

# ALFRED KAZIN

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# A Writer's AMERICA

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## Landscape in Literature

*With 102 illustrations, 16 in colour*



THAMES AND HUDSON

TITLE PAGE: *Wayside grave on the Oregon Trail; a reminder of the perils of "westerling" (1872).*

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Printed and bound in the German Democratic Republic

FOR JUDITH

*from sea to shining sea*

*The look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle.*

Henry James: *The Art of Fiction* (1884)

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## INTRODUCTION

Leopold Mozart was definitely not American when he warned his celebrated son: “Nature is the greatest enemy.” From its beginning as the original creation, as pure “unstoried wilderness,” Nature in America has dominated the imagination of Europeans exploring the place, of settlers hoping that so much available land really meant a “New World,” of writers enraptured with this new divinity. America was the world’s myth before there was actually a place that could be called “America”; the genuine substance of that myth was not just a new continent, abundant land, but the magic of its actuality, the consummation of a dream, a second chance for mankind. The “great circle” for which Columbus had started out was at last in sight; America made it possible for the world to be seen as one.

As “God’s own country,” however, this paradise was always getting lost. Was Nature just raw material, as likely as any to be defiled and exhausted? At the heart of American literature lies the continuing uncertainty. On the one hand Nature was the gift of gifts, “fresh from the Creator’s hand.” As late as 1925, in one of the most beautiful of American books, Scott Fitzgerald ended *The Great Gatsby* with undiminished longing for that fabled beginning. “For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an esthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

But on the other hand! Nothing about American writing and writers is so well known as its passionate protest against every curtailment of national hope and individual will. In a country that once thought of itself as “Nature’s Nation” but now proclaims itself one vast technological hookup, no subject is more pressing to many people than “conservation,” the preservation of “wilderness areas.” The constitution of the State of New York contains a commitment to keep the vast Adirondack State Preserve, the largest of national parks, “forever wild.”

Nature not just *in* America but *as* America was a dream from the beginning. An unoccupied continent plus the young republic’s good fortune in having for its “fathers” men of the Enlightenment combined—as is written in the Declaration of Independence—to give authority to “the laws of nature and to Nature’s God.” Two centuries later many Americans—by no means all of them mountain poets from the Northwest—see a betrayal of some early commitment to Nature in this most urbanized and “developed” of nations. The wilderness societies are so numerous and active that they have taken to buying up vast tracts of land in order to keep them unsullied.

The sense of loss, even of guilt, at the merest hint of defilement to Nature was routine in America when the eighteenth-century botanist William Bartram revisited a favorite cove in Indian-occupied East Florida and lamented some rudimentary attempts to make the place habitable. The legendary Daniel Boone is supposed to have indignantly removed himself when another settler appeared in Kentucky miles away.

Yet the literature of this notoriously rootless people is haunted by the sense of place that amazed D.H. Lawrence in the American classics. American writing is just as famous for Thoreau's fierce attachment to a pond in Massachusetts as it is for Melville's world wandering. No real American place lingered long in the mind of Edgar Allan Poe; he was never really at home there. Yet no reader of Nathaniel Hawthorne can forget the stockades of Puritan Boston in *The Scarlet Letter*, the very look of the decaying house in *The House of the Seven Gables*, even of the inhuman forest fit only for the Devil, who proclaims in Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown" that "Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness."

Some ingrained memory of mankind's eternal wandering, of the hardships of the terrible passage over, has lingered in American writing along with expressive gratitude for a place of one's own. America's "sacred places" were made so not by religion but by attachment to places that spelled safety. In the freezing, deserted North Woods country of the Adirondacks, an Irish family that had fled there from the famine refused to leave their hardscrabble farm even on Sundays; the priest had to come to them. Bit by bit, as among the English who built up the Connecticut River Valley and became its "River Gods," the Scotch-Irish who fled from Scotland upon the defeat of the Stuarts to cross the Appalachians into the wild Indian country of the Mississippi Delta, the ragged, often desperate, first arrivals became the first citizens of each little piece of new country.

And left the story of their rise, often enough of their decline, to be told by eccentric descendants—Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord, Walt Whitman in Brooklyn, Emily Dickinson in Amherst, William Faulkner in Oxford, Mississippi. These were followed by the children of recent immigrants and the descendants of slaves—Saul Bellow from Chicago, Richard Wright from Mississippi, Ralph Ellison from Oklahoma. The enduring sense of place such writers created fills American writing with the sight and fury of a hundred different American settlements. And how different from each other, how often speechless with each other, these "Americas" remain. A nation composed of many nations, a people who often have nothing in common but their being Americans (this can become everything), have produced a literature united only by the sense of difference within the country itself.

Yet behind all these writers still lies some everlasting background that we call "Nature"—land, the land that was here before there was anything else. And what have the writers in this book not said about it, in amazement, in rapture, in frustration! From Jefferson exclaiming over the Blue Ridge to John McPhee describing the "bruises" in the ponds of great empty Maine, from Nathaniel Hawthorne in Concord laughing over the sluggishness of the local river to Huckleberry Finn bewitched by sunrise on the Mississippi, there is such a journey here into the face of Nature as has always filled out the world's insufficient sense of wonder.

ALFRED KAZIN  
New Year's Day 1986

## NEW WORLDS

By the end of 1781 the long-drawn-out war for American independence had finally come to an end on a battlefield in Virginia overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. “There is something absurd in supposing a continent to be governed by an island,” Thomas Paine wrote. Thomas Jefferson, more aware than any other leader of the Revolution that his country was indeed a continent, would soon be going abroad for the young republic. But because a secretary to the French Legation in Philadelphia had passed a series of questions “relating to the laws, institutions, geography, climate, flora and fauna” of Mr. Jefferson’s native state, he took time to write the one book he would publish in his tumultuously crowded life, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

At Monticello, his “little mountain,” the hilltop mansion he had designed and helped to build overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains to the West, Jefferson now summed up all the knowledge available about a province that was believed in its founding charter (1609) to extend “from sea to sea.” In 1781 it actually extended from the Atlantic to the Appalachians, and included what are now West Virginia and Kentucky, a roughly triangular area that Jefferson too generously thought a third larger than Great Britain plus Ireland. He proudly called it “My Country.” In twenty-three chapters he described Virginia’s boundaries, rivers, seaports, mountains, cascades, aborigines, laws, manners. Nor did he overlook “proceedings as to Tories.” For him the war against England was a war against the old order prevailing everywhere in Europe.

Serenely neo-classical Monticello owes much to the Renaissance architect Palladio, more to Thomas Jefferson. It awes visitors as a triumph of taste, but it was built to serve the boundless curiosity and activity of Thomas Jefferson—architect, inventor and experimenter extraordinary, agriculturist, natural philosopher, political philosopher, bibliophile, musician, lawyer, wartime governor, soon to be Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President and third President of the United States.

Monticello, stately as it looks, an eighteenth-century “picture” of a great landowner’s benevolent authority, was a plantation seat that had to double as the workshop of a universal savant who lived in the middle of a great forest. Planning his own house, laying out its grounds, inventing appliances and creature comforts unthinkable to primitive Virginia, Jefferson on a grand scale was playing Adam, Prospero, Robinson Crusoe—owner and master of everything he surveyed, the first man on the place. This almost Biblical sense of authority was to lead him as President to send out Lewis and Clark on a “scientific” survey of the land from the Missouri River to the Pacific, preparing its inevitable absorption into the continental United States. He drew into tiers the map of new States in the Midwest and gave names to ten of them.



The great dome over the mansion at Monticello can make a visitor think that Jefferson's intellect is still presiding over the estate he laid out in every particular. He put a similar dome over his favorite creation, the University of Virginia, one even over his modest summer retreat at Poplar Forest. He was the proprietor of Monticello, 10,000 acres, and a hundred slaves; many were trained to carpentry, cabinet-making, house-building, weaving, tailoring, shoemaking. He imported the first threshing machine known in Virginia, invented the first scientific plough. Along the way he was a prime inventor of the United States. Of course it was Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence. No country had deliberately created itself before. No such separation of church and state had been known in any country before Jefferson wrote the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. If Washington, the nation's capital, reflects the power of the United States in its solid mass of cold white Roman "temples," Monticello will always reflect the intoxicating sense of possibility on which the nation was founded.

Jefferson's biographer Dumas Malone notes that no one before Jefferson had thought of setting a plantation at such a height. The woods were thick, grading had to be done in stubborn soil, and everything had to be carried up a mountain. But Jefferson "had not disciplined his mind to the loss of imagination, . . . His eye, like his mind, sought an extended view. From this spot he could see to the eastward an expanse of forested country, rolling like the sea; and to the westward he could look across the treetops to a mountain wall of lavender and blue. . . . The country was little marred by the hand of man as yet and the prospect was majestic." On the estate, the open ground to the west seemed to call for shrubbery; Jefferson wanted it to remain an asylum for wild animals, excepting only beasts of prey. He thought of procuring a buck-elk to be monarch of the wood.

*Notes on Virginia*, written to satisfy the curiosity of the Old World, is alive with the glow Jefferson felt in reporting everything available about that new situation in the West, "My Country." He modified Palladio to make more window space and terraced roofs looking out to the Blue Ridge. Although he had studied at the College of William and Mary and had trained as a lawyer in the old colonial capital of Williamsburg on the coast, Jefferson was by birth and inclination a product of the Piedmont and what another Southern writer, William Faulkner, would call the "unstoried wilderness." Monticello was the creation of a patrician who was more a political visionary and a practical observer than any other Virginian of his class. Jefferson identified himself not with the English institutions at the tidewater but with the mountain country and beyond.

In *Notes on Virginia* he listed not only the great rivers of Virginia that rush down to Chesapeake Bay—the Rappahannock, the York, the James, the Potomac—but also the Ohio, "the most beautiful river on earth, the periodically flooded Mississippi, the muddy Missouri, the gentle Illinois, the lovely Wabash, and a dozen other streams." Much that went into the building of Monticello Jefferson devised and helped to manufacture himself, as was natural to pioneer country. His prime sense of being a new man in a new country imparted a certain rapture to the political argument behind the Declaration of Independence. It appealed to "self-evident" truths, such as are proclaimed by Nature. When it became necessary for one people to dissolve the political band connecting them with another, they could "assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them." Abraham Lincoln formed his political philosophy around the Declaration of Independence. It was to encourage many an American visionary to find on the frontier "self-evident" justification for his political actions.

One of these visionaries was John Brown, who in 1859 tried to stir up a slave insurrection by attacking the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. Long before this extraordinary site was called Harpers Ferry and before the slavery issue became “the fireball in the night” that frightened Jefferson into the realization that “this government, the world’s best hope,” might not last, *Notes on Virginia* described it as if no one had been there before Thomas Jefferson.

The passage of the Potomac through the Blue Ridge is, perhaps, one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand in a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Potomac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, render it asunder and pass off to the sea. The first glance of this scene hurries our senses into the opinion, that this earth has been created in time, that the mountains were formed first, that the rivers began to flow afterwards, that in this place, particularly, they have been dammed up by the Blue Ridge of mountains, and have formed an ocean which filled the whole valley; that continuing to rise they have at length broken over at this spot, and have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base. . . .

The distinct finishing which nature has given to the picture is of a very different character. . . . For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon, at an infinite distance in the plain country, inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. Here the eye ultimately composes itself. . . . You cross the Potomac above the junction, pass along its side through the base of the mountain for three miles, its terrible precipices hanging in fragments over you, and within about twenty miles reach Fredericktown and the fine country around that. This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic.

In “On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” (1752) Bishop Berkeley described

The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime,  
Barren of every glorious Theme,  
In distant Lands now waits a better Time,  
Producing Subjects worthy Fame:

In happy Climes, where from the genial Sun  
And virgin earth such Scenes ensue,  
The Force of Art by Nature seems outdone,  
And fancied Beauties by the true.

In describing the confluence of the Potomac and the Shenandoah, Jefferson, like a good American, takes it for granted that “the Force of Art by Nature seems outdone.” What excites him is Nature charging about, erupting and breaking through the expected, on land very near his own. Nothing could be less like the experience of an eighteenth-century Englishman on the Grand Tour. This is “Nature’s Nation,” and Jefferson’s very own. Another wonder described in *Notes on Virginia*, the Natural Bridge, was actually on



