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Terra Incognita

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Monument Valley

Every landscape has a story to tell.

The red rock spires and mesas of Monument Valley know much about water. At first glance you wouldn't think so, for there is no water here. But this desert rock knows much about oceans. Oceans of 250 million years ago. Oceans that advanced and retreated across the land. Oceans filling with sediment from distant mountains. Oceans filled with life. The spires and mesas know something about the origin of humans.

Yet when people come to Monument Valley, they usually see a different story. They see a team of horses pulling a stagecoach, tiny amidst the spires. They see the passengers clutching their guns, fearful of Indian attack. They see a grand horizon glowing not only with sunset, but with freedom and opportunity. They see a drama in which freedom and opportunity can be won only by the tough and brave, who must triumph over wildness, the wildness of the land, the wildness of the Indians who embodied the wildness of the land, and the wildness of the whites who would abuse that freedom for unfair gain over other whites. The red rock spires and mesas are simply the stage on which this drama is enacted.

It was this drama, this dream of opportunity, that sent Harry Goulding heading west in 1938. He owned the trading post in Monument Valley and was barely enduring the great depression. He believed his poverty would end if he could get tourists to discover Monument Valley, which was far from railways or highways. He took his meager savings and his photos of Monument Valley and drove to Hollywood. Against many closed doors he persisted until he grabbed the attention of director John Ford. Before long, Ford was filming *Stagecoach* in Monument Valley. Though the movie depicted a long journey across the West, Ford was actually sending the stagecoach in circles, casting the spires from different angles. Moviegoers were left thinking the whole West looked like Monument Valley. As many more westerns were filmed there, Monument Valley came to epitomize the West. Since the West itself epitomized a national mythology, Monument Valley became a symbol of that mythology.

Perhaps every tribe and nation has a story that distinguishes it from others. Often that story is associated with a particular landscape. We can't think of the ancient Egyptians or their religion without thinking of the Nile. The ancient Greeks are indissoluble from images of Olympic gods and Aegean voyages.

For several centuries, no national mythology has fascinated the world as much as the American mythology. After dozens of generations in which feudalism had seemed the inevitable fate of European peasants, America allowed them to dream of alternatives. America was exciting because it had no past to limit the future. Yet societies need a shared past to define and unite them. Americans shared only the grandeur of their landscape, and their quest to pioneer it. Without pyramids or palaces to serve as symbols of national grandeur, we enlisted our natural wonders. Without a mythology or long history to give us identity, we enlisted our brief pioneering history, making demigods from those who broke a new trail or shot the biggest game. These two elements of

national identity were most satisfying when they could be combined into images of pioneers in the grandest landscapes. Far more Americans found prosperity plowing farms in the Ohio Valley than herding cows in the Southwest, yet it is the image of the cowboy beneath a mesa or mountain that fascinates Americans. When the frontier had turned into suburban Los Angeles and our mythology of limitless mobility seemed to be mocking us, we clung to this image more fiercely than ever, or tried to transform it into an astronaut conquering a desert moon.

Monument Valley is but one nub of the Colorado Plateau, which is perhaps the most extraordinary geological realm on Earth. Nowhere else has a sedimentary record so large in area and time been so well preserved and then carved into amazing shapes. The Colorado Plateau itself is but one section of the most geologically diverse region on Earth, which very recently has become the western part of a nation. Compared to rock, nations do not endure long. Some nations appear and disappear in the span of a single human lifetime. A nation that manages to endure a thousand years is considered ancient. It is ironic that the youngest of nations should enact its national story on the oldest of geological stages. It is a measure of the power of national stories that a few decades of human activity should so thoroughly outweigh hundreds of millions of years of geologic activity in defining a landscape. The very names of the landmarks are those of pioneer heroes. In Monument Valley, Mitchell Butte and Merrick Butte immortalize two prospectors who were killed by Indians. Throughout the West, names of mountains and valley and rivers invoke not themselves but humans who had viewed them only as foes or sources of wealth. At Mount Rushmore, the ultimate fusion/confusion of national and geological stories, the people and the granite stare at one another in mutual unrecognition. Little boys in east-coast cities already know the national myth like an unconscious archetype and dream of galloping into sunset amongst red rock skyscrapers.

Sedona

The mesas and canyons around Sedona know much about time. They know of the time that erodes mountain ranges and piles up sand grain by grain into thousands of feet of rock, only to erode that rock away grain by grain. They know about the earth forces that open up faults and lift up plateaus and pour out lava. They know how to stand quietly as the life upon them frets and vanishes. They have watched innumerable generations of birds and reptiles and mammals come and go. They have watched as whole species evolved and disappeared.

But many of the people you find roaming the Sedona mesas and canyons experience something else. One person stands in a trance, receiving messages from a native American shaman who lived here a thousand years ago. Someone else stares into the sky, receiving messages from extraterrestrial hovering over the mesa in a flying saucer. Still someone else, in the enhancing psychic energy flowing from the rock, is suddenly remembering that in a previous life he was a high priest in Atlantis. Another person feels herself being cured of a terminal illness. Yet another person is holding out her giant quartz crystal to charge it with psychic energy to take home. Someone else feels himself shifting into the higher vibrational energy plane where the spirits live. Yet another person feels the astrological currents strengthening as Earth prepares to enter the Age of Aquarius. A small circle of people repeat a chant to encourage the complete transformation of global society, the imminence of which is signaled by headlines about earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions.

There is nothing new about humans finding power in the earth. For most of human history, it was the earth and its varied spirits that created us, sustained our lives, or punished us for misbehaviour. But when we created monotheistic gods, we stripped the earth of its magic and left it God's material creation. Earth became a mere stage for a moral drama soon to be completed, allowing earth to be discarded. Ironically, stripping the earth of magic encouraged the scientific worldview, which eventually undermined

confidence in the monotheistic god. Science returned credit for our creation to the earth and the cosmos, to forces more ancient, strange, and creative than those any tribal shaman had imagined. Yet science gave those forces no authority to grant humans meaning or moral directives. As science encroached upon the authority of God, the Romantics responded by locating God's authority in nature, particularly in sublime landscapes. If nature was approached with emotional rapport rather than rationality, God would be felt.

These intellectual currents converged on the red rocks of Sedona. It could have been elsewhere, but this was a suitably sublime landscape, and someone happened to report feeling energy coming out of the rocks. Soon, pilgrims were coming from all over the world to experience the vortexes, which gained authenticity by sounding just like the strange, vague energies described by physics. The pilgrims shared, if only vaguely, the same project of restoring to the earth the authority of creation. But their specific agendas varied wildly. Some wanted to live in a native American universe, some in the universes of eastern religions, and some in a universe of wise extraterrestrials. Most wanted the earth to give them detailed, personalized instructions on how to live. Many pilgrims had apocalyptic visions of the earth as an old testament god inflicting floods on unbelievers. Perhaps, in an age of ecological crisis, it is good that we learn respect for the earth. Certainly the earth has power. But perhaps to do justice to the earth as our creator, we need to believe in the slow eons in which sand grains turned into mesas, and in which billions of days of living turned into new forms of life. Perhaps to do justice to the possibility of extinction, we need to believe that the mesas stood there watching, in utter indifference, as species had their day of egotism and then vanished forever.

Grand Canyon

Grand Canyon knows much about creation. It knows that human faces are but the latest face of the creative powers that have appeared as millions of animal faces and plant bodies and clouds and rivers and rocks, and before that, as nebulae and stars. The canyon rocks can tell all about the flowing of mountains and rivers and oceans and life into this moment when they have paused, perhaps to linger, as the first face that can show recognition of that changing story.

But the canyon's story is difficult for people to recognize. Visitors on the rim have trouble just judging the canyon's physical scale. The first whites to discover the canyon supposed that the Colorado River was a creek a few feet wide. Today's visitors debate whether a line they can see in the canyon is a road or a foot trail. Confronted by the canyon's unapproachable depths and shapes, visitors are delighted to discover something with a familiar human scale. They spot the footbridge across the river. They spot the buildings at Phantom Ranch and study them a long while. They study a raft on the river, and a helicopter in the air. They take photos not to prove the canyon, but the bridge or raft. They find these objects reassuring, not because they provide a measuring stick to the true scale of the canyon, but because they prove the canyon has a human presence and meaning. The canyon depths do not threaten human significance, but prove we can go anywhere we please.

At night, above the canyon, looms another landscape that has not been seen for itself. The stars have been forced to pose as familiar personalities and objects, a religious landscape we still see thousands of years after the deaths of the civilizations that inscribed in the constellations their story of creation. Compared to the ancient Babylonians or Egyptians or Greeks, America is a very young civilization. Until recently we have been too preoccupied with settling the land to worry about interpreting it. Americans don't need to impose a creation story on the sky, for we have been given a landscape that proclaims it beautifully.

Perhaps it is a sign of our maturing that we have moved from seeing the land the way cowboys saw it a hundred years ago to seeing it the way native Americans saw it three

hundred years ago. We are at least seeing beyond our national story. But perhaps to do justice to the land, we need to see it the way the rocks saw it millions of years ago. Perhaps to do justice to ourselves, we need to see ourselves the way the Grand Canyon would see us.

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