

Imagining North America: Nineteenth Century German Travel Writers and Cultural Transfer

Jefferson Dillman

The early nineteenth century witnessed an increase of European travelers to the fledgling United States of America. They came from all parts of the continent and for various reasons. Some, like Alexis de Tocqueville, came to observe the prison system of the young republic, while others came to observe the western frontier and its indigenous inhabitants, and others still had scientific exploration in mind. Among these European visitors to the shores of North America were a large number of Germans. Their aims were as diverse as their cities and states of origin. Rudolf Kurz, for example, came from Bern, Switzerland, with the intention of painting Native Americans, while Julius Gustorf, a Frankfurter, came to examine German immigrant colonies in the northwest. The men who left written records of their travels shared cultural and literary perspectives that shaped the journals they produced, and allowed them to act as agents of cultural transfer from the Germanic world, to the Atlantic, and back again.

European travelers to North America did not come as morally and philosophically neutral observers. As Mary Louis Pratt argues in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Europeans “created the domestic of Euroimperialism” by seeing what they expected and were predisposed to see.¹ She points to the emergence of “Europe’s planetary consciousness,” a trope through which they viewed the lands they subsequently wrote about.² Pratt’s work is specifically concerned with the creation of a New World for its eventual subjugation and exploitation by European commercial interests, but in the larger context of travel writing her views can be more broadly applied.

Looking to Alexander von Humboldt as a seminal figure in shaping European views of the Americas, Pratt notes the specific exploratory and scientific context, which drove Humboldt and Bonpland to the shores of South America. Fueled by “prospects of vast expansionist possibilities for European capital, technology, commodities, and systems of knowledge,” European intellectuals prepared Humboldt to see and report that, which most closely aligned with their views.³ In the same manner, German travelers such as Maximilian von Wied, Prince Paul Wilhelm, and Gottfried Duden wrote their travel narratives with views already formed and prepared by the intellectual and philosophical climate of nineteenth-century Germanic culture.

A vibrant and expressive culture of the mind pervaded Germany in the early nineteenth century.⁴ One strand of this expression of ideas centered on aesthetics and, more particularly, the

Jefferson Dillman received his Ph.D in Transatlantic History from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2011 and works as a History Instructor at Temple College in Temple, TX.

¹ Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

⁴ By Germany, I mean those regions, states and principalities in which the Germanic language and Germanic cultural traits predominated. Thus not only the states that are characteristically associated with Germany such as

concept of the Sublime. Ideas about the Sublime figured prominently in the literary theory of the day. In Germany, the concept of the Sublime first found voice with Immanuel Kant, in a brief essay in 1764 and more fully in *The Critique of Judgment* in 1790, and later with Friedrich Schiller in his *On the Sublime* in 1801.⁵ If Schiller could be said to have responded to and refined Kant, then Kant may be said to have built upon the foundation laid by another as well, that of British philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke.⁶

In 1756 Burke published his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a work on aesthetics that was to exercise wide influence on philosophical constructions of vision, beauty, and nature. The sources of the Sublime, Burke posits, are “whatever is fitted to excite the ideas of pain, and danger,” that is, anything that can produce “the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling.”⁷ It is not enough to observe that pain or danger (and not mere common pain or danger, but that which might be called terrible) may produce feelings of the Sublime, because, as he points out, if these things “press too nearly they are incapable of giving any delight.” Yet, if those things that are terrible are viewed “at certain distances, and with certain modifications” they become delightful.⁸

Though terror, and the feelings it engenders is a starting point for understanding the Sublime, Burke goes on to insist that mere terror is not the only cause of the Sublime. Rather, those things, which *might* produce terror may also inspire the Sublime. Thus, visual objects of great dimension are a source of the Sublime. They are not dangerous or terrifying in and of themselves, but when comprehended in size and scope, so as to dwarf the viewer through vastness and grandeur, an effect similar to that of terror is created.⁹ Therefore, encounters with such physical features as cataracts of great size and violence produced in its viewers a “peculiar combination of rapture and terror,” or, more simply, the Sublime.¹⁰

Kant picked up the theme of the Sublime first in an essay titled “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime” (1764) and treated the subject more fully in *Critique of Judgment*. Whereas Burke’s ideas of the Sublime were intimately connected to the numinous, and, indeed, could not be separated from it, Kant posited beauty as a crucial element of the concept, not as a separate line of inquiry. He acknowledges that the greatest expressions of Sublimity occur in nature and in nature at its most chaotic, in its “wildest and most ruthless disarray and devastation, provided it displays its magnitude and might,” but goes beyond Burke in asserting that the inspiration of terror is not sufficient to produce the Sublime.¹¹ Rather, only when great apprehension is coupled with reason, and thus associated with a preexistent idea of beauty, can the Sublime be approached. It is not enough, Kant argues, to be filled with fear by a “vast ocean

Saxony and Prussia, but regions such as Alsace-Lorraine and Switzerland merit inclusion within the broader meaning of Germany before nationalism and political unification.

⁵ Schiller also dealt with sublime in earlier essays, but “On the Sublime” represents his mature thinking on the subject.

⁶ For further development of this see Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and J.T. Boulton “Editor’s Introduction” in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958). Boulton also notes Burke’s indebtedness to the Greek philosopher Longinus. Werner Pluhar, in the translator’s introduction to Kant’s *Judgments About the Sublime*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), also connects Kant to Burke.

⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-137, 142.

¹⁰ Patrick McGreevy, “Imaging the Future at Niagara Falls” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 77, no. 1 (Mar. 1987), 49-50.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis; Hackett, 1987), 98-99.

heaved up with storms,” even though it inspires the greatest apprehension and terror in a person. The individual so taken by that natural event must have already “been taken up by all sorts of ideas ... ideas containing a higher purposiveness.”¹²

This “higher purposiveness,” then, is one of Kant’s primary contributions to the discovery and explication of the Sublime as first elucidated by Burke. In dividing the analysis of the Sublime into two parts, Kant recognizes two elements that generate contemplation: the mathematical, which corresponds to size and quantity (i.e. “shapeless mountain masses”), and dynamic, which relates to the above-mentioned “ocean heaved up with storms.”¹³ Yet neither of these modes of apprehending nature can inspire feelings of the Sublime in and of themselves. Kant states that any object of vast scope (whether dynamic or mathematic) cannot be properly comprehended without the application of reason. It is reason that allows one to imagine the object in its totality, but the absolute whole of an object which has the potential to provoke the Sublime overpowers the purely empirical sense of reason.¹⁴ Reason, therefore, must be coupled with moral feeling, that which Kant describes as the “supersensible,” the innate ability of people to “judge [themselves] independent of nature,” and thus imagine themselves superior to it.¹⁵ By so doing, the Sublime may be comprehended through “higher purposiveness,” through a moral feeling that allows judgment of natural objects of vast magnitude simply by placing the idea of Sublime in the mind, and not in the object of contemplation itself.

The Sublime, then, in Kant’s estimation, is a rational act based on man as a moral agent; the Sublime is attributed to nature, but proceeds from the mind of the observer, making it not only comprehensible, but, by implication, describable.¹⁶ Kant thus created a conversation about Aesthetics that called for the intersection of imagination and reason and elevated art as a primary means by which the “higher purposiveness” in the soul of man could be experienced.¹⁷

Schiller, an admirer of Kant, while not strictly a philosopher, made several forays into the idea of the Sublime, which culminated in his 1801 essay “On the Sublime.”¹⁸ Schiller made no secret of his debt to Kant, and his explorations of the Sublime were crafted largely in response to *Critique of Judgment*.¹⁹ If, for Kant, the Sublime was wholly subjective, generated by the observer, Schiller finds a universal imperative in its operation. He agrees with Kant that the conception and appreciation of the Sublime lies in the mind, but argues that objects of natural beauty (and thereby suitable for fostering feelings of the Sublime) have inherent properties without which no amount of contemplation can produce Sublimity. “The wild masses of nature,” he writes, “round about [a man] begin to speak to his heart an entirely different language; and the relative greatness outside of him is the mirror, wherein he perceives the absolute greatness within himself.”²⁰

¹² Ibid., 99.

¹³ Ibid., 112, 120.

¹⁴ Ibid., 105, 127.

¹⁵ Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁶ Ibid., 100-101, 142. Kant’s investigation into the sublime, with its subtleties and nuances encompasses far more than can be summarized or detailed here. However, his basic argument is fairly straightforward and is sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

¹⁷ Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-2.

¹⁸ Schiller’s earlier work, as noted in footnote 5 was 1793’s “Of the Sublime - Toward a Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas.”

¹⁹ Reginald Snell, “Introduction” in Kant, 7.

²⁰ Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

Schiller's insistence on a dual locus for the generation of the Sublime is significant in that it involves artistic expression and thus concerns itself closely with Aesthetics. Not that Burke, or Kant for that matter, would have separated the Sublime from Aesthetics, but Schiller's contribution is such that beauty remains both something intangible and yet objectively classifiable. To produce the Sublime with the end of elevating man to a state of perfect moral freedom, beauty as something perceived and something objective forms a link between the rational and natural determinations. Drawing upon the Kantian dichotomy of reason and morality, Schiller insisted upon the blend of the two to produce a picture of the highest ethical ideal a man could attain. This harmonization of two disparate elements avoided an over reliance on reason, or indeed, a reliance upon reason alone, and made possible the expression of Aesthetics in the context of the beautiful and the Sublime with the end goal of raising the soul of man to heretofore unconsidered heights through art.²¹

Taken as a whole, the development of the Sublime as a philosophical category and its application to Aesthetics, by the beginning of the nineteenth century had firmly embedded itself into German intellectual culture. Visually, the Sublime, and the beautiful that forms an essential component thereof, is represented by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Anton Koch.²² In the same way that visual artists communicated the Sublime through physical imagery, literary artists expressed it verbally. Thus, what Koch was able to convey in his *Der Schmadribachfall* (1829) was also conveyed by travel writers such as Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach in his description of Niagara Falls: a sense of the majestic in which the human being is rendered nearly insignificant, yet at the same time is able to conceive of the spectacle, attach meaning to it, and thereby elevate his soul.²³ German travelers of this period achieved in print what painters achieved on the canvas. In short, they spoke the language of the Sublime.

A conception of the Sublime and its penetration into the culture of the educated is evidenced by the German travelers to North America in the early part of the nineteenth century. These travelers were, without exception, educated men, and most received degrees from universities. The relatively small world of German intellectual elites ensured that no idea of merit would go unnoticed or unappropriated. Schiller, a progressive in the field of Aesthetic philosophy, held a post as professor at Jena University, and later collaborated with Goethe in the opening of the Weimar Theater. Schiller's influence extended well beyond his death in 1805: Rudolf Kurz acknowledged in 1851 that "to the works of Schiller . . . I am indebted for my viewpoint concerning the ideal," which posited physical beauty as a sign of moral and spiritual beauty.²⁴ Duke Bernhard, who spent a year traveling the United States in 1825 and 1826, was an acquaintance of Goethe, had ties to the University of Jena, where Schiller once taught, and moved in the circles of those who studied contemporary Aesthetics and Philosophy.²⁵ Prince

1967), xxvi; Friedrich Schiller, "On the Sublime," trans. William F. Wertz, retrieved 01/14/08 from www.schillerinstitute.org.

²¹ Schiller, "Sublime,"; Oskar Walzel, *German Romanticism*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), 15, 22.

²² Brad Prager, *Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism*, (Rochester, NY: Camden House 1997), 93-94.

²³ Ibid., 117-118; Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, *Travels Through North America During the Years 1825 and 1826 in Two Volumes*, trans. unknown, (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1828), 75.

²⁴ Rudolf Kurz, *Journal of Rudolf Freidrich Kurz: An Account of his Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and the Upper Missouri Rivers During the Years 1846 to 1852*, trans. Myrtis Jarrell, Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937, 157.

²⁵ John T. Krumpelmann. "Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar: An Emissary of Gothe to the American South" in *South Central Bulletin*, Feb. 1970, 201-203; Marlis Mehra, "Prince Bernhard's Travel Diary; A German Aristocrat's View of American Customs and Social Institutions" in *South Central Bulletin*, (Winter 1980), 156-159.

Maximilian von Wied, who led an expedition that included the painter Karl Bodmer up the Missouri River in 1833-1834, was educated in Natural History, and was an intimate of Humboldt, who himself was a friend of Kant and Schiller and worked with them on the influential literary journal "The Graces."²⁶ Even Julius Gustorf, though apparently not university educated, taught German at Harvard and was a colleague of George Ticknor, whose ties to Germany's intellectual elite are well-documented.²⁷

Beyond the web of university connections and personal ties, German travelers to North America demonstrated a shared perspective on Aesthetics and the Sublime in their writings. Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Württemberg, who traveled the American northwest from 1822-1824, though his narrative is largely dispassionate and scientific, approached the Sublime in his discussion of a thunderstorm experienced at sea off the coast of Cuba and in the Gulf of Mexico: "it is difficult to form a clear idea without witnessing them," he writes, "the horizon appears dissolved in fired with great drops of rain pouring down illuminated brilliantly by the electrical barrage." He further observes that "the thunderstorms are rarely preceded by gusts of wind, but sometimes a brief and violent disturbance of air concluded this majestic spectacle."²⁸

Echoing Kant and Schiller in their insistence on the Sublime as containing moral and spiritual significance, Duke Paul describes the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as "justly called the pride of creation. I may confess that I was filled with deep emotion and gratitude to the almighty Creator of the universe, who had blessed man with the beautiful gift of receptivity for great and exalted things."²⁹ On viewing the vast Western prairie at sunset, he expresses similar feelings: "Illumined by the golden rays of the nearly setting sun, the charming picture in its simple beauty was still more captivating and . . . there the emotions of man are deeply touched, and the soul of man is filled with devout praise of the Creator."³⁰

The danger that often attends the Sublime as Burke conceived it struck Duke Paul at his first sight of the Missouri River. Noting that the ferry crossing from St. Charles, Missouri to Illinois was hazardous due to the raging waters, he writes that the "first sight of the river afforded me a magnificent and never-to-be-forgotten spectacle, augmented by the opportunity to see it at high water and in stormy weather, making the native wild region appear still more impressive."³¹ A lightning storm also experienced on the prairie further provoked Duke Paul to expression of the terrible aspect of the Sublime: "A frightful and yet majestic thunderstorm arose in the east. Never have I seen more beautiful cloud formations, nor did more light changes of striking colors . . . uninterrupted lightning and thunder augment the impression offered by the awe-inspiring spectacle."³² Duke Paul does not explicitly reference the Sublime, and his expressions might be read as simple enthusiasm for a natural spectacle. However, his education as a natural scientist

²⁶ Davis Thomas and Karin Ronnefeldt, eds. *People of the First Man: Life Among the Plains Indians in Their Final Days of Glory. The Firsthand Account of Prince Maximilian's Expeditions up the Missouri River 1833-1834*. (New York: Promontory Press, 1982), 11; Reginald Snell, "Introduction" in Friedrich Schiller On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters, trans Reginald Snell, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1988), 3,6.

²⁷ Fred Gustorf "Introduction" in *The Uncorrupted Heart: Journals and Letters of Frederick Julius Gustorf 1800-1845*, (Columbia, MO; University of Missouri Press, 1969), 5-6.

²⁸ Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg, *Travels in North America 1822-1824*, trans. Savoie Lottinville, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 18-19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 260; Many proponents of the Sublime or the proto-Sublime connected it to religious feeling, in which the Sublime sensation was linked to the grandeur of deity. See for example the works of Shaftesbury or Joseph Addison.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

³² *Ibid.*, 278.

provided him access to current intellectual trends, and the language he employs indeed suggests that he had the Sublime in mind while framing his account.

Gustorf, the former German instructor and tutor at Harvard and Yale, returned to the United States after a ten-year residence in Frankfurt, inspired by Gottfried Duden's examination of settlement opportunities for Germans. Visiting the West, Gustorf had occasion to travel on the Ohio River, remarking on how "it flow[s] gently between wooded banks ... then suddenly, around the next bend, appears a striking panoramic view." Further on, as civilization decreased, and upon seeing "the rarest color shadings" among forests and hills, he observes that "the banks of the Ohio are becoming wilder and more sublime."³³ Another American River, the Wabash, also provoked within Gustorf expressions of the Sublime: "this river, like the Ohio, has remarkable bends" and, at a place where the river divided around a small island, it was "too beautiful to describe—one must see it with his own eyes."³⁴ And again, viewing the Mississippi, Gustorf says of the view of the great river and St. Louis in the distance that it "is a pleasure to the eye and an inspiration to the mind."³⁵ Given his previous reference to the Sublime, Gustorf's appreciation of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers suggest that his pleasure sensations derive from the same.

The paleontologist Albert C. Koch, a native of Saxony, while traveling the American West in search of fossils, had several occasions on which to note the beauty and grandeur of nature. Employing the language of the Sublime at his viewing of a natural cavern, Koch writes, "the much harder petrification consequently lie raised on the stone slabs, more splendid than the most beautiful sculpted ornament ... a truly enchanting view that which indeed I would like to have described by a more skilled pen ... this is, as I want to express it, a magical subterranean garden."³⁶ At the entrance to another cave, Koch observed a "crystal clear stream" running through picturesque flora, and surrounded by trees hung with Spanish moss which "gave the whole a somewhat melancholy appearance." He "stood absorbed by in this beautiful view, moved by the feeling which so often overpowered me, that I could not share all this beauty with any one of those who are so dear to me."³⁷

Waterfalls, though not of the magnitude to provoke the terrible, also captured Koch's imagination. While exploring along the Alabama river, he came upon a small cataract which "ma[d]e the landscape all the more beautiful," surrounded as it was by "green trees including the magnificent *Magnolia Grandiflora*," as well as "glorious fan palms," the whole scene punctuated by the roar of the fall "mingl[ed] with the songs of various birds and the melancholy cries of several horned owls."³⁸ At Trenton Falls in western New York, Koch observed a "romantic situation," in which the largest of the several falls, cutting a course through black limestone, and surrounded by foliage made a "wildly frothing and thundering fall . . . rolling rapidly between the high black walls, and then, plunging anew into the depths, changes into foam and spray, a spectacle which repeats itself four times."³⁹

³³ Julius Gustorf, *The Uncorrupted Heart: Journal and Letters of Julius Frederick Gustorf 1800-1845* ed. and trans. Fred Gustorf and Gisela Gustorf, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 20-21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁶ Albert C. Koch, *A Journey Through a Part of the Unites States of North America in the Years 1844 to 1846*, trans. Ernst A. Stadler, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach journeyed through North America in 1825 and 1826, and marveled at Niagara Falls. Viewing the massive cataract, Bernhard lamented his inability to properly express such magnificence:

[W]e . . . saw before us the immense mass of water which rushes with a tremendous noise into the frightful abyss below. It is impossible to describe the scene and the pen is too feeble to delineate the simultaneous feelings of insignificance and grandeur that agitate the human breast at the sight of this stupendous work of nature.⁴⁰

Observing the falls from the precipice, he further remarked that “we can only gaze, admire, and adore . . . and satisfied ourselves by looking from above upon this sublime and majestic sight.”⁴¹ Crossing to the Canadian side of the falls, Bernhard encountered the “Horse-Shoe,” a semi-circular into which the greater portion of the falls plunged. With spray rising up from below like a mist, Bernhard described the sight as “awful and horrible” and stood there “like a petrified being.”⁴²

Niagara Falls was not the only natural wonder in North America that elicited the language of the Sublime from Bernhard. Drawing upon Thomas Jefferson’s notes on the Natural Bridge in Virginia, who described it as “the most sublime of all Nature’s works,” Bernhard writes that “it is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were up to heaven! The Rapture of the spectator is indescribable!” He further compares the Natural Bridge to other great wonders of nature such as Vesuvius, the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland, and even Niagara.⁴³ Though Bernhard, prefacing his description of the Natural Bridge, claims to have little poetic inclination, his description of the falls of the Little Miami River in Ohio belies this claim. “Large cedar trees shade this precipice,” he observes, “which makes it very gloomy, and contribute in great measure to the peculiarity of this imposing scene of nature.” Taking a pathway to the bottom of the falls and standing amidst the steep rock walls, he felt “entirely separated from the world,” and he was “scarcely able to preserve the consciousness” of his own existence.⁴⁴ Clearly, Bernhard was as taken by the falls of the little Miami and the Natural Bridge as he was by Niagara Falls, and constructed his narrative around an existing conception of the Sublime.

Though Duke Bernhard acquitted himself well in expressing the Sublime in prose form, his lyricism was exceeded by Rudolf Kurz, who wrote of his life and travels over a six-year period in the American West. As noted above, Kurz referenced Schiller’s view on the beautiful and Sublime in his writing, and this frame of mind was present with him almost from the beginning of his journey. Shortly after arriving in St. Louis, he visited the Cahokia River in Illinois in order to draw landscapes. Viewing a tangle of creepers, vines, and several varieties of tree, Kurz was “so enraptured by their indescribable loveliness that [he] came near to forgetting, not only the rest of the world, but even to do [his] sketching.”⁴⁵

His descriptive powers aside, Kurz reveals a penchant for Philosophy and Aesthetics as constructed by Schiller. Speaking in the context of art, he writes that beauty exists for more than

⁴⁰ Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 192, 142

⁴⁵ Kurz, *Journal of Rudolf Freidrich Kurz*, 15.

pleasure, that “it has the much more lofty goal aim to inspire us to love the good.” To Kurz, the goal of man is to attain a moral perfection, just as Kant had posited, and the beautiful and Sublime, existing as they do outside of man, nonetheless require what is inside of man to perform their work: “the soul possesses this sensitive faculty, we see with our ‘mind’s eye’” which “possesses also a power peculiarly its own—the imagination.” Through imagination pictures are made more beautiful and are created or transformed in the mind. The artist takes natural forms and perfects them through a conception of ideal beauty and “by that means the human being rises above that which is usual and commonplace. To inspire their fellow beings is the artist’s most lofty aim.”⁴⁶

Just how far the idea of the Sublime had penetrated into German intellectual culture is evidenced by the travel journal of Prince Maximilian von Wied, who, accompanied by the painter Karl Bodmer, undertook an expedition in the American West in 1832-1834. Wied was as much a rational man of science as any could be at that time. Thoroughly educated in the natural sciences, and already a noted naturalist and ethnologist, Wied’s prose, though descriptive, is generally dry and matter-of-fact, and seldom does he indulge in the sort of eloquence that characterize the narratives of Duke Bernhard, Kurz, and Duke Paul Wilhelm.⁴⁷ Yet even he was moved by natural spectacles that presented themselves to his view in North America. Passing down the upper Missouri River, through a formation known as the Gate of the Stone Walls, Wied remarks on “the wonders described earlier passed us as in a dream . . . only trappers and the *engages* . . . sometimes look with indifference on these interesting scenes of nature, the value of which few of them can appreciate.”⁴⁸ Further down the river, he noted that “a solemn silence prevailed in the vast solitary wilderness where Nature, in all her savage grandeur, reigned supreme.”⁴⁹ Clearly lacking the rhetorical flourish of even a fellow scientist such as Koch, Wied nonetheless had occasion to express himself in language approaching that of those more obviously influenced by a more metaphysical philosophy of Aesthetics.

The language of the Sublime in all its variations, whether Burke’s dichotomy of terror and pleasure impulses, Kant’s recognition of the role of reason and “higher purposiveness,” or Schiller’s insistence on necessity of the moral agency of man, found its way into the literature produced by German travelers to the American West in the first half of the nineteenth century. All of the works cited above were published in Germany, and helped to inform German views of the North American continent. Yet the construction of the West that appeared in the popular *Indianer* literature of the second half of the nineteenth required more than the beautiful and the Sublime. A second philosophical and literary movement that began to develop in Germany at the same time, Romanticism, also made an impact on the writers of travel narratives about North America. More specifically, German Romanticism contained an element that sought a mythical tribal past through the use of texts from classical antiquity such as Tacitus’ *Germania*, and the medieval saga *Das Nibelungenlied*.

Renaissance scholars in Italy rediscovered Tacitus’ manuscript, lost for the better part of fifteen hundred years, in the mid-fifteenth century, and it was translated into German vernacular in 1496. Conrad Celtis applied *Germania* in a proto-nationalistic sense in that same decade, contrasting the purity and valor of Arminius and his Chersucan warriors with the decadence of Imperial Rome, beginning a tradition that would culminate in the essays of Johann Gottfried

⁴⁶ Kurz, *Journal of Rudolf Freidrich Kurz*, 187-189.

⁴⁷ Thomas and Ronnefeldt, *People of the First Man*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

Herder and that would greatly influence the early German Romantics. Herder called for a revival of a culture grounded in true German history, the history of “topography, customs, and communities of local native tradition.” He rejected notions that culture could be found in idealized Classicism, but rather in “the Vernacular arts: folklore, ballads, fairy tales, and popular poetry.”⁵⁰ Beyond the heroic warriors of Imperial Roman times, *Germania* also represented the vast, primeval Teutonic forests, a land as pure as the men who inhabited it, and a place, which gave birth to all that was truly German. Arminius and his brave army could not exist apart from the land from which they derived.

Along with a revival of Tacitus and his heroic tribesmen of antiquity, German intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also sought a German identity in the medieval saga. With a tide of post-Napoleonic nationalism rising throughout Germany, and the early Romantics possessing an affinity for the literature of the Middle Ages, the epic Germanic saga *Das Nibelungenlied* gained intellectual currency. This fascination with medieval literature grew out of a concept of *Bildung*, the development of human faculties in attempt to reach perfection. Under the aegis of *Bildung* “human activity is a widening of self-determined destiny to infinite proportions.”⁵¹ A longing for the infinite in the quest for perfection embraced the distant past, where the imagination is freed from limitations. Thus, the Middle Ages became a ripe field for the Romantic conception of life, and the epic poetry of five or more centuries earlier had an especial appeal.

Das Nibelungenlied is a poem, which recounts the tale of the Burgundians and their fight against three kings of the Huns and Romans, to whom they eventually, and tragically, succumb. The fight is valiant but ultimately inglorious. The story itself is replete with fantastic feats, treachery, intrigue, and mythology, but its chief value to the early Romanticists and proponents of Herder is the portrait it paints of the Burgundians, those who represent true Germany much as Arminius and the Cheruskans do. Idealizing adjectives are plentiful in *Das Nibelungenlied* when it comes to the descriptions of the characters. D.G. Mowatt and Hugh Sacker note that such verbiage is “in general rather indiscriminately applied to everyone,” and so in some sense the hero of the first part of the saga, Siegfried, is not differentiated from Hagen, the treacherous counselor who plots and carries out Siegfried’s murder.⁵² However this affects *Das Nibelungenlied* as a story, the more important point is that the Burgundians are described hyperbolically, and it is on to this that the Romanticists latched.

From the beginning, we see the language of heroism emerge in the text of *Das Nibelungenlied*. The opening adventure describes the three brothers of Krehmilde as brave, “strong and eager for battle, daring, fierce, and wholly unyielding.”⁵³ Siegfried is often extolled for his great height and strength, his bravery and nobility. The knights of Siegfried’s household are described in a like manner, and the poet says of Gunter, the King of the Burgundians at Wurms, that he is “a mighty warrior, keen and wise.”⁵⁴ Many others of the Burgundian court are noted in such fashion: Hagen, Volker, Ortwin, and Danewart are all variously presented as heroic, valiant, mighty, noble, powerful, bold. *Das Nibelungenlied* thus provided Germany’s

⁵⁰ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 77-78, 91-92, 101-103.

⁵¹ Edward R. Haymes, “Introduction” in Burton Raffel, *Das Nibelungenlied; Song of the Nibelungs* trans. Burton Raffel, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), xvi; John C. Blankenagel, “The Dominant Characteristics of German Romanticism,” *PMLA* 55 no. 1, Mar. 1940, 6.

⁵² D.G. Mowatt and Hugh Sacker, *The Nibelungenlied: An Interpretive Commentary*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 10-11.

⁵³ Raffel, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

intellectual elite with a trope through which to imagine themselves as Germans, but also through which those who traveled to North America could imagine the natives of that region.

Hartmut Lutz, in an essay on what he calls German Indianthusiasm, comments on the peculiar affinity Germans feel for the Native North Americas up to the present day. He sees the groundwork for “German-Indian identification” laid with the rediscovery of Tacitus and *Das Nibelungenlied* and locates the beginnings of this phenomenon with the novels of Karl May.⁵⁵ Frank Mehring argues for an earlier proliferation of German fiction involving Indians, including translation of James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking stories, and the novels of Carl Postl and Friedrich Gerstaecker.⁵⁶ However, these works were generally published around the mid-1800s, placing the travel narratives thus far examined of the early nineteenth century in advance of them, and providing the foundation upon which later fiction writers would build.

Albert Koch, the paleontologist so enraptured by natural caverns, observed of the struggling Native American population on Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts that “the love of the land holds them here where their ancestors had lived from time immemorial.”⁵⁷ This sentiment echoes Herder’s notion of the land forming an integral part of the core of a people, and Koch further reflects this ideal and hearkens back to Tacitus in his description of the banks of the Mississippi south of St. Louis: “the opposite side of the road was bordered by a primeval forest with trees of a size and strength of which one has no idea in Germany. To give the whole an even more romantic atmosphere, from time to time the howling of hungry wolves could be heard.”⁵⁸

Duke Paul Wilhelm tacitly references Tacitus and *Das Nibelungenlied* in encounters with Indians in Illinois. Though his descriptions of these destitute people are not flattering, an echo remains of what they once were, and might still be were it not for the presence of the white man. A Delaware Indian, dressed in rags, “revealed but little of a proud and warlike people which distinguished this mighty nation half a century ago,” and only the nations further west “continue to maintain their nationality and moral freedom with pride.”⁵⁹ The corruption that Wilhelm finds attending the natives that live in close proximity with the whites, aside from their obvious fall from a tribal people possessed of admirable Teutonic-like qualities is suggestive of a more subtle theme found in *Das Nibelungenlied*. The heroes of Burgundy, for all their valor, strength, and prowess, ultimately succumb to the superior numbers of a lesser people, the Huns. Wilhelm speaks critically of the handling of the natives by the United States government, which occupies the role of the Huns, and even goes so far as to propose that miscegenation is “one of the main causes of the decay of the Indians.”⁶⁰

Wilhelm was not alone in this assessment. Kurz and Wied also reflect this view. Kurz, who found much of the forest in North America “primeval” and observed of the Iowa Indians “forms more beautiful than those . . . I can not imagine,” and further admired their “proud, easy bearing as well as to the natural grace and easy movements,”⁶¹ believed that they were “no longer a true type of the savage. They have acquired much,” he goes on to say, “from living neighbors to the

⁵⁵ Hartmut Lutz, “German Indianthusiasm,” in Colin G. Gallow, Gerd Gemunden Susanne Zantop, eds. *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 172-175.

⁵⁶ Frank Mehring, “Indians in German Literature” in Thomas Adam, ed. *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History, a Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clío, 2005), 554-560.

⁵⁷ Koch, *A Journey*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁵⁹ Wilhelm, *Travels in North America*, 174, 184-185.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁶¹ Kurz, *Journal of Rudolf Freidrich Kurz*, 38.

white man and, more's the pity, little that is good." Those Iowa who went to school in Kentucky were, "in a word, ruined as braves."⁶² The Sauk and Fox, recently dispossessed of their lands, still retained some of their virtuous characteristics, including a "proud warlike mien," but for their future, Kurz notes that "they have no outlook . . . that inspires hope."⁶³

To further underscore this point, when Kurz encounters Native Americans at the trading posts farther west, those natives who were not yet defeated or dominated by the westward rush of white settlement, he is largely complimentary of them, and in particular their stature, strength, and martial spirit. The Yankton Sioux he finds to be strong warriors, particularly the well-proved braves whom he calls "soldiers" and who make up the Chief's honor contingent, such as it is, and the core of war and raiding parties.⁶⁴ Concerning these Native Americans' martial traits, Kurz praises their "force, skill, cunning, and bravery" and notes that even when faced by a much superior force, Indians will "fight as courageously as lions, even down to the last man." This, too, is reminiscent of the last battle in *Das Nibelungenlied* where the Huns slaughter the brave Burgundians almost to a man.⁶⁵

Wied, like Kurz, is complimentary towards many of the Indians he encounters, and refers to them in *Nibelungenlied*-like terms. He describes an Omaha as having a "savage and martial appearance, to which his athletic frame greatly contributed," while a delegation of Yankton and Teton Sioux is portrayed as "Tall, good-looking men" who "greatly prize personal bravery." Crow warriors are characterized as "tall and handsome men," mounted and carrying muskets and spears. Wied reports that the Minataree are "tall, athletic men" and also "fine, bold horsemen, resembling the Circassians"⁶⁶ Yet of others, those who live too near, or have become too accustomed to, white men, he is less than complimentary. Of the Sioux who live near whites he writes that "they become negligent hunters, indolent, and consequently poor" for having surrendered their way of life. The Assiniboin whom Wied encountered living permanently in Fort Union on the far upper Missouri were constantly begging for items, particularly tobacco which "they were too indolent to prepare, or to get from the forest themselves." He further notes that "most of the Indians now present looked wretchedly poor, and many of them had not even a pipe of their own."⁶⁷

To see that such a dual depiction of Native American had an impact on German *Indianer* literature, one need look no farther than Karl May's preface to *Winnetou*. The Indian, he writes, was once "a proud handsome figure . . . and how miserable and degenerate he has become." The noble warrior with the strength to fight single-handedly a grizzly bear has been reduced to a pathetic figure, begging and stealing for his keep.⁶⁸ Yet the native characters within the novel more often resemble those of *Das Nibelungenlied* or *Germania* but with the cultural and physical characteristics reported on by the travel writers. Old Shatterhand's first encounter with Winnetou and his father might have been given by Wied or Kurz: Intshu-tshuna is above medium height and strongly built, with a comportment that "had something truly noble, and his movements suggested considerable physical agility," while Winnetou's face was "almost more noble than his father's, and of a subdued light brown with a tinge of bronze." The Kiowas Old Shatterhand

⁶² Ibid., 34, 45.

⁶³ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 174-175.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 142-143; on the Burgundian last stand, see Raffel, 308-329.

⁶⁶ Thomas and Ronnefeldt, *People of the First Man*, 34-37.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 27, 57.

⁶⁸ Karl May, *Winnetou* trans. Michael Shaw, (London: Continuum, 1977), xii-xiii.

encounters while surveying for the railroad were “powerful figures and had a martial appearance.”⁶⁹

In an example of cultural transfer, German travelers to North America carried with them a literary tradition derived from Romanticism and proto-nationalism in the form of *Das Nibelungenlied* and Tacitus. This literary tradition allowed them in many ways to identify with Native Americans as, to use Hartmut Lutz’s terminology, “tribal brothers,” like the Teutons of antiquity, and the Burgundians of medieval saga who represented true Germanic identity. Native Americans peopled a primeval land from which they derived their identity, and in their bravery, heroism, and physical stature as men and warriors, travel writers readily found figures they could place into an existent interpretive grid. What was bad about Indians was most often what was bad about the whites who corrupted them.⁷⁰ When the travel accounts were published in Germany, they were seized upon by writers of *Indianer* literature such as May, who then presented Native Americans who resembled the ones found in relations of “real” encounters. Even *Indianer* novels that proceeded from the pens of writers with experience of North America, like the above-mentioned Postl and Gerstacker, seem, as Jeffrey L. Sammons notes, to correspond to these conceptions, though it is less clear in this case whether travel literature influenced them or whether they brought with them the same cultural literary traditions that informed the travel narratives.⁷¹

The cultural transfer of the concept of the Sublime from Europe to North America can be found in the sources cited previously. Landscape and natural feature descriptions from German travel writers of the early nineteenth century bear the marks of that particular cultural and literary tradition. Without exception, the sources express, in one form or another, ideals of the Sublime and its corollary, the beautiful. The North American landscape, untouched in so many places by the shaping hand of civilization, was peculiarly suited to provoke claims of Sublime encounters and cause reflection on the contemporary conception of Aesthetics. Certainly, as in the case of the Native Americans, representations of North America in literary form found their way into print. The extent to which they influenced German culture is not as easily established as it is in the case of representations of Native Americans, which are visible in the emergence of *Indianer* literature. There is a hint of such in *Winnetou* in May’s description of the landscape that Old Shatterhand traverses, but nothing as obvious or identifiable as is the case with his descriptions of Indians and the correspondence with the travel narratives.

Nonetheless, as a vehicle of cultural transfer, German travel narratives about North America in the nineteenth century stand out. Unquestionably travel writers, as Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out in the case of all writers of such literature, brought to their work an identity and a worldview that shaped their narratives. When these accounts were brought back to Germany and published, they contributed to the construction of a North America in German cultural consciousness that was as much a product of their own culture as it was a truth about the New World. This is not to cast aspersions on the veracity of the writers. To a man, the writers discussed here are judicious and considered, and speak with considerable detail. Yet how much of what they saw, through preconditioned eyes, “imperial eyes” as it were, resembled reality? In

⁶⁹ Ibid., 61-62, 115.

⁷⁰ To be sure, Wied and Kurz in particular do not resist pointing out negative traits of certain tribes or individuals that have nothing to do with white proximity or domination, but the presentation of such appears by contrast, and is far less prevalent than expressions of praise and admiration.

⁷¹ Jeffery L. Sammon, “Nineteenth Century German Representations of Indians from Experience,” in Galloway et al., 185-192.

the case of Native Americans, it can be argued that what emerged in the form of *Indianer* literature was stereotypical and idealized, and left little room for viewing Indians as human beings like any other: men with same virtues, vices, defects, and qualities as men of any other race, nation, or ethnicity. For that, German travel narratives share responsibility, as does the culture that produced them.⁷²

⁷² Certainly the definition of cultural transfer is wide open for debate, and it depends largely on how narrow or wide a view one takes of either culture or transfer in accepting an event or situation as constituting it. In this case, I argue for the widest possible interpretation: that any form of encounter, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, leaves its mark on both the donor and the receptor.