

# "Wetlands, Woodlots, and Native Prairies: Beauty in Leopold's Land Aesthetic,"

by Flo Leibowitz

with Loren Russell

Baird Callicott has referred to *A Sand County Almanac* as an aesthetics of the unspectacular. That's a very apt characterization. This book isn't about what there is to appreciate in snowy mountains, stormy seas, and rugged desert cliffs. It's about what there is to appreciate in plainer places and things: like marshlands and bogs, and the woods on the edge of the farm, and the plants and grasses that sometimes get dismissed as "weeds" or "brush". In that way, it's an aesthetics of overlooked sources of beauty, and what there is to look for when we actually take the trouble to go and look.

The essay Leopold called "The Marshland Elegy" is full of the kinds of observations that make Leopold's aesthetics of nature what it is. It's dawn, there's a wind on a marsh, and the fog is rolling in. Since this is a marsh in the midwest, it's rolling over tamarack trees. As the sun comes up, the sandhill cranes come in to feed.

A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place...The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake. The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history. These peats are the compressed remains of the mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet. An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host may live and breed and die.

To what end? Out of the bog, a crane, gulping some luckless frog, springs his ungainly hulk into the air.

Ever since ancient times, philosophers have connected beauty to some idea of order. For example, Plotinus thought beauty lay in symmetry, Hutcheson thought that a beautiful object combines two qualities: uniformity with variety. Other philosophers have seen beauty in a form that follows function. One of the reasons there are different definitions of beauty in the history of western thought, is that there are a lot of different ideas about what counts as orderedness.

In fact, one reason that beauty symbolized truth for classical thought is that both truth and beauty were given a connection to order: a beautiful object has an orderly design to it, and so does a true philosophy (in the sense that its component parts should fit together in an orderly and logical manner. That's one reason that appreciating beauty was supposed to be practice for appreciating truth. (that's right,

cultivating your sense of beauty was supposed to make you a better philosopher.)

Leopold's ideas about natural beauty are very much in keeping with this classical connection of order to beauty. What's different here, though, is the kind of order that makes for beauty in Leopold's thinking: it's order as an ecologist or natural historian sees it. It's the complexity of the marsh, it's the diversity of its species, it's the interactions and connections between the species (it's a whole biological community that you appreciate), and it's the ancient roots of the marsh community that makes it so noble and beautiful. ("Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of early history.") Here, natural beauty isn't mainly a symbol of human freedom, as it sometimes was for Schiller and other Romantic philosophers. Beauty reflects something in natural systems themselves, the interconnections that characterize a biological community and the landscape it inhabits. Essentially, Leopold's project is to aestheticize ecological and evolutionary parameters. (This sense of things shows up in an interesting way in the rhetoric of "Marshland Elegy," where we aren't to look at the crane only. The crane is used like the narrator in a Michener novel, linking all the actors in a specific place through time.)

This isn't just an idea about what you observe in nature, it goes along with an idea about how you do the appreciating. In Leopold, the enjoyment of nature depends on having a knowledge of Nature. Philosophers today call this a cognitive aesthetics of nature. It's not as if the sensory or emotional parts go away -- it's that they're informed by rationalistic elements. To Leopold, these elements make the experience less provincial, and more satisfying. For this reason, there are several places in Leopold's writings that compare the appreciation of Nature to the appreciation of art. Environmental education, to him, is like art education: it refines the taste, and without it what you see is superficial -- you only see the pretty, not the beautiful, which takes more insight.

There are other contrasting traditions in which the appreciation of Nature doesn't depend so heavily on scientific consciousness, and is more visceral or emotional. For example, you can stand by a waterfall and appreciate its grandeur, without knowing much about the hydromechanics of the thing. You can walk through piles of leaves and appreciate the sense of restfulness, or play, or just enjoy their sound. Some people may actually prefer this way. They might think, "You're killing the pleasure with this cognitive stuff." These attitudes may leave more room for a sense of mystery, or so their proponents maintain (e.g., Stan Godlovich in "Icebreakers"). Leopold's pleasures in Nature begin here, but then go farther; they are supposed to be deeper for the knowledge behind them.

The emotional and the visceral were an important part of the Romantic understanding of the sublime. The sublime refers to the spectacular parts and potentially terrifying parts of Nature. It gave you pleasure through an emotional thrill,

and the more spectacular Nature was, the bigger the thrill you got. Perhaps trying to deepen this X-Games-like experience, Kant added an intellectual component to this kind of pleasure. He thought that the sublime brought our attention around to the inexhaustible capacity of the human mind to try and make sense of things. So ultimately the pleasure we take is about us, not nature. That's very different from the intellectual basis that Leopold gives to the aesthetics of the unspectacular.

Leopold commentators in philosophy like to contrast nature with art more than they compare it. For example, many art objects are appreciated in isolation from the background on which they are displayed. You're supposed to look at the marble in the sculpture of David, not the combination it makes with the marble in the floor. Sometimes we look at driftwood and shells and stones that way, and flowers in a flower show in the way we look at sculpture. In Leopold's philosophy, though, it's deeper to appreciate a natural object in its environment, not in isolation from it. What we do with the driftwood is not the kind of appreciation *A Sand County Almanac* is about.

The appreciation of the picturesque, which does compare nature to art, is sometimes made the villain of the history of taste by Leopold commentators. Callicott, for example, contrasts its way of appreciating nature with the one that Leopold is endorsing. Usually, the complaint is that this was a tradition in which a real landscape was appreciated merely as scenery, as if it were a painting and not a natural formation. It's all true. It became a practice in England to walk in the country with a piece of tinted glass that compressed the landscape around you a little bit, so that when you looked through it, the scene looked like the French and Italian landscape paintings in fashion at the time. The picturesque was also associated with the romanticizing of loss. Ruins were romantic because of the absent nobility of which they reminded us. You wouldn't restore a romantic ruin to its former glory; that would spoil the whole thing! By contrast, Leopold is out to preserve the natural nobility he values (like the sandhill crane). He isn't interested in mourning over it and being satisfied with the memories.



A romantic ruin: Kenilworth Castle, Kenilworth, England (near Coventry).

But that isn't the whole story of the picturesque. It's important to remember why these paintings were so loved, and it's because they presented the abstract ideal of human society in harmony with Nature. They didn't have it in reality, so they looked for glimpses of it in art. (SLIDE 2: A typical painting of this type: "A Landscape," by Claude Lorraine, 1600-1682; painted about 1650.) This is a value that's part of Leopold's thinking, too. He isn't presenting a deep ecology. He isn't out there asking for a buffalo commons in the Dakotas. He's out there hoping that the farmer will value the native grasses in the hedgerows as much as he appreciated his crops.

In classical philosophy there was a connection between beauty and goodness. In *A Sand County Almanac*, there's a connection between the land aesthetic and the land ethic. Here's an example of the connection, from "An Illinois Bus Ride": Everything on this farm spells money in the bank. The farmstead abounds in fresh paint...Even the pigs look solvent.

The old oaks in the woodlot are without issue. There are no hedges, brush patches, fencerows, or other signs of shiftless husbandry. The cornfield has fat steers, but probably no quail. The fences stand on narrow ribbons of sod, whoever plowed that close to barbed wire must have been saying, "Waste not, want not".

In the creek-bottom pasture, flood trash is high in the bushes. The creek banks are raw, chunks of Illinois have sloughed off and moved seaward. ... Just who is solvent? For how long?"

Leopold implies that this farm is attractive by conventional standards, but it's a false beauty. Because it isn't based on sustainable practices. Leopold sees a disharmony here, between beauty and the deeper value behind it, sort of like the classical philosophers did when the outer beauty of a person hid an ugly inner character. And it disturbs him.

But Leopold sees a ray of hope. Do you remember the story in "Natural History" about the two farmers planting tamaracks in a strip of their farms that was once a tamarack swamp? The tamaracks that were there once are gone. This tree is useless, either for firewood or timber. What is the motive of the farmers? Leopold says:

"They have caught the idea that there is pleasure to be had in raising wild crops as well as tame ones....Perhaps they wish for their land what we all wish for our children -- not only a chance to make a living but also a chance to express and develop a rich and varied assortment of capabilities....I talk here about the pleasure to be had in wild things..."

The pleasure Leopold refers to is an aesthetic one. And he thinks this pleasure may motivate people to preserve wild nature, even where other motivations don't. To him, cultivated taste in wild nature isn't just for personal enjoyment. He thinks it's necessary to save the wild parts of nature that are disappearing.

There's one more connection to the picturesque to be mentioned. Early in the 18<sup>th</sup> c., there arose the fashion of turning the outlying areas of an estate into landscape parks. These had big lawns and artificial lakes and rolling hills...and no people. There was a designer who became famous for this, named Lancelot Brown. His competitor was Humphry Repton, whose pitch to his clients was that he could design your, estate with, say, your mill or granary artfully on display. The tenants would thrive. Your sensitivity would be on display for all to see. He called this a moral landscape. It wasn't a figure of speech. It was a real plan for real property. This is where the figure of speech we use today may have come from. I mention this because Leopold seems to look at the tamarack swamp at the edge of the farm is something like the same way. It's a good work that also looks beautiful...once you learn how to appreciate it. Leopold's ideals bear a rough similarity to Repton's ideals, in this way.