

MANIFEST DESTINY AND "THE LITERARY FALLACY": THE PARADOX
IN BERNARD DEVOTO'S TREATMENT OF WESTWARD EXPANSION

by

Peter Skiles Pruessing

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I

Bernard DeVoto, who was not a trained historian and did not consider himself a "professional," achieved his greatest success in the field of history. His three volumes on the exploration and settlement of the American continent--The Year of Decision: 1846, Across the Wide Missouri, and The Course of Empire--have won praise and admiration from scholars and non-professionals alike.¹ But DeVoto did not write a very common brand of history. He was concerned, in all three books, with bringing the past alive in an immediate and intimate sense; he wanted to make the people, the emotions, and the events of the westward movement available to his readers as personal experience. This is not an easy task, for it attempts to achieve something like the effect of imaginative literature while maintaining a fidelity to historical "fact."² The extent to which DeVoto was successful is impressive. As Wallace Stegner points out, "These histories are related to Parkman's in their quality of personal participation, in the way history can be felt on the skin and in the muscles. . . ."² They belong, Stegner says, on the shelf with Prescott, Bancroft, Motley, Adams, and Parkman. They go beyond the simple recording of objective data, they contain "more than mere information; these are not merely history as record, they are history as literature."³

This is high praise, but there is an irony in such classification: it exposes a paradox in DeVoto's writing--a paradox which will be examined here in some detail.

Bernard DeVoto had a great deal to say about how history should be written. He expressed his views in professional journals and popular magazines, in lectures, in books of criticism, and at various places in the histories themselves.⁴ Taken together, this body of criticism constitutes DeVoto's informal theory of historiography, and certain central ideas form the core of that theory. The paradox to be examined here is most effectively revealed when DeVoto's theory is confronted by his own practice; there is, as will be shown, a distinct disparity between the two. DeVoto's practice, as exemplified by the history trilogy, conflicts with two aspects of his theory: general statements about how history should (or should not) be written, and more specific (though still theoretical) statements about the nature of American history--especially Western history. Although many aspects of this paradox could be discussed, it can be most fully and meaningfully revealed by examining, as both a literary device and an historical concept, the central idea on which the trilogy is based--Manifest Destiny. It is this idea around which many examples of the paradox cluster.

First the theory.

II

"Metaphysics," said Bernard DeVoto, "is not experience, and the philosophy of history is not history."⁵ This statement, seemingly simple yet complex in implication, lies at the heart of DeVoto's thinking, and it colors all of his attitudes. He made his position perfectly clear in answer to Edmund Wilson's request that he declare himself, that he define his principles of criticism:

I am, if you must have words, a pluralist, a relativist, an empiricist. I am at home with the concrete inquiries of historians and scientists, and uneasy among the abstractions of critics and metaphysicians. I confine myself to limited questions; I try to use methods that can be controlled by fact and experience; I am unwilling to let enthusiasm or desire or a vision of better things carry me farther than the methods will go by themselves. I rest ultimately on experience and, where that fails, on common sense.⁶

This reads like a manifesto, stated in good Jamesian pragmatic terms; it is a set of principles that he applied equally to the writing of literary criticism, literary history, and his own specialty, social history. He felt that writing history was an exacting task and that the historian must be committed to the discovery of objective fact; he was suspicious of conclusions based on intuition or deduction or a priori argument or any "system" of logic; and he ridiculed writers who claimed they had discovered in American history the existence and operation of "higher truths." "I distrust absolutes," he said. "Rather, I long

ago passed from distrust of them to opposition. And with them let me include prophesy, simplification, generalization, abstract logic, and especially the habit of mind which consults theory first and experience only afterward."⁷

DeVoto's opposition to these forms of thinking was largely based on, and stimulated by, his disagreement with the methods and findings of literary historians, most of whom he considered incapable of writing accurate, objective history. "The literary historian," DeVoto claimed, "practices intuition as a method of research. He has frequently announced his superiority to facts and customarily dismisses as a pedant the historian who insists on saying nothing that facts do not justify. He prefers truths--poetic perceptions, guesses, and beautiful notions."⁸ The favorite target for many attacks like this one was the critic and literary historian Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks, DeVoto felt, was typical of those literary historians who consulted their own theories and ignored both the experience of others (they had none of their own to rely on) and the data of history; in fact, they knew almost nothing about history! The student of literature, DeVoto said, must also be a tireless student of history. "There is no separation between the fields. The study of American literature is now set squarely in a frame of history and attached to it by a web of linkages and connections at

every possible point."⁹ Brooks--and many others like him--had studied literature (some less than others, and some presumably very little), but they were ignorant of the historical backgrounds to that literature. So DeVoto issued a warning: "Writers must be content to hold their peace until they know what they are talking about."¹⁰

These are strong words, but they are typical of DeVoto's attitudes and his tone. They are also an accurate reflection of the manner in which DeVoto took Van Wyck Brooks to task for the theories he had expressed about Mark Twain in his book The Ordeal of Mark Twain, 1920. DeVoto's own book Mark Twain's America, published in 1932, was an attempt to discredit much of what Brooks had said about Twain, but it was especially aimed at Brooks's discussion of the significance of the West in Mark Twain's life and career.¹¹ The particulars of the argument are not relevant here, but the grounds on which DeVoto justified his own study and simultaneously attacked the efforts of others in the same field are important. They are simple: "My claim to some measure of authority in these pages derives from the fact that I have lived in a frontier community and known frontiersman, as none of the literary folk who now exhibit ideas about frontier life have done, and that for many years my interests have led me to study the frontier, a study that has never commended itself to those exhibi-

tors."¹² DeVoto felt that he knew the frontier intimately, through concentrated study and personal experience; these, he maintained, were the necessary ingredients for any writer who wanted to make his subject matter come to life, to instill in the reader a feeling of personal involvement, the excitement of direct participation and first-hand knowledge.

DeVoto's quarrel with literary people--a quarrel which had begun long before he published Mark Twain's America, and which continued through his entire life--reached its peak of intensity when he published The Literary Fallacy, 1944. Again his target was the "literary folk," and he accused them of creating and perpetuating the literary fallacy: "essentially, the belief that literature is a measure of culture."¹³ The literary fallacy, DeVoto said, "is not a formal fallacy but rather a complex of fallacies of logic, defects in observation and understanding, and errors in fact."¹⁴ DeVoto claimed that these errors were easily explained: they were a reflection and a direct result of the operation of "the literary mind," a phrase he had used many times to characterize the literary historian's intuitive method, his ignorance of and inability to deal with concrete data, and his preference for "poetic perceptions" and "beautiful notions." The literary mind, he said, is consistently inaccurate, naive, and, because of its habit of distortion and manipulation, intellectually

dishonest. These are not small faults.

The literary mind might be harmless in a vacuum, or entertaining at a dinner-party, but DeVoto felt that it was dangerous in the field of American history. It deceived the reader, did a serious injustice to the American people, and hopelessly confused the events and nature of American history. It was a denial of the historian's responsibility to those who depended on him for accurate information, and it was unfair to future generations who would want to know the truth about their past. "When you set out to write history," DeVoto said, "no poetry however beautiful and no sentiment however commendable can be substituted for statements of fact."¹⁵ Yet the literary mind insisted on creating abstract generalizations about life in America, such concepts as the American mind, the American point of view, the soul of America, and the American experience. DeVoto saw these as projections of the critic's own biases, the creation of pattern and structure where they did not exist. Take, for example, "the American mind": "The phrase represents to any given person merely a group of his private sentiments, and though it may be used to symbolize those sentiments for people who share them, it is barren of meaning to people who do not."¹⁶

Even more dangerous, DeVoto felt, was the application of literary generalizations to the process of American

history itself. The literary mind attempted to fit the immense diversity of American history into a preconceived pattern, something that would provide continuity and could explain particular events as simple variation on a basic theme--often some obscure principle stated as a literary metaphor. This was especially true when the literary folk wrote about the West, the place they knew the least about and had had no direct experience with; and consequently it was here that the literary mind took its greatest liberties with fact. Ignorance of the frontier, for example, produced useless nonsense: "Literary intuition," DeVoto said, ". . . asks us to suppose that on the frontier, climate, geography, wealth, commerce, and occupation produced no differentiation. All races, all degrees of intelligence, all individual variation, that is, and all the differences of religion and private interest and group effort and civil war were overcome by some process of mystical disintegration."¹⁷ This kind of thinking simply rendered American history unrecognizable. It called for strong opposition, and so DeVoto--in revolt against generalizations, and on the basis of his knowledge of the nature of American history--formulated his own principle, or anti-principle: "The past of America is immensely complex and immensely at war with itself. No unity exists in it. Its discords and contradictions cannot be harmo-

nized. It cannot be made simple. No one can form it into a system, and any formula that explains it is an hallucination."¹⁸

III

Bernard DeVoto published the first of his three histories, The Year of Decision: 1846, in 1943, some years after many of the already quoted statements on historiography were written, but before publication of The Literary Fallacy; his second history, Across the Wide Missouri, appeared in 1947; The Course of Empire, the third volume of the trilogy, was published in 1952. Although each work deals with a different period of history and different subject matter, and though a period of almost ten years separated the publication of the first and third volumes, the three books should be viewed as a single unit. They are unified by purpose and technique; as DeVoto explained, "in all of them the effort is to exhibit the westward movement as a national experience and a nationalizing force."¹⁹ Taken in the order in which they were written, the three volumes deal with history in reversed chronological sequence, each book examining an earlier period and a broader scope of materials than its predecessor. The underlying theme of the trilogy is the creation and realization of a continental nation, and the motivating

force behind the events that are narrated (in all three books!) is Manifest Destiny.

Set against the general political background in 1846-47, The Year of Decision: 1846 is the story of some of the people--a wide variety, in fact, ranging from missionaries to businessmen, from the Donner party to Captain John C. Frémont to Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny and the First Dragoons--who went west in 1846; and DeVoto's expressed purpose is "to tell that story in such a way that the reader may realize the far western frontier experience, which is part of our cultural inheritance, as personal experience."²⁰ But personal experience alone was not enough; DeVoto wanted it to be seen and felt as part of a larger context. He specifically chose 1846 rather than some other year because "1846 best dramatizes personal experience as national experience."²¹

DeVoto's stated intention and his choice of materials bring the paradox in his writing to the foreground. If he objected, as has been shown, to the use of concepts like the American mind and the American experience, what justifies his use of the term "national experience"? And what does it mean? In Mark Twain's America, DeVoto had said that Twain, "more completely than any other writer, took part in the American experience. There is, remember, such an entity."²² Now, in his histories, DeVoto was

making that experience the basis for his interpretation of the westward movement. In light of his castigation of literary historians for using exactly such concepts, one finds Bernard DeVoto the historian irreconcilably in conflict with Bernard DeVoto the theorist; he is directly subject to his own criticism. Ironically, the history trilogy is a product of the literary mind.

There can be no doubt that DeVoto considered belief in Manifest Destiny to be the major force behind the development in America of a continental nation, and that he himself came to share that belief retroactively. He believed that the election of James K. Polk, a strong expansionist, to the Presidency in 1844 was a clear expression of the national will. "Polk came into office with as unmistakable a 'mandate' from the people as any in our history. . . . His mandate was clear. He was to get Great Britain out of Oregon. He was to defend Texas against Mexico--the election was a mandate to annex Texas. . . ."23 And needless to say, it was a mandate for Manifest Destiny. In 1941, using material that had been gathered for The Year of Decision: 1846, DeVoto delivered a series of eight lectures to the Lowell Institute in Boston; the series was entitled "American Empire, 1846: Manifest Destiny and the Western Frontier."²⁴ (The lectures, variously transformed, appeared as chapters in his book.)

The implication of that title has already been hinted at: Manifest Destiny was an expression, an embodiment, of the Zeitgeist, and the inevitable result must be a continental empire.

In the book itself, DeVoto uses Manifest Destiny as a thematic device to tie the many threads of the narrative together. He structures the narrative as an on-going drama, using the techniques of fiction--color, detail, characterization, suspense, poetry, a mixture of realism and romance--to heighten the action on stage. Thus Manifest Destiny, in addition to supplying an historical justification or explanation for the events themselves, accounts artistically for the movements--the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance--of the dramatic personae at various places in the "plot." Consequently, DeVoto creates many scenes like the following:

At midnight or a little later, [Francis] Parkman, resentful of the drunks, emigrants, and Kentucky Colonels turned his back on Fort Bernard, riding back to Fort Laramie. A few minutes later the Minneconjou began to come in, from the northeast. A little later still a party from the west arrived, nine or ten men, two women, two children, and appropriate horses and packs--Jim Clyman keeping an appointment with destiny.²⁵

In DeVoto's narrative, all those who went west or were already in the West in 1846 are, like Jim Clyman, keeping appointments with destiny. They are partaking of a national experience and are fulfilling the role that history

has chosen for them. They are, in fact, personifications of the process of history, performing dramatic roles in dramatic situations. Observe Jim Clyman again, spotlighted at one of these moments of suspense and decision:

Clyman talked on, repeating his warnings and threats--the mountain man, the man who knew, the master of his wilderness, pleading with the tenderfeet. Till there was no more to say, the fire was only embers shimmering in the dark, and they separated, to lie awake while the coyotes mourned and the Sioux screamed--and think it over. In the desert, where Laramie Creek empties into the Platte: a moment of decision.²⁶

The occasion is Clyman's meeting with the Donner party at Fort Bernard on June 27, 1846. Clyman was one of the few men who had traveled the "shortcut" route to California named for its promoter Lansford Hastings (Hastings himself had not tried it before he described it in his influential The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California), and Clyman urged the emigrants to stick to the old trail. It was good advice, and their refusal to follow it was one of the decisive factors (but only one of many) that led to the famous disaster in Truckee Pass. DeVoto paints the scene skillfully, evoking the atmosphere of the meeting and effectively describing the emotions of those present. His technique is lively and convincing. But he is not satisfied with merely recreating the experience. He must tie this incident in with his larger purpose, uniting the historical process with the literary theme. And so Clyman

becomes more than an individual, more than an experienced man with sound advice to give, and the emigrants' decision transcends simple ignorance or miscalculation (it becomes heresy) because "American history in the person of Jim Clyman had told the Donner party not to take the Hastings Cutoff from the California trail."²⁷

Many other characters and situations get the same kind of treatment in The Year of Decision: 1846. The Mexican War and the events leading up to it occupy a good many pages in the book, and these pages all sound a familiar note. For example, except for the specific circumstances of the situation, DeVoto's description of Captain Cooke's entrance into Santa Fe is amazingly similar to his description of Jim Clyman's role in the events of 1846. Both men are personifications of historical force:

"Shaved, washed, brushed, his shoulder straps and saber knot rubbed as bright as possible, he was formally conducted to Armijo. . . . The will of the war President had found its instrument and in the person of Captain Philip St. George Cooke, First Dragoons, Manifest Destiny was calling on its first objective to surrender."²⁸

Cooke, like Clyman, is seen as an "instrument" of much larger forces that were transforming the entire consciousness of the American nation. The transformation was complex and monumental, but it was subtle too. In

describing it, DeVoto's language becomes heavily metaphorical and poetic, almost mystical:

It was a faintness, a shrinking back while the feet moved forward in darkness, a premonition more of the lower nerves than of the brain. Something had shifted out of plumb, moved on its base, begun to topple down. Something was ending in America, forever. A period, an era, a social contract, a way of life was running out. The light artillery at Palo Alto had suddenly killed much more than the ardent, aimless Mexican cavalry, and it was intuition of this death that troubled the nation's heart.²⁹

We have already seen DeVoto's attitude toward the use of literary abstractions and poetic perceptions in the writing of history, especially when they are based on metaphor. The language in the example quoted above is an excellent illustration of the paradox in his writing. Note that, whereas he objects to a concept like the soul of America, he is apparently willing to concede that it has a heart.

The Year of Decision: 1846 lays the groundwork for the other two books in DeVoto's trilogy. It establishes the technique, sets the tone, and focuses attention on Manifest Destiny as the major force in the development of a continental nation. It also defines the dual function of Manifest Destiny as an historical force and a unifying literary theme in DeVoto's work. Distinctions between the two functions begin to fade in Across the Wide Missouri, as the two become increasingly interchangeable. In The Course of Empire they are almost inseparable.

Across the Wide Missouri, 1947, focuses on the rivalry between the American Fur Company (John Jacob Astor's firm) and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (an outgrowth of William H. Ashley's original outfit) in the years 1832-38. Besides the fur traders, the other major element in the story is the early missionaries and a few emigrants on their way west. This second group represents the onset of a new era in the West; its members are manifestations of the national will, the first instruments of Manifest Destiny in its early stages.³⁰ The narrative is developed around these two groups, and their interaction over the period that the book covers highlights the closing of the era of the mountain man and the emergence of the emigrant as a symbol and a purveyor of the future.

The stimulus for the book was the rediscovery in 1935 of some watercolor sketches that Alfred Jacob Miller made while on a trip to the West in 1837-38.³¹ These sketches are used to illustrate the book. Miller made the trip with his patron, Sir William Drummond Stewart, whose western travels cover almost the same period as DeVoto's narrative. Miller and Stewart actually play very small roles in the book, and DeVoto's real purpose is "to describe the mountain fur trade as a business and as a way of life: what its characteristic experiences were, what conditions governed them, how it helped to shape our heritage, what its

relation was to the western expansion of the United States, most of all how the mountain men lived."³²

DeVoto paints his portraits of mountain men with great care. He displays an impressive knowledge about all aspects of their way of life, and he recreates specific events in the history of the fur trade, events like the rendezvous of 1832 and the battle of Pierre's Hole, with all the color and excitement of first-hand experience. He obviously finds the mountain men fascinating, and he frankly admits his admiration for their talents: "It is hardly too much to say that a mountain man's life was skill. He not only worked in the wilderness, he also lived there and he did so from sun to sun by the exercise of total skill. It was probably as intricate a skill as any ever developed by any way of working or living anywhere."³³ DeVoto follows the mountain man from sun to sun, describing in detail the skills he used, the hazards he faced, the kind of man he was--his fears, his joys, and his disappointments. He concludes that "any free trapper who survived very long was on the evidence of that fact alone a graduate mountain man."³⁴

DeVoto's treatment of the missionaries and the emigrants is not nearly so flattering. And here he displays a rather startling willingness to generalize. It will be remembered that DeVoto sharply rebuked literary historians

for making generalizations about the frontier when they knew nothing about it. The literary mind, he said, created stereotypes which had no relation to reality. For example, it had created a "demi-urge" called the pioneer:

He goes West because he is "unadjusted" or "mala-justed," because he is an economic misfit, because he resents authority or cannot stand discipline, because he is driven to escape reality, because he is under a compulsion to "revert." It turns out, too, with the happiest results that he is coarse, hard, extraverted, unintelligent, devoid of imagination and culture, resentful and contemptuous of everything he does not understand. He is a pretty accurate summary of the critic's phobias.³⁵

If accurate, this would seem to be a severe and telling indictment of the literary mind. What, then, was DeVoto thinking about when he wrote the following description in

Across the Wide Missouri?

The new type at its first appearance exhibits all the characters of the emigrant: total ignorance, anxious stupidity, above all the inability to get along with one another that was to make the wagon trains split into halves, quarters, eights, tending always to reduce the society to the family.³⁶

And again:

They had already been quarreling and they kept it up. They were further establishing the type--denying the authority of their elected officers, questioning decisions, disputing routes, rejecting all trail discipline, bellyaching about alleged fraud and alleged tyranny and alleged or real stupidity, asserting with fists and endless oratory the freeborn American's right to cleave unto his own property in all circumstances and to commit any damned idiocy his whim might suggest.³⁷

Here is the paradox in full bloom. According to his own

formula, DeVoto is projecting a set of phobias that simply mimic those of the literary historian. He has written a parody of his own criticism. To whatever extent these descriptions of the emigrant are valid, the literary critic must be absolved of blame for oversimplifying; but to the extent that they are inaccurate, DeVoto is guilty of violating his own rules. The truth lies somewhere between, but there can be little doubt that the paradox exists, and is painfully obvious, in DeVoto's writing.

DeVoto's preference for the mountain man over the emigrant is not restricted to Across the Wide Missouri. He had expressed the same attitudes in The Year of Decision: 1846, as, for example, in his comparison of Jim Clyman and the Donner party. His comparison in that book of an emigrant train and a fur caravan of mountain men is interesting: "The fur caravan was a co-operative unit, the emigrant train an uncohesive assemblage of individualists."³⁸ He provides a further elaboration of the efficiency of the mountain men:

Apart from the Indian menace, travel on the Santa Fe trail was necessarily easier than on the Oregon trail for it was conducted by professionals. This was the commerce of the prairies, not a migration of individualists, and the best procedures were enforced. The techniques were adapted from those of the mountain men, who, in fact, had first organized the trade. The wagons were more closely directed than those that traveled the northern trail, discipline was semi-military, the routines were established and there was seldom any reason to vary them.³⁹

These descriptions are not inaccurate, but it is ironic that DeVoto should single out individualism as the great evil that afflicted the emigrants, for in Across the Wide Missouri he says that the mountain men possessed "an extremity, perhaps the maximum, of American individualism and gusto."⁴⁰ (They were, however, willing to sacrifice that individualism for the semi-military discipline that made the fur caravan "a co-operative unit.") DeVoto's comparisons encourage the formation of stereotypes. It would seem fairer to attribute much of the difference between the groups to experience. DeVoto admires the skill of the mountain man, and as he says, "skill develops from controlled, corrected repetitions of an act for which one has some knack. Skill is a product of experience and criticism and intelligence."⁴¹ But there was no such thing as a "graduate" emigrant; they made the trip only once, with no opportunity for "controlled, corrected repetitions." They were bound to be the victims of inexperience, and inexperience often looks like stupidity. DeVoto should have been the first to realize and acknowledge that fact, but his personality colors his presentation of the material. As Robert Edson Lee points out, "his reading of history mirrors his own needs, beliefs, and attitudes."⁴²

One of those beliefs, of course, is that Manifest Destiny was a central force in the period which his nar-

rative covers. Across the Wide Missouri is filled with the same kinds of metaphor and the same personifications of historical force that occupy the pages of The Year of Decision: 1846. Again the movements of groups of people are seen as expressions of the prevailing time-spirit.

The missionaries are a good example:

The missionaries were vortices of force thrown out in advance by the force to the eastward that was making west. They thought that they came to bring Christ but in thinking so they were deceived. They were agents of a historical energy and what they brought was the United States. The Indians had no chance. If it looked like religion it was nevertheless Manifest Destiny.⁴³

DeVoto's approach is more sophisticated than this statement indicates, but there is no denying that the language is blatantly deterministic. It collapses individual differences and points toward the kind of unity in American history that DeVoto explicitly denied.

DeVoto is willing to admit that there were some dedicated and heroic men among the missionaries, but as a group he finds them even more distasteful than the emigrants. Yet there is one thing that they have in common with the mountain men: their leaders, men like Jason Lee and Marcus Whitman, are "instruments" of larger forces, they are leaders being led (driven might be a better word) by the historical process. Jason Lee, for example, is the subject of one of DeVoto's most extravagant metaphors:

Jason Lee was a particle, an exceedingly vigorous particle, from the core of the expansionist consciousness, an inflexible will swept into the field of the national will, an instrument of the gigantic forces that had sent him spinning out in advance of those to come like an asteroid moving on the edge of a planet's orbit.⁴⁴

DeVoto here describes Lee in language that is metaphysical, cosmic. Lee himself could not fully understand his own motivations, but DeVoto is quite ready to speculate on them. In fact, he is willing to pronounce final judgment on a question which has never been adequately answered:

Jason Lee never satisfactorily explained to anyone why, on reaching the people whom his God had directed him to serve, he did not hesitate even momentarily but passed by on the other side. The explanations which lay and religious historians have supplied vary too greatly to be reconciled and none are convincing. He was simply a carrier of the Zeitgeist. Here in 1834 it can almost be seen running in his veins. By another three years it spoke with his voice.⁴⁵

DeVoto can base this conclusion on nothing better than intuition. He admits that there is insufficient evidence, but he displays a perfect willingness to project his own feelings about Manifest Destiny into the person of Jason Lee. That projection simplifies matters a great deal; it also livens the narrative and unifies DeVoto's book. But this is all rather surprising coming from a man who tenaciously maintained that a good historian "insists on saying nothing that facts do not justify."

These examples reflect a continuation of the techniques and concepts that DeVoto employed liberally in The

Year of Decision: 1846. Many more examples could be quoted from Across the Wide Missouri, but the procedure has been clearly established, and a detailed catalogue is unnecessary and would become monotonous. Having written these two books, both of which have rather well-defined chronological limits, DeVoto addressed himself to a much more demanding task.

"The Course of Empire, 1952, is a more complex book; it is dominated by a theme so spiritual it can hardly be expressed."⁴⁶ Basically, the theme is the same one which we have seen beneath the surface of DeVoto's two other books: the almost inexorable development in America of a continental empire. But the scope here is tremendous. The book describes a period of two hundred and seventy-eight years, from 1527 to 1805, during which time numerous explorers were searching the American continent for the Passage to India. Interwoven with these explorations are several other "minor themes": the effect of the geography of North America on the development of the nation; the contention of four empires for what is now the United States; and the relationship of these factors to various Indian tribes. DeVoto says that the separate themes are meaningful, but "they are only instruments; the meaning of the book is their meaning in combination."⁴⁷

These instruments provide DeVoto with the means to

investigate a subtle combination of forces that he says historians too often overlook. They are the "intangibles" of American history:

What constituted the New World a new world, how the new world made Americans out of European stocks, what interactions of men and land established the configuration of American society--these are intangibles which historical thinking has only gingerly considered. Fragmented facts, all commonplaces, await a synthesis.⁴⁸

The Course of Empire is DeVoto's attempt to provide that synthesis. It is an immense undertaking, one that demands integration of materials, simplification of complex interactions, vast knowledge, and a genuine artistic talent. The book employs a style that is lyrical, rich in metaphor, dramatic and sometimes mystical; it is heavily stocked with poetic perceptions; and it discovers a number of "higher truths." Organized around the concept of continentalism, and skillfully manipulating a number of themes which eventually form a single force, the book is a unified literary work whose meaning emphatically denies that there is no unity, no harmony, in American history.

It would be impossible here to summarize the subject matter of The Course of Empire, or to do justice to its total value as a work of history. But that is not necessary. It only remains to show its relation to the other books in the trilogy, and to document its contribution to the paradox in DeVoto's writing. Several examples should

suffice.

The force of continentalism (a kind of infant Manifest Destiny) makes its appearance at the very outset of the book. The wheels are set in motion by Cabeza de Vaca, discovered by a gang of Spanish slave hunters after eight years of wandering lost in the deserts and mountains of what is now the southwestern part of the United States. He tells them fantastic stories, firing their imaginations with thoughts of gold, emeralds, and the imaginary Seven Cities of Cibola. This is 1536.

So now the conquistadors would push the frontier of the Spanish Empire out of Mexico into the area of the United States. This slight increment of force, itself a minute integer of experience in a sum of fantasy, made the first whorl in what would be a vortex of forces, and that vortex would become the contention of four empires.⁴⁹

The language is unmistakable. This vortex of forces will eventually propel a certain satellite (Jason Lee) into orbit; it will send Captain Philip St. George Cooke to Santa Fe for a meeting with destiny, and it will drive the Donner party across the Great Salt Desert and into the snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains; but before it does that it will send Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on a mission to the mouth of the Columbia River. Cabeza de Vaca is the first link in a long chain of people and events that charts the course of empire in America.

In order to enhance the element of mystery involved

in the exploration of unknown lands, DeVoto uses a single metaphor consistently throughout the book. This is the image of "the mist." Uncharted territory is described as shrouded in this mist, which recedes momentarily, advances, recedes again, and finally disappears as continued exploration fills out the map. It is a romantic image, mysterious and fascinating, and it controls much of the action of the narrative. Some of DeVoto's most lyrical passages describe history in terms of this mist. As in the following:

Dreams have their own gravity and exert an attractive force on one another. As the mist crept over New Mexico again following Coronado's failure to find the corded gold, Cibola stayed where Esteban first saw it, but Quivera floated off through the rainbows.⁵⁰

This may not be a substitution of poetry for fact, but it certainly is a poetic perception of the process of history.

One force in the ultimate development of a continental nation clearly emerges as the central one in DeVoto's book: geography. "I am not writing the history of American geography," DeVoto says, "but I must insist on the importance of this concept, whose consequences have by no means been sufficiently appreciated."⁵¹ DeVoto emphasizes the importance of geography again and again, until it becomes the determining principle in the destiny of the United States. Manifest Destiny is seen as an outgrowth of the inherent geographical conditions of the American continent. Actual geography and "the geography of fantasy"--those aspects of

geography created by imagination, dream, and faulty maps-- somehow constitute a cohesive force for continentalism even before they are part of the United States. For example, DeVoto says that "the lands that had been granted by English kings according to the geography of fantasy. . . . were the nation's most valuable asset and its strongest cohesive force. They were a prime mover in fulfilling the geographical, political, and psychological destiny that required us to be a continental nation."⁵² Again the language is deterministic, casting geography as the "prime mover" among a group of forces which "required" America to fulfill its continental "destiny." In the following example, DeVoto uses his metaphor of the mist in combination with the features of geography to foreshadow the outcome of centuries of history:

In 1541 Coronado heard that a great river, which behind the mist was the Missouri, headed in the eastern slopes of a western range of mountains. He had heard of a basic feature of our continental geography and a fundamental key to it. The year before, 1540, De Soto had determined the existence of a big river, the Mississippi, which was another basic feature and a fundamental key of the continental geography, though all but a short stretch of it was hidden in the mist. The features were to involve the destinies of empires.⁵³

This rather esoteric combination forms what DeVoto calls "the logic of geography."⁵⁴ And it is almost impossible in this passage to separate (or distinguish) what is literature from what is history. The literary device and the

historical concept have merged into the logic of geography. Manifest Destiny and continentalism are the inevitable results.⁵⁴

DeVoto would probably object strongly to such an analysis. He warns against interpreting his writing as a belief in determinism: "no one who reads my book can suppose that I believe in historical predestination. Men are masters of their societies, society's will is free, and history is not geography, it is men and the events they produce."⁵⁵ We must accept DeVoto's statement of his own beliefs. But it is the purpose of this analysis to compare his stated beliefs with his actual use of historical materials, his theory with his practice. And anyone who reads the five hundred and fifty-four pages of the text of The Course of Empire is very likely to forget the few words of warning in the Preface. Especially when he reads that the major features of American geography

compose an articulation, a pattern, an organic shape. It is not a perfect symmetry nor a perfect unity, but it is incomparably closer to being both than the physical matrix in which any other modern nation developed. The American teleology is geographical.⁵⁶ (*italics added*)

Teleology, American or otherwise, clearly operates at the level of higher truths. It implies purpose and direction, and if American history embodies a teleology which is geographical, then that geography provides an unmistakable element of unity and harmony in the process by which the

nation develops. DeVoto's history trilogy culminates in this realization, but the outcome is seldom in doubt from the beginning. It simply takes time and a lot of pages to trace the process backwards from the final result to its source.

If this realization is what is finally left at the center of the stage, the complex process of getting it there has also uncovered the full force of the paradox in DeVoto's work. DeVoto denied the existence of determinism in his writing, and he denied the validity of all formulas that sought to explain American history. He also vigorously attacked the application of the literary mind to the problems of writing history. But his own history trilogy employs deterministic language and deterministic historical concepts; it develops a formula which accounts for the impulses and movements of the historical process in America; and it achieves artistic unity by structuring its narratives upon the techniques of thematic literature. This is the paradox. DeVoto himself describes it perfectly, in an ironic context. He says of Thomas Jefferson, that "though he may sometimes have thought that the nation could not permanently fill its continental system, he acted as if, manifestly, it could have no other destiny."⁵⁷ The statement applies directly to the paradox in DeVoto's work: although he may have thought (and written criticism) as if

no unity or harmony existed in American history, he acted, wrote history, as if both were embodied and expressed in Manifest Destiny.

IV

Bernard DeVoto's sustained attack on the literary mind, and his struggle to overcome it in himself, contrast with his consistent use of it in writing about American history. The Year of Decision: 1846, Across the Wide Missouri, and The Course of Empire are products of the literary mind. DeVoto seems not to have realized that fact, but it is largely responsible for his successes and his failures.

DeVoto once described his personal preference for a certain kind of literature: "The literature that most interests me is the literature of man's loneliness and hope, his entanglement with the world, his words and consolations, his dismay under the night sky."⁵⁸ When he is writing about these things in his histories he is at his very best. Few historians can approach his skill at transforming history into personal experience. He recreates events as drama, and he peoples his drama with real men and women. He brings history to life--the monotony of it as well as the excitement. He is nowhere better than when he is describing the fur trade "as a business

and as a way of life."

But the trilogy is essentially a work of synthesis. It is a synthesis of a huge amount of scholarship and of a great number of people and events. As such it must deal not only with personal experience but with the process of history. Here the literary mind betrays him (or causes him to betray himself). It produces poetic perceptions, it discovers higher truths; it carries him to the realm of metaphysics. These are the very things he objected to so strongly, and the paradox in his writing appears to be part of the paradox in his own personality. Wallace Stegner, who knew DeVoto about as well as anyone did, says

he despised literary phonies, narcissistic artists, public confessors, gushers, long-hairs, and writers of deathless prose; and he would despise these because he feared them in himself. All through Benny's life, a submerged romantic, a literary Harvard boy from Copey's class, would send up embarrassing bubbles of gas, and one way to cover these moments would be the overt belch of professionalism.⁵⁹

Stegner's metaphor also describes the discrepancy between DeVoto's writing of history and his criticism.

Social history is perhaps the most difficult kind of history to write well. It demands skill in literary expression and a delicate sense of balance. This is Samuel Eliot Morison's opinion; he adds,

Historians notably lack the talent at description which novelists have developed to a high degree; Prescott had it, of course, and Parkman; but you

can count on the fingers of one hand the American historians now writing who can describe a scene, an event, or a natural setting in such a way that the reader can see it.⁶⁰

DeVoto had that talent, too; it was a product of the literary mind. He was indebted to the literary mind more than he knew or would ever acknowledge. But he was right in criticizing it for exceeding the bounds of historical knowledge. There were times when he should have listened to himself more closely.

Footnotes

¹ For example, The Year of Decision: 1846, published in 1943, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and its first printing ran to 300,000 copies; Across the Wide Missouri, 1947, won the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize; and The Course of Empire, 1952, like the others, generated enthusiastic, though not unqualified, praise.

² Wallace Stegner, "The Personality," in Four Portraits and One Subject: Bernard DeVoto, Catherine Drinker Bowen et al. (Boston, 1963), pp. 107-108.

³ Stegner, Four Portraits, p. 107.

⁴ DeVoto was a prolific writer. Only a small portion of his total production is relevant to this discussion, but it is worth indicating the magnitude and diversity of his output: five novels, six serials, fifty short stories, four books of non-fiction, three histories, four collections of essays, a number of other books edited or introduced, and more than six hundred essays, editorials, and book reviews. A detailed and rather comprehensive bibliography is provided by Robert Edson Lee, "The Work of Bernard DeVoto, Introduction and Annotated Check List," unpubl. diss. (State University of Iowa, 1957).

⁵ Forays and Rebuttals (Boston, 1936), p. 177.

⁶ Minority Report (Boston, 1940), p. 165.

⁷ Minority Report, p. 165.

⁸ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 104.

⁹ "Interrelations of History and Literature," in Approaches to American Social History, ed. William E. Lingelbach (New York, 1937), p. 35.

¹⁰ The Literary Fallacy (Boston, 1944), p. 173.

¹¹ Mark Twain's America is an important book, and it stimulated a heated controversy which has not yet been fully resolved. For a detailed discussion of the Brooks-DeVoto controversy, see Roger Asselineau, The Literary Reputation of Mark Twain. Paris, 1954.

¹² Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), p. XIV. DeVoto's claim to experience in frontier living is based on his having grown up in Ogden, Utah, where he was born in 1897, and his consequent contact with society in that "frontier community." It is worth pointing out that the frontier is usually considered to have been a thing of the past after 1890. All such dates are somewhat arbitrary, but twentieth-century Ogden certainly cannot be equated with the Western frontier of the 1840's.

¹³ The Literary Fallacy, p. 48.

¹⁴ The Literary Fallacy, p. 5.

¹⁵ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 165.

¹⁶ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 160.

¹⁷ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 172.

¹⁸ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 177.

¹⁹ "Cambridge Man," Holiday, XVI (July, 1954), 33.

²⁰ The Year of Decision: 1846 (Boston, 1943), p. 4.

²¹ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 4.

²² Mark Twain's America, p. 321.

²³ DeVoto, "Manifest Destiny," Harper's, CLXXXII (April, 1941), 557. The meaning of the election is not nearly so clear or one-sided as DeVoto indicates. For a brief but enlightening discussion of the election in the context of the present investigation, consult Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History (New York, 1963), pp. 41 ff; see also Ray Allen Billington's The Far Western Frontier: 1830-1860 (New York, 1956), pp. 143 ff.

²⁴ See Four Portraits, p. 123.

²⁵ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 181.

²⁶ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 185.

²⁷ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 186.

²⁸ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 271.

²⁹ The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 214.

30 This marks the beginning of DeVoto's backward projection of Manifest Destiny, not merely as a term that describes historical movements, but as an actual personified force affecting the destiny of the American nation. Yet the first "Great Migration" occurred in 1843, and the term Manifest Destiny itself did not appear until it was coined by John L. O'Sullivan in an editorial on the Texas question in the Democratic Review for July and August, 1845. See Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History, p. 27.

31 The circumstances of the discovery of Miller's sketches are described by Mae Reed Porter, the woman who bought them and arranged for their publication, in a Forward to Across the Wide Missouri, pp. XV-XVIII. DeVoto provides an interesting appendix, "The First Illustrators of the West," pp. 391-415, in which he compares Miller's work with that of two other western artists, George Catlin and Charles Bodmer.

32 Across the Wide Missouri, p. XI.

33 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 159.

34 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 48.

35 Forays and Rebuttals, pp. 171-172.

36 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 379.

37 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 381.

38 The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 161.

39 The Year of Decision: 1846, p. 250.

40 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 44.

41 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 158.

42 "The Work of Bernard DeVoto," p. 109.

43 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 371.

44 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 355.

45 Across the Wide Missouri, p. 200.

46 Lee, "The Work of Bernard DeVoto," p. 98.

- 47 The Course of Empire, p. XIV.
- 48 The Course of Empire, p. 403.
- 49 The Course of Empire, p. 10.
- 50 The Course of Empire, p. 62.
- 51 The Course of Empire, p. 565. DeVoto may not be writing "the history of American geography," but he manages to write much American history largely in terms of its geography--especially where crucial matters are concerned.
- 52 The Course of Empire, p. 60.
- 53 The Course of Empire, p. 54.
- 54 This kind of thinking is perfectly in line with those who preached Manifest Destiny in the 1840's. As Albert K. Weinberg points out, "the expansionists added to the idea of the natural boundary a metaphysical dogma which converted it into the theory that may be called geographical predestination. They quaintly held that nature or the natural order of things destined natural boundaries for nations in general and the United States, the nation of special destiny, in particular." Manifest Destiny (Baltimore, 1935), p. 43.
- 55 The Course of Empire, p. XVI.
- 56 The Course of Empire, p. 404.
- 57 The Course of Empire, p. 403.
- 58 Minority Report, pp. 168-169.
- 59 Four Portraits, pp. 87-88.
- 60 "Faith of a Historian," American Historical Review, LVI (January, 1951), 273.

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