Knowledge Dissemination in the Long Nineteenth Century

Knowledge Dissemination in the Long Nineteenth Century:

European and Transatlantic Perspectives

Edited by

Marina Dossena and Stefano Rosso

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Knowledge Dissemination in the Long Nineteenth Century:
European and Transatlantic Perspectives

Edited by Marina Dossena and Stefano Rosso

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

MARINA DOSSENA AND STEFANO ROSSO

Our Starting Points

Humans interact in many ways and in so doing they always exchange/ share information. All communicative events happen socially, across boundaries, languages, cultures. Besides, they take place at all levels, often in unpredictable ways and regardless of the educational attainments or social standing of the individuals or groups involved. For these reasons any discussion of how knowledge is disseminated cannot be restricted to analyses of popularization strategies in scientific communication, although that has been, and obviously so, a privileged field of investigation. As everyday experience shows, knowledge also circulates outside scientific (or anyway specialized) networks, giving rise to complex phenomena enacted by different subjects, whose competence may be equivalent or asymmetrical, but who share the same interests. In such cases, a study of knowledge dissemination patterns and strategies requires a broader approach, in which different text types should be taken into consideration in order to achieve a more complete picture.

This book aims to take this more encompassing approach while centring its attention on both European and American texts pertaining to the "long" nineteenth century. More specifically, we intend to shed light on interdisciplinary aspects concerning knowledge dissemination by offering studies dealing with literary, cultural, and linguistic history. The aim is to highlight the features that are actually shared by their different approaches, in an attempt to enhance research by offering new insights into phenomena which appear to have been underinvestigated so far, such as the role played by popular culture, music, literary debate, and the arts in the circulation of information, in the construction of popular taste, and even in scientific popularization on both sides of the Atlantic.

Our choice to focus on the nineteenth century is dictated by various reasons. First of all, its significance in literary history is indisputable and also in relation to language over the last fifteen years Late Modern English has found the place it had always deserved in studies of English historical

linguistics.[1] As for our adoption of the qualifier "long" in relation to the nineteenth century, this bears witness to our belief that temporal demarcations are rarely viable *per se*: phenomena have long lives, develop in ways that encompass the achievements of previous decades and, in turn, have an impact on later times. In the case of the nineteenth century, while it can be debated whether the American and French revolutions started it, there can be little doubt that the First World War was a more significant turning point than the *fin de siècle*.

Another very significant aspect, the impact of which on knowledge dissemination mechanisms is hardly negligible, is that – throughout the nineteenth century, from the Napoleonic Wars to the great transatlantic migrations (and of course excluding the forced deportations from Africa to America) – more people were on the move than ever before, with lasting consequences on the social frameworks within which they operated. Also, it is in the "long" nineteenth century that, for the first time in history, scientific, technological, and social developments accelerated simultaneously, and this is witnessed in linguistic change: statistical data in the website of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) show that – particularly in the second half of the century – more new lexical items or meanings are recorded than at any other point in the history of English. Finally, disciplines evolved and new ones actually began to develop: it is the case, for instance, of *palaeontology*, the name of which was first recorded in the OED in 1836, of *sociology*, which the OED first records in 1842, and of *psychiatry*, another item first recorded in the OED in 1828. In addition, the impact of Karl Marx's and Charles Darwin's theories needs no discussion here.

It is therefore important to see how such new knowledge was circulated among ever growing audiences. Within this framework, however, it should be borne in mind that knowledge dissemination is never a neutral process. Before contents are circulated, they are (more or less implicitly) evaluated and selected: as a result, knowledge dissemination is inherently subjective, and may imply ideological choices concerning both the quantity and type of information to be spread and the type and breadth of audiences that may be addressed.

Knowledge dissemination may also have different aims, which in turn inform and influence the kind of choices we have just mentioned.

---

[1] See, among others, the studies listed in Dossena (2015). The increasing interest in this field is seen also in the new developments that have occurred in specific branches of the discipline: for instance, this is the case of historical pragmatics and historical sociolinguistics (see Fairman 2003, Elspaß 2012, and, most recently, Auer et al. 2015).

Providing information is seldom an end in itself: it is generally meant to elicit or prevent action and/or reinforce or undermine beliefs. It can also be (self-)promotional, suggesting erudition and consequently enhancing prestige. In this sense, then, knowledge dissemination acquires an important interactional (though paradoxical) value, in which the power imbalance implicit in asymmetrical knowledge functions as a distancing tool even at a time when attempts are made to redress this asymmetry.

In this volume we discuss the phenomena at hand from a transatlantic perspective, in the belief that this may provide more insights into them on account of the close relationship that has always existed between Europe and North America, to the point that a one-sided approach might result in important data being overlooked. For instance, emigration from Europe to North America has always been a complex phenomenon on account of social, historical, and cultural factors, and it can hardly be seen as a one-way process, as communication from overseas provided valuable information also for the people who remained in "the Old Country". When we consider the important ways in which the two continents have influenced each other, many examples may be significant; among these we might mention the case of people like John Muir and Andrew Carnegie, who left an indelible mark on both their homeland (Scotland) and in their new adoptive country (the USA). However, there is a much greater quantity of data we can investigate concerning less well-known subjects and indeed concerning the kind of materials that proved of interest and contributed to the advancement of knowledge – music, the arts, and literature, for instance, were as valuable as newspapers, magazines, and teaching materials for the dissemination of contents. Nor should we neglect the importance of personal exchanges in familiar correspondence, in which information is provided and often explicitly evaluated by the participants in an attempt to guide their readers' interpretations and facilitate their understanding of the phenomena under discussion.

For these reasons, our aim is to see how different narratives have contributed to shaping images and concepts that have proved pervasive through time, to the point of being still relevant today. For instance, this is the case of themes and tropes pertaining to the so-called American Frontier, of the relationship existing between science and literature, between ethics and truth, understanding, and actually being able to express that understanding, if it can be grasped at all. Similarly, narrations concerning the experience of war and emigration, whether in familiar correspondence or recounted in newspapers and magazines, help (re)define identities and offer representations of otherwise unknowable realities. In the following chapters analyses of literary, linguistic, and

cultural phenomena are presented, in order to assess the mutual influences that such narratives can be shown to have had on the creation of (new) meanings.

As a result, the book's contribution is both in its interdisciplinary approach and in its aim, which is to investigate literary, linguistic, cultural, and historical phenomena in a transatlantic perspective. To the best of our knowledge, transatlantic studies have typically concentrated on relations between Europe and America in specific fields and in relation to trajectories concerning either emigration from Europe to America or America's influence on European phenomena. Here we hope to give a more encompassing view.

All the individual chapters seek to address their research questions on the basis of state-of-the-art methodology in the different branches of investigation to which they pertain, while not neglecting interdisciplinary approaches. As a matter of fact, the contributors' competences are usefully complementary: the group comprises historical linguists with expertise in the compilation of diachronic corpora and in historical sociolinguistic studies; together with them, literary critics and cultural historians provide methodological approaches that enable readers to explore the contiguities existing between disciplines.

As the main research questions addressed in this book concern the study of narrations pertaining to knowledge dissemination throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, we hope that our findings will prove significant at various levels. First of all, the study of both literary and non-literary documents may allow glimpses into the ways in which facts and events are represented, embellished, or indeed silenced, in order to present new and possibly more appealing images. The information provided in emigrants' letters, for instance, supplemented and occasionally contradicted what was circulated in printed materials, such as in prospective emigrants' guides. At the same time, literature, and indeed popular literature, such as dime novels, transformed emigrants into pioneers, reshaping their identity in such a way that their European past was practically elided, in favour of a new, American present and – needless to say – future. Indeed, such narrations coexisted with other cultural artefacts, such as paintings, that reinforced the idea of the new role the pioneers were playing in their new country, especially in relation to the displacement of native populations, who were portrayed in often biased ways for the sake of more or less covert agendas.

The attention given to a broad range of sources, both literary and non-literary, to the arts, and to popular culture, such as it is witnessed in familiar correspondence, diaries, autobiographies, and even songs and

music, will – it is hoped – enable the book to be relevant in many different disciplines, obviously starting from historical, literary, and linguistic ones, but also appealing to scholars engaged in studies of musical and artistic representations. Similarly, this interdisciplinary approach is expected to be of interest to scholars and students dealing with complex ideas of knowledge representation and dissemination, as several contributions focus on important theoretical issues, such as the (im)possibility of construing a credible narrative of "the truth", despite continued attempts to do so, and notwithstanding the stress placed on reliability, for instance in newspapers and specialized magazines.

The Chapters in This Book

As we said, this book aims to present different but complementary approaches to knowledge dissemination. On the one hand, this can be understood as a phenomenon depending, first and foremost, on representation; in this sense, then, the first four chapters (authored by Bruno Cartosio, Stefano Rosso, Marina Dossena, and Aileen Dillane) deal with the ways in which the arts and popular culture have contributed to the definition of contents and to the debate concerning their reliability. Still within the framework of representation, the next three chapters (by Sonia Di Loreto, Angela Locatelli, and Robert-Louis Abrahamson) focus on literary discourse and the contribution of literary figures to epistemological debates. The following chapters, instead, deal with knowledge dissemination as a phenomenon relying on information and education; the first two of these (by Nicholas Brownlees and William H. Mulligan, Jr.) discuss newspapers and specialized magazines. Finally, Polina Shvanyukova and Kirsten Lawson focus on epistolary discourse and the ways in which knowledge is conveyed in authentic and in constructed documents. More details on the individual contributions are given below.

Following this **introduction**, the book opens with an essay by **Bruno Cartosio** on the role that painters and photographers have played in the crystallization of often ideologically-charged images of the American West, especially as far as Native Americans are concerned. The paintings, photographs, and their reproductions as (chromo-)lithographs are discussed in the context of the historical period in which they were made, in order to highlight their importance as tools for the representation of what was meant to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e. the demise of the "Indian", while on occasion expressing nostalgia for an irretrievably lost world.

The next chapter, by **Stefano Rosso**, investigates the impact of an immensely popular (sub)genre, the Western – and especially the dime novel western – on the creation of a well-established image of land and culture at large. In the thousands of dime novels published between the beginning of the Civil War and the end of the century, major issues, like gendered identities, ethnicity, and ideological "traps" (such as what would be called, in the 1930s, "The American Dream") feature very prominently. Besides, it is in this domain of spectacular adventurous stories that violence acquires the central role it would dramatically maintain in the twentieth century.

A transatlantic perspective characterizes the following essay, by **Marina Dossena**, in which the author relies on familiar letters, diaries, travelogues and expressions of popular culture for an analysis of what pieces of information were transmitted to readers in Scotland from writers in Canada and the US. The (often manuscript) materials discussed here make up a valuable set of documents in which geographical, geological, and anthropological knowledge was popularized and in which description, narration and evaluation appear to interact in interesting ways. In addition, the chapter's focus on popular writing is consistent with current trends in historical sociolinguistics, in which "language history from below" has shown increasing viability in recent years.

The experience of emigration, but this time in relation to Ireland, is the object of **Aileen Dillane**'s study, in which a collection of Irish music published in Chicago in 1903 (Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*) is discussed in light of the context where it was produced, in order to analyze its dependence on this same diasporic context, or on a more cosmopolitan imagery. As the author shows, although the collection became a landmark within an Ireland-centric historiography of Irish traditional music culture, its layout and typographic choices suggest an organizing principle that meant to express a certain idea of modernity, in which the natural layering of history and social relations in music was erased.

The importance of the production context of literary artefacts is also considered by **Sonia Di Loreto**, who focuses on the works of Sarah Willis Parton (aka Fanny Fern) and investigates the reprints and advertisements of Fern's articles in England, so as to assess the formation of a transatlantic network, to which different actors (writers, readers, printers, and translators) contributed.

Angela Locatelli's chapter deals with the relationship between science and art by looking at Tolstoy's essay *On the Significance of Science and Art* and discussing it in the framework of a widespread attitude towards an

increasing disciplinary hybridization – a theme of considerable relevance also in today's discussions of postmodern literary discourse.

Robert-Louis Abrahamson, on the other hand, discusses Robert Louis Stevenson's struggles to obtain and disseminate knowledge, by examining some of Stevenson's scientific, moral, and historical works, stretching across the full range of his writing career; in particular, the chapter focuses on essays from late 1878 to mid-1879 which address the three-fold problem of producing knowledge, articulating knowledge, and, on the part of the recipient, comprehending knowledge.

In the following chapter a different approach is taken, in that **Nicholas Brownlees** analyzes how knowledge about war and conflict is construed and circulated. The focus of his investigation is on the reports of the 1812 war in the *Liverpool Mercury*, a weekly publication that was founded in 1811 and continued publication up until the early twentieth century.

The next essay, by **William H. Mulligan, Jr**., deals with the controversies pertaining to the greater or lesser importance attributed to academic or practical knowledge in the study of geology in nineteenth-century Ireland. The essay focuses on *The Mining Journal*, the major industry trade paper, to show that relying exclusively on practical knowledge led to serious failures in mining ventures, although experience itself might have taught otherwise.

Polina Shvanyukova's chapter also focuses on practical knowledge, but this time in relation to educational materials in the business sector; the author analyzes instances in which the kind of instruction provided in letter-writing guides published in Britain and in the USA can be shown to disseminate cultural values and contribute to the creation of a shared work ethos while offering linguistic and textual examples.

Finally, the awareness of different cultural values as expressed in private correspondence is investigated by **Kirsten Lawson**, who analyzes a collection of letters sent by a Scottish soldier to his family during the First World War; in this case, schooling ensured that the author could convey his contents in fairly articulate ways, and the essay focuses on the main strategies employed to encode psychological proximity, convey stance, and provide information concerning personal experience of life in the trenches.

Concluding Remarks

The informants whose voices are heard in the texts discussed in these chapters range from soldiers, to emigrants, to artists, to literary critics, novelists and short story writers, to journalists and journal editors. In many

cases we know very little about their life stories, the networks with which they had stronger or weaker ties, or other details that might be useful in socio-historical investigations. However, their texts prove of considerable interest anyway; from them we gather that their level of education was of course uneven, but their communicative competence is fascinating in its very diversity.

Their wish to disseminate knowledge, to inform, to persuade, and to educate caused them to look for the most efficient ways in which their contents could be circulated and made credible. The virtual presence of their readers was a crucial factor in the identification of what means might work best. From iconography to textual arrangements, from literary and philosophical debate to the specialized discourse of geology, and from familiar to business letters, what these texts may be shown to have in common is their constant attention to the impact that their messages might have on their audiences. The wish to make contents both acceptable and credible led to the identification of textual strategies that might be viable while ensuring persuasiveness.

It is of course impossible to assess now how successful they were in this respect; however, their relevance is indisputable, and this concerns both their intrinsic interest as documents of a bygone age and their contribution to our own reflections on how knowledge is disseminated today. Of course further explorations in different fields and text types are in order, before a more complete understanding of these strategies may be reached, but we hope this volume will prove a useful starting point.

References

Auer, Anita et al. 2015. "Historical Sociolinguistics: The Field and Its Future." *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* 1.1:1-12.

Dossena, Marina. 2015. "Introduction." In *Transatlantic Perspectives on Late Modern English*, edited by Marina Dossena, 1-12. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Elspaß, Stephan. 2012. "Between Linguistic Creativity and Formulaic Restriction. Cross-linguistic Perspectives on Nineteenth-century Lower Class Writers' Private Letters." In *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*, edited by Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, 45-64. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Fairman, Tony. 2003. "Letters of the English Labouring Classes 1800-34 and the English Language." In *Insights into Late Modern English*, edited by Marina Dossena and Charles Jones, 265-282. Bern: Peter Lang.

AMERICAN ARTISTS LOOK WEST

BRUNO CARTOSIO

Abstract

Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt were the prime figures responsible for giving historiographical shape to the "thought" regarding the conquest of the American West that was "floating in the air" – as Roosevelt wrote Turner in 1894 – in the early 1890s. There were differences in their readings of the "winning of the West" by the Anglo-Saxon Americans, especially with regard to the place assigned to the Natives. Yet their views coexisted, complementing each other to a certain extent. They are to be seen as the two main efforts to channel into coherent national, historical visions the interpretations of American expansion that had come to prevail among the many which had found expression in American popular culture in the previous decades through art, literature, and journalism. In this essay a number of visual representations by different nineteenth-century artists will be mentioned and discussed. The purpose of the essay is to show how the themes tackled by the artists and the treatments those themes and subjects received in their paintings and lithographs contributed to form Turner's and Roosevelt's outlook, thanks to the popularity they reached, and the support coming from all the other media through which popular culture was disseminated in the nineteenth-century United States.

Introduction

We are all familiar with a number of images and stories concerning the American West that have been passed on to us primarily by the film industry, and – before and after the movies – by art, literature, radio, and television. And whether we are aware of it or not, we all have assimilated some of the basic concepts characterizing "western" discourse. Needless to say, the "frontier" is one of those concepts, probably the best known of them.

In this essay I shall start from that concept – from Frederick Jackson Turner, to whom the responsibility of having "implanted" it into American historiography is usually attributed, and from Theodore Roosevelt, who

injected a very explicit racial content into his history of the very first steps in the American conquest of the continent – see Turner (1921, 1-38) and Roosevelt (1996 [1889-1896]).

I shall contend that the visions expounded by the two historians in the final years of the nineteenth century were as much creations of their own geniuses as drifts of the main currents into which the attitudes towards the newly acquired lands and their inhabitants had been channeled in the previous decades.

I shall not discuss the many "Wests" that have existed in the history of modern North America. And I will not consider literature, not because I underestimate the importance that Filson's Boone, Cooper's Leather-stocking, and Irving's Captain Bonneville – along with a number of early autobiographies by mountain men and other adventurers – had in furrowing the field of popular culture with regard to one or the other of the succeeding Wests. The much narrower purpose of this essay is to focus on some of the ways in which white American artists – painters, essentially – have represented *their* West and tackled *certain* themes.[1]

The visual arts were both one of the media through which ideas about the western expansion found expression, and one of the main channels through which images and views of the West were "disseminated" in nineteenth-century American society. And I shall give a few examples of how some of the most popular visual representations of western themes or events became popular in American culture in the decades extending roughly from the 1830s to the early years of the twentieth century.

For most of the nineteenth century those representations existed independently of historical research. Narrations and images came about through the filter of myth-making, functioning as substitutes for historiography. Through them a sort of cultural and racial common sense was formed, to which neither Turner nor Roosevelt – or other ideologues – could be indifferent, being themselves imbued with it. Here I shall look at those representations from the standpoint of Turner's and Roosevelt's interpretations of American expansion, which came to be hegemonic in American historiography and, more broadly, in American popular culture until at least the 1950s.

The subject matter of Turner's and Roosevelt's properly historical narrations did not extend beyond the early decades of the century of their birth, yet their readings of the historical process became standard interpretations of the entire American history in the following decades.

---

[1] All the works of art mentioned in the following paragraphs, besides being seeable online, are reproduced (and often discussed) in Truettner (1991), Prown et al. (1992), and Goetzmann and Goetzmann (1986).

That happened not because, or not only because, Turner and Roosevelt were giant historians, but because they had come to synthesize, and give historical dignity to pre-existing, widely shared views of the American past. When Turner sent Roosevelt his essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, published in 1894, Roosevelt wrote back to him a few lines of praise:

> You have struck some first class ideas, and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely.
> (Roosevelt to Turner, February 10, 1894; in Morison 1951-54 (1), 363)

Had he been more analytic, he would have acknowledged not only that both his own and Turner's interpretations had been influenced by that "floating thought", but also that most of it had originated outside the field of historical research.

As we know, in that famous essay Turner set forth his "frontier thesis", which he had conceived after the 1890 *Bulletin* of the Census Office had announced the "closing" of the frontier.[2] His thesis met with an enormous, albeit not immediate, success in academia and became one of the favorite keys with which to interpret the *whole* of the continental expansion. Roosevelt, who had already written articles for popular magazines and published volumes about his experiences as a Dakota rancher in the early 1880s, celebrated the early steps of the conquest in the four volumes of his *The Winning of the West* (1889-96). Both authors were imbued with the ideology of social darwinism and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. But Turner's bias was less explicit and aggressive than Roosevelt's, who celebrated the conquest as part of the triumphal "spreading of the English-speaking people" all over the world, as he wrote in the first volume of *The Winning of the West*.

Even though Turner's and Roosevelt's ideology was essentially the same with respect to race, one major difference characterized their attitudes toward the Natives. For Turner the conquest came about as a "natural" process – as natural as the cyclical movement of sea waves – wherein the conquering race proceeded West by occupying lands after lands that were "free". For sure, armies went alongside the colonists, Turner concedes, and at times the colonists had to recur to arms and band together to defend themselves, but he mentions no war with the Indians. As if they had always chosen to oppose no resistance and just flee ever

---

[2] Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Extra Census Bulletin: Distribution of Population According to Density: 1890*, No. 2, April 20, 1891, Washington, D.C., 1-6.

further West every time a "wave" of advancing Anglo-Saxons hit their "shores". For Roosevelt, instead, the advance of civilization was inherently associated with "armed conquest" and the killing of the "savages" who opposed it.

Whatever the interpretation, both historians assumed that the Indian nations were destined to extinction. Each of them in his own way, they dealt objectively with the fact that the number of Indians had been constantly diminishing. As if the "Manifest Destiny" that Providence had assigned to the Anglo-Saxon – conquering the continent and expanding civilization – implied for the Indian the loss of both land and life.[3] Their visions went untouched by the romantic theme of the "Vanishing Indian", or "Vanishing American", with which a number of artists – writers, painters, sculptors, and photographers – had accompanied the "passing" of the Indian during most of the century (Dippie 1982).

The photographer Edward S. Curtis was one of the last to underscore the theme that the novelist James Fenimore Cooper had injected in his novel of 1826, *The Last of the Mohicans*. In a way, Curtis did what Turner and Roosevelt had done a few years earlier in their own field, fixing the theme for good in the images and words of his multivolume opus. In his famous photo of 1904, *The Vanishing Race – Navajo*, with which he opened the first "Portfolio" of *The American Indian*, a small group of Navajo horsemen proceeds in a single file away from the viewer and toward a dark, gloomy background. The gray atmosphere is not brightened by the uncertain sunlight and the contours of the figures are blurred – as their future is. The caption that Curtis attached to the picture synthesizes the elegiac, sentimental feeling associated with the idea of the Indian's extinction at the beginning of the twentieth century:

> The thought which this picture is meant to convey is that the Indians as a race, already shorn in their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future. Feeling that the picture expresses so much of the thought that inspired the entire work, the author has chosen it as the first of the series. (Curtis 1907-1930, Vol. I [1907]: *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho*: Portfolio 1, Fig. 1)

Painters

Let's go back to the 1830s and '40s. George Catlin claimed that he was the first artist to travel among the Indians of the Upper Missouri, then the "unknown" West. He did most of his travels, paintings, and writings in the

---

[3] See O'Sullivan (1845), Merk (1963), and Stephanson (1995).

1830s. His gaze on the Indians was that of an *ante litteram* ethnologist –
his Indians were hunting buffalo, dancing, living their social life in their
villages, or standing in front of him to be portrayed. They were never
shown as being warlike; they were friendly because, and as long as, they
did not feel threatened. No one was there to grab their land, *then*.[4]

By that time, Cooper's Mohicans had disappeared in Northwestern
New York, and other Indian nations stood in the way of the land-hungry
Anglo-Saxons in the region comprised between the Ohio river, the Great
Lakes and the Mississippi river. In their reports, to justify their assaults on
the Natives and the expropriation of their lands, the invaders depicted
them as blood-thirsty savages, with no pity for the white women and
children whom they captured during their attacks on the incoming
colonists.

The so-called captivity narratives that had been relatively popular until
the end of the eighteenth century had a revival in the nineteenth century,
and a number of artists tackled the theme in their paintings, both before
and after the Civil War. I'll only mention a few of them. John Mix Stanley
painted his *Osage Scalp Dance* in 1845. In it a mother is kneeling with her
baby at her side, while a group of menacing Indians surrounds her. One of
them is going to deliver the fatal blow on the woman, who raises her arm
to protect herself and her child, but the leader of the group stops him and
saves her, at least for the moment, leaving open the possibility that later
she may be tortured in the "scalp dance" to which the title alludes.

Instead, the mother in the painting by George Caleb Bingham,
Captured by Indians (1848), is portrayed while sitting by the fire of a
night camp, as she raises her eyes to heaven with a solemn air and with her
baby asleep in her lap, surrounded by the three Indians who have captured
her. Asher Durand also addresses the issue in *Indian Rescue* (1846). In a
sylvan ambience typical of his style, a white prisoner squatting with her
baby at the foot of a rock is surrounded by four Indians – three men, armed
with axes and bows, and a woman, also sitting on the ground, who seems
almost to be begging one of her companions. Upon them, however, are
going to come the white saviors, advancing quietly in the woods, rifles in
hand, who will surprise the Indians and rescue the captives.

In a way, Catlin and Stanley can be taken as early examples of the two
different attitudes which will lead later on to Turner and Roosevelt. What

---

[4] Catlin was one of the first to write openly of the "Vanishing Indian". The
Mandans he portrayed and with whom he sojourned were not exterminated by war,
but disappeared nonetheless, killed *en masse* by smallpox. By the end of the 1840s
they were extinct. The few survivors were assimilated into neighboring nations.
See Catlin (1851 [1841]).

is important in their case – and relevant to the subject matter of this essay – is the large publicity that their paintings received in their own times. Both artists made a business out of showing their paintings in all the major American cities (and in Europe). They put up itinerant "Galleries", sold admission tickets, and illustrated to the customers one painting at a time. Catlin became so famous that when the army captured the two leaders of Indian resistance, the Sauk Black Hawk and the Seminole Osceola, he was given the opportunity to portray them while in jail – afterwards giving special prominence to their portraits in the posters illustrating the contents of the Gallery. Catlin was also one of the first to express his sorrow at the realization that the Indians were a "dying nation", a people "rapidly passing away from the face of the earth" (see Catlin (1851 [1841] vol. 1, 3).

The theme of the "vanishing Indian" is explicit in a painting by Asher Durand, one of the leading representatives of the Hudson River School. Durand's West is still way East of the Great Lakes. The title of his canvas is *The Indian Vespers, Last of the Mohicans* (1847). In adopting the title of Cooper's still popular book, Durand helps set the *iconographic* features of the Indian doomed to extinction. In his painting, the time of the day is that of the early evening, just before sundown, and the setting is that of a rich natural environment bathed in golden light. There is no sign of civilization: the lake that reflects the last rays of the sun is empty, and on its bank a lonely Indian, "the last of the Mohicans", stands with arms raised, as if to greet for the last time the sun setting behind the mountains facing him across the lake. Sun and Indian both passing away, the sun for the day, the Indian forever.[5]

The presence of the Indians is also highly symbolic in Durand's *Progress*, painted in 1853. The painter has put two Indians in the bottom left corner of the scene. They are in the shade, almost indistinguishable from the rocks, trees, and dried trunks that surround them: they also seem to be part of nature – of a nature that is not hostile. From the top of a hill overlooking a lake or river, they observe a sunlit landscape, characterized by the presence of the typical signs of progress: farms and cultivated

---

[5] Another "vesper" appears sixty-five years later in the picture of the photographer Joseph Kossuth Dixon, *Sunset of a Dying Race*. In it an Indian warrior on horseback is shown while facing a sunset. He is alone. His horse stands on the crest of a hill and he is dressed in his full ceremonial regalia. No part of the landscape is visible, the central figure is surrounded by gray clouds in a gloomy atmosphere, and the uncertain light of the setting sun filters through the clouds in front of the Indian just enough to make the scene "readable". The photo, taken in 1909, was published as a photogravure in Dixon (1913).

fields; people, carts and herds on the road; telegraph poles and wires; a city where plumes of smoke rise to the sky; steamers on the water, and in the distance the railway line, with a train running from right to left on an impressive viaduct.[6]

There is another, post-Civil War painting that summarizes in a very didactic way all the elements of what will become the "turnerian" perspective: *American Progress*, by John Gast, painted in 1872, twenty-one years before Turner wrote his essay. Following the directions of his client, George A. Crofutt, a publisher of guides to the West for railroad travelers, John Gast assembled the symbols of progress, of western expansion, and of national pride on his canvas. It is not to its intrinsic quality as an oil painting that *American Progress* owes its lasting fortune – it became extremely popular thanks to a chromolithographic reproduction that brought it to every corner of the country. That painting was a synthesis of a widespread view regarding American expansion, but it also contributed to fix *that* view and make it common sense.

At the center of his composition is a beautiful woman – "Columbia", i.e. America – wrapped in a classical tunic and floating in the air, facing West. She wears the "star of empire" on her forehead. In her right hand she holds a schoolbook – meaning knowledge, civilization – while with her left hand she unwinds a telegraph line which, in the East behind her, is already suspended to its poles. On the ground below the three transcontinental lines trail her – the Northern Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroads, yet to be built, and between them the Central Pacific-Union Pacific line, that had been completed in 1869.

The three railroads, and Columbia herself, are preceded by advancing frontiersmen, prospectors, and the *conestogas* of emigrants, who are followed by a stagecoach, a solitary Pony express messenger, and finally by settlers. Before them, bison, bear, and Indians flee West, towards a dark sky not yet reached by the sun rising in the rosy right-hand side of the painting, where a big city is shown, and a bridge, and a river upon which steamboats and sailboats are floating. The painting assembles, and gives symbolic meaning to, all the details characterizing the ideology and iconography hegemonic in the culture of the time, but it also offers a key

---

[6] In the same years, other painters – notably, William Mason Brown, also a member of the Hudson River School, in *Landscape with Two Indians* (ca. 1850) and William Frerichs, of North Carolina, in *Storm Over the Blue Ridge* (ca. 1855) – portray the insignificance of the Indians by putting one or two of them at the center of lush natural sceneries overwhelming them, as if they were intrinsic, but minuscule parts of the world of nature.

to interpret American expansion. America is a superior entity – a deity, or an idea – smilingly and serenely supervising the advance of civilization.[7]

While the depiction by Gast and the pictorial quality of his painting belong more to the didactic iconography of popular prints than to high art, the opposite is true in the case of the allegorical picture by Domenico Tojetti, *Progress of America* (1875). In the large canvas by the Italian classicist painter, a San Franciscan for twenty years, the goddess America is a beautiful young woman dressed in a rosy tunic, who extends her arm and points to the left of the picture, the West. She is standing on a Roman chariot decorated with an imperial eagle, and holds the reins of the two white, prancing horses pulling the chariot forward. America, who wears a Phrygian cap – the red symbol of liberty – and on whose head a putto is about to lay the laurel wreath of triumph, is surrounded by four maidens symbolizing agriculture, medicine, music, and science. America's chariot is preceded by two puttos, one holding a flaming torch, the other a Roman tuba, and is followed by two female figures – one holding a tablet and a stylus, the other with laurel on her head – that could symbolize the history and glory which ensue from civilization and reward it. In the background, on the right, under a pink dawn, a barely visible locomotive moves in the same direction as the goddess, while on the left, again in a West whose darkness is still untouched by the light of progress, Indians and bison alike are running away. Conflict is absent in Tojetti's and Gast's paintings, as it will be absent in Turner's essay.

It is a different perspective that Theodore Roosevelt comes to embody. The four volumes of *The Winning of the West* only cover the period 1769-1807, yet, for him, the conquest of *that* West had happened thanks to the inborn martial qualities of the Anglo-Saxons, who waged war against the trans-Appalachian Indian nations. While Turner ignores the Indians, Roosevelt openly despises them as inferior human beings. He presents them as threatening savages, but he also pays high tribute to them as

---

[7] After the Civil War, when the building of railroads across the continent was a synonym for both progress and conquest, a large number of paintings and lithographs were made with trains at the center of the "story". Many of them adopted and made popular the verse by Bishop Berkeley ("Westward the course of empire takes its way"), from the last stanza of his *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America*, of 1752. In a speech given in 1802, John Quincy Adams substituted "the star of empire" to the original "the course of empire" (*An Oration Delivered at Plymouth, December 22, 1802 at the Commemoration of the First Landing of Our Ancestors*. Boston: Russell and Cutler, 1802: 31). Since then the two "versions" have coexisted in American popular culture.

warriors, who valiantly antagonized the advancing whites. This apparent contradiction is easily explained: by praising their prowess as fighters he boosts the superior valor of the Anglo-Saxons who fought and defeated them. Thus the Anglo-Saxons' victories were at the same time the proof of the superiority of the race, and the justification of both the conquest and the elimination of the Indians by military force.

Let's quote Roosevelt:

> Whether the whites won the land by treaty, by armed conquest, or, as was actually the case, by a mixture of both, mattered comparatively little so long as the land was won. It was all-important that it should be won, for the benefit of civilization and in the interests of mankind. It is indeed a warped, perverse, and silly morality which would forbid a course of conquest that has turned whole continents into the seats of mighty and flourishing civilized nations. […] The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him. […] the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people.[8] (Roosevelt 1996 [1889-1896], Vol. II, 2, 45)

That view became increasingly popular as the Anglo-Saxon expansion reached the Western territories of the Mississippi valley, after the Civil War. Most plots in popular western dime novels and theater, many paintings, most of the reports and articles published by the press nationally, and finally all of the "Wild West" shows that toured American cities in the last decades of the century were centered around the conflict between Indian savages and civilized whites. In other words, most of the racial anti-Indian stereotypes – which Herman Melville defines as the "metaphysics of Indian-hating" (1991 [1857], 192-202) – were common sense at the time of Roosevelt's writing. And Roosevelt's attitude was much more popular than Turner's.

Their views were not, as I said, the "product" of historians. It is a fact that American history was virtually not taught in American schools and colleges up until the 1880s, and that archaeology, anthropology and ethnology were infant disciplines until about the same time. It was only after 1879, the year when the Santa Fe railroad reached Las Vegas, New Mexico, that the first archaeologists and anthropologists traveled to the Southwest and started studying the Indians of the region (see Cartosio 1999).

---

[8] Similar expressions occur in Roosevelt (1996 [1889-1896]: Vol. III, 41-46).

In a number of cases photographers – often aggregated to the great geographical-geological-topographical expeditions that explored the West between 1867 and 1879 (led by Ferdinand Hayden, Clarence King, George Montagu Wheeler and John Wesley Powell: see Goetzmann 1993) – preceded scholars, creating in the East an enormous interest in the grandiose western scenery they had photographed. Their stereographs became extremely popular after the Civil War, so much so that selling them became the main source of income for many professional photographers. William Henry Jackson's photos of the Yellowstone wonders were decisive in convincing Congress to create the first national park in the world, in 1872; Carleton Watkins's photos of the higher Merced valley in the 1860s contributed to the setting aside as a protected area of what later became Yosemite National Park; Jack Hillers's photos of the picturesque Zuni and Hopi pueblos made New Mexico popular at the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia, in 1876. And on the basis of what photographers and western landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran were showing, the great railroad lines started promoting mass tourism in the last years of the century. By then the Indian wars were a thing of the past.

Custer's Last Stand

Well before the Civil War, along with the "captivity paintings" already mentioned, other paintings reinforced the hegemonic, "rooseveltian" theme of the Indians as aggressors, of the conquest as a deadly struggle between savagery and civilization. A few examples are in order. In Charles Deas's painting, *The Death Struggle* (1845), a white man and an Indian are depicted as clinging to each other, knives in hand, while their racing horses jump over the edge of a precipice. The white man – on the white horse, while the Indian's is black – is desperately trying to save himself from falling, grabbing with one hand the branch of a tree, which will hardly be able to support him. The fight will be deadly for both. In his St. Louis study Deas usually portrayed trappers and merchants, and painted and engraved genre scenes with pioneer life as a subject, James Flexner writes, but "when Indians entered [his] art, it was to incite terror." (Flexner 1970 [1962], 84). He was far from alone, even though many a subplot, so to speak, characterized that popular narrative. In the painting by Carl Wimar, *The Attack on an Emigrant Train* (1856), it is a caravan of settlers that is attacked by Indians. At the center of the painting is the first *conestoga* of the "train", with the defenders responding with their rifles to the attacking Indians armed with axes and bows. In the following decades,

thanks first to dime novels, then to newspaper coverage of the "Indian Wars", and later to Buffalo Bill's *Wild West*, the representations of such scenes would be much more gruesome, and the bands of blood-thirsty attackers would be given center stage.

After the Civil War, when the building of railroads across the continent became a synonym for both progress and conquest, a large number of paintings and lithographs were made that had trains at the center of the "story". Indians were inserted in the scenes either while fleeing in the face of an advancing America – as in the canvases by Gast and Tojetti – or as passive onlookers, remnants of a fast disappearing past, or as attackers. In the Currier and Ives lithograph by Fanny Palmer, *Across the Continent: "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"* (1868), two Indians are shown standing upon a hill on the other side of the tracks from a village, observing the busy life going on in it. The village is crossed by a railroad and the smoke puffed by a locomotive ready for departure is about to envelop them and cancel them from view. Instead in Theodor Kaufmann's *Westward the Star of Empire* (1867), a train advancing toward the viewer, at dusk, is about to derail because a group of Indians hiding in the foreground has torn up the rails.

But from the point of view of cultural stereotyping, nothing was more effective than the Custer myth, and no story was more "rooseveltian" than the battle on the Little Big Horn. I will not discuss the nationally unifying ideological significance of Custer's "Last Stand" as a "blood rite", or as an archetypal myth of sacrifice and regeneration.[9] Here, I'll refer only to its visual representations.

As the historian Brian Dippie wrote in 1976, the grand narrative iconography of the "Last stand", created through the recurrence of the theme, was the work of many "unskilled hacks" who represented the battle of June 25, 1876 with "distressive persistency" (1994 [1976], 39). The paintings worthy of mention are a handful; the vast majority of the approximately three hundred works portraying Custer's last defense on the Little Big Horn – so many of them painted, drawn or lithographed as of 1976 – are characterized "more by fantasy and imitativeness than aesthetic merit" (Dippie 1994 [1976], 39). Imitativeness, because the interpretive model set immediately after the event was repeated over the years with hardly any major changes. Fantasy, because no white witness survived to tell how things had happened, and because the Indian accounts and pictographs which became gradually available were largely ignored, since they were difficult to interpret, or appeared irreconcilable with each other,

---

[9] On this point see Ehrenreich (1997) and Slotkin (1973 and 1994 [1985]).

and thus overall unreliable, or were considered too "biased" in favor of the Indians themselves.

The distrust against the Indians lasted long, with the result that only sporadically was the voice of an Indian heard, and even then it was often dependent on the skill of an interpreter and the pen of a white person. In any case, according to Robert Utley, only a few white scholars have been able to make use of reliable Indian witnesses. Most of them have failed, because "they lacked insight into the character of Indian testimony and the manifold influences that produced distortions, incoherence, and falsehood". Frequently "the obstacles stemming from differences in cultural backgrounds" have been ignored: "Testimony delivered from an aboriginal frame of reference" has been interpreted "according to a Caucasian frame of reference", with obvious negative results (Utley 1988 [1962], 86-87). Only the recorder who had "lived among the Indians long enough to become familiar with their thought patterns could guard against construing their speech in terms of the background and experience of his own race", Utley adds (1988 [1962], 86-87). On the contrary, modern Indian scholars like Dee Brown (1971 [1964] and 1970) and James Welch (1994) have demonstrated how important Indian testimony can be if correctly interpreted, and when used with caution and discernment.

On July 15, 1876, ten days after the news of the events of June 25 had reached political centers and newspaper offices, the Texan *San Antonio Express* wrote:

> Overwhelmed by blood-thirsty and yelling thousands, enclosed with the 'jaws of hell', with certain death staring every man in the face, there was no panic, no rout, but each company took its place in turn to fight and die, Custer and his staff taking their turn last.

Four days later, the *New York Daily Graphic* published a full-page drawing by William M. Cary, titled "The Battle on the Little Big Horn River – The Death Struggle of General Custer". In less than two weeks, writes Brian Dippie, the illustrator of a daily newspaper "crystallized his conception of what would ever after be known as 'Custer's Last Stand'." Cary showed "a heroic figure clad in army blues, standing with one foot on the haunch of a dead horse, his left arm stiffly extended, the fingers gripping a pistol, and the right poised overhead, saber in hand, about to deliver a devastating blow to a nearby Indian" (Dippie 1994 [1976], 34). No one can doubt that Custer will be the last to fall. His figure is the only one that stands out, fully visible, still unharmed and composed in his gestures, in the middle of a confused scene, crowded with men and horses, soldiers and Indians, dead, and, if alive, entwined in mortal combat. A

"memorable picture," says Dippie, which set the model and style afterwards followed by scores of artists.

John Mulvany, with *Custer's Last Rally* (1881), and Edgar Samuel Paxson, with *Custer's Last Stand* (1899), produced two of the few works worthy of consideration, at least partly on account of their aesthetic quality and of the popularity they both enjoyed. The huge painting by Mulvany, the only important work in the life of the Irish-born painter who had studied art in Germany, had an extraordinary circulation: it was exhibited, seen and admired in all the states (and probably in Europe). When it was exhibited in New York City, the painting absorbed the attention of Walt Whitman, who looked at it "for more than an hour" before writing an enthusiastic review in the *Tribune*. The poet praised the aesthetic quality of the representation, but especially extolled the ideological implications which, in his opinion, it conveyed:

> Altogether a western, autochthonic phase of America, the frontiers, culminating, typical, deadly, heroic to the uttermost – nothing in the books like it, nothing in Homer, nothing in Shakespeare; more grim and sublime than either, all native, all our own, and all a fact. A great lot of muscular, tan-faced men brought to bay under terrible circumstances. Death ahold of them, yet every man undaunted, not one losing his head, wringing out every cent of the pay before they sell their lives.
>
> (Whitman in Taft 1982 [1953], 138-139)

These men are martyrs, fallen in the name of the greatness of the nation. Their death is a rallying call. Their sacrifice is to be glorified by the nation.

A lithographic reproduction of the painting was exhibited in hundreds of public places: in 1946 Robert Taft wrote that it was still possible to see a copy of it here and there. What is also interesting in Whitman's review is what we might call its "rooseveltian" twist: he sees "swarms upon swarms of savage Sioux, in their war-bonnets, frantic, mostly on ponies driving through the background, through the smoke, like a hurricane of demons", yet the Indians he sees in the foreground are "two dead Indians, herculean […] clutching their Winchester rifles, very characteristic" (Whitman in Taft 1982 [1953], 138-139).

The equally large painting by Edgar Samuel Paxson, probably begun in 1895 and "completed" four years later, was exhibited in many American cities, where visitors paid 25 cents to admire it. Paxson, a sign painter, moved to Montana in 1876, right after reading the news about Custer and the Little Big Horn disaster. He settled in Deer Lodge, repeatedly visited the battlefield, tracked down and interviewed the Sioux warriors who had

taken part in the combat, including the leaders Gall and Two Moons, and a hundred soldiers, including General Edward S. Godfrey, then captain in one of the companies that survived the massacre and among the first to return on the field to bury the dead and to examine Custer's body. The peculiarity of Paxson's canvas lies in the fact that the painter continued to retouch it for twenty years, before bringing it to how it is currently visible in the Whitney Gallery of Western Art at Cody, Wyoming. The search for documentary accuracy allowed him to portray Custer properly (short hair, buckskin clothes, and no saber); in addition, it made him study the battlefield and the testimony of the participants, and led him to trace the highest possible number of photographs of Custer's soldiers to insert their pictures into the painting. He found thirty-six. As a result, his painting, despite being full of figures and movement, is characterized by the fact that the Indians are relegated to the background of the scene, leaving the proscenium to the soldiers and to Custer himself at the top of the hill, each in a different pose and with his specific, personal physiognomy.

On the other hand, it is certainly not for its artistic quality that the large canvas by Cassilly Adams, *Custer's Last Fight* (1885), deserves to be remembered. The fact that this mediocre painting was exhibited in many American cities bears witness to the strength of the ideological reasons due to which the last stand theme was insistently brought to the public in those final years of the Indian wars. In the end, Adams's painting was to be purchased by Adolphus Busch – of Anheuser-Busch, one of the largest breweries in the country – who had it lithographed in 1895. The lithograph by Otto Becker, who made extensive departures from the original, was reproduced in no fewer than 150-200,000 copies and distributed, between 1896 and 1946, in bars, hotels and restaurants, in museums and in all other possible public places and homes across the country. "It is probably safe to say that in the fifty years elapsing since 1896", Robert Taft wrote, this print "has been viewed by a greater number of the low-browed members of society – and by fewer art critics – than any other picture in American History" (Taft 1982 [1953], 129-130).

It goes without saying, at this point, that the ideal perspective and ideological interpretation of the battle, and that the main purpose of most of its representations were hagiographic: to magnify manhood in the fight against a "blood-thirsty" and overwhelming enemy, to glorify the heroism of the victims, and to raise their sacrifice to martyrdom. And of course it was for the same reasons that Buffalo Bill inserted Custer's last defense in his *Wild West*, making it the closing scene of the show.