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## Cunning Corridors: Parkman's La Salle as Quest-Romance

by DANIEL JAMES SUNDAHL

*Into the making of a historian there should appear something of the philosopher, something of the novelist, something of the poet.*

John Fiske

"Francis Parkman," *A Century of Science*

THE "study of genres," Northrop Frye argues, "is based on analogies in form" (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 95). History which purports to be literature is thus intrinsically informed by a genre's features; noticing "analogies in form" places a history within the corresponding order of a genre. Francis Parkman's *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* is a history analogous in form to a tragic quest-romance.

Extrinsically, the artifactual materials of *La Salle* exist without analogy to a quest-romance. The extrinsic history is a simple chronicle of facts. Intrinsically, the presence of a self-conscious narrator relates the chronicle to the corresponding order of a quest-romance. "Freed from its dependence on fixed points without," Collingwood argues, "the historian's picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture, and its necessity is at every point the necessity of the *a priori* imagination" (*Idea of History*, 245).

There is a need to distinguish in *La Salle* the extrinsic "fixed points without" from the intrinsic "*a priori* imagination" of the narrator; the cunning corridors of this imagination mythologize the Great West and La Salle's character, analogizing and merging the extrinsic, artifactual records with the quest-romance genre.

As the history is presented, the narrator integrates the framework of a quest-romance with his documentary evidence; his constructive imagination adheres to the separate annals in the history's chronology, but he shifts his position when he perceives that a fact corresponds to the convention of his genre. Since the historical record is often fragmented and incomplete, the narrator's "imaginary picture" analogizes the historical record with recognizable human situations, transmuting these situations into modes and tropes. The purpose of such a scheme, according to Hayden White, argues that the

... historian shares with his audience general notions of the forms that significant human situations must take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making

that identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another. In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the possible story form that such events may figure. In his narrative account of how this set of events took on the shape that he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind. The reader, in the process of following the historian's account of those events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another . . . . And when he has perceived the class or type of stories to which the story he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events of the story explained to him. ("Historical Text as Literary Artifact," 49)

White's argument is simple: we do not live stories, but we live by them.

As a diagrammatic quest-romance, *La Salle* is an archetypal drama of self-identification, the various episodes illustrating a homeless hero's journey toward a supreme trial and his destiny. There is an elusive, visionary goal for which La Salle searches, a variety of human and nonhuman antagonists, various episodes illustrating La Salle's transcendence and victory over the antagonistic obstacles that confront him, the achievement of the vision, and a tragical denouement. Over the full process of this quest-romance, the narrator reveals portions of his hero's moral character, even as that character is defeated by his antagonists. La Salle's transcendence and victory are sublimated when the reader estimates the degree of responsibility La Salle bears for his tragic end. This diagrammatic framework is the result of the narrator's metahistorical point of view, seizing the mythic from the chronicle. Parkman's narrator shifts the direction of his discourse when the chronicle order has about it an element analogous to the quest-romance, transmuting the historical documentary, introducing the generic center of the history:

The Spaniards discovered the Mississippi. De Soto was buried beneath its waters; and it was down its muddy current that his followers fled from the El Dorado of their dreams, transformed to a wilderness of misery and death. (*La Salle*, 3)

The narrator's shift from the objectivity of the first sentence involves a merging between the historical record and his orchestration of the record according to his metahistorical point of view. The narrator's symbolizing consciousness merges with the historical record as he shapes the record according to metahistorical structures that have a separate integrity and independence. The shift that occurs between the first two sentences exemplifies the two positions in the narrative: chronicle and quest-romance. The extrinsic position of the first sentence is objective and historical. The shift into the second sentence maintains the objectivity of the history, but the sense is more dramatic. With this shift the narrator metahistorically projects his intrinsic position, the shift arising as a reflex of his *a priori* imagination, adding the extrinsic account of De Soto's burial to a generic account of a failure to escape from a world of strife. Here, too, is the quest-romance theme of heroic action, categorically wider and richer than mere chronicle.

There is, therefore, the well-known outline of a completed story present

in the narrator's introduction. This outline is an immense poetic reserve, creating a frame for La Salle's quest and announcing to the audience the history's generic form. The Mississippi and the wilderness enshrouding it, the elusive goal of the quest, lie in labyrinthian wait, the specific dangers and perils comprehensible vis-à-vis the legend of another historical personage who contended with those same wilderness shadows. The narrator's diagrammatic framework is associative; he represents previous history as mythic legend, foreshadowing the story that will follow. La Salle's history has thus been "motifically encoded," as Hayden White argues; "the reader has been provided with a story" (*Metahistory*, 6).

The second sentence ironically undercuts the first sentence; the narrator's historicism interprets action occurring as the result of mitigated human intentions, virtues undercut by tragic flaws. This tragic irony draws the reader's awareness to themes central to the narrative: human actions often do not produce intended results; human pretensions and illusions to power, virtue, knowledge, and innocence are revealed as flaws. The analogous form of the quest-romance has subtly been put into place. Like De Soto, La Salle is a questing hero who will be drawn into conflicting relationships with forces inadequately understood. For the narrator, there is also the symbolic commitment to such a monomyth as El Dorado, a Spanish place of myth and dream, the legendary land of the Golden Man.

Parkman's narrator recites this in a stylistically graceful, easy, offhand manner; there is, too, a strong impression of mystery. The search for the "Messipi" had, to the narrator's mind, acquired a visionary dimension: "More and more, the thoughts of the Jesuits—and not of the Jesuits alone—dwelt on this mysterious stream. Through what regions did it flow; and whither would it lead them,—to the South Sea or the 'Sea of Virginia'; to Mexico, Japan, or China? The problem was soon to be solved, and the mystery revealed" (*La Salle*, 6).

Add to this lush descriptions of the American landscape, "all the fair outline of . . . graceful scenery, the finished and polished master-work of Nature." The effect is to draw the reader back in time, evoking an earthy, forest-smothered wilderness or "a rolling sea of dull green prairie, a boundless pasture of the buffalo and the deer" (*La Salle*, 168). Into this "vast New World . . . more and more unveiled" (*La Salle*, 298) comes La Salle, a man of intrepid moral vigor, "unfit for any enterprise of which he was not the undisputed chief," and who, "by a necessity of his nature, could obey no initiative but his own" (*La Salle*, 9). As he appears to the narrator's imagination, La Salle is a force in the universe, living a dreadful equation.

The "vast New World" confronted by La Salle and his followers has the Romantic effect of mystical transport, somewhat antithetical and dangerous to a Jesuitical mood; the sublime depth of the woods, the river's fog, the unspeakable rites of the natives create for La Salle a heroic

test for his moral vigor. Had La Salle stayed at home and not pursued his quest, the narrator argues, he “might perhaps have lived and died with a fair repute; but the wilderness is a rude touchstone, which often reveals traits that would have lain buried and unsuspected in civilized life” (*La Salle*, 421). As these traits are revealed, La Salle becomes a kind of man-god, from whom is extracted divine-like suffering, leading to his final extinction in death.

As the narrator builds his plot, he places La Salle in scenes that make the audience conscious of the creative and destructive elements of human life as a whole. During these scenes, the narrative again shifts from chronicle to metahistory informing the narrative with the mythopoetic:

The priests of St. Sulpice were granting out their lands, on very easy terms, to settlers. They wished to extend a thin line of settlements along the front of their island, to form a sort of outpost, from which an alarm could be given on any descent of the Iroquois. La Salle was the man for such a purpose. Had the priests understood him, — which they evidently did not, for some of them suspected him of levity, the last foible with which he could be charged, — had they understood him, they would have seen in him a young man in whom the fire of youth glowed not the less ardently for the veil of reserve that covered it; who would shrink from no danger, but would not court it in bravado; and who would cling with an invincible tenacity of gripe [*sic*] to any purpose which he might espouse. (*La Salle*, 11)

The shift here is toward a fictional narrative, historically credible but creating a plot-compositional framework ineluctably ironic. The facts of La Salle’s life are transmuted into metaphor. Hayden White:

It is this mediative function that permits us to speak of a historical narrative as an extended metaphor. As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events. . . with different emotional valences. . . it calls to mind images of the things it indicates, in the same way that a metaphor does. . . Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that “liken” the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture. (“Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 52)

The chronicle events of the actual historical narrative, in other words, are not value-neutral; the narrator apperceptively understands the events to have a gloss about them; when the motives of the priests are placed in conjunction with the motives of La Salle, a classical conflict begins to emerge. The characterological descriptions of La Salle as “a young man in whom the fire of youth glowed,” “who would shrink from no danger,” “who would cling with an invincible tenacity” are details which come to symbolize the kind of character-entity the audience also expects to find in its own culturally encoded experience. The narrator thus exploits the metaphorical similarities between the factual messages and the conventions of American fiction.

Not far removed from this framework is our familiarity with a character placed against the forces of the social compact. A community is placed in the wilderness, symbolically representing the forces of order, institutional stability, organized religion, and legal procedures, all of which con-

flict with the freedom of an individual who trailblazes. Cooper would not have resolved it better.

The extrinsic point of view is present in the first two sentences; its context is objective and historical. The narrator's interjection ("La Salle was the man for such a purpose.") is an utterance with a dramatic vitality, shifting the text into quest-romance. The sovereign ego of the narrator thus mixes the discourse, shifting to a historical thinking containing within its emplotment conflicts between La Salle and the nonhuman antagonistic forces in the wilderness—the "vast New World . . . more and more unveiled"—and between La Salle and the antagonistic Jesuit community, his followers, and the Indians.

The narrator builds his quest-romance by suggesting a strong measure of will in La Salle whose will is also his pride. His tragic fall is foreshadowed in the narrator's symbolizing consciousness. He suggests something of an ultimate commitment by La Salle; simultaneously he suggests that a tragic suffering will occur, partially imposed from without by the Jesuits, by La Salle's followers, and by the physical prowess of the landscape, mainly, however, as a result of La Salle's own tremendous vitality pitted against the archetypal universe at large. The narrator's metahistoricism mythopoetically prepares the audience for the tragical denouement.

The focusing attention of that symbolizing consciousness is upon archival records and facts. A comparison between an original document and the narrator's transmutation illustrates the metaphorical process by which he creates his quest-romance.

We left the following day, September nineteenth, with fourteen people in four canoes. The smallest one, loaded with five hundred pounds, I paddled with the help of a carpenter newly arrived from France. My companion did not know how to take the waves in heavy weather, so I had the entire responsibility of handling this little craft. The four bark canoes were loaded with a forge and all its equipment—carpenter's, joiner's, and pit sawyer's tools, fire-arms, and goods.

We followed a southern course toward the mainland, a good four leagues from the Island of the Potawatomi. Half-way across, in the midst of a perfect calm, a storm arose which put us in danger and made us fear for the bark. We were even more frightened for ourselves, because we were finishing this long passage in the dark, hailing each other to avoid separation. The water often broke into our canoes. The gale lasted four days with a fury equal to the worst storms at sea. We landed in a little sandy cove where we waited five days for the lake to calm. While we were there, the Indian hunter who accompanied us shot only a porcupine to flavor our squash and corn.

The twenty-fifth we journeyed all day and by moonlight part of the night, along the west shore of Lake Michigan; but when the wind became too strong, we were forced to land on a bare rock. We endured rain and snow for two days, huddled under our blankets around a little fire fed with wood cast on shore by the waves. (Fr. Louis Hennepin, *Description of Louisiana*, 41–42)

The parting was not auspicious. The lake, glassy and calm in the afternoon, was convulsed at night with a sudden storm, when the canoes were midway between the island and the main shore. It was with difficulty that they could keep together, the men shouting to each other through the darkness. Hennepin, who was in the smallest canoe with a heavy load, and a carpenter for a companion who was awkward at the paddle, found himself in jeopardy

which demanded all his nerve. The voyagers thought themselves happy when they gained at last the shelter of a little sandy cove, where they dragged up their canoes, and made their cheerless bivouac in the drenched and dripping forest. Here they spent five days, living on pumpkins and Indian corn, the gift of their Pottawattamie friends, and on a Canada porcupine brought in by La Salle's Mohegan hunter. The gale raged meanwhile with relentless fury. They trembled when they thought of the "Griffin." When at length the tempest lulled, they re-embarked, and steered southward along the shore of Wisconsin; but again the storm fell upon them, and drove them for safety to a bare, rocky islet. Here they made a fire with drift-wood, crouched around it, drew their blankets over their heads, and in this miserable plight, pelted with sleet and rain, remained for two days. (*La Salle*, 156-57)

The differences between the two passages are not merely peripheral. Parkman's original source is a chronicle describing actions and events. Something apperceptive is present, nonetheless, allowing Parkman's narrator self-consciously to memorialize the spirit of the chronicle, reconstituting and making it visually more dramatic. In doing so the narrator diagrammatically continues the framework of the quest-romance.

Hennepin's rather blank description of the departure by fourteen people in four canoes, for example, is static; Parkman's narrator transmutes that blankness into metaphor, fusing the content of the source with extra-plot concerns under which La Salle and his followers are tested by unusual and unexpected conditions. The generic concerns are those of a rite of passage, a testing of the man in La Salle who must be extraordinary if he is to survive.

The explorers of this wilderness are, additionally, attempting to acquire control over Nature, an attempt the narrator suggests is an illusion. The scene further calls to mind the grand, sublime canvases of the Hudson River School. The narrator's mid-nineteenth-century American consciousness, in that respect, metaphorically renders for the reader a moral theme: the selfish ends of the explorers are in confrontation with an adversary nonhuman, or perhaps superhuman. Such an adversary impresses upon the mind a reverence for the enormousness of Nature, a stage upon which the explorers should move with humility. The size of the scale contrasts nicely with human diminutiveness, offering a mythic contrast between the Great West and the attitudes of the characters who face constant danger. The metahistorical structure seems implicit, therefore, creating solemn feelings of respect and awe, as well as preparing for the broader significance of La Salle, a character intent on pursuing his own ends but also a character aware of the sublimity around him.

There is an additional suggestion of a generic rendering in the difference between "hailing each other to avoid separation" and "the men shouting to each other through the darkness." Parkman's source is not as dramatically fraught as the narrator's transmutation; historically it is as true as the Hennepin source but mythically greater. The narrator's imagination does not, however, operate capriciously or fancifully. Apperceptively he establishes his metahistorical plot-composition which has the potential for generic interpretation, the image-set of "men shouting to

each other through the darkness” metaphorically transmuted into the moral idea of a ritualistic passage and death struggle. The focus is on the hero and the conflict with the mythic, demonic powers of the darkness. Such an agon continues to give the history the generic, literary form of a quest-romance, specially emphasizing the difficulties involved in pursuing that elusive goal, highlighting the immensity of the nonhuman antagonisms that prevent successful pursuit of that elusive goal.

The consciousness of the narrator thus mediates and reflects upon the psychological effects of the natural world, charging the audience to visualize the landscape, poetically swelling and stimulating the emotions. When he describes the lake as “glassy and calm in the afternoon” but “convulsed at night with a sudden storm,” he symbolically contrasts the benevolent aspects of Nature with the malevolent aspects, the canoes placed emblematically at a point midway between, illustrating the theme he wishes to convey. As it is here, the explorers stand the possibility of annihilation; the peace beneath the calm is ironically deceptive.

Parkman's narrator has also transmuted the point of view from Hennepin's first-person account to an omniscient format; it is a change interesting for its illustration of a consciousness in total possession of the general adventure and drama. Hennepin's overall account has some drama and impact, but the integrity of its unfolding lacks a certain consistency. Parkman's narrator seamlessly portrays the scenic conditions, the adventure unfolding all of a piece before the eyes of his audience.

Different also from Hennepin's account is the narrator's insertion “They trembled when they thought of the ‘Griffin.’ ” It is a single insertion but calls to mind a prior scene during which La Salle and his followers debate whether or not to send the *Griffin*, “laden with . . . furs,” across Lake Michigan “to satisfy his [La Salle's] creditors.” The *Griffin* is lost during the ensuing tempest. The narrator's insertion enforces a tragic irony, the result of a defect in character and about which we moralize. “La Salle,” as the narrator previously makes clear, “who asked counsel of no man, resolved in spite of his followers, to send back the ‘Griffin.’ . . . It was a rash resolution, for it involved trusting her to the pilot, who had already proved either incompetent or treacherous” (*La Salle*, 156).

The audience, therefore, perceives headstrong characteristics in La Salle; as for the plot, La Salle's “rash resolution” is a cause for division between his followers and him and is a later motive for revenge by those followers. An explanatory note in Parkman's text adds to the irony by explaining that La Salle had been “expressly prohibited” by the Jesuits “from trading with the Ottawas and others who brought furs to Montreal. This traffic on the lakes was, therefore, illicit” (*La Salle*, 156). The narrator thus portrays La Salle as a tragical quest-hero whose misjudgements are the result of ambitions strong enough to conflict with the legal limits placed upon him by the Jesuits.

In trespassing those limits, La Salle's tragic fault emerges, suggesting



that he has not learned and accepted the boundaries in which human judgement and action are enclosed. The irretrievable loss of the *Griffin* is the result of that faulty judgement and action, forcing La Salle into that tragical abyss from which he will not extricate himself. The ensuing tempest symbolically prefigures La Salle's fate; he is a character at odds with the Jesuits, his followers, and the universe at large.

It is further clear that La Salle is also a man of conscience. To establish La Salle's moral fidelity, the narrator metahistorically attributes psychological and emotive assets to La Salle: "But where was the 'Griffin'? Time enough, and more than enough, had passed for her voyage to Niagara and back again. He scanned the dreary horizon with an anxious eye. No returning sail gladdened the watery solitude, and a dark foreboding gathered on his heart" (*La Salle*, 163).

Romantic devotees of individualism should perceive in such a passage the narrator's mythic conception of La Salle's history. There is a striving for symbolic fusion between the extrinsic qualities of the history and the intrinsic, metahistorical drama of romantic "self-identification symbolized," as Hayden White would have it, "by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it—the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the story of the resurrection of Christ in Christian mythology. It is a drama of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall" (*Metahistory*, 8–9).

Parkman's narrator reflects upon and portrays La Salle as a man who, in becoming anxious, loses some of his central integrity and fortitude. In doing so, he finds himself in a state of division that will become more terrible as the foreshadowing seems to indicate. The conditions of his existence, after all, are now unalterable; the conscious spectator to the drama further relates this immediate scene to that fund of story forms upon which the narrative rests. The narrator's myth, the palimpsest, cunningly contains the ghostly implication of Odysseus scanning the horizon. The allusion thus reconciles the evidence with the mythopoeic, retaining through the metahistorical, quest-romance framework a historical authenticity that rests on the documentary record as well as the narrator's "imaginary picture."

The narrator's center of interest, therefore, is focused upon a character who misjudges himself and bears a degree of responsibility for his fate. La Salle's inclinations, in fact, prior even to his arrival on the North American continent, are described by the narrator in some detail. La Salle was a person who could not be "the passive instrument of another's will, taught to walk in prescribed paths, to renounce his individuality and become a component atom of a vast whole." He was a "youth whose calm exterior hid an inexhaustible fund of pride. . . whose strong personality would not yield to the shaping hand." His morals were "unimpeachable,"

but were combined with the “cravings of a deep ambition, the hunger of an insatiable intellect,” and “the intense longing for action and achievement” (*La Salle*, 9).

The implications are clear: the narrator has an affinity for an isolated, somewhat existential character questing for his destiny and identity, dramatically placing the quest against the background of an American literary landscape. The metahistorical plot-composition thus continues to find its structure in cultural ideals and mythic values inherent in the rich fabric of American literature. The narrator’s creative imagination discursively characterizes La Salle, but then metaphorically extends the boundary: “What manner of man was he who could conceive designs so vast and defy enmities so many and so powerful? And in what spirit did he embrace these designs?” (*La Salle*, 105).

La Salle, of course, goes rambling over the American landscape but spiritually cannot accept his own human limitations. All-embracing and beckoning as the world might seem, it is ultimately impossible for him fully to achieve all that his “deep ambition” and insatiability require. If the world is also destructive in the amount of limitless freedom it offers, the nature of the Jesuitical organization is mutually destructive in that it, too, thwarts La Salle’s cravings and longings.

The only interests of the Jesuits, the narrator argues, were the precepts of the Catholic faith “as represented by Jesuits,” who thus might regulate and “reign with undisputed sway” (*La Salle*, 104). Their ambitions and enthusiasms were “intense and fervent,” and the “vital force of Jesuitism had suffered no diminution.” The characteristics that bind the Jesuit Order are those of that “marvellous *esprit de corps*, that extinction of self and absorption of the individual in the Order which has marked the Jesuits from their first existence as a body,” and which “was no whit changed or lessened” (*La Salle*, 103).

Drawn early in life to this “great organization, so complicated yet so harmonious, a mighty machine moved from the centre by a single hand . . . an image of regulated power, full of fascination for a mind like his,” La Salle would “no less likely . . . soon wish to escape” (*La Salle*, 8). His aim was “occupation, fortification, and settlement. The scope and vigor of his enterprises, and the powerful influence that aided them, made him a stumbling-block in their [the Jesuits’] path. He was their most dangerous rival for control of the West, and from first to last they set themselves against him” (*La Salle*, 104). Ironically, to be true to his own nature and destiny, La Salle must become disloyal to an organization that had once attracted his loyalty; he becomes civilly disobedient.

The opposition of these two forces enhances the quest-romance generic form, a tragical process in which the capacity of one man is tested against the capacity of a self-binding organization, against the contending moral principles of freedom and law. The narrator’s interest is in the creative life found in a space and time removed from the patterns of thought and

feeling prevailing in society at large. The narrator's imaginary picture portrays La Salle as a character vividly responsive to Nature and untrammelled freedom. Still, La Salle's background and early relations with the Jesuits suggest an ironic conflict of allegiances. The narrator's portrayal of the conflict between La Salle and the Jesuits is, however, a curious mingling of his own point of view with a relatively loose "long memoir, written by a person who made his [La Salle's] acquaintance at Paris," the substance of which is based upon conversations had by Abbé Renaudot with La Salle, resting on their "own unsupported authority" (*La Salle*, 106-07).

What is more generally involved is a change in the method of emplotment; throughout the pages dealing with La Salle's life during a portion of the year 1678, the narrator transmits the story "through the mind of another person in sympathy with him [La Salle], and evidently sharing his prepossessions." As this chapter develops, the narrator specifies the dispute that existed between La Salle and the Jesuits by citing or reading from the text of a memoir that is "of unquestionable historical value; for it gives us a vivid and not an exaggerated picture of the bitter strife of parties which then raged in Canada, and which was destined to tax to the utmost the vast energy and fortitude of La Salle." The narrator offers "an abstract of its [the memoir's] statements" (*La Salle*, 107) as he finds them. The narrative changes to an emplotment in which the historical times are perceived contextually by the narrator; the effect is not proto-scientific-historiography, however, so much as it is metahistorical emplotment by argument.

Briefly, the abstracted argument suggests that the Jesuits were harsh, intolerant, and jealous and went to extremes with regard to persons not of their organization. La Salle was the recipient of much of this treatment; he stood accused of having made unfavorable comments relative to "the attitude of [the] saviors of the colony" (*La Salle*, 116). Regardless, La Salle attempted to live on terms of courtesy with the Jesuits. The narrator employs the memoir to portray the treatment of the Jesuits against La Salle:

Once, when he was at Quebec, the farmer of the King's revenue, one of the richest men in the place, was extremely urgent in his proffers of hospitality, and at length, though he knew La Salle but slightly, persuaded him to lodge in his house. He had been here but a few days when his host's wife began to enact the part of the wife of Potiphar, and this with so much vivacity that on one occasion La Salle was forced to take an abrupt leave, in order to avoid an infringement of the laws of hospitality. As he opened the door, he found the husband on the watch, and saw that it was a plot to entrap him.

An accompanying note indicates that the memoir relates this story at considerable length, especially the "advances of the lady particularly described" (*La Salle*, 113).

In the same chapter the narrator further describes an attempt on La Salle's life, "not . . . the only one of the kind made against La Salle." On

one occasion, “a quantity of hemlock and verdigris was given him in a salad.” The memoir adds that La Salle, “who recovered from the effects of the poison, wholly exculpates the Jesuits,” although he later indicates he “was not sorry to have this indication of their ill-will” (*La Salle*, 116–17). The narrator concludes this chapter by suggesting that the memoir might be criticized, but it “does not exaggerate the jealousies and enmities that beset the path of the discoverer” (*La Salle*, 119).

Hayden White suggests that such a *mutatis mutandis* should be considered as a metahistorical discursive argument, the basic form of which is a philosophical reflection (*Metahistory*, 15). The narrator accomplishes this by isolating one element of the historical field for special study—the Jesuits. The narrator picks and pulls at this one thread in the historical tapestry, identifying the ethical variety of the characters, wedding, as it were, metahistorical plot with metahistorical argument. By citing the memoir at some length he unspicuously merges the technique of the memoir with his quest-romance, pausing to read the memoir as a dialogue or colloquy in which the narrative interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than character.

The chapter is, however, dramatically foreshortened and synthesized; the usual wilderness images that dominated the early narrative are not depicted. To quicken the segments or sections of time in this portion of his plot, the narrator offers a synchronic mode of representation, moving forward in time, assimilating time, but without an objective sense of chronology. The memoir, in other words, provides the narrator with brief moments of La Salle’s biographical time, directly and personally conjoined with the narrator’s own contextual explanation of La Salle’s difficulties vis-à-vis the Jesuits. What is interesting is for the audience to imagine the narrator possessing extra-temporally an original historical document, the transmuted reading of which gives the audience an actual participation in La Salle’s world, but which is also interpreted as the narrator intrudes, subordinating these moments of biographical time into his plot structure. The extrinsic flow of historical time is thus intrinsically interrupted; each documentary moment is a separate adventure taking place at a given moment but further mediated by the narrator who moves those given moments along the chronology of his metahistorical compositional-plot structure. The reader does not see La Salle as an isolated figure, however, inasmuch as he is not placed within the context of a *telos*; the organization of the whole historical field upon which La Salle is a character is, furthermore, intrinsically significant only as his life converges with the Jesuits who occupy the field at the same given time. The narrator’s mediative function is simply to tell the audience in what contextual direction to think about the extrinsic moments.

The contextualist argument is, in that respect, discursively understood; La Salle is engaged in a struggle to extricate himself from the Jesuits’ corporation. The generic argument remains in the background; still it is

figuratively understood. La Salle is engaged in a drama of disclosure during which he struggles spiritually to liberate himself from forces that would prevent his freedom. He will, furthermore, soon find success in his quest while suffering the tragic circumstances that attend the completion of that quest. The narrator then mitigates his contextualist argument, shifting to an elegiac tone associated with a romantic emplotment and generically more true to the tragic nature of La Salle's quest-romance.

The narrator describes, for example, the cowardly desertion of six of La Salle's fellow explorers, an episode which was followed by another attempt on La Salle's life. Poison was "placed in the pot in which their food was cooked, [but] La Salle was saved by an antidote which some of his friends had given him before he left France. This, it will be remembered, was an epoch of poisoners." The narrator then argues that such was the practice "to which many of the highest nobility were charged with being privy" (*La Salle*, 178-79).

The narrator's plot strategy thus returns the audience to a structural homology in which La Salle's heroic courage is placed in opposition to the lack of courage in his followers, who, in abandoning La Salle, deprecate his honor and spiritual fortitude. These desertions "cut him to the heart. It showed him that he was leaning on a broken reed; and he felt that, on an enterprise full of doubt and peril, there were scarcely four men in his party whom he could trust" (*La Salle*, 178).

We read here again the part played by the narrator's historical imagination, an imagination which purely and freely functions while working inferentially from fixed, pegged-down points. But the narrator's intention is to take these extrinsic, fixed points and transmute them into his generic emphasis, the transmutations permitting the narrator a shift into a language border in which a mythopoeic expressiveness of feeling fuses the historical with the metahistorical plot structure. That plot structure is poised on a sequence of actions unified in the life of the tragic protagonist whose success is mitigated by his failure. Parkman's narrator locates this moment of success when La Salle finally traverses the length of the mysterious Mississippi to arrive at the river's mouth. The narrator's conception of the event is elegiac and remarkably subdued, vitiated as it is by cosmic and dramatic irony. A comparison between the original document by Father Zenobius Membre and the narrator's transmutation is enlightening:

At length, after a navigation of about forty leagues, we arrived on the sixth of April, at a point where the river divides into three channels. The Sieur de La Salle divided his party the next day into three bands to go and explore them. He took the western, the Sieur Dautay the southern, the Sieur Tonty, whom I accompanied, the middle one. These three channels are beautiful and deep. The water is brackish; after advancing two leagues it became perfectly salt, and advancing on, we discovered the open sea, so that on the night of April nine, with all possible solemnity, we performed the ceremony of planting the cross and raising the arms of France. After we had chanted the hymn of the church, "Vexilla Regis," and the "Te Deum," the Sieur de La Salle, in the name of his majesty, took possession of that river, of

all the rivers that enter into and all the country watered by them. (Father Zenobius Membre, "Narrative of La Salle's Voyage Down the Mississippi," *Journeys of La Salle*, 145)

And now they neared their journey's end. On the sixth of April the river divided itself into three broad channels. La Salle followed that of the west, and Dautray that of the east; while Tonty took the middle passage. As he drifted down the turbid current, between the low and marshy shores, the brackish water changed to brine, and the breeze grew fresh with the salt breath of the sea. Then the broad bosom of the great Gulf opened on his sight, tossing its restless billows, limitless, voiceless, lonely as when born of chaos, without a sail, without a sign of life.

La Salle, in a canoe, coasted the marshy borders of the sea; and then the reunited parties assembled on a spot of dry ground, a short distance above the mouth of the river. Here a column was made ready, bearing the arms of France, and inscribed with the words "Louis le Grand, Roy de France et de Navarre, règne; le Neuvième Avril, 1682."

On that day, the realm of France received on parchment a stupendous accession. The fertile plains of Texas; the vast basin of the Mississippi, from its frozen northern springs to the sultry borders of the Gulf; from the woody ridges of the Alleghanies to the bare peaks of the Rocky Mountains, — a region of savannas and forests, sun-cracked deserts, and grassy prairies, watered by a thousand rivers, ranged by a thousand warlike tribes, passed beneath the sceptre of the Sultan of Versailles; and all by virtue of a feeble human voice, inaudible at half a mile. (*La Salle*, 306, 308)

The differences between the two passages are self-evident; there is no ironic intent in the original document, but the narrator's perspective in the second passage is freighted with irony. The narrator implies that La Salle's success has been mitigated. The images of loneliness and isolation, combined with the notion of conquest and possession, offer the sense of an illusion. La Salle was successful in his discovery, but the narrator, from his future perspective, offers his analysis of some vices as well as virtues. The virtues are in La Salle's reverence and humanity; the criticism is in the contrast between the "Sultan of Versailles" and La Salle, between Europe and America, between the arrogance of an artificial aristocracy and the humility of a natural aristocracy.

The irony is also part of a contextualist argument; the narrator sees national sins, a kind of French evil, compared to La Salle's free-of-ideology American righteousness. The narrator carries these implications into the following portion of his narrative, a chapter completely devoted to La Salle's own sense of himself. It is a remarkable chapter, interesting for its lack of action and for its abundance of mood.

In general, the chapter is a meditative, reflective pause by the narrator, who engages in self-indulgence. Extrinsically, his constructive imagination operates on examples of La Salle's correspondence, but, as the narrator argues, "the motive forces that urged him, and the influences that wrought beneath the surface of his character, were hidden where few eyes could pierce" (*La Salle*, 328). Of course the narrator's eyes do pierce, psychoanalyzing La Salle as a character with a "lonely and shadowed nature," shy, morbidly afraid of "committing himself," unable

...to express, and much more to simulate, feeling, — a trait sometimes seen in those with whom feeling is most deep... [and] are strange ingredients in the character of a man who

had grappled so dauntlessly with life on its harshest and rudest side. They were deplorable defects for one in his position. . . . All that appears to the eye is his intrepid conflict with obstacles without; but this, perhaps, was no more arduous than the invisible and silent strife of a nature at war with itself, — the pride, aspiration, and bold energy that lay at the base of his character battling against the superficial weakness that mortified and angered him. In such a man, the effect of such an infirmity is to concentrate and intensify the force within. In one form or another, discordant natures are common enough; but very rarely is the antagonism so irreconcilable as it was in him. And the greater the antagonism, the greater the pain. There are those in whom the sort of timidity from which he suffered is matched with no quality that strongly revolts against it. These gentle natures may at least have peace, but for him there was no peace. (*La Salle*, 340–41)

The narrator's sympathetic imagination personally conveys the consummation of La Salle's quest-romance, developing additional, mythic qualities in La Salle's character. He continues to convey the historical facts, but his brooding translates into a dramatic kind of poetry, suggesting La Salle is a captive of himself rather than master of himself. La Salle is ultimately inadequate to his questing task of overcoming himself and the world. Waiting for him is his unremitting enemy, the dark force of his death; the narrator's conclusion to his carefully scripted tragedy illustrates his belief in the affinities between history and mythical, generical patterns.

"Night came," the narrator says, "the woods grew dark. . . . Now the assassins rose. . . . The floodgates of murder were open, and the torrent must have its way. Vengeance and safety alike demanded the death of La Salle" (*La Salle*, 426–27). La Salle seemed, however, to have a presentiment that his death was about to take place. The narrator indicates that as the explorers had been proceeding on their way, La Salle and the friar Anastase Douay had discussed at some length "matters of piety, grace, and predestination; enlarging on the debt he owed to God, who had saved him from so many perils during more than twenty years of travel in America. Suddenly, I saw him overwhelmed with a profound sadness, for which he himself could not account. He was so much moved that I scarcely knew him." Within moments, La Salle was dead, pierced through the brain by a shot fired from ambush, after which his murderous followers "came forward, and with wild looks gathered about their victim. . . . With mockery and insult, they stripped it naked, dragged it into the bushes, and left it there, a prey to the buzzards and the wolves" (*La Salle*, 429–30).

The final act of any quest-romance is, of course, the death or departure of the hero. There is in the narrator's portrayal of La Salle's death, however, an obvious echo of salvation symbolism. La Salle is still to be understood as a character eager for life, and yet the whole sense of his life is epitomized in his death; he would not be a tragic quest-hero if death held for him any terror. The narrator suggests that La Salle had become reconciled to the conditions that awaited him. The subsequent acts of revenge and the degradation heaped upon La Salle's corpse are also to

be regarded as a moment of catharsis; the action is instantaneous and effective as well as complete and final at that moment. La Salle's suffering is his apotheosis. The story has come full circle: the man who had risen to heights has now tragically fallen. His death and degradation remove the last shreds of his physical heroic humanity, but his reconciliation with his death is acknowledgement that his life and his death have made him worthy of salvation. And, although the extrinsic, documentary records do not so indicate, the narrator's intrinsic, mythopoeic emphasis suggests that La Salle has achieved his true measurement, his true identity, his true quest. The mood, therefore, is elegiac but hopeful. La Salle has been portrayed as a character who struggled against the mystery of human limitations; his heroic ambition has ironically come to dust, but his suffering and tragic death are constructive moments of greater courage and deeper spiritual union.

The moment of spectacle and emotional intensity has thus passed, but the legacy of La Salle and the French is still to be assessed. The assessment is, however, still the special province of the narrator's consciousness, the cunning corridors of which portrayed the tragedy of La Salle, leading the audience to the inevitable moral verdict upon all of human nature. "Here ends the wild and mournful story of the explorers of the Mississippi. Of all their toil and sacrifice, no fruit remained but a great geographical discovery, and a grand type of incarnate energy and will. Where La Salle had ploughed, others were to sow the seed; and on the path which the undespairing Norman had hewn out, the Canadian D'Iberville was to win for France a vast though a transient dominion" (*La Salle*, 472-73).

Of course the general conclusion the audience draws from these final pages is consistent with the structural modes found throughout the whole of La Salle's history. The discourse at the conclusion, on the other hand, has the sort of context in which the narrator's philosophy of history emerges more distinctly. He relativizes his discourse, displaying the attitude of someone living with the after effects of irony, which is not to suggest that the narrator has become a different person so much as it is to suggest that his constructive imagination philosophically conceives of the whole historical process as transient, mutable, ironic, and tragic. The freedom of human nature, the concluding pages argue, the framework of heroic quest and action, will always be limited by the nature of the universe. The expansiveness and perfection of the human spirit on one day are frailties and limitations on another day. Intrinsicly, the narrator presumes to offer his audience an imaginative and intellectual authority mythic in its diagrammatic framework, the unifying, metahistorical form of which is intrinsicly tragic. Because of human illusions and pretensions, complexities and contradictions, the normative, extrinsic frame of events lived in "real" historical time is intrinsicly transformed into a metaphorical historical world in which the audience understands the truth of history itself as well as the generic, ultimate nature of all history. "Of



what avail to plant a colony. . . ?” the narrator at one point asks. “The Mississippi was the life of the enterprise, the condition of its growth and of its existence. Without it, all was futile and meaningless, — a folly and a ruin” (*La Salle*, 391).

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