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Richard Gravil

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Ethnic Cleansing; or,
Edmund Burke in
Wish-ton-Wish

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Richard Gravil

Regicide and Ethnic Cleansing; or, Edmund Burke in Wish-ton-Wish

The tensions and ambivalences of *The Pioneers* (1823) which render that novel in the end wholly incoherent, are never permanently resolved. Indeed the question for the reader of the Leatherstocking Saga is whether Cooper's sustained ambivalences, or in Tony Tanner's phrase, cultural schizophrenia, are precisely the source of their power, and of Cooper's international marketability as America's first novelist-superstar. Henry Nash Smith saw in *The Pioneers* 'a genuine ambivalence' towards such issues as 'a rough equality' as against social stratification, free access to wilderness as against inviolable property rights, Leatherstocking's 'intuitive theology' as against institutionalised religion.¹ George Dekker's thesis that Cooper converts the wavering hero of Scott into the mythologized hero of the Leatherstocking novels is just,² but it might be added that the wavering hero remains, more romantically, in the persona of the author. Cooper's attitude towards the Indians, for instance, manages to combine emotional identification (through Natty's love for Chingachgook) with practical extermination, while his constant use of the term 'savages'—however ironic we may find the term—countermands such emotional identification as Natty invites. Such wavering applies equally to the condition of wilderness vis-à-vis the cultivation of 'smiling fields', or for that matter something as fundamental as whether America's westward thrust at the expense of a more ecologically sound aboriginal culture exhibits manifest destiny or original sin. The deep emotional and even visceral appeal of the Leatherstocking saga is that of eating your cake and having it too. The same is true, in the end, of its fine offshoot, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* (1829), a novel which deals with the foundations of Anglo-America and with conflicts between Puritans and Indians long before the

¹ *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 62

² George Dekker, in *James Fenimore Cooper the Novelist: the American Scott* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).