Winter Aesthetics:
Open and Closed Fields in American Modernist Poetry

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> Thus we have a series of correlations. At the pole of the origin, at the point of greatest proximity to the birth of language, there is the chain origin-life-south-summer-heat-passion-accentuation-vowel-metaphor-song, etc. At the other pole, to the extent that one departs from the origin: decadence-illness-death-north-winter-cold-reason-articulation-consonant-correctness-prose writing. But, by a strange motion, the more one departs from the origin, the more one tends to come back to what precedes it, to a nature which has not yet awakened to speech. . . .
>
> Derrida, "The Opening of the Field"

> Snow is, observe, God's greatest gift
> to poets of New England, endlessly imperfect
> in its fallen state, its crystal forms,
> a silence like the pause between right words,
> amenable to every worldly surface. . . .
>
> Jay Parini, "Things of This World"

What happens when the composition of landscape has become impossible? When Pastoral becomes (as we have often been told it has become since the early nineteenth century) a form of nostalgia, when Nature has been declared bankrupt, when art has rejected realism, and when the task of describing the world has been usurped by science? All these things have happened, at least to some extent, yet landscape remains a possibility in poetry; even a pervasive presence in poetry in the twentieth century. In this essay, I will attempt to explore the persistence of landscape, or one particular landscape, within American Modernism, and to explain some of its features, including in particular the way in which ideas about landscape have been incorporated within modernist aesthetics. The story is, in part, that of the death of landscape, but also of its revival, its reconstitution and return as a Nature which has, as Derrida puts it in the epigraph to this essay, "not yet awakened to speech."[1]

I Maps and blanks: objective and subjective landscapes

There are many reasons why landscape represents a problem to twentieth century poets. The celebrated high modernist indifference to nature – Mallarmé's "La Nature a lieu," Valéry's "la sottise de nature" – and its celebration of the city means that the twentieth century has not seen an emphasis on the human figure in the landscape; an absence which is one aspect of modernist attacks on what T.E. Hulme called "split religion" and the romantic tendency to seek meanings and portents in nature. Yet that modernist attitude is itself symptomatic of an earlier sense of a lack of an explicitly human meaning in the external world – much Victorian landscape poetry is a response to what one critic terms "the designification of landscape," the loss of that category of the numinous which is celebrated by the Romantics.[2]

We can, I think, distinguish two broad movements in perceptions of landscape in the modern period. One of these was external: an increasing objectification of the landscape, and a subsequent alienation from it. As many writers have pointed out, the modernist sense of alienation from the landscape was partly a response to the way in which, in the nineteenth century, exploration, science and technology had transformed perceptions of the biosphere.[3] The harsher world posited by Darwin, combined with the lack of an authorizing divine presence, was one alienating influence. Moreover, the increasing objectification of landscape brought about by a more detailed scientific mapping of the geological, biological, and geographical forces at work in it meant that the artist had less to say. The Darwinian landscape is, James Paradis argues, no longer a blank, the *tabula rasa* which it had often been for the Romantics, on which the mind of the poet could easily project speculations and emotions. The world of the natural historian has become full of what Thoreau called "vestiges," traces of earlier life; it has become overdetermined, already written.[4] There was also a change in perspective: things in an objectified landscape are related to each other rather than to the perceiving subject. Nature is more comprehensively mapped; and to Emerson's famous declaration that "The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look on nature, is in our own eye," Darwin could respond, at the end of his *Journal*, that the blank is only there for the idealist willing to distort nature: "the map of the world ceases to be a blank; it becomes a picture full of the most varied and animated figures. Each part assumes its proper dimensions. . . ."[5] The world is both more crowded and less full of spiritual meanings.

For Thoreau, the results of this plotting were ambiguous. On the one hand, he was fascinated by scientific method, as his famous grids, tables, and soundings of Walden Pond suggest. On the other hand, the purely scientific view of the world was, he saw, productive of an absence as much as a presence, as his comment on maps and the "blank spaces" they contain suggests:

> How little there is on an ordinary map! How little, I mean, that concerns the walker and the lover of nature. Between those lines indicating roads is a plain blank space in the form of a square or triangle or polygon or segment of a circle, and there is naught to distinguish this from another

> area of similar size and form. . . . The waving woods, the dells and glades and green banks and smiling fields, the huge boulders, etc. etc., are not on the map, nor to be inferred from the map.[6]

Thoreau's insistence that the map does not contain everything, that it leaves blanks, suggests a desire to save something for the perambulating naturalist who colonizes those "blank spaces." His own map-making was concerned to fill in the blanks on the maps which he brought with details of the regions he visited that could not "be inferred" from them. The map becomes both a threat and a symbol of possibility: a limiting enclosure, but also a liberating paradigm which offers a framework for the exploration of the fields, for the use of what Clifford Geertz calls "local knowledge" as a point of opposition to the Manifest Destiny implicit in the Euclidian grid, with the latter's hunger to fill in all the available spaces. Thoreau is constantly concerned to negotiate a pathway between individual experience and those scientific paradigms which posit an objective view of the world.

If one general movement in attitudes to landscape is a scientific objectivism, the response in literature was more commonly a subjectivism born of that very alienation. Modern descriptions of the landscape, as Rhoda Flaxman suggests, often foreground not the external world but the forming intelligence of the writer: she cites Virginia Woolf's seascape at the end of *The Waves* as an example of such a space, in which the play of individual perceptions becomes the subject of the work, just as (in the American context) Emily Dickinson's landscapes are radically interiorized, part of the "Landscape of the Spirit." We pay attention to what Annabel Patterson describes as "the characteristically modern definition of pastoral as interior landscape, the pastoral of the mind."[7]

Perceptions of landscape in the modern era are thus split between a heightened subjectivity and a scientific objectivity. Literary paradigms can be found to place alongside each of these positions: on the one hand the high modernist rejection of nature and the external world as irrelevant to the writer, whose aim is to record the operations of the mind or of language itself; and on the other hand a modernist aesthetic which embraces the objective world of the sciences and seeks to expunge all subjectivity from writing, or even to incorporate scientific writing in its texts, as a number of writers from Marinetti to Charles Olson do.[8] Yet, typically, such extreme positions are not adopted: writers seek, like Thoreau, some accommodation between these two opposed poles. If that is the case, we need to ask to what extent twentieth century descriptions of landscapes contain a survival of an essentially Romantic aesthetic – one which seeks numinous moments in the landscape (even if they persist, as Charles Altieri argues of what he calls the "scenic mode" in recent poetry, in relatively muted forms).[9] The preoccupation of modern American poets with certain regions (Frost's Vermont, Williams' Paterson, Olson's Gloucester, Ed Dorn's mid-west, Gary Snyder's Pacific Coast) has been seen as part of an attempt to uncover what Altieri calls an "immanence" in locality. In this reading Modernism returns, in part, to a Romantic aesthetic in order to recover meanings – and indeed, modernist and

Objectivist writers have been attacked for an aesthetic of "presence" which seeks to ascribe a false "reality" to language.**10**

Any simple mapping of Romantic aesthetics onto recent poetry is, however, misleading. Firstly, the influence of those "objectifications" of landscape sketched above is the way in which landscape is filtered, for Olson and others, through a series of organizing paradigms provided by geology, history, geography, and cartography. Secondly, there is in the work of most recent poets an awareness that the sciences, and indeed any "grids" imposed on the landscape, are themselves constructions which reveal as much about the human subject as about the thing in itself. There is thus a constant negotiation between objectivity and subjectivity in the modern landscape poem, a teasing awareness of the fictionality of space itself. There is also, as Michael Davidson suggests, a confrontation of the underlying meaninglessness or blankness of that which the viewer confronts, and of the disassociation implied by Wallace Stevens's title "Description Without Place". As Davidson comments, "in numerous contemporary poems, from Adrianne Rich's 'Diving into the Wreck,' to Sylvia Plath's 'The Colossus,' to Charles Olson's 'The Librarian,' the poet encounters an alien landscape whose outlines are familiar but whose terms of order remain obscure. The poet uses a poem to investigate this area."**11**

In this reading of landscape in recent poetry, the sense of belonging which the poet establishes is typically an enabling fiction rather than any sense of psychological concord. Moreover, it is, as Davidson puts it, a "two-stage process" in which construction, or what Stevens calls the "endlessly emerging accords" between self and not-self, is preceded by a negative or deconstructive moment, a clearing of the ground. The dialectic of presence and absence, and the encounter with "an alien landscape whose outlines are familiar" is important in a number of the poems discussed below.

II Textual Space

One twentieth-century legacy of the late nineteenth century emphasis on the objective landscape is the attempts by Williams, Olson and others to "map" in detail the historical and geographical landscape. Mapping space implies, of course, the imposition of a techné which replaces landscape with a representation, and one of the distinguishing features of modernism is the foregrounding of the map or grid itself; an attention to the "frame" which forms the spatial field of the work (as in Joyce's Dublin), and to the processes of perception and organization. The *Four Quartets* include space as only one (non-privileged) combinative element in a textual field in which there are numerous integrative permutations and patternings, from verbal repetition to religious structures. In *Ulysses*, the separate "spatial" framework provided by the *Oddysey* is already textual: a space whose discursive tracing is self-consciously literary rather than literal.

An explicitly cartographical example of such a frame is Elizabeth Bishop's "The Map" (appropriately, the first poem in a volume entitled *North and South*). Here

landscape is depicted as a function of the process of depiction; "reality" supplanted by the map and its contours, boundaries, and typography:

> The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
> Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
> has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
> under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
> or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
> The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> – the printer here experiencing the same excitement as when emotion
> too far exceeds its cause.
> These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
> like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods. (*CPB* 3)[12]

Where Thoreau is suspicious of the map, Bishop celebrates it. Space is represented rather than experienced, the product of different human responses to the map, and including the mapmaker's small frisson as well as the emotions of the homesick Eskimo (interestingly, it is the "primitive" who seems to feel a nostalgia for the actual presence of the landscape). We consider the look of the peninsulas as entities on the map and only secondarily as actual geographical features. Some of the descriptions in the poem could be applied directly to the landscape, but all are in fact mediated through the printed document, and are subsumed to its power. In mapped space there is no ordering like that provided by the human eye in the prospect-poem: "Topography displays no favorites." Direct engagement with landscape is impossible in the world of the map, and in particular the element of relief is lost; that elevation associated with the sublime is impossible in a world where "North's as near as West," where all distance is representational and reciprocal and shares all the arbitrariness of the sign: "Land lies in water . . . . Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, / drawing it unperturbed around itself?" In Bishop's poem the outside world is rendered secondary, and the mind dwells on the representation alone – just as in the later "found poem" with which she prefaces *Geography III* geographical co-ordinates and features blend together into a catalogue of questions: "In what direction is the Volcano? The / Cape? The Bay? / The Lake. . . . / What is in the East? In the West?" (*CPB* 157). Much of her poetry draws on this sense of the secondariness of space, often organizing a perceptual field around some iconic device like the Huntress of "The Colder the Air" or the painting of "Large Bad Picture."

It is this topography, or rather this effacement of topography in favour of the map, which generates what Hugh Kenner calls the "closed field" of modernist construction: a preoccupation with bounded spaces like that in *Ulysses* which is essentially a field of information rather than a landscape.[13] In the modernist text, place is often seen as something like formatted space on a computer disc, ready to be filled with information. The text itself is spatialized, as Joseph Frank argued, in terms of its formal arrangement; it becomes an array of information on a grid.[14] Place thus often becomes a part of the very way in which the text is organized: not something which is seen, out there, but rather that which is worked into the structure of the text. In the American context, there are numerous examples of

localism in the service of such a desire for a bounded space. The landscape of Williams' Paterson, or of Eliot's New England, or (more abstractly) of Stevens's Pennsylvania, becomes a field of information, throwing up different relationships and instances. The eye of the poet roams not over an actual landscape but over a textual field, a "case" like that which Williams evokes when describing Paterson: "I took the city as my 'case' to work up, really to work it up. It called for a poetry such as I did not know, it was my duty to discover or make such a context on the 'thought.' To make a poem. . . ."[15] Space thus becomes peculiarly textualized as well as subjectivised; a function of writing itself.

Even the design of the page is an aspect of that tendency to shuttle between a composition elicited organically from the landscape to an emphasis on the field of writing – a fact registered by Stevens in poems like "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," where the page is a "blank" waiting to be filled by the writer/reader:

> The page is blank or a frame without a glass
> Or a glass that is empty when he looks.
>
> The greenness of night lies on the page and goes
> Down deeply in the empty glass. . . . (*CP* 267)[16]

Concentration on the actual makeup of the page, Marjorie Perloff has argued that William Carlos Williams' crucial initative in his earlier poetry was the designing of his poems for the eye rather than as stanzaic of metrical patterns; as visual patterns within the space bounded by the page. The credit for this development properly belongs to Mallarmé, who justifies the use of the "blanc" in his essays and in *Un coupe de des*, but the fact remains that Williams' sense of the space of the page as a pattern of spaces and boundaries is linked to his theories about the characteristic American preoccupation with space, the poem figured as a sort of mobile frontier moving forward across the space of the page, an encounter with and mapping of its blankness.[17] The aesthetic which Williams shares with Pound insists that space change within the poem, that the line change:

> Without invention nothing is well spaced,
> unless the mind change, unless
> the stars are new measured, according
> to their relative positions, the
> line will not change. . . . (*P* 50).

In this way, the metaphor which leads critics like Stephen Fender to write of America as an empty book to be "plotted" by the early writers of the west can in fact be reversed, so that the book itself becomes a new frontier, a "virgin land" for the new American poet of the East.[18] But the page-space so discovered is, importantly, a different one to that defined by the frontier: like Williams' Paterson, Stevens's page, and like the spaces which Thoreau discovered, it is "framed": bounded and already plotted by the horizontal and vertical lines of margin and print. In the work of Williams, Thoreau's "plain blank space in the form of square or a triangle" which is like any other "area of similar size or form"

has become the poem itself, in terms of its governing aesthetic. The link between the page and nature is a direct one; the page is nature, and the congruence between writing and nature is close: "A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world" (*P* 129). Where Thoreau meditates on the landscape within a subject-object dualism, Williams (like many of the Modernists) insists that nature is in some senses objectively present on the page. If there are "no ideas but in things" then ideas are, in printed form, things themselves.

As a number of writers have pointed out, Williams was influenced in his sense of visual design by his interest in modern painting, with its tendency to use grids (Mondrian, Leger) and other mathematical mappings of space (Cubism) and to see all landscape as a construct.**19** Another parallel can be seen in the Modernist cartoons of George Herriman (whose work e.e. cummings admired). In Herriman's Krazy Kat strip the characters deform, puncture, and otherwise test the frame in which they are imprisoned, while space in rendered abstractly. In one strip the "horizon line" itself appears as the subject, with the characters arranged above and below it in successive frames. The accompanying captions read: "Perhaps one of the finest portrayals of an 'horizon line' ever published – perhaps – . . . a continuation of that same linear divider of earth and sky, with 'Krazy Kat' below it . . . the top, and bottom sides of that immutable filiform demarcation."**20** Herriman's work, like Klee's and that of Miro, produces an abstract, geometrical, and essentially Modernist sense of space like that described in Wallace Stevens's "The Common Life." Bonnie Costello comments that in this poem "textual abstraction takes on a kind of materiality by its identification with visual abstraction" – a remark which precisely identifies that interplay between text and landscape which we have discussed:**21**

> The paper is whiter
> For these black lines.
> It glares beneath the webs
> Of wire, the designs of ink,
> The planes that ought to have genius,
> The volumes like marble ruins
> Outlined and having alphabetical
> Notations and footnotes. (*CP* 221)

III New England: "this blank screen"

The argument so far has been rather general. The remainder of this essay will attempt to link the ideas sketched above to a particular tradition: that or New England landscape writing, and in particular descriptions of the winter landscape. Why winter? The reason lies in part in that spatialization of ideas about language suggested by the quotation from Derrida which begins the essay, and in which Derrida describes Rousseau's identification of primary poetic utterance with the South, and of a more rational, written prose-script with the North. If we use Rousseau's formula, it was with the latter, northern poetic that Modernism associated itself, with a writing that would (as Pound said) have the virtues of

prose, with an anti-romantic coldness and objectivity, and with a self-consciously written text rather than verbal utterance. It was those "northern" qualities that were praised in those modernist writings which stressed the hardness, coldness, and clarity of Melville, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and other New England writers.

It can, moreover, be argued that the sense of space which was promulgated by American Romantic writers has a direct inheritance in Modernism. Tony Tanner has stressed the intrinsic "otherness" of the American landscape when compared to that with which the European Romantic sought an interchange, and the way in which the American writers sought to make that alien landscape into something "not necessarily benevolent . . . but amenable – ductile to the imagination." One particularly "ductile" landscape, as I have shown elsewhere, was that of the New England winter.[22] The celebration of the wintriness of the New England tradition was a way of expressing both the difference and the newness of New England, through an emphasis on the severity of the winter there, and on the fact that (as J.R. Lowell claimed in his essay "A Good Word for Winter") poets of New England seemed to describe the winter landscape more strongly and more often than their English counterparts. But more important in this context is the landscape aesthetic which the Transcendentalists extracted from the winter scene. Thoreau, Emerson, and Lowell himself all explore a landscape in which nature is wiped clean and reduced to the status of a blank slate on which the naturalist can observe the signs of life or inscribe their own thoughts. The place of the observer is foregrounded in this scene, both because only the hardiest spirits can learn the lessons of the snows and work on them, and because the position they occupy is itself traced in the snows: "each man tracks himself through life," Thoreau wrote. The winter landscape thus suggests a freedom from nature as presence (whether Darwin's plotted world or Hume's "blooming, buzzing confusion"), or a version of nature which is radically internalized, the climate of the mind which winter is for Stevens. Moreover, that silence or removal from speech which Rousseau ascribes to "Northern" writing is often figured in the winter landscape: the snows are largely silent.[23]

It is this reduction of landscape to a "blank" scene which is the essence of modern uses of the topos of the winter scene. If the depiction of landscape in modern poetry was often preceded by a negative movement, a clearing of the ground which enabled a recognition of the fact that landscape was essentially a subjective and textual construct, then one way of figuring such a clearing and negativity is through a contemplation of a landscape which has in fact been cleared, reduced to an abstract pattern, a blank page – as in the snowscape, in the writing of the North. And paradoxically, the return of landscape, or a voice of nature, which Derrida describes in Rousseau is what is licensed by such a reduction. Just as Thoreau's description of the map is carefully angled at preserving the "blanks" in the face of the map's usurpation of territory, the snowscape is a landscape which is self-consciously freed for the inscribing presence of the mind: an absence of the imagination, as Stevens said of his own winter poetics, which "had / Itself to be imagined" (*CP* 503). The result, for a number of poets, is something like a scene of instruction; a stark landscape in which those dualisms which define the poet are at their most visible, and in which the first irruption of writing (of a textual space)

can be traced. Indeed, much of American literary history can be traced within that irruption: an encounter with an alien landscape, and the birth of a new script.

We can, finally, be more specific about snowscapes and the modernist aesthetics described above. The peculiar abstraction of the wintry spaces of modern poetry themselves tend to suggest the abstract lines on paper which Stevens evokes, a world of pure boundaries and forms. Robert Rosenblum, arguing for a continuity between modern painting and the Northern Romantic tradition, explains the tendency towards an internalized, visionary landscape in the abstract grids of Mondrian, Barnett Newman, and others: "Matter and objects are as thoroughly excluded from this visionary space as they are from the work of Mondrian, who shares with Newman the sense of not only the sense of infinite radiance but also the triumphant annihilation of matter whereby both the open ground planes and the lines that cross them seem thoroughly impalpable, fields of spirit and paths of energy rather than earthly substances." In discussing Friedrich's abstract landscapes as a precursor to such works, Rosenblum turns to a snowscape for example: Friedrich's "Trees and Bushes in the Snow," a painting in which the branches have become "a fragile network of radiant lines," and in which space is rendered as a proto-modernist play of line and figure.[24]

There is, I would argue, a similar stylistic continuity between Thoreau's tracings on the snow and the abstract designs of a number of twentieth century writers on the blank sheet of winter. When Robert Frost meditates on winter and suggests that "there are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed," or when Elizabeth Bishop entitles a poem "The End of March," alluding to Stevens's winter thematics, they consciously participate in this New England tradition. The blankness of winter becomes a trope for the absence of landscape, or for a landscape which is cleansed of phenomena and rendered abstract, an emblem of the blankness of the text on which the mind may inscribe its visions.

Thus, at the centre of another representative of this tradition, A.R. Ammons's *The Snow Poems*, there is a blank space, a point of origin. It is a month in his chronicle in which, as he puts it, "I wrote / nothing: it is / the winter-deep, the / annual sink."[25] This blank or generative space (which is released into poetry in the poems which follow it, describing late winter and spring) must, for Ammons, be guarded as a moment of pure negativity: he concludes "leave it unwritten, / as snow unwrites / the landscape." The poem is itself untitled, and not listed in the Contents page of his book, as if the page near the middle of the book on which it appears were blank. It is only past the zero point of winter that the landscape returns as "a manuscript patch / of snow illuminate," and a new book of the world can begin.

Robert Lowell, writing in London but remembering the New England tradition of which he was a historian, figures the same point of origin in terms of the lurid projections of the cinema screen:

> This morning, as if I were home in Boston, snow,
> the pure witchery-bitchery of kindergarten winters;
> my window whitens like a movie screen,

> glaring, specked, excluding rival outlook –
> I can throw what I want on this blank screen,
> but only the show already chosen shows:
> Melodrama. . . .[26]

The easy movement from "snow" to "show" suggests how far from an actual landscape we are: it is a backdrop Lowell has in mind, an entirely neutral ground for his own characteristic melodramas. Much modern American poetry makes use of such an abstractly conceived "white place." The title of Jay Parini's "The White Town" is taken from Twain's description of Hannibal, but the place he imagines nevertheless mutates from a place where things (the houses, fences, ants, cats and dogs, milk trucks) are white into a snowscape in which the "whirling pigments" of memory are mixed into the whiteness of a "pinwheel dream":

> blue-vermilion culm and azure slag
> the mud-brown cellarholes and mucous glades
> with lilies overlaid, the orangeade suns –
> all ground to powder, into dry soft snow,
> the frosted window you can never open.[27]

In his poem "Things of This World" Parini addresses those problems of the concords (or imagined concords) between man and nature which are central to modern landscape poetry. The poem begins with a declaration that "Reality inheres in particulars, of course," but insists that this leads to another problem: how are the things of the world to be subsumed to a vision of things beyond, or to human moral purposes? The "miracle of correlation" we hope for between self and world is an illusion. Parini sees more hope of correspondence in the weather, which "more than objects may contain / the parallels we seek." One example of this is the lines quoted as epigraph to this essay: "Snow is, observe, God's greatest gift / to poets of New England." The delicate erasure produced by snow is, as in Lowell's description of Thoreau, linked to the spare compositional methods of the poet. Nevertheless "weather" is too much like a theoretical principle to satisfy the appetite for landscapes which is part of the eye's search for meanings:

> But weather, of itself
> is far too fragile to compete head on
> with landscapes, vistas, Nature's present
> to the active mind in search of objects
> to contain its love.[28]

The poem moves on to a broader conclusion about the way in which poetry deals with loss rather than with achieved accords between words and things, encompassing that negative moment in which description becomes impossible: "Each word we say / becomes an elegy to what is lost." Yet the earlier snow-covered landscape, itself a metaphor for absence, for the loss of nature beneath the covering blanket of snow, has helped prepare this conclusion; and the poem ends in winter once again, with "the sparrows in the snow" serving as symbols of a minimalism which succeeds in finding something even in a landscape of loss. The

snows thus serve as a metaphor for the "unwriting" of landscape and the liberation of a textual space which is, itself, another kind of landscape.

IV The self against the snow

For those poets most directly in the New England tradition, the winter landscape serves as a place of instruction for the walking poet: the locus of a contest between self and world, but also a space which retains some of the textual overtones which it has for poets like Ammons. In his most famous poem, Robert Frost inserts a play on the wintriness of his name: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."[29] It is frost which splits stones, and the poet Frost seems to use his riddle to suggest his own "secret ministry": a preoccupation with boundaries and limits, but also a desire to efface them and seek some point of pure origin. In that pun and its connection with the winter landscape we thus find one secret of his identity: a wintriness, but also a tendency to walk outside at night, to convert a landscape to his own purposes (as he puts it in another poem: "don't forget / The lurking frost in the earth beneath / That will steal forth after the sun is set" [*PRF* 276]). The snowscape seems particularly suited to Frost's preoccupation with the "place apart" from human possession and use. In "There are Roughly Zones" he explores the boundaries set up by the interaction of civilization and the harsh New England climate, worrying about the survival of a fruit tree, but also drawing from that worry a metaphor for the survival of a defiance which is one source of poetry:

> It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach.
> What comes over a man, is it soul or mind –
> That no limits and bounds he can stay confined? (*PRF* 305)

The refusal of confinement is enacted again and again in Frost's poems, and the way in which winter effaces field-marks, limits, signs of activity and ownership seems to enable the poet's activities, so that he lays claim to places and things (an abandoned wood-pile; a crow; a few red berries) from which a meaning can be generated.

On the conservative side, Frost looks back over the whole tradition of New England snow poems: "Snow," for example, is a moral tale that recalls Whittier's "Snow-Bound." But in other poems we see him defining the self, as Stevens does, against a landscape which has been rendered elemental and abstract by the snows. In a number of Frost's snowscapes it becomes difficult to detect a landscape at all, in the normal sense of the word: the world is reduced to the poet and his own trace. In "The Wood-pile" the poet sets his own boundary, only to reach over it, or rather to see it effaced by snow and replaced by an undifferentiated zone of abstract lines:

> Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day,
> I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
> No, I will go on farther – and we shall see."
> The hard snow held me, save where now and then
> One foot went through. The view was all in lines

> Straight up and down of tall slim trees
> Too much alike to mark or name a place by
> So as to say for certain I was here
> Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.

The landscape here is one defined simply by the co-ordinates of "near" and "far," "here" and "home." Typically in Frost's poems the snow and the frost destroy boundaries or leave them uncertain – just as in the snows of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the ownership of the land seems to be questioned, or rather effaced in order to create a space for the poet's meditations:

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow. (*PRF* 224)

In this poem, the abstraction of the landscape is, in part, what creates the resonance of that dream-like repeated final line "And miles to go before I sleep." Destination is problematic in such a space, in which the only co-ordinate is "between," and in which the woods seem to offer some temptation simply because of their otherness. Similarly, in "Afterflakes," there is simply the interplay of self, shadow, snow, and the sky from which it is scarcely distinguished:

> In the thick of a teeming snowfall
> I saw my shadow on snow.
> I turned and looked back at the sky. . . . (*PRF* 303)

The question raised by this glimpse of his own body projected between sky and snow is simply that of the density of the self, an irrevocable taint to the flesh which is revealed, amidst this play of pure natural forces, as solid, sullied, and "swarthy." It is the irreducible presence of the body of the perceiver that is figured here, and the way in which it writes itself into the landscape, almost as if Frost were countering that danger which Tony Tanner identifies, that the American poet will be spread too thin:

> If I shed such a darkness
> If the reason was in me,
> That shadow of mine should show in form
> Against the shapeless shadow of storm,
> How swarthy I must be.

The starkest of all these evocations of self against the winter landscape in Frost's corpus is the very last poem included in the main sequence of his poems. Here, the ambiguity of the word "against" allows a dark suggestion of opposition, transgression, and a primal writing which is a violence against nature, a kind of reductivism like that achieved by the winter landscape itself:

> In winter in the woods alone
> Against the trees I go.

I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low. (*PRF* 470)

Moving "against" the landscape means moving across it, diagonally; and at war with it, antagonistically. Both these senses are kept alive in the second (final) stanza:

At four o'clock I shoulder ax
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.

In terms of its design, the poem is constructed as a series of diagonals: the vertical trees, and the man who moves "against" them (as Frost pictures himself against a wood in "Stopping Outside Woods on a Snowy Evening"); the felled maple which forms another diagonal; the ax which is "shouldered" at an angle to the body; the line of tracks which is linked by another diagonal. And the shadow is (as we saw in "Afterflakes") itself a diagonal. If Emerson could complain (in the passage from *Nature* already referred to) that in the fallen world "the axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things," and assert that man "cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit," then Frost with his "ax" assets a harsher doctrine: that man is at war with nature, and defines himself in the angle between himself and the landscape.

In this way, Frost's snowscapes allow him to retain an elemental dualism in which self and world are polarized. The complex, interconnected landscape posited by Darwin is emptied of its content, and the "blanks" which Thoreau had wished for are recreated, celebrated, and textualized as the "line of shadowy tracks" which is both the poet's trace and his poetic text. The snowscape becomes in some ways an anti-landscape, or a landscape which is simply the vehicle of Frost's enactment of self-definition as alienation and otherness.

There are a number of parallels between Frost's winter walks and those of a later, adoptive, New Englander, Robert Penn Warren. Warren has written a number of snow poems, many of them dealing with his persistent themes of a house at night or an evening walk. The locus of an important group of them is a particular storm in Guthrie, Kentucky, remembered from when Warren was twelve. One of this group, "Time as Hyperbole," links that particular storm with a rite of passage in which the first markings of poetic consciousness are traced. It opens with a crisis between world and word in which America seems, as Emerson put it, to dazzle the imagination:

White, white in that dawnlight, the world was exploding, white
Light bursting from whiteness. What
Is the name of the world?**30**

The landscape has been obliterated, rendered alien as a "white emptiness." As was the case for Thoreau, the poet (or his younger self) meditates on that which is buried beneath the surface of the snow, and notices the first tracings on the surface

of the snow, the unwritten landscape: “Have you ever seen how delicately / Etched the print of the field mouse’s foot in fresh snow is? / I saw the tracks. . . .” The landscape, here, becomes simultaneously a challenge and a source of self-awareness. The walker searches his visual field for a referent, a frame or a horizon that would bound the space in which he seems trapped, but he finds that he is the only referent in the landscape, and that the tracks which he detects are in the end his own. Thoreau’s claim that “each man tracks himself through life” is literalized:

> In the middle of that space. I looked back, saw
> My own tracks march at me. Mercilessly,
> They came at me and did not stop. Ahead,
> Was the blankness of white. Up it rose. Then the sky.

These tracks are also, implicitly, traced within the poet: “They came at me and did not stop.” What Warren calls “the glittering metaphor / For which I could find no referent” finds its only referent in the poet himself and his crisis. Inner and outer become so confused in this blank scene that even at the end of the poem Warren is left wondering whether the experience was “a dream / That was only what the snow dreamed” – a question which also asks, perhaps, whether poets choose their metaphors of origin or are chosen by them. The role of the landscape is to give expression to that uncertainty about what does or does not constitute the “place” of the poet.

V Abstract Designs

The aesthetics of the snow poem equally suit abstract poets like John Ashbery, for whom landscapes are always framed artifacts, whether figured as movies, pictures, or (at his most naturalistic) scenes seen from a train window. Ashbery’s teasing landscapes, with their sense that, as Andrew Ross puts it, they seem “to have only just been evacuated by persons or by an event,” emptied of a meaning whose absence is palpable, are suggested by “What is Poetry.”[31] In this poem, the blankness of the snowscape is akin to an untouched canvas (both Breugel and Japanese screens are hinted at):

> The medieval town, with frieze
> Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow
> That came when we wanted it to snow?
> Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
> Ideas, as in this poem?

The snow-covered fields here are a place of expectancy, in which “All the thought got combed out” in one of those negative moments so typical of his poetry, and which may yield something new: “It might give us – what? – some flowers soon?” Ashbery is an urban, New York poet, and his most favoured images for what Stevens called “poverty” are urban: “the dirty stone of some plaza” is the baseline of reality. But even there we seem to see snow as an after-image: to “extend one’s life” in the plaza is “like coming out of / A coma that is a white, uninteresting

country"; and in other poems, like "North Farm," Ashbery shows himself able to use Rousseau's winter-summer dialectics. Like Stevens and Bishop, Ashbery modulates dialectically into a wintry voice, enlarging what he calls in the final lines of his best-known poem the "cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time."[32]

Mark Strand is, even more than Ashbery, a modernist poet who employs a characteristic Stevensian wintriness of voice in the service of an abstract vision of landscape. His poetry employs those parameters which Derrida analyses in Rousseau in order to suggest that winter, the north, represents a distancing and self-effacement of the phenomenal world (and the landscape) in favour of a perfect negativity, an inverse world which may become the space of writing. In his short poem "Snowfall" the snow renders absolute the division between self and world, while the outside world collapses into a self-negation:

> Watching snow cover the ground
> cover everything that is not you, you see
> it is the downward drift of light
> upon the sound of air sweeping away the air,
> it is the fall of moments into moments, the burial
> of sleep, the down of winter, the negative of night.[33]

In other poems, like "Poor North," the Northern landscape is a climate of being; the place of Stevens's "poverty" or "need." But in "White" he uses the traditional New England winter walk as the vehicle for an abstract epiphany:

> I walk under the trees,
> the frayed leaves,
> the wide net of noon,
> and the day is white,
> drifting over the patches
> of grass and fields of ice
> into the high circles of light.
> . . . . . .
> And out of my waking
> the circle of light widens,
> it fills with trees, houses,
> stretches of ice.
> It reaches out. It rings
> the eye with white.
> All things are joined
> even beyond the edge of sight.[34]

As the dedication of the poem to Harold Bloom might suggest, this is a knowing version (or revision) of Emerson's "Circles." A metaphysical landscape is described, an abstract extension of the snowscape into a whole climate of being. The "white" which extends beyond the "edge of sight" – beyond the individual perspective – is, like the snow of "Snowfall," a figure for that which is "not you,"

so the poem becomes (like Frost's and Warren's snow poems) a quest for identity in a minimalist landscape.

Such a minimalism is not the only alternative, and I will conclude this examination of winter poetics by examining the work of a poet who explores the New England tradition with an eye to its relation to the Romantic tradition in general. Alfred Corn, a weekend inhabitant of Vermont, writes of a winter landscape which, once again, seems to be cleared of meaning and opened up for the poet. In his "Two places in New England" the snows appear once again as a blank sheet, removed from speech: "Out on the speechless white plain / The snowshoes slush no sound except their own."[35] But landscape, for Corn, does not simply involve an "other" against which the self is positioned. A characteristic equivocation is suggested in these opening lines, with their self-referential music: the "slush" of the shoes is a sound written on a blank, but it is the sound of the "speechless" snow as well as of the walker's movements. Indeed, "slush" denotes a kind of snow itself, as well as a sound; just as "snowshoes" suggest a necessary conjunction of walker and he surface which he walks upon. The blankness of the plain is an "effect" which can only be detected by an imposition. Thus, the writer's involvement in the scene is highlighted, as in the description of a writing on the snow: "Dry and watered grist, bear the weight. / Keep the record of each cross-hatched step." Here, the grammar most easily suggests that the first line could (at the dropping of a comma) be a simple description: the grist is what bears the weight and keeps the record. But the presence of the comma also suggests the imperative voice: the grist should, at the poet's behest, bear the weight. This delicate ambiguity again suggests that the landscape is not simply a passive medium which records the writing of human activity; it is within the mind that landscape becomes the space of writing.

With its heightened sense of the impossibility of a Romantic landscape, Corn's winter scene is a revision of Keats's autumnal landscape in the direction of a greater emptiness and spareness, born of the lateness of the season:

> A dozen half hoops,
> The barbed raspberry canes
> Anchored in snow, a wicker the dustiest
> Brown rose.
> No waxwing or winter wren nimbly stationed
> On the stubble's threaded glaze; or on
> The thick brakes of underbrush at field edge.

Here, the scene is sketched in with a conscious minimalism, even to the point of describing what is not there. Corn's landscape is suggestive a post-modernist return to a variety of self-conscious realism, in contrast to the uncompromising modernist abstraction of Strand. The winter section of the poem ends with a complex, allusive, and ambiguous attack on the emptiness, coldness, and "otherness" of nature, in the tradition of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" and Stevens's "Domination of Black." Who is speaking here and what is demanded of a personified and apostrophized Winter?

> Winter, know, be, and say more than this
> Intricate featureless plain of ice,
> Shadowed by hemlock,
> The needles' tight black plan,
> Weeds their own monument,
> Seeds their shorthand. . . .
> Winter, timeless machine, cold presence of the past –
> A cold that is polar and blue, in the pastures and snowfields.

Again, the poem seems to oscillate between the fiction of address, a vocative, and a distanced description. And the poet's impatience with winter is to be read as indicative for a search for human meanings, and for a desire for something beyond the static imprisonment of nature which it figures. In the second half of the poem, it is the movement away from the absolute coldness of winter into the activity of spring which is described and moralized: the beautiful, perhaps, rather than the sublime. But that movement – the movement away from origins – is another story.

Like the frontier, winter is a place of American origins, where the field is continually opened anew. It is a space which exists as the blanks on the map, as Thoreau suggests all space is, and which can be kept open even where too much is, seemingly, known about a landscape for the poet to assert her or his possession of it. Indeed, if in material terms poets have lost cultural authority (have lost "ground," as they say) in the last century, it is in the snowscape that the ground is most effortlessly reclaimed: it is, both metaphorically and literally, re-covered as what Tanner called a "ductile" surface, a neutral space in which the mappings of science, roads, commerce, and ownership are evacuated. For Frost it is the season in which he steals back the landscape from those who "own" it. Like all modern landscape, but in a more visible way, winter becomes a construct, a textual space which is traced within the parameters of the self-conscious subjectivity and even fictionality of description. Of all the seasons, it is most amenable to such a construction, most open to its own metaphorization as a text, and to an aesthetic in which nature is figured as an absence or as mapped space, as a lightly formatted "blank." If, as Bachelard puts it, "We think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability," then winter is preeminently the season of self-knowledge, in the sense that we "fix" ourselves against its abstract screen.[36] It is also, as I have tried to suggest, a season with particular American (or New England) associations, in terms of the literary tradition. The Plymouth Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts late in 1620, and traced their first enclosures and boundaries in the heavy snows of that winter, "fixing" the incipient American self against a harsh climate in a way that has been echoed ever since. So Hayden Carruth introduces his meditation on New England writing in an anthology on regionalism: "Begin with the land. Instinct would tell me this, even if the authorities did not. I look out my window. As it happens I live in what we call the north, and the season is deep winter. Thick snow, three, four, five feet in depth, covers everything . . . ."[37]

Notes

1 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 147.

2 Susan Lorsch, *Where Nature Ends: Literary Responses to the Designification of Landscape* (London: Associated Universities Press, 1983). On the "impossibility" of landscape in modern poetry, see Sieghild Bogumil, "Images of Landscape in Contemporary French Poetry: Ponge, Char and Dupin," *New Comparison* 6 (1988): 119-36.

3 See, for example, Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); James Paradis, "Darwin and Landscape," in *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives*, ed. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 85-110; Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Barbara Stafford, *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account 1760-1840* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984); John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

4 On "vestiges," see Joan Burbick, *Thoreau's Alternative History: Changing Perspectives on Nature, Culture, and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

5 *Nature*, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson et al,. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971), I,43; Darwin, *Journal of Researches*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1846), II, 310, quoted by Paradis, p.101

6 Thoreau, *Journals*, quoted in Robert F. Stowell, *A Thoreau Gazetteer*, ed. William L. Howarth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p.x.

7 Rhoda L. Flaxman, *Victorian Word Painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), pp. 130-31; Susan Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Country: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), ch. 1; Annabel Paterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.267.

8 For a consideration of the latter, see Andrew Ross, *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

9 Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Recent American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also his "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics," *Boundary 2* 1 (1973): 605-41.

10 For a discussion of such claims and a defence of Zukofsky on this score, see Burton Hatlen, "Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, and the Poetics of Absence," *Sagetrieb* 1 (1982): 63-96.

11 Michael Davidson, "Notes beyond the Notes: Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelphi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.154-55. Stevens's "The Snow Man," in particular, has served as the focus for a debate about the meaning of this dialectic of "blankness" or negativity and imaginative

reconstruction: see Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of a Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.63; Helen Vendler, *On Exended Wings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp.8, 258.

12 Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), p. 3 (Referred to in text as *CPB*).

13 Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Commedians: Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett* (London: W.H. Allen, 1964), pp.96-97. Kenner also uses the phrase "technological space."

14 Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp.3-63. On grids and field models in fiction, see Robert M. Adams, "Paradigms and Grids," *Afterjoyce: Studies in Fiction After Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.37-50, and N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

15 William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), author's note, p.vi. Referred to in text as *P*.

16 Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p.267. Referred to as in text as *CP*.

17 Marjorie Perloff, "'To Give a Design': Williams and the Visualization of Poetry," in *William Carlos Williams: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1983), pp.59-186. Perloff's arguments are anticipated by Bram Djikstra, *Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Steiglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). For a useful overview on "texual space," see R.W. Bradford, "Criticism and the visual format of poetry," *Word & Image*, 5 (1989): 198-205.

18 Stephen Fender, *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the California Trail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.3-12.

19 Robert Lawson Peebles connects Jefferson's interest in applying a grid to the American landscape with Mondrian's abstract designs, in *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The world turned upside down* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.187.

20 Krazy Kat, July 21, 1918. Reproduced in *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986, p.134.

21 Bonnie Costello, "Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, p.76. The article is particularly valuable for its careful differentiation of Williams and Stevens in their respective uses of visual analogies.

22 Tony Tanner, "Notes for a comparison between American and European Romanticism," in *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.31-33; Tim Armstrong, "'A Good Word for Winter': The Poetics of a Season," *New England Quarterly* 60 (1987): 568-83. Alongside the issues of cultural nationalism and American virtue addressed in that article, I would now stress the influence of Humboldt's writings on the unique characteristics of different climactic Zones.

23 Tanner, p.30, points out that American Romantic writers tend to listen to nature less than their British counterparts: the easy interchange between self

and world which Wordsworth attempts to suggest through auditory metaphors is unavailable to them.

24 Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), pp.211, 194.

25 A.R. Ammons, *The Snow Poems* (New York: Norton, 1977), p.140.

26 Robert Lowell, *The Dolphin* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p.48. A nice cinematic analogue for this limbo-like space is provided by George Lucas's first feature, *THX 1138* (1973): "through much of the film, a vast white background is shockingly punctuated by the discreet use of pure primary colours and blank. Human beings – hairless and dressed in white clothing – show up against the white screen as disembodied heads and hands floating in limitless space, disconnected from a context and from themselves." Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ungar, 1987), p.98. Inevitably, Sobchack compares Lucas's spaces to those of Mondrian and Alexander Calder.

27 Jay Parini, *Town Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), p.37.

28 Ibid., p.69.

29 *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.33-34 (cited in text as *PRF*).

30 Robert Penn Warren, *Selected Poems 1923-1975* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976), p.23. Cf. the same scene in "The Moonlight's Dream," in *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* (New York: Random House, 1980), pp.17-18.

31 Ross, p.184; John Ashbery, *Houseboat Days* (New York: Viking, 1977), p.47.

32 John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Viking, 1975), p.83.

33 Mark Strand, *Selected Poems* (New York: Athaneum, 1980), p.127.

34 Ibid., p.119

35 Alfred Corn, *The Various Light* (New York: Viking, 1980), p.18.

36 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.80.

37 Hayden Carruth, "The New England Tradition," in *Regional Perspectives: An Examination of America's Literary Heritage*, ed. John Gordon Burke (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), p.4.

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