

The art of medicine Landscape and health

"My soul hurt", writes Paul Theroux at the beginning of *The Happy Isles of Oceania*, "my heart was damaged. I was lonely. I did not want to see another big city. I wanted to be purified by water and wilderness." His marriage coming apart, the threat of cancer hanging over him, Theroux gives in to what must be an ancient impulse: he turns his back on the known and the civilised and strikes out into the wild. "Where there is wilderness", he writes a little later, "there is hope".

The link between health and certain kinds of natural landscape is interesting and strong. Although the technology of medicine is increasingly metropolitan, the search for health has often led out of the city and into nature. Where the city has been seen as a source of sickness and contagion, of confusion and disorder, the rhythms of the natural world have offered the hope of cure or relief.

It has been said that fewer than half of all ill people have an identifiable underlying pathology. They may feel ill, they may in fact be ill—perhaps the two amount to the same thing—but there is no recognisable organic dysfunction. Although we have to be wary of our terminology—it is easy to slip between illness, the subjective sense of being ill, and disease, the identifiable biochemical disorder—it would seem that much sickness lies beyond the reach of

orthodox medicine. Where biochemical interventions fail or fall short, where a literal cure is unavailable, we sometimes have recourse to symbolic means. Theroux's escape into wilderness, his search for purification, has obvious symbolic content. He sees his sickness as a case of impurity. The natural world will cleanse him and return him to a state of native health. Given the lack of an organic origin for so much of our sickness, this use of symbolic resources may not be entirely fanciful. Human beings inhabit a world of matter and of meaning, of fact and symbol. If our sickness is of symbolic origin it may be amenable to symbolic cure, or at least to symbolic amelioration. Psychoanalysis is only the most obvious, the most organised example of such a cure; homoeopathy may be another.

In our search for symbolic sources of healing, we have heavily mined the idea of the natural. Ideas of wellbeing and human wholeness have helped structure our idea of landscape itself. Take this habit of opposing the natural landscape to the urban. It extends at least as far back as the Greek pastoral poets of the 3rd century BC and has set up an enduring, if mutable, set of contrasts between two ways of life: one rooted in agriculture and the natural world, the other in the complex economic practices that have their origin in trade and finance and are located in the city.

Although the lived experience of the country and the city may have borne no real relation to this set of oppositions—poverty, ignorance, disease, and malnutrition were as much a part of rural life as fresh air and Edenic plenty—the symbolic link between health and natural landscapes has endured. There is clearly a moral dimension to this association. The word "sick" is often used to describe depraved or immoral behaviour and sickness has often been seen as an embodied punishment for sin. Moll, the harlot in Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*, falls apart physically as well as morally, the one a vivid visual counterpart to the other. This association is still with us. Despite the alleged neutrality of the state towards the life choices of its citizens, the question of personal responsibility for health is never far away. As Lord Darzi has said: "The NHS in the 21st century increasingly faces a disease burden determined by the choices people make: to smoke, drink excessively, eat poorly and not take enough exercise. Today, countless years of healthy life are lost as the result of these known behavioural or lifestyle factors."

The association between the city and immorality and therefore with illness is also an ancient one. The simple economics of pleasure concentrates the possibilities for vice in centres of population: Sodom and Gomorrah were both cities of the plain. The city also offers anonymity, and with



Bill Jacklin, *Walking Down Broadway* (1998)

it the possibility of escaping moral surveillance. Take one of the greatest of rural novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, one of the few novels, according to Virginia Woolf, written for grown-up people. Its moral order depends upon a network of cause and effect in which good and bad actions have inevitable consequences. This moral causality only works, however, in face-to-face communities, in the sort of human associations that the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies called *Gemeinschafts*, communities of shared values and relatively simple structures in which people know each other over time. It is difficult to imagine how such a moral order could survive transplantation to a city. Cities are just too impersonal, too anonymous, too full of possibilities for evading the slow-moving moral consequences of our actions.

The association of the city with immorality also owes something to the fact that the city, especially the capital city, has traditionally been the location of the Court. Intrigue, corruption, sophistication, and vice all dance attendance on the Crown. In the country, manners may be rude, and wits may not sparkle, but plain living and open air are more likely to keep us on the path of righteousness, both physically and morally.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing in the mid-18th century, bequeathed to modernity the most passionate and systematic account of the moral and physical superiority of the state of nature. "I dared to strip man's nature naked", he writes in *Confessions*, "to follow the evolution of those times and things which have disfigured him; I compared man-made man with natural man, and I discovered that his supposed improvement had generated all his miseries."

It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent and importance of Rousseau's influence. Sigmund Freud is indebted to him. Rousseau's fearlessly honest self-scrutiny in his *Confessions* lies close to the root of our developmental understanding of human personality, and Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* at times reads like the work of a disciple. Karl Marx can also feel like an heir. "Man is born free", wrote Rousseau, in words that could easily have come from Marx, "but everywhere lives in chains". Rousseau was a central figure in the Romantic onslaught on the Enlightenment—on the great 18th-century belief in reason and progress, in science and the perfectibility of mankind. For Rousseau, so-called progress was itself the problem, leading us further and further from our original nature: our civilisation is our sickness, and recovery lies in a return to our essential, our natural goodness.

The Romantic mistrust of science and progress, of the relentless march of western technological civilisation, can be felt in much contemporary unease about medicine. The sense that the sophisticated, invasive, and alienating technologies of medicine are somehow generative, or



Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Lark* (1887)

at least symptomatic of the very maladies they seek to cure, lies behind the appeal of much alternative and complementary therapy with its stress on "natural" remedies and non-invasive techniques. Against the forces of technology, are amassed the symbolic resources of nature, which seem to lie so close to the sources of health and, in the end, to the sources of life itself.

Modern western medicine is often criticised for mission creep. The net of sickness is cast ever wider, bringing more of our life into its purview. States that were once considered ordinary parts of human character or experience—shyness, heartbreak, inattentiveness—are gradually becoming pathologised, offered up for biochemical tweaking, seen less as facts to be lived with than disorders to be purged or overcome. And yet a reaction to the medicalisation of human experience is setting in, a reaction that is mining a deep stratum of symbolic resources linked to the idea of the natural. Against ideas of engineered human perfectibility is set the sheer, fertile, haphazard, and exuberant contingency of nature. Thinking about this reaction, it is beginning to look as if we are fearful that we might have paid a high price for our triumph over the natural landscape. We may have subdued the external world but the idea of nature has come back to haunt us, holding out the possibility of a wellbeing we fear we may have lost forever.

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