The Lay of the Land

Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters

by Annette Kolodny

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters

by Annette Kolodny

The University of North Carolina Press • Chapel Hill

94 93 92 91 90 7 6 5 4 3

Manufactured in the United States of America
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 74-23950

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kolodny, Annette, 1941–
The lay of the land.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. American Literature—History and criticism. 2. United States—History—Philosophy. 3. Nature in literature. I. Title.
PS88.K65 810'.9'36 74-23950
ISBN 0-8078-1241-2
ISBN 0-8078-4118-8 (pbk.)

Preface

The original impetus for the following investigation was my growing distress at what we have done to our continent; its final shape was determined by the need to isolate, for the purposes of examination, an area of interconnection that had not previously been given the kind of attention I believed it deserved. The richness, the potency, the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters, all suggested a pervasive and dynamic psychohistorical import that demanded examination in and for itself.

That that symbolization appears to have had important consequences for both our history and our literature should not suggest, however, that it accounts for everything, or that to it, alone, we must attribute all our current ecological and environmental ills. No such simplistically reductive thesis is intended. At best, I am examining here only a link in a much larger and much more complex whole; but it is a vital and, in some cases, a structuring link—and one that has been for too long ignored.

In pursuing this study, I crossed a number of discipline boundaries, and employed elements from widely varying methodologies. For many, such an approach will raise more questions than it answers; but then my primary aim is to generate discussion.

The six years that I spent on this study have served to convince me that fundamental change can occur only within the mind. If we seriously contemplate any meaningful reordering of our relations with our landscape, then we need—in addition to improved environmental protection laws and more recycling facilities—a better grasp of the ways in which language provides clues to the underlying motivations behind action; provides clues, if you will, to our deepest dreams and fantasies.

The omission of women's materials, in light of the study's subject matter, may strike some readers as curious—but it *was* intentional: insofar as the masculine appears to have taken power in the New World, it seemed necessary to understand its relationship to the landscape first. That women's writings and linguistic usages have all along been offering us alternate means of expression and

perception is a possibility I am even now beginning to explore, and one that I hope others will want to explore with me.

Finally, if these pages leave the reader with any single conviction, I hope it is this: our future (if we have one) need not continue the errors of our past nor continue betraying its pastoral promise.

It is customary, I know, to thank by name those who have been of particular help in putting together a work such as this, and then give a more general acknowledgment of gratitude to others, too numerous to name. But such is not the case here: there are not too many people to thank, just too much to thank them for.

At every stage of composition, this book benefited from the comments and criticisms of friends and colleagues. Earlier versions of the manuscript were progressively rethought and revised in response to the suggestions of David Leverenz, Henry Mayer, Jim MacIntosh, and, most importantly, the brilliant insights of Joanna Wilcove. The present form of the Audubon section, moreover, bears the mark of Fred Crews's keen Freudian observations and Ruth Schorer's exquisite editing. But, for my mentors and advisers at The University of California, Berkeley, who aided and encouraged me to pursue this project, even as it grew from a doctoral thesis into a book, I can summon no adequate expressions of gratitude. The unstinting kindness and generosity of Norman Grabo, Mark Schorer, Henry Nash Smith, and Charles Sellers are by now axiomatic among their students.

The final manuscript shows the care of my research assistant at The University of British Columbia, Christina Parkin, whose intelligence and patience made it possible to check and recheck hundreds of quotations and notes. The whole was then made readable through the diligent efforts of my typist in Vancouver, Doreen Todhunter.

Research for the book was completed under the auspices of a generous and timely grant from Canadian philanthropist and itinerant scholar, Paddy Stewart; and the final stages of composition and editing were made possible by a grant from The Canada Council.

I am grateful for permission to reprint material that has appeared previously, in somewhat different form, in the *Southern Literary Journal* (1972) and *Women's Studies* (1973). I am similarly indebted to the authors and to Random House for allowing me to quote extensively from Robert Penn Warren's beautiful poem, *Audubon: A Vision* (New York, 1969), and from Dr. Joel Kovel's provocative study, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Pantheon Books,

1970). I am also grateful to be able to quote from Lew Welch's "Chicago Poem" from *Ring of Bone* by Lew Welch, Copyright 1973, by permission of Donald Allen, Literary Executor of the Estate of Lew Welch.

Last, but far from least, I wish to thank my husband, Dan Peters, for *not* trying to check notes or help me with proofreading; instead, to give me ample time to prepare this book for publication, he repeatedly put off work on his own long-awaited biography of Zelmo Beaty and took over all household chores for prolonged periods. Greater love hath no man.

Abbreviations

B	"The Bear"
D	*The Deerslayer*
DA	"Delta Autumn"
DAS	*Delineations of American Scenery and Character*
ET	*Crevecoeur's Eighteenth-Century Travels in Pennsylvania and New York*
F	*The Forayers*
GG	*The Great Gatsby*
H	*The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*
HRK	*Henderson the Rain King*
KW	*Katharine Walton*
LAF	*Letters from an American Farmer*
LM	*The Last of the Mohicans*
M	*Mellichampe*
P	*The Pathfinder*
Par	*The Partisan*
Pi	*The Pioneers*
PPF	*The Poems of Philip Freneau*
Pr	*The Prairie*
S	*The Scout*
SEA	*Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*
SH	*The Secret History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*
W	*Woodcraft*

Contents

The Lay of the Land

1.
Unearthing Herstory
An Introduction

You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone,
They paved Paradise and put up a parking lot.
—JONI MITCHELL, *"Big Yellow Taxi"*

For the brief space of perhaps two weeks at the end of May 1969, a small plot of deserted ground just south of the University of California campus at Berkeley dominated headlines and news broadcasts across the country. That such an apparently local incident as the "Battle for People's Park" could so quickly and so effectively capture a nation's attention suggests that it had touched off a resonant chord in the American imagination. If the various legal, political, moral, and ecological issues involved in the controversy are as confused and confusing today as they were in 1969, they do at least all seem to cohere around a single unifying verbal image that appeared in almost all of the leaflets, handbills, and speeches printed during the uproar:

The earth is our Mother
the land
The University put a fence around
the land–our Mother. [1]

In what has since been partially paved over and designated a parking lot, the advocates of People's Park dared fantasize a natural maternal realm, in which human children happily working together in the spontaneous and unalienated labor of planting and tilling might all be "sod brothers."[2] So powerful was the fantasy, in fact, that many seriously believed that, armed "with sod, lots of flowers, and spirit," those evicted from the park might return and "ask our brothers in the [National] Guard to let us into our park."[3]

If the wished-for fraternity with the National Guard was at least erratically realized, the return to "the land—our Mother," the place, they insisted, "where our souls belong,"[4] was thwarted completely. The disposition of the land through "proper channels"—including city council and university officials—was characterized variously as "the rape of People's Park" or, more graphically, as a case of "The University . . . / fucking with our land."[5] For many, hurt and angered at the massive repression their fantasy had engendered, People's Park became "a mirror in which our society may see itself," a summing up of American history: "We have constituted ourselves socially and politically to conquer and transform nature."[6]

In fact, the advocates of People's Park had asserted another version of what is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction.[7] Such imagery is archetypal wherever we find it; the soul's home, as the People's Park Committee leaflet and three hundred years of American writing before it had asserted, is that place where the conditions of exile—from Eden or from some primal harmony with the Mother—do not obtain; it is a realm of nurture, abundance, and unalienated labor within which all men are truly brothers. In short, the place America had long promised to be, ever since the first explorers declared themselves virtually "ravisht with the . . . pleasant land" and described the new continent as a "*Paradise* with all her Virgin Beauties."[8] The human, and decidedly feminine, impact of the landscape became a staple of the early promotional tracts, inviting prospective settlers to inhabit "valleyes and plaines streaming with sweete Springs, like veynes in a naturall bodie," and to explore "hills and mountaines making a sensible proffer of hidden treasure, neuer yet searched."[9]

As a result, along with their explicit hopes for commercial, religious, and political gains, the earliest explorers and settlers in the New World can be said to have carried with them a "yearning for paradise." When they ran across people living in what seemed to them "the manner of the golden age," and found lands where "nature and liberty affords vs that freely, which in *England* we want, or it costeth vs dearely," dormant dreams found

substantial root.[10] When, for instance, Arthur Barlowe's account of his "First Voyage Made to the Coasts of America . . . Anno 1584," described the Indian women who greeted him and his men as uniformly beautiful, gracious, cheerful, and friendly, with the wife of the king's brother taking "great pains to see all things ordered in the best manner she could, making great haste to dress some meat for us to eat," he initiated a habit of mind that came to see the Indian woman as a kind of emblem for a land that was similarly entertaining the Europeans "with all love and kindness and . . . as much bounty." Not until the end of the seventeenth century, when the tragic contradictions inherent in such experience could no longer be ignored, were the Indian women depicted more usually as hag-like, ugly, and immoral. The excitement that greeted John Rolfe's marriage to Pocahontas, in April of 1614, may have been due to the fact that it served, in some symbolic sense, as a kind of objective correlative for the possibility of Europeans' actually possessing the charms inherent in the virgin continent. Similarly, the repeated evocation of the new continent as "some delicate garden abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers," and the sometimes strident insistence that early explorers had "made a Garden vpon the top of a Rockie Ile . . . that grew so well,"[11] tantalizes with the suggestion that the garden may in fact be "an abstraction of the essential femininity of the terrain." Paul Shepard undoubtedly has a point when he claims that "we have yet to recognize the full implication of the mother as a primary landscape,"[12] especially since, as psychiatrist Joel Kovel has argued, "the life of the body and the experiences of infancy, . . . are the reference points of human knowledge and the bedrock of the structures of culture."[13]

If the initial impulse to experience the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal "garden," receiving and nurturing human children, was a reactivation of what we now recognize as universal mythic wishes, it had one radically different facet: *this* paradise really existed, "Whole" and "True," its many published descriptions boasting "the *proofe* of the present benefit this Countrey affoords"[14] (italics mine). All the descriptions of wonderful beasts and strangely contoured humans notwithstanding, the published documents from explorers assured the reader of the author's accuracy and unimpeachable reliability. No mere literary convention this; an irrefutable fact of history (the European discovery of America) touched every word written about the New World with the possibility that the ideally beautiful and boun-

tiful terrain might be lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience. In some sense, the process had already begun, as explorer after explorer claimed to have "personally . . . wth diligence searched and viewed these contries" before concluding them to be "the fairest, frutefullest, and pleasauntest of all the worlde."[15] Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden, in short, all the backdrops for European literary pastoral, were subsumed in the image of an America promising material ease without labor or hardship, as opposed to the grinding poverty of previous European existence; a frank, free affectional life in which all might share in a primal and noncompetitive fraternity; a resurrection of the lost state of innocence that the adult abandons when he joins the world of competitive self-assertion; and all this possible because, at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape. And when America finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral never had, explored the historical consequences of its central metaphor in a way European pastoral had never dared, and, from the first, took its metaphors as literal truths. The traditional mode had embraced its last and possibly its most uniquely revitalizing permutation.

As Joel Kovel points out, of course, "It is one thing to daydream and conjure up wishful images of the way things ought to be in order that one's instinctually-based fantasies may come true;" at the time of America's discovery, this had become the province of European pastoral. "It is quite another matter, and a more important one in cultural terms,"[16] he continues, to begin experiencing those fantasies as the pattern of one's daily activity—as was the case in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century America. For only if we acknowledge the power of the pastoral impulse to shape and structure experience can we reconcile the images of abundance in the early texts with the historical evidence of starvation, poor harvests, and inclement weather.[17] To label such an impulse as "mere fantasy" in order to dismiss it ignores the fact that fantasy is a particular way of relating to the world, even, as R. D. Laing suggests, "part of, sometimes the essential part of, the meaning or sense . . . implicit in action."[18] In 1630 Francis Higginson, "one of the ministers of Salem," claimed that "Experience doth manifest that there is hardly

a more healthfull place to be found in the World" and boasted that "since I came hither . . . I thanke God I haue had perfect health, and . . . whereas beforetime I cloathed my self with double cloathes and thicke Wastcoats to keepe me warme, euen in the Summer time, I doe now goe as thin clad as any, onely wearing a light Stuffe Cassocke vpon my Shirt and Stuffe Breeches and one thickness without Linings."[19] The fact that he died the next year of pneumonia, or, as Governor Dudley phrased it, "of a feaver," in no way negates what the good minister claimed his "Experience doth manifest." American pastoral, unlike European, holds at its very core the promise of fantasy as daily reality. Implicit in the call to emigrate, then, was the tantalizing proximity to a happiness that had heretofore been the repressed promise of a better future, a call to act out what was at once a psychological and political revolt against a culture based on toil, domination, and self-denial.

But not many who emigrated yearning for pastoral gratifications shared Higginson's "Experience." Colonization brought with it an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation. As a result, those who had initially responded to the promise inherent in a feminine landscape were now faced with the consequences of that response: either they recoiled in horror from the meaning of their manipulation of a naturally generous world, accusing one another, as did John Hammond in 1656, of raping and deflowering the "naturall fertility and comelinesse," or, like those whom Robert Beverley and William Byrd accused of "slothful Indolence," they succumbed to a life of easeful regression, "spung[ing] upon the Blessings of a warm Sun, and a fruitful Soil" and "approach[ing] nearer to the Description of Lubberland than any other."[20] Neither response, however, obviated the fact that the despoliation of the land appeared more and more an inevitable consequence of human habitation—any more than it terminated the pastoral impulse itself. The instinctual drive embedded in the fantasy, which had first impelled men to emigrate, now impelled them both to continue pursuing the fantasy in daily life, and, when that failed, to codify it as part of the culture's shared dream life, through art—there for all to see in the paintings of Cole and Audubon, in the fictional "letters" of Crevecoeur, the fallacious "local color" of Irving's Sleepy Hollow, and finally, the northern and southern contours clearly distinguished, in the Leatherstocking

novels of James Fenimore Cooper and in the Revolutionary War romances of William Gilmore Simms. "Thus," as Joel Kovel argues, "the decisive symbolic elements [of a culture's history] will be those that represent not only repressed content, but ego activity as well."[21]

Other civilizations have undoubtedly gone through a similar history, but at a pace too slow or in a time too ancient to be remembered. Only in America has the entire process remained within historical memory, giving Americans the unique ability to see themselves as the wilful exploiters of the very land that had once promised an escape from such necessities. With the pastoral impulse neither terminated nor yet wholly repressed, the entire process—the dream and its betrayal, and the consequent guilt and anger—in short, the knowledge of what we have done to our continent, continues even in this century, as Gary Snyder put it, "eating at the American heart like acid."[22] How much better might things have turned out had we heeded the advice of an earlier American poet, Charles Hansford, who probably wrote the following lines about the middle of the eighteenth century:

> *To strive with Nature little it avails.*
> *Her favors to improve and nicely scan*
> *Is all that is within the reach of Man.*
> *Nature is to be follow'd, and not forc'd,*
> *For, otherwise, our labor will be lost.*[23]

From accounts of the earliest explorers onward, then, a uniquely American pastoral vocabulary began to show itself, releasing and emphasizing some facets of the traditional European mode and all but ignoring others. At its core lay a yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine, a yearning that I have labeled as the uniquely American "pastoral impulse." Obviously, such an impulse must at some very basic level stem from desires and tensions that arise when patterns from within the human mind confront an external reality of physical phenomena. But the precise psychological and linguistic processes by which the mind imposes order or even meaning onto the phenomena—these have yet to be understood. Let us remember, however, that gendering the land as feminine was nothing new in the sixteenth century; Indo-European languages, among others, have long maintained the habit of gendering the physical world and imbuing it with human capacities. What happened with the discovery of America was the revival of that linguistic habit on the level of personal experience; that is, what had by then degenerated into the dead conventions of self-consciously "lit-

erary" language, hardly attended to, let alone explored, suddenly, with the discovery of America, became the vocabulary of everyday reality. Perhaps, after all, the world *is* really gendered, in some subtle way we have not yet quite understood. Certainly, for William Byrd, topography and anatomy were at least analogous, with "a Single Mountain [in the Blue Ridge range], very much resembling a Woman's breast" and a "Ledge that stretch't away to the N.E. . . . [rising] in the Shape of a Maiden's Breast."[24]

Or, perhaps, the connections are more subtle still: was there perhaps a *need* to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown? Beautiful, indeed, that wilderness appeared—but also dark, uncharted, and prowled by howling beasts. In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed. But, more precisely still, just as the impulse for emigration was an impulse to begin again (whether politically, economically, or religiously), so, too, the place of that new beginning was, in a sense, the new Mother, her adopted children having cast off the bonds of Europe, "where mother-country acts the step-dame's part."[25] If the American continent was to become the birthplace of a new culture and, with it, new and improved human possibilities, then it was, in fact as well as in metaphor, a womb of generation and a provider of sustenance. Hence, the heart of American pastoral—the only pastoral in which metaphor and the patterns of daily activity refuse to be separated.