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THE NECESSITY FOR RUINS

AND OTHER TOPICS

himself and, like him, are all eye and intellect — how distinct the language of form that they talk, how different from the rustic drawl of the landscape!" [5]

It was in this tentative and almost unconscious manner that the street in our European-American landscape began a career that became increasingly spectacular and then culminated in the freeway. Imperceptibly and over many generations our vision of the city shifted from the cluster of towers and spires to the perspective of avenues and streets and uniform-size lots. The celestial model, never easy to discern in the dark medieval spaces among stone walls and crowded huts, has been at last forgotten; the map, the diagram, the coordinates are what help us make sense of the city.

Landscape as Theater

WHEN WE SPEAK OF THE "scenes of our childhood," or borrow Pope's phrase and refer to the world as "this scene of man," we are using the word *scene* in what seems a literal sense: as meaning location, the place where something happens. It rarely occurs to us that we have in fact borrowed a word from the theater to use as a metaphor. Yet originally scene meant stage, as it still does in French, and when it first became common in everyday speech it still suggested its origin: the world (we were implying) was a theater, and we were at once actors and audience.

The notion that a bond exists between people and the world they inhabit is fundamental to our understanding of life, and the bond has usually been seen as that between parents and children. The metaphor drawn from the theater seems to have become popular at a comparatively late date, no earlier than the 16th Century. Its formulation implies three things: the development of the theatrical production as a formal art with its own rules and conventions and its own environment; a widespread belief that the relationship between people and their surroundings could be so expertly controlled and designed as to make the comparison appropriate; and, most important of all, the metaphor implies people's ability to see themselves as occupying the center of the stage.

It was logical that the theater arts as we know them should have evolved first in Italy in the early 16th Century, for it was there that the art (or science) of perspective arose — the art, that is to say, of defining or depicting a body in terms of the space it occupies. The first stage sets were the work of Italian artists and architects and technicians, and it was in Italy

that we find the first stage, the first area defined in terms of the relation between actors and audience, and in fact the first building designed exclusively for theatrical productions. For more than a century the standard theater was known as the Italian style theater; the term meant not only the building itself, but stage, scenery, the whole illusion of space achieved by the skillful use of light and color and form: the space of a make-believe world which revolved around the presence of actors.

It was surely no accident that at much the same period artists began to paint pictures of landscapes. It was Albrecht Dürer who in the course of his return from Italy first sketched from life some of the villages he travelled through. The painters of northern Europe differed from those of Italy in their interest in the everyday aspect of the landscape; they often chose as their subject village celebrations or glimpses of peasants at work in the fields, whereas the Italian painters preferred to use the rustic landscape as a somewhat remote background for more formal subjects inspired by myth or philosophy. But in both cases landscape was an element in the composition, serving to locate or define the human action. The artist modified or even restructured the background scenery in order to produce a harmony between the world of man and the world of nature.

The last decades of the 16th Century and the first decades of the 17th witnessed the development of still another form of landscape depiction: the rise of descriptive geography. Geography had previously been little more than a branch of cosmography — the study of the earth as a heavenly body. The growing interest in Classical literature encouraged the investigation and description of places mentioned in Greek and Latin texts, and a renewed study of Classical writers on geography. What first evolved was therefore a kind of historical geography. But the impact of the reports of explorers of the New World and of Asia soon expanded the field. Travelers, merchants, missionaries all contributed to a wider and more accurate knowledge of the earth's surface and at the same time supplemented or corrected Classical accounts. An abundant literature of topographical description, enriched by maps and illustrations

of cities and landscapes and exotic costumes, was the outcome of this first wave of geographical inquiry.

It was characteristic of those early productions that they emphasized the human or political aspects of the world: boundaries, territorial divisions, language, towns and cities. Only insofar as they served as frontiers were rivers and mountains mentioned. All of them dwelt on history, military or dynastic; but history as then conceived included legends and myths. The writings of Mandeville and Münster and of many of the early travelers in the New World contained not only much valuable information about little-known regions but also a large element of the fabulous, and generalizations based on hearsay. In the minds of the writers the distinction between fact and fancy was neither clear nor important. Scientific accuracy was not the aim of the descriptive geographers: they sought to make the world visible and to inspire wonder.

From the point of view of the student of landscapes and their evolution, the 16th and 17th Centuries represent one of the most important periods in our Western history. It was then that men first undertook to impose order and design on their surroundings not merely for survival but to produce a kind of beauty glorifying and making visible a particular relationship between men, and between men and nature. There was scarcely a discipline which did not contribute to the undertaking. The artist was the first to see and depict men and women, not as isolated figures but as dominating their environment. It was the cartographer who delineated territories, revealing their form and relating them one to another. It was the geographer who undertook to describe the world and the bond between people and the land they occupied. Always the emphasis was on the visual; the world and everything in it was a source of delight, and all that could be seen and understood by vision was worthy of study.

In those times a word much used in the titles of books of travel and description was *theater*. A popular textbook was called the *Theater of Geography*, a book of pictures was called the *Theater of Cities*. There were books called the *Theater of Agriculture*, the *Theater of the Garden*, the *Theater of the*

World. The word of course emphasized the visual, the spectacular aspect of the environment, but it also suggested a spectacle in the sense of a dramatic production with a well-defined space, an organization of place and time, and coherent action.

Theater was thus a useful and appropriate metaphor, but more than that, it gave the ultimate three dimensional form to all the chorographic, esthetic and philosophical theories redefining men and the world. In retrospect it is clear why the drama should have been the dominant art form of an age concerned with place and visibility and the Classical image of humanity. It is clear why the theater developed new techniques of staging precisely when artists and cartographers and geographers were beginning to describe the surface of the earth. Lope de Vega wrote the *Great Theater of the World;* Shakespeare, among others, reminded us that all the world was a stage. It was in theatrical terms, therefore, that man's place could be interpreted as a work of art, his identity best established.

It is tempting to assume that this recognition of the environment and its role in establishing human identity signified a scientific interest in nature. But this does not seem to have been the case. Beautiful though the world of nature might be, it was nevertheless seen essentially as background, the realm of myth and magic. The scenery which artists, architects, engineers created on the 16th Century stage was far from realistic. It consisted of the illusion of great distances, vertical as well as horizontal, of architecture on a monumental scale, of supernatural light and movement. Even the plays of Shakespeare, though modestly produced as compared to Italian and French plays, were performed in an atmosphere of magic. Many unholy sound effects accompanied the action: bells, cannon, thunder, birdsong. The wind blew, the sea crashed, echoes resounded. Music was closely coordinated with the development of the drama and underscored the lyrical or passionate episodes. On the continent, stage designers produced impressive cloud effects with thunder and lightning and the illusion of mountains and stormy seas suddenly appearing or vanishing, or parting to reveal an elaborately costumed ballet. Pagan divinities

descended from the sky, cities were consumed by fire, destroyed by earthquakes. In a Spanish production of the 16th Century, God Himself was shown, surrounded by saints and hovering angels. In a play given in Rome and staged by the architect Bernini, the entire stage was suddenly flooded.

The purpose of these elaborate illusions was to amaze and delight a public eager for visual pleasures, for the sensation of space, and to entertain those who were perhaps not able to follow the drama itself. In the early days of the new theater many conventions, carried over from court or church ceremonies, effectively destroyed any feeling of realism. Writing and acting were still inexpert. The left side of the stage was considered the most prestigious location and actors sought to stand there, regardless of the action of the play. When not reciting their lines, they frequently greeted friends in the audience, and, in fact, favored members of the audience came and sat on the stage, commenting loudly on the performance and interfering with the movements of the actors.

Nevertheless the many illusionary devices made visible to the public a world of myth and magic and history and legend; a kind of supernature more dreamt about than experienced, giving intensity and color to the action, and locating it in an imaginary realm. A superreality, an allegorical verisimilitude was the stage designer's objective, as it was that of the geographical descriptions; by associating man and his actions with an exotic or splendid setting, his importance and uniqueness were magnified. There was no attempt to explain man in terms of environmental influences, though astrological influences were generally acknowledged.

It was characteristic of the period that it defined the word landscape in another manner: *landscape* indicated both the *background* of a picture, and a stage set — that element in a composition which gave it form and suggested location but which was not of the main body of the argument.

It was while this reverent and uncritical acceptance of the world prevailed that men expressed most eloquently their delight in God's creation; in painting, in writing, in the design of gardens and in the artificial world of the theater. The

familiar landscape was thought to be no less worthy of study and admiration than the remote and new, and provincial culture flourished as vigorously as the metropolitan. It was in consequence a time when geographical descriptive writing enjoyed much the same sort of popularity as did the theater. A 17th Century French book on the art of conversation ridiculed the amateur geographer who, when he had bought a beaver hat, regaled his dinner companions with a discourse on Canada, the fur trapping industry, discussed North and South America, naming their principal rivers and gold mines, adding details about their unusual flora and fauna. Atlases, and albums of city panoramas were widely sold; fashionable ladies read books about Persia and Siam in order to shine in society. The same writer cautioned women against appearing *too* geography-minded. "I permit them to use such words as *climate, zone,* and *isthmus,*" he wrote, "and a few others, but I do not want them to terrify me by mentioning *longitudes* and *latitudes.*"

Toward the middle of the 17th Century the metaphor of landscape as theater quite abruptly and quite radically began to change its significance. Theater ceased to mean exclusively spectacle and came to mean drama, the analysis and solution of a problem. Landscape painting acquired, at least in its choice of subjects, a formal, almost abstract quality; the plan, the detailed map replaced the panorama of the countryside and city, as if color to charm the eye had been drained from the view of the world. Increasingly it was presented in the black and white of the printed word or the steel engraving.

It was in fact in the mid-17th Century that geographers appear to have abandoned their exclusive interest in description based on observation and personal experience and to have turned their attention to what we would now call the earth sciences. There were practical as well as philosophical reasons for the shift. The greatest demand for geographical expertise came from merchants and traders engaged in foreign commerce, eager for more precise knowledge of tides and weather and currents and the location of safe harbors. Both in France and England the crown demanded geographical investigation of

strategic and political problems. The emphasis accordingly moved to research, to measurement and theory, and there was a corresponding decrease in provincial or historical writing, with its moral and religious ingredient. On the continent the influence of Descartes on geology and meteorology encouraged the rejection of the Classical heritage, as well as a skeptical approach to local sources of information. Vision itself demanded a new, scientific perspective: that of the microscope and telescope.

This turning inward, away from the world as a spectacle revealing the divine order, was also characteristic of the late 17th Century theater. Instead of seeking to establish man's central place by means of spatial illusion, the theater now resorted to intellectual means, formulating with increasing precision the doctrine of the three unities: unity of time, of place, and of action, and rejecting the magic aspects of the theater, at least in the presentation of serious drama. Tragedy demanded a small, all but empty stage with a highly formalized background — a room in a palace, a public space in the city. "As philosophers have divided the universe . . . into three regions," Hobbes wrote, "celestial, aerial and terrestrial, so the poets . . . have lodged themselves in the three regions of mankind, court, city, country. . . . From hence proceeded three sorts of poesy, heroic, schematic, and pastoral." In the heroic or tragic production interaction between the stage and the surrounding imaginary world was reduced to a minimum, as if the century were declaring that man was most clearly himself, was best identified, when the influences of the legendary environments of history and supernature were eliminated. Drama was interaction with other persons, a psychological confrontation. "The tragic palace," a historian of the 17th Century theater has remarked, "the simple decorated antechamber with four doors . . . make all action and drama converge on a single point. These correspond to the severity of a plot or story line where fate has confined the protagonists to one place and condemned them to struggle against each other until death — or flight — has liberated them." The bare stage epitomizes the new abstract definition of space.

Thus with the development of a more intellectual, scientific geography, and a more intellectual, psychological type of drama the metaphor of landscape as theater ceased to be useful or appropriate. There remains, however, as a kind of epilog, the story of its final eclipse.

The popular, as distinguished from the serious or classical, theater in the 17th Century, continued to rejoice in the spectacular. An increasingly exaggerated celebration of the mythical historical landscape, particularly in opera and ballet, eventually led to even more grandiose productions, with the result that on the popular level the staging, the scenery — the landscape in the theater sense of the word — threatened to overwhelm the actors and their not very significant dilemmas. The fascination with illusion inevitably led to a fascination with deception. Plays of little quality went to infinite pains to achieve meticulous realism in staging: scenery, props, and costumes reproduced in pedantic detail regional or historical settings — China, the New World, ancient Greece, scenes from the Bible. Accents and gestures sought to reinforce the illusion, and actors, like figures in a historical pageant were reduced to little more than props. A century earlier the scenic environment, whether on the stage or in the landscape, had served to highlight and intensify the identity of the protagonists: now, identity was seen as a matter of conformity to a given environment, a blending into it.

We can, in fact, indicate with some precision the moment when this reversal was complete. In 1799, Robert Fulton, the American inventor, brought the first large diorama to Paris. A grandiose, circular panorama of New World scenery, accurate in every detail and without the disturbing presence of a single actor, it was an immediate success. Within a short time a theater was opened devoted exclusively to dioramas, one of its rules being that no more than two actors were ever to be allowed to appear in front of the scenery. The theater was dedicated "to the reproduction on a theatrical scale of those views which are most worthy of exciting public curiosity from the historical and picturesque point of view."

Significantly enough, one of the men who helped organize

the theater was Daguerre, soon to make a name for himself as a pioneer photographer.

This first theater without actors, devoted to the display of landscapes without people, marks the appearance of a totally new definition of landscape: natural scenery which man should not contaminate by his presence. It also marks the appearance of a new kind of drama — one which takes place in a domestic interior and involves domestic and psychological problems, hidden from the public world. And with the final rejection of the Classical metaphor of landscape as theater the search was on for a new and more vivid way of defining the landscape.

We are still searching. All that we have so far come up with is an analog of one sort or another, borrowed from biology or ecology or communication theory. When it is a matter of controlling or manipulating the environment, analogs can be extremely helpful; yet if we are again to learn how to respond emotionally and esthetically and morally to the landscape we must find a metaphor — or several metaphors — drawn from our human experience. The fact that we have so far failed to do so is no cause for despair. As history should teach us, and particularly the history of art, it is largely a matter of chronological perspective. It was only in the 19th Century that men perceived the rightness of the theater metaphor as applied to the 16th and 17th Century concept of landscape. It is only now that we are acquiring sufficient perspective on the 19th Century to understand that landscape in terms of a metaphor of growth and decay and evolution. It is still too early to understand the new 20th Century landscape. We can best rely on the insights of the geographer and the artist and the philosopher. They are the most trustworthy custodians of the human tradition; for they seek to discover order within randomness, beauty within chaos, and the enduring aspirations of mankind behind blunders and failures.