

Mountain Majesties above Fruited Plains: Culture, Nature, and Rocky Mountain Aesthetics

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Those residing in the Rocky Mountains enjoy both nature and culture in ways not characteristic of many inhabited landscapes. Landscapes elsewhere in the United States and in Europe involve a nature-culture synthesis. An original nature, once encountered by settlers, has been transformed by a dominating culture, and on the resulting landscape, there is little experience of primordial nature. On Rocky Mountain landscapes, the model is an ellipse with two foci. Much of the landscape is in synthesis, but there is much landscape where the principal determinant remains spontaneous nature, contrasted with the developed, rebuilt landscape in which the principal determinant is culture. Life in the Rockies permits both use and admiration of nature (fruited plains), with constant reminders (mountain majesties) that the human scale of values is rather tentatively localized in a more comprehensive environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

My home for a third of a century has been the Rocky Mountains. Those who live in the Rockies find that nature becomes a defining part of our existence, palpably affecting our sense of presence. Environmental aesthetics in the Rocky Mountains is dwelling with the earth and sky; the sense of human presence and achievement is always in the ambience of cosmic forces that both support and limit our residence. This geographical setting is crucial to our sense of well-being; the same job, the same family moved to Indianapolis, subtracting the big outdoors, would not be the same lifestyle.

My previous third of a century was lived in the East; my family roots lie in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia; there too is a rich aesthetics of nature, but with a difference. The East has the Jeffersonian landscape: the rural countryside that idealizes the hard work and achievement of the farmer, culturing nature, agriculturing nature. The New Englanders, the Southerners, bringing their lifestyles over from England and Europe, cut down the forests and built for themselves a composite environment. We in the Rocky Mountain West, though we too reside in a composed environment, have never been far away from the wild environment. The West has the Pinchot-Muir cognitive dissonance: a landscape utilized versus primordial nature.

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The beauty of this landscape is that the human residents thereon are daily set in a world not entirely developed by human artifice for human interests. The great vista of life on Earth is still evident on the horizon of the local landscape. I live toward the edge of town, a comfortable home. If you just step outside, look West to the horizon, there the mountains are.

II. AN ELLIPTICAL LANDSCAPE

Typically, the inhabited world is a Hegelian landscape: nature is the thesis; culture is the antithesis; and what results is a synthesis of nature and culture. At best, that is an ideal, not always reached in the real. The ideal model is an attractive gardenized landscape, sustainably managed, well-kept nature. At worst, the real, we often lament, is a blighted landscape, but even that dis/synthesis is an ugly sort of nature-culture synthesis. As usually formulated, the Hegelian dialectic suggests rather strongly that original nature, the thesis, both is and ought to be entirely transformed in the synthesis. Original nature passes over into something else: humanized nature.

One treats the landscape as a human product, subject to active management, aimed at goals that humans collectively desire, some balancing of aesthetic amenities and functional commodities. One does not ask how the landscape evolved, or what its pristine character was; one asks why human actors did this here and that there. If we did it well, nature is blessed by the human transformation; nature artifactual is both useful and a work of art. This is landscape architecture.

By contrast, the Rockies are an elliptical landscape. Take that model first in the metaphorical sense: a landscape that tends to be ambiguous and cryptic, at once excessively extreme, often truncated and abruptly changing. Next, take the model mathematically. We can make analogical sense of this elliptical landscape by recalling from geometry how an ellipse is generated under the constraints of two foci (not under the radius of one focal center, as with a circle). On the Rocky Mountain landscape some events are generated under the dominant control of a *culture* focus; such events are in the "urban" zone, where *urban* marks those arts and achievements where the contributions of spontaneous nature are no longer evident in the criteria of evaluation, though they remain among the precursor and supporting events.

At the other extreme, a *wild* region of events is generated by another focus: spontaneous *nature*. These events take place in the absence of humans; they are what they are in themselves—pasqueflowers in the spring, coyotes howling on a summer's night, aspen trembling in the wind. A domain of *synthetic* or *hybrid* events is generated under the simultaneous control of both foci, under the sway variously of more and less nature and culture. Nature is re-directed into cultural channels, pulled into the human orbit. Our labor and craft put natural properties to use, mixing the two to good effect in agricultural or rural or (we might say) "sub"-urban landscapes. In much of the arena of the ellipse, culture is pulling on the picture of nature; so there we do find Hegelian synthetic nature. Yet synthesis is not the whole picture.

Synthesis, the noun, is a positive enough word; but the adjective, *synthetic*, in our nature-culture discussion takes on a pejorative tone. Perhaps we might better use the parallel, more positive biological term: *symbiosis*; most of the area of the ellipse is a "symbiotic" landscape.

An ellipse is, etymologically, a defective circle; and, elsewhere "back East" (as we say) or in the Old World (so-called), those long settled peoples might take our Rocky Mountain landscape as defective, because our world has not yet been perfectly humanized. This New World (much of it inhabited by "Westerners" for only a century and a half) is so recent that nature has not yet been fully domesticated and managed. But we new "Westerners" take this "defect" to be one of the glories of the Rocky Mountain landscape. The twin foci here permit binocular vision; we see with more depth than those on the anthropocentric landscapes.

To those who suppose that they live in the "Old World" and that ours is a still too "New World," we reply by flipping over this claim and celebrating how we, living in recently settled parts, still have with us the original "old world." The pre-cultural archaic and ever-elemental world foundations are much in evidence on our landscapes. True, even back East, relict wilderness remains, in the Maine woods or the Okefenokee swamp. But there one has to hunt for it; out West it is more obvious and in your face.

On more domesticated landscapes, the human inhabitants may say they have reached the end of nature—the end, that is, of wild nature. So they may set good stewardship as their environmental policy. They think sustainable development a beautiful thing. But we rejoice that on this Western landscape Bill McKibben need not lament that "we live in a postnatural world," in "a world that is of our own making," that "we live at the end of nature."¹ So far from lamenting that our landscape falls short of being fully humanized, we in the mountain West might even want to say that others on more intensively cultivated landscapes are "deprived." The Rockies is the high-quality, indeed, the more healthy landscape.² Their over-civilized territory is the defective landscape. Maybe they don't miss the wildness on their skyline. Too bad. We also notice that these Easterners and Old Worlders come here as tourists in droves, and what they most want to see is not our cities but our national parks—the Grand Canyon, the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone—or our wilderness areas, the Bob Marshalls or the Frank Church River-of-No-Return Wilderness.

"Dualism" is out of style—so most philosophers seem to think. They hope to rid us of the nature/culture distinction, a sad legacy of Descartes and his mind/body dualism. Culture—say these pragmatists, or postmodernists, or deconstructionists, or anti-foundationalists, or pluralists (or whatever they call themselves)—is still

¹ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), pp. 60, 85, 175. Later, McKibben found more hope for wildness returning in his native Adirondacks, with a gentler human presence in *Hope, Human and Wild* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

² Terry C. Daniel, "The Legendary Beauty of the Rocky Mountain Region: Is It More than Skin Deep?" *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 24 (1988): 18-23.

natural; humans are part of nature. Get people and nature together, integrated in mind and body; get culture and nature integrated on your landscape. Humanized nature is all we have got, or ever can have. Or, if you are epistemologically sophisticated (= non-realist), humanized nature is all we have ever had; nature is always contaminated with our minds. Only the naively unreflective will think either that there is a wild landscape, or if there were, that humans could know it. There is no natural system any more, and there never was any aesthetics of wild nature that was not in the eye of the beholder. Nature is always a social construction.

Maybe so. But, we in the West still have a certain sense of dualism on our landscape. Outdoors at least, we don't have that much problem telling where culture stops and wild nature starts. One good icon for this boundary is when one parks the car, shoulders a backpack, and, half a mile in, crosses the wilderness boundary. Yes, the Indian Peaks wilderness was designated so ("constructed," if you like) by Act of Congress; but yes equally: this is country "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain, ... retaining its primeval character and influence ... and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable" (Wilderness Act of 1964).³ This is not architected landscape; nor is there art; and now our aesthetic challenge is different. Yes, there is the eye of the beholder; but, equally, wild nature is there to behold. Back home, we cultivated the landscape; we have a settled sense of place; here, in a world not our own, we realize what it is like to be "a natural alien."⁴

For a century now, Americans have sung of their "purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain."⁵ Katharine Lee Bates, an Easterner, was inspired to compose her famous hymn during a trip to Pike's Peak, and we who reside in this West still take those classic American complements and contrasts of beauty to be nowhere better exemplified than here. If we were to use the old Michelin Guide ranking, we live on a four-star landscape.

III. FRUITED, ARID PLAINS

We do live on this landscape, and thereby there is something of a paradox. We inhabit both the mountains and the plains. The mountains are thought more scenic; people may prefer to dwell there for second homes or if their income is derived from outside the region. But more typically if Westerners draw their living from this landscape, they dwell on the lowlands. The plains or foothills are where our towns and most year-round residential development occur; mountain living is rather strenuous, steep, seasonal. This grassland landscape is at once fruitful and

³ U.S. Congress, *Wilderness Act of 1964*, Sec. 2(c). Public Law 88-577. U.S. Stat 891.

⁴ Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

⁵ Katharine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful."

semi-arid. The short-grass prairie (ecologists would rather we called it the steppe), when used for range or plowed for grain, is productive; but then again not all that user friendly either. Here again we compare our West with the better-watered and often milder East. We often conclude that, dealing with this dry and open landscape, the best thing is not to try to judge it by comparisons with Europe or with eastern North America.

Life on the range is not the storybook farm. The ranchhouse, more often than not, is nowhere in sight. When the house comes in sight, even with its barns, the home place is modest, not the commanding element in the scene. The landscape scale is too big, whether of wheatfields, rangelands, or even the potato farms. Large even in the Old West, the fields are still larger in the modern West because agriculture has moved toward monocultures. One needs to be efficient to make food cheap. Big machinery operates in big fields—so far as is possible uniform, rectangular, flattened fields, because the odd gully or rock outcrop is a troublemaker for the tractors.

In much of the West, the only thing you can really raise unirrigated is wheat. A grain of wheat is quite small, and if you are going to feed a nation, you need millions of bushels of wheat. Raising wheat is a considerable human achievement—recall Cyrus McCormick and his reaper—but the big machines are working big nature. Wheatlands replace grasslands and this simplifies the landscape, but then too the grassland ecologists, now that they can sequence DNA, have found that the grasslands were nearer monoculture than we thought. Many of the grasses here spread as much by runners and shoots as by seeds, and a square mile of grassland may be clones from a few original plants. Wheat too, of course, is a grass. Wheat or native grasslands, one has to learn to enjoy this steppe.

Easterners, and even more the Europeans, will complain that the plains are bland-scapes that lack diversity, lack the subtlety of the better-watered, better-composed, more topographically diverse landscapes back home, where the rural landscapes have the time-honored features: smaller and more diverse fields, woodlots, ponds, fences, old barns, bends in the roads, knolls, churches, cemeteries, creeks.⁶ Those are "charming" landscapes indeed, at their legendary best. But when Westerners go "back East," they have a space lag, a time lag. On Rocky Mountain scales, the Old World is Lilliputian; the countryside is quaint (despite their advanced urban developments, sprawling into that countryside). The West is big country, the wide open spaces. This is not pasture; it is range. Our landscape is not "charming" but "awesome." One needs aesthetic sensibilities for features "en masse," as on desert or tundra. Stooped down on the ground, one admires the gentle curve of the inch-long inflorescence at the tip of a spike of blue gramma grass, brush-like spikelets so well aligned on one side; and then you lift your eyes to realize that you are looking at billions of them.

⁶ J. B. Jackson, "The New American Countryside: An Engineered Environment," *Landscape* 16, no. 1 (1966): 16-20; J. A. Walter, "You'll Love the Rockies," *Landscape* 27 (no. 2, 1983): 43-47.

Fields are the primary element of the agricultured landscape, and the Mountain West is at times a heavily transformed landscape. The Idaho spud farms were built by much irrigation and labor. On the wheat fields of eastern Washington huge aggressive tractors seem to have plowed up every inch of the landscape. But then with an over-the-shoulder glance the Tetons are on the skyline of many of these potato fields. Looking up at the open sky, the wheat fields are still big, and the tractors seem smaller. If the mountains are out of sight, the waving wheat reveals the constant wind. One wonders if there will be enough rain to make the wheat crop, and realizes again that humans are delimited in their powers. Agriculture in a land of limited rain permits both use and admiration of the land, with constant reminders (drought, heat, wintry or alpine cold) that the human scale of values is rather tentatively localized on a much larger environment. Nature is lurking nearby.

If the land is better settled and irrigated, there will be roads and fences along the range and section lines, squared off, with the human range and township grid imposed on the once-wild and vast plains. From high ground, these have aesthetic pattern; the long straight roads meeting at right angles and disappearing in the distance combine a sense of human presence probing vast open spaces. The checkerboard grid ignores the landscape, at least as long as it can, until it meets a bluff or creekbed floodplain and the engineers were forced to relocate the road around it. Or there will be the sweep of the great rotating arms of the center pivot irrigation systems, seen so well by those who travel by air. On the ground, the line of spray forms a pleasing arc. These superimpositions overlay human-introduced formal geometrical qualities on the landscape, but the scale remains oversized and the result continues the same tension of culture versus nature that characterizes the whole landscape. There is irrigated greenery, but its limits are evident, and the vast, arid, unwatered landscape still dominates.

Though we are celebrating the Rocky Mountain "environment," the plains are not "green," certainly not in contrast to the conifers in the mountains. Much of the year the landscape is brown; if raised on greener lands, one needs to acclimate to a tan world. But this aridity gives the landscape its character; it makes the air clear, the sky blue. It subdues the landscape colors, one sees soils between the bunch passes, earth tones complementing the blues, whites, grays of the sky. Even when the landscape is green, it isn't really so by Eastern and European standards; one needs a more subtle aesthetics to celebrate the grey-purple colors of the sage (along with the smell); and the blue gramma is so named because it is more blue grey than green. So too the junipers.

One enjoys the cottonwood silhouettes against the horizon in winter, without green at all. Not infrequently there is a marked reversal of the usual coloring of dark trunks and light sky. There is darkened sky overhead, but toward sunset the sun drops so low as to break through from the West with light enough to illuminate the trees; the tree trunks are white against a darkening sky. And with the dark night, often clearing, in the dry, cold air, one can see more stars (so it seems at least) than anywhere else in the world.

The prairie can be a productive landscape, the breadbasket of the nation. Thanks to novel strains and ingenious methods of cultivation (such as summer fallow wheat or crowfoot cultivators), the growing of wheat has proved possible on drier lands and moved further toward the Rockies, though always memories of the dust bowl chasten our confidence. Aesthetic experience on these agricultural lands lies in the interaction of the natural forces in, with, and under what is arranged for by human intervention. The curves in the fields are from the plowshare blades, as the wheat was sown. The lay of the wheat on the land is perhaps not "picturesque." But the fields do have form, sweep, symmetry; in the distance they join with mountains or sky. The growth is under sun and rain; the wind that waves the fields blows where it wills. The wind in wheat or grass gives to the earth also a flowing motion. But really that ground motion is sky motion. Prairie action is wind and weather, light and shadow, clouds and sky. Half of the beauty on this landscape is in the sky, pouring with light, blue open space, the clouds always forming and reforming.

The transforming of the landscape even brings some aesthetic benefits that are natural. Ring-necked pheasants were once introduced from China, but so long ago and so well have they habituated to the agricultured plains that they seem now to belong there. Irrigation dams and water releases according to crop needs have evened out the river flows, and there are more willows and cottonwoods along the riparian zones, with more perching birds. The lakes on the plains are all artificial reservoirs, in contrast to the mountain lakes, mostly glacial and natural. But the big reservoirs do bring the waterfowl: ducks, mergansers, grebes in diversity, geese by the millions, bald eagles by the hundreds.

Much of the plains is harvested, but mostly it is not. Mostly it is "range," wide open spaces, maybe with some cattle in the distance, especially if it is "greenup time" (as spring may be called here) and there has been rain enough to make a little grass. Look closely, though, if the animal color is more tan than cattle, earth tones again, they are antelope—always wary. If you stop to put binoculars on them, they will be off and running. Admire the animal form in graceful locomotion, a dozen of them flowing across the plains, approaching the speed of your automobile, disappearing over the slope, their flow blending with the grasses in the wind.

In their wild autonomy and rhythmic beauty, they make the cows look tame, motionless. Wait, isn't that a golden eagle perched on the fence post a little left of where the pronghorns disappeared? Yes, and we've spooked the eagle too; it's taking off. Get your binoculars on it and admire the flight as it climbs to soar, huge dark golden wings against the blue sky. Wild lives raise the excitement level; the untrammelled quality of their lives raises the quality of the human experience.

This is a land that doesn't like fences; fencing the West was an impressive human achievement. New England was for picket or stone fences; Kentucky was, and still is, for white board fences. Here the land is so vast and treeless that it was not until the coming of barbed wire that the land could be fenced. Now there are fences aplenty; but, unless cattle are currently on the range, the fence lines are more likely to have breakdowns than not. Roadside there are fences to protect the

cattle and the motorists, but on a day's drive in the West you are more than likely to cross a cattle gate and be in open range country.

Driving across Wyoming or Colorado, there are those ghost towns, or abandoned ranches, reminders of failed settlements. The old farmhouse, a ruin, again with failing fences, invites us to reminisce about the past. But the cabin is failing into ruin because it is incessantly weatherbeaten by an ever-present, returning nature. There is a sense of the transience of human endeavors. One can find such ruins back East, as I recall from hiking the Appalachian Trail. Given a chance, nature returns East and West. But out West the struggle for survival lurks large on the landscape, not only in the wildness of the antelope and the eagles, but in the legacies of the pioneer, the settler, the mountain man, the cowboy.

In the city, there may be empty stores, but this is without the sense of being conquered by nature. On landscapes back East, the abandoned buildings, empty stores, faded signs, unkempt farms with a half dozen old cars and tractors about the barn look—well—just trashy. But on Rocky Mountain prairies or mountains the old cabin with the roof fallen in, or the abandoned corral, convey more—a sense of the forceful resistance of nature to our human enterprises. Trashy perhaps they still are, but these ruins surrounded by and being overcome by the returning forces of nature change the aesthetic framework. There are lichens growing on the broken bricks, and a tree now grows in a corner of what was once the kitchen. The ruined cabin is not, of course a work of art—although the original location may have been chosen with some view in mind. No artist intended for us here to have any aesthetic experience. But the scene is somber and picturesque, and the conflict between primordial nature and the culture that once sought to modify it, with the once and future nature now returning, is essential to the aesthetic mood.

IV. MAJESTIC, AWESOME MOUNTAINS

Rocky Mountain aesthetics moves from plains to peaks, from the horizontal to the vertical, with a continuing sense of space, freedom, distance, magnitude, and contrast. The cities in the Colorado Front Range lie at the breaks of the plains; the mountains rise up a few miles West. Likewise in Utah, though there east and west are reversed with the Wasatch range on the eastern skyline. In western Montana the cities are in the valleys. In western Wyoming, Idaho, or northern New Mexico, the towns lie where they do commanded by the surrounding presence of mountains—often because the mountains dictate where the rivers run. The mountains dictated where railroads could cross the nation (the Union Pacific or the Santa Fe), or before that the wagon trails (the Oregon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail).

Today the railroads are there (though not many compared to the East); there are roads through the passes; indeed, there are interstate highways crossing the Rockies (though east-west really only one crossing each state). In the mountains these roads can no longer be squared off on the grid. The mountains must be worked around on the ground; and the grid, still evident enough on the maps, is largely

an abstraction. The Rockies are so big and difficult to cross that nowadays we fly; from the air, looking down immediately at the ranges, the straight state boundary lines, on meridians and parallels on the maps, seem quite outlandish. Mountains dominate the topography and the mindsets of those who engage them. The Rockies are the really big mountains. True, the Appalachians are to be respected; but the Colorado mountains start up from the plains at the same elevation at which the Great Smokies top out. This is where the Continental Divide is, the real "high country."

Montana takes its name from its mountains. Colorado has fifty summits over 14,000 feet; no other state comes close. There are roads to the top of only two. There is more alpine land in my home county (Larimer) than in all of Switzerland. Only five percent of the Earth's surface is 10,000 feet or higher; for most of Earth's inhabitants the lofty land is out of sight and out of mind. But not here. In Denver two million people have alpine wilderness on their skyline (Mount Evans Wilderness) to the West; on a clear day one can see Pike's Peak to the south and Long's Peak to the north, the two great landmarks of the early prairie travelers. Utah claims "the greatest snow on Earth," and Salt Lake City can see snow-clad peaks in the distance.

In New York or Philadelphia you can forget you are on a landscape. In Manhattan, the skyscrapers are impressive; they are icons for the total domination of the landscape by humans. Even in the great Eastern seaboard cities, the sea remains, since the Atlantic may also be on the horizon; but there the land is ours, and the skyscrapers are proof of our human power. But in Denver, the skyscrapers are hardly so commanding; step outside, look West and there are those fourteeners on the skyline; in that environment the skyscrapers are puny. Or look East and the vast prairies, flat but horizontally expansive for almost forever, make the skyscrapers look silly. Even the ground on which one stands is a mile high.

Cosmopolitans in an Eastern metropolis commonly regard Denver and Salt Lake City as underdeveloped in cosmopolitan life. The problem (so they allege) is that residents of the Western cities do not cultivate so resolutely the arts, theatres, museums, amenities in their cities because, when leisure time becomes available, they take off for the mountains. Easterners may be underestimating the arts of the West. But Westerners do indeed look for much of their aesthetic enrichment outside the city. They do not suffer from the blindness of the uptown "cosmopolitan" world (so-called, as though the "polis" were the "cosmos") to everything that is not itself ("The Big Apple"). Leaving these cities, with the mountains at first distant vistas on the skyline, and then, climbing, winding up with surrounding peaks at every turn, the mountain majesties provide marvelous scenery coupled with constant reminders of parts of the landscape, unlike the city, that we have not mastered. Moving around on the landscape, one is simultaneously enjoying the ever-changing mountain overlooks and figuring a route around the peaks.

Mountains have a certain "loft" to them; there is something about the upward sweep that brings the cosmic into focus. Mountains uplift the spirit. The land itself

rises up; and, on this rising land, trees push toward the sky, accentuating this sense of pressing upward. Mountains are not always forested (as the name "Rocky" Mountains reminds us), but those in the Southern and Northern Rockies nearly always are. There are, of course, ready scientific explanations for such uplift. First there are tectonic plates and forces, of which the crags and the twisted bands in the gneiss and schist remind us. Next, the climb brings us into the clouds, up toward the prevailing westerlies, where there is more moisture. Further, with photosynthesis, there is competition for sunlight. The tree has to invest in cellulose to maintain the heights needed, has to shed the snow, to withstand the winds; hence the structure of trunks and limbs. But just these same scientific explanations gives us the mountain forests solidly there.

Mountain forests convey a sense of life flourishing in massive and enduring proportions; the vertical contrasts with the horizontal. The biomass is greater than on the grasslands; living things command more space, from canopy through understories down to the underground. The fiber is more solid; the vegetation on the forest floor includes annuals and biennials, but the dominants are perennials on scales of decades and centuries. Like the sea, like the sky, and, recalling those plains, montane forests bear the signature of time and eternity. But the forests have more evident and perennial exuberance. The forest is where the "roots" go deep, where life rises high from the ground. The forest is where one touches the primordial elements raw and pure.

These forests, planted on ancient rock, come with an aura of ancient and lost origins. Forests take one back through the centuries; or, put another way, they bring the historic and prehistoric past forward for present encounter. Confronting forest giants we realize that trees live on radically different scales of time than do we. One knows that this past is there in the shadows—first on the order of centuries, recorded in tree rings and fire scars; and behind that on the order of millennia, recorded in landforms, glacial moraines, successional patterns; and on geological scales, recorded in the cliff faces, carved by Pleistocene ice, into rock that predates the forests.

These ancient forests are yet living landscapes. The phenomenon of forests is so widespread, persistent, and diverse, spontaneously appearing almost wherever moisture and climatic conditions permit it, that forests on Earth cannot be accidents or anomalies but rather must be a characteristic expression of the creative process. But so much of Earth has lost its forests to human transformations of the landscapes—lost at least the extensive old-growth forests. Civilization, especially in Europe and eastern America, created space for itself in the midst of forests, opening these up, making our residential areas more rural. We felt more comfortable clearing the forest for a pasture, for the farm and the village. True, we kept the trees throughout the countryside, and in the woodlots; but a woodlot is not an ancient forest. Here in the Rockies, in the mountains, the deep woods remain.

There are beauties at all elevations, from the ponderosa pine savannas through the montane aspen groves, the stands of lodgepole pine, passing over with elevation

into spruce and fir. The excitement level rises as one reaches the alpine, especially with its glacier-carved cliffs and cirques. One might think that when the great forests thin out at treeline, aesthetic experience would be proportionately reduced. But not so. Life is no longer massively present, as it was lower down. To the contrary, life is on the edge, as with the wind-stunted spruce and pine, banner trees at treeline. In the alpine, life is small, but still enduring. On the plains, life is limited by the dry; in the alpine life is limited by the cold, which also makes water unavailable. Over evolutionary history, and continuing today in ecosystem processes, coping with both the dry and the cold have demanded innovation and tenacity in life. Such conflict and resolution results in the chastened alpine beauty—seen in cushion wildflowers, the Alpine forget-me-not, or in a fairy primrose hidden in a protected niche among the stones.

The Rockies are a landscape of charismatic megafauna, originally on both plains and mountains, though now, especially with the bison nearly gone, more often in the canyonlands and mountains. There are deer back East, and here too; but this is elk country. A six-point bull is impressive indeed; and during rut in Rocky Mountain Park, there will be hundreds of persons listening for the bulls to bugle, hoping to see a fight. With luck, one will also sight bighorn sheep up on the rocks, and with more luck a full-curl ram. In Yellowstone, we put the wolves back, glad of the successful restoration and ashamed of ourselves for exterminating them a century ago. Once, the hoped-for Yellowstone experience was seeing a grizzly; to that has now been added (and experienced by tens of thousands of visitors) a glimpse of that ultimate symbol of the wild: the wolf. The Rockies is lion country, increasing the excitement, even to the danger level, as we increasingly inhabit the foothills. Typically, tourists think of our forests as scenery to be looked upon. Those from Philadelphia or Boston may think that a day spent in the national park is like driving through a gallery of landscape paintings in their museums, only better because one is there, with three-dimensional, not two-dimensional experience. We who reside here know that this is a mistake. One cannot experience a Rocky Mountain forest from a roadside pullover, any more than on television. A forest is entered, not viewed. The mountain experience is one of participation, not observation. The forest attacks all our senses—sight, hearing, smell, feeling, even taste. Strolling through an art gallery is one kind of environment. Being embodied in the Rocky mountains is a radically different environment.

Albert Bierstadt's "The Rocky Mountains" hangs in the gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; one can enjoy it in comfort and fantasize about the never-never land of savages and their sublime landscape. But if one has shouldered a pack all day to reach an alpine lake in those Wind River Mountains of Wyoming, fatigued from the climb and pitching camp toward evening, looking for a level spot, out of the wind, but still with a view of the water and the peaks, the on-the-ground, up-there aesthetics is something else. There is the kinesthetic sense of bodily presence, being incarnate in place, a place not our home (even if we camp there) but still our landscape. The New York museum goer is still in culture;

high in the Winds, one has entered real nature. They have the idea; we have the encounter.

This is a landscape with trails, thousands of miles of trails. Yes, distances are big, and one needs an automobile for outings. We have roads, perhaps too many of them. But the blacktop only covers a fraction of the landscape. After that, this is four-wheel drive country; and, often as not, whatever the vehicle, one uses it only to get in place, and explorations begin where one cannot take motorized transport. Indeed, in the (legally designated) wilderness motors are illegal. This is muscle and blood country. One can reach most of this landscape only by exertion, human or horse. In the Indian Peaks Wilderness in Colorado, it is difficult even to see the magnificent Lone Eagle Peak (named for Charles Lindbergh) without a day's hike. Much of the landscape one cannot reach without spending the night in the woods. Trails are sometimes crowded; but the locals know where they are not, where one expects to meet so few people that when one encounters others they are greeted in the passing—as never happens on the streets in big cities.

Even as a day hiker on the trail, one knows one's embodiment, when it is getting rapidly later and colder, descending toward the mouth of the canyon. And I also notice, as I hurry down, that the rocks are intensely metamorphosed, with great banded swirls, that were formed under intense heat and pressure deep in the bowels of the Earth. The canyon walls close in and I must crisscross the creek repeatedly—how long must it have taken that little creek to cut this deep canyon. This place through which I hurriedly walk, was formed, first the country rock and then, a billion years later, the topography, before humans walked the face of this Earth. And there, at this creek crossing is *Jamesia*, with its small but delightful off-white flowers—*Jamesia* found in Oligocene fossils in the fossil beds of Creede, Colorado. And here am I, my species, *Homo sapiens*, come into the world since the Oligocene, and I myself so briefly here; indeed, just now I am the only one on the trail, myself the only creature present able to enjoy and to celebrate this exciting place, the only one able to wonder at it all! This vast nature transcends me and my humanness; but, then again, thinking these thoughts in overview of such natural history, do I not transcend it?

Those in the Rocky Mountain West are not going to be as easily persuaded of the social construction of nature as are those in Kentucky or the English Lake District. True enough, the American West is a landscape of (Hollywood) myth; it is, if you like, socially constructed country.⁷ But we who are now resident there daily "re-construct" our perceptions because nature "re-presents" itself as constraint, as reality with which we must reckon. Maybe the nature we saw on the drive to the trailhead was socially constructed; maybe this is still true within the range of low quarter shoes. But put five miles in good hiking boots between yourself and the trailhead, breathing heavily in thin air, and stop for lunch at a craggy overlook or beside a spring, watch the ravens soar, hear their call, turn an eye on the gathering

⁷ John Rennie Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture, and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991).

afternoon thunderstorm; and you are not much inclined to believe that your environment is nothing but social construction.

How naive these Western yokels are!—those sophisticated epistemologists will by now be thinking. And the cosmopolitan aestheticians will add: "Don't you realize that there was nothing of beauty here before we humans came?" None of these primroses or elk appreciated this scenic grandeur, the sweep of the mountains, or the coniferous green contrasting with aspen gold. Colorado is named for its colorful mountains; but color is observer-introduced, and aesthetic enjoyment of it human-introduced. When we humans walk out, this place will be aesthetically "in the dark." We have been enjoying the spruce, Colorado blue spruce lower down and Englemann spruce higher up. The blue spruce is a lovely tree; it has been transplanted all over the world. But it isn't even "blue" unless someone is looking at it. After all, the trees are not even green, much less beautiful, except as we humans are perceiving them. Can't you see how much human contribution there is to your supposed Rocky Mountain wildness and its aesthetics?

True, we respond, but the spruce does have that form and symmetry whether I am here or not. The conifer shape is adapted to the wintry elements. The green is from the chlorophyll and there is photosynthesis after I leave, as there was millennia before I came. There are trees rising toward the sky, birds on the wing and beasts on the run, age after age, impelled by a genetic language almost two billion years old. There is struggle and adaptive fitness, energy and evolution inventing fertility and prowess. There is succession and speciation, muscle and fat, smell and appetite, law and form, structure and process. There is light and dark, life and death, the mystery of existence. Maybe the experience of beauty is epiphenomenal, but what this experience is of is a phenomenal, marvelous world.

A characteristic element in the aesthetic experience of nature moves us with how the central goods of the biosphere—hydrologic cycles, photosynthesis, soil fertility, food chains, genetic codes, speciation, reproduction, succession—were in place long before humans arrived. Forests and sky, rivers and earth, the vast plains, the everlasting hills, the cycling seasons, wildflowers and wildlife—these are superficially pleasant scenes in which to recreate. At more depth, they are the timeless natural givens that support everything else. On these scales humans are a late-coming novelty, and that awareness too is aesthetically demanding. The aesthetic challenge is the creativity, the conflict, the resolution, the natural history, the late-coming humans who can overlook it all, presented on these awesome scales. In the forest itself, there is no scenery; we compose the landscape vista. Forests undergo no aesthetic experience; trees enjoy no beauty. The beauty is in the eye of the beholder, constituted with our "phenomenal" (sensory) experience, whatever "phenomenal" (outstanding) forest properties may arouse such sense of beauty. Meanwhile it is difficult to escape the experience of gratuitous beauty—with montane peaks, or with Parry's primrose beside the creek, or with the aspen trembling, gold in the autumn wind, against the dark coniferous green.

Those who reside in the Rockies know the challenge of aesthetic wonder. Maybe only we can wonder; but the landscape we inhabit is worthy of our wonder. Perhaps

in our encounter we constitute the beauty; we also confront wildness on a landscape evidently there long before we came, before the Europeans, before the native Americans, before humans evolved on the planet.

V. A LANDSCAPE IN JEOPARDY

The natives have, since their birth, loved this nature-culture tandem offered by the Rocky Mountain West. More recently, hundreds of thousands of non-natives have moved here, with the mountains and plains, the wildlands a dominant motif in their desire to relocate in the Rockies. Westerners love their "open space." There is much public land (U.S. Forest Service, National Parks, Bureau of Land Management, state parks), disproportionately so compared to the East, South, or Midwest. Tax initiatives to preserve "open space" here usually pass, even when other initiatives to increase taxes fail. We do want this landscape preserved, saved for ourselves, saved for our nation (for those "back East"). Indeed, we want it saved for the world (recalling the internationals at Old Faithful or the south rim of the Grand Canyon), since so much of the world is absent what we have here. But this is a landscape in jeopardy.

The jeopardy is triple. It arises from agriculture, from industry, from residential development. It arises, paradoxically, from loving the landscape into losing the landscape. One might think that it is easy to save what we love, and that makes an ethics based on aesthetics more persuasive than one based on duty or rights. One hardly needs commandments to save mountain majesties or fruited plains, this America the beautiful. But the catch is that function must be traded against beauty; utilities trump amenities. The environmental aesthetics we have been celebrating keys value to the satisfaction of human interests, but just the high level of such value results in low priority competing with basic needs. The really heavyweight human interests are economic and utilitarian.

The plains, grazed for millennia, are now cattle country. The land area devoted to cattle is greater than that for any other species. Cows on the Eastern storybook farms may graze peacefully in green pastures; but cows in the West are usually on overgrazed land, made ugly by their abuse, grazed to the point of dangerous erosion by ranchers operating on slim margins. Even if not overgrazed, the composition of the grassland ecology is radically altered. Fences and roads fragment the plains; the survey grid imposed on the landscape affects land ownership and use often in disregard of grassland ecosystem realities.⁸ The need for hay, to get the cattle through the winter, forces irrigation, and this alters streams and ecologies. Cattle introduce invasive exotics, or they make weeds of those plants they will not eat. Chemicals used to fight the weeds pollute the waters. Cattle trample riparian areas.

⁸ Curt Meine, "Inherit the Grid," in Joan Iverson Nassauer, ed., *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 1997), pp. 45-62.

Cattle displace the charismatic megafauna; this is a main reason why the bison, the wolves, the grizzlies are gone.⁹

"Agribusiness" is not generally an aesthetically positive word. Water is the limiting resource in the Rocky Mountain West. We can grow wheat "dryland" (as we say), and maybe one crop of hay. But for all the row crops, the maize, the vegetables, and for the second cut of hay, we must irrigate. There must be water for the cattle. These would not be fruited plains without our massive irrigation schemes, transforming the landscape, moving the water from the mountains where it falls (often as snow) onto the plains with measured care. So the demands of the plains have put dams in our mountains and canyons. Of the twenty-five largest dams in the United States, ninety percent are in the West. This productivity on the plains has made all our rivers, connecting the mountains and the plains, "virtual rivers."¹⁰

Industry strains the environment, from the now-abandoned or still-functioning mines that scar the landscape and pollute the rivers, to more modern high tech industries that still require power and water, and spill over with their wastes. In Montana, Butte with its copper mines is ugly by any standards. Rocky Flats outside Denver, long used for the production of nuclear weapons, is now being restored as a wildlife reserve, but is so used both because we desire the wildlife and can find no other use for so dangerously polluted a site. Climax, Colorado, with great mountains stripped away, and huge talus piles remaining, disfigures the region, the more so in stark contrast with the majestic peaks in the distance. Flying into Salt Lake, one marvels at the Uintas rising from the Colorado Plateau, then the Wasatch Range, but is suddenly taken aghast by the huge Kennecott Copper mine ripping deeply into the Oquirrah Range, the largest open pit mine in the world.

Forests have been massively cut in years past, producing often ugly hillsides; and even where there is restoration and regrowth, the old-growth is gone. Roads built to access the timber fragment the forest, as well as do the cuts.¹¹ Now the superimposed survey grid may indeed show up in the mountain clear-cuts, especially in winter from the air, when the overcut, patchwork landscape reveals a dark green and white snow checkerboard, replacing an ancient forest. Fire suppression, demanded by the forest industry and practiced for a century, has left fire-prone forests, with the huge burns of recent years. The effects of global warming on Rocky Mountain plains, forests, and alpine is a big unknown; the current droughts leave us apprehensive.¹²

The most recent threat comes from trying to expand suburbia, sprawling into

⁹ Jerome E. Freilich, John M. Emlen, Jeffrey J. Duda, D. Carl Freeman, and Philip J. Cafaro, "Ecological Effects of Ranching: A Six-Point Critique," *Bioscience* 53 (2003): 759-65.

¹⁰ Ellen E. Wohl, *Virtual Rivers: Lessons from the Mountain Rivers of the Colorado Front Range* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Richard L. Knight, Frederick W. Smith, Steven W. Buskirk, William H. Romme, and William L. Baker, eds., *Forest Fragmentation in the Southern Rockies* (Niwot, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 2000).

¹² Anna Maria Gillis, "Weathering Warming in Colorado," *Bioscience* 46 (1996): 178-80.

"exurbia."¹³ The human population of the Rocky Mountains is increasing at an alarming rate, some regions doubling, even tripling in twenty-five years. People are flowing in, attracted to this environment; and, alas, often fleeing the environments from which they come. They come to work, but just as often they come to retire, living on wealth earned outside the region. Partly the threat is sheer numbers of people, but even more it is the lifestyle they demand. The Rocky Mountain West, especially landscapes at the breaks of the plains and in the foothills and valleys, are being transformed into extensive, expensive high-development landscapes. There may be rows of suburbs miles from town, with the shopping malls following the housing, or, in an especially land-hungry pattern of development, widely dispersed homes on large lots, dozens of acres in size. The result is commuters driving to work and shoppers headed for the malls, accelerating the traffic and pollution.

Such development also produces demands on the landscape that are difficult to support, such as fire suppression to protect mountain homes. The grid pattern of land ownership makes it too easy to think of the plains as commodity, difficult to see grasslands as biotic community. Surface waters are soon exhausted; the dams and draw-downs deplete the riparian biodiversity. Having de-watered the nearby surface, the Front Range demands water from the Western slope, altering that ecology too, and rivers on both sides of the Continental Divide. Then we go underground. In the Denver Basin, extending from Brighton to Colorado Springs, we have nearly half a million people who rely solely on nonreplenishable groundwater for domestic supply, drawn from wells deep into the aquifer, mining fossil water that fell on the Earth thousands of years ago.

Management of such growth by state and county governments is mixedly successful; the economic pressures tend to win over the aesthetic ones. The sense of ownership of land and property threatens the sense of belonging and residence on the land. The result is a landscape in jeopardy.

VI. RESIDENT GRANDEUR

So we live with a tension both between culture and nature and between ideal and real. Back East and in the Old World, people put their landscapes into place. In the Rockies, the landscape puts us in our place. Northeast, South, Midwest, they want to be civilized in their residences, urban and rural. We in the Rockies hope to be civilized too, but we know it is equally important to be residents on a landscape; and we want some of our world uncivilized, wild. We humans have evolved (so the evolutionary psychologists say) to love the homey-looking savannas on which we humans originated in Africa.¹⁴ That is why (so they say) when we rebuilt the

¹³ William H. Romme, "Creating Pseudo-Rural Landscapes in the Mountain West," in Nassauer, *Placing Nature*, pp. 139-61.

¹⁴ Gordon H. Orians and Judith H. Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes," in Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 555-79.

landscapes of Europe and eastern America, we made them into easily habitable places. Neither these dryland prairies nor these alpine peaks are the landscapes for which we humans are supposed to have biophilia; love both we Westerners do nevertheless.

True, today we are a citified people. Increasingly in the Rocky Mountain West we live urban lives. But even those in the cities cherish their landscape in ways that transcend considerations of instrumental utility or profit. This is both fact and vision. We live—at least we can and ought to live—with resident grandeur. The peaks and clouds above, misty in the distance, maintain an ethereal dimension. Still in the office, one thinks what it is like there in the distance, in the alpine—how different from here in town. Weekends, going there, recreating in creation, one still inhabits the landscape one is visiting. In Rocky Mountain Park, the Texans are visitors, but I am a local—I see Long's Peak on the skyline from where I work. Others are observers who take postcards home. I live on my landscape, and want both the architected landscape with the wild landscape overtowering.

This is goose-pimple country. Or, to put the Rocky Mountain experience more majestically, this is panorama country. Montana is "big sky country." Wyoming is "like no place on earth." Colorado is where all the fourteeners are. This is where, on a clear day, you can see forever.¹⁵ This is where *the* Grand Canyon is, where the Grand Tetons are. The great mountains and canyons blend into the "Great" Plains. One expects that during a day's outing, whether in the mountains or on the steppe, there will be experiences of awesome vistas. Constantly, aspects of the landscape run off scale.

This is deep time country. Geology is inescapable in the West; the age-old rocks are never out of sight. One picnics by Boysen Reservoir in Wyoming, an artificial reservoir, impressed with human engineering; but right after lunch you drive through Wind River Canyon where the state geologists have labeled the formations, and humans seem latecomers and puny on the landscape. The East is as old as the West geologically, of course, The (anomalously named) New River Gorge is ancient; but how few in the 17,000 vehicles that cross daily the famous New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia, admiring the graceful bridge—one of the highest and longest bridge spans on Earth—know that the river below them is superposed on and older than the mountains. In the West one is constantly reminded, as on the (even higher) Royal Gorge Bridge over the Arkansas, that we humans have not been on this landscape so long, neither in the Rockies nor on the planet.

The settlement of the landscape is still within our memory, or the memory of those with whom we recall conversations. For senior citizens, this is a landscape settled by the Europeans almost within the living memories of the old-timers they once knew; the historical icons are the trapper, the miner, the pioneer, the cowboy, the shepherd, the settler, the pioneer. In an old-growth forest, the trees are older

¹⁵ More Class I Visibility areas under the U.S. Clean Air Act Amendments of 1997 are in the Rockies than in any other region.

than our European presence on the landscape. Ours is a "new world" superposed on an "old world." Yes, the Native Americans were here in the West long before the Europeans; but over much of the land they little more than "passed this way," hardly remaining permanently enough to settle it, neither wishing nor gaining legal title; nor did they plow, fence, and road it. Even the Native Americans were here only since the last ice age.

We live with Manifest Destiny and the Westward expansion present just yesterday, and framing the landscape we see today. Wagon ruts on the Oregon trail through Wyoming are still visible. A stage coach station yet stands in a picturesque location thirty miles north of where I live. The Rockies, formidable and inhospitable, were what was in the way, but we conquered them, put roads in them, found the passes, dug irrigation canals, pushed a railroad all the way West—and today one drives a modern interstate through Wyoming along that Union Pacific. So much of the myth of the West is of a people who discovered themselves by turning wilderness into a productive and beautiful land.

But now we love those mountains as a worthy foe that brought out the best in the pioneer, the cowboy, the miner, the shepherd. There has been conflict and resolution, but still the mighty Rockies remain. We are proud of our conquest, yes; but this is still a landscape on which it is easy to be humbled. We have conquered the land, our manifest destiny? Well, some of the land is transformed; but much of it is not, Earth has kept much of the landscape to herself; and now, of uncertain minds about our manifest destiny and conquest, we are pleased to co-operate and see to it that those places stay wild. One looks up at a craggy cliffside and thinks that, although someone may have been to the top, quite probably no human has ever set foot on that particular shelf of rock halfway up the precipitous face. We love to live in the Rockies, but are both humbled and proud that there are places we only visit and do not remain.

The Rockies are never very modern, or postmodern, or enlightenment, or humanistic, or antirealist, or constructionist, or deconstructionist, or any of those things. The Rockies, frankly, are rather disruptive of the latest trends in philosophical speculation. Maybe the Easterners and the Europeans have forgotten the sublime, but those who reside in the Rockies find experiences of the sublime returning, even after they think such capacities might have been educated out of them. There is vertigo before vastness, magnitude, power, these austere, fierce ever-enduring elemental forces.

Confronting this landscape, one naturally asks the limit questions: "Who am I?" "Where am I?*" So curiously, we humans are the only self-reflective, spirited beholders. A bold environment dares us to a bold claim. We become convinced that there is something more real, something more ideal about living on fruited plains below mountain majesties than residing elsewhere. Here in the Rockies we are especially blessed. We humans are the only aestheticians on the landscape, and if we do not rejoice in this "awe-full" beauty, who will? And what a pity if none ever should.