*, Cooper's art charges the landscape with symbolic meaning for the first time, so that a symbiotic relationship is created between the perceiver and the thing perceived. By drawing heavily on the *James Account*, moreover, Cooper was affected at one remove by the landscape. He took those elements that appealed to him—the seemingly unlimited line of sight, the land's rolling quality, and the mirage effect—and adapted them into literary motifs and symbols to suit his thematic needs.

Cooper's artistic use for his own purposes of landscape elements in James's *Account* is apparent in *The Prairie* when, as the Bushes trudge across the "interminable tracts" of the prairie toward the setting sun, they are confronted by Natty Bumppo. Backlighting by sun, Cooper's hero presents to the emigrants "a

spectacle as sudden it was unexpected." Cooper continues:

The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the center of this flood of fiery light a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background as distinctly, and seemingly as palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of an extended hand. The figure was colossal, the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route of the travelers. But embedded as it was in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.²¹

James, it will be recalled, had written that he and his party had found themselves "abused by [their] eyesight" while traveling the prairie. Cooper seized upon such optical effects in presenting Natty Bumppo at the outset of *The Prairie*, for the Bush caravan is brought to a grinding halt by the "spectacle" they find before them; like James's eyesight, theirs was also dramatically abused. The colossal figure of Natty, standing "directly in the route of the travelers," represents Cooper's adaptation of James's observations. For James, who was a botanist and geologist, the optical illusions caused by the prairie landscape are notable scientific phenomena. Adapted by Cooper, they became the basis for a symbolic presentation of character.

Given Cooper's assumptions, the optical illusion is perfect. The backlighted Bumppo is presented symbolically as his author's ideal. He is alone, huge, palpable, and bathed in a golden light, standing as an impediment to western settlement. Ultimately, it is the effect of the landscape that allows Cooper to write, "But embedded as it was in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character." This is, of course, what *The Prairie* is about. In order to understand the action of the novel, the reader must tackle Natty's "just proportions or true character." Thus a known phenomenon of the prairie landscape, attested to by Pike, Gregg,

and numerous other travelers in addition to James, presented Cooper with a vivid means of introducing Natty Bumppo as a symbolic figure. This instance is only one example of the landscape aiding Cooper's descriptive technique; there are many others.

Such effects are pervasive throughout prairie-plains fiction, both American and Canadian. Willa Cather uses the setting sun on the prairie to make a symbolic point similar to Cooper's in *My Ántonia*, and Frederick Philip Grove was sufficiently struck by a comparable scene to incorporate it within *Fruits of the Earth*.²² Toward the beginning of Cather's novel, Jim Burden feels "erased, blotted out . . . between that earth and sky" of Nebraska. Brackenridge, Lambert, Butler, and Irving all expressed similar feelings. The play of unimpeded wind across the prairie is a central motif in both Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, to name only two such examples, and a similar concern is evident in the descriptive accounts, such as Thompson's and James's. Hamlin Garland's protagonist in *Boy Life on the Prairie*, upon moving to a farm in Iowa, climbs like Alexander Henry atop his roof so as to encompass the landscape in his view.²³

Faced with a landscape that satiates the eye with immensity, novelists adapted for the purposes of fiction the same means used by the explorers and travelers who preceded them. Like Irving, they were unable to impose a conventional form on the prairie-plains. Instead, their descriptive and dramatic technique was modified by the landscape itself—a landscape which presents, as Butler described it in *The Wild North Land*, "a view so vast that endless space seems for once to find embodiment." The continuity of reaction seen in descriptive writings about the prairie-plains and the fictional depictions of the region demonstrates that writers have historically reacted to the landscape as Parkman did; from Castañeda onward they have found it to be "strange, too, and striking to the imagination," and their texts bear the mark of this impression.

NOTES

1. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, trans. by [Thomas] Buckingham Smith (1851), reprinted in *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528-1543*, ed. by Frederick W. Hodge and Theodore H. Lewis (1907; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946), p. 72.

2. Pedro de Castañeda, *The Narrative of the Expedition of Coronado by Castañeda*, trans. by George Parker Winship (1896), reprinted in *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States*, p. 331. Subsequent quotations are from this text.

3. Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, "Translation of a Letter from Coronado to the King, October 20, 1541," in *The Journey of Coronado, 1540-42*, trans. and ed. by George Parker Winship (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1904), p. 214. Coronado's letter was written while he was still on the plains, so his is an immediate impression as opposed to Castañeda's, who wrote his *Narrative* some twenty-five years after the expedition. It should be noted, too, that Coronado's allusion to the sea is the first use of the prairie-ocean analogy that later became commonplace.

4. Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., "York Factory to the Blackfeet Country; The Journal of Anthony Hendry [sic], 1754-55," in *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3d ser., 1 (Ottawa, 1907), sec. 2, p. 336.

5. David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative, 1794-1812*, ed. by Richard Glover (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), p. 161.

6. Elliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company, 1799-1814*, 3 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), 1:99. Despite the title of Coues's edition, the whole text is made up of Henry's journals; Coues felt the need to give equal credit to Thompson because his papers, which had not yet been published at the time Coues was working, lent a great deal of information to his editorial work.

7. H. M. Brackenridge, *Journal of a Voy-*

age up the Missouri: Performed in Eighteen Hundred and Eleven (1816), reprinted in *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904-06), 6:92. All subsequent quotations are from this text. Hereafter the Thwaites series is abbreviated EWT. Decrying the absence of white inhabitants on the plains is a common motif in the literature of the West; see, for example, Gabriel Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, trans. and ed. by J. V. Huntington (1854), reprinted in EWT, 6:372-73.

8. Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820* (1823), reprinted in EWT, vols. 14-17 (1905), 15:183-84. Subsequent quotations are from this text. James was not alone in noting the lack of apparent progress while traveling overland; in his *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, George Catlin comments that "the pedestrian over such a discouraging sea of green, without a landmark before or behind him; without a beacon to lead him on, or define his progress, feels weak and overcome when night falls," and says that it is with difficulty that the individual convinces himself that he is not "like a squirrel in his cage, after all his toil, standing still." See George Catlin, *Letters and Notes . . .*, 2 vols. (1841; reprint, London: Henry H. Bohn, 1866), 1:218.

9. James, *Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*, in EWT, 15:259. For another description of the mirage effect, see Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (1845), reprinted in EWT, vols. 19-20 (1905), 19:241-42.

10. [John Lambert], "Papers Accompanying Governor I. I. Stevens's Reports" (1855), reprinted in *The Western Interior of Canada*, ed. by John Warkentin (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), pp. 151-52.

11. Sir William Francis Butler, *The Wild North Land* (1873; reprint, Toronto: Musson, 1924), pp. 30-31; see also Butler, *The Great Lone Land* (1872; reprint, Toronto: Macmillan, 1910).

12. Irving uses European and eastern references in describing the prairies from his first glimpse of them; see Washington Irving, *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, ed.

by Richard Dilworth Rust (Boston: Twayne, 1979), vol. 24, *Letters: Vol. II, 1823-1838*, ed. by Ralph M. Aderman, Herbert L. Kleinfield, and Jenifer S. Banks, pp. 722-32; *The Western Journals of Washington Irving*, ed. by John Francis McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), passim; Irving, *The Complete Works*, vol. 22, *A Tour on the Prairies*, in *The Crayon Miscellany*, ed. by Dahlia Kirby Terrell. Subsequent quotations are from the latter text.

13. Irving, *Western Journals*, p. 131.

14. Irving's journal for this portion of the trip is assumed lost, so a comparison of this passage with a more immediate description is impossible.

15. Parkman's reading prior to his western trip was extensive; he knew Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairies*, Maximillian's *Travels* (EWT, vols. 22-25), and John C. Frémont's report, among the first-person accounts; he had seen George Catlin's western paintings and had read his *Letters and Notes*. In addition, he knew all of Washington Irving's western books and James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and could quote William Cullen Bryant's western poems from memory. By contrast, Irving knew only Cooper's *The Pioneers*, although he would have been aware of the other two tales in the series in print when he took his tour in 1832. For Parkman's reading prior to his trip, see *The Oregon Trail*, ed. by E. N. Feltskog (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, pp. 460-61), n. 16, and Mason Wade, "The Oregon Trail Journal, 1846," in *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, ed. by Mason Wade, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1947), 2:397. Subsequent quotations from *The Oregon Trail* are from the Feltskog edition. For Irving's reading, see Dahlia Kirby Terrell's "Introduction" in *The Crayon Miscellany*, p. xx, n. 13.

16. Parkman is probably referring to the painter Catlin and the poet Bryant, each of whom romanticized the prairie landscape of the Mississippi Valley in their writing. A likely candidate for his "picturesque tourist" is Edmund Flagg, whose *The Far West* is unequalled for sheer gush of romantic hyperbole over the prairie landscape; see Edmund Flagg, *The Far West; or, A Tour Beyond the Mountains* (1838), reprinted in EWT, vols. 26-27

(1906), 26:251, 343. Finally, Parkman's romantic novelist is most likely Cooper.

17. *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, 2:430.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

19. A parallel passage that also illustrates the imaginative effect of the landscape on Parkman's writing concerns an incident already seen in Irving; like the author, Parkman one day finds himself lost on the prairie. Unlike Irving's journal, however, Parkman's survived, and contains this entry: "Got separated from the others—rode for hours westwardly over the prairie—saw the hills dotted with thousands of buffalo. Antelopes—prairie dogs—burrowing owls—wild geese—wolves, etc. Finding my course wrong, followed a buffalo-track northward, and about noon came out on the road. Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie" (*Journals*, 2:434-35). In *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman's description of the incident is about four times longer and recreates the effect of disorientation Parkman felt; at one point he says that he "summoned the scanty share of woodcraft" he possessed "(if that term be applicable on the prairie)" (p. 81). Just as his view of the Platte and the surrounding plain led him to reconsider the meanings of the terms "picturesque" and "beautiful," here Parkman is forced to reconsider the meanings of "woodcraft" and "landmark." As they helped Castañeda and Coronado, the buffalo come to his aid; by following a buffalo track—on the assumption that the animals take the shortest route to water—Parkman is able to rediscover the road. Just as the landscape affected his ability to find his way, the landscape affected the way he wrote about the experience, since he conveys the same sense of bewilderment he felt on the prairie to his reader. Thus, in writing *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman felt compelled to expand one phrase in his journal ("Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie") into almost a page of descriptive prose.

20. For an extended discussion of Cooper's use of the *James Account* and other contemporary sources in his composition of *The Prairie*, see Orm Överland, *The Making and Meaning of an American Classic: James Fenimore Cooper's "The Prairie"* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget and New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 63-94.

21. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie: A Tale* (1827; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 15. Subsequent quotations are from this text.

22. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 159; Frederick Philip Grove, *In Search of Myself* (1946; reprint, Toronto: McClelland and

Stewart, 1974), pp. 258-60.

23. Cather, *My Ántonia*, p. 9; Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (1941; reprint, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957); W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947); Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 5-7.