

Gazing:

Prairies, Mountains, Cathedrals, God and Sex



Prairies

Walk through any of the great art galleries of the world and you will not find one landscape of the prairies. Yes, you will find pictures that focus on people, plants, animals, or objects located on the prairies. But unlike the ocean or the mountains or forests, there are no great paintings of the prairie in and of itself.

Why is that?

I am not an artist, but I suspect there are at least two reasons.

The first has to do with focus; the second with perspective. And both of these have to do with our gaze.

Our gaze is constantly drawn to a focus. Look around and you will find that your eye cannot take in the scene as a whole. Instead, it notices the specific objects and shapes and then composes these into a visual narrative: "I see a table with a vase of flowers," for example. Our minds cannot take in the complete canvass of visual sensations and present that to our attention without first processing the data into known objects placed in relation to each other. That is, without focussing and putting into perspective.

But the prairies confound this process. Go ahead. Walk out onto any wild, uninhabited, uncultivated, unpastured prairie. Let your eyes try to find a focus. Let them try to put things into perspective. Let them try to see the prairie as a whole in itself. And then try to paint that. Paint the vastness of the sky over head; the immensity of the unending horizon; the subtle shifts of the surface planes; the detail of the dozens of different species of grass at your feet. Can't be done.

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On the prairie, nothing is foreground; all is background.

Mountains

Mountains on the other hand practically shout out, "Look at me! Don't look there, look here!" Our gaze is constantly drawn to a focus. The landscape is nothing but perspective. Go ahead, try and paint the vastness, the immensity, the subtlety, the detail of a mountain. It cannot not be done. Painting a mountain is a piece of cake.

Cathedrals

Cathedrals are like mountains. They are human-built replicas of vastness, immensity, subtlety, and detail. Like mountains, they are spaces of awe and wonder.

Like mountains they habituate our gaze to focus and assess; to select an object as foreground.

There is nothing human-built that replicates a prairie. There is nothing human-built that gives rest to the constant craving of the habituated gaze to focus and create narratives of perspective, of foreground and background.

God

In the beginning, so the story goes, humans had no knowledge of good and evil.

There was fruit provided for them to eat, so I imagine they had experience of desire.

But without knowledge of good and evil, without any sense of the shame that comes from knowing wrong, perhaps their gaze was able to desire without turning the other into an object, into a means to an end. Everything just was what it was in its own self. Their gaze did not assess and evaluate. They saw with delight but not with covetousness. They desired to experience but not to possess.

It is interesting, so the story goes, that when the first humans did gain knowledge of good and evil, their gaze SAW that they were naked. How could this be? Were they not naked all along?

But knowing good and evil, their gaze could now no longer simply see; their gaze now also assessed. Desire could no longer simply delight; it also objectified. Their bodies were no longer just what they were in themselves. Knowing good and evil, their gaze saw that their bodies were naked. And they were ashamed.

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Sex

Good sex is like standing on a wild prairie.

Because, like the prairies, good sex confounds the gaze that is habituated to constantly assessing, focusing, narrowing; constantly desiring and objectifying; no longer able to see the other just as they are in themselves; always selecting one aspect to foreground; always creating a narrative to feed one's own desires; always creating objects to meet one's own ends.

But like the prairies, good sex transforms our gaze. Allowing us to see with desire that delights; to see the other as they are in themselves and not as ends to our own needs.

Imagine that. Imagine standing naked in front of your lover and feeling no shame. Imagine standing naked in front of your lover and feeling their gaze upon your body with only delight.

If you can imagine that, then you know what it is like to stand out in the open on a wild prairie.

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