
THE PRAIRIE AND DELIVERANCE : A Futile Search for A "Paradise Regained"

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1. Introduction

Through the fall of Adam and Eve, paradise was lost to human beings; the striving for its recovery never ends. The dream for a "paradise on earth" is a universal phenomenon which attracts writers. In this short essay I would attempt to show how two American novelists of different generations depict the futile effort to regain the lost paradise in this world. James Fenimore Cooper who wrote *The Prairie* was born in the nineteenth century whereas James Dickey the writer of *Deliverance* was born in the twentieth century, yet both novelists deal with the tragic relationship between the ideal and the real. In their respective novels, *The Prairie* and *Deliverance*, both James Fenimore Cooper and James Dickey describe humankind's futile search for a paradise regained. Both are bitter books, in the sense that the protagonists in each find out that what they are striving for is only an empty dream.

2. The Mirage of a Paradise on Earth

In *Deliverance*, Ed Gentry and Lewis Medlock go to the country to get a glimpse of "paradise on earth." Lewis is fed up with city life, describing it as being complicated and "used-up." He needs a "new heaven" which he believes can be found in a country life. He puts his faith in country folks, in the mountains and hills, which promise new hope and provide new color and new sound in his life. They promise deliverance from the corruptive world of the city. For Lewis, country life recalls an almost cartoon version of life as it might be found in heaven. Lewis says to Ed when they set off for the country: "There's lots of music, it's practically coming out of

the trees. Everybody plays something: the guitar, the banjo, the autoharp, the spoons, the dulcimer" (Dickey:45). These people in the hills, with their folk-songs and dulcimer, will presumably come to lead him toward a new paradisiac world.

Lewis has found that he could sustain sanity in the city only because he has this rural Paradise to visit once in a while. He wants to share this with his best friend, Ed, and is eager to make him taste the heavenly bliss of the land. He idealize country life as being pure and innocent, and he wants to get the most out of it before it is overpowered by so-called civilization. The river, a vein of heaven on earth is going to be dammed up: "We really ought to go up before the real estate people get hold of it and make it over into one of their heavens," he says to Ed (Dickey:44).

The "heavens" the developers will create in the country will be one with "marines and beer cans," with the blaring sound from transistor radios and other modern conveniences. But Lewis believes that nature will survive this calamity: some day these modern machines are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over (Dickey: 42).

Thus three newcomers and one old believer set off to find a celestial niche in the land --before it vanishes altogether through yet another folly of mankind -- as a deliverance from the modern city's corruption. Ed Gentry, Bobby Trippe, Drew Ballinger, and Lewis Medlock are city-born and bred, and they are more or less bored with the tedious domestic routine of their daily lives: they have reached the top of their respective careers, and have no idea what to do next with their lives. Having no particular destination or goal, they

live in a kind of drift. Consequently, when Lewis tempts them with an image of "paradise on earth", they succumb to his vision and set off with great expectation not realizing that they are after an unobtainable mirage.

While the people in *Deliverance* try to fulfill their longing for a paradisiac happiness by going to the country, Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo tries to regain his lost paradise in the prairie. For years the forest has been his earthly paradise, where he can live and be one with nature. He loves and respects nature, and reciprocally nature has been kind to him, provided him with food, given him both physical and spiritual satisfaction. To him nature is a kind of book in which he can find all the wisdom a human being needs. It is also a medium for him to see the greatness of God and to enjoy His gift. When he can be one with nature, without any barrier, he is close to God and he can derive all God's blessings. To live freely in a wilderness and to become one with nature is like living in a Paradise before the Fall. But eventually the "serpent," in the form of civilization, comes to jeopardize the heavenly wilderness, turning it into a hellish "civilized" world. To Natty's eyes, the way people "open" wilderness is like a stripping off of God's gift:

They scourge the very 'arth with their axes. Such hills and hunting grounds as I have seen stripped of the gifts of the Lord, without remorse or shame! I tarried till the moths of my hounds were deafened by the blows of the chopper, and then I came west in search of quiet. It was a grievous journey that I made, a grievous toil to pass through falling timber and to breathe to thick air of smoky clearings week after week as I did! (Cooper:78).

With the emergence of civilization there is a "barrier" now between him and nature; he can not reach her without violating the barrier. Consequently, he is not free to enjoy nature's gift any more; his relationship with nature is disrupted, and the new community with its so-called "law and order" suffocates him. Thus, he goes farther west to the prairie, a place still uncontaminated by "civilization," to recapture the lost Eden, without realizing

that the "civilization" is like a Nemesis, following him wherever he goes.

The protagonists in both novels put their hope in this "promised Eden," never thinking that in reality it is just as corruptive as the Old World, or as empty as the shell of empty lives which they are trying to leave. Like a mirage, the image of heavenly bliss on earth dwindles away as soon as the characters try to grasp it.

3. The Illusive Journey into "the Garden of Eden"

At the first stage of their journey --"still about forty miles to Oree"-- Lewis and his friends in Dickey's *Deliverance* meet with a scene of beauty:

We were among the trees now, lots of them, I could have told you with my eyes closed; I had no notion what the trees were, but they were beautiful, flaming and turning color almost as I looked at them. They were just beginning to come (Dickey: 63).

And when they reach Oree, they enjoy the empyrean music from Lonnie, the retarded albino boy: "through everything he played there was a lovely unimpeded flowing that seemed endless (Dickey:60). All these seem to be the beginning of the rapture the promised land will offer.

But as they begin the river journey, Ed starts to notice what he ironically calls the result of civilization. The banks are filled with "thin sheds-rusted pieces of metal-engine parts-broken bottles," and worst of all are colorful "plastic pitchers" discarded there which will never "decompose." The word "doesn't decompose" suggests that this heavenly countryside is spoiled forever; it cannot be redeemed. And as they go deeper into the country, they realize that everything is not the way they imagine it will be: it is not Paradise at all. The pure, untainted countryside is as dirty as the city, if not more nauseating:

The river was feathering itself night and day. The rocks were full of feathers, drift on drift; even downriver sides were streaming and bannered with them. Every shape under the river was a sick off-white; the water around us was full of little prim, dry feathers curled up like things set sail

by children, all going at about the same speed we were. And out among them to the right, convoyed by six or eight feathers, was a chicken head with its glazed eye half-open, looking right at me and through me (Dickey:77).

Here Dickey uses the image of "feathers" aptly to jolt the reader, lulled by the heavenly music and scenery, and force him to come back down to the spoiled world of reality. The river bed feathers are not the lovely feathers of colorful birds, but of slaughtered chickens. The feathers symbolize things that are bad in this world: cruelty, unscrupulousness, waste, and slovenliness. Ironically, Dickey uses words such as "bannered" and "convoyed" not to denote glory or something we venerate, but as an implicit reminder of how debased human beings are.

Similarly, in The Prairie, the image of heavenly peace dwindles for Natty Bumppo as soon as he meets the Bush family. He sees in these people a force potentially destructive to the newly "regained paradise." They are the epitome of the "serpent" he thought he had left behind: "a sight I had never thought to behold again (Cooper: 17). When Duncan Uncas Middleton, Junior, asks Natty why he stays in the prairie, which Duncan terms "wastes," he answers that he comes "to the plain to escape the sound of ax, for here, surely, the chopper can never follow" (Cooper: 123). Ironically, however, that is the first thing the Bush family does after Natty led them to a camping ground. As soon as they arrive at the desirable spot the eldest son of Ishmael Bush spoils the wilderness by cutting down trees with an ax:

At length the eldest of the sons stepped heavily forward, and, without any apparent effort, he buried his ax to the eye in the soft body of the cottonwood tree. He stood a moment regarding the effect of the blow, with that sort of contempt which a giant might be supposed to contemplate the puny resistance of a dwarf, and then, flourishing the implement above his head, with the grace and dexterity with which a master of the art of offense would wield his nobler though less useful weapon, he quickly severed

the trunk of the tree, bringing its all top crashing to the earth in submission to his prowess. ...

The stranger had been a silent but attentive observer of their progress. As tree after tree came whistling down, he cast his eyes upwards at the vacancies they left in the heavens, with a melancholy gaze, and finally turned away muttering to himself with a bitter smile, like one who disdained giving a more audible utterance to his discontent (Cooper: 19).

The diction and the imagery Cooper uses is very apt in producing a vivid contrast between the softness and vulnerability of nature and the brutality and insensibility of man. The words "contempt" and "severed" are vividly contrasted with "soft" and "submission." The action of this brute in violating nature has left "vacancies" in "heaven," marring the seemingly regained paradise.

The tainted countryside in Deliverance, especially the image of those feathers appearing like a "banner" and the head of a slaughtered chicken being "convoyed" by six feathers in the water, mirrors the distorted moral virtue of the country people in Dickey's novel. They have a weird concept of moral value: their perception of vice and virtue is twisted. Killing, raping, and committing other unlawful deeds are nothing to them, yet they regard it as something base and degrading to abandon friends in need. The story of the fifteen-year-old boy who has saved a total stranger --Had Lewis's friend-- in the middle of a winter night is a vivid contrast to the raping sense. The rape of Bobby and the killings that follow are the most obscene and degrading events to happen in either books, even worst than Bush's and Abiram's sordid habits. What Ed encounters shocks and jolts his sense of reality. The false image of paradisiac country which Lewis has built tumbles down like an avalanche. The loss of the dream hits him hard, and eventually he runs back to the city to find shelter in his old world. Life in the country is not full of celestial serenity, as he has dreamt, but turns out to be chaotic, turbulent, and as sordid as city life. Even in his last glimpse of the countryside he has to face a grue-

some scene of people digging graves and "heaving up" dead bodies to move them to some other place before the area is flooded by destroyed river. This horrible picture is in stark contrast to the paradisaical scenery of his first glimpse of the country.

4. Conclusion

The disillusionment of the characters in both novels shows us how futile it is for mankind to try to regain the lost Eden in this mundane world.

Both Natty Bumppo and Ed Gentry --the protagonists of *The Prairie* and *Deliverance*-- are defeated by the realization that they can not regain the lost paradise: Natty dies knowing that he cannot find the Garden of Eden in the vanishing wilderness; and at the end of *Deliverance* Ed hides away in his old shell of a studio like a turtle. Both books end with defeat: Natty dies, failing to find a Paradise on earth, and Ed runs back to his old meaningless life as a "director" at the Emerson-Gentry studio, his dream of a paradise shattered.

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