

Paul Gruchow and Carol Bly: Walls We Build Against the Prairie

by

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Barry Lopez' essay "Landscape and Narrative" distinguishes between two landscapes, one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape, he explains, is the one that we see - not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but its seasonal plants and animals, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution. He's talking about history here and sense data, too - the pungency of a creosote-bush, the clack of stones together in dry air, animal tracks obscured by the wind. Organized according to principles or laws or tendencies beyond human control, the exterior landscape the sum of all its parts, contains an integrity that is unimpeachable. What makes the landscape finally comprehensible to us is our intuition of the relationships between such elements.

The interior landscape is a projection within a person of the exterior landscape. Our minds give purpose and order to the exterior landscape in ways sometimes obvious and sometimes impenetrably subtle. A person's thinking, in Lopez' view, is given shape and character by where on earth one goes, what one touches. These thoughts are arranged, further, according to the thread of one's moral, intellectual, and spiritual development.

When I gave my expository writing class this fall quarter a focus on nature writing of the Midwest, I introduced the notion of interior landscape perceiving exterior landscape not with those terms but with an illustration, an essay written by a former student of mine that had been published in *Lake Superior Magazine*. In it the student described his six-month hike around Lake Superior. My class and I discussed together, with some envy, his experiences with placid rolling fogs, rumbling lashing storms, and serendipitous agate finds, and then they took seats at their computers to compose their own definitions of "nature," how approaching an exterior landscape might be accomplished, and to formulate a unique rationale for how a study of nature and nature writing could be personally valuable to them this quarter. Most responses were timid, some ebullient. I should have anticipated the first sentence that I read past the substantial and athletic shoulders of one student whom I had already targeted as needing sentence level tutoring outside of class: "The natural world to me in my mind is the good things in life - fast cars, women, and free time." His sidekick had already

d me during the break whether what I had in mind as our quarter's
ie was something like broken bottles in the back alley.

ite this not to sneer or snivel but to remind myself that some walls
idy built in some students against the remote possibility of perceiv-
my landscape at all are thick and high, whether from prior failure
her apprehension. Something in the teacher in us wants the walls
1, wants to make students aware of more than broken bottles in the
alleys of their past and present.

shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes,"
Lopez. That reassures me. And so I give my students over to Paul
chow, in *Journal of a Prairie Year* (1975), and Carol Bly, in *Letters
from the Country* (1981). Newspaperman Gruchow, born in southwest-
small town Minnesota, microscopically examines seasonal changes
ie flora and fauna of regional Worthington. Essayist and fiction
er Bly has a broader and more probing vision. She is a city person,
splanted from Duluth birth and Wellesley education by marriage to
rural western Minnesota prairies for a period of twenty-five years.
chow embraces what life he finds dwelling in the prairie and revels
ie discovery and efficiency of its parts; Bly rages against the total
t of what she finds the prairie doing to the collective minds and lives
airie people. Both authors first published portions of their books in
Minnesota Monthly. Both take as their subject life experiences in the
er of Minnesota's "lost Swede Towns," as F. Scott Fitzgerald called
1, the part of the state Nick Carraway was careful to say he did not
e from. Nor do any of my students hail from there, it turns out.
ugh the Minnesota people in these communities are more Norwegian
German than Swedish, it is the "lost" that Bly finds rings so true.

it is the void of that loss I want to guide my students to filling in. If
1 help them see relationships between separate elements in the land
rly, to construct a simple framework of sequential incidents and
osite detail, help them limn well an exterior landscape, they will
ounter something new and pleasing and authentic, and they will be
to write about it, and, subsequently, about other things better, too,
o I suppose. My expectation is for them to respond to clear vision with
ise vocabulary and ultimately to bring two landscapes together that
didn't know existed, to experience a congruence within themselves
thus with the world. If a person succeeds in accurate perception,
will also succeed at accurate language, since interior landscape is a
aphorical representation of exterior landscape. Insofar as one can
er his interior landscape according to exterior landscape, Lopez
eves, a balanced state of mental health will be achieved.

Both Bly and Gruchow do not deny the difficulties - that there are
attitudinal walls between perception and the natural world, and that
sometimes we keep heaping stone upon stone to keep those walls up. For
Gruchow, in part, dispensing with the wall is a matter of overcoming his
genes: "My parents," he tells us, "who were poor and rural, had never
amounted to anything, and never would, and never expected to. They
were rather glad for the inconsequence of their lives" (11). Though their
life patterns - rising, retiring, planting, harvesting - were dictated by the
seasons, they were not cognizant of and never watchful for natural
subtleties. Such mindset is, moreover, a malady endemic to the
Midwestern rural community. When Gruchow appeared at a book-
signing event in hometown Worthington not too long ago, no one showed
up. That's typical, he says, of the "overwhelming sense of failure" that
characterizes the rural psyche. Something must not be worth much if
it didn't come from far away. It should be added, though, that the more
cosmopolitan contingent of Minnesota displays a greater faith in itself -
during the three years in the late 1980s when Gruchow was publishing
his column "Backroads" in *Minnesota Monthly*, the readership num-
bered nearly 70,000.

Gruchow's natural observation is primitive, yet inviting, infused with
facts of history and science (did you know that a flash of lightning
reaches an internal temperature of 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit, or that
the energy unleashed by a stormcloud is equivalent to explosions of nine
Hiroshima-sized atom bombs?). He can also be disarming: "A badger is
not a tiny creature - an adult weighs about twenty-five pounds - and it
comes low-slung, broad-skulled, pug-nosed. It is as muscled as a boxer,
and it is decorated with a white racing stripe down the center of its head.
It looks like a fat little bomb" (56). For Gruchow, the prairie is not flat,
but "a gigantic dish" (x), teeming with life, which he explores at every
season; winter, spring, summer, and autumn are the four divisions of his
book.

Considering a single piece of cottonwood tree bark, only one of billions
of microcosms of prairie life, Gruchow finds "a teeming universe of life
in the mountains and canyons that had formed around the soft heart of
a tree growing in springwater at the edge of a prairie marsh" (16): cattail
seeds, two species of lichen, spider webbing, a dozen pale and immature
spiders, and thousands of strange creatures he cannot name and
therefore can never possess. He does compulsively name prairie flowers
and grasses. He tells us that "a square meter of prairie sod might contain
25 miles of roots" (39). He describes at length and with brilliance the
greatest flier of all, the dragon fly; the sound of the rooting buffalo; the
unrivalled music of the prairie - the meadowlark's song; and the spring
coupling of garter snakes in a thick and writhing "mating ball" at the
bottom of an abandoned well.

building materials of life itself, Gruchow's prairie is often spirals - pools, eddies, storms, blizzards, cyclones, tornadoes. It is circles - the great circle of the compass, the seasons, the process of decay and renewal he so eloquently chronicles, the flux and reflux of life itself. Bowl-shaped prairie also holds much of Gruchow's own life. It holds making and walking, his revelation of moral wrongdoing when he is a mink, his benediction of tears ("something wet in the midst all thirst" [75]) on the faded plastic flowers on his parents' graves.

Low-key portrait of small town life is congruent with Gruchow's perspective of his parents and his town, but her more objective, more local stance means that she comes out as being more condescending. Bly is the admitted gadfly, in the country yet not of it, one who will set the walls against the prairie exist intact without a fight. What is she sees in midwestern small town sensibility that she will not let be? She klatches that by virtue of their goodnatured camaraderie repress feeling. The middle ground of inertia that obviates both criticism and ease. "Real nice" is the adjective of optimism here, not "marvelous"; "sober," never "heartbroken," tells the restraint in grief. Such a tepid existence is comfortable and sweet for a people who are bounded by directness. Evasion and lethargic acquiescence become biological walls which Bly would take down with, for example, her "my evenings," held periodically in her community to uncover and to incite conflict. Here, parties on opposite sides of the fence would be together to quarrel openly about, for example, the defense budget, methods of fertilization, or drainage ditches. Moreover, she won't let the people make do with the "pretty good" that they have been conditioned and anaesthetized to be satisfied with when "excellence" can be had by working at it. Things worth doing are worth doing badly, she believes. Every town should have its community theatre, should let the wind trumpets screech through Handel at Christmas. Country people accustomed to hard physical work in the fields, as Bly can attest to direct experience - they should not let their minds lie fallow any more than their fields.

Gruchow moves beyond Gruchow - in addition to heightening perception of exterior landscape as he proposes, Bly would facilitate awareness of actions and connections within the interior landscape of human relationships, in other words, to raise rural consciousness. Gruchow is a Midwestern reticence that renders him parsimonious with private opinion and probably disinterested in social reform. Bly schemes education - compile a course called Ag Lit for rural 11th and 12th graders in which the literature would actually mean something. Create a community resource person, a "mail-order servant" armed with *Books*

in Print and the *Whole Earth Catalog*, who could run a sort of Montgomery Ward order store for the mind. Her goal is to render the townspeople less lonely than she perceives them being (even if they don't realize that they are) by instilling in them the ability to authentically feel, and to express authentic emotion in all of their encounters.

All of this distinction is not to say that Bly does not wax pastoral - her well-formed phrases despite the politics do, like those of Gruchow, tell charmingly of "the endless, fainting fields, with the dusty rivers hooded by cottonwoods" (1). And albeit near the end of his book, Gruchow, like Bly, notes the suffocating effect that the prairie can have on human life:

The prairie is...a place in which souls regularly wither. The countryside was once dotted with insane asylums, and everybody had an aunt or a nephew who had gone to live in one. Madness was the cancer of the settlement era on the prairie. Either you faced the isolated endlessness with a sense of invincibility, or you collapsed under the strain; there was in the immensity of the prairie fuel enough to feed either fire (103).

So the most efficacious human existence is a wedding of ethics to aesthetics, an awareness of the congruence of exterior landscape and interior landscape. If we can achieve this, we will get the walls down so that we don't close off the vast space of the prairie by closing off each other and ourselves. Rather than timidly huddling together against the prairie, eyes and exuberance cast down, we would do better to keep our eyes steady and direct on what Bly calls "the sticking place," a place of honest and expressed feeling. Gruchow calls the horizon the essential feature of the prairie, which is like the horizon of the sea, which we can neither walk to or touch. If we're watchful, it will show us that "there seems to be no middle ground between us and the firmament" (Gruchow 61).

Works cited

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