

# James Fenimore Cooper His Country and His Art

Papers from the  
1997 Cooper Seminar  
(No. 11)



frontispiece to  
George H. Preston,  
*Hawkeye,*  
*A Séquel to The Deerslayer of J. Fenimore Cooper*  
Cincinnati: Razzall & Co., 1897.

"I am a white man without a cross,  
and care not to take a human life  
except to protect my own."

Hugh C. MacDougall, Editor  
James Fenimore Cooper Society

*The Cooper Seminar is sponsored by  
The State University of New York College at Oneonta  
Oneonta, New York*

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## VOICES OF INSTRUCTION: ORATORY AND DISCIPLINE IN COOPER'S *The Last of the Mohicans* AND *The Redskins*

Granville Ganter

(City College of New York Graduate Center)

As Cooper scholars have generally acknowledged, Cooper believed the novel might serve as a useful medium of American political discourse (Clark, *James* 12). Although Cooper identified strongly with democratic ideals, he was distrustful of the demagoguery of American politics. In particular, Cooper's portrayals of oratory and demagoguery are usually instances of hypocrisy, civic betrayal or wistful nostalgia. But as Cooper's critics have also pointed out, many of his characters speak in oratorical modes. They give speeches; in the heat of desperation, they give soliloquies. In this paper, I examine the tension between Cooper's political distrust of oratory and his simultaneous dramatizations of the form in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Redskins*. The rhetorical struggles of *Mohicans* are familiar terrain: Natty and Chingachgook's discussion about whether to chase Magua by land or by water; Magua and Tamenumd's civic oratory; and most of all, the characters' debates about the differences between the white men and the red, the Delaware and the Iroquois. With a few notable exceptions, Cooper criticism has emphasized the univocality of these passages: Magua seeks revenge; Natty insists he's more white than Indian; and Uncas is the last of the Mohicans. What I plan to demonstrate, however, is that Cooper is attracted to the flawed rhetoricity of these declarations, the tension between their claims and their substance. The major speeches both identify the dramatic oppositions of the novel (between races and nations) and undermine them at the same time. Rather than using his characters as mouthpieces for a simple lesson in political affairs, Cooper uses a series of oratorical performances to draw attention to the strategies and methods of democratic pugilism. Turbulent and complicated, *Mohicans* is a war of words that reflects the unsettled language of race relations of the 1820's.

This insight is particularly germane to the politics of racial separatism in *The Last of the Mohicans*. With the death of Cora and Uncas, the novel apparently retreats from a racial union, that, as Leslie Fiedler and many others have asserted, would have been unacceptable to Cooper's audience.<sup>1</sup> But in the *rhetoric* of the protagonists's declarations of purity, and the contradictions between their claims and substance, however, the novel actually describes the painful fusion of these cultures *in debate*. In Cooper's novel, whites and Indians share not only a separatist rhetoric but borrow philosophical and literary techniques from each other. As Alan MacGregor has shown in his history of the Tammany Society, by the time of Cooper's novel, American political oratory had a long tradition of appropriating Native postures. And as I shall show, Native orators also borrowed white ideas and made them their own, too—both sides absorbing aspects of the cultures they opposed, and both sides waxing eloquent about their own purity. Cooper, ever mindful of the dangers of hypocrisy and demagoguery, portrays these ironies throughout *Mohicans*, laying bare the paradoxes of separatist political belief and attempting nonetheless to demonstrate the creation of social identity through public rhetoric. And although Cooper became more and more critical of democratic oratory as he aged, in a later novel like *The Redskins* he nonetheless turns to Native oratory for the final word in disciplining an unruly democracy.

One of the perennial criticisms of the Leatherstocking Tales is the argument that Cooper presents his readers with idealized Indians. Although Cooper defended his novels on the grounds of his fidelity to his sources of Indian history, and later critics such as Albert Keiser and John T. Frederick have supported his claims, the question of Native *verisimilitude* often leads to unfortunately static concepts of human behavior. The problem of focusing exclusively on the narrow issue of whether Cooper's characters speak like "real" Indians is that it denies Native Americans the agency of manipulating their own language to suit the discursive needs of different occasions. As James Axtell has pointed out in his studies of Euro-Native contact in North America, one of the primary insights of the ethnohistorian is to recognize the mutual influence of colliding cultures.<sup>2</sup> Cooper imitated the white historical records of Indian speech and "civilized" the sentiments of many of his Indians, as did many Indians themselves in an attempt to be understood by white listeners. For example, Dave Edmunds has suggested that Tecumseh and his brother learned the politics of religious enthusiasm by watching the progress of the Kentucky evangelists. Edmunds also points out Tecumseh's appropriation of European concepts of land ownership, which functioned as a means of communicating with whites, and which was also a significant departure from traditional Native beliefs about real estate.

Although Roy Harvey Pearce has deftly summarized the scope of Cooper's Indian portraits within a field of "noble" and "ignoble savagery," Cooper's Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans* are not always savages, any more than his whites always behave in civilized fashion. Rather, Cooper is often attracted to moments of indeterminacy (Patterson; Rans; Robinson). Cooper's historical sources for the linguistic habits of his characters often reflect this indeterminacy as

well: for example, in one of Magua's speeches, Cooper borrows from Wingenund's famous speech to Captain Crawford that he must die in revenge for his part in the massacre of Moravian Indians on the Sandusky river in 1782. In Heckewelder's text, this scene demonstrates the tensions and challenges of intercultural communication: Wingenund translates a form of Indian justice, which he knows is incomprehensible to Crawford, into a language and a terminology that a European Other can understand. Wingenund's speech is particularly moving because it is evident he shows sympathy for Crawford's plight but he is unable to change his tribe's decision. Although Magua shows little sympathy for his own captives (undeniably looming as the *locus classicus* of ignoble savagery), Magua's rationale for their murder is an intriguing parallel of the white juridical procedure responsible for his own flogging at the hands of Munro. Magua's travesty of justice undermines the very principles he invokes, but his speech echoes with both the historical precedent of Wingenund and, simultaneously, with the arguments of white demagoguery: Magua is no simple ignoble savage.

Similarly, Magua's speech on the three types of man is remarkable not only for the way it mirrors the beliefs of some white racists of the time but for the way Magua seeks to situate Native identity through public language. Magua's nativist speech to the Lenape concerning racial difference also resembles the separatist philosophies of several prominent Indian spokespersons of Cooper's day. Describing the separate creation of the Indians and the whites, a notion current in Native American discourse from the middle of the eighteenth century on (Dowd 312), Magua employs the creationist rhetoric many Indians came to use as a means of distancing themselves from white culture, particularly concerning matters of religion. Magua identifies three types of men made by the same great Spirit and accords each a separate place and temperament: The blacks are designated to work in the south as slaves. The whites, Magua continues, are designated by the Spirit to be "traders, dogs to their women, and wolves to their slaves.... His gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough and yet he wants it all. Such are the pale faces" (319). Magua's account is clear: white men have been molded in the ways of greed and vice, and the Indians live in pastoral harmony with nature, not eating more than the land will provide: "They were brave: they were just; they were happy." Although Magua crafts his narrative to earn the appreciation of his listeners by putting the Delaware at the apogee of human creation, his insistence that the Indians live by a code of justice which the whites are unable to respect is both historically accurate *and* a reflection of the same discourse used by Indian-haters like Lewis Cass.

One of the sources Cooper seems to have drawn upon for Magua's speech was Petalesharo's address to President Munroe in 1822 (Rindo). Cooper reminds us in *Notions* that he had met Petalesharo during his east coast tour and had spent some time with the orator (2.277-88). The speech, republished by James Buchanan prior to the writing of *Mohicans*, illustrates Petalesharo's separatist belief that

the Great Spirit made us all—he made my skin red, and yours white; he placed us on earth and intended that we should live differently from each other.

He made the whites to cultivate the earth, and feed on domestic animals; but he made us, redskins, to rove through the uncultivated woods and plains; to feed on wild animals; and to dress with their skins. He also intended that we should go to war—to take scalps—*steal horses from* and triumph over our enemies—cultivate peace at home, and promote the happiness of each other.... We worship [the Great Spirit], but we worship him not as you do. We differ from you in appearance and manners as well as in our customs, and we differ from you in our religion. (39)<sup>3</sup>

Although less critical of whites than Magua, Petalesharo insists on the incommensurable value systems of whites and Indians. His translators emphasize this point by italicizing his determination to "steal horses" in appropriate circumstances. Highly aware of how his speech and appearance in Washington might be understood, Petalesharo concludes his speech by asking that several tokens of his visit, including a bear claw, be put on display as a record of his visit. They may not mean much to most Americans, Petalesharo declares, but they will mean much to his descendants who will see them in Washington.

Petalesharo's remarks have a dual effect. On one level, Petalesharo firmly maintains a sense of cultural difference: he points out their different lifestyles, and different systems of justice. The difference, however, is not so great that he completely alienates himself from the culture he is addressing, invoking freedom of religion as if it were a right, rather than a question of force. In fact, he is careful to pay tribute to the norms of the culture he is addressing and he expects his descendants will be rewarded by his diplomacy by having the opportunity to see the records of his visit. The result is a curious negotiation where the politics of separatism get worked out rhetorically in reference to systems of shared, or at least mutually recognizable, beliefs.

Another orator who likely influenced Cooper's exposition of the rhetoric of separatism was Red Jacket, the famous Seneca from New York State. Cooper would have been familiar with Red Jacket not only through published accounts of his prominent speeches, but because Red Jacket was a leading opponent of the lucrative Robert Morris/Holland Land Company sale in upstate New York (1797), a several million acre tract which Cooper's father had unsuccessfully tried to secure during the 1790's (Taylor 114, Stone 237). In 1805, after an inconsistent political record, Red Jacket converted to a strict Indian racialism which opposed land sales, intermarriage, drinking, English speech, and Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

Red Jacket's conduct during the Morris sale, which the Coopers must have watched carefully, is particularly illustrative of his rhetorical and political styles. Even though Red Jacket often went on record as a contentious opponent of white encroachment, he occasionally undermined what he said publicly in private negotiation, and took a highly pragmatic strategy advocating Indian rights. After Morris's initial proposal, Red Jacket declared that they were unconvinced that they should sell their lands at any price, the reason being that although the land was wild, its possession gave great stature to his people:

It raises us in our own estimation. It creates in our bosoms a proud feeling which elevates us as a nation. Observe the difference between the estimation in which a Seneca and an Oneida are held. We are courted while the Oneidas are considered a degraded people, fit only to make brooms and baskets. Why this difference? It is because the Senecas are known as the proprietors of a broad domain, while the Oneidas are cooped up in a narrow space. (Stone 240)<sup>5</sup>

Red Jacket then abruptly ended the negotiation. At night, however, he went privately to Morris and told him that he had no objections to selling the land, but it was politically inexpedient for him to say so—he wanted Cornplanter to take all the blame. Red Jacket also refused to sign the treaty, but asked Morris to leave a space at the bottom for him to sign it later, so that when Washington signed it, he would see Red Jacket's name near his own and understand what an important Seneca leader he was (244-50).

Red Jacket's equivocal and intemperate behavior was common knowledge when Cooper was writing *The Last of the Mohicans*: Red Jacket was a troublesome orator who didn't necessarily mean what he said. Cooper draws on this paradox in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Natty Bumppo pauses at many points in the novel to insist on the fundamental differences in "natur" of the white men and red. He repeatedly identifies himself as "a man with no cross," which most readers have taken to mean a man "of the whole blood of the whites" (75). But Natty's claims to purity are inconsistent: he prefers the oral culture of the Indians and yet he claims to be more white than red; he often abjures white civilization for the company of Chingachgook; he lives like an Indian hunter and though he disdains scalping, he has absorbed many of the habits of an Indian brave. Similarly, Chingachgook insists on the "unmixed blood" of Indian chiefs in his own veins but his claims are undermined by the fact that his fate has already been scripted in *The Pioneers*: he becomes a Christian (and heavy drinking) convert. Then, during his last moments in *The Pioneers*, he starts singing a Delaware death song. Both these protagonists' claims to a "separate" race are confusing.

The question of identity is a central one in *Mohicans*, and one of the most important myths which Cooper takes from Heckewelder foregrounds the relationship of identity to public rhetoric: the "transformation" of the Delaware into women at the hands of the Iroquois.<sup>6</sup> The feminization myth is important because it illustrates the way in which identity was portrayed in *Native myth* as a rhetorical construct. As Heckewelder tells it, the story is a classic example of the high art of Indian politics, which valued the hermeneutic ingenuity of both speaker and auditor. In his chapter on Indian politics, Heckewelder reports that tribes often sent complex messages to each other as a matter of literary and political pride. In terms of the feminization story, the Iroquois proved more skillful poets than the Delaware. Cooper's interest in this *Native* hermeneutics of identity asks us to consider the ways in which public rhetoric shapes Native identity, and, by extension, the way it shapes both white and Native presences in his novel.

As Kenneth Burke has remarked, the rhetoric of dispute can take place in antagonistic or amorous modes. In my discussions of Magua, I have attempted to show how his antagonistic relationship with whites ironically reveals aspects of mutual influence. Similarly, Uncas and Chingachgook speak to the Iroquois as enemies, but they speak to Natty in the rhetoric of courtship. In the section where Natty, Chingachgook and Uncas decide on whether to chase Magua by land or by water, their ability to negotiate verbally sets the heroes apart from their rigidly racist peers. Natty is truly persuasive only when he sheds the "cold and artificial manner which characterizes all classes of Anglo-Americans" and dons the physical and metaphoric eloquence of an Indian. The bond generated between these men through rhetoric is an explicitly optimistic model of a collaborative politics and a portrait of the limitations of racial separatism:

In short, Uncas and his father became converts to his way of thinking, abandoning their own previously expressed opinions with a liberality and a candor that, had they been the representatives of some great and civilized people, would have infallibly worked their political ruin, by destroying, forever, their reputation for consistency. (208)

Although it is Natty's "white" reason which prevails, it would be a mistake to discount Chingachgook and Uncas's conversion as an abandonment of Indian principle. Without the service of sophisticated Indian rhetoric or a non-"civilized" code of argumentative conduct, there would be little chance for consensus. Both the Indian and white culture mutually contribute their talents to this decision.

The most controversial aspect of *Mobilians* is the way in which it seems to prophesy a fatalistic demise of native culture—Uncas, the "last" of the Mohican line is dead and Tamenund, the grandfatherly representative of Indian tradition, apparently abdicates the continent to the advancing whites. As many scholars have remarked, Tamenund's words evoke the myth of Logan, whose pathos-ridden final testament was widely broadcast in Cooper's day as the finest example of Indian oratory on record. After the murder of his wife and children, Logan supposedly declared,

There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called upon me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many: I have fully glutted my vengeance: For my country I rejoice at the beams of peace. But I do not harbor a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn Logan? No one. (Sandefur 291)

The fatalistic melancholy of Logan's speech presides over *The Last of the Mohicans*. As Eric Seeber has documented, the authenticity of Logan's speech is highly suspicious. Its Biblical overtones suggest it was created in part, if not wholly, by the imaginations of Logan's Anglo translators, if indeed he ever spoke anything resembling this speech at all. But rather than seeing this only as an example of cultural imperialism (which indeed it is), it is also a record of the rhetoric generated by two cultures in collision. Corruptions of the white man included, Logan's speech nonetheless set the pattern for many "authentic" speeches given by defeated chieftains during the nineteenth century, such as Black Hawk, Seattle, and Chief Joseph (Vanderwerth). In these speeches we hear resonances of both Indian and white presence: what we hear is a struggle.

And amid this struggle the Tamenund Cooper portrays in *Mobilians* does not entirely disappear in Cooper's work. Cooper resurrects him in the form of Susquesus in the Littlepage manuscripts. After Hugh Littlepage's oratory has failed to disperse the anti-renters in *The Redskins*, Cooper concludes the action with Susquesus, as old "as Tamenund," who speaks for several pages condemning the actions of the fake Injins. In this strident novel one is tempted to fault Cooper for his lack of artistry. Susquesus's words to the Injins include phrases such as "When you make a law, you keep it.... This is my counsel: do what is right" (712). Susquesus seems less an agent than an equally bogus stage prop Cooper uses to point out the fraud of the Injins. But we can also take Susquesus seriously as a figure who tries to negotiate the various claims of the black, white and Native peoples around him. Although we might applaud Cooper if he had Susquesus go West at the request of his peers, we might ourselves fall prey to the fallacies of racial separatism Cooper points out in *Mobilians*. If Cooper is constantly instructing his readers how to behave, the answer is seldom clear. Like white men? Like Indians? Like a little of both?

Although Tamenund's resignation in the concluding lines of Cooper's novel, "Why should Tamenund stay? The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the redman has not yet come again. My day has been too long," is an accurately pessimistic declaration of sentiments then current in both Native and white discourse, it leaves the future open. The removal and disintegration of Native tribes at the hands of the United States government is a matter of record. I would submit that Cooper's achievement in *Mobilians* is a record of the mutual influence of these cultures on each other, respecting their differences, but also an attempt to recognize a discourse that they can share.

## Notes

1. See also Philip Fisher and Jane Tompkins. See James Wallace and Forrest Robinson for alternative interpretations of Cooper's views on amalgamation.
2. See also Richard R. Johnson's "The Search for a Usable Indian."
3. See Murray, Vanderwerth and Cheyfitz for discussions of the problem of translation. While I would not minimize the issues they raise, the emphasis of this paper is to draw attention to the mutual, Euro-Native influence evident in the historical records of Native oratory as well as in Cooper's work.

4. Red Jacket's conversion seems to have been prompted by the introduction of a disagreeable missionary among the Senecas, named Cram. Red Jacket's reply to Cram, composed after two hours of deliberation with his peers, is re-published in the preface of the SUNY Albany edition of *Mohicans*. The full exchange appears in William Leete Stone's *The Life and Times of Red Jacket*, (272-9). After their meeting, the Seneca tried to shake hands, but Cram withheld his hand, saying "no fellowship between the religion of God and the devil" (Stone 277). Red Jacket later punned on Cram's name by declaring "Not content with the wrongs the white men had done to this people, they were now seeking to *Cram* their doctrines down [our] throats" (279). Red Jacket often spoke boldly and contentiously, sometimes earning the censure of his peers for his indiscretion, but his vivacious style comes through nearly all the translations of his speeches. Stone's book, like all his Indian histories, self-consciously includes as many primary records of Indian orations as possible, and is the best anthology of Red Jacket's oratory in existence. As his son declares in the preface to the 1866 edition of *The Life and Times of Red Jacket*, Stone's hope was that future generations of historians would need facts, not just interpretations.

Red Jacket's political inconsistencies prior to 1805 were significant. Although his speech in 1784 at Ft. Stanwix argued that any further treaty negotiations should embrace the Indian tribes as a whole, and that no single tribe should sell land without the approval of all, Red Jacket later did sign over 999-year leases to nearly 6,000,000 acres of land to American investors in 1788 (Stone 136-37). The price was a \$5000 down payment, and \$500 a year rent.

5. Red Jacket's characteristically blunt style is clearly evident in this passage. His skill as a speaker was rooted primarily in his ability to say frankly what others would not—when Morris's former business associates (Col. Ogden and Miller) later tried to buy the Seneca reservation itself in 1816, Red Jacket replied that President Madison must have been "disordered in his mind when he when he offered to lead us off by arms to the Allegheny reservation" and "should Ogden come down from heaven with life and with flesh on his bones, and to tell us that he had a title for these lands, then we might believe him" (Stone 371-74). By 1827, 26 chiefs met to depose Red Jacket for the contentiousness he brought to negotiations, but even until his death, Red Jacket continued to speak forcefully. After a visit to Washington in 1829 to meet Andrew Jackson, he was advertised to give a speech in Albany everyone expected would be an Indian panegyric upon the President. Instead, he launched a prolonged anti-Jackson tirade composed of unfavorable juxtapositions of Jackson and Washington (448).
6. Robert Clark's *History and Myth in American Fiction* argues that Cooper suppressed the real history of the Delawares and Iroquois, and substituted the feminization myth to validate his writing and his family's land claims. Clark's reading is persuasive in biographical terms but it does not explain other consequences the myth produces in the fiction. As Stockdon argues at length, Heckewelder never claimed the myth was historical fact: it was a traditional story. And as a story, it provides an intriguing framework for understanding the transformational effects of rhetoric in Cooper's novel.

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