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## The Curve of a Continent

By FRANCES GILLMOR

**C**URIOSLY persistent in American literature is an emphasis on the great spaces of the continent stretching west. Bryant sang of the Prairies "for which the speech of England has no name." Thoreau, walking in the morning woods around Walden Pond felt that he "must walk toward Oregon and not toward Europe." Whitman absorbed the nation into the periphery of himself, and became

"A Southerner soon as a Northerner . . .

At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the Texan ranch,

Comrade of Californians, comrade of free North-Westerners, (loving their big proportions)" . . .

And in a more recent time, while Vachel Lindsay sits by the Santa Fe trail and sees the cars from Memphis, Atlanta, Savannah,

"The United States  
Goes by."

Sometimes this sense of space becomes merely a phase of an imperialistic nationalism. But imperialistic or not, it sings the distance.

That spatial concept becomes definitely a shaping factor in the work of Archibald MacLeish. It is so integral to his thinking, that it seems to be for him a way not only of entering into a national emotional heritage and of finding the identification with his own land which over and over again he proclaims necessary, but also to be a symbol for him of the way out of negation—a half-formed answer to the half-formed question which he asks of the universe in "The Hamlet of A. MacLeish."

Out from himself his thought flings itself over the curve of a continent, the curve of a turning earth. In "American Letter"—

"We first inhabit the world. We dwell  
On the half earth, on the open curve of a continent.  
Sea is divided from sea by the day-fall. The dawn  
Rides the low east with us many hours;  
First are the capes, then are the shorelands, now  
The blue Appalachians faint at the day rise;  
The willows shudder with light on the long Ohio;  
The Lakes scatter the low sun: the prairies  
Slide out of dark: in the eddy of clean air  
The smoke goes up from the high plains of Wyoming:  
The steep Sierras arise: the struck foam  
Flames at the wind's heel on the far Pacific.  
Already the noon leans to the eastern cliff:  
The elms darken the door and the dust-heavy lilacs."

As day comes over the continent, so night in "You, Andrew  
Marvell" comes around the world:

"To feel creep up the curving east  
The earthy chill of dusk and slow  
Upon those underlands the vast  
And ever climbing shadow grow—"

In the brazen trumpet lines of "Salute" it is day again:

"O Sun! Instigator of cocks!  
Thou. . .  
Quickener! Maker of sound in the leaves  
and of running  
Stir over the curve of the earth like the ripple of  
Scarlet under the skin of the lizard  
Hunter!  
Starter of westward birds!"

Sometimes, off the curve of the planet, this spatial sense  
becomes even more astronomical. He surveys

"the ancient  
Westward greying face of the wandering planet."

He calls on the "Seafarer" to gauge his spirit to this wider  
sweep:

"And learn O voyager to walk  
The roll of earth, the pitch and fall

That swings across these trees those stars:  
That swings the sunlight up the wall."

Or he writes from a dying earth:

"It is colder now  
    there are many stars  
        we are drifting  
North by the Great Bear."

But always the space of a world, or a universe, is in the lines.

This is more than a device. It is a way of thinking which does for him what the view of a regional pattern does for so many writers today. It gives him roots in America.

The longing for rootedness is frequently expressed in his work. *American Letter* speaks the nostalgia for old lands

"with the air  
Tasting of hung herbs and the sun returning  
Year after year to the same door and the churn  
Making the same sound in the cool of the kitchen."

But he knows that

"This, this is our land, this is our people. . .  
Here we must eat our salt or our bones starve."

A deeply felt childhood moment is recorded in "Eleven" when he sits in the sheds with the garden tools—

"Shapes  
Older than men were, the wise tools, the iron  
Friendly with earth. . .

and is

"Happy as though he had no name, as though  
He had been no one: like a leaf, a stem,  
Like a root growing—"

This integration with his land he finds not in the detailed regional view but in the continent's sweep—and in the westward march which has given the continent's sweep to our history and our consciousness.

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It is strange how those marching feet beat through his lines. In the "Hamlet of A. MacLeish" we see them—races marching westward, pressing on—

"Westward they move with the sun. Their smoke hangs  
Under the unknown skies at evening. The stars  
Go down before them into the new lands.  
Behind them the dust falls, the streams flow clear  
again."

In the "Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City" there is again the westward march—a bitter satire here on the fact that

"Everything sticks to the grease of a gold note—  
Even a continent—even a new sky."

But behind the satirical view of the Empire Builders to whom the new land was a price and a bid and ink on the books is the continent still. We see

"How it went out from you wide and clean in the sunlight."

and we see

"how full and clear and deep  
The Yellowstone moved on the gravel and the grass  
grew  
When the land lay waiting for her westward people."

It is of course in Conquistador most of all that the hard beat of that westward march rings in MacLeish's lines. There this man who has never identified himself with regional expression, draws upon Spanish sources and puts into the "iron of English" the space and mountain hardness of the Southwest. Much quoted as the preface has been, even greater lines are in the stinging reproof Cortez gave to his men at the time of the mutiny:

"Why should you waste your souls in the west! You  
are young:  
Tell them that you left us here by the last water  
Going up through the pass of the hills with the sun."

And in the record of their march, through the strange and beautiful compression of every phrase, one looks "for a great space under heaven."

"Ever before us lay vast earth secret with  
Sun with the green sound with the singing of grass-  
hoppers. . .  
Ah but the mark of a man's heel is alone in the  
Dust under the whistling of hawks!  
Companion of  
Constellations the trace of his track lies!  
Endless is unknown earth before a man. . ."

Space and the curve of a continent—abstract as music this struggles for words and finds them.

Something is likely to happen to the individual viewed against this backdrop of continent and interstellar spaces. He is likely to shrink. Sometimes he does—to a point. And we look with satirical pity on Jacob Schmidt, who man and bones has been his hundred times around the sun—

"His chronicle is endless—the great curve  
Inscribed in nothing by a point upon  
The spinning surface of a circling sphere."

We see whole races pressing always gallantly from known and loved lands into the unknown—disappearing at last, and

"The same moon  
Still over the earth!"

We see the exultant march of Cortez end with a lesser breed covering the land like lice—

"And the west is gone now: the west is the ocean sky. . ."

Cosmically perceived, or continentally perceived, men and races become small.

But the poet confronts infinity with painful consciousness of himself, nevertheless. And this encounter of the individual with a universe silent to his half-formed questioning of its meaning, provides the tragic motif of Archibald MacLeish's work.

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He tries to find an answer in "The Pot of Earth" by putting the individual into the pattern of the generations:

— "the generations  
Of man are a ripple of thin fire burning  
Over a meadow, breeding out of itself  
Itself. . ."

As the woman gives birth and dies, we see the pattern of life out of death, symbolized in one of the fertility rites which, through Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, have provided images for so many poets:

"I will show you the body of the dead god bringing forth  
The corn. I will show you the reaped ear  
Sprouting.

Are you contented? Are you answered?"

He is not answered. The agony of his continued questioning is recorded in "The Hamlet of A. MacLeish." Neither from the silent dead, nor from religion, nor from love, from playing the strong boy and spitting in the world's face, nor from telling his agony to the stars, is there answer. "Have pity upon us."

In "*Einstein*" he once more tries to cope with infinity.

What is the individual in a world of relativity, where he can exist only in relationship? He tries to absorb the infinite universe into himself, but his subjective world disintegrates,

"For suddenly he feels  
The planet plunge beneath him."

He tries to enter in mystically to the universe which is bigger than he:

"put out leaves  
And let the old remembering wind think through  
A green intelligence. . ."

But

"He cannot think the smell of after rain  
Nor close his thought around the long smooth lag

And falter of a wind, nor bring to mind  
Dusk and the whippoorwill."

Music also fails him. He turns to cool analysis—he counts the ocean in atoms—

"But still the dark denies him. Still withstands  
The dust his penetration and flings back  
Himself to answer him.  
Which seems to keep  
Something inviolate. A living something."

The individual is still there against his backdrop of time and space—still questioning,—and still finding no answer.

But such answer as he finds once more comes to him in this wider spaciousness where he loses, as much as may be, his personal identity, and where he finds as a poet a stature far above those who look only inward for the frail moods of a moment.

He is quite conscious of this turn away from the individual, and states it in one of the few expressions of his writing credo:

"It is no longer A MAN against the stars. It is Mankind: That which has happened always to all men, not the particular incidents of particular lives. The common, simple, earthriding ways of hands and feet and flesh against the enormous mysteries of sun and moon, of time, of disappearance-and-their-place-knowing-them-no-more. . . Not myself, my soul, my glycerine-dropping eyes, but these unknown and nameless men, anonymous under this sky, small in these valleys and far-off and forever there."

He wrote this in *Poetry* in July, 1931. In 1933, and in the poem so entitled, with the western horizon still in his lines and his imagery, and with the march of exploration a symbol now for social progress; he seems, along with this loss of individual emphasis, to find a buoyant hope for his time. Elpenor points Odysseus away from the shores of the



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present Hell, content to stay there himself as long as his oar might stand as warning of shipwreck to other seafarers; but for Odysseus—

“You have only to push on  
To whatever it is that’s beyond us. . .

You have only to cross this place  
And launch ship and get way on her

Working her out with the oars to the  
Full wind and go forward and

Bring yourselves to a home:  
To a new land: to an ocean

Never sailed: not to Ithaca:  
Not to your beds—but the withering

Seaweed under the thorn and the  
Gulls and another morning. . .”

What that other morning will be, he does not say, any more than the Hamlet of A. MacLeish hears the ghost speak, hears the answer to his question, or knows even the question completely. But at the edge of his dark night, where the individual stands appalled before the universe, “the dawn rides the low east.”

By 1934, MacLeish seems to come still further away from negation, away from despair, urging hope, and hope for American democracy, and hope even for the individualism of American democracy. In the *Forum* for April, 1934, he sees man standing erect and strong, not submerged by either a capitalistic or a communistic society, not weakened by dependence upon the group as the revolutionary writers would have him, but able to direct his own destiny.

Again he gives no chart for this new morning. But he sees it there. He pushes on, as those men of the past who so stir his imagination have pushed on with courage, even into

the unknown, to new horizons. His questions still unanswered, he nevertheless declares his faith in the possibility of free creation and action, for the individual, for the nation. Again he digs roots down into America, taking his place without bombast, without eagle screaming, in the long line of American writers who have felt a continent under them, and a people marching.

“America is West—and the wind blowing.”