

A NEWLY DISCOVERED WORK OF BELTRAMI

There has lately appeared on the shelves of a New York bookseller a pamphlet by Beltrami which, so far as is known, has escaped the attention of students of Minnesota history. It is a paper-covered pamphlet of thirty-six pages entitled *To the Public of New-York, and of the United-States*, by the "author of 'The Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi,' etc.," who at the end of his discourse signs himself "J. C. Beltrami, Member of many Academies." The date, "Dec. 1825," appears below the author's signature. The pamphlet was published in New York in 1825 and a copy is now in the library of Mrs. Gino Speranza of Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. A photostatic reproduction has been generously presented by her to the Minnesota Historical Society.

Beltrami made his picturesque "pilgrimage" to the Minnesota country and the sources of the Mississippi River in 1823. After leaving Fort Snelling, then known as Fort St. Anthony, he journeyed down the Mississippi River to New Orleans and in 1824 published in that city, in French, his first description of his travels, entitled *La découverte des sources du Mississippi et de la rivière Sanglante; description du cours entier du Mississippi . . . ainsi que du cours entier de l'Ohio*. As in his later book, written in English, the form was cast in the shape of letters to a lady — Madame La Comtesse Compagnoni née Passeri. As the author states, "Ces Lettres vous appartiennent, Madame. C'est à vous, et pour vous, que je les ai écrites." The book contained eleven such letters.

Upon Beltrami's return to Europe, he published in London in 1828, in two volumes, his well-known book in English entitled *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America Leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River, with a Description of the Whole Course of the Former, and of the*

Ohio. The first volume is descriptive of various "pilgrimages" in Europe; the second is devoted to America and contains two letters not included in the earlier French work — one written from Philadelphia describing the ocean voyage and one written from Pittsburgh describing Pennsylvania and adjacent regions. Following these two letters are the eleven letters that appear in the earlier French work. They are published in the same order, freely translated or transcribed — and Beltrami seems to have been as accomplished in writing English as French. The letters are again addressed "to my dear Countess," but in this instance her name is not published. Beltrami had previously divulged to Major Taliaferro at Fort St. Anthony that the countess was not his wife.

It is evident that the New Orleans work had considerable circulation throughout the United States, either in the original French or in translation, and that it met a very mixed reception. The nature of the criticism that appeared in newspapers, magazines, or in the conversation of the period is also revealed by what Beltrami has to say in this pamphlet brought out before he left these shores and before the publication of his English book in 1828. It was manifestly written in defense of the earlier New Orleans work.

In a sort of introduction Beltrami pays his respects to some of his critics in particular:

Multi multa dicunt concerning my *Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi*, &c.&c. but no one has yet shed the light of an impartial criticism upon it. I shall myself attempt to supply this deficiency. Let no one condemn my audacity, until they have first read me. I shall endeavour to develop the true sense of some passages, which appear to have been designedly misinterpreted or misunderstood. We must also promise not to abuse the patience of the reader: unless my nature be all at once changed, it is almost impossible that I should be prolix.

The present writer ventures to say the general reader would find, on the contrary, that this was quite possible.

First, let me say a word, with some reflections, upon what has been said, and done, for, and against my book, in order, that the public may the more properly appreciate this unusual attempt.

At New Orleans, I was deemed worthy of Paradise, in England, I was assigned to the Infernal Regions, and the Holy Alliance have condemned me to Purgatory.— No matter :

Integer vitæ scelerisque purus
Non eget Mauris jaculis neque arcu :

Happily till now I have escaped the darkness of *limbo!*

I have been told, that the Bishop of Louisiana has accused me at the court of Rome, as an arch-heretic, and has inscribed my name on his *Index*, whilst some prelates, and other respectable clergymen of devout and orthodox Mexico, have proclaimed me as a defender of the faith.

At Philadelphia, the editor of the National Gazette, *the friend of Major Long*,¹ (and whom all the world knows very well,) has prostituted truth, evidence, and the good sense of the public, to the necessity, which he cannot resist, of being malicious, and rude. See his paper of the 11th or 12th August, 1824.— Mark, I have committed no other fault towards him, but that of treating him with much politeness ; which I have done also towards many others who have conspired with him, and sought, by secret and base devices, to prejudice the public of Philadelphia against my poor book.

The first article which appeared in this city, in the Commercial Advertiser of July 25th, compared me almost to Columbus, &c. &c. Exaggerated praise is no criterion ; and it is always suspicious in the eyes of the judicious ; but the writer speaks truly of the perfidious conduct, which for a year and a half, kept concealed 400

¹ The reference is of course to Major Stephen H. Long, organizer and leader of the government expedition of 1823 to the sources of the St. Peter River, which Beltrami accompanied as far as Pembina. The story of the "falling out" of the two men during the expedition is well known. The only reference to Beltrami in the official account of the expedition is the following note: "An Italian whom we met at Fort St. Anthony attached himself to the expedition and accompanied us to Pembina. He has recently published a book entitled, 'La Découverte des Sources du Mississippi,' etc., which we notice merely on account of the fictions and misrepresentations which it contains. S. H. L." William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc. Performed in the Year 1823*, 1: 314 (Philadelphia, 1824). Keating was the geologist and historiographer of the expedition.

copies of my book at Philadelphia, whither I had sent them from New-Orleans, to be distributed among the different cities of the East, and which had I not returned from Mexico, and made some enquiries respecting them, would never again have seen the light. A second article in the Evening Post of the 11th of August, gives me at first, praise without bounds; but concludes by accusing me of a disposition to satire, which does not constitute a just criticism; and a third article, a generous Macænas, under the signature of "Army," grants me a certificate, as if the self-evident truth of my book required testimony.

The National Advocate, whilst honouring me with his approbation, which I duly appreciate, seems to cast some doubt on my discovery, for in saying "this is the first important work on the topography of that section of our country, *written in the French language*," the reader is naturally led to conclude, that there had been others written in English; the praise is therefore *equivocal*.

Another journalist has amused himself with throwing oblique glances, with a quantity of "*not without*," upon the offering which a worthy son of unhappy Italy thought his duty to make to his country, and to friendship. The editor has all the means of announcing his opinion without marring articles confided to his paper, and which he was not asked to comment upon; certainly it is not generous, and the public will judge if it be courteous. The Prophet Samuel, was not wrong when he said to the Jewish People, *May Heaven preserve you from KINGS!*

The critique of the editor of the "Reveil," wants the extremes, *rectum et probatum*, prescribed by the Roman orator. In order to justify that part of his article, where he accords me some praise, he supports it by some passages, which he has done me the honour to transcribe from my book, and to offer to the public as possessing merit; but the part in which he accuses me of peccadillos, as he offers no arguments to prove them, it rather attests the frivolity than the soundness of his judgment; consequently after the law of Justinian *in Odiosis*, in thus accusing me, he condemns himself, and the reader cannot avoid absolving me.

The editor of the "New-York Review," has just indicated the title of my book in his 5th number; I dare not penetrate into his future sentence, but it is certain that he has commenced his article as an enlightened man, and a profound critic. The passions cannot constitute the basis of a just and enlightened criticism; it can only be founded on facts duly weighed, and compared: that is what this Editor appears to propose to himself; his scrupulous examination of every thing which has been written on the Mississippi,

and on the Savages, announces his desire to be just and impartial. If such be his disposition, I freely submit my discovery, my Savages, and my book to his judgment.

In fine the flattering letters of the Senate, of the Legislative body, of the Governor, and of the Mayor of New-Orleans; those of the scientific Dr. Mitchell, of the illustrious Guest of America, of the venerable patriarch of Monticello, and of other respectable persons, all these I ought to regard only as a testimony of their accustomed courtesy, and of their generous feelings for the efforts, which a poor, and solitary traveller constantly contending against obstacles, which nature and men were opposing to him, may have offered to society.

There are besides certain Dracon's, certain Seneca's, who taking their sophisms for principles, their passions for opinions have also been disposed to pass their sentence against my poor book, interpreting it after their own fancy: but *de minimis non curat prætor*, and I recommend to them the famous inscription of the Temple of Apollo, *Nosce te ipsum*.

Amidst this labyrinth of opinions, of favors, and of passions, I cannot refrain from seeking the thread of Ariadne myself, and of entering the lists in my own person.

Beltrami then proceeds to discuss his Ohio River and St. Louis letters, since the accuracy or justice of some statements in these seems to have been questioned by the critics. The letters descriptive of the voyage up the Mississippi from St. Louis to Fort St. Anthony — made in company with Major Taliaferro — and of the Indians of the region are warmly defended.

It is my system never to read any thing on the subject of the countries I travel over, before I have formed my own judgment upon what I meet with there, in order that no extraneous impression should influence either my eyes, my thoughts, or my pen: I ought frankly to confess that the comparison, with what I have afterwards read, has made me sin a little against modesty. Will the reader permit me to turn his attention principally, as the most interesting, to the articles upon the census, the funeral ceremonies, the marriages, the councils, the wars, and the origin of these savage nations. The environs of Fort St. Anthony and the grand falls of the Mississippi are accurately described; but I dare not judge, whether my pencil has been skilful. If in these letters there are some *pointed touches*, it is because nothing is more offensive, to

an honest man, than diffidence; but one may see, that I write with the *ink* of *gratitude*, the least politeness that is accorded me, and with a *pencil*, which itself effaces, all the trifles which annoyed me.

The two letters descriptive of the journey from Fort St. Anthony to Lake Traverse and from Lake Traverse to the "Colonie de Pembear" Beltrami "jumps over," but he adds:

One might believe, that I fail in the respect, which I owe to the nation, in *complaining* of an *individual*, who represented them in the expedition, with which I have been for some time associated. In my book, I have turned the affair into ridicule; in this note I shall condemn it to silence. The public are better judges than the cabalists and the wicked may think, and particularly, the public of the United States; they know the *heroes* of the *piece*; I am not troubled about it; and I resign my cause entirely to their judgment.

I shall limit myself to remark, that some of the beautiful situations, which one meets in the valley of the river of St. Peter, afford interesting scenery for descriptions; that some new traits of the savages, some curious anecdotes, and the history of the swan, the musk-rat, the buffalo, the wolves, merit all the attention of the reader. The wars, the horrors, and policy of the colony of Pembonell, and of the *North West* and *Hudson Bay* companies, offer a new proof that civilized man is more barbarous than the savage.—The dogs, also, act a part there, which adds something to the natural history.

Here again Beltrami is referring to the "differences" which arose between himself and Major Long, the leader of the expedition.

The eighth letter, descriptive of the journey from the Selkirk colony to the sources of the Mississippi and "Bloody" rivers, Beltrami describes as "the Achilles and the Hercules of my work; it is the shield upon which I repose myself."

I tremble every time, when I think upon the terrible situation in which my savage guides left me; and I feel with pride, that I have been more than human in not trembling then. And the sources of the *Bloody River* to the north going to throw themselves into the *Frozen Ocean!* . . . and the sources of the Mississippi to the south! . . . and the waters flowing on one side towards the Pacific, and on the other, towards the Atlantic! . . . and the phenomenon of that lake, which is only surmounted by the Heavens!

. . . Those enchanting situations! That silence! That sombre solitude!—My poor savage repast! My bark porringer!—What an assemblage of wonders, of thoughts, and of feelings, surrounding the eyes, and the soul! . . .—What an exalted idea of the Almighty, of the Great Architect of the Universe! . . .—Ah! Yes! It is with the most devout enthusiasm, I exclaimed, *how happy is one to believe!* It is here that my hypocritical calumniators ought to be confounded. . . . But, where religion is only a calculation, all good profession of faith is useless; in order to please them, one must believe as they wish, and blindly serve their ambitious projects, and their culpable policy. And these bitter and delightful remembrances! . . .—*Infandum regina jubes renovare dolorem.*—Let us only stop here a moment to allow some souls of sensibility to consecrate again their tears of regret and veneration to the most pure virtue, to the rarest friendship.—Such tears are equally honourable to the beings who weep, and to those who are the subjects of them.²

Of the remaining letters Beltrami says:

I have conducted the reader to the western sources of the Mississippi; I have marked, *with exactitude*, the places, where Messrs. Pike and Schoolcraft have arrived before me; I have shown him the entire course of this great river, all the lakes and rivers which flow into it; I detain him at the most interesting spots, to inspire his admiration; and, with incontestible evidence, I prove that the Mississippi is the first river in the world, and I hope that the Americans will find some new proofs of my esteem in the new reflections that I offer them there.

The picture of the dreadful Bacchanals at Leech Lake is of a horror entirely new, and I believe, that the terrible dangers, from which I have escaped, only through the miraculous interposition of that *Providence*, which has never abandoned me in this perilous undertaking, may affect the reader of sensibility.

So much for his comment on the substance of the “letters.” The author then proceeds to tilt in knightly fashion against a number of unfriendly criticisms of a general nature which had been leveled at his “discovery.”

You have now seen all the drama of my *Promenades*; you have seen that I have stopped upon some passages to fence against pas-

² The frequent series of periods in the passages here quoted are characteristic of Beltrami's nervous punctuation and do not indicate omissions for which the present writer is responsible.

sions, rather than against criticisms; let us now enter into the examination of some generical accusations, which are spread all over the work. Have patience! I set you a great example of it; I will take wings, and you, call all your attention! We shall finish sooner.

Too much Erudition! . . . That is not a bad fault; I accept the charge, and it is very reasonable on the part of those who understand nothing about it; but what one might believe to be an affectation is no more than a speculation. When I undertake to write, I am *very* lazy, and I must be careful of my writing arm, because it is an invalid. There is not a better secret to economise upon sentences, and words, than erudition. It sometimes imparts in two words what we should not be able to express with twenty. — For the rest, every one has his mania; there is mine: and to promise to correct myself, it would be to renew the promises of *Ovid*, who, at the moment he gave his father the hope that he would write no more verses, made one:

“Nunc tibi promitto nunquam componere versus.”

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His Cynicism.—It is a folly to seek (as Diogenes) for a perfect man; such a one exists not:—we should be satisfied with telling some truths to correct him: if ever I have done so, you should be obliged to me. I write *delectando pariterque monendo*, and, the hypocrisy of language is incompatible with my nature. If I had flattered you, you would perhaps be wise enough to recal to my memory the famous lesson that Canute gave to his courtiers, at the sea-shore. We show a retrograde tendency, when we feel irritated against useful truths. It would be too soon, I think, for a people, who appear to be destined to go farther than any other. It is very easy to prove to your unjust detractors, that you have done in fifty years what no nation as ever effected, even during many ages; but, in the mean time an extreme pride might make them *Vates infaustos, fatal prophets*, upon your decline. In order to advance better, do not refrain from meditating upon every thing that casts Europe back; and remember, that the world is now in America; that, you are the first actors in it, and that, the good or bad example you may set, is the compass which conducts us to the port, or makes us run against the rocks.

His maxims against Religion.—What religion? that of speculators, of *Tartufes*? . . . I detest it!—that of Jesus Christ? . . . He knows my heart, and he constitutes my happiness with my conscience, as honest men, who are judges of my actions, contribute to it by their opinion. Besides, amidst the thousand ways that the

different sects, and almost every different individual (*Car tot copita tot sententie*) allow themselves to take, in order to attain eternal happiness, they might also allow me the privilege of selecting mine, particularly when I do not put any obstacle in the way of others. Intolerance was never the inhabitant of Heaven! She is the daughter of earth, or of hell. We employ ourselves in reciprocally accusing each other of Heresy, whilst God regards us all equally as his children; whilst he speaks to us, by the mouth of the Great Philosopher of the church—*Love me, and worship me as you please*.—Numa had recourse to false oracles, in order to correct and civilize his still barbarous people; our *Nymphs Egerias* now only speak to debase civilized beings, and to spread despotism over them. Interest, and ambition (as Bossuet says,) have so changed the Gospel, that the Lord Jesus Christ does not know it; and in order to satisfy their passions the better, they cover them with the cloak of Religion.—They will never see me an unbeliever, or an apostate; but yet they will never succeed in making me profess a faith, which is against God and against man. In the sight of God, there are no impious but wicked people, no good believers but honest men. I will regard this accusation, (as many others of the same weight,) with the hope of the Psalmist: *Concilium impiorum peribit*.

And then there was no map, a fault, by the way, which was corrected in the 1828 English edition.

A Map! . . . exclamat Egestus, and the Turba, without having read me, repeat a Map. Cur tanta animis celestibus ira! . . . Peace my dear Sirs! Reflect a moment, I beg you, that, in the short space of eleven months, I have travelled more than *six thousand miles*, through a most dangerous wilderness; I have written, and printed my book:—put yourselves in my place, and do better. . . . For the rest, by the example of candour, with which, at the sources of the Mississippi, I declared my own insufficiency, the presumptuous reader will find that he can gain on the side of modesty, what he loses on that of geography: and from the traces, that I have given, the least skilful geographer can very easily form a map. I have even believed to oblige you, in not delaying, to make soon known to you a discovery which should interest you; but, it is very true, that, *in this world, we are always discontented with ourselves or with others*.

On the rather delicate subject of egotism, Beltrami has this to say:

Less self love. . . . That is very singular! a man who, voluntarily, exposes himself to all sorts of dangers, who without the least assistance, and always striving against powerful impediments, has almost exhausted his patience, his courage, and his purse, to open new and interesting scenes to the observing world; a man, who has not even left a remembrance of himself upon those lakes, rivers, and unknown countries, which he has been the first to show to geography, can such a man be accused of egotism? May Heaven bless the Editor of the *Reveil*!

The charge of effeminacy, which evidently had been emphasized, moves Beltrami to one of his fervent panegyrics on the fair sex, the precursor of the long formal introduction in the English edition, dedicated to women in general.

The judgment of these *Trappists* shall in nothing affect my worship for this adorable sex, nor even in my last will. I bequeath my heart to *women*; my soul to God; and the wicked to the D. . . .

The last pages of the pamphlet are devoted to some general reflections on life, fate, things political, and things personal. One personal matter is referred to in the following passage:

I ought also to justify myself, with much respect, towards your First Magistrate, for, in having condemned to silence the homage, which I offered him with a copy of my work, a work concerning his country, I must believe that he thought there was something heterogeneous in it; and that it has profoundly displeased him.—I should not have touched upon this chord, which does not harmonize with my natural and reflected repugnance to speak of great personages; but the higher men are in authority, the more necessary it is to justify ourselves upon what may lead them into error, because, (whatever certain independent minds may say,) their good, or bad opinion often influences the *obsequious multitude*.—Certes in the United States, there is no court; but courtiers, like mushrooms, are plants indigenous to all countries, and like them succeed each other very quickly.

I have been frank, be you just.—You have lately given, with much solemnity, a great example of gratitude, confounding, by it, all those who think that the collective bodies, as Republics, are not susceptible of that feeling, which they believe to be the virtue of individuals; do not tarnish the splendor of it, by being insensible to the efforts I devoted to you; and remember that I am perhaps the only stranger, who has ever had the confidence to publish, upon

the scene of action, a book which treats of travels and discoveries, situated in the jurisdiction of his inexorable judges; remember that I am always before you without a rival, and without fear.

A more appealing note is struck in the following passage:

And in Europe, what is the fate that awaits me? . . . After all, I must reflect, that Demetrius, after having been named *Poilorcete*, for having taken so many cities, could not find an asylum in any; that the Fabius, the Marcellus of America, the Immortal Washington, has seen the moment when he was going to pay dearly for having been the Liberator and the Mentor of his countrymen; and that Napoleon, so extraordinary a man in prosperity, and so great in adversity, whose memory the world venerates as that of an universal genius, has been gnawed, as a new Prometheus, by Vultures of St. Helena, for having also dared to spread a new fire upon the earth.— If such things were, I, who am only an honest man, consequently nothing at all, I must submit to my fate, whatever it may be.— I shall accustom my soul to vicissitudes and sufferings, as Mithridates habituated his body to poison.

Beltrami, as is well known, was practically an exile from his native land. Though he ultimately returned to Italy and died in Bergamo, the city of his birth, his life was a stormy and tempestuous one. While undoubtedly grandiose, vainglorious, and sometimes ridiculous, yet he was also gallant, brave, and adventurous. He rode across the Minnesota horizon like some old armored knight clad in the mental panoply of the Middle Ages, to which period he really belonged.

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MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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