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PLAINS LANDSCAPES AND CHANGING VISIONS

JOHN MILTON

The plains landscape has always been a dominant factor in the lives of those people who confront it daily. Our recognition of pioneer nineteenth-century landscapes is a fusion in the mind of what we remember from early reports and visual images and our own personal vision of the land as it looks today. That concept of the pioneer landscape remains in our minds even as we respond to the contemporary landscape or through the imagination create our own. One reason, then, that pioneer landscapes are still important to us is that they have influenced our perceptions of the plains in the twentieth century. Although man alters his physical environment somewhat from decade to decade, it may still be argued that the land is eternal in relation to the brief existence of man. The duration of an individual's perception of the land is almost negligible in the long view of many centuries. Yet, the land and its shape can mean nothing without

man's awareness of it and his attitudes toward it.

To a certain extent it is man who changes, rather than the land itself. His changing beliefs affect his perceptions of the landscape, so that descriptions and representations of the landscape are constantly in a "pioneer state." In that sense the term "pioneer" applies to contemporary as well as nineteenth-century observers of the land.

Because landscape is at once elementary and complex, we encounter a great variety of reactions to it. Indeed, many contemporary geographers, psychologists, and artists define *landscape* as a concept. We can no longer view landscape as mere scenery. It is able to evoke in us much more than pleasantries or idle expressions of interest. Whereas *scenery* represents for the viewer a rather simple visual pleasure, *landscape* seems to be synonymous with *nature*—that part of our total environment that is original, that existed long before the arrival of humankind. Whatever we call it, it is through the land, or nature, that man arrives at philosophies and personal beliefs, that he survives physically, and that he dreams of the unknown. As Hermann Mattern has said,

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we treat a landscape as we do nature. We substitute landscape for nature, though we know that at best it is only a piece of nature, a part which we take for the harmonious whole and of which we expect that, incomplete though it be, it could communicate at any time and to the very end of time the harmony which belongs to the whole.¹

In this context, both *nature* and *landscape* have meaning, whereas *scenery* is a lesser term denoting only a view, an optical vision or experience lacking the implications of a psychological or spiritual vision.

In looking at examples of pioneer landscapes, we need to keep in mind that many forces are at work within both the initial observer and the later observer (or the person who has the immediate experience and the viewer or reader who later shares that experience). Preconditioning, memory, temporary frame of mind, the attitude brought to the landscape, the degree of comfort of the observer, the point of view or position within the landscape—these are all factors in the observation and interpretation of landscape and what it evokes.

The spaciousness of the plains landscape leads to certain kinds of reactions that may be less common in other landscapes. The only space on a comparable scale is the space of the open sea, and we expect the plains to be described in terms of the sea. The etymology of the word *landscape* is relevant here. The Dutch word (*landschap*) that precedes the English *landscape* contains the suffix *-ship*. The suffix is difficult to define, but as in *kinship* or *friendship* it points to the form, condition, or character of the noun to which it is attached. It resembles the Old English verb *gesceap*, meaning “to create” or “to form.” Both of these meanings lead, through popular usage, to the modern noun *shape*. Through a bit of etymological folklore it is even possible to arrive at *shipshape*, suggesting the presence of the sea, although *landscape* as a painter’s term in English precedes *seascape* by two hundred years.

It is indeed the “shape” of the land that

first engages our attention whenever we are confronted with a landscape, whether in geographical actuality or by its representation in a painting, written description, or photograph. The initial perception, usually a relatively simple visual act, is often followed by a complex of reactions stemming from mood—either pre-existing in the viewer or elicited by the physical conditions of the land, the exigencies of survival and economy, or even the remembrance of previously seen landscapes and their total environment. Images of the sea, for example, are common in plains literature because many of the plains settlers—or their parents—had crossed the ocean to America. They retained that memory, that seascape, and let it work upon the new landscape, so that the Great Plains seemed as expansive as the ocean, and where the grass was tall in the prairie fringe the wind moved it in the same way that it moved the waters of the sea. One of the first major images, then, was the sea of grass. When a wagon moved through it, “the track that it left behind was like the wake of a boat.” Rölvaag’s people in *Giants in the Earth* were accustomed to the sea and had good reason to liken the swells of the prairie to the waves of the ocean, to feel the same isolation within an immense space, and to recognize a distant horizon line.²

With Tom Scanlon in Wright Morris’s *The Field of Vision*, the recognition comes from some part of the memory that is learned rather than experienced:

Tom Scanlon was a plainsman, but he had a seaman’s creased eyes in his face. The view from his window . . . was every bit as wide and as empty as a view of the sea. In the early morning, with just the sky light, that was how it looked. The faded sky was like the sky at sea, the everlasting wind like the wind at sea, and the plain rolled and swelled quite a bit like the sea itself. Like the sea it was lonely, and there was no place to hide. Scanlon had never been to sea, of course, but that was beside the point.³

It does not matter that Scanlon has never been to sea; it does not matter if Wright Morris has ever been to sea (although he did, in fact, travel

to Europe at an early age). Nor does it matter a great deal that Morris lived on the plains for only nine years, as a child. What is important is that the sea memories of our culture have been revived on the plains so that the western landscape as a "dry copy" of old seascapes survives as a persistent image.

Memory is only one aspect of our confrontation with landscape. The painter may emphasize form, consisting of such elements as color, line, and tonality. The writer, on the other hand, often notes the emotional response of his characters as they are affected by the landscape. A full realization of landscape takes into account its totality of shape, the physical climate, the time of the year, the time of day, the extent of man's cultivation and building on the land, and the extent to which these factors prompt an emotional reaction, a plan of action, or an esthetic response that can be either weak and sentimental or strong and artistic. According to the modern artist Paul Klee, the landscape "grows beyond its appearance through our knowledge of its inner being, through the knowledge [that the landscape] is more than its outward aspect suggests."⁴ For this condition, which might be called a "landscape consciousness," we need a thorough knowledge of the many relationships among the elements of our environment.

For nineteenth-century pioneers, most reactions to the landscape were determined by nonesthetic qualities and revolved around the extreme emotions of fear and optimism. These emotions are tied to traditional responses to wilderness and depend not only upon the interpretation of immediate experience but also upon pervasive myths such as that of the Garden. In medieval painting an emphasis on cultivation in landscapes evolved from a fear of the harsher realities of life. The painter could alleviate at least some of the fear by including in his landscapes signs of civilization, indicating safety. Or he could illustrate the intellectual idea of the enclosed paradise garden where man had control over nature.

The garden image is not strong in early Western American painting, although Albert

Bierstadt and other artists painted the mountains with a romantic grandeur that perhaps substituted for the garden. On the plains, the sketches and watercolors of visiting artists tended to exaggerate the space and distance, if that is possible, with the natural immensity of the land.⁵ The "vista" was the important thing for western landscape painters. In works by George Catlin, for example, the landscape often appears more parklike than it probably was, although grass was undoubtedly more prevalent then. Through the use of light and viewpoint in *Turf House on the Plains* (ca. 1860), Charles Wimar made the natural landscape seem fairly attractive in contrast to the sod house in the middle foreground. The viewer faces the setting sun, the bluffs in the background are pink and gold, and the sod house is almost blacked out by the backlighting, appearing as a rather ugly blob, without identity, stark and lonely. With this combination of romantic realism and a somewhat stagey style, the picture might be suggesting that nature is lovely until man spoils it.

Nature can be spoiled in a number of ways, both in and out of art. Early photographs were coarse-grained, a technical deficiency that made plains landscapes look barren and muddy, lacking fine details. These photographs conveyed an image of desolation and ugliness, especially in contrast to the romantic sunsets and the mountain rainbows painted farther west. Also, photographers in the plains country often chose subjects such as piles of buffalo bones or the bodies of slain outlaws and Indians. These images, in an otherwise uninhabited landscape, added to the dismal mood and sense of barrenness long associated with the plains.

Because many of the nineteenth-century American painters in the West probably fell under the influence of the English landscapist John Constable, it is not surprising that the grandeur and beauty of the mountains—less capable of being despoiled although not entirely safe from the westerner's greed—should be a more popular subject for painting than the empty plains. The best-known painters who

were natives of the general region—Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry—were not plainsmen but middle westerners from the farm lands to the east, a countryside with more varied shapes than the flat plains.

It is in literature and in the writings of travelers and land seekers that we get a richer portrayal of plains landscape. In *Astoria*, Washington Irving makes allusions to other parts of the world, as if the steppes of Asia were more familiar to American readers than the western plains. References to Scripture were common; Irving's "cattle upon a thousand hills," for example, is a biblical phrase that also appears in the title of a novel by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *These Thousand Hills* (1956).⁶ As late as the post-Civil War period in North Dakota, a *Harper's* reporter, C. C. Coffin, described farm reapers as

a squadron of war chariots, not such as once swept over the Delta of the Nile in pursuit of an army of fugitive Israelites, not such as the warriors of Rome were wont to drive, with glittering knives projecting from the axles to mow a swath through the ranks of an enemy . . . but chariots of peace . . . for the sustenance of men.⁷

Also, in both Irving and Coffin, the ocean is a major image conveying the plains landscape.

Sometimes the writer-observer ran out of allusions and was left in a state of confusion, having no appropriate comparisons to draw upon. Irving's impressions were mixed; on different days, he saw "confused masses," a "vast realm of fertility," "a boundless waste," gay colors, monotony, "pastoral tracts," and "debris" and "abrasions."⁸ Ill-prepared for the plains, even well-educated observers lacked the means of description. Two views from the bluffs above the Platte River in Nebraska, just three years apart in time and almost coincident in space, illustrate the difficulty of "capturing" the plains landscape in words. The first is by Jesse Applegate, at age thirty-two in the year 1843, and the second is by Francis Parkman, age twenty-two in 1846.

We have reached the top of the bluff, and now have turned to view the wonderful panorama spread before us. To those who have not been on the Platte my powers of description are wholly inadequate to convey an idea of the vast extent and grandeur of the picture, and the rare beauty and distinctiveness of its detail. So extended is the view . . . that the broad river . . . and the broader emerald valley that borders it stretch away into the distance until they narrow at almost two points in the horizon.⁹

At length we gained the summit, and the long-expected valley of the Platte lay before us. We all drew rein, and sat joyfully looking down upon the prospect. It was right welcome; strange, too, and striking to the imagination, and yet it had not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any of the features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness. For league after league, a plain as level as a lake was spread beneath us; here and there the Platte, divided into a dozen thread-like sluices, was traversing it, and an occasional clump of wood . . . relieved the monotony of the waste.¹⁰

It does not matter that the point of observation may not be precisely the same in the two cases; our interest is in the attitude and vocabulary of two men confronting essentially the same landscape, the one man ten years older and versed in engineering, political science, and law, and the younger man destined to become a famous historian.

One similarity in the two passages is the use by both men of the vague term "vast extent." (I am aware of the difficulty in finding a better word than *vast* in describing ocean and plain, but it has been "vastly" overused and has long since lost most of its power.) "Panorama" in Applegate is close enough to "prospect" in Parkman. "Grandeur" appears in both passages, but Parkman says there is none in the scene, and Applegate says there is. What is most interesting, however, is that Applegate easily admits his inability to describe the landscape before him, while Parkman struggles with the realization that he cannot, obviously disturbed

by his inadequacy.¹¹ Yet, in his youthful dilemma, Parkman discovers for his readers the tensions and contrasts of the plains—strange and striking, but not beautiful, picturesque, or grand. He also reveals the concept of “learned” beauty (as opposed to absolute beauty) and of preconceptions that are slow in adjustment to new objects, new landscapes, and new visions. The plains have a beauty of their own, different though it may be from the softer and more classical beauty of woodlands, low hills, quiet streams, and domestic animals. Parkman finds no beauty in starkness or in the lizards that he later mentions as the only living thing in the landscape.

The confusion is understandable. However, during the period of expansion to the West, among professional writers as well as explorers and pioneering settlers of varied educational backgrounds, most reactions to the landscape were less complex. The landscape was either beautiful or ugly; it evoked fear and loneliness, or enthusiasm, optimism, and a sense of opportunity. Fear and loneliness can be attributed to lack of familiarity, to space, and to a scarcity of people. To be lost on the plains had quite a different meaning from being lost in the eastern woodlands. As George Kendall expressed it in 1845 on the southern plains, “*To be lost*, as I and others have experienced, has a complex and fearful meaning. . . you lose your presence of mind.” His difficulty, and that of others, arose from the absence of landmarks such as trees, so that he felt as if he were on the ocean in a “wide waste of eternal sameness.”¹² Fear determines the shape of the landscape, just as the landscape can initiate fear. For Kendall, who thought he had already experienced nature—the out-of-doors—elsewhere, nothing compared to the plains. He could find no system, no order, no finished shape.

In similar fashion, Willa Cather wrote in *My Antonia* that on the Nebraska landscape there was nothing to see. There was only land, no country—by which she meant no trees, hills, creeks, fences, or farms. Here familiar natural features are grouped with man-made objects whose absence seems to indicate a complete

loss of landscape. Yet the land was there. What was missing was any kind of recognizable and therefore comforting form.¹³

One's vantage point and predisposition can make a great difference in the perception of landscape. Three decades after Kendall's visit and a few hundred miles farther north, the optimistic Walt Whitman wrote eloquently about the prairie after having seen Missouri and eastern Kansas. This region is not quite the plains, but we can suspect that Whitman did not lose his unbounded enthusiasm between Topeka and Denver.

I . . . shall remain for the rest of my life impress'd, with that feature of the topography of your western central world—that vast Something, stretching out on its own unbounded scale, unconfined . . . combining the real and ideal, and beautiful as dreams.

He then speaks of the “grandeur and superb monotony of the skies,” and “how freeing, soothing, nourishing they are to the soul.” We must take into account that Whitman was a tourist, and that he was traveling in at least a measure of comfort. Nevertheless, I know of no other use of the expression “superb monotony,” and the rest of his comments reveal the potential for a spiritual relationship between man and the plains landscape, a potential realized in some later fiction, again from a relatively comfortable point of observation, and perhaps one that is more intellectual than physical.¹⁴

It is also possible that Whitman, like others who wrote about the plains, was subject to the effects of the western myth. The myth of the West has included the notion of a Great American Desert at times, but among its more enduring and appealing elements are concepts of rugged individualism, freedom, the garden, and gold at the end of the rainbow. A poignant account by Martha Smith, who left Missouri in 1890 with her husband and five children to go west, shows the persistence of these ideas. Kansas appeared beautiful to Mrs. Smith, but her husband insisted that they were going to “God's Country,” which was farther along.

The family stopped at last in Oklahoma, near the Texas border. Mrs. Smith did not like the place and was afraid of cattle, coyotes, panthers, and polecats, but she stayed because this was God's Country. After a prairie fire in 1892, she wondered whether God had forsaken the country. She wondered again in 1895 after a crop failure. Later that year the family set out again. "This new God's Country was much farther north," she wrote. "We were going to God's Country." Eventually, when her husband died, she came to a remarkable conclusion:

We had spend 48 years together hunting for God's Country. Before he died we learned something. Something terribly important.

We learned that God's Country isn't in the country. It is in the mind. As we looked back we knew that all the time we was hunting for God's Country, we had it. We worked hard. We was loyal. Honest. We was happy. For 48 years we lived together in God's Country.¹⁵

That would seem to be the end of the myth, but as we know, it lingers even today.

Although myth and nostalgia sometimes feed upon each other, they are quite different. Myth can be not only the subject or content of a work of art but also a form of art. Nostalgia is an emotion, and while emotion is a legitimate factor in many works of art, nostalgia per se, either as felt by the viewer or as deliberately evoked by the artist, is not recognized as a true esthetic response. Nevertheless, it is a common feeling in the presence of landscape, especially if the viewer is reminded of another landscape elsewhere that is associated with a good or pleasant experience. Since most western pioneers were seeing a new landscape, an environment that often disturbed them or puzzled them, nostalgia became possible only after it had been lived on, cultivated, and built upon. After the settler had survived in his new environment and had become familiar with it, then he could look upon it with a feeling of nostalgia, especially when taking leave of the place.

Hamlin Garland has written some bitter passages about the Dakota landscape, finding it

bleak and cruel. Even so, when he left Ordway to return to school in the 1880s, he was moved to say that the landscape "seemed suddenly very beautiful, and the old home very peaceful and very desirable." When he went back to Ordway some years later he felt the presence of God and saw a delicate beauty in the plain, even though he felt obliged to describe it as "weird" and "grotesque."¹⁶ Garland is known as a realist; the fact that he could not exclude romantic reactions to the plains landscape from his writing suggests that it was generally difficult for pioneer artists and writers to avoid nostalgia, myth, exaggeration, and other elements of romanticism.

In the twentieth century, new understandings of the plains landscapes are a result of continued experience and the ongoing exercise of the imagination. Also, a new and serious interest in the ways in which the Plains Indians have viewed their environment has led to a revival of the primitive perception of nature (land) as holy. Finally, in contrast to the Indian view, several kinds of technology have played a part in altering the landscape as well as in providing new methods of looking at it.

In *Grant of Kingdom*, a novel of changes in the Southwest, Harvey Fergusson wrote that "this was a country that would look good to any man who loved country for its own sake. . . . And it would also look good to any man who knew the value of things and wanted to own them and use them."¹⁷ The first point is a kind of esthetic response, like art for art's sake, a response that many nineteenth-century pioneers could hardly afford, even if they understood it fully. It is an impractical attitude—artistic, spiritual, and close to the beliefs and spirit of the Indians who felt that they belonged to the land. Its opposite is the new conquerors' attitude that the land belonged to them. The two ideas are at odds with each other, and yet both have influenced our perception of the landscape, the one by shaping us, the other by shaping the land.

Through technology, the later pioneer has raised large cities on the plains; huge tracts of land have become arable through irrigation; the

landscape is criss-crossed with thousands of miles of wide concrete paths for automobiles; and a hill is a welcome relief for the motorist rather than an arduous task for a wagon train. New concepts of art evolving in reaction against pictorial painting have led the new pioneer painter to search out the essences of the land, to interpret in symbols, and to achieve an abstract rather than a realistic representation of the landscape. Writers who have lived in peace with the Plains Indians have learned from them the harmony and unity of the natural world and have endowed landscape with meanings new to the non-Indians.

The several phases in the relationship between plainsman (or his artistic representatives) and the landscape may be arranged in sequential order, like this:

First—A romantic, idealized, Edenic vision.

Second—A realistic, almost fearful, shattering of the initial vision.

Third—An industrialized and technological revision in the use and reshaping of the land for man's benefit; the ruin of some landscapes, and the establishment of other kinds.

Fourth—A reaction to the exploitation of the land; a partial return to a primitive or sacred understanding of the land, spiritual in attitude and intuitive and symbolic in art forms.

The perceptions implied in the fourth phase seem to require a special rapport with the landscape that is best established by long-time residence on the plains. When eastern painter Edward Hopper visited the southern plains of New Mexico and the adjoining mountains, he lost his orientation and could paint nothing except a familiar object—a locomotive.¹⁸ Georgia O'Keeffe stayed many years, long enough to see smaller objects such as bones, skulls, and flowers as symbolic of the total environment. Perhaps the best term for her paintings as well as for the plains and high plateaus of the Southwest is "barren beauty."¹⁹ By abstracting shapes and therefore ideas from the landscape she was able to suggest meanings unavailable to the realist. The lines and geometric shapes in the flattened-out cubism of

Robert Motherwell's painting *Western Air*, from the 1940s, bear a similarity to the written description of the northern plains by Wallace Stegner in *Wolf Willow*. The difference is one of perspective. In *Wolf Willow* we look out at or down on the geometric landscape. In Motherwell's painting we seem to be beneath the land lines, looking up through them at sky and sun.

Jackson Pollack, whose paintings are so abstract that most viewers see only paint drippings, lived in the West as a child and never got over what he called the West's "vast horizontality."²⁰ No matter how many or what kinds of lines he put into his paintings, they strongly express an expansiveness that can be associated with the western landscape. Because the landscape is relatively empty and uncluttered, it lends itself both to abstraction and to the filling of the open spaces. In Pollack the two approaches come together.

Those pioneers who settled on the land and altered the landscape by erecting shelters and fences and laying out furrows had in most cases neither the inclination nor the time to think very far past their own survival. It is the later pioneers of art—painters, writers, architects, composers of music—who have looked deeply into the landscape for its revealing shapes, forms, and spiritual emanations to create new landscapes of the mind. Although Morris Graves has lived on the West Coast, his aim in art seems to suggest either the present or the next phase in the relationship between the artist and landscape: his purpose in art is to make notations about the external world "with which to verify the inner eye."²¹ His painting *Bird in the Spirit*, from the early 1940s, can evoke the plains or the desert as easily as the private symbolism it seems to be, if not through the vague shapes, then through its color.

Photography, once regarded as the most appropriate medium for realism, has also been used in recent years to create landscape images through various devices such as special lenses, filters, and optical tricks. It is not entirely a question of technology, however; imaginary landscapes also depend on the perception of the

photographer as well as on his memory of other landscapes. Focusing through several layers of glass, distorting whatever object may be visible through the viewfinder, he looks for vertical lines that may represent trees, patches of blue that may suggest sky, or, most often, a horizontal line that may symbolize or represent the horizon line, the line that is most familiar to persons on the plains or on the sea. These imaginative landscapes are ultimately as real as the original shapes of the land, and equally meaningful.

Since the nineteenth-century pioneers arrived on the plains, we have become increasingly aware of the complexity of the relationship that exists between humankind and the land. It is not as elementary a relationship as it often seemed to be 100 or 150 years ago. Nevertheless, each treatment of landscape takes into account—whether consciously or not—the older but still available observations. Whether landscape of the western plains is seen as simple or as highly complex, it has exerted a powerful influence on both old and new pioneers.

NOTES

1. Hermann Mattern, "The Growth of Landscape Consciousness," *Landscape* 15 (Spring 1966): 16.
2. O. E. Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929), p. 3.
3. Wright Morris, *The Field of Vision* (New York: New American Library, Signet Books, 1957), pp. 37-38.
4. Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, vol. 2, *The Nature of Nature* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1973), p. 135.
5. William Tappan's 1849 sketch of the Platte River is one example.
6. Washington Irving, *Astoria*, quoted by

John Conron in *The American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 332.

7. Conron, *American Landscape*, pp. 377-78.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-33.

9. Jesse Applegate, "A Day with the Cow Column," quoted by C. Merton Babcock in *The American Frontier: A Social and Literary Record* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 75.

10. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (New York: New American Library, Signet Classics, 1950), pp. 55-56.

11. The difference may be that Applegate was more mature and therefore able to accept his limitations, while Parkman was both young enough and ambitious enough to become frustrated. Another suggestion is that Applegate was a "whole" man, directed by common sense, and that Parkman had psychological problems. Either way it is obvious that reactions to landscape differ according to the disposition and character of the observer.

12. George W. Kendall, *Across the Great Southwestern Prairies*, quoted by Conron in *American Landscape*, pp. 340-42.

13. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, new ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), p. 7.

14. Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, quoted by Conron in *American Landscape*, pp. 361-62.

15. Martha L. Smith, *Going to God's Country*, quoted by Babcock in *American Frontier*, pp. 123, 125.

16. Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, quoted by Babcock in *American Frontier*, pp. 111-17.

17. Harvey Fergusson, *Grant of Kingdom* (New York: William Morrow, 1950), p. 58.

18. *American Painting: 1900-1970* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1970), p. 86.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 131.