Paradigms and Paradoxes

Nature, Morality, and Art in America

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To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion—all in one.
—John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as nature began to be regarded as a positive presence, rather than an alien force, landscape art in England and America was based on several well-established aesthetic concepts.[1] The *beautiful* was seen as the tranquillity of "smooth" nature that led the viewer to a meditative state, removed from the complexities of life. The *sublime*, as articulated by Edmund Burke, referred to the spiritual uplift beyond rational understanding that came from untamed nature and its overwhelming forces, such as thunderstorms or waterfalls. The *picturesque*, a category developed by Thomas Gilpin, pertained to the "satisfaction of viewing the complexity and continuous change of nature." Gilpin celebrated "roughness" or "variety."[2] Another term, the *pastoral*, applied mainly to subject matter; it could be either picturesque or beautiful, but as subject matter it included shepherds and flocks in a gently settled landscape.

In America in the 1820s Thomas Cole's paintings adopted all of these conventions, paired with his own commitment to the spiritual and moral role of the specifically American wilderness. Cole's theory of landscape suggested that, lacking the cathedrals and Greek temples that endowed the more settled European landscape with so many associations, the uncultivated "wildness" of our scenery gave it meaning in contrast to the homogeneity of more domesticated nature:

Those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. . . . We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly.

At the same time he already mourned the destruction of the land by the advances of civilization: "The beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation."[3]

Cole used the imagery of identifiable monuments of the American wilderness, such as Mount Chocorua, to suggest Eden, as in the recently rediscovered 1828 painting of that subject at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth. With obvious reference to both the sublime and the picturesque, this painting, along with its companion, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1827, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), uses the paradigms of landscape imagery to speak to the idea of the moral role of unspoiled nature (Eden) *as well as* our punishment for not respecting it. Later in his career, Cole elaborated this theme in *The Course of Empire* (1833–36, New-York Historical Society), with its five states of human presence in the land: *Savage*, *Pastoral*, *Consummation (fig. 1)*, *Destruction (fig. 2)*, *Desolation (fig. 3)*. Cole's message in this astonishing five-part sequence is the domination of nature by civilization and nature's eventual overthrow and destruction of humanity for its immoral act. He was profoundly concerned that the artist not create "mere dead imitations of things—without the power to impress a Sentiment or enforce a moral or religious truth."[4]

Contemporary with Cole, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau also responded to the American wilderness. For Cooper the wilderness represented a threat, for Emerson and Thoreau, a refuge. In Cooper's novels, such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, the still-rugged wilderness is an active and changing character that is partner to the conflicts that occur within it. In Emerson and Thoreau, the wilderness is a place of recuperation for the spirit. Emerson extolled nature, albeit somewhat abstractly, from his solidly civilized home in Concord. For him nature symbolized spiritual presence and the possibility of renewal. Thoreau more intimately and specifically engaged the wildness of nature from his cabin on Walden Pond and anxiously bemoaned its invasion by civilization. He decried the insensitivity of the townspeople of Concord in running waterpipes from Walden Pond to use for washing their dishes:

Now the trunks of trees on the bottom and the old log canoe, and the dark surrounding woods, are gone and the villagers, who scarcely know where it lies, instead of going to the pond to

FIG. 3 Thomas Cole, *Desolation*, from *The Course of Empire*, 1833–36, oil on canvas, 39¼ × 63½ inches. New-York Historical Society, New York.

bathe or drink, are thinking to bring its water, which should be as sacred as the Ganges at least, to the village in a pipe, to wash their dishes with!—to earn their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug![5]

The widely read criticism of John Ruskin reinforced the association of landscape with moral and spiritual qualities for Americans, as well as Europeans, during the middle of the nineteenth century.[6] Nature was the "footprint" of God. Nature in art was the product of sensitivity to the incredible complexity of the work of the divine. But for Ruskin, examining and presenting nature in art engaged the entire moral person; indeed, *art and the depiction of nature in art were part of a larger moral activity*: art was meaningful only in its connection to and inspiration toward larger social, political, and economic issues—and those issues were not the economic exploitation of the land. In fact, by the 1850s Ruskin spoke despairingly of the "failure of nature" caused by the actions of man, a situation that was leading to the annihilation of life. As nature was being destroyed by the Industrial Revolution and the increased cultivation of land for farming in England and America, so was human life being diminished and so would it ultimately be destroyed.[7] Ruskin's despair forecasts prophetically the contemporary ecological crises of land and spirit in America.

In the same years of Ruskin's despair, American landscape painters were inspired by his writing, but not by his call to action. Alfred Bierstadt's paintings virtually illustrate, with their glowing backlighting as a symbol of the spiritual, the concept of Manifest Destiny, or the Christian mission to subdue the wilderness. The powerful western light draws the pioneer wagons forward. No sense of the threat that civilization poses to nature sullies these blissful prospects. Native inhabitants are diminutive. The paintings stand as testimony to American artists' wedding of morality with development, rather than preservation. Artists often accompanied surveyors for railroads and geological expeditions that determined the economic value of the land, and later profited from its development. Thomas Moran contributed to the creation of the first national park, with his grandiose *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.). Artistically clearly linked to the sublime, the painting speaks not of protection, but of celebration. The park, established in 1874, was created because the area was believed to have no minerals valuable for development, rather than for purely nature-loving reasons.[8] Once a national park, the landscape itself became a consumer product—one that is currently under siege by millions of nature worshipers each year.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries artists began to reject the restraints of the decadent materialism of bourgeois society. They turned from what they saw as a meaningless realism to a purified art of color, line, and shape. As part of the dismissal of the tired conventions of the nineteenth century, modernists also began to celebrate modern technology, rather than nature. At the same time, the immensely influential modernist theory of Roger Fry dis-

missed the nature-based criticism of Ruskin and relegated aesthetic experience to a separate sphere of life in order to purge it of what he saw as the pedestrian moralizing of Victorian painting.

By the 1930s, however, Utopian beliefs and pure aesthetic experiences no longer seemed very important, as people starved to death and artists were imprisoned for creating modern art. Artists felt a need, above all else, to express their social and political concerns. In this context, the landscape and its moral role reentered art as a major theme and subject. In literary and architectural theory, interest in the land was inspired directly by Ruskin's ideas. The Southern Agrarians, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, at Vanderbilt University, proposed that life and art based in a rural environment were morally superior to the dehumanizing of industrialization and capitalism in cities. A profound emotional connection to a particular place led easily, by extension, to their rejection of an urban-based modernist art. In painting, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry consciously opposed the abstract style and subjects of European modernism and presented a nostalgic and stereotyped iconography of life on the land. This romanticized imagery frequently connected to specific events of local American history in the "American Scene" agenda of government art programs.

While landscape painting by the Regionalists came to be ridiculed in the highly politicized art world of the mid-1930s, in film and theater landscape imagery had a profound effect. Hallie Flannigan, head of the Federal Theater Project, created a statement of outrage about the agricultural crisis in *Triple A. Plowed Under*, a "Living Newspaper" that combined theater, vaudeville, and other avant-garde techniques to engage the audience. Filmmakers used direct moral references that even recall the paintings of Thomas Cole. In the film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), the force of wind and blowing sand in the Dust Bowl recalls the final scene of Cole's *Course of Empire*, *Desolation*, in which the ruins of empire are buried by the powers of nature. The film paired the sublime power of the landscape with Russian avant-garde film techniques. It explained to the urban citizen the problems of the farmers in the Dust Bowl caused by overgrazing, overproduction, and mechanized farming. Editing, cut to match the score by Virgil Thomson, used the "grass as heroine, the sun and wind as villains."[9] The government hoped to gain support for its Rural Resettlement Program with the film.

Yet, paired with these romantic and moral purposes in painting, film, and theater, other aspects of the economic turmoil of the 1930s generated the on-going domination of the urban and technological agendas through the construction of massive dams, such as the Grand Coulee in Washington State. The dam itself was a herculean effort that was likened to the construction of the Pyramids of Egypt. Its sanctified moral purpose was to rejuvenate the entire center of the state by attracting homesteads. Today that land is irrigated and farmed—not, indeed, by homesteaders, but by enormous corporations who reap their profits *in absentia*.

During the revival of modernism, and particularly abstraction, following World War II, landscape imagery, even all figuration, as well as social and political concerns, were dismissed by critics. Regionalism was seen as provincial, chauvinist, and, at its nadir, fascist. American landscape paintings of the nineteenth century were interpreted as virtual abstractions. The critical concept of Luminism, developed in the 1950s and 1960s, almost entirely eliminated the image. Writers such as Barbara Novak depicted the artist as standing in a self-abnegating state before the abstract, indigenous light of America.[10] Cole's commitment to the moral content of his art, as well as his use of landscape as an opportunity to comment on the destruction of nature by American civilization, was, in these same years, dismissed as a violation of what was seen as his more important contribution, the pure landscape.

In the late twentieth century many artists have turned once again to nature and the land as central themes in their work. Since artists are, in the majority, urban, and only visit rural environments, they often seize upon one aspect of the land to exploit for picturesque or even sublime images that can be marketed by urban galleries. Conversely, artists who move out of the city often simply bring their urban-based aesthetic with them. Decades of formalism and a lack of political engagement in the United States in general still prove daunting obstacles for many artists who have strong political feelings. Some artists, such as Robert Smithson, made form into new paradigms, as in his earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a metaphor for the spiral of evolution and the principles of entropy. The work has been consumed by the salt and water of the Great Salt Lake. Other artists working in the land—Nancy Holt, for example—have sought a social role by reclaiming industrial-waste sites. Still others collaborate with landscape architects to create an environment, somewhat in the tradition of Frederick Law Olmsted, that enhances and expands our awareness as we move through it. Yet the pressure of our devastation of nature still rarely appears in art, just as the devastation caused by Manifest Destiny in both human and natural terms was rarely seen in nineteenth-century art after the time of Thomas Cole. Ruskin's absolute despair with industrialization rarely finds resonance in the work of contemporary artists concerned with the land. The paradox is now, as in the nineteenth century, between art as a moral statement and art as a marketable aesthetic object.

A group of artists located in a remote area of eastern Washington State, known as the Palouse, provide a case study of the difficulties and contradictions of making aesthetic objects and engaging political issues within a single artistic practice. These artists are linked to a land-grant research institution, Washington State University, that is providing

FIG. 4 Ammonia/nitrogen distributors, eastern Washington State, 1991.

scientific data for both the assault on the land by agricultural technology and some of the new alternatives to that traditional approach to agriculture. The Palouse initially seems a gentle place, when compared to the harsh expanse of irrigated farmlands of the central desert. In contrast to the agribusiness farms of central Washington, watered by the Grand Coulee Dam, with their irrigation devices scaled like huge, metamorphosed insects preying on the land, the rolling, lush hills of golden wheat on the farms of the Palouse seem intimate and friendly. Living in this land, the artists, as well as the farmers, of the Palouse are profoundly aware that the opposite is the case.

The Palouse is a land ravaged by modern technology and chemical fertilizers on a scale far more exaggerated than the conditions that led to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. This has created massive erosion of the rich volcanic soil, now flying into the air at the rate of fifty tons per acre per year. For every bushel of wheat produced, fifteen hundred pounds of soil are lost.

The rivers and forests too have been robbed. Dams have created a "water desert" on the banks of rivers in place of orchards; native habitats of plants and wildlife have been destroyed. Logging has filled the streams with debris. Erosion has filled the dammed streams with sedimentation. The natural cycles of fish and birds are disrupted, their normal paths obliterated or decimated. The last remaining 5 percent of virgin forest is currently being clear-cut.

In this lightly populated region, the Department of Defense placed a lethal plutonium production plant on 570 square miles in the south central area of the state. Between 1944 and 1957 the plant at Hanford produced over five hundred thousand curies of radioactive iodine and created a massive toxic-waste problem. The nine reactors along the Columbia River used its water to cool the cores and then passed it directly back to the source, making it the most radioactive river in the United States.[11]

Earth, air, and water are all troubled. This rugged land of farms and small towns is far from simply picturesque. The isolated residents of the region intensely experience nature as a transcendental presence, as well as both oppressor and oppressed. The tiny communities form a haunting counterpoint to the massive presence of late-twentieth-century technology in the surrounding farmlands. They are usually kept alive by a single chemical-fertilizer manufacturer, which

arrays massive machines in military ranks, awaiting the appropriate moment for their assault on the land *(fig. 4)*.

Confronted with these disasters, as well as the still-transcendent presence of the earth and sky itself, artists are faced with a dilemma. Do they respond to and interpret such horrific ecological conditions or do they create an alternative imagery that virtually preserves or re-creates nature as beautiful? Such artists as Robert Helm pursue an imagery that appears to be transcendently calm, but often contains a tense, unexplained melodrama lurking in its midst. Jack Dollhausen uses electronics as a metaphor of the extended natural time and space of the region. His complex light sculptures sometimes take an entire year to complete a single cycle, demanding that the viewer exist in nature's time, not the instant time-bite of contemporary life.

George Trakas is a part-time resident of the Palouse who addresses the balance between the individual and the environment. As part of a ten-year commitment to rework the center of the campus of Washington State University, Trakas is working with Catherine Howett to open the school and its residents to the extraordinary setting of the Palouse. They have so far created an open gathering place, embraced by slabs of granite, that provides a horizontal pause at the center of the narrow, linear campus axis *(fig. 5)*.

FIG. 5 George Trakas and Catherine Howett, *Todd Terrace*, 1990, ca. 90 × 90 feet. Washington State University, Pullman.

Other artists, such as Gaylen Hansen, address the imbalance of animal and human interactions. He presents humans confronting huge animals, birds, insects, fish, and reptiles. The theme of enormous insects, for example, is psychically realistic, since grasshoppers actually can devour an entire garden within hours *(fig. 6)*. Josephine Hockenhull's work also addresses the interactions of humans and nature, but from a perspective of the structural bonds that connect us. Hockenhull uses x-ray images in complex, composite print media to explore ecological issues both historically and scientifically. Her iconography, as well as that of another printmaker, Rita Robillard, at times intersects with the concerns of deep ecologists and ecofeminists, who see humans as part of nature, rather than its dominator and exploiter. In these potent philosophies, the earth is "intrinsically feminine," and the primary problem is our androcentric institutions that value the earth only economically, not spiritually.[12]

A few artists in the Palouse focus on political activism, rather than object making, as a primary commitment. Although interfacing with a formidable system itself, these artists attempt actually to restore the balance in nature. Victor Moore, a sculptor, founded the Palouse Preservation League, a group that attempts to reestablish ecological balance through sustainable agriculture, in cooperation with local farmers. The league advocates protecting habitats for wildlife, opposes the use of pesticides, particularly near schools, and tries to delay clear-cutting of the last few virgin-growth forests. Moore even ran for the state legislature from eastern Washington, on a platform of respect for the environment.

Crystal Dollhausen, a painter turned political activist, focuses on the virtually invisible problem of the Hanford plutonium plant's toxic emissions. She has filled an entire small house with literature on nuclear health-hazard and pesticide issues. In her own immediate environment, she rejects the concept of the carpet of green lawn so institutionalized in our culture, and yet so ruthless in its arbitrary selections from nature's balance. In her home she has tried to reestablish the full complexity of the original plants in the Palouse:

I feel as though we are hanging on by our fingernails against the juggernaut that reduces everything to a pesticide-dependent monoculture. I approach my little plot of earth feeling a great responsibility to protect the few species, pitiful remnants of the native Palouse, that have survived here. I live by the tenet that the diversity of species offers protection from infestations. It wards off the plague. . . . The greater the variety, the more stable the community. . . . [Gardening] is an unraveling of the mysteries of the universe, the enterprise I assume humans are meant to engage in, in order to survive.[13]

From 1984 to 1989 I spent five years in eastern Washington State and experienced the various paradigms outlined

FIG. 6 Gaylen C. Hansen, *The Kernal Encounters a Swarm of Crickets*, 1983, oil on canvas, 71½ × 83 inches. Seattle Art Museum.

in this article. From an initial sense of the pastoral, picturesque, and sublime, I have now come to see the environment as victim of a violent rape. I turn to that paradigm, dismissing more tranquil scholarly analysis, as I now see the earth dying under the assault of scientific objectivity.

On a recent return visit to eastern Washington State I saw a poplar tree that had been chain-sawed during "routine maintenance," deeply scored and treated with a powerful, illegal poison: a violent death for a simple tree, in the name of efficiency. The poplar was, in fact, ten feet from the "utility" line it supposedly threatened. But the tree had, at least temporarily, the last word. Within a few months four saplings had already sprung up directly under the line. Although the main tree had been destroyed, its deep roots had survived and come back. Perhaps it is not yet too late for the Earth.

Notes

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Rutherford Platt.

1. I first explored aspects of this essay in several lectures, including "Environmental Concerns in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Art," at the School of Agriculture, Washington State University (1987, 1988), and "Artists of Earth, Space and Time of the Inland Northwest," New York, 1987, San Francisco, 1989. A few of the current reevaluations of American landscape painting are Ellwood C. Parry, *Thomas Cole* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988); Alan Wallach, "The Voyage of Life as Popular Art," *Art Bulletin* 59 (June 1977): 234–41; Grey Sweeney, "The Nude of Landscape Painting," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3 (Fall 1989): 43–65; William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). See also Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).
2. Peter Fuller, "The Geography of Mother Nature," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 47–50.
3. Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," repr. in John McCoubrey, ed., *American Art, 1700–1960* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 109.
4. Franklin Kelly and Gerald Carr, *The Early Landscapes of Frederic Church, 1845–1854*, exh. cat. (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1987), 35.
5. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 144.
6. Roger Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).
7. Fuller, "Geography," 15, 24; see also Wolfgang Kemp, *The Desire of My Eyes: The Life and Work of John Ruskin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 257, 351.
8. The "worthless lands" thesis is that of Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 48–64. See also Eugene Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 77–107.
9. Robert Snyder, *Pare Lorentz: The Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 27. *Tobacco Road*, a novel by Erskine Caldwell developed as a long-running play as well as a John Ford film, also used the land in a political and spiritual role.
10. Barbara Novak, in *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1969), is the best-known proponent of this theory, based on John I. H. Baur, "American Luminism: A Neglected Aspect of the Realist Movement in Nineteenth Century American Painting," (1954), reprinted in Harold Spencer, ed., *American Art: Readings from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 122–29.
11. Jim Thomas, "Shadows of Hanford's Past: Radiation Releases," *Heal* 1 (Fall 1990): 4–6; also see Rosalie Bertell, *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth* (Summertown, Tenn.: The Book Publishing Co., 1986).
12. Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness from Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 309–16.
13. Letter, Crystal Dollhausen to the author, November 30, 1990.

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