Five critical papers

Janet Bierrum

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FIVE CRITICAL PAPERS

By

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B. S., Montana State University, 1958

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Mark Tobey was born in Centerville, Wisconsin, in 1890 and spent his youth in the rural countryside along the banks of the Mississippi. These early years in the household of a farmer and carpenter family created images which he savored as he was experimenting with new spatial concepts in his paintings: "The Mississippi, a mile wide and islanded in the center . . . flows through the nights and through the days . . . At night through the screen window the train on the Minnesota side looks like a child's toy . . . moving toward Winona."¹

During these childhood years, his parents nurtured his interest in art. His mother liked to create beautiful floral arrangements, and his father, a builder, felt a strong responsibility to encourage his son's talents. In later years, Tobey still remembered the rounded forms his father drew with his thick carpenter's crayon or incised in Indian pipestone. Though he rejected the building trade, Tobey's continuing interest in structure reflected this early influence. "Near Eastern Landscape" [1927] and "Algerian Landscape" [1931] are two examples. In addition, more than twenty years after he left his home on the Mississippi, he painted "Middle West" [1929]. In this work, he rendered buildings in simplified geometric forms and incorporated a highway and railroad line which sweep toward the vast plain.
Tobey was very conscious of nature during his rural years. Even in 1951 he could vividly recall the level and motionless land, a favorite cave along the bank of the river, and leaves swirling beneath huge elms. He also recalled that Indians still lived in wigwams near his home. He liked to think, too, about exploring ancient Indian mounds near the river. These several images continued to float through his mind in later years.

When his family moved to a home near Chicago in 1908, he attended Saturday classes at the Art Institute until the illness of his father forced him to study on his own. As a result of his classes in Chicago, he had become extremely interested in drawing the human form. He avidly studied the humanism of Picasso's Blue and Rose Periods. However, he could not accept deforming or fracturing the human figure for the sake of shape or pattern. "A terrible mutilation of the figure isn't very impressive. I've seen pictures in which the human figure has been chopped up, looked like leprosy . . . . This is not to me humanistic art at all."²

In his work, Tobey often chose to decrease the scale of figures and to multiply the shapes so they could fit into small compartments of space. "Take the Renaissance," he said. "The figure dominated the space. And then after the Renaissance, the space dominated the figure. In Oriental painting, the landscape dominates the figure."³
In a few of his works which feature compartments, artifacts were as important as figures. For instance, in "Forms Follow Man" (1941), watches, compasses, and musical instruments surround human forms and move with them.

During the years between 1911 and 1917, Tobey moved back and forth between Chicago and New York and worked as a fashion artist and as an illustrator for mail order catalogues. Then, shortly after World War I, he met friends who introduced him to the Bahai World Faith. Because this introduction altered the course of his life and of his work, a few details of Bahai teachings are noteworthy.

Bahai is based on the theory that man will slowly understand the unity of the world and the oneness of mankind. The faith further instructs man to balance his knowledge of science and religion and thus realize his full potential of maturation. Humanity is compared to a tree: each person is a part of the tree and is the product of a single seed.

The Bahai temple has nine sides. As the largest integer, nine represents unity, oneness, and comprehensiveness. Furthermore, followers of each of the nine great world religions can enter through separate doors and meet with members of other faiths in worship at the central Godhead, which is portrayed as round and radiant like the sun.

Although dates were not cited, one group of paintings is specifically related to Bahai. "The Cycle of the Prophet" concentrates on the sequence of divine spokesmen;
"The Retreat of the Friend" shows the saint and friend of humanity as he moves aside to allow another to take his place; "Movement Around the Martyr" rejoices in the rebirth of the martyr through music, architecture, art, and social change; "The Gold of the Martyr" contrasts material and spiritual riches; and "The New Day" defines a period when men could live in peace. Indeed, the Bahai faith confirmed Tobey's strong belief in inspiration and intuition. "Man-kind today," he complained, "has lost the power of scent." He was convinced that this world faith could enable him to sharpen and refine his own unique sensibilities.

In 1922 Tobey moved to Seattle to New York and began teaching a class of four pupils at a progressive school of the arts directed by Miss Nellie Cornish. He was disappointed in Seattle's cultural opportunities, but the slower pace and beautiful landscape helped him adjust. In addition, his teaching experiences enriched the days. Tobey advised hovering parents of his young students to "just give them materials and be interested in art yourselves." He told adult students to "start with the imagination, then go out and look at things, study them, and that will stimulate your retentive memory and your retentive memory will bring it back in your imagination again."

During this time in Seattle, Tobey formulated his own view of cubism. One evening he imagined himself working in a small, centrally lighted room. A portrait on the easel
in front of him formed a second smaller unit within the room. He visualized a fly moving freely around the objects in the room and around himself. The fly's movements were unrestricted by logic or gravity as they generated planes in the cube of the room. Following this experience, Tobey could see solid objects as transparent and metaphysical: "I don’t need to bother about that solid there . . . I can go right through myself and I get here and come up there. When I got through with this, I was freed from the cube." 6

Tobey made a second discovery in Seattle which involved the art of calligraphy. In 1923 he met Teng Kuei, a young Chinese artist who was studying at the University of Washington. He asked Teng Kuei to instruct him in the techniques of Chinese calligraphy; and, as Tobey developed his skills in the process, he discovered new movements for his brush. He later described this experience: "I need only to take one step backward into the past, and the tree in front of my studio in Seattle is all rhythm, lifting, springing upward!" 7 From that point, the tree and all other objects possessed separate energies and were no longer solid. Through the "living line," as he chose to call it, Tobey learned to fracture and dissolve shapes and to create transparency. In addition, he learned to open volumes and to make them porous.
Between 1930 and 1938, Tobey taught at Dartington Hall, a school and cultural center in Devonshire about two hundred miles from London. There he met Aldous Huxley and Pearl Buck, who were devoted--like Tobey--to the melding of Eastern and Western ideas. Years later in 1957, Tobey wrote, "I have often thought that if the West Coast had been open to aesthetic influence from Asia, as the East Coast was to Europe what a rich nation we would be!"^8

During 1934, he took a year's leave of absence from Dartington Hall and made the most significant journey of his life. For eleven months, he lived in Shanghai with the family of his friend and teacher, Teng Kuei. With the help of his mentor, he refined his skills in Chinese calligraphy and enjoyed plays and concerts. He also studied the history of calligraphy, and portions of that history plus specific types of calligraphy pertain to this study.

In China and Japan, calligraphy has been considered one of the most important forms of artistic expression. Although calligraphy is basically a written language, it is recognized as a major art form for two reasons: it is a flexible medium and it possesses a graphic potential from individual characters. From an artistic viewpoint, the moment of execution and the action are important, not the interpretation of the characters themselves.

In this discussion, calligraphy will be used in the context of the art of handwriting as script, which is formed
from a single line or from several lines. Pictographs and letter forms serve as the derivations for these lines. The brushwork which creates this script is usually cursive; however, sometimes angular lines are incorporated as well. This type of calligraphy has artistic and aesthetic values of its own and can be considered a kind of gesture. In its most perfect form, the movements of the brush and the pressure of the hand reflect the disposition of the writer and his integral relationship to the act of writing. The calligrapher attains a relaxed and contemplative mind through which he can cause his fingers to move without his wrist being conscious of their movement. Only then can the brush become an extension of the individual.

During his studies of calligraphy types, Tobey was especially influenced by Chinese Ch'an. This type derives its name from the Indian word dhyana, meaning meditation. Originating in India and Central Asia, Ch'an was introduced to China during the sixth century. In this type of writing, spontaneity is the most important quality since it directly relates to the quest of Zen for immediate and direct inspiration. Because the cursive script of Ch'an allows individual expression and improvisation, it became a favorite form for Tobey's "white writing."

Following his visit to Shanghai, Tobey traveled to Japan and spent a month in a Zen monastery. There he sometimes attempted Eastern meditation, visited with abbotts and
monks, and practiced calligraphy and painting. During this
time, he concentrated on Japanese kana which evolved from
cursive script and resembles grass writing. One type of
kana, hiragana, has developed into a refined and simplified
type of calligraphy and has become the most popular variety
of Japanese script. Though its source is Chinese cursive
script, the kana character is often without individual mean-
ing. The characters are simplified to the point that they
rarely consist of more than three strokes. Kana usually
disregards many of the standard, formal techniques and al-
 lows a wide freedom in composition. Furthermore, the line
is often threadlike and has a fragile quality. In both
Chinese Ch'an and in Japanese kana, however, the flowing
and curved transitions between and among separate strokes
and characters create the visual impact. This visual im-
 pact intrigued Tobey as he applied his calligraphy skills
to experimental paintings.

After his studies in the Orient, he returned to Dart-
ington Hall and shared this insight:

I knew when in Japan and China, I would never be
anything but the Occidental that I am. But it
was there that I got what I call the calligraphic
impulse to carry my work on into some new dimen-
sions. With this method I found I could paint
the frenetic rhythms of the modern city, the inter-
weaving of lights and the streams of people who are
entangled in the meshes of this net.10

During the fall of 1935, Tobey began to paint a unique
series of works which represented a synthesis of his travels
and marked the beginning of his style which became known as
"white writing." One evening he started a small picture
of entwining whitish lines on a brown background, like the
negative of a photograph. Small forms in blue, red, and
yellow emerged through the network of lines. As he con­tinued, he realized that the painting depicted Broadway
with the people trapped in the mesh of interwoven lights.
He freed some shapes so they had a vibrating quality and
used a variety of calligraphic characters from bold to
fragile and sharply defined to soft-edged. Some strokes
were separated from the background; some dissolved into
space. Through these techniques, the "frenetic rhythms"
moves across the surface.

Tobey liked to contrast Hong Kong with New York City:
Thousands of Chinese characters are turning and
twisting . . . The narrow streets are alive in
a way that Broadway isn't alive. Here all is
human, even the beasts of burden. The human
energy spills itself in multiple forms, writhes,
sweats, and strains every muscle towards the
day's bowl of rice. The din is terrific. 11

Shortly after he painted "Broadway," Tobey chose to con­cent­rate on a different din from that of Hong Kong streets. In
"Welcome Hero" (1935), he relied on his memories of Lind­bergh's reception after his transatlantic flight. Because
he fractured the focus and filled spaces between buildings
with movement and mass, "Welcome Hero" was even more experi­mental than "Broadway." At one point, Tobey explained,
"White lines in movement symbolize light as a unifying idea
which flows through compartmented units of life bringing a
dynamic to men's minds, ever expanding their energies toward a larger relativity." For Tobey, multiple space bounded by involved white lines symbolized higher states of consciousness. "Welcome Home" forces the viewer to be conscious of the freedom of vibrating light, the festive reception, yet the restriction of city compartments.

Tobey also created multiple space effects in "Rummage" [1949]. In this painting, cells become autonomous in size and position. The cells contain figures facing and moving away from the viewer. In addition, they contain an astonishing assortment of objects: chairs, lamps, bowls, shoes, and garments. Delicate white lines thread through the entire surface area and create a multidimensional effect.

In "Transition Forms" [1942], Tobey repeatedly altered the focus as he painted. The work resembles a group of photographs which are printed over each other in different positions. The eyes of the viewer have no focal point upon which to rest but are forced to scan the surface of the painting. Tobey explained that it was a "type of painting in which you are not allowed to rest on anything: you're bounced off it or you have to keep moving with it." He had succeeded in creating his moving focus.

By 1942, Tobey had returned to Seattle. He enjoyed hours and days of wandering the Seattle Pike Place Market. During this time, he began his series of "Public Market Types" in pen and tempera. He recorded the vitality of the
scene, the color of the wares and people, and the constant
disorder. For hours he would swiftly sketch truck farmers,
down-and-outers, the old, and the hungry. He sketched men
curled over trash bins and crowds pressing between vege-
table stands. Following the sketching process, he would
return to his studio and apply traces of tempera. Some-
times he would lunch at a point overlooking Elliott Bay and
study the movements of ferries, tugboats, and freighters.
These were soothing images in contrast to the bustle of the
Market.

Inspired by images of the Market, "E Pluribus Unum"
[1942] differed from compartment paintings. In this piece,
Tobey juxtaposed individual figures, then melded them into
flat designs or dissolved them into lines. He used his
white lines to create texture or to outline profiles and
wares. This painting seems to depict the din which he re-
membered from Hong Kong.

In the late 1940s, Tobey returned to his "calligraphic
impulse." "The Tropicalism" [1948] is a tempera and oil
painting which incorporated an almost automatic type of ab-
straction. Various strokes turn and twist and move in all
directions. The strokes vary in tone, size, width, and
sharpness, and a variety of foci vibrate across the multi-
dimensional surface. Both dry and wet brush strokes plus
both cursive and running styles of calligraphy create the
effect of energized heat waves.
Tobey was also interested in intricacies of nature which reflected a more soothing tone. Throughout his career, he painted fish, birds, insects, and animals. In addition, he painted gardens, trees, landscapes, night, dusk, and dawn. Sometimes he thought about a time when he sat on the floor of a room in Japan and studied an intimate garden with dragonflies hovering in space. He realized that the small world of the garden had a truth and energy of its own. In a tiny painting entitled "Breath of Stone," he implied energies of a larger force of nature which could split rocks and fracture the earth. On a different scale, his round painting "World" [1959] showed a vibrating mass which suggested the birth of Planet Earth plus the energized life on that sphere.

Tobey painted "Edge of August" in 1953. He realized that the theme for this painting had been circulating in his mind for almost ten years, and he was able to paint it only when he brought his "white writing" to further stages. In "Edge of August," he hoped to express the time of transition between summer and fall. As he stroked the dense writing, the delicacy reflected influences of Japanese kana. He used the brush strokes to create a feeling of continuous yet suspended space. In the lower left corner, the field of intricate calligraphy is bounded by a lavender triangle; at the right side, the threadlike strokes fade into a dark void. Through the web of lines, the viewer glimpses soft
iridescent colors of blue, yellow, rose, and lavender which suggest space between and beyond the strokes. Because of the fragile strokes and the silent voids created by the lavender and black areas, "Edge of August" is a much more introspective painting than "Tropicalism:" the movements of the lines seem to mutter instead of clamor.

In 1957 Tobey began a series of sumi paintings. He remembered the impulse:

"Space Ritual XIII" [1957] is one of these sumi paintings. The strokes are bold and spontaneous. Tobey's brush has lashed in vigorous, agitated movements which are far different from the careful illumination and cumulative strokes of his "white writings." He used a dry brush very quickly, and the hairs of the brush leave white streaks within the black strokes, characteristic of some Ch'an calligraphy.

In 1958 Tobey received an award of international distinction: the gold medal for painting at the Venice Biennale. Prior to that date, only one other American--James Abott McNeill Whistler--had been selected for this honor. Following the award, some critics referred to Tobey as "an intimate Pollock." True, Tobey and Pollock were among the first to paint "off the picture." But true also,
Tobey achieved his results years earlier than Pollock. His paintings "Broadway" and "Welcome Hero" were accomplished in 1935; anything comparable by Pollock did not appear until 1943.

How might we interpret the term "an intimate Pollock?" Perhaps it meant that Pollock had moved painting beyond the limits of the Constructivist era. Certainly, he heightened the value of the gesture and of spontaneity. He approached his huge canvases with tremendous concentration, then boldly applied strokes which would fill the empty expanse. Tobey usually achieved his results in a different manner, often on a small piece of paper with a hair-fine brush. Unlike Pollock, he did not use his entire physique but chose a delicate stroke in place of Pollock's bold and even violent gestures. Knowledge of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy had altered Tobey's intuitive acts.

Indeed, Mark Tobey was a unique individual and a versatile, inspired, experimental painter. Various descriptions have been used to define his character: "the sage from Seattle," "the sage from Wisconsin," "a wandering mystic." He was highly introspective, and he was a loner. He rarely engaged in activities of the avant-garde art world but preferred quiet places like Dartington Hall, a Zen monastery, and his residence in Basel, Switzerland. He was born in a small town in Wisconsin, yet thrived on new images from his travels to Mexico, to China, to Japan, and
to Palestine. He was perplexed, yet fascinated, by the pace of cities in the Orient and in America. He was forty-five when he painted his first mature pictures, "Broadway" and "Welcome Hero," and he was over sixty when his international reputation began to flourish. Tobey could wait, though: he continued his experiments and never tried to force his work.

His quest, like that of Bahai, was for peace and for a soothing space where he could meditate and paint. On one occasion, however, a friend remarked that Tobey seemed to paint what he professed to like the least. He was irritated by the press of crowds but he painted them with great understanding; he was a poor traveler yet he painted man's migrations with considerable insight. "Skid Road" [1948], for example, effectively portrays the dislocation during one migration.

For Tobey, the crush of crowds and traffic in America symbolized mobility and materialism which was unlike China's. America's crowds and traffic possessed an energy and tension that was more mechanical than human. Still he chose to study the bright lights of traffic and electricity. In fact, he found a form of beauty in the structures of beacons and of electrical transformers. "City Radiance" and "White Night" [1942] are two examples which reflect his awe of pulsing electrical fields. In a third example, "Electric Night" [1944], human figures move through the maze.
Tobey's personal interests nourished his painting. He was an amateur musician and composer and often played the piano to relax and to clarify visual images. He also wrote poetry upon occasion. One poem includes these lines: "Where does the round moon live? The eyes are not related in unison. The circle is too small; it binds and bruises . . . thoughts can be round as the moon is round." His painting "Space Rose" (1959) seems to echo these lines. Two circles undulate within the painting, perhaps the eye and the moon. Lines of various lengths and widths fill the mass and project into the void toward the edge of the canvas. The edges of the circles do not constrict but are blurred and energized.

When Tobey visited China, he learned the character called Chung which means the middle. He believed that most Americans do not have the sense of this middle because they were moving too quickly forward or backward. As a result, there was no movement within the circle. "Space Rose" reveals motion and mass within the circles: an individual has time to study and to contemplate before moving beyond.

While Tobey was drawn toward some of America's colorful folkways and a few of its landscapes, often he did not feel at home in his native land. Upon viewing a painting by Edward Hopper at an exhibition in Chicago, he commented that the painting reflected "the loneliness and solitude
that is in American psychology, and that thing talked more to me than all those other paintings." He continued:

. . . I have lived all over America except the South; actually lived these damned streets on Sunday where not even a cat is seen . . . It's that kind of a life that can live without extensions. Isolationism. But not isolated by continents and water--isolated from spiritual currents.20

In 1960 Tobey moved to a historic fifteenth-century house in Basel, Switzerland. Most of the rooms remained empty, and packing cases occupied some of the spaces as though Tobey were ready at any moment to continue his migration. When visitors stopped by, he enjoyed escorting them on tours of his home and liked to discuss his continuing experiments: tracing through gold foil and creating monotypes from ribbed and porous foam rubber. He commented upon a variety of imaginary portraits in his studio: heads with monstrous hats, actors, and dancers. Throughout his life, Tobey remained impatient and restless, always searching for some untried route, always moving back and forth in time and space. "I am accused often of too much experimentation," he stated, "but what else should I do when all other factors of man are in the same condition. I thrust forward into space and science and the rest do."21

Since his introduction to Bahai, Tobey believed that painting should evolve from the processes of meditation instead of action. Yet the action of migration filled his mind with images upon which to meditate. From his many
travels, he concluded: "The thing we've got to fight for is humanism--it's the highest thing we know; we can't mechanize ourselves out of existence."22

The many painting styles of Tobey bewildered some critics. In his catalogue for Tobey's 1959 retrospective exhibition in Seattle, Edward B. Thomas explained: "The Tobey genius is not so simple that it can be easily or methodically charted... within a single year, a single month or a single week there are incredible variations."23

For over fifty years, Tobey was extremely interested in exploring techniques to fill space. His friend and teacher, Teng Kuei, motivated him through calligraphy and through this particular criticism. On one occasion, Kuei commented that Western artists made paintings "that looked like holes in the wall."24 Tobey was determined to fill these holes.

Early in his career, he realized that humans are constantly dealing with space in their day-to-day lives: traveling through it; slicing it into rooms, homes and offices; and sleeping and eating within it. As he applied his calligraphy skills, Tobey’s space was rarely empty and rarely quiet. He filled his spaces with figures, artifacts, fog, threadlike lines, energized lights, and--upon occasion--bold sumi ink gestures.

In addition, his spaces vibrated with quiet sounds of transitions between seasons, hums of electrical currents,
whispers of wind, and the clamor of parades and crowds. On occasion, he filled his spaces with nets and mazes of lines; sometimes he formed sculptures from lines or constructed containers of lines for figures and objects. No matter how rectangular the surface, his brush strokes extended in every direction with images usually ending or fading near the edge. Whatever process Tobey used, the space became occupied and multidimensional.

Yes, Tobey's world incorporated varied relationships, heightened consciousness, and constant motion. The individual object and the perspective were rarely his primary concern: his objective was to create moving foci and energized spaces. His paintings teemed with tensions: of nature and of technology; of cities and of individuals; of religions and of cultures. These paintings always required a wakeful, perceptive eye. Tobey knew that the Greek philosophers saw the essential being of the soul as existing in constant movement. "So, I have tried to tear out just a few scraps of that beauty which makes up the miracles of the Cosmos and which is in the multifacetedness of life."
Footnotes


3. Ibid.


5. Ibid., p. 46.


7. Seitz, p. 47.

8. Ibid.


11. Seitz, p. 36.

12. Ibid., p. 19.


16. Seitz, p. 27.

17. Schmied, p. 5.


20. Seitz, p. 16.


22. Seitz, p. 15.

24. Seitz, p. 27.

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Between 1800 and 1850, the trans-Mississippi West projected a variety of images. Some individuals applied negative images of hostile Indians, wild beasts, harsh climates, and formidable mountain ranges. Others viewed portions of the vast area as worthless regions of deserts, cactus, and whirlwinds of sand and dust. During this time, however, other frontier images were evolving in California, in New Mexico, in Texas, in the Rocky Mountain regions, and in Oregon.

During the 1820s, California was still under the rule of Mexico. Approximately four thousand Mexicans lived on ranches or in small communities along the coast. At this time, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco served as garrisons and sheltered 307 soldiers and twenty-two officers in small wood or mud forts. By 1846, approximately 1,500 Anglos lived in California. Most were craftsmen and businessmen who lived in the more sizeable communities of San Francisco and Monterey. Some were ranchers who had secured large sections of land from the Mexican government, and a few were fur trappers who had chosen to settle in the valleys where they once trapped beaver.

In 1848, two events occurred in California that significantly altered the images of the region. The first involved the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded California and the rest of the present American Southwest to the United States; the second was the discovery of gold.
which brought more than 80,000 people to that region in 1849. These events triggered migration patterns of prospectors and settlers as they pushed west in search of gold, fertile land, or business enterprises.

Migration patterns in California affected another segment of the population: the Indians. In 1846, both Anglos and Mexicans were greatly outnumbered by the Indians. The majority of the estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Indians lived in valleys and foothills of the interior and possessed neither guns nor horses. After the turmoil of the gold rush, however, only 17,000 were left. What were the causes of this reduction? Certainly, disease took its toll, but the primary cause of the decimation was brutal treatment by settlers and gold seekers.2

New Mexico was another region of change. Still under Mexican rule in 1827, New Mexico boasted 44,000 residents—ten times more than either California or Texas at this time. The primary industry was raising sheep, and about four million wooly creatures grazed the pastures. In 1827, a second important industry began in the Ortiz Mountains south of Santa Fe where gold was discovered. During its good years, the Real de Dolores Mine delighted its owners with a $30,000 annual yield.3

For these some 40,000 New Mexicans, Santa Fe was the center of commercial activities. They hungered for various
manufactured wares which their mother country was unable to provide, so—following the decision of 1822 to open the borders to American trade—eager merchants from the Mississippi Valley began to exploit a lucrative market. Since New Mexicans offered a wealth of gold and furs to trade, why not supply them with cutlery, clothing, and American knick-knacks? The Mexican government actively encouraged this trade; sheep raising and gold mining could not sustain stable growth patterns. As a result—for the two decades between 1820 and 1840—long lines of wagons carried items of every description over the thousand-mile trail between Missouri and New Mexico. Certainly this flourishing trade brought excellent profits to merchants. In addition, the United States became more aware of the weakness of Mexico's control over its northern provinces.

In 1820, Texas was a third area of evolving images. At this time, only three small Mexican outposts stood sentinel over the entire area, and cattle raising was quickly becoming the primary interest. But the immense territory needed a larger population to develop its resources. Acting on this recognition, in 1821 Mexico opened the settlement of Texas to Americans with the stipulation that the settlers become loyal to the Mexican government. By 1830, approximately 8,000 pioneers had moved into Texas, 4,428 of whom lived in Stephen Austin’s colony.
While Santa Fe traders were expanding their profits and pioneers were settling Texas, the fur trappers were carving trails into the heartland of the Far West. They began their explorations from three primary points. From the outpost of Taos, they moved east along the Pecos and west across the Gila River valley. A second point of departure was Fort Vancouver along the banks of the Columbia River, which the Hudson’s Bay Company of England had constructed in 1824. Each autumn during the 1820s and 1830s, dozens of trappers moved south from this base into the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys in California or headed east along the Snake River. The third point of origin was St. Louis where businessman and politician William Ashley gathered a small band of explorers to blaze a trail into the central Rockies. Famous mountain man and explorer Jedediah Strong Smith led this 1823 expedition and discovered an extremely abundant population of beaver in the Green River valley of Wyoming.

During the 1820s and 1830s, about 100,000 beaver pelts were used each year in the manufacture of men’s hats. Beginning in the 1830s, however, more and more silk was used, and this substitution saved the beaver from extinction. Although the fur trade had a heyday of only twenty years, the trappers played a significant role in blazing trails for more permanent settlers.
Promoters eagerly encouraged settlers to participate in the overland migrations of the 1840s. Merchants, missionaries, and empire builders especially lauded the fertile land in Oregon. For those settlers who endured the arduous journey, promoters promised lush parcels of 640 acres. The first mass migration occurred in 1843 when one thousand excited settlers left Independence, Missouri, and headed toward the "Garden of the World," as Henry Nash Smith called it. By 1845, six thousand American pioneers had settled in the territory and had begun to cultivate the wilderness.

During the years between 1800 and 1850, then, the word "Frontier" embodied a wide range of images: Mexican forts and outposts, Indians, discoveries of gold, sheep ranches, trade routes, cattle ranches, fur trappers, settlers, merchants, missionaries, and empire builders. From this kaleidoscopic range, two primary images evolved. The first envisaged a Garden of Eden awaiting the arrival of white Americans, especially farmers, who would fulfill their mission of settlement. The second viewed the vast expanse as a land awaiting economic exploitation. Americans from varied backgrounds, experiences, professions, and expectations perpetuated or confirmed or questioned these images. The major portion of this discussion examines the diverse--and often conflicting--images of the trans-Mississippi frontier through the eyes and minds of visionaries Thomas
Jefferson and Thomas Hart Benton, of artists Karl Bodmer and Albert Bierstadt, and of selected authors.

Visionary Thomas Jefferson was the intellectual father of the American advance to the Pacific. In 1782, twenty-two years prior to the Lewis and Clark expedition, Jefferson wrote a treatise entitled Notes on Virginia. The secretary of the French legation had posed numerous questions concerning characteristics of the new land; therefore, the document originated when Jefferson compiled a comprehensive series of answers. One of the most compelling images within this treatise was agrarianism. Jefferson viewed the West as an uncultivated paradise and, like Prospero in The Tempest, envisioned cultivating the wilderness and creating a prolific garden. As a result of this image, Jefferson viewed the farmer as God's chosen person with the skills and tenacity to subdue the wilderness.

Following the Lewis and Clark expedition, though, Jefferson abandoned his Edenic agricultural images pertaining to the vast land west of the Mississippi. Members of the expedition had reported some encouraging data which supported the garden image. However, there were conflicting images as well: hostile Indians, dense forests, harsh climates, rushing rivers, and rocky soil. Furthermore—unlike Jefferson's vision—the Rocky Mountains were considerably higher, steeper, and more formidable than the Appalachian chain. Applying this information, Jefferson projected a different frontier
image and suggested "that the right bank of the Mississippi should be turned into an Indian reservation for at least fifty years. Emigrants should be forbidden to cross the river until we shall have filled up all the vacant country on this side." 7

During his public life, Jefferson's thoughts and actions revealed certain inconsistencies. He lauded the farmer's life, yet he ascended to the Presidency of the United States. He was attracted to a quiet, rural life style, yet he savored the pleasures which the arts could provide. He desired the preservation of an agrarian existence but encouraged progress in technology and science.

Richard Hofstadter suggests that Jefferson's inconsistencies emerged from a deep-seated ambivalence and grew from complex responses to conflicting demands of the individual and of society. Certainly the penetrating vision of Jefferson anticipated the conflicting and painful circumstances which continue to plague Americans in present times. During the War of 1812, he wrote, "Our enemy has indeed the consolation of Satan on removing our first parents from Paradise: from a peacable and agricultural nation, he makes us a military and manufacturing one." 8

A second visionary, Thomas Hart Benton, was a devoted follower of Jefferson. His daughter, Jessie Benton Fremont, related details of a visit which Benton paid to the aged statesman at Monticello late in 1824. During this
visit, she stated that the occasion of a "laying on of hands" occurred, through which Jefferson invested Benton with the responsibility of promoting expansionism in the American West.

Like Jefferson, Benton emphasized considerations of commerce. In this view of expansion, the highway to the Pacific became more than a means of connecting wharves of the seaports with warehouses of merchants in the interior:

An American road to India through the heart of the country will revive upon its line all the wonders of which we have read--and eclipse them. The western wilderness, from the Pacific to the Mississippi, will start into life under its touch.

As a result, a wide variety of settlers could engage in the business of trading, and this would energize the nation. Furthermore, Benton believed that trade along the American passage and with the Orient would emancipate the United States from its dependence on Europe.

In the spirit of confirming images of westward movement, on February 7, 1849, Benton introduced a bill to set aside some of the proceeds of public land sales for the purpose of constructing a Central National Road which would extend "from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River." Along the entire length of the railway, contractors would build "a plain old English road . . . a road in which the farmer in his wagon or carriage, on horse or on foot, may travel without fear, and without tax--with none to run over him or make him jump out of the way." He added a further
archaic note to this frontier image: he favored construction of a railway as far as practicable, then suggested that sleighs transport travelers and wares through the snowy passes.

By 1854, Benton had renounced his devotion to an antiquated view of mercantile development and began to confront the theme of the "garden of the world." Like Jefferson, Benton never visited the Far West, yet he consistently praised the beauty of the Rocky Mountains and the astonishing fertility of the soil. If the land proved infertile, he switched to discussions of rich iron and coal deposits. In some areas of inadequate rainfall, he quickly turned to recommending irrigation from conveniently located artesian wells. On one occasion, he refused to accept the records of a surveyor who stated that a route through the Rockies of southern Colorado was impracticable. Instead, he insisted, "Not a tunnel to be made--a mountain to be climbed--a hill to be crossed--a swamp to be seen--or desert or moveable sand to be encountered in the whole distance." Visionary Benton saw the West through the eyes of explorer Fremont, but he believed he possessed the power to move portions of the Rocky Mountains. Certainly, Benton loved his images of the Far West. Maybe his attraction was more powerful because he had never viewed it for himself: he could imagin what he wished.
In contrast to Jefferson and Benton, artist Karl Bodmer spent almost an entire year in the Far West. A native of Zurich, Switzerland, Bodmer was invited by naturalist Prince Maximillian of Rhenish Prussia to accompany him on a scientific expedition to North America. Bodmer and his patron visited America during 1832 to 1834, which were pivotal years in American history. These years marked the height of the energetic Jacksonian Era and marked the rapid development of the backcountry frontier as far as the Mississippi. By 1832, though, Americans had not begun the tremendous mass migration along the overland trail to Oregon and California. John Jacob Astor's giant fur trading company was just moving up the Missouri River into the center of Indian country, and the mountain men were still searching for undiscovered regions in the central Rockies. In 1833, however—as Bodmer and Prince Maximillian were pushing up the Missouri in keelboats and paddlewheel crafts—the great Oregon Trail migration was beginning, and this migration ended the era of the unspoiled West.

Prior to arriving in America, Bodmer had studied with his maternal uncle, noted watercolorist and engraver Jacob Meier. From this influence, Bodmer worked somewhat in the manner of the Renaissance masters, making numerous sketches or "cartoons" of his subjects before applying his paints. Few of his watercolor paintings are totally finished: from
the beginning, Bodmer envisaged his subjects as preliminary material for the aquatints which would illustrate the Prince's atlas.

Images of the landscape of the Missouri River overwhelmed Bodmer. He painted the Missouri with its sandbars, snags, and crumbling shorelines. In addition, he painted the unique rock formations upriver and the white table mountains that resembled ancient castles. One of his most striking paintings of landforms along the Missouri is entitled "Great Gate of the Upper Missouri," which he accomplished on August 6, 1833. The right side of the painting introduces the viewer to rocky ledges along the shore, and the aquamarine river in the left foreground gives way to white rapids in the distance. The intricate, sculptural white chalk towers are the focal point and provide a definite contrast with the flowing river and cloudy lavender and blue sky.

In addition to landforms of the Missouri, Bodmer was extremely interested in images of Indians. Bodmer and Maximillian lived at a time when science--especially German science--was concerned with origins of the world's people. Certainly, Bodmer's investigations were conducted in a scientific manner; however, his studies created profound, romantic emotions. Indian people were not commonplace but were colorful specimens from a wilderness that could perhaps illuminate origins of all human beings.
In the portraits, Bodmer started with the faces as keys to understanding individual personalities. On several occasions, he was fascinated by the configuration of a prominent nose as in his portrayal of Piegan notable Pioch-Kiaiu [The Distant Bear]. In addition to capturing the unusual nose of Pioch-Kiaiu, Bodmer portrayed the character as a seer. Out of a blue-painted face, his eyes stare into infinity with the wisdom of a medicine man. After the battle with the Assiniboins on August 28, 1933, Pioch-Kiaiu told Bodmer that no bullet had touched him, probably because of the powerful medicine of the painting.

On November 8, 1833, Bodmer and Maxmillian arrived at Fort Clark, located on the west bank of the Missouri about forty-five miles north of present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. They spent nearly five and one-half months at Fort Clark and survived an unusually brutal winter under very primitive conditions. During this period, their base was Kipp’s post—a two-room shack with no chinks between the logs. Because of the extreme cold, Maxmillian’s ink and Bodmer’s paints often froze and had to be thawed in hot water. In addition, neither the trader Kipp nor the Mandan Indians had gathered enough food for the winter. Lacking fresh game, the painter and the naturalist often existed on gruel prepared from rotting, rat-infested corn. Sometimes there was no tallow for candles, so they worked by the light of a small fireplace, which was often blocked
by curious Indian visitors.

In spite of the unusually cold winter and primitive living quarters, this was one of the most productive periods of the entire journey. One of Bodmer’s masterpieces was painted during this time and portrayed the Mandan village near Fort Clark. His frontier image is a vast panorama in grays and subtle blues of a 46 below zero day. The viewer gazes across the frozen Missouri to flat hills, promontories, leadened sky, and the vast prairie horizon. In the middle background, the Mandan village and Fort Clark are barely visible against the prevailing gray sky. Indian figures in the foreground brave the cold as they search for wood. Since the great smallpox epidemic of 1837 almost eliminated the Mandans as a culture, Bodmer’s paintings are a treasured account of what became a lost tribe.

Karl Bodmer created a collective portrait of the American frontier that was equaled by no other eye-witness artist prior to the advent of photography. He studied and painted the Far West in its amazing variety, and his paintings—as reproduced in Maximilian’s atlas—became a significant record of the American frontier of the early nineteenth century.14

Unlike Bodmer, artist Albert Bierstadt programmed his frontier images of the Far West through studies and travels in Europe. To his eyes, the Rocky Mountains resembled the Bernese Alps of Switzerland. Indeed, if no Indians or
buffalo were included, many of his works might just as well have been painted in that region. Furthermore—in contrast to Bodmer—Bierstadt did not seek even semi-scientific exactitude. His paintings were often highly exaggerated and romantic in nature. He often steepened declivities, sharpened peaks, and applied various formulas to trees, cliffs, and clouds.

Bierstadt's first opportunity to sketch the Rocky Mountains occurred in 1859. He gained permission to accompany civil engineer Frederic W. Lander who was heading west to improve the mountain portion of the wagon road from Fort Kearney, through the South Pass, and on to the eastern border of California near Honey Lake. By May of 1859, Bierstadt was travelling the same route which artist Alfred Jacob Miller had taken twenty-two years before—up the Platte and Sweetwater valleys and on to the South Pass.

On July 10, 1859, Bierstadt wrote a letter from the Rocky Mountains to an art magazine, The Crayon. This letter disclosed the artist's inability to reflect accurate images or, in fact, to view the Rocky Mountains except by comparison:

I am delighted with the scenery. The mountains are very fine. As seen from the plains they resemble very much the Bernese Alps . . . They are of granite formation, the same as the Swiss mountains and their jagged summits, covered with snow and mingling with the clouds, present a scene which every lover of landscape would gaze upon with unqualified delight.
During his first journey to the Far West and during subsequent journeys, Bierstadt's subject matter incorporated the pleasant and spectacular. In his wilderness views, he concentrated on the visual beauty of the western mountains, valleys, park-like areas, and waterways. He avoided scenes of the desert or of the plains which might impart discomfort. No matter how stupendous the view, he rarely evoked fear or isolation in nature, and he avoided painting freakish, eroded landforms. Furthermore, he chose scenes beyond settlements and never depicted mining subjects. When he painted pioneers, they were mobile rather than on farms. From his paintings, the viewer would never learn that the trans-Mississippi West grew in population from two to twenty million between 1850 and 1900.

Yosemite Valley was a primary place of attraction for Bierstadt. He first visited this region in 1863 and painted it in all moods, climates, and seasons. He painted it as a pleasant park bordered by rising mountains and he painted it as a magnificent phenomenon of nature; he painted it as an intimate spot for a picnic and as a snow-covered wilderness. "Yosemite Valley" [1866] shows Yosemite as a parklike enclosure, even though the valley floor is still wilderness. In spite of threatening skies, the serenity of the view emphasizes Yosemite's Edenic qualities. In this painting, Bierstadt studied balances between forms and sequences of movement more thoroughly than usual and created skilled
transitions between cliff profiles, tree trunks, and reflections in the water.

Bierstadt’s painting "Rocky Mountains" [1863] catapulted him to national and international fame. Exhibited at the New York Metropolitan Fair in April, 1864, the painting’s enormous size (73½" x 120-3/4") coupled with its portrayal of spectacular scenery accounted for the work’s immense popularity. In the foreground, Indians accomplish daily tasks. Bierstadt had, after all, found the Indians "appropriate adjuncts to the scenery." Unlike Bodmer, he was not interested in their uniqueness as individuals or in their culture. To him, Indians symbolized the solitude and romance of the wilderness. In the middle ground, a transparent sheet of water reflects the falls and adjacent golden cliffs. Rugged mountain peaks rise in the distance in muted, gray-blue tones with touches of soft browns and white. The focal point is centered and features the waterfall and golden cliffs. Bierstadt has incorporated sharp changes in tonal qualities, and these changes contribute to a feeling of a space box composition.

When Bierstadt’s frontier images first appeared on huge canvases, their vast scale overwhelmed the viewer with the grandeur of the West. As the large canvases increased in number, however, he chose to rely more and more on formulas. Often he placed one or more wild animals in the foreground to accentuate the isolation of the wilderness.
Sometimes he placed a lone horseman in the foreground to dramatize the expanse. He fractured foreground and background to create spectacular effects of distance, and his skies contained dark storm clouds or exotic rainbows.

Because of these tactics, Bierstadt ultimately received more praise abroad than at home. After all, Europeans were extremely interested in American frontier images which depicted idealism. Bierstadt reinforced this interest, and his breast sparkled with medals which were awarded him by Austria, Prussia, Bavaria, Belgium, and France. However, many American critics issued barbs, not medals. John F. Weir expressed the verdict of the Hudson River taste and stated that Bierstadt's "vast illustrations of scenery are carelessly and crudely executed." They represented "a lapse into sensationalism . . . and a loss of true artistic aim."¹⁷

Two other critics blasted Bierstadt with similar volleys. In 1869, James Jackson Jarves wrote in his *Art Thoughts* that Bierstadt's paintings "do address significantly the majority of Americans who associate them with the vulgar ideas of 'big things' as business . . . Nature's best is left out."¹⁸ Another critic named King delivered this commentary:

It's all Bierstadt and Bierstadt and Bierstadt nowadays! What has he done but twist and askew and distort and discolor and belittle and be-pretty this whole doggone country! Why his mountains are too high and too slim; they'd blow over in one of our fall winds. I've herded colts two summers in Yosemite and honest now, when I stood right up in front of his picture, I didn't know it.¹⁹
In his studio paintings of images of the Far West, Albert Bierstadt chose contrivance of spectacle. Yet many of his small oil-on-cardboard field sketches have been praised in recent years. These sketches accurately represent specific locations and are accomplished during the impact of fresh impressions. They reveal a keen observation, skilled draftsmanship, and spontaneous appreciation of basic forms. When he relied on the moment instead of on the past, Albert Bierstadt was indeed capable of creating accurate images of the frontier.

Like visionaries and artists, authors reflected diverse and sometimes conflicting images of the frontier. For example, although Nathaniel Hawthorne possessed little knowledge of the subject, he was very interested in the West. When he served as American consul in Liverpool, he became acquainted with more Westerners than he had met in either Salem or Concord. He looked upon some of them with disapproval as in the case of a Mr. Lilley whom he presented in his notebooks as "a very unfavorable specimen of American manners--an outrageous tobacco chewer and atrocious spitter on carpets." Hawthorne continued to be inquisitive about the West, however, and imagined the region as more clearly American. For him a prominent image prevailed: he wished to view a portion of America "on which the damned shadow of Europe had not fallen."
A second author, James Russell Lowell, praised American uniqueness in his "Commemoration Ode" to Lincoln:

For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,  
And choosing sweet clay from the breast  
Of the unexhausted West,  
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new . . .  
Nothing of Europe here.21

Henry David Thoreau also commended the values of the Western frontier. From his vantage point, life in the New England states had become too worldly. He frequently spoke of "these degenerate days," and emphasized in Walden that "we need the tonic of wildness." He encouraged the strong self-reliance of the settlers and stated if Americans were to retain their energy, they should experience "a primitive and frontier life."22

Upon occasion, Thoreau enjoyed quoting colonial historians, especially Edward Johnson, who described how the first settlers of Concord lived in a cave and "cut their bread very thin." He imagined this type of rigorous existence was also experienced by frontiersmen of the West. "Adam in Paradise," he declared, "was not so favorably situated on the whole as is the backwoodsman in America." The backwoodsman he visualized, however, was not of the lawless or greedy sort. Instead, this individual was a hard-working soul who lived on a farm and was committed to a life style without frills. He believed the gambling and avarice of many individuals who participated in the California gold rush were "a disgrace on mankind." The spectacle "made God
a moneyed gentleman who scatters a handful of pennies in order to see mankind scramble for them."\(^{23}\)

Certainly various interpretations of Daniel Boone constitute a primary study concerning literary images of the frontier. Who was Boone? Was he an innocent child of nature who interpreted wilderness as a refuge and who kept travelling farther west as the settlers advanced? Or did he promote agrarian communities? One view of Boone was presented in 1820 by an anonymous kinsman. He commented that it would be normal to assume that Boone found great pleasure in the growth of settlements which he founded in the wilderness. Not so, the kinsman claimed. He emphasized that Boone was extremely enthusiastic about hunting "like the unrefined savage." He recognized that advancing pioneers scattered the game and destroyed his sport. The kinsman concluded that Boone would "certainly prefer a state of nature to a state of Civilization, if he were obliged to be confined to one or the other."\(^{24}\)

From another perspective, Boone's efforts to secure and to keep property were a source of newspaper jokes. In an article for the *New York American* in 1823, one reporter wrote, "As civilization advanced, so he, from time to time, retreated." Boone confirmed his restless spirit and complained about the increasing number of settlers in Missouri: "I had not been two years at the licks before a d--d Yankee came and settled down within a hundred miles of me."\(^{25}\)
In 1833 Timothy Flint published a biography on Boone which presented conflicting images. In one section of the book, Flint commented that Boone was pleased to imagine "the rich and boundless valleys of the great west . . . and the paradise of hunters had been won from the dominion of the savage tribes." A few pages later, though, the reader learns that Boone left Kentucky because of "the restless spirit of immigration, and of civil and physical improvement."26

Another author, James H. Perkins, wrote an article about Boone in an 1846 issue of the North American Review. In the article, he stated that Boone and his companions did not wish to explore the wilderness in the hope of creating new settlements. Rather, the motive of Boone was "a love of nature, of perfect freedom and of the adventurous life in the woods." He continued to explain that Boone "wanted a frontier . . . not wealth; and he was happier in his log-cabin, with a loin of venison and his ramrod for a spit, than he would have been amid the greatest profusion of modern luxuries."27 True, Boone wanted a frontier refuge, but did he muster the energy to maintain it? Was he a child of nature or was he an individual who was too restless to establish a stable base? The conflicting images remain.

James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking character bears some resemblance to Daniel Boone. In 1823 Cooper published his third novel, The Pioneers, which was the
first of the five Leatherstocking tales. He created the protagonist in terms of binary oppositions between wilderness and settlement and between freedom of the individual and laws of the community. In contrast to his contemporaries, however, Cooper appeared "more strongly committed to the principle of social order" but--at the same time--was "more vividly responsive to ideas of nature and freedom in the Western forest."28

The thematic conflict in The Pioneers becomes apparent when Elizabeth Temple exclaims: "The enterprise of Judge Temple is taming the very forests! How rapidly is civilization treading on the footsteps of nature!"29 At the core of the novel is a confrontation between Judge Temple and the elderly hunter Leatherstocking, and this confrontation symbolizes the problems created when American Adam farmers begin to cultivate the wilderness and subsequent communities evolve.

In the opening scene, Judge Temple claims a deer which Leatherstocking's young companion has shot. Later the Judge sentences Leatherstocking to a fine and imprisonment because he has resisted legal procedures. Ensuing narrative revolves around issues and images concerning freedom of the individual to explore the forests versus social order of the community. The Judge intends to pay Leatherstocking's fine, but he cannot ignore the sentence of imprisonment he has imposed as the spokesman of justice. As the Judge directs Elizabeth to visit the hunter with money to pay
the fine, he admonishes, "Say what thou wilt to the poor old man; give scope to the feelings of thy warm heart; but try to remember, Elizabeth, that the laws alone remove us from the condition of the savages; that he has been criminal, and that his judge was thy father." Within this passage, there are images of a vulnerable individual [poor old man] and of compassion [feelings of thy warm heart]; however, the primary images concerning limits of individual freedom prevail [laws alone, criminal, and judge].

In a later passage, the Judge comments "that the unsettled life of a hunter is of vast disadvantage for temporal purposes, and it totally removes one from within the influences of more sacred things." The Judge's "more sacred things" appear to include settlements, courts, manners, and comfortable living. This view causes an emphatic retort from Leatherstocking:

No, no, Judge . . . take him into your shanty in welcome, but tell him the real thing. I have lived in the woods for forty long years, and have spent five years at a time without seeing the light of a clearing, bigger than a wind-row in the trees; and I should like to know where you'll find a man, in his sixty-eighth year, who can get an easier living, for all your betterments and your deer laws; and, as for honesty, or doing what's right between man and man, I'll not turn my back to the long-winded deacon on your Patent.

If Cooper had been willing to experiment with character and plot within the Leatherstocking series, perhaps it would have become a major work of art; perhaps the
antitheses of wilderness and community and of individual freedom and social order could have realized a greater degree of resolution. Despite Cooper's failures, however, the Leatherstocking character is a primary symbol of westward exploration and adventure for both Americans and Europeans.

By 1832, The Pioneers had been translated into French, German, Swedish, Danish, and Spanish. In the translations, all the elements of a robust adventure story were present: the gray-haired hunter raced along wilderness trails; the skilled child of nature accomplished deeds of unbelievable bravery; the backwoodsman spoke in a simple dialect. In addition, Leatherstocking helped good Indians, was the relentless enemy of evil, and was kind to animals unless he was hungry.

It is noteworthy that Europeans viewed Cooper as an author who accurately depicted Indians and frontiersmen. For example, a German reviewer wrote, "Never has an author presented the natural scene with such ... fidelity. Everything in action, character, poetry ... He is incomparable when he describes the speech of the Indians and life in the wilderness." 32 Like many Americans, Europeans needed to believe in romantic images of individuals who prevailed against the wilderness of the West.
Indeed, the frontier minds of visionaries, artists, and authors presented diverse and conflicting images of the trans-Mississippi West between 1800 and 1850. How can we superimpose these images on the Far West of the present? Certainly, Jefferson's early images of the West as a cultivated, lush garden still lure settlers of the 1980's. Perhaps Thomas Hart Benton would enjoy a journey by Amtrak to Seattle or Los Angeles to view the wharves of a passage to India. Would Bodmer locate exciting subjects if he visited Moise Bison Range or Indian Days in Browning? And what about Bierstadt? As he painted portions of the cultivated wilderness of Yosemite, would he incorporate a few tourists in the foreground as "appropriate adjuncts" to the scenery? Perhaps Cooper would discover a new Leatherstocking in the vast terrain of Alaska. Yes, images of the frontier persist: vast, open, wild, bountiful, sometimes treacherous, perhaps exploitable.
Footnotes


4. Ibid., p. 21.


10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 27.

13. Ibid., p. 32.

14. William H. Goetzmann, Karl Bodmer’s America [Omaha, Nebraska: Joslyn Art Museum, 1984], p. 3.


19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., p. 355.

23. Ibid.


25. Ibid., p. 54.

26. Ibid., p. 56.

27. Ibid., p. 57.

28. Ibid., p. 63.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

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When I write, I like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get a pen and paper, take a glance out the window . . . and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble . . . If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen.¹

Poet William Stafford concentrates on the process rather than the product and does not view his poems as refined pieces of art. During his writing process, he accepts "sequential signals toward an always-arriving present;"² therefore, free association is the core of his creative act. He emphasizes that he is not aware of his thematic focus when he begins writing. He has confidence, though, that he can look back over the lines and see how he arrived: the signposts are evident only after the journey. As Stafford embarks on his fishing expeditions, he often focuses on three themes: elemental forces of nature, physical and mental mobility, and rediscovery of the past.

Stafford is always conscious that elemental forces of nature are far stronger than forces of man. The elemental forces of his "north" are cold, harsh, dangerous, often strange, and sometimes fatal. In his poem "End of the Man Experiment," for example, the great wind possesses a power that moves beyond cleansing to scouring. The force of wind is personified as "whimpering low, forlorn," sounding, in
fact, vulnerable. Yet the action of the wind is destructive, "blowing away/lips, head, hands." Finally

... only the level wind
lived in that land,
the whole bowed world
one storm. 3

Stafford applies the tone of irony to the second stanza:

"What a strange carol he sang!" "Carol" connotes a joyful tone of celebration, but he personifies the wind as a force which annihilates man: the wind seems compelled to scour a form of life which is not worthy of continued existence in that region. "Its mighty hand / scoured a kingdom out / and formed the last snowman." Humanity is frozen and impotent.

In "Allegiances," images of the north also describe a dangerous and alien world:

Far to the north, or indeed in any direction,
strange mountains and creatures have always lurked--elves, goblins, trolls, and spiders--we encounter them in dread and wonder . . . 4

In the first stanza, Stafford encourages travelers and readers, "all of us common ones," to "locate ourselves by the real things / we live by." But during that location, we have encountered an alien land of "strange mountains and creatures." Our reaction is ambivalent: "dread and wonder." However, this experience in the north of our days--though frightening, painful, and uncomfortable--can enable us to hone a deeper spiritual essence and return "changed / but safe, quiet, grateful" at least for a time. Through conscious explorations, travelers and readers can discover a
refreshing spirituality.

"Kinds of Winter" also concentrates on elemental forces within our lives and becomes a kind of parable as it describes hunters on a particular quest. In the poem, Stafford defines one reality of nature: "That's what The World means-- / there are kinds of winter that you meet. / And that big one had met us, its big winter." Certainly, the poem suggests death for the hunters who did not acknowledge the force of winter but would indeed have to accept a literal death: "We looked at each other. Our winter had come." A second interpretation, though, involves a figurative death in the winter of our days. The traveler, the character is in limbo: he has not dealt with his past ["the tracks were gone"]; he does not possess a vital present ["We had used up all the daylight"]; and he perceives no future [the trail is obliterated "ahead of us"]. Without a trail, the spirit freezes: the exterior landscape prevails.

In addition to dislocation or death in the north of our lives, Stafford often probes the theme of loneliness—that condition which traps us in a static state. In "A Story That Could Be True," "your real mother died" and you feel the urgency to locate another contact [parent, partner, godhead]: "your father is lost and needs you." Within this poem, Stafford incorporates forces of nature that are present in small towns and cities as well as in wilderness.
These forces include "great wind," "robberies of the rain," "dark," and "cold." The character is physically located "on the corner shivering" in his quest for sense of being. In contrast, the people who pass by seem to feel a sense of place: "you wonder at their calm." These people appear to have no quest, no urgency: "They miss the whisper that runs / any day in your mind, / Who are you really, wanderer?"

There is, however, a glimmer of hope: perhaps the character can create a self that is strong enough so he can cancel the search for a lost father or even an omnipotent being: "And the answer you have to give / no matter how dark and cold / the world around you is: Maybe I'm a king." In this poem, then, Stafford encourages the traveler to become a messiah unto himself through physical and mental mobility.

Another theme which nibbles at Stafford's mind concerns recovering or rediscovering the past. In "Remember," the tone of the first three stanzas is peaceful: "the quiet way we lay there then" and "the world stilled for dawn." The images suggest, however, a dormant state which is gathering momentum for a journey. When the mature traveler returns to the rural scene of his youth, he perceives that "Nothing was new; / still, the horizon gained something / more than color." The traveler has moved past the horizon of Nevada and his youth, yet the recovery of his earlier days can enable him to redefine an "always arriving present:"

In "Remember," as in many other poems, Stafford uses air as a means of joining patterns of time: past, present, and future. In addition, the air links patterns of discovery of a deeper spiritual reality. There is the reality of the past: "We were there." And there is the recognition that "beyond the air was a touch / any morning could bring us-- / any morning." The air of the horizon and the "touch" invite mobility. If the traveler responds, he can continue to discover--and rediscover--facets of self.

As he encourages mobility, Stafford often invites the traveler, the character, to explore in a westerly direction. This route is less harsh than the north but is still risky. "Midwest" defines the "west of your city." In the first stanza, we move from our city "into the fern" and savor two beautiful images: "where the shape of game fish tapers down / from a reach where cougar paws touch water." Through free association tactics, Stafford makes a leap from images of a present wilderness to images of a historical, painful past:

Corn that the starving Indians held all through moons of cold for seed and then they lost in stony ground the gods told them to plant it in-- west of your city that corn still lies.

The gods--white fathers--forced Indians into an alien climate which could not nourish their instincts and culture. They, like the corn and corn and non-seekers, could not flourish. The traveler has choices of mobility; the
Indians did not choose their particular journeys.

From a semi-cultivated setting, the traveler returns to the wilderness of the poem. It is not a safe wilderness: "wild things wait crouched in those valleys." Nor is it especially comfortable, because "the ultimate wind" prevails. But Stafford emphasizes the risk and, subsequently, the possibility to sculpt a path or direction and explore: "Come west and see; touch these leaves." "Outside your lives," the narrow, cramped lives, could be fresh insights. The "leaves" of the traveler's spirit could discover new zest.

In Stafford's poems, then, elemental forces of nature, physical and mental mobility, and rediscovery of the past are significant themes. Stafford likes to think about the Greek hero, Antaeus. "Every time he touched the earth he got stronger. For me, this myth is part of my life--to touch something outside, to have things in your poetry is a healthy move. The world can save you, it can make you strong."
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Footnotes


2. Ibid., p. 57.


5. Ibid., p. 29.

6. Stitt, p. 82.
There's nothing gradual about anything in Seattle. Everything is dramatic and dark. The predominant colors are gray and a kind of black-green of the pine trees. This is what the country is like. In Montana, it's open, panoramic. You can see things coming from far off. There are seldom any surprises.¹

As Richard Hugo sees "things coming from far off" in Montana and in other regions, his poems describe polarities of city and wilderness, of interior and exterior landscapes, and of his preferred self and his ugly self.

In "Duwamish," even the wilderness images are negative. During the vibrant season of summer, "this river's / curves are slow and sick" . . . and "crud / compounds the gray." Like the river, immigrants ["the Greek who bribes / the river with his sailing coins"] and Indians [who "ignore the river as it cruises / past the tavern"] are "slow and sick." No eagles soar here; only scavenging gulls "are diving crazy" in search of decayed morsels. For the river and for the characters, "there is late November / only, and the color of a slow winter." This is a grim space: both interior and exterior landscapes are stagnant. Hugo comes "here to be cold."

But cold is a word. There is no word along this river I can understand or say. Not Greek threats to a fishless moon nor Slavic chants. All words are Indian. Love is Indian for water, and madness means, to Redmen, I am going home.²

Going home offers no comfort here; going home is spiritual death.
In a second poem, "Camas Prairie School," the wilderness images are also bleak. The wind is "blowing / when there is no wind," emphasizing the open, lonely, uncomfortable landscape. No matter how fast you run, you arrive in darkness "too late / to eat or find the lights on." The character—even through strenuous exertion—has a hard time gleaning physical or spiritual sustenance. In this vast land, the distance between people is debilitating: "Father's far / from Mother." The "far bell" of a spiritual essence may ring, but "you can't hear." Even in the anguish of a crisis, "When your sister's raped / help is out of range." Despite the numerous images of despair, however, "The road beside the school goes either way." The possibility of physical and spiritual mobility is present: "You run again, / the only man going your direction." Unlike the ending lines in "Duwamish," these lines offer the possibility of affirmation: the character can move beyond the distance of people and of landscape if he chooses to muster the energy.

"Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg" focuses on the decadent space of a townscape. This space has been polluted by greed of the past and by crippling apathy toward present and future. As in "Duwamish," both exterior and interior landscapes are stagnant. The residents are trapped in a futile physical mobility, "the tortured try / of local drivers to accelerate their lives" on "streets laid out by the insane." The jailer has chosen to physically, and
mentally, incarcerate himself: "the only prisoner / is always in." However, the desolate landscape of minds and town is contrasted with a soothing pastoral image of "panoramic green you know the cattle eat."

Like other characters who choose to be imprisoned in the charcoal of their past, the residents of Phillipsburg can reach only a limited vitality "until the town you came from dies inside." Like the dweller of Camas Prairie, the visitor to Phillipsburg can choose mobility beyond "the tortured try." The residents of Phillipsburg could choose that, too: their bodies and minds could move to other vistas. Fresh images, even of Butte, could nurture a more vital being beyond the gray of self and town.

In "For Jennifer, 6, on the Teton," Hugo uses a wilderness setting and concentrates on binary oppositions of youth and age and present and future. The first stanza is lively: Jennifer is a natural, spontaneous character learning "laws of bounce and run." As she frolics, she is confident of her essence and knows her "name is silver." In the second stanza, however, "beaver's greed" and "violent opaque runoff" contribute to a tone of apprehension. Jennifer, like the rest of us, will ultimately learn that some of her youthful "summer streams" cannot "come clean for good." The third stanza returns to a playful tone: "Swirl, jump, dash, and delirious veer . . . bright way home / for little girl and otter . . ." Jennifer possesses the freedom
of imagination far from "games from organized games," and she possesses the vitality of youth. She is open to possibilities of wilderness.

However, from these moments of rejoicing, Hugo projects Jennifer into a future of dislocation. From the exuberant character who revels in a wilderness experience, she become the misfit: "our naming song gets lost. / An awful ghost / sings at the river mouth, off key." Jennifer faces the end of a lyrical experience, and she faces the finality of death. In the final stanza, though, Hugo offers a bit of hope. If Jennifer makes the effort, silver memories of her past will remind her of a vital self where "tributaries burn." Those memories can ease the anguish of "nearing the sea."

In addition to polarities of cityscapes and wilderness and of exterior and interior landscapes, Hugo describes polarities of his preferred self and his ugly self. The voice of the ugly self speaks in "The Death of the Kapowsin Tavern:"

I get along, write my poems. Essentially a phony, I try my feelings now and know I fail. George, it's Christmas Eve and bells are caroling. I'm in the kitchen, fat and writing, drinking beer and shaking. 3

Hugo's preferred self is embodied in the fisherman. On the banks of clear streams and rivers, the character can combine spheres of reflection and of action. Furthermore, the fisherman savors each pulsing detail. In the second stanza
of "Trout," Hugo presents this sheer joy of observation:

I wedged hard water to validate his skin—call it chrome, say red is on
his side like apples in a fog, gold gills. Swirls always looked one
way until he carved the water into
many kinds of current with his nerve-edged nose.

In addition to applying keen observation of visual de­
tail, Hugo's fisherman character sometimes endures all forms
of weather, accepts the natural order, and—upon occasion--
grows wise. As a result, he is a type of natural 'hero
"whose vices are forgivable and whose virtues are neces­sary."

These men are never cold. Their faces
burn with winter and their
eyes are hot. They see, across the flat,
the black day coming for them
and the Black sea. Good wind
mixes with the bourbon in their bones.

Like the Stafford character who recognizes elemental forces
beyond himself, Hugo's fisherman character sometimes real­
izes a deeper sense of being through solitary, wilderness
experiences.

In the fisherman poems, upon occasion the sheer joy
of absorbing visual images and landing an aggressive trout
trigger urgent sexual needs. "Phoning from Sweathouse
Creek," for instance, includes wonderful, vibrant imagery
of the cutthroat and bulls:

... this is where the shy cut
is, he is, and he comes lighting
out of nothing at your egg. Best of all,
the color. It could be the water, but the bulls
are damn near gold and their white dots
stark as tile. The orange spots flare
like far off fires. The body's tubular and hard.
Cuts are rose and peach, all markings definite
as evil, with a purple gill.7

This solitary, energized experience creates an urgent need:
"I found a virgin forest with a moss floor. / You and I can
love there . . . But lover, the color, the markings on /
the bulls and cuts, and that deep forest / and the moss."

Richard Hugo's poems encompass a panoramic view: of
decaying and insular communities, of refreshing and ele­
mental wilderness, of decadent and exuberant characters.
For certain, he catapults us from our dreams "into the
world of real sky and real water:"

We love to imagine
a giant bull trout or a lunker rainbow
will grab the drunk fisherman's bait
and shock the drunk fisherman out
of his recurrent afternoon dream and into
the world of real sky and real water.
We love to imagine the drought has ended,
the high water will stay, the excess
irrigate crops, the mill reopen, the workers
go back to work, lovers reassume plans
to be married.8

We know that sometimes the fisherman dies, sometimes the
drought continues, sometimes the workers draw welfare, and
sometimes lovers cancel plans. However, as Hugo forces us
to confront exterior and interior landscapes, perhaps we
shall choose to face ourselves in recurrent afternoon re­
alities and make more certain that we go on.
Footnotes


4. Hugo, p. 3.

5. Smith, p. 167.


7. Hugo, p. 211.

Selected Bibliography


Like William Stafford and Richard Hugo, David Wagoner does not cast a superficial glance at nature: he hopes to discover what is really present and how nature can nourish equilibrium in travelers and seekers. In fact, Wagoner seems to measure himself and others by a feeling of harmony or discord with the natural world. He admits:

Coming to the West Coast changed my whole view of life . . . On my first solo excursion into rough country, I only needed five minutes to get lost in the woods . . . [I] took one look at the maze of sword ferns, huckleberry, wildflowers, seedling firs, moss, and the incredibly welcoming greenness of a world I'd never imagined back in Whiting [Indiana], and started walking straight in, as though I expected to be met by God. But the god turned out to be Pan, and when I'd finished my panicky circles in his honor a few hours later, I clung to my rediscovered steering wheel and was no longer a Middle Westerner.¹

As he probes harmony or dislocation within the natural world, however, Wagoner's poems—unlike those of Hugo or Stafford—often reflect a didactic tone. In "Staying Alive," for example, on one level he presents practical advice to a traveler in a literal woods: "settle down where you are, and try to make a living / Off the land, camping near water, away from shadows." He further cautions, "Don't try to stay awake through the night, afraid of freezing—The bottom of your mind knows all about freezing." Along with these lines of instruction, Wagoner presents sinister images: "unidentifiable noises of night," "Bears and packs of wolves nuzzling your elbow," and "If you hurt yourself, no one will comfort you."
On another level, though, Wagoner is talking about the dark wilderness of the spirit. In these lines, for instance, he says, "You may feel wilder, / But nothing, not even you, will have to stay in hiding." Hiding from the Pan of your spirit is a fearful, static condition; confronting a deeper sensibility is dynamic and risky. But the character who chooses confrontation could discover revelations concerning nature and self.

In a later passage, Wagoner advises, "But if you decide, at last, you must break through / . . . Think of yourself by time and not by distance, counting / Wherever you're going by how long it takes you." If the character pulls down barriers of a static mind frame, perhaps he can become more vital. But spiritual growth evolves slowly: the distance is formidable. Therefore, it is crucial to count "wherever you're going by how long it takes you." "How long"—rather than how far—sustains momentum.

Sometimes in "Staying Alive," the mind and body renew energy. In this passage, for example, Wagoner describes a floating time of comfort and rest which does not involve a quest:

. . . There may even come, on some uncanny evening
A time when you're warm and dry, well fed, . . .
Uninjured, without fear,
When nothing, either good or bad, is happening.
This is called staying alive. It's temporary.
When the temporary renewal ends, Wagoner urges the traveler to perceive new elements of the search: "Or something crossing and / hovering / Overhead, as light as air, like a break in the sky, / Wondering what you are." Expanded dimensions are possible.

Like Stafford, Wagoner emphasizes a spiritual death for travelers who do not recognize elemental forces of nature. After intimate confrontation with details of the natural order, the character may find no signposts to alleviate his dislocation. Should this occur, the search is futile:

. . . Afterward, if you see
No ropes, no ladders,
No maps or messages falling, no searchlights . . .
Then, chances are, you should be prepared to burrow
Deep for a deep winter.3

Wagoner's poem "Lost" also serves as a survival manual. He presents terse instruction: "Stand still. The trees . . . and bushes beside you / Are not lost." The forest prevails "And you must treat it as a powerful stranger, / Must ask permission to know it and be known." You must, in fact, gain humility to discover sense of self. The character or seeker can recognize uniqueness through physical and spiritual wanderings: "No two trees are the same to Raven. / No two branches are the same to Wren." No two discoveries are the same to individual characters.
Because of Wagoner's tight focus on physical detail and his use of first person, "The Nesting Ground" is more lyrical than the two previous poems. The characters and seekers learn through experience rather than instruction as they move through a killdeer's nesting space. Wagoner uses precise images: "Piping sharp as a reed," "piercing double note," "skimmed over the sand," "crooking its wing / to flash a jagged streak / And the amber of its back," and "each checkered, pebbly stalk." The characters attempt to discover the chicks, but they are too impatient in their quest and "forget / Whatever they might have caught / By standing still instead." Finally, they see the chicks only with the help of their "strongest glass;" their discovery is less significant because they attempted to force the view.

In "After Consulting My Yellow Pages," Wagoner catalogs images of technology and images of nature, creating a surreal effect. His inventory is specialized: "razor handles, clippers, theodolite, universal joints, hose-couplings, elastic hosiery, and shingles and shakes." Within passages identifying technological objects and devices, he inter- sperses images of nature: "singing like locusts, the red and silver sun brushed lightly, downhill pasture, birch-trees, salmon, star-burst." Toward the end of the poem, he flips satiric barbs at "The well-beloved escrow companies" and the montage of commercial objects which "all
sprang, remarkably, out of the swinging doors." His concluding line blasts the reader with the questions: "And where were you? What did you do today?" Was your day energized or tedious? Were you shuffling in a sphere of objects or responding to refreshing images of nature?

As he combines images of the natural world with images of a dislocated mind, Wagoner achieves a tone of tragi-comedy in "Lullaby Through the Side of the Mouth." In the first stanza, the lullaby suggests the rhythm of a fairy tale: "Goodnight, unlucky three. / Mice at a feast / Go nibbling the grain away." In the second stanza, the poet's voice becomes instructive: "O pray to the wall, pray to the billypan." These prayers, we know, are futile and absurd. From these instructions, Wagoner turns to threatening images in stanza three: "sacrifice -- first to the dark, / Next to the crippled underhalf of the mind--/ . . . Before you come to the burrows at wit's end." Following these images of imbalance of the unlucky [blind] creatures, he uses incongruous images which, juxtaposed, create a surreal quality: "a hairless tail; . . . a quill . . . antennae with soft plumes." Wagoner closes stanza four with, "Now put them on, deer Lust, my Love, poor Will."

The first three lines of the final stanza present prospects of hope; the final line presents darkness:
May forefeet lift each kernel like a cup;  
May beak and claw touch heaven under wings;  
May the dust-flecked moth find every window up.  
But these are joys. You will not dream such things.  

The blind characters will not find sustenance or discover 
openings which nurture: they will endure an absurd, surreal 
world. For sure, this lullaby's notes are not soothing.  
"Through the side of the mouth," the music is distorted and 
becomes grotesque. The lullaby ends in a void of vision.  

Within his poetry of survival manuals, catalogues, and 
ventories, Wagoner's voice is often instructive and some-
times didactic. This voice hopes to jar the traveler, the 
seeker, and the reader into discoveries of an energized 
being which is more conscious of the natural order and of 
self. Perhaps the character can achieve a less fractured 
existence and can leave behind at least some failures and 
inadequacies: "Real lives" can evolve from "years of barely 
touching the surface."  

Footnotes


3. Ibid., pp. 55-56.

4. Ibid., p. 12.

Selected Bibliography


