



Common
of Landscape
America,
1580 to 1845

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Satyrane, for example, and Milton's Comus. The wild folk of drama and poetry are descended from the wild folk whom peasants knew and feared as Satan's bastards or victims of bewilderment beyond the landschaft fringe.

Until well into the seventeenth century, peasants peered at the wilderness through the prism of bewilderment and chaos. Every sort of experience beyond the farthest field was distorted by the certainties attendant upon losing one's way. Huntsmen and woodcutters who understood devious paths and trackless reaches of forest were never entirely trusted by their stay-at-home neighbors. No one knew when a woodcutter or charcoal burner might suddenly succumb to the temptations successfully resisted for years. In the landschaft of folktale such half-trusted characters live not in the dwelling cluster inhabited by husbandmen but at the edge of the landschaft, at the interface of field and wilderness. Their solitary huts, like the isolated windmill or water mill, stood in the shadowy interface of landschaft and wilderness chaos.

A typical landschaft consequently objectified order not only in its intricate arrangement of dwellings and fields and mills and pastures but in its juxtaposition with chaos. Wild folk only sharpened the peasant view of landschaft as comfortable order, and until the blossoming of *strassenromantik* ("the romance of the road") personified the uncertainties beyond the edge.

ROADS

Princes and kings intent on consolidating their rule by unifying their realms shattered the old integrity of landschaft space and social order. From the fifteenth century onward, at first hesitantly and then decisively, they made forests and other wastes safe for travel. Pacification through road-building proceeded unevenly, but by the close of sixteenth century rural people sensed new possibilities for adventure and profit. The concern for good roads—and overseas exploration—developed as slowly as political unity and long-distance overland commerce, but eventually it modified the popular distrust of the wilderness. Sixteenth-century Europeans saw the road not as good or evil but as enticingly mysterious.³⁰ Their fascination with it found expression in *strassenromantik*, in ballads about the joys of wandering, and most importantly, in wandering itself, for the roads that passed from landschaft into wilderness promised excitement and fortune. Folktale after folktale begins with a plowman or craftsman accosted by a traveler on the highway and lured into adventure.

Unlike the path between fields, garden plots, or dwellings, which be-

longed to its abutters and was limited in use, the highway belonged to wayfarers and to the king. It clearly expressed an authority greater than that of landschaft householders, for it promised protection from wilderness danger. Highway robbery was infinitely more than theft by violence—it affronted and mocked royal power and disrupted the new order of the road. By any name, *camino real*, *Reichsstrasse*, and *route royale*, the king's highway was a new sort of space. Each landschaft on the long-distance road was commanded to maintain its share of roadbed in order that armies, couriers, and traders might not be delayed. Along the highway flowed wealth greater than that of any landschaft, and self-sufficiency vanished as cities and large towns drained surrounding regions of talent and produce and flooded landschaften with fashionable goods. Local values too contested with those of the highway; the peddler prized an honesty unthinkable to the husbandman. Economic and social conflict grew as roads became safer and smoother, and as carts, wagons, and finally coaches replaced packhorses. No longer was a stranger a distrusted oddity to be cautiously welcomed or warned away from a landschaft but an expected figure in—but not of—any landschaft intersected by a long-distance road.

Highways seemed to most peasants to be half-landschaft and half-wilderness. On the one hand they existed by royal decrees and received intermittent maintenance; quite clearly they expressed intention. On the other, they supported what most European husbandmen called "the traveling folk," a shadowy host of people without place. Wild folk, of course, had no specific place on earth—only the vague run of the wilderness. But road people confined themselves, at least most of the time, to the road and moved about with little apparent reason. By the seventeenth century they included swarms of traveling entertainers (some organized in bands large enough to be termed circuses) dragging with them exotic animals and more exotic customs. As of old there were pilgrims, of course, and wandering clerics, and traveling scholars too, the last spreading the new significance of printed literature. Discharged soldiers roamed the roads, seeking employment and adventure and now and then descending on a landschaft to loot and kill. Beggars and exiled peasants and refugees from growing religious persecution stumbled along-the roads and mixed freely among the merchants, traveling apprentices, royal couriers, tax collectors, armies, and those grown weary of landschaft order.³¹

Although professional itinerants often claimed residence in some city or town along the road they usually had only the road as home. Theirs was a new view of the countryside, for they saw only what was visible

from the road and they used only what was immediately accessible from it. Increasingly the roadside adapted to their needs. First came inns, and stables for pack animals; then corrals for driven herds; then bridges for wagons freighted with precious ores and with smelted metals; then toll gates to tax the growing traffic. Eventually directional signs and mileposts made asking directions unnecessary even after dark, and great rows of trees to shade marching armies lined the shoulders. It was at this time that *vill*, the French and English synonym for *landschaft*, was replaced by *village*, a new word emphasizing the cluster of structures at the center of the *landschaft*.³² Travelers cared for good inns, blacksmith shops, and other structures in which they had business, not for fields and meadows and pastures.

The wayfarer was, for the sedentary inhabitants of the *landschaft*, personified other, that against which they evaluated themselves. In the days when roads were so few and so dangerous that traveling was almost unknown, adolescents had only their parents and adult neighbors as models. The absence of different values and exotic behavior made internalization of *landschaft* values fairly simple, and only when travelers provided new standards to any youth astute enough to linger about the inn or stableyard after nightfall did socialization break down. Travelers were anonymous, without past and without place, and their larger experience was approached with a mixture of distrust and deference by adults and adolescents alike. The road introduced a marked change in personal relationships, one almost identical to the essence of urban life. Strangers met knowing they might not meet again, judged one another as types according to dress and occupation, and talked of things that mattered only to themselves. It was a rare carter who was deeply interested in the state of the crops, and a rarer husbandman who cared about the unsafe bridge thirty miles to the east, but traveler and native alike were interested in conversation, the traveler to pass his evening and the native to learn something of the broader world. However well liked and trusted the traveler, people forever suspected him as foreign. For all that the traveler's linear space lay in the *landschaft*, it smacked too much of wilderness-like disorder.

The wider world beyond the turn in the highway, beyond the farthest field and the wilderness edge—if the wilderness had not been cleared to provide additional arable or grazing land—made its presence felt in every *landschaft*. Old landholding customs disintegrated in the face of market agriculture, as elders subdivided common fields and sold lots to husbandmen who fenced in their land and often moved their families away from the dwelling clusters onto free-standing farms.³³ Market ag-

riculture rewarded specialization and innovation in ways unknown to earlier generations of husbandmen, and countless changes in field size and crops testified to the overpowering urge to discard old ways. Industrious sons, deprived of any chance to practice any agriculture at all due to a growing shortage of land, left *landschaften* for new occupations in artifice, or on the highway, or in the burgeoning cities.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century only four European cities boasted populations of more than 100,000 people. Most so-called cities seemed villages when travelers compared them to Istanbul, Naples, Venice, and Paris; their tiny forms remained dominated by adjoining agricultural land or by ocean wilderness. Behind most houses extended some sort of garden space, and many householders enjoyed vegetables and fruit in season from their own plants. Only the rare late medieval mercantile town or city extended more than half a mile from its center, the church or cathedral that marked its ecclesiastical focus and the roland that pinpointed its civil axis mundi, but within the perimeter defined by new, often artillery-resistant walls pulsed a life almost invariably attractive to travelers from *landschaften*. Markets presented crafts beyond the imagination of plowmen, and religious festivals prompted great processions and week-long entertainments, all encapsulated in space seemingly free of natural forms and restraints. The narrow, twisting streets and alleys, or the rectilinear avenues newly laid out in expanding cities, nurtured few trees and fewer shrubs.³⁴ Man-made form, not natural vegetation, ruled urban space, even though city dwellers lived closely attached to the *landschaften* a few miles beyond their gates. Indeed no plants belonged in urban space. Curses like "May grass grow in your streets!" took their power from the terrible image of a deserted city, its streets regained by the wilderness.³⁵ Urban form—cityscape—attracted people away from landscape, although urbanites eventually hungered for the land of tradition they left behind.

Landscape

It was at this time, in the last years of the sixteenth century, that *landscape* entered the English language, imported from Holland along with Dutch scenery, or *landschap*, painting. By *landschap*, of course, the Dutch understood the traditional territorial *landschaft*, the houses surrounded by common fields and encircled by wildernesses of ocean or swamps. The English garbled the meaning, however, and *landschap* entered the language as *landskip* and meant at first only the Dutch paintings. Within two decades it was spelled as it now is, but it had acquired a far more complicated definition. By 1630 *landscape* denoted large-scale

rural vistas, chiefly hilltop views of woods, villages, fields, and roads, dominated by the colors of vegetation and good soil—green and brown. It meant also large-scale ornamental gardens objectifying ideals of beauty and denoted still paintings of rural vistas. The English seemed fascinated with the new word and used it familiarly and loosely, to the confusion of dictionary compilers.³⁶ Quite evidently, the word captured in two syllables something most important.

Certainly the connotations of *landscape* were pleasing to an England caught in an age of change. The word invoked neat hedgerows, small ponds and copses, and cows grazing lazily near thatched farmhouses. It recalled a past age thought golden by people bound up in technological innovation, religious ferment, and overseas adventure. While *landscape* connoted agricultural stability, it connoted too the small, agriculture-dominated enterprises of artifice evident in but hardly intrusive in the countryside. Ironworks, mines, water mills, and other enterprises that disconcerted traditionalists seemed much less threatening in a large context of agricultural space. Even the city of London seemed manageable when viewed from afar, across an agricultural foreground. *Landscape* identified beloved, traditional space from which more sinister forms seemed less fearsome.

Highways and dramatic urban growth sharpened perceptions of space, and sensitive observers throughout the seventeenth century set off to discover landscape. Most of the great painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries traveled either through their own countries or through others, particularly across Italy, and writers of topographical description, a genre that became more popular as explorers brought back tales of new places beyond the seas, wandered too. Many chose to closely describe every place in their home region by compiling vast "itineraries" or "perambulations" of counties, districts, and even kingdoms. In comparing one landscape with another they passed judgment on the aesthetic and functional worth of each. Implicit in their evaluations is a traditional, strongly agricultural bias: beautiful, useful landscapes are those made and maintained by husbandmen. Land shaped by artifice they ignored or condemned as ugly. Their topophilic aesthetics survived the Atlantic crossing, endured, and prosper today. They loved, and many Americans still love, landscape: space shaped for agriculture and gently punctuated by artifice and roads.

Of course, wilderness endured to bias men's judgments. Well into the nineteenth century, great expanses of wilderness interrupted eastern American landscape. Edmund Ruffin, along with many other southerners, worried about the gigantic quagmire that stretched some forty

miles from Virginia into North Carolina. In 1837 Dismal Swamp remained as treacherous and unexplored as William Byrd found it more than a century before, when his boundary surveyors blundered about it for days. Ruffin discovered to his horror that the impenetrable swamp had become the last resort of great bears, wild cats, and wolves, all of which—along with fugitive slaves—now and then rampaged through the contiguous landscape before retreating to the shelter of the tree-covered mire. Along with Byrd, Ruffin proposed that the swamp be drained and made into agricultural land—shaped into landscape.³⁷

Wilderness took other, more horrifying forms, even in the regions most shaped by people. Earthquakes tormented New Englanders throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the one of 1727 prompting one clergymen to write two books describing the fragility of man-shaped spaces and structures. "In one ward of the city," wrote Cotton Mather of the 1726 earthquake that destroyed much of Palermo in Sicily, "a whole street gaped at once with a hideous and horrid noise; and from the chasm there issued out flames, which were mixed with calcined stones, and a torrent of burning brimstone, whereby in less than half an hour, the whole ward was consumed." Earthquakes like the 1692 shock that destroyed Port Royal in Jamaica and the one in 1755 that flattened the city of Lisbon in Portugal and muddied springs and wells across most of western Europe—and roiled the waters of Lake Ontario too, according to information subsequently gathered from trappers—reminded North American colonists that wilderness existed in the heart of towns. The great Missouri Territory earthquake of 1812, however, made the New England tremors unimportant and made the peace of shaped land infinitely sweeter. A series of gigantic convulsions toppled log houses, created lakes twenty miles long, split trees, buried prairies with several feet of water-carried sand, and showered farms with rocks and debris blasted up from the earth. Not many people died in the scantily populated frontier area, but the loss in agricultural land, houses, and livestock ruined the lives of many settlers. While the fear of being thrown "down quick into the pit" caused the previously impious settlers to turn from sinful ways, it caused too a pronounced migration from the region.³⁸ No traveler stared into the abysslike crevices marking the former site of Little Prairie without thinking of the wilderness temporarily quiet beneath the waving grass.

Subterranean wildness convinced Americans that Satan lurked just beneath farms and houses, and places of frequent tremors acquired fearsome reputations. In Connecticut, for example, the otherwise peaceful town of East Haddam suffered such frequent and powerful earth-

quakes throughout the eighteenth century that wise inhabitants recalled that the Indian name of the region, *Machemoodus*, meant "place of noises." The town clergyman remarked in 1729 that East Haddam was "a place where the Indians drove a prodigious trade at worshipping the devil" and remembered that years before, an aged Indian explained the tremors and eerie noises by saying that "the Indians' god was very angry because the Englishmen's God was come here." While the Puritan cleric wondered about "fire or air distressed in the subterraneous caverns of the earth," he remained suspicious of diabolical presences, and his suspicions endured well into the nineteenth century.³⁹ No matter how carefully the East Haddam townsfolk built their houses and shaped their stone walls, the intermittent convulsions toppled chimneys and opened fissures into the earth. The "moodus noises" awakening them at night and the convulsions heaving them from bed warned all Americans of the enduring potential of wilderness.

And always the ocean made people appreciate landscape. Sea serpents worried New England colonists, especially those unlucky enough to encounter them squirming off Cape Cod and other supposedly civilized places, and they frightened nineteenth-century fishermen too. Melville's *Moby-Dick* epitomizes the mid-nineteenth-century fascination with deep-sea creatures and with the idea of ocean as chaotic, mysterious wilderness. But even Melville wondered about creatures larger than the white sperm whale, and in 1851 confided to Hawthorne that "leviathan is not the biggest fish—I have heard of Krakens." Certainly something, giant squid or otherwise, lurked beneath the ocean surface and symbolized whatever submerged terrors tormented Melville and his contemporaries. For all his love of "nature," Thoreau distrusted the ocean lapping at Cape Cod beaches, noted that no one laughed when the lighthouse-keeper told of sharks, and marveled at the force half-hidden in the waves. "Serpents, bears, hyenas, tigers, rapidly vanish as civilization advances," he wrote after visiting the shore and the bodies cast up after a shipwreck, "but the most populous and civilized city cannot scare a shark far from its wharves." Thoreau described the ocean wilderness that almost drowned him in Plymouth Harbor as chaos itself.⁴⁰ As did Melville and others, Thoreau scorned the landscape-destroying monster of industrial urbanism, but he hated equally real wilderness—wilderness unlike the woodlots of safe, peaceful Concord.⁴¹

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, seekers of landscape moved on foot or horseback. Scarcely any difference in spatial perception separates Daniel Defoe's *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* of 1724 from William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* of 1830, or Timothy

Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York* of 1821 from Frederick Law Olmsted's *A Journey in the Back Country* of 1860. Dwight's experiences are typical. He paused to inquire into crops and wildflowers, to examine soils and ferries, to discover local history each evening at an inn, and to question farmers about their land. He gazed from hilltops on the landscape below, criticized houses and street arrangements, and now and then marveled at industrial enterprises nestled in ravines and crowding waterfalls. He enjoyed moments of "profound contemplation and playfulness of mind" only when gazing at landscape, at traditional rural space. For Dwight, horseback travel was a succession of minor discoveries and observations, of deciphering vague maps and vaguer directions, of stopping again and again to examine a barn or a run-down farm or any other constituent of landscape. His four-volume book chronicles self-paced searching after details and wholes, a searching that in 1860 Olmsted found conveniently only in the back-country South, away from railroads. Self-paced travel, what Thoreau called "walking" in an essay aimed at encouraging people to do it, vanished in the 1840s in Europe and in the eastern United States with the coming of the railroads and the popularization of railroad observation.⁴²

Railroads epitomized the new industrial age that came to fruition only after the Civil War. Mines and factories grew larger and larger by the decade but in the 1840s dominated few rural regions. But expansion quickened with the coming of corporation-owned manufacturing towns such as Lowell in Massachusetts, with the dramatic growth of urban population that fueled industrial and commercial development, and—most importantly—with the perfecting of steam power. No longer did entrepreneurs locate mills and factories only near waterfalls; suddenly such structures, along with railroad trains, appeared almost everywhere, and the shriek of steam whistles floated over coastal towns and western farms along with black, acrid smoke. Had Americans not confronted other change, the new power of industry might have seemed less threatening. But suddenly new difficulties appeared. In the west, pioneers learned that the great forest ended somewhere in Illinois and that entire agricultural techniques were almost worthless on the prairie and plains. In the East, farmers no longer processed most of their harvest but shipped it on trains to urban manufacturing centers. Everywhere the family gave up some fraction of its importance to well-established schools and churches and social institutions. Abolition and talk of dis-union and rebellion frayed everyone's nerves. In 1845 Americans glanced backward, recalling the traditional space of the preindust-

rial age with satisfaction and half-consciously ordering the spatial aesthetics of the future.

What they remembered or thought they remembered blossomed in the prose, poetry, and painting of the American Renaissance, the creation of Emerson, Hawthorne, Kennedy, Thoreau, Melville, Bancroft, Prescott, Parkman, Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin Johnson Heade, and others. What had been—the land shaped between 1580 and 1845 in accordance with local, then regional, and finally national understanding of vernacular tradition—informs their work, making it “romantic” in both setting and tone. But the land as it was shaped cannot be discovered in artistry alone, because every artist interprets what he or she sees, adding and deleting details and juxtapositions according to personal whim or literary prototype. In order to discover the shapes of the past, one must read the shapes of the present as one reads a palimpsest, looking for details perhaps overshadowed by newer building and then ascertaining their evolution and contemporaneous meaning.

What vestiges are selected for examination here? Almost all are *common*, the creation of common people shaping and building according to orally transmitted or example-transmitted tradition. Only a few are the creation of professional designers; the building of monuments has been recounted frequently although such monuments were—and are—rare anywhere within the current bounds of the United States east of the Mississippi and south of the Arkansas, the area shaped between 1580 and 1845. Almost none are urban, partly because cities have received much careful attention of late, partly because cityscape is not landscape, but chiefly because the vast amount of American space shaped between 1580 and 1845 was not urban—and is still not urban. The vestiges examined in this book constitute a theory of landscape, a theory in the sense of *theoria*, the ancient Greek word meaning a spectacle, something seen. Taken together, they are landscape. Mixed with subsequent forms and spaces, they are the contemporary confusion called “the man-made environment.”