



PREFACE

THE MOST BELOVED writers through the ages and throughout the world reflect in their work one of the basic truths of humankind: the realization that in local knowledge begins self-knowledge. Here is the starting point for what used to be thought of as worldliness, now transformed into global consciousness. Whichever expression one chooses, the essential premise, in large measure, still points to an understanding of what it means to live on this planet, with its galaxies of grief and pleasure. But what exactly is “local knowledge,” and how does one attain this state of presumed comfort and wisdom?

For most of the history of human presence on earth experience of this kind was rather the natural rhythm of daily life, because one simply had to know as much as possible about the land and the sky and the sea and folkways, as a matter of sheer survival. Human history has reached a point at which technological transformations have so reordered the perception of space and time and human relations that many people spend much of their lives in a physical and cultural world they do not truly know in their bones, much less in their neighborhoods. It is like learning only parts of the language one speaks, not knowing the names of important objects.

Learning the language of a country is a life's work, enraptured by the many themes of this language that find expression in the manner of speaking and writing that defines a particular place and time and people. Besides, there are many narratives in the life of a country, region, or town, by turn historical, social, ecological, and cultural.

What kind of struggles did a people fight, were their houses made of stone, which bird songs awakened them, did they love honor?

Social history and natural history are bound together in the composition of the world we inhabit, like leaves in a solemn book that reminds us it comes from a sturdy tree. Broadly speaking, if we are to contemplate the true nature of a place, the cultural system cannot justly be separated from the ecosystem in the life of a society. Now we have learned to tell time by the trees.

In the Western heritage Herodotus, the father of history, made geography an aspect of the description of momentous events. But in our era of overspecialization the strands of human affairs have become disengaged, not intertwined, erasing geography from the understanding of history, agriculture from the context of culture, the humanities from science. Through this process of erosion the transmission of knowledge becomes more and more restricted by a kind of forced zoning regulation, while the universe of knowledge itself is continually enriched. In the most profound analysis, a society is ultimately judged by the connections its people make between the urgent themes of their world. There is a good deal of truth and subtlety in Emerson's view that "no man can write anything who does not think that what he writes is for the time the history of the world."

Here again is that irreducible leap from the local to the global perspective. For what is the sense of place if not the beginning of a world view of things. Can one rightly think of place, which is history, without thinking of nature, the natural history of habitats? It is not possible, I have found, to write of the Hudson Valley without writing of nature. More than a region it is a topography of the spirit.

Some landscapes are known by foot, others by horseback or boat, many more by automobile. Regions themselves are usually defined by dialect, cuisine, by music or dance, by furniture, costume, and art forms. The more than five million current inhabitants of the Hudson Valley have not been joined over the centuries by any of these cultural inflections, not in the nearly four hundred years of European settlement, nor in the millennia-old tribal ways of vanquished Indians. One cannot construct a continuous "Hudson Valley culture" out of these themes. No, the people of the Hudson Valley are unified by

one earthly fact: geography. They are joined, spectacularly, by the shared presence of the Hudson River, which spills a 315-mile watery trail through New York State, from its headquarters at Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks, to the end of Manhattan Island, where it moves out toward the Atlantic Ocean. Perhaps as many as 65 million years ago what Henry Hudson called the “great River of the Mountains” began to slice a valley through the Catskill Mountains to the east and the Taconic Mountains to the west.

The stretch of the Hudson most celebrated is the 150-or-so miles from Manhattan to Albany, where towering Palisades, elegant mountain passes of the Highlands, and the soft figuration of the Catskills beyond the west shore create a blue-green haze of reflected grandeur and winding calm. East and west the shores play with images of each other, and again north and south, in continual forced double perspective. The Janus-faced riverbanks, like opposite pages of an open book radiating diverse people’s histories and the history of the landscape, remind us that Janus, the god of passageways, is another name for Chaos. This, the name of our contemporary condition—let’s call it another version of the persistent American theme, urban versus rural life (corruption versus innocence).

Nowhere in the Hudson Valley is this duality more certain than in the land between the boundary lines of Manhattan and Albany that once was New Netherland and is now New York. The word “New” is significant in every sense. The Hudson Valley was the “New World” whose profundity of natural resources Adriaen Van der Donck, its early historian, proclaimed to would-be Dutch settlers. Here Crèvecoeur was sure he found democracy’s “New Man” who would eventually influence his own French compatriots. And the Swede Peter Kalm discovered new species to populate the plant kingdoms of old Europe.

The Hudson River itself was never a passive scenic partner, but an active participant in new currents of thought in the American mind. Along its waters the people made a Revolution to shake off British colonialism, many of its residents—Robert R. Livingston, Robert Morris, John Jay, DeWitt Clinton, Alexander Hamilton, Martin Van Buren, Franklin D. Roosevelt—were statesmen who helped to make a country. The Hudson was the surface on which innovative modes of

transportation played, the steamboat and the Erie Canal, and then the railroad that ran along its shores. In small river towns and growing cities the Industrial Revolution moved people and forests and mountains in the surge toward prosperity. The very landscape captured the American imagination in some of the country's earliest travel writing and nature writing set in the Valley, which also became, in the national period, a center for painting, tourism, architecture, and horticulture whose influence radiated throughout the country and across the Atlantic.

Ideas flowed to and from New York City, as surely as the Catskills sent its cool, clear, refreshing waters there, making it a world capital of culture and finance, and a gateway to new possibilities for those who would call it home. From everywhere they came. Multiculturalism defined New York from the very start. When the English took the colony from the Dutch in 1664, at least eighteen languages were already spoken around what is now Manhattan, which at the time had a European-descended population of less than 2,000.

The Hudson Valley region embraces a heritage that has fed every tributary of American enlightenment. That is what it means to be a landscape rather than merely scenery, a world not a setting. But it is past history alone that has cast emblematic shadows over its velvet hillsides. In the twentieth century the Hudson Valley has not been a frequent theme in the American cultural consciousness. More than a century ago the West superseded it as the symbol of wilderness and spirituality. American myth has always looked to the landscape for its sense of poetry and identification, and in times of trouble, for solace. Even today the population swells westward.

There were other cultural changes that would draw attention away from the region, those occurring from the third quarter of the nineteenth century to the decades before World War II, such as the decline of the Hudson River School of painting, whose canvases by Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederic E. Church, and others had symbolized national themes for tourists and natives. The lack of a sustained *belles lettres* tradition, originated by the likes of Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, James Kirke Paulding, Nathaniel P. Willis, and William Cullen Bryant, surfacing only sporadically at opposite ends of the century, between the publication of Henry

James's *The American Scene* and T. Coraghessan Boyle's *World's End*, is an overwhelming factor in the loss of the image of Hudson Valley life in the literary imagination. There are, of course, Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed*, Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor*, John Gardner's *Nickel Mountain*, William Kennedy's more urban novels of Albany, to name a random sampling of twentieth-century works set in the Valley. But no modern novelist, poet, or essayist has made so prominent and permanent a literary home in Hudson Valley country themes that his or her work is identified with the region, as writers have done elsewhere in the country. To this day, a century and a half later, Edgar Allan Poe's picturesque tale "Landor's Cottage" remains unsurpassed in its exquisite portrait of the mid-Hudson landscape.

The overwhelming attraction of the Valley has always been more visual than literary, though a school of painting is now long gone. The untimely death in the 1850s of young Andrew Jackson Downing, whose indigenous architectural style gave its name to the Wharton novel, was a great loss to horticultural and architectural life here. His partner Calvert Vaux remained a few years more at Newburgh to design homes, before bringing his feeling for the region's romantic landscape to the creation of Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park, which he conceived with Frederick Law Olmsted.

Even accounting for the great beauty and variety of nature, the absence of any local nature writer of national reputation since the death of John Burroughs in 1921 is unsettling to discover. Unlike New England, for example, the Hudson Valley has not developed an ongoing tradition of nature writing or travel writing, a puzzling condition, given the proximity of such a magnificent landscape close to New York, with its substantial population of writers. Indeed, a comprehensive cultural history of the Hudson Valley has yet to be written.

Here is a place where history is marked indelibly in the landscape. Ancient Indian arrowheads jostle with bottle caps in the dirty silence beneath wild meadows, old country barns are mirrored in satellite dishes, the ghosts of dying main streets haunt shopping malls that push profligacy and prophylactics. Everywhere the incongruent images pile up: meat and potatoes and Tex-Mex, dumpsites and country seats, prison farms and golf courses, high tech and

migrant workers, and here and there an occasional glimpse of “Hudson River Bracketed” through the urban detritus, ironically framing the alternating scene of wealth and welfare that winds its way through towns up and down the Valley. Endangered species of bald eagle and the short-nose sturgeon glide over and around the magenta nuisance of bountiful loosestrife, and the shad runs through toxic waste. Fireflies light up backyards like stage sets, the gypsy moths pitch their tents in our trees. Welcome to the New World! Scientists are just coming around to tell us there is no balance or order in nature, no original scene to which we can return, as if we hadn’t suspected that all along. Americans have always been busy “peopling solitudes,” to use Tocqueville’s majestic turn of phrase. Isn’t it time to rethink the myth of country life? The great estates nostalgia of the Hudson Valley shrouds its stubborn *pentimenti*, and disordered sublime.

Already by the middle of the nineteenth century mid-Hudson life was contrasted with the brutalities of New York City streets. In the 1850s the dandy Willis wrote about declining pastoralism in the face of what we now call “development” that changed the look of the land in the antebellum years. Farms have been going continually out of business, about 93,000 acres worth in the Hudson Valley—more than 13 percent of the farmland—between 1982 and 1987. Even with all the farmland remaining, 700,000 or so acres, it is sometimes easier to find fresh vegetables in the middle of Manhattan than in a small rural town upstate. Still, many of these towns have all the amenities associated with the contemporary good life: environmental awareness, artists and arts organizations, imported foods, historic restoration, service industries, ethnic restaurants, waste recycling . . . the list goes on and on. Now that IBM is the Valley’s largest private employer, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define the borders between urban and rural life.

In a rather strange reversal of history, the twentieth century has brought to the region its own “ruins,” the absence of which was much lamented by the romantic travelers of a hundred and fifty years ago. But our ruins do not evoke the passion of Medieval or Renaissance poetry, only the industrial and agricultural attrition of modern life. Kindly neglect, failing economy, disregard for historic buildings, lack of civic responsibility, wanton destruction are often to blame. I

believe in what the landscape historian J. B. Jackson calls “the necessity for ruins.” Our landscape is littered with these sorrows of architecture, but history is not a theme park.

I rarely take the Thompson Street hill down past the old cemetery to the center of Catskill without looking up at the distant hills where the Catskill Mountain House once grandly presided over the aesthetics of the picturesque, before it was torched into a burning forgetfulness nearly three decades ago by the New York State Conservation Department. The absence of the Mountain House is not merely the loss of a building but the end of its life as a metaphor that would have aged in the pages of our histories of culture, social life, and ecology, an image in which generations would continue to define who they are. When we neglect or destroy the things of our world, we silence chapters of our history, and without history society is bereft of the sense of itself as a people.

The urge for history, or more simply, rootedness and connection, grows more compelling as a source of nourishment in our world of computer menus and sound bites and fast food. Tasting the deep satisfying aromas of one’s own small world takes a little time.

What makes a Hudson Valley life different from any other life? It begins with knowing where you live. For me, local knowledge is the smell of a wet woods, the color of autumn, patterns of traffic and deer damage; it’s stores opening and closing in town, the revival of Kingston and Athens, the hard work of turning clay into garden soil; it’s following the year-to-year population of cicadas and Japanese beetles, measuring the violence of sudden storms, and the sour tears of acid rain. But most important, is to hear the first song of the oriole who nests each year in the silver maple, signaling the start of summertime, and then to follow little by little the buttery glaze of evening light that sweeps across my lawn.

The history of a place is written in the landscape as surely as in its books, and memory acts as a kind of dormant seed. Hudson Valley history, from its earliest entry into literature, has been depicted in a dreamy disremembering, the sleeping and waking theme that Irving introduced in his story of Rip Van Winkle. A century and a half later there was another awakening, this time less a literary than an ecological quake—the Storm King controversy, which threatened to

disrupt the sanctity of the Hudson Highlands with a hydroelectric plant Consolidated Edison planned to build there. The legal issues that grew out of the protests by local residents influenced environmental law, and put Hudson Valley conservation ethics at the forefront of a new ecological activism.

Today, there is a third awakening in the New York State Legislature's creation of the Hudson River Valley Greenway Council which has proposed a Hudson River Trail on both sides of the River from the Mohawk to Battery Park. Such a plan, involving twelve counties and eighty-two units of local government would surely generate a new social organization of cities, towns, and countrysides, sound land-use policies, joint public and private responsibilities, long-range planning by regional and local governments. The scope of this vision is unprecedented in a place where community independence has always superseded regional cooperation. Plans for the Catskill Interpretive Center have slowed since Governor Mario Cuomo's support of it a few years ago in his State of the State address. Earlier, Governor Nelson Rockefeller's Hudson Valley Commission (1966-1974) proved ineffectual in the long run, failing to meet the environmental challenge of the region's future. The Greenway Council plan, on the other hand, matches desire with vision and timeliness, complementing the Department of State's recent inventory of ten sites designated by the Coastal Resources Management Division as "scenic areas" of statewide significance, thus acknowledging their need for special protection. More recently, parts of Dutchess and Columbia counties have been declared the Hudson River National Historic Landmark District.

Up and down the Hudson, environmental groups, local residents, and planning commissions are joining together to accept the stewardship of the Hudson Valley's natural resources, and to influence greater public awareness of environmental issues. This is in contrast to the necessarily more local and site-specific battles Scenic Hudson fought in the 1960s and '70s on behalf of Storm King Mountain. Now everyone is getting involved.

More than anything else a new environmental ethos will bring the Hudson Valley into the twenty-first century, as a humanistic model for the people of the region, as a gift to themselves. A large population

reflecting diverse interests and pleasures can perhaps come together to create a contemporary Hudson Valley culture in new spatial and cultural configurations of the very landscape in which they live, work, raise their children, and at the end of the day, dream. When all else is done, it is in their plans for the future that societies distinguish themselves.

To be sure, the future is always rooted in a usable past. Knowledge of the world begins where each of us lives—in our body, in our town, in our country. Literature, too, is a home, the repository of memory in which fact, myth, and fantasy cohabit to engender the various histories by which an age measures its presence in time. Like any writer surveying a surrounding world, I looked to old books to describe the place where I live. In nearly four hundred years of this “decayed literature” that Thoreau claimed makes the best soil, I found a gathering of travelers, artists, inventors, writers, statesmen, scientists, and historians. Here is what they wrote of a place, and people who have dwelled there.

—BONNIE MARRANCA

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