TRUTH AND LANDSCAPE

WHEN travelers reach the foothills west of Denver, they often stop to be photographed against the Great Plains or the Continental Divide. They remind us, as they smile and look into the distance, of the fondness Americans traditionally have shown for their geography.

There is evidence, however, that the affection may be ending. Along the Front Range, for example, buildings are now often being designed to allow few views of the outdoors. We are told that this protects office furnishings from the sun, adds retail display space, and makes possible uniform lighting; customer and worker morale is, it is reported, unharmed. Apparently business has discovered the dark side of ecological awareness, managing, as Camus said of those who built the city of Oran, to "exorcize the landscape."

Admittedly scenic grandeur is today sometimes painful. The beautiful places to which we journey for inspiration surprise us by the melancholy they can induce. On northern Long Island recently, for instance, at the end of a promontory where I was living — an overlook from which one could see ducks and wild swans and miles of gleaming bay — were scattered hundreds of empty liquor bottles, a common record of sorrow in places worthy of postcards.

Our discouragement in the presence of beauty results, surely, from the way we have damaged the country, from what appears to be our inability now to stop, and from the fact that few of us can any longer hope to own a piece of undisturbed land. Which is to say that what bothers us about primordial beauty is that it is no longer characteristic. Unspoiled places sadden us because they are, in an important sense, no longer true. Thomas Gray's consolation — "many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air" — has become an irony; we have the flowers counted and fenced.

Part of the anodyne offered by Denver builders has been to disallow windows, but another part has frequently been to substitute paintings of uniformly attractive, often foreign, landscapes. The views are unconvincing, but they address a need that is human, and as a landscape photographer I find myself asking whether pictures based on other principles could do better. Given our geography — the actual, mixed one of great trees and of fields littered with Styrofoam, of still-awesome mountains and of valleys dense with tract houses — is it possible for art to be more than lies?

Landscape pictures can offer us, I think, three verities — geography, autobiography, and metaphor. Geography is, if taken alone, sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial, and metaphor can be dubious. But taken together, as in the best work of people like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact — an affection for life.

We expect first from landscape art, as the name implies, a record of place. With the help of the camera we can recognize and enjoy an unnamed New Mexican mesa or the Delaware Water Gap. Although we are not as naïve as we once were about the accuracy of the pictures, we continue to value them initially as reminders of what is out there, of

what is distinct from us. There is a certainty in geography that is a relief from the shadow world of romantic egoism.

If landscape art were only reportage, however, it would amount to an ingredient for science, which it is not. There is always a subjective aspect in landscape art, something in the picture that tells us as much about who is behind the camera as about what is in front of it. Pictures are never so cleanly tautological as, say, Gertrude Stein's description of a rose. For one thing the subject is too big; a normal lens, though it can cover a rose, can never cover a whole landscape, just as when without a camera we stand in the middle of a field and after turning full circle must decide what part of the horizon to face.

That a photograph is unlikely to be a laboratory record is evident when we think about how it is made. Most photographers are people of intense enthusiasms whose work involves many choices — to brake the car, grab the yellow instead of the green filter, wait out the cloud, and, at the second everything looks inexplicably right, to release the shutter. Behind these decisions stands the photographer's individual framework of recollections and meditations about the way he perceived that place or places like it before. Without such a background there would be no knowing whether the scene on the ground glass was characteristic of the geography and of his experience of it and intuition about it — in short, whether it was true.

Making photographs has to be, then, a personal matter; when it is not, the results are not persuasive. Only the artist's presence in the work can convince us that its affirmation resulted from and has been tested by human experience. Without the photographer in the photograph the view is no more compelling than the product of some anonymous record camera, a machine perhaps capable of happy accident but not of response to form.

Art asserts that nothing is banal, which is to say that a

serious landscape picture is metaphor. If a view of geography does not imply something more enduring than a specific piece of terrain, then the picture will hold us only briefly; we will probably prefer the place itself, which we can smell and feel and hear as well as see — though we are also likely to come away from the actual scene hoping somewhere to find it in art. This is because geography by itself is difficult to value accurately — what we hope for from the artist is help in discovering the significance of a place. In this sense we would in most respects choose thirty minutes with Edward Hopper's painting *Sunday Morning* to thirty minutes on the street that was his subject; with Hopper's vision we see more. Precisely what it is that he helps us to see must be carefully talked around, but the painter Robert Henri came close to it in his description of the discovery to be made with the help of all successful paintings; in such pictures, he observed, "There seem to be moments of revelation when we see the transition of one part to another, the unification of the whole. There is a sense of comprehension."

We rely, I think, on landscape photography to make intelligible to us what we already know. It is the fitness of a landscape to one's experience of life's condition and possibilities that finally makes a scene important or not. Weston's photograph from 1945, for example, of a pelican floating dead in kelp and lumber (Plate I), is to me, as it is to many, unforgettable because it is true. It records accurately a mystery at the end of every terror — the survival of Form.

Not surprisingly, many photographers have loved gardens, those places that Leonard Woolf once described as "the last refuge of disillusion." Gardens are in fact strikingly like landscape pictures, sanctuaries not from but of truth. An etymological detail that Kenneth Clark raises in his discussion of landscape — *paradise* is the Persian word meaning "a walled enclosure" — stands I think as perhaps the best possible synopsis of what a photographer sees through the

I Edward Weston, *Tidepool*, 1945

finder of his camera just before he releases the shutter. His view is of a safe wayside for travelers, built from the local geography, but still and clarifying.

Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in 1961, was at the time he died preparing to retire to a farm on the southern coast of Sweden. The house, a part of which is now open to the public, is a one-story building of timber and stucco that, like many Scandinavian farm buildings, encloses a courtyard. In July 1968, when I visited, the flagstones were warm in the sun, hollyhocks bloomed against one wall, and the smell was of the ocean and newly cut hay.

Two rooms in the house contain Hammarskjöld's personal effects, including his collection of painting and sculpture. The variety is striking — pictures of the Swedish countryside by regional artists are placed among works by Picasso, Georges Braque, and Barbara Hepworth. It is, I learned, an installation designed by friends to accord with his conviction that if one loved one's own landscape it would then, and only then, be possible to love other landscapes.

Hammarskjöld was, it pleases me, an avid photographer. Many wire photos showed him, while visiting Asian and African countries for the United Nations, smiling and looking down through his Hasselblad. Once, when he was on a diplomatic mission to India, in fact, his hosts noted his enthusiastic picture taking and offered to fly him along the side of Everest (he was also a mountain climber). Though the plane was an unpressurized DC3, he made effective use of the opportunity, and in the resulting pictures there are elements of geography, autobiography, and metaphor.

The final entry in Hammarskjöld's notebooks is a poem that reflects the condition and hope of us all, but especially the condition and hope of landscape photographers. In it he

tells of the burden of sight in the modern, disfigured world, he describes memories of a better geography, and he comes to a discovery. The poem, "August 24, 1961," begins with a description of waking in the city, an experience of dislocation and potential dread:

Is it a new country
In another world of reality
Than Day's?
Or did I live there
Before Day was?
I awoke
To an ordinary morning with gray light
Reflected from the street.

Faced with that gray, Hammarskjöld tries, as we all often do, to escape into memories of a better place, which for him was Lapland:

But (I) remembered
The dark-blue night
Above the tree line,
The open moor in moonlight,
The crest in shadow.
Remembered other dreams
Of the same mountain country:
Twice I stood on its summits,
I stayed by its remotest lake,
And followed the river
Towards its source.

Then, as Hammarskjöld recalls coming to the origin of the river, he is brought to a recognition. His memory of the way the lake or ice field looked — presumably it was a landscape in glacial, alpine grays — brings him back to the gray street in front of him:

The seasons have changed
And the light
And the weather

And the hour.
But it is the same land.
And I begin to know the map
And to get my bearings.

Judged by the achievement of Hammarskjöld's life, the insight was an enabling one. And it was, I think, strengthened by his fondness for landscape art, the main business of which is a rediscovery and revaluation of where we find ourselves.