

UNST 124g fall 2011
oh thou wondrous Mother age

1 introduction

The challenges that confront us when we start learning about sustainability are substantial. It is not hard to feel overwhelmed and to wonder how progress is possible. Jaime Lerner, architect and former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil suggests that we just get on with things, for example by engaging in “urban acupuncture,” strategic actions that allow us to make progress where progress is immediately possible. His approach may be beneficial in two ways, we can see the results of our actions as we take them and we may not have time for worrying while we are acting. But sooner or later, many of us come around to questioning our actions and the ways in which they affect the environment in which we live.

During fall term we examined spirit of place (Flores, 1998)—the human relationship with the landscape—but we didn’t explicitly include the *bulit* environment in our definition of landscape. Yet clearly, roads, buildings, cell phone towers, and other artifacts we associate with modernity are all in view when we cast our eye around. These constructions are clearly associated with environmental impacts, justice, and sustainability—should they also be included in our definition of landscape? If we follow Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) in her discussion of landscape and Pueblo peoples, the answer must be yes, because the people, the land, and all that lies upon it are one. This understanding could form the basis of a land ethic that embraces both the natural¹ and the built environment.

Philosophers in the Aristotelean tradition might beg to differ². While the best life may be one lived in accord with nature, we humans are nevertheless set apart by our interest in forming households, our tendency toward the political life of the city and state, and the pleasure we derive from reasoning things out. Indeed, many of your classmates argued in this vein when asked to agree or disagree with the assertion that humans—at least prior to the rise of agriculture—are much like other animals at work in the Earth system. Intention, many of you argued, is important and intention—from the first land-clearing fire onward—sets humans apart.

Is it possible to be wholly different from any other living creature³ and still indistinguishable from the landscape with which we live? Dan Flores (1998) asserts that ideas about the value of nature have changed throughout human history, due in part to the development and use of new technologies—from plows to power plants—but also in reaction to those developments. Why not, then, include roads and buildings and cell towers in that synthesis?

Whether or not we admit cell phone towers into our definition of the natural world, we must come to terms with them as part of the human experience. Do we like these objects made by our own

¹We must be careful with how we use the word **natural**, given what we have learned from Foley et al. (2005), Mann (2002), and Rowley-Conwy and Layton (2001).

²This point of view is described in detail in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*.

³If, that is, you agree humans are quite distinct.

hand? Are they beautiful? Do they hold meaning beyond their utility? What are we to make of any of the artifacts of modern life? These questions may not have easy answers but perhaps we can take comfort in knowing that they are not new.

2 assignment

You are asked to visit the Portland Art Museum to view two paintings in which two artists express quite distinctly their perceptions of landscapes modified by the human hand. Last term we viewed and discussed René Magritte's painting *La Condition humaine*. You may recall that when lecturing⁴ about that work, Magritte told an audience that the painting was meant to show us how we see the world. "We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside." Magritte accords with Tolstoy's (1899) definition of art as a manifestation of the *human condition* (p. 40), that is, it reflects the human search for meaning and is a medium through which communication takes place.

You are also asked to read two poems (reproduced here) in which the writer confronts modernity. The first, *Locksley Hall*, was written in 1835 by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and published in his *Poems* in 1842. *Locksley Hall* is a dramatic monologue in the style of pre-Islamic poems featuring a traveling hero whose chance encounter of a former residence causes him to reflect with mixed emotions on affairs gone by. The second, *Feed Me, Also, River God*, written by modernist poet Marianne Moore, was published in 1921 in her collection *Poems*.

1. Compare the following at the Portland Art Museum

- *City Perspectives* painted by Raymond Jonson in 1932.
- *The World No Longer Resembles Itself* painted by Katherine Porter in 1985

How do these two painters depict the urban environment? Are there ways in which their visions are similar? What ideas and feelings are they trying to communicate?

2. Like many Victorian writers, Tennyson was interested in the social implications of scientific discoveries and industrialization. In *Locksley Hall*, he reprises a classical theme and style while expressing his thinking about the modern world.

- (a) Tennyson makes a very specific statement about what causes sorrow. What is it?
- (b) What imagery does Tennyson use to represent the future he sees emerging from the science and innovation of the 19th century?
- (c) Tennyson presents an alternative to living in a society characterized by modern science and industry. How does he do that? Does he prefer the alternative society to the one in which he lives?
- (d) The speaker in this poem has a series of very strong reactions when reminded of the unrequited love of his youth. How does Tennyson connect those feelings to his own feelings

⁴As quoted in Schama (1995), p. 12.

about the modern world and what is he trying to tell his reader? Does Tennyson seem optimistic, pessimistic, or something else about the future? As always, explain the reasoning behind your answer.

3. Like other modernist artists and writers, Marianne Moore rejected traditional motifs in favor of new forms that they felt could better meet the issues of the industrialized world. In *Feed Me, Also, River God*, Moore connects that modern sensibility with ancient challenges by quoting the Hebrew prophet Isaiah.
 - (a) What is the challenge (or challenges) faced by the speaker?
 - (b) How did the ancient Israelites face that challenge (or challenges)?
 - (c) Does Moore approve of their approach?

3 Locksley Hall

COMRADES, leave me here a little, while as yet 'tis early morn:
Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle horn.

'Tis the place, and all around it, as of old, the curlews call,
Dreary gleams about the moorland flying over Locksley Hall;

Locksley Hall, that in the distance overlooks the sandy tracts, 5
And the hollow ocean-ridges roaring into cataracts.

Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I went to rest,
Did I look on great Orion sloping slowly to the West.

Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising thro' the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid. 10

Here about the beach I wander'd, nourishing a youth sublime
With the fairy tales of science, and the long result of Time;

When the centuries behind me like a fruitful land reposed;
When I clung to all the present for the promise that it closed:

When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see; 15
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.—

In the Spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin's breast;
In the Spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another crest;

In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove;
In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. 20

Then her cheek was pale and thinner than should be for one so young,
And her eyes on all my motions with a mute observance hung.

And I said, My cousin Amy, speak, and speak the truth to me,
Trust me, cousin, all the current of my being sets to thee.

On her pallid cheek and forehead came a colour and a light, 25
As I have seen the rosy red flushing in the northern night.

And she turn'd her bosom shaken with a sudden storm of sighs—
All the spirit deeply dawning in the dark of hazel eyes—

Saying, "have hid my feelings, fearing they should do me wrong;"
Saying, "Dost thou love me, cousin?" weeping, "I have loved thee long." 30

Love took up the glass of Time, and turn'd it in his glowing hands;

Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.

Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might;
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight.

Many a morning on the moorland did we hear the copses ring, 35
And her whisper throng'd my pulses with the fullness of the Spring.

Many an evening by the waters did we watch the stately ships,
And our spirits rush'd together at the touching of the lips.

O my cousin, shallow-hearted! O my Amy, mine no more!
O the dreary, dreary moorland! O the barren, barren shore! 40

Falser than all fancy fathoms, falser than all songs have sung,
Puppet to a father's threat, and servile to a shrewish tongue!

Is it well to wish thee happy? having known me—to decline
On a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart than mine!

Yet it shall be: thou shalt lower to his level day by day, 45
What is fine within thee growing coarse to sympathize with clay.

As the husband is, the wife is: thou art mated with a clown,
And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down.

He will hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force,
Something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse. 50

What is this? his eyes are heavy: think not they are glazed with wine.
Go to him: it is thy duty: kiss him: take his hand in thine.

It may be my lord is weary, that his brain is over-wrought:
Soothe him with thy finer fancies, touch him with thy lighter thought.

He will answer to the purpose, easy things to understand— 55
Better thou wert dead before me, tho' I slew thee with my hand!

Better thou and I were lying, hidden from the heart's disgrace,
Roll'd in one another's arms, and silent in a last embrace.

Cursed be the social wants that sin against the strength of youth!
Cursed be the social lies that warp us from the living truth! 60

Cursed be the sickly forms that err from honest Nature's rule!
Cursed be the gold that gilds the straiten'd forehead of the fool!

Well—'tis well that I should bluster!—Hadst thou less unworthy proved—
Would to God—for I had loved thee more than ever wife was loved.

Am I mad, that I should cherish that which bears but bitter fruit? 65
I will pluck it from my bosom, tho' my heart be at the root.

Never, tho' my mortal summers to such length of years should come
As the many-winter'd crow that leads the clanging rookery home.

Where is comfort? in division of the records of the mind?
Can I part her from herself, and love her, as I knew her, kind? 70

I remember one that perish'd: sweetly did she speak and move:
Such a one do I remember, whom to look at was to love.

Can I think of her as dead, and love her for the love she bore?
No—she never loved me truly: love is love for evermore.

Comfort? comfort scorn'd of devils! this is truth the poet sings, 75
That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.

Drug thy memories, lest thou learn it, lest thy heart be put to proof,
In the dead unhappy night, and when the rain is on the roof.

Like a dog, he hunts in dreams, and thou art staring at the wall,
Where the dying night-lamp flickers, and the shadows rise and fall. 80

Then a hand shall pass before thee, pointing to his drunken sleep,
To thy widow'd marriage-pillows, to the tears that thou wilt weep.

Thou shalt hear the Never, never, whisper'd by the phantom years,
And a song from out the distance in the ringing of thine ears;

And an eye shall vex thee, looking ancient kindness on thy pain. 85
Turn thee, turn thee on thy pillow: get thee to thy rest again.

Nay, but Nature brings thee solace; for a tender voice will cry.
'Tis a purer life than thine; a lip to drain thy trouble dry.

Baby lips will laugh me down: my latest rival brings thee rest.
Baby fingers, waxen touches, press me from the mother's breast. 90

O, the child too clothes the father with a dearness not his due.
Half is thine and half is his: it will be worthy of the two.

O, I see thee old and formal, fitted to thy petty part,
With a little hoard of maxims preaching down a daughter's heart.

"They were dangerous guides the feelings—she herself was not exempt— 95
Truly, she herself had suffer'd"—Perish in thy self-contempt!

Overlive it—lower yet—be happy! wherefore should I care?
I myself must mix with action, lest I wither by despair.

What is that which I should turn to, lighting upon days like these?
Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys. 100

Every gate is throug'd with suitors, all the markets overflow.
I have but an angry fancy: what is that which I should do?

I had been content to perish, falling on the foeman's ground,
When the ranks are roll'd in vapour, and the winds are laid with sound.

But the jingling of the guinea helps the hurt that Honour feels,
And the nations do but murmur, snarling at each other's heels. 105

Can I but relive in sadness? I will turn that earlier page.
Hide me from my deep emotion, O thou wondrous Mother-Age!

Make me feel the wild pulsation that I felt before the strife,
When I heard my days before me, and the tumult of my life; 110

Yearning for the large excitement that the coming years would yield,
Eager-hearted as a boy when first he leaves his father's field,

And at night along the dusky highway near and nearer drawn,
Sees in heaven the light of London flaring like a dreary dawn;

And his spirit leaps within him to be gone before him then,
Underneath the light he looks at, in among the throngs of men: 115

Men, my brothers, men the workers, ever reaping something new:
That which they have done but earnest of the things that they shall do:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be; 120

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm; 125

Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,

And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law. 130

So I triumph'd ere my passion sweeping thro' me left me dry,
Left me with the palsied heart, and left me with the jaundiced eye;

Eye, to which all order festers, all things here are out of joint,
Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point:

Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion creeping nigher, 135
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.

Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the suns.

What is that to him that reaps not harvest of his youthful joys,
Tho' the deep heart of existence beat for ever like a boy's? 140

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers, and I linger on the shore,
And the individual withers, and the world is more and more.

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers, and he bears a laden breast,
Full of sad experience, moving toward the stillness of his rest.

Hark, my merry comrades call me, sounding on the bugle-horn, 145
They to whom my foolish passion were a target for their scorn:

Shall it not be scorn to me to harp on such a moulder'd string?
I am shamed thro' all my nature to have loved so slight a thing.

Weakness to be wroth with weakness! woman's pleasure, woman's pain—
Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain: 150

Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, match'd with mine,
Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine—

Here at least, where nature sickens, nothing. Ah, for some retreat
Deep in yonder shining Orient, where my life began to beat;

Where in wild Mahratta-battle fell my father evil-starr'd; 155
I was left a trampled orphan, and a selfish uncle's ward.

Or to burst all links of habit—there to wander far away,
On from island unto island at the gateways of the day.

Larger constellations burning, mellow moons and happy skies,
Breadths of tropic shade and palms in cluster, knots of Paradise. 160

Never comes the trader, never floats an European flag;
Slides the bird o'er lustrous woodland, swings the trailer from the crag;

Droops the heavy-blossom'd bower, hangs the heavy-fruited tree—
Summer isles of Eden lying in dark-purple spheres of sea.

There methinks would be enjoyment more than in this march of mind, 165
In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind.

There the passions cramp'd no longer shall have scope and breathing-space;
I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.

Iron-jointed, supple-sinew'd, they shall dive, and they shall run,
Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun; 170

Whistle back the parrot's call, and leap the rainbows of the brooks,
Not with blinded eyesight poring over miserable books—

Fool, again the dream, the fancy! but I know my words are wild,
But I count the gray barbarian lower than the Christian child.

I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains, 175
Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!

Mated with a squalid savage—what to me were sun or clime?
I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time—

I that rather held it better men should perish one by one,
Than that earth should stand at gaze like Joshua's moon in Ajalon! 180

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range.
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.

Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day:
Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.

Mother-Age (for mine I knew not) help me as when life begun: 185
Rift the hills, and roll the waters, flash the lightnings, weigh the Sun—

O, I see the crescent promise of my spirit hath not set.
Ancient founts of inspiration well thro' all my fancy yet.

Howsoever these things be, a long farewell to Locksley Hall!
Now for me the woods may wither, now for me the roof-tree fall. 190

Comes a vapour from the margin, blackening over heath and holt,
Cramming all the blast before it, in its breast a thunderbolt.

Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow;
For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go.

4 Feed Me, Also, River God

Lest by diminished vitality and abated
vigilance, I become food for crocodiles—for that quicksand
of gluttony which is legion. It is there close at hand—
on either side
of me. You remember the Israelites who said in pride

and stoutness of heart: “The bricks are fallen down, we will
build with hewn stone, the sycamores are cut down, we will
change to cedars”? I am not ambitious to dress stones, to
renew forts, nor to match
my value in action, against their ability to catch

up with arrested prosperity. I am not like
them, indefatigable, but if you are a god, you will
not discriminate against me. Yet—if you may fulfill
none but prayers dressed
as gifts in return for your gifts—disregard the request.

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