

Gilfillan's treatment of Native Americans past and present includes elements of critique. In "Three Songs" he remembers the shooting of a band of Cheyennes who escaped from the Fort Robinson barracks in 1879. He insists that we imaginatively inhabit this site and notice both what is there and what is lost:

Antelope Creek will never
sleep. Boys and girls
cut down. Meadowlarks sing,
pronghorns run the hills—
six join twelve, five more
from the east make twenty-three—
But Antelope Creek can never sleep.

In no way is Gilfillan blind to or naive about the violence of our national history; to the contrary, he directly confronts that history. Yet he does not follow the more familiar route of ironically sending up the false ideology of Manifest Destiny. Such critique relies on distancing itself from what is disagreeable, whereas Gilfillan's poems implicate themselves in the past and present of the spaces they evoke, in both their horror and their beauty. They affirm that a candid encounter with a place like Antelope Creek should always also be an encounter with oneself. Such affirmation is made explicit in this section of "Paschal Letter":

Of course, the Cheyenne battle
there, the death of Roman Nose,
lends a dialectical glamour,
even a hint of "noble rot."
But mostly airy amplitude
and sweet-tooth thoughts.

In a clever reversal, Gilfillan makes the engaged, political impulses of this speaker rather pat ("Of course"), jokingly hinting that such political concern largely functions to add that touch of bitter complexity cherished by more cultivated palates, even as it pretends at a de-enchanting self-abnegation. Instead, all the emphasis here is on abiding a while in the "sweet gregarious," and it is implied that doing so makes us better, not worse. The gentle self-mockery of admitting to one's "sweet-tooth thoughts" keeps that stripe of critical stridency at bay, and the way is cleared for the modest work of coming to know a bit more about just where one stands, and is standing.

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