

Thought and Landscape

The Eye and the Mind's Eye

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Landscape, from a naive viewpoint, is a sector of reality "out there." It is made up of fields and buildings. Yet ~~it is not a bounded entity~~ as a tree or a building is. Nor does landscape mean simply a functional or legal unit such as a farm or a township. Landscape, like culture, is elusive and difficult to describe in a phrase. What is culture and how does one delimit a culture area? The contents of culture can be itemized, although if one is meticulous the list threatens to grow to interminable length. Culture is not such a list. Landscape, likewise, is not to be defined by itemizing its parts. The parts are subsidiary clues to an integrated image. Landscape is such an image, a construct of the mind and of feeling.

Images of landscape are potentially infinite, yet they have a family likeness. This family likeness is not so much the result of shared elements in the landscape as of a common principle of organization, which evolved historically in modern Europe. Briefly stated, the principle requires landscape to be a fusion of two major perspectives—functional and moral-

aesthetic. Originally, the term "landscape" referred primarily to the workaday world, to an estate or a domain. From the sixteenth century on, particularly in the Netherlands and in England, landscape acquired more and more of an aesthetic meaning; it became a genre of art.¹ Limited to the functional or utilitarian perspective, the concept of "landscape" is redundant since the more precise terms of estate and region already exist. Limited to the aesthetic perspective, "landscape" is again redundant since the word "scenery" offers greater clarity. But we do have the word "landscape" in addition to the other terms, and it is being used because we have learned to recognize a special ordering of reality for which a special word is needed.

Landscape is an ordering of reality from different angles. It is both a vertical view and a side view. The vertical view sees landscape as domain, a work unit, or a natural system necessary to human livelihood in particular and to organic life in general; the side view sees landscape as space in which people act, or as scenery for people to contemplate. The vertical view is, as it were, objective and calculating. The farmer has to know how much land he has under each crop and how many head of cattle the pasture will support. The geographer studies the rural landscape in a similar way—that is to say, from "above"; likewise the ecologist when he looks at landscape as a natural system. The side view, in contrast, is personal, moral, and aesthetic. A person is *in* the landscape, working in the field, or he is looking out of a tenement window, from a particular spot and not from an abstract point in space.² If the essential character of landscape is that it combines these two views (objective and subjective), it is clear that the combination can take place only in the mind's eye. Landscape appears to us through an effort of the imagination exercised over a highly selected array of sense data. It is an achievement of the mature mind.

Children and Landscape

The abstract and practical understanding of an estate, domain or region takes time and thought; similarly, the perception of mood, of beauty and ugliness, of justice and oppression in a scene. Consider how children, as they mature, acquire increasingly complex images of landscape in the context of middle-class American culture. In the late 1950s, Frank and Elizabeth Estvan studied first- and sixth-grade pupils in the rural and urban schools of Wisconsin.³ The children are shown four pictures in turn: village, farm, downtown, and factory. Each picture is framed in such a way and includes

such elements as to represent what an adult conceives to be a typical landscape. For each picture the child is asked the open-ended question, "What does it say?" To first-graders the pictures say very little, particularly those that depict a factory and a village. Young children often fail to recognize a structured entity—a landscape—in the picture. Their first identifications are of human figures: "Here is a little girl shopping with her mother" and "There is a boy going to school." Of the physical environment young children tend to see individual elements, such as church, playground, and bicycle, rather than the larger unit that encompasses them. First-grade pupils can easily identify the farm. They are articulate in their description of it irrespective of whether they come from a country school or from a school located in the metropolis. In America knowledge about the farm, including the appeals of farm life, is inculcated at an early age. The picture showing a downtown area is also easily recognized, although the response of both city and country children to it is more ambivalent. The factory evoked the least interest and response, which is not surprising; but many first-graders fail to recognize the village and this is rather unexpected. The older pupils have no trouble identifying the pictures as representing landscape entities. In their descriptions they offer facts that are not evident in the picture, such as the regional setting of a village or farm, and how a factory functions as part of a larger system. Enthusiasm for both rural and urban scenes grows with greater understanding. The older children, for example, feel more warmly toward the farm than do the first-graders because they see more precisely what they are able to do and enjoy in such a setting.

Ecological and Sociological Appreciation

As the children mature they learn to see landscapes in an increasingly complex manner. When they look at a farmstead they are able to discern that it has a regional content, that it has special functions within a regional economy, and that the scene before them was different in the past and will change again in the future. In other words, they learn to perceive more and more with the mind's eye. Visual stimuli from the environment will increasingly trigger more trains of thought that lead lives of their own, and when the mind refocuses on the environment what it beholds is necessarily colored by its history.

Among the numerous ways that thought can organize and interpolate sense data, two have gained currency in recent years: the ecological and the

sociological. They can strongly affect our judgment. Consider the English countryside of hedged fields, stately houses and rustic villages. Many people like it. The landscape's charm is enhanced when viewed through ecological spectacles, but it is marred by vexing moral questions when seen from a critical sociological perspective.

The English countryside we know today owes much to the socio-economic forces and aesthetic tastes of the eighteenth century.⁴ Two hundred years of art and literature have taught us to respond to it almost as to a physical stimulus; that is to say, unreflectively. What ecological ideas add is a veneer of intellectual satisfaction to the sensory rewards. Jacquetta Hawkes invites us to see this landscape as having achieved a happy moment of balance in its long course of evolution. Before the eighteenth century, she maintains, nature still dominated the Englishman. Power was on the side of nature and it could be brutal. After the eighteenth century, as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, the scale of power was tipped in man's favor. He proceeded to outrage the land with coal dumps and urban sprawls. For a time, however, the people were confident though not yet arrogantly so. For a time, as Hawkes put it, "Rich men and poor men knew how to raise comely buildings and to group them with instinctive grace. Town and country having grown up together to serve one another's needs enjoyed then a moment of balance."⁵

Sociological thought, unlike the ecological one, exposes the somber side of the picture. We are reminded that in Georgian England the rich had power. This power was used wisely to improve the fertility and beauty of the land, but it was also used to exploit tenant farmers and wage laborers. Whereas the abuse of land produced ugly scars that endured, the oppression of a people left few visible traces. Oppressive society and a rich beautiful countryside are fully compatible. The countryside can always look innocent, for the instruments of rural exploitation exist most conspicuously as law courts and money markets which are all in the city. Raymond Williams has shown, however, that if we look closely and with imagination, the English landscape will reveal a darker meaning. He asks us to observe the arrogant disproportion between country houses and farmers' cottages. The working farms and cottages are in the ordinary scale of human achievement. What the "great" houses do is break the scale by an act of will corresponding to their real and systematic domination of others.

For look at the sites, the façades, the defining avenues and walls, the great iron gates and the guardian lodges. These were chosen for more than the effect

from the inside out; where so many admirers, too many of them writers, have stood and shared the view, finding its prospect delightful. They were chosen, also . . . for the other effect, from the outside looking in: a visible stamp of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe.⁶

Landscape and Culture

When we look at a person we may admire his suit and personal belongings in themselves, for their functionality and handsomeness. More often we attend to the human personality for which the dress and other accouterments provide the subsidiary clues. Landscape can be evaluated in itself as beautiful or ugly, productive or infertile. On the other hand, it is also a clue to a region's human personality. Here is an example of how to see the landscape subsidiarily; that is to say, how to see *from* the landscape *to* the values and pathos of a folk. The place is the backwoods of South Carolina. The people handle snakes as part of a fervent cult. Benjamin Dunlop writes:

Snakehandling [in the American South] is a post-industrial phenomenon, spawned by the textile mills and the rootlessness of workers flushed from the hills. . . . [The people's] religion has been jerrybuilt from the Appalachian junkyard—the broken washing machine on the porch, the bedsprings and tin cans in the gully, the engineless Chevy on blocks in the yard. Their graves are weed-grown holes on a scraggly hillside—no hint of the dignified destitution of [the movie director] John Ford's pioneers, dust sifted to dust as the vast mesas and vaster sky loom above them. This is a backwater, not a frontier, and the faithful seem more concerned with this world than the next. Unto Caesar they render Kentucky fried chicken and suburban station wagons, unto Christ fluorescent Last Suppers and electric guitars. It is a discount-house religion, an Appalachian cargo cult, built on the rock of consumerism and hence not our contradiction but our lowest common denominator.⁷

This attempt at descriptive analysis appeals largely to the mind. There are, it is true, simple material facts in the description: one can easily take pictures of a broken washing machine on the porch, of graves on a scraggly hillside, and of the ecstatic snake-handlers. But pictures in themselves offer only superficial information. What Dunlap's vignette offers is a mental image in which visual elements of the landscape suggest, and are interwoven with, relations and values that cannot be seen. Of man's symbolic systems only the verbal kind is subtle and flexible enough to articulate such a world. We hear it said that a picture speaks a thousand words; true,

but only because we have language and use words. If we were not linguistic animals, visual images could not carry even a small fraction of the meaning that they often have for us.⁸

Thoughts in a Cemetery

We can think, therefore, that we are able to see an entity called landscape. Landscape in turn evokes thought. How people act in different physical settings is fairly well known, but we know little about the thoughts run through their minds. Consider the cemetery. It is a type of landscape. It can be appraised for its utilitarian, religious, and aesthetic qualities. People visit it for a variety of reasons: a relative or a famous person is buried there and, moreover, the trees provide shade for a picnic. People may also be drawn to it for no ostensible purpose. The cemetery has a curious appeal. According to Elias Canetti, it induces a special state of mind which in turn affects how one perceives it. Canetti asks, What does someone who finds himself in a graveyard actually do? How does he move and what occupies his thoughts?

He wanders slowly up and down between the graves, looking at this stone and that, reading the names on them and feeling drawn to some of them. Then he begins to notice what is engraved beneath the names. Here is a man who lived to be thirty-two; another, over there, died at forty-five. The visitor is older than either of them and yet they are already out of the race. But this is not the only kind of calculation which occupies the man who stands between the rows of graves. He begins to notice how long it is that some of the buried have lain there. Chronology, which is normally only used for practical purposes, suddenly acquires a vivid and meaningful life for him. All the centuries he knows of are his. Many of the things which happened during those years are known to him; he has read about them, heard people talk and experienced some of them himself. He is in a position where it would be difficult not to feel some superiority, and the natural man does feel it. But he feels more than this. As he walks among the graves he feels that he is alone. Side by side at his feet lie the unknown dead, and they are many. They cannot move, but must remain there, crowded together. He alone comes and goes as he wishes; he alone stands upright.⁹

Science and Landscape

Canetti says that a cemetery induces a special state of mind and then proceeds to describe that state of mind. From the description it is clear that Canetti does not use the word "induce" in any causal-deterministic sense; a

cemetery is a special kind of place that can trigger meditation along certain lines, usually on the general theme of time and mortality.

What happens when a scientist looks at the landscape? Ideas come to his head. He develops them and in the process withdraws from the immediate sense impressions. Should he look at the landscape again, he will be able to see it in a fresh light using the developed conceptual frame as a subsidiary clue. "Time" may be such a clue. When a scientist asks how a feature in the landscape has come into being, his answer necessarily has a temporal dimension. Knowledge of this temporal dimension will affect his next encounter with the landform, provoking--perhaps--thoughts of mortality. Here is an example. A residual block of soft sandstone in New Mexico was designated a National Monument. It earned this honor because four hundred years ago some Spanish explorers had carved their names on it. Four centuries are a long time in human terms, yet in this period weather and erosion have made so little dent on the sandstone face that the signatures are preserved. A scientist will know that the sandstone block was once attached to the main scarp several miles away. In the immensity of geologic time, weathering and erosion had removed thousands of square miles of rock to produce a broad plain that now surrounds and isolates the monument. As the scientist sits in its shadow and looks across the plain to the distant scarp, he sees this panoramic space; it feels overpowering and alien to him because he perceives not only space but, given the scientific knowledge, geologic time of a dizzying remoteness.

That scientific knowledge can increase one's appreciation of landscape is not news. John Muir, for example, studied the Yosemite Valley in great detail and made original contributions to our understanding of its landforms; such knowledge only enhanced Muir's own appreciation of the valley.¹⁰ But equally well known is the idea that scientific analysis leads to abstractions and removes us from any personal involvement with landscape or nature. For instance, the story is told of a Princeton physicist who walks about in very large boots because to him the ground is not solid and supportive, but is made up of atoms in empty space.

How does a scientist of a highly conceptual bent respond to the world? I imagine it to be something like this. Take a theoretical geographer. He begins by looking at the city, experiencing it as most people do. Very quickly, however, he abstracts data from it and builds a model out of the data. Being a good scientist, he will then test the model against abstracted data of a similar kind in other urban areas. The model is a pair of spectacles through which a scientist looks, not at the thunder showers, houses, and

people, but at their quantified indices. In geographical work the indices normally lie close to the reality: for example, when I look at a rising curve of relative humidity I can almost feel the heat; likewise when I examine tables of family income I can almost envisage the kinds of houses the families live in. Because of this close relationship, a geographical model is capable of illuminating not only the indices of the real world but the real world itself, should the theoretician choose to return to it and contemplate it through the new conceptual frame. He may, of course, forgo the privilege since it is not required of him as a scientist.

The physicist has a much more difficult job integrating his theoretical knowledge with the world of daily experience. In his work the indices to reality are practically indistinguishable from that reality. A physicist can see atoms and smaller particles only as they are registered on the screens of elaborate instruments. He knows that all substance, including the ground on which he walks, consists of atoms. But his knowledge of the mathematical structure of atoms is not likely to function as a subsidiary clue illuminating the experience of walking on the hard ground: the concept and the experience are too far apart. Even if the physicist were to substitute a picture of atoms for the mathematical formula, it will remain difficult for him to amalgamate a picture of atoms with the trees and houses that he can see before him. The mental picture and the perceptual experience remain too far apart to be readily combined in the mind as a new and more vivid reality. Should, however, the physicist succeed in making the integration he is surely leading the imaginative life of an artist.

Art and Landscape

T. S. Eliot wrote: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for his work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."¹¹ Eliot has simplified to make a point. In his sense of how a poet's mind works, the ordinary man is a poet as we all are in varying degree. When we look at a landscape and see a church spire at the end of a tree-lined road, our eyes have automatically combined visual data to form a stereoscopic image, and our mind has integrated, with little conscious effort, diverse clues and experiences to give a rich meaning to that image.

Landscape, as a distinct concept sanctioned by past usage, is a fusion of disparate perspectives. We have seen earlier how it can be both a domain and a scene, both a vertical view and a side view, both functional and moral-aesthetic. To see landscape properly, different sets of data must be conjoined through an imaginative effort. Perhaps a student's attempt to see three-dimensional relief in photo interpretation provides a useful analogy. A student puts a stereoscope over a pair of aerial photographs. Looking through the instrument he is aware at first only of the flat surfaces shown on one or the other of the photographic pair. Soon, however, the data from the two sources fuse and what he then sees is three-dimensional relief—a stereo image.¹² In like manner, when a person faces the environment he may see alternatively an operational farm, a pleasant scene, and a type of social order. Should these different sets of clues amalgamate into a vividly coherent whole in his mind's eye, what he sees is landscape. But there is no instrument, no stereoscope, that will enable him to achieve the integration. He must learn by being shown fully realized examples. These examples are the works of art. A particular work may be an architect's designed environment; it may be a masterful essay in landscape description, or it may be the words of a teacher as he struggles to capture the genius of place in the classroom and in the field.

Architecture and Landscape

Architecture and literature are both achieved integrations. Both can help us to see landscapes in environments. The ways they are able to do this necessarily differ. A topographical poem affects us purely through the mind. It trains the mind to juxtapose and fuse disparate experiences. A successful building also stimulates the mind. As the lucid exemplar of how the functional and the aesthetic can be integrated, a well designed park, church, or shopping mall trains us to be aware of such syntheses in natural scenes as well as in the happy accidents of unplanned manmade environments. A poem or an essay is not itself an important element in our surrounding. By contrast, a building is. A designed landscape is indeed an all-encompassing milieu. Architecture, unlike literature, can affect our senses directly. It influences us by simply being there, bypassing the necessity to stimulate the active cooperation of the mind.

Buildings and topographical poems, insofar as they are artworks, clarify experience. They clarify different kinds of experience and encourage



We begin by looking; but to see landscape properly, different sets of data must be conjoined through imaginative effort, such as tables of family income and the kinds of houses the families live in. (P.J. Hugill)

us to select different kinds of environmental clues to attend and fuse in the imagination. Literature is made up of words that have evocative as well as analytical power; they combine subtlety with precision. Words in themselves, however, are mere vocables or marks on a page. They are abstract rather than concrete symbols and hence they can be used to reveal the dark and offensive sides of life without overpowering the listener or reader. Buildings and landscape gardens, on the other hand, are a physical environment as well as a system of symbols. While we can bear to read about suffering and death, we are less able to tolerate human agonies depicted by pictorial and plastic means. Thus, although superb architectural works illuminate experience just as novels and poems do, they focus on a narrower spectrum; they leave out the horrors and the more glaring contradictions of life.

There are, of course, exceptions. A medieval cathedral depicts the depths as well as the heights. It shows Christ bleeding on the cross and effigies of the dead lying on slabs of marble. It has dank cellars and dark corners for the confession of sins. It is able to combine these depths with the

sublimity of heaven in the soaring nave and in the splendor of rose windows. A cathedral is not, however, one's ordinary environment. The setting and the rituals encourage the worshiper to distance himself from life so that he can better contemplate it unflinchingly. At the other extreme, a house designed purely for efficient living should be nearly invisible; that is to say, a resident should be as unaware of its support as he is unaware of the support of his own healthy body. The children's playground provides another case. A successfully designed playground is one in which the children are conscious only of their own kinesthetic joy and of the potential field for action. In such a setting, they are barely aware of the environmental design and equipment that make their activities possible.

Most designed environments fall somewhere between these extremes. A park serves multiple functions: its lake caters to swimming, boating, and other forms of active recreation, but the park also provides benches on which people can sit and admire the view. Shopping centers, suburbs and new towns all cater to utilitarian ends but they also aspire to something more, to images that reflect communal values and ideals, to a kind of visibility that demands attention rather than use. The communal experiences and values that an architect or city planner captures in his design is idealized. That which the architect skillfully encourages us to see is almost always something harmonious or uplifting. Thus the arts differ in how they affect our perception. Whereas literary works, paintings, and even sculpture can afford to direct our attention to the sad and offensive, buildings should not because their primary function is to support life.

Thought versus Response

The designed environment has a direct impact on human senses and feelings. The body reacts unreflectively to such basic architectural attributes as enclosure and exposure, verticality and horizontality, mass, volume, interior space and light. At a more conscious level a person responds to the signs and symbols in the designed setting, such as the paneled walls and the deep leather chair, which speak of solid comfort and wealth. A still more conscious level exists. Imagine a connoisseur of design. When he looks at a building or a landscape garden, his relation with it is no longer simply one of "response"; he actively explores and evaluates it with his mind. He approaches it with something of the knowledge and imagination of the architect himself. The architect does not, however, normally design

for the connoisseur. His landscape garden or shopping mall is not an object for thought; it is meant to be used and to affect the ordinary users at the subconscious level. This, then, is another important difference between architectural impact and the impact of literature. To illustrate the difference forcefully, consider how people might act with regard to two supreme achievements of late medieval art, Chartres Cathedral and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Whereas a devout man ignorant of architecture can enjoy the cathedral unreflectively as a landmark or an ambience, the *Divine Comedy* will reward the reader only if he is able to make a sustained imaginative effort in line with that which enabled Dante himself to create his masterpiece.¹³

I have stressed the fact that landscape is not a given, a piece of reality that is simply there. What is given is an environment to which we respond in automatic and subconscious ways. It is important to distinguish between environment and landscape. Whereas environmental psychology can be the study of how human beings react more or less unthinkingly to the stimuli around them, landscape psychology must primarily be a study of human learning and cognition. We have seen the way children learn to integrate their different experiences and knowledge of environment into images of increasing coherence and complexity. They learn to recognize landscapes, to construe worlds, while at the same time they submit--as all organisms must--to environment's pervasive influence.

The Relevance of Landscape

If it be granted that landscape, in a general sense, is a composite feature in which elements of function and of use combine with values that transcend them, then it should be clear that landscape is not simply domain plus aesthetic appeal. Landscape is not only a village and its orderly fields, mountains and valley, but also the denuded hill country of South Carolina with bed springs and tin cans in its gullies. For here is an economically depressed region and here is also a demoralized people who seek relief in cultist fervor and in unbridled consumerism. To see this South Carolina country as landscape is to amalgamate such distinct, though related, perspectives into a single vision.

Why make the effort? What is to be gained from it? To understand the world at all we must start with the evidence of the senses. We go into the field. A physical geographer looks at the landscape and immediately

proceeds to extract data of use to him in the construction of a scientific hypothesis. Landscape is for him a point of departure; he is not bound to return to it and see it with the added depth of his scientific perspective. Similarly, a concerned citizen or social scientist may go into the backwoods of Appalachia; what he sees there immediately turns his thoughts to problems of social and economic justice. The physical setting itself is of no great moment; what is important is what it tells, in visible and unmistakable signs, of human destitution and hopelessness. To such a socially concerned person it must seem frivolous to use human suffering as a subsidiary clue toward a finer appreciation of landscape.

So the question remains. Why should we want to make a landscape a focal interest? Why study it, why does it seem worthy of our close attention? Here is a tentative answer. Yearning for an ideal and humane habitat is perhaps universal. Such a habitat must be able to support a livelihood and yet cater to our moral and aesthetic nature. When we think of an ideal place in the abstract, the temptation to oversimplify and dream is well nigh irresistible. Dire consequences ensue when that dream is set prematurely in concrete. Landscape allows and even encourages us to dream. It does function as a point of departure. Yet it can anchor our attention because it has components that we can see and touch. As we first let our thoughts wander and then refocus them on the landscape, we learn to see not only how complex and various are the ways of human living but also how difficult it is to achieve anywhere a habitat consonant with the full potential of our being.

Notes

1. J. B. Jackson, "The Meaning of 'Landscape,'" *Saetryk af Kulturgeografi* No. 88, (1964):47-50.
2. E. Straus, *The Primary World of Senses* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 318.
3. Frank J. and Elizabeth W. Estvan, *The Child's World: His Social Perception* (New York: Putnam's 1959).
4. D. Lowenthal and H. Prince, "English Landscape Tastes," *Geographical Review* 55, no. 2 (1965):188-222.
5. J. Hawkes, *A Land* (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 143.
6. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 106.
7. Benjamin Dunlop, "Snakehandling in South Carolina," *New Republic*, 22 November 1975, p. 20.