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Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory and the Nineteenth-Century Traveler in Trans-Allegheny America: F. Trollope, Dickens, Irving and Parkman

Kris Lackey

In addition to their trunks or saddlebags, many travelers in trans-Allegheny America in the early and middle nineteenth century brought with them on their journeys very particular criteria for judging the landscape they encountered from the Ohio Valley to the Rockies. The vogue of western travel during this period coincided with the rise of Romantic consciousness and followed closely upon late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates over the nature of aesthetic perception of landscape. Romantic awareness provided a range of expression for the projective subject and a means of connecting landscape and emotion; and, as a number of studies have demonstrated, the descriptive taxonomy and vocabulary of aesthetic theorists such as Edmund Burke, Uvedale Price, William Gilpin and Richard Payne Knight often shaped the traveler's impressions of "discovered" territory.¹ Together these influences educated the traveler's eye. They taught him or her what qualities and effects to look for in a landscape, how to look for them, how to arrange them, and what to call them. Moreover, this alliance of Romanticism and aesthetic terminology often figured in the political agendas of travelers who bestowed symbolic value on American landscape.

Readers of travel works by Frances Trollope, Washington Irving, Francis Parkman and Charles Dickens will find in these authors' evocations of western landscape the Romantic interplay of nature and spirit (in Trollope somewhat subdued), but the terminology all save Dickens employed to discriminate among various types of visual effects derives from pre-Romantic aesthetic theory

concerned with the content and form of garden landscaping and landscape painting. Late-eighteenth-century debates about “painterly” vision, while they often addressed the problem of subjective participation, concentrated on objective qualities. But the terms they produced to describe visual effects—“beautiful,” “sublime,” “picturesque”—when employed by later writers usually bore the Romantic tension between the inherent and projected qualities of perceived objects. Building upon the established vitality of both Romantic sensibility and eighteenth-century aesthetic theory in nineteenth-century travel writing about America, this essay examines how both influences operate (in some cases conditioning cultural judgment) in four widely-read travel books published between 1832 and 1849: Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the American* (1832), Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), Dickens’ *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) and Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* (1849). Dickens’ and Irving’s books were American bestsellers, the *Notes* selling 50,000 copies in three days (Hart 305, 103). *Domestic Manners* provoked a storm of criticism and inspired the colloquial term “trollope”—an aspersion on America. And *The Oregon Trail* is of course a classic personal vision of the westward expansion. These four works, all of which remain in print, have since their appearance provided for both popular and academic readers a fascinating spectrum of responses, by highly literate observers, to the exploration and/or early settlement of trans-Allegheny America.

When Meriwether Lewis came upon the Great Falls of the Missouri in the late spring of 1805 he was moved to reach beyond the typically dispassionate and empirical voice in which he and his companion recorded information for Jefferson’s great Enlightenment undertaking. Lewis chafed at the restrictions of objective, statistical description that robbed the spectacle of wonder; his initial effort in this vein left him “so much disgusted with the imperfect idea which it conveyed of the scene” that he “determined to draw [his] pen across it and begin again,” this time recording his first *impressions*; he “wished for the pencil of Salvator Rosa . . . or the pen of [James] Thomson” in order to recreate the scene adequately (149). Acknowledging his lack of such skills, Lewis in the end resorted to the critical vocabulary of Edmund Burke (whom he might have read in Jefferson’s library) to distinguish between the visual effects of the lesser and greater falls: “At length I determined between these two great rivals for glory, that this was *pleasingly beautifull*, while the other was *sublimely grand*” (154). The smaller, “beautiful,” cataract “pitches over a shelving rock, with an edge as regular and as streight as if formed by art” (153-54); the “sublime” cascade falls onto “irregular and somewhat projecting rocks below,” where “large roling bodies of the same beaten and foaming water is thrown over . . . the water after descending strikes against the butment . . . on which I stand, and seems to reverberate and being met by the more impetuous courant, they roll and swell into half formed billows of great hight” (148).

Lewis’ struggle to find a satisfactory means of conveying both a correct image and its emotional impact is in fact a search for the happy descriptive

paradigm. The ingenuous anxiety revealed in Lewis' journal de-naturalizes this selective process, exposing its subjective arbitration and erasing, with each rejected approach, still more of the landscape's inherent qualities. Writing of the proposed Indian Territory two decades later, Washington Irving possessed literary skills that allowed him to conceal such anxiety in the interest of creating the illusion that sublimity and beauty, while apprehended by a human mind, also inhere in the forests and prairies of the West: he naturalized the Romantic correspondence.

But the example of Meriwether Lewis, who tried clumsily to be for the nonce what Parkman (echoing Gilpin) would later call a "picturesque tourist" (34), serves to make us sensitive to the textual conditioning of vision in sophisticated popular travel books about the American West. When thousands of nineteenth-century British and American readers first glimpsed trans-Allegheny America in the pages of Trollope, Irving and Parkman, its topography usually appeared as a sequence of vistas, framed, described and evaluated (both objectively and subjectively) in terms borrowed from criticism in the visual arts. Like painters, sculptors and photographers who treated western subjects—Catlin, Remington, Curtis—these writers adapted convention to place and in the bargain transformed place with convention.² In the course of composing a landscape, Parkman, for instance, replaced the picturesque banditti of Salvator Rosa with frontiersmen (56), and Irving transmogrified a heap of sandstone into a Moorish castle (106). Both Americans, like Trollope, brought to their western travels an aesthetic sense informed by transatlantic art and theory: the *phenomenal* landscape of western America as depicted in travel literature owed its form to imported principles of organization. Dickens differs from the other three writers in his comparatively slight attention to formal criteria for appraising landscape. He relies more fully on imaginative projection, which enables him to reconfigure the landscape in accordance with his cultural prejudices.

The reputation of Frances Trollope as an American traveler does not rest on her landscapes. We remember chiefly the bluff Tory persona of *Domestic Manners* (1832), her lively encounters with the republicans, her witty and derisive estimates of American egalitarianism, and of course her diatribes against tobacco juice. Yet she plays the incisive comparatist of landscape with the same sprightly dogmatism that won the admiration of Twain. The terrain of America, no less than its citizens, had to take its place before the Trollopien bar.

While she admitted that America was a land of much rural beauty (146) and that its "clearness and brightness" of atmosphere gave its landscapes an aesthetic advantage over those of England (86), Trollope often complained that the absence of ruins damped interest in the landscape. As she steamed up the Ohio after taking leave of the Nashua colony, she celebrated the varying riparian scenery and the cheering effects it produced by distracting her from brutish riverboat society.

I imagine that this river presents almost every variety of river scenery; sometimes its clear wave waters a meadow of level turf; sometimes it is bounded by perpendicular rocks; pretty dwellings, with their gay porticos are seen, alternately with wild intervals of forest, where the tangled bear-brake plainly enough indicates what inhabitants are native there. (27)

Notwithstanding this pleasant composition, “were there occasionally a ruined abbey, or feudal castle, to mix the romance of real life with that of nature, the Ohio would be perfect” (27).

Later, as she traversed the “Allegheny Alps” on the National Road, Trollope once again praised the “beautiful succession of wild and domestic scenery”:

we were again cheered by abundance of evergreens, reflected in the stream, with fantastic piles of rock, half visible through the pines and cedars above, giving the idea of a vast gothic castle. It was folly, I confess, but I often lamented they were not such; the travelling for thousands of miles, without meeting any nobler trace of the ages that are passed, than a mass of rotten leaves, or a fragment of fallen rock, produces a heavy, earthly, matter-of-fact effect on the imagination, which can hardly be described, and for which the greatest beauty of scenery can furnish only an occasional and transitory remedy. (165-66)

We can note several parallels between Trollope’s remarks on American landscape and eighteenth-century debates over the nature of aesthetic vision. Although the word “picturesque” has a long and complex history (which has been traced by Walter Hippie, Jr.), the technical aesthetic phrase “Picturesque Beauty” was defined and illustrated by William Gilpin in his 1792 work *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to Which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*. Gilpin, who devoted less attention to the psychological bases of aesthetic perception than did Burke, undertook to explain the texture and composition of picturesque scenes—gardens or unimproved landscapes that satisfied the painter’s eye. He singled out *roughness* as the essential quality that distinguished the picturesque from the beautiful, which is smooth and regular (6). His advice to “improvers” (as landscape gardeners were called) was to replace flowering shrubs with rugged oaks, break up smooth walks and mark them with wagon ruts, and “scatter around a few stones and brushwood” in order to produce a picturesque scene (8). As for natural formations that resemble bold architecture, “The spiry pinnacles of the mountains, and the castle-like arrangement of the rock, give no particular pleasures to the picturesque eye. It is fond of the simplicity of nature . . . in her *most usual forms*” (43). However, if, as Trollope found, natural forms suggestive

of human architecture disappoint the eye and the imagination, human architecture itself, Gilpin argued, inspires both: “among the objects of art, the picturesque eye is perhaps most inquisitive after the elegant relics of ancient architecture; the ruined towers, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles, and abbeys” (46). In a subsequent edition of *Domestic Manners* Trollope responded to American critics of her aesthetic bias on this point by arguing that human art, however meager in comparison with the grandeur of unimproved nature, exerts a greater power on the eye because it links us with a vast history of human endeavor (166n).

Despite the renewed political gibe implicit in Trollope’s response, her appended argument echoes the aesthetic theory of Richard Payne Knight, who located the origin of aesthetic response in the viewer’s associations, and not, like Burke, Gilpin and other theorists, in the landscape itself. In *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), Knight subordinated the role of “sensual” delight to that of subjective association in his perceptual model of landscape appreciation. In the “pleasing train of ideas” excited by “the venerable ruin, the retired cottage” (63) lies the genesis of picturesqueness, according to Knight (152). Such associations might include not only memories of landscape paintings (which formalize vision) but also historical musings or fond remembrances of other landscapes. If Trollope was denied a ruined abbey, she found some recompense, as she crossed the Allegheny plateau, in another “pleasing train of ideas”:

I little expected that the first stop which should recall the garden scenery of our beautiful England would be found among the mountains Often on descending the narrow valleys we found a little pot of cultivation, a garden or a field, hedged round These valleys are spots of great beauty (162-63).

In this passage traits of “the beautiful,” as defined by Burke and Gilpin—smoothness, regularity, smallness of scope—enter the associative process described by Knight to render an “English” landscape in America. As Peter Conrad notes, Trollope’s “criteria of beauty and interest are genteel and domestic” (31). By extension, Trollope generally missed in American landscape what she missed in the citizenry—evidence of cultivation, tradition and educated taste—and she typically made these qualities conditions of her aesthetic approval, as she had made them conditions of her cultural approval.

But it is not quite accurate to claim, as Conrad does, that Trollope “objects . . . to nature’s unmannerliness” (31). For all her reservations, Trollope generally relished the sublime experiences a relatively untamed America could offer. As distinct from a “beautiful” or “picturesque” scene, a sublime scene depends less, or not at all, on human artifice in the landscape. Unaided nature can terrify, and according to Burke “Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is

sublime” (96). Writing of the Great Falls of the Potomac, Trollope makes use of Burke’s familiar distinction:

To call this scene beautiful would be a strange abuse of terms, for it is altogether composed of sights and sounds of terror. The falls of the Potomac are awfully sublime: the dark deep gulf which yawns before you, the foaming, roaring cataract, the eddying whirlpool, and the giddy precipice, all seem to threaten life, and to appal the senses. Yet it was a great delight to sit upon a high and jutting crag, and look and listen. (201)

She follows Burke closely here, emphasizing one after another of his criteria for sublimity: power, loudness, obscurity (the dark deep gulf), extent, terror, the excited instinct for self-preservation, and delight made possible by removal from the source of danger (Burke 124, 151, 99, 127, 96, 58, 60). In an earlier and somewhat less touristly passage treating the sublime, she describes the effect of Ohio thunderstorms:

Every thing seems colossal on this great continent; if it rains, if it blows, if it thunders, it is all done *fortissimo*: but I often felt terror yield to wonder and delight; so grand, so glorious were the scenes a storm exhibited. (72)

The metaphor of “exhibited scenes”—a succession of framed vistas whose composition and subject matter effect the sublime—reveals the conventionality and structure even of Trollope’s most exuberant descriptions of the American landscape. Like Gilpin’s “picturesque traveler” she moved through the countryside in pursuit of “new scenes” (Gilpin, *Essays* 47) that would inspire the painterly eye. Her descriptions of these scenes, as well as her expressions of delight or disappointment with them, owe their words and manner to a relatively new kind of landscape appreciation, one that both intensified and formalized human interaction with nature during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The forms this interaction might take, as we have seen, were various; its essence could be instinctual, associational, painterly—or any combination of the three. While the Romantic impulse may be discerned in the sublime moments of Trollope’s narrative, she confines subjective expression to an established vocabulary of responses, resisting extreme fashions of spontaneous emotion or imaginative projection.

The American nature passages in Charles Dickens’ *American Notes* (1842) are by contrast much more deliberately projective—the products of what Conrad calls his “malign magic” (51). Like Trollope, Dickens usually endows his landscapes with cultural criticism. Trollope locates the basis for parallels between landscape and culture in a codified body of aesthetic desiderata. For her, the advantages and shortcomings of the culture may be registered (with reference

to conventional aesthetic criteria) in the aesthetic felicities or disappointments afforded by framed vistas. Dickens, on the other hand, transforms western American landscape with the projective imagination that marks his fiction. Freely employing personification, hyperbole and patterns of imagery, he fashions an impressionistic landscape that accords with his cultural judgment of the western extremity of settlement as a region of isolation, deprivation and decay.

As representatives of western society, Dickens' steamboat company fared little better than Trollope's. He found that "nothing could have made head against the depressing influence of the general body. There was a magnetism of dulness in them . . . Such deadly leaden people; such systematic plodding weary insupportable heaviness" (215). The landscape description succeeding this complaint intensifies the prevailing mood, compounding particulars into a satisfactory novelistic whole:

Nor was the scenery, as we approached the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, at all inspiring in its influence. The trees were stunted in their growth; the banks were low and flat; the settlements and log cabins fewer in number: their inhabitants more wan and wretched than any we had encountered yet . . . Hour after hour, the changeless glare of the hot, unwinking sky, shone upon the same monotonous objects . . . But what words shall describe the Mississippi, great father of rivers. . . . An enormous ditch . . . running liquid mud . . . choked and obstructed everywhere by huge logs and whole forest trees . . . now rolling past like monstrous bodies, their tangled roots showing like matted hair; now glancing by like giant leeches; now writhing round and round in a vortex of some small whirlpool, like wounded snakes . . . mud and slime on everything. (215-6)

A "gorgeous" sunset mitigates the ugliness for a short time, but then the scene becomes "a thousand times more lonesome and more dreary than before" (217).³ The genii of Dickens' animated landscape are the deadly leaden steamboat passengers: boorish, aloof, preoccupied by "tremendous concealments," they roll like social corpses down the father of rivers. The more he saw of America, especially the West, the more Dickens shared Tocqueville's misgivings about the social effects of individualism in America. While American manners, according to the French critic, were "moulded upon the feelings and notions of each individual" (249), the strange issue of this independence was an apparent uniformity of manners. "The people are all alike," Dickens complained of the passengers. "There is no diversity of character" (204).

As the westernmost point of his 1842 tour, the Looking-Glass Prairie outside St. Louis offered Dickens a long-anticipated vista of the spacious frontier.

Whether his expectations were too steep (as he thought) or his recent sojourn in western society too stultifying, the prairie revealed itself a cipher:

It would be difficult to say why, or how—though it was possibly from having heard and read so much about it—but the effect on me was disappointment. Looking out towards the setting sun, there lay, stretched out before my view, a vast expanse of level ground; unbroken, save by one thin line of trees, which scarcely amounted to a scratch upon the great blank; until it met the glowing sky, wherein it seemed to dip: mingling with its rich colours, and mellowing in its distant blue. There it lay, a tranquil sea or lake without water, if such a simile be admissible, with the day going down upon it: a few birds wheeling here and there: and solitude and silence reigning paramount around. . . . Great as the picture was, its very flatness and extent, which left nothing to the imagination, tamed it down and cramped its interest. I felt little of that sense of freedom and exhilaration which a Scottish heath inspires, or even our English downs awaken. It was lonely and wild, but oppressive in its barren monotony. I felt that in traversing the Prairies, I could never abandon myself to the scene, forgetful of all else; as I should do instinctively, were the heather underneath my feet. . . . but should often gaze toward the distant and frequently-receding line of the horizon, and wish it gained and passed. (225-26)

In purely aesthetic terms, the scene, as a picture, lacks variety. In locating a picturesque scene, Gilpin argued, the painter seeks a “happy union of simplicity and variety” that allows for massing. “An extended plain,” he continued, “is a simple object. It is the cultivation of only one uniform idea. . . . the mere *simplicity* of a plain produces no beauty” (28). But Dickens cared less about such criteria than did Trollope. He viewed the landscape in its imaginative potential—its susceptibility to projection and transformation. The Looking-Glass Prairie inhibited rather than excited his imagination. It seemed to him a dead and deadening thing because, I think, it mirrored his growing dissatisfaction with the culture that would overrun it. Several years before Dickens’ visit, Washington Irving had hit on similar descriptive terms for the western prairie of Indian Territory—“vastness and simplicity” (106)—yet for Irving, who was vaunting his patriotism in order to quell suspicions that he had become a European man, the effect was sublime. Irving found in the open plains a natural corollary for the exhilarating spirit of individualism and self-reliance that a young American could develop there (55), but Dickens, who had begun to feel the social oppressiveness engendered by democracy, found just so much space, barren of spiritual promise and romantic inspiration alike.

En route to St. Louis Dickens had steamed past the Big Grave Indian mound in what is now West Virginia. Though not the ruined abbey Frances Trollope had

wished for, the mound was indeed a “nobler trace of the ages that are passed” than were geological formations. Salient among the surrounding natural hills, it furnished what was for Dickens one of very few bright vistas along the Ohio. In Dickensian fashion the scene bears the excesses of interpretive projection: it is a labored emblematic contrast between the “hoarse, sullen” machine transporting similar cargo, and the placid Ohio, which, “as though it shared one’s feelings of compassion for the extinct tribes who lived so pleasantly here, in their blessed ignorance of white existence . . . steals out of its way to ripple near this mound” (205). As Dickens’ meditation extends, in subsequent pages, to the general deforestation of Ohio, he fondly imagines a distant era when American civilization will have vanished and the primordial forests reclaimed the land. At bottom these fantasies reverse Trollope’s aesthetic logic while they partake of her cultural judgments. She shared the common view that ruins added human resonance to the landscape: they nurtured historical reflection by connecting nature with art, and they inspired a racial kinship with the improvers of nature through the ages. Dickens viewed the Big Grave mound as a memento of a primitive society, harmoniously involved with the land, which had given place to the occupation of a narrow and rapacious culture of empty expansionism. The mound’s beauty was, for Dickens, largely the product of association, but in his case the “pleasing train of ideas” does not link modern American civilization with the past; instead, the associations lead backward to a time when it didn’t exist and forward to a time when it won’t. The Looking-Glass Prairie and the Mississippi at Cairo suggested only the bleak course of emigration, whereas the Big Grave mound represented the comforting ephemerality of American culture.

It was only coincidence, I think, that Dickens gave himself over completely to an American landscape only after he had crossed into Canada and found a civilization more to his liking. The Canadian vantage of Niagara Falls offered him solitude, and he wished to “shun strange company” while he viewed the falls for ten days. His description of the spectacle commences in good Romantic fashion with a sequence of subjective responses: he is “stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene . . . the first effect, the enduring one— instant and lasting—of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind, Tranquility” (242-43). As if to emphasize the peculiarity of such a reaction, Dickens takes pains to distinguish it from a conventional sublime experience: he feels “nothing of gloom or terror” (243). The Boz sublime admits of no theoretical prescription. It arises spontaneously from imaginative absorption in the landscape, it obliterates care, and it manifests itself in a compound of physical description and sentimental fantasy.⁴ The play of light and shadow on the falls, summoning images of angels’ tears, speaking visages, and ghosts (243-44), restores that sense of exhilarating self-abandonment Dickens had felt on the heath and missed at the Looking-Glass Prairie. “Oh how the strife and troubled daily life receded from my view,” he says of his Niagara sojourn (243), and he clearly means the burden of his western experience. The mound at Big Grave had freed Dickens’ imagination from immediate historical involvement by inspiring a

reverie that contracted and displaced history, leaving the Romantic self in an untenanted paradise. The conclusion of Dickens' passage on Niagara Falls leaves him pondering the moment when "Darkness brooded on the deep, and that first flood before the Deluge—Light—came rushing on Creation at the word of God" (244). For Dickens, it would seem, the American landscape served a radically Romantic function, assuming the fantastic shapes of his disappointments and desires. If it overpowered ugly historical circumstances, it was a version of paradise; if it evoked them, it was a kind of hell.

Preceding Dickens' *Notes* by only a few years, Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835) recounts his rambling in 1832 over what was to be Indian Territory, and later Oklahoma. Irving's book poses more rhetorical difficulties than *American Notes* because its narrator is more clearly a persona, in this case designed to effect Irving's rapprochement with his readers in the United States. In creating this persona Irving had to tread a fine line, for while his readers expected a genteel, cosmopolitan narrator who could draw upon his European experience to embellish his writing and draw contrasts between Continental and American scenery, they wanted proof of his commitment to American experience. Irving's self-portrait in the pages of *A Tour* is thus fashioned to garner maximum political capital from what he knew was the most American of enterprises—a journey to the frontier. His readers understood that when Irving advocated sending young men out west—to toughen them and instill in them the individualism and self-reliance demanded by American political institutions—instead of to Europe, where they might be effeminized (55), he was describing his own regimen in reverse.

The persona of *A Tour*, in short, obscures the author's uneasiness with home as found (not to mention his improvidence, haughtiness and nervousness on the trail, as noted by his companions). Although Irving's reservations about the American society he returned to coincided with some of Dickens' objections (Williams II, 77), he took care to avoid sensitive ideological issues in *A Tour*, instead endowing this persona with the sort of bland, floating patriotism evident in the remark about western acculturation. Irving's sophisticated and enthusiastic treatment of western landscape fits nicely into such a program in two respects. First, Romantic impressions of the landscape in *A Tour* arise from the sensibility of a genial and nearly ahistorical persona. Second, the objective landscape is translated as a picture, with some reference to the theoretical criteria (especially those relating to the sublime) that we have discussed in connection with Trollope. Both features set Irving's book apart from Dickens' *Notes*, in which the perceiving mind bristles with historical prejudices and creates its own aesthetic.

There is little need to reexamine Irving's debt to aesthetic theory throughout *A Tour*. However, a brief recapitulation of his treatment of the prairie as a symbolic landscape provides a helpful contrast for both Dickens' and Parkman's prairie extracts. Like Dickens, Irving stood on the verge of the open prairie at the most western point of his tour. The term "prairie," of course, is a relative one, for Irving looked out over a larger, emptier expanse than did Dickens at the Looking-

Glass Prairie outside St. Louis—and neither of them saw the high plains traversed by Parkman in 1846. Yet in both *American Notes* and *A Tour* the prairie appears, in its palpable difference, a uniquely American landscape, and in a fashion reminiscent of the Alps in *The Prelude* it marks the topographical climax in both books. The extreme and divergent responses to the prairie recorded by Dickens and Irving thus chart their respective political agendas when these programs are brought to bear on a symbolic place—a place full as much in the mind as on the continent. Dickens relies on the fiction of spontaneous impression to naturalize the prairie—that is, to affirm its essence as discrete from his prejudices. Irving takes a different tack, though his goal is the same. He creates the illusion of objectivity by identifying the prairie’s physical features with those features of landscape Burke claimed would produce the sublime. (Unlike Richard Payne Knight, who contended that aesthetic responses grow purely out of association, Burke held that the object itself engenders the sublime effect.) Rhetorically, Irving operates on the basis of informed judgment among fixed aesthetic alternatives rather than by simple ingenuousness, and with this strategy he gains the cogent fiction of a seamless and inherent identity of the object, its aesthetic qualities, and the subject’s response.

After a tedious march through gullied and difficult country, Irving’s party

emerged upon a grand prairie. Here one of the characteristic scenes of the Far West broke upon us. An immense extent of grassy, undulating, or, as it is termed, rolling country, with here and there a clump of trees, dimly seen in the distance like a ship at sea; the landscape deriving sublimity from its vastness and simplicity. (106)

He had earlier observed that a “thunderstorm on the prairie, as upon the ocean, derives grandeur and sublimity from the wild and boundless waste over which it rages and bellows” (103). And during a subsequent pause on the prairie he notes that “there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie” (175).

Irving’s prairie occupies and divides space differently than Trollope’s Potomac Falls, but the sublimity of each scene arises from a visual impetus expressly characterized by Burke, whose *Enquiry* Irving prescribed for himself in 1810 (*Journals* II, 27). The falls inspire awe with noise, power, a “rugged or broken surface,” and a perpendicular orientation (Burke 124, 128). The prairie excites similar emotions, but it does so in an apparently opposite manner—through “general privations” such as vacuity, solitude and silence (Burke 125), and through “succession and *uniformity* of parts” that “constitute the artificial infinite” (Burke 132):

Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. . . . the eye not being able to perceive the

bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. (Burke 129-130)

Recapitulating Burke on the artificial infinite, Uvedale Price says that “Infinity is one of the most efficient causes of the sublime; the boundless ocean, for that reason, inspires awful sensations” (84). The illustration also belongs to Burke, who cites the sea as a more terrible example of infinity than the only other horizontal scape that can produce it—“A level plain of a vast extent on land” (97).

Irving did not, of course, borrow the parallel from Burke: the sea metaphor in literature about the prairie was conventional before the mid-point of the century. Rather, like Melville, who compared the sperm whale’s brow to the prairie in its power to awaken “dread powers,” Irving found in Burke’s criteria the path to an objective correlative for the awe he wanted his readers to share as he beheld the grand prairie of the American West.

With a fresh Harvard law degree, Francis Parkman set out from his Beacon Hill home in the spring of 1846 to see the West. He had two primary motives for undertaking this adventure: he wanted a rest from his studies, and he wanted to get some first-hand experience of the emigration with an eye toward beginning a history of the English and French in America. In the end, the recuperation he sought complicated his neurotic ailments, and the emigrants he encountered along the Oregon Trail disgusted him. Bernard DeVoto has argued that Parkman’s Brahmin snobbery, manifested in his rejection of the “coarse, crude folk who were the movement he traveled with . . . denied our culture a study of the American empire at the moment of its birth” (112). But if the emigrants disappointed Parkman, the emigration itself—and the vast canvas on which it was enacted—did not. Despite misgivings about democracy and the bent of the common people, he celebrated the westward expansion as a testament to Anglo-Saxon perseverance in the American wilderness (see Van Tassel). In *The Oregon Trail* (1849) Parkman records these varied responses in the context of adjusting his readers’ notions (and his own) about the conditions and terrain faced by emigrants. The romantic West—one resembling Irving’s Cimarron valley, apparently laid out by the hand of taste—did indeed exist, and Parkman paid it its due, but he discovered another West as well—a bleak, violent desert beyond Irving’s gardens, starker than his sublime prairie. In other words, he is at pains to describe an uncanny environment, one that will explain both the prevailing “fear and dissension” (50) of wagon train members struggling over the prairie and intermontane “deserts,” and the perplexity of some former backwoodsmen who are “totally out of their element” on the prairie (89). In so doing he can at once mitigate the unsavory or pitiable conduct of the emigrants he encounters and blend them into the grand setting of his relatively unfettered individual adventure.

As a “spectator” of western landscape, Parkman shows that he is well versed in the argot of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. He handles its distinctions in a conventional manner, making greater use of them than Irving. Parkman does

share with the *Sketch-Book* author the ability to naturalize the interplay of subject and object by creating detailed, painterly vistas from which the Romantic response seems to develop organically. In this respect both authors place a degree of emphasis on the object, with regard to its composition and aesthetic type, that is consistent with the concerns of Gilpin or Burke, while engaging the feeling self in typically Romantic fashion. In certain passages of *The Oregon Trail*, however, Parkman stakes a special claim outside the purview of both Romantic and picturesque travelers. Adjusting his readers' conception of the West sometimes requires a new traveling posture—that of the realist who can put aside conventional visions of the West and attest to the desolation of some stretches of the Rockies and the ugliness of the high plains.

These instances of ekphrasis (assertions of verity, based on contrasts with “less-than-realistic” expressions) appear at the passages into and out of a band of undulating prairie east of the high plains. The rolling prairie, “a wide and fertile belt” (34), meets all the requirements of the “beautiful”: a “land of gardens” (19) that needs no improvement, no “foreign aid,” it has “all the softened and polished beauty of a region that has been for centuries under the hand of man” (25). According to Parkman the landscapes of this band

will probably answer tolerably well to [a traveler's] preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets, and novelists, who have seldom penetrated farther, have derived their conceptions of the entire region. If he has a painter's eye, he may find his period of probation [before entering the high plains] not wholly void of interest. The scenery, though tame, is graceful and pleasing.
(34)

And upon regaining the area in-bound, Parkman repeats that “These are the prairies of the poet and the novelist” (283). West of this region, however, a traveler following the Platte valley must relinquish for a time the “paradise of his imagination” (34) as he encounters not only the climatic violence and formidable terrain of the great plains—double bane of the emigrants—but a distinctly *unparadisiacal* landscape: “it had not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any of the features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness. . . . a barren, trackless waste” (55-6). Parkman follows Irving in his strategy of emphasizing the aesthetic uniqueness of the plains with the help of a conventional critical vocabulary. But in accordance with his realist's posture, he does so by rejecting all three aesthetic categories (though hedging some on the sublime) as insufficient to describe the Platte valley. Instead, he recounts his odd reaction: “It was right welcome; strange, too, and striking to the imagination.” “The naked landscape,” he continues, is “monstrous enough; and yet the wild beasts and wild men . . . make it a scene of interest and excitement” (55-56).

Parkman, I think, is trying to shed artifice in his rendering of the Platte valley. To get at the stark but haunting essence of the place, he eschews the painterly mode (in which he elsewhere demonstrates talent) because it subdues and conventionalizes the landscape; he shuns effusive expressions of the sublime for the same reason—the formulaic sublime smacks of hyperbole, insincerity and, worst, effeteness. The high plains desert being traversed by weary emigrants calls for a vocabulary of studiously candid descriptive terms, and it demands as well a peculiarly understated response: it is barren and monstrous, strange and right welcome.

Parkman repeats this ekphrastic gesture only once, in his description of a stretch of mountains, near Ft. Laramie, which he passed with a band of Ogillallah (P's spelling): "On the next morning we entered again among the mountains. There was nothing in their appearance either grand or picturesque, *though* they were desolate to the last degree, being mere piles of black and broken rocks, without trees or vegetation of any kind" (203-4, my ital.). In other words, the barrenness and desolation of this landscape do not add up to a sublime effect; there is neither painterly interest nor anything that might awaken the delightful fear Burke associates with the sublime.

As if to bolster the authority of his discrimination, Parkman characterizes the landscape through which his party marches the very next day as "a sublime waste, a wilderness of mountains and pine-forests, over which the spirit of loneliness and silence seemed brooding" (206). The privative sublime, it would seem, can be found in the mountains as well as on Irving's prairie, but both require some pictorial stimulant of the proper emotion.

In the course of extracting from *Domestic Manners, American Notes, A Tour on the Prairies* and *The Oregon Trail* a variety of interpretive paradigms and strategies for dealing with western landscape, I have necessarily overlooked and simplified some issues. For example, Parkman and Irving often blur the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Moreover, the focus on passages that contain aesthetic terminology exaggerates somewhat the role of these terms in the profusion of descriptive passages in Trollope, Irving and Parkman. Such are the hazards of emphasis. Nonetheless, the vocabulary of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, in addition to supplying the taxonomy of vistas, establishes a common ground of aesthetic judgment between the traveler and the sophisticated reader. As we have seen, this terminology does not always have description as its end. In various ways, it serves Trollope, Irving and Parkman as a conduit for cultural and political judgment—a vehicle for connecting landscape with social enterprise. The "objectivity" that is supposed to inhere in these terms bestows a rhetorical authority on such judgment, while further naturalizing the identity of terrain and culture. In *American Notes* Dickens makes small use of the vocabulary of aesthetic theory while delivering his cultural appraisals by way of a thoroughly projective and symbolic landscape. The most fully Romantic of the four travelers, Dickens internalizes the landscape and so gains authority from a different quarter—the rhetorical "ingenuous" self—by

concealing epistemological system.

Meriwether Lewis threw down his pencil at the falls of the Missouri because his descriptive paradigms had failed him. A second try yielded somewhat more satisfactory results in the form of Burke's categories, yet Lewis keenly missed the powers of the poet and painter in his desire to capture the wonderful force of the Missouri as it fell toward the high plains. His hermeneutic deliberation, recounted with the immediacy and candor characteristic of a journal entry, lays bare the process—and limitations—of choosing a handle for western landscape. If some of the literary travelers in the half century after his trek effectively obscured such arbitration in the interest of naturalizing their descriptions of landscape, we can, by tracing both the influence of aesthetic theory and the motives behind their cultural judgments, detect in their books patterns of choice masquerading as seamless perception.

Notes

1. Donald Ringe, examining the importance of both contemporary landscape painting and eighteenth-century aesthetic theory in the works of Bryant, Irving and Cooper, demonstrates the connections between these influences and the creation the symbolic landscapes that transmit the authors' "visions of both the possibilities and the dangers of American life" (54). Christopher Mulvey demonstrates the extent to which judgments of British travelers in America were shaped by eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. Kent Ljungquist, in a study of Poe's landscapes, traces the philosophical, literary and epistemological background of these aesthetic theories, and he notes that "what occurred in America from approximately 1820 to 1860 was a full-scale reaction of eighteenth-century aesthetics that acquired a peculiarly native flavor" (14). And in a study of prairie literature that appeared as this article was undergoing revisions, Robert Thacker devotes passages to Irving and Parkman (among many other writers) in a broad examination of aesthetic and literary conventions operant in writings about the prairie.

2. Thacker discusses the adaptation of landscape conventions to paintings and sketches of the prairie by George Catlin, Paul Kane, Alfred Jacob Miller and other painters (56-69).

3. Mulvey observes that Dickens's description of the Mississippi accords with the anti-romantic responses of many British travelers (221).

4. Conrad views Dickens's response to the falls as disingenuous and primarily rhetorical: the syntax of Dickens "is as automatic as the emotions" (13). But Mulvey's assessment of the passage—that Dickens is a Victorian struggling with a Romantic emotion at this "quasi-religious moment" (194)—strikes me as a more accurate accounting for Dickens' turgid expression.

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