Denis Wood

The Spell of the Land

DENIS WOOD was born in 1945 in Cleveland, Ohio. He passed his childhood along the Cuyahoga River, and his youth in Cleveland Heights. He received a B.A. in English from Western Reserve University, and completed an M.A. and a Ph.D. in geography at Clark University. He taught in an alternative high school in Worcester, Massachusetts, until being invited to apply for the position he currently holds, in which as a professor of design he teaches environmental psychology and landscape history at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Professor Wood has published extensively on a variety of topics that include cartography, children's behavior, and environmental psychology, but his primary concern is meaning in the environment at any scale. His books include *World Geography Today* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976; 1980), with Saul Israel and Douglas Johnson, *The Power of Maps* (Guilford, 1992), and *Home Rules* (Johns Hopkins, 1994), with Robert J. Beck. He also curated *The Power of Maps* show at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

THE LANDSCAPE comes at us from every direction. It comes at us in *every way*. It rushes at our eyes, hurtling toward the retina . . . at the speed of light. It batters at our ears, rattling down our ear canal . . . at the speed of sound. Inhale, and within a quarter of a second the landscape is at our olfactory bulb. Sometimes we have the feeling that the landscape is . . . *out there,* but it is not; it is in our eyes and ears, up our nose and down our throat. It rubs our feet and caresses our cheeks. When things are just right, it plays with our hair, tickles the back of our neck, sends shivers running up and down our spine. It is not out there anywhere; it is right here, in our face.

Unless it's just a word. If *landscape* is just a word—just an idea—then it's some*where* else, on someone else's tongue, maybe, but not necessarily on ours. If it's just an idea, it's some*thing* else, not a thing with characteristics of its own, but . . . a notion, a concept, an intention maybe, maybe no more than a vague supposition, something, at any rate, one can toss around without worrying about breaking, a bunch of lines on a sheet of paper one can move around at will, and see (!) the paper can be crumpled up and nothing's the worse—or the better—for it. But maybe this one doesn't get thrown away, but instead is sent out to direct the behavior of a bulldozer. And suddenly it's no longer just an idea, it's the noise of crashing trees and subsoil slipping downslope into a creek and, when we walk across what used to be a forest floor, the red muck sticks to our boots and we don't come back for years. Or we drive across it but at sixty miles an hour, and in what is now a divided highway we fail to recognize the shivering grove thick with the must of rotting wood and quick with bird song where the loosestrife and sorrel and chokeberry grew. It is easy to miss this. It is easy to relegate to abstractions the suffering and death this landscape's transformation meant when we see it from the inside of an air-conditioned car with *All Things Considered* or *Morning Edition* on the radio. What birds?

What branches? What woods? It was never anything but fine lines on white paper in the first place.

But sooner or later we have to stop the car and get out: instantly the landscape is in our face again. The concrete is hard beneath our feet and the noise of the traffic hurts our ears. The fumes from the gas pumps send sharp signals to our brain. And what's this? Something in our eye? A piece of highway grit to scratch our cornea? The regret is instantaneous. With our hand on the nozzle we wonder, How did it come to this?

I can hear individual insects this late in the year, and pick out the rattle of individual leaves where the dying kudzu clatters in the breeze. I want to say it is quiet here—simply because I can hear no cars—or worse, the poisonous whine of power saw and motorbike—but, of course, it is not quiet, not if what I want to mean by that is silent. In the scrubby second-growth woods across the pond a pair of crows fuss at each other, the muted stridor of a cricket shivers from the silvery grasses, at intervals I hear the *ribbet-ribbet* of a frog and the echoing cry of a bird on the wing. Fall is more apparent here than in the city, and though the slope of the other side of the valley is still more green than anything else, it is a wayworn green tattered with russets and rusts and coppers and here and there a handful of the palest gold. The sky is a dusty blue, softening to chalk along the southern horizon, and the thin, high wisps of cirrus are more down than feather. The sun is warm but not hot. A fly has found me. On the wing of its buzzing drone come snatches of music from the radio of a fisherman somewhere out of sight . . .

I wake up with a start, my forehead clammy with a drying sweat. The sun has slipped west and the shadows have lengthened. A landscape of hues is modulating into one of shades. My eyes follow the track that brought me here around the knee of this thigh of land. Is it the wind in the weeds that lulled me to sleep, that even now sings to reclaim me? Or is it another spell the land has laid on me? Sun besotted . . . it is hard to say.

Three cyclists slip by me, bright in their lycra on their shiny new machines. This wakes me up! I am not alone out here with the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees. In fact, I'm a little dubious about those flowers. Picking my way in their direction I soon enough make out what they're about—surveyors' flags, marching like dutiful teenagers to a drillmaster's beat, a long straight line of them, down-slope and up, the only thing in view wholly unresponsive to the curves carved by wind and rain. They are not hard to follow. The surveyors have hacked their way through copse and covert, pounding their stakes into the ground

every fifty or sixty feet, down and up gully, into and through patches of bramble, out and across an ancient field. There, at the end of a red clay scar squats the great yellow dozer like the bully in a schoolyard. Quiescent this weekend afternoon it nonetheless stews in its reek of gasoline and oil. I don't need to ask what it's doing here—its path is clear enough. Others have preceded me along this walk and the spell the land has laid on them is other than the one it's laid on me.

This is the puzzle about the spell of the land, the way looking out, as at this moment I am, from a height of land—taking in glades green-gold in the westering sun that invests with shadows the wood-clad slopes and coaxes powerful volumes from a landscape flatter beneath a higher sun—*one* can be bewitched by the incantation of light and land, but *another* animated to a vision of homes and shopping malls, speculative office spaces and profit centers. Or, in this case . . . university campuses, for this place whose charms I cannot help but sing (so strong is the spell) is the hundreds of acres of woods, old fields, dusty lanes, and water—calm now and dark at day's ending—on which (so strong is the spell) a state university is raising its Centennial Campus.

To spin a spell, the land must speak. And indeed we talk as though it could. "This piece of land just cries out to be a residential subdivision," one says, as another might say, "It just wants to be left alone." I am writing this with my back against a great old pine. I stand and put my arms around it. Only if another comes with me and we hold hands can we embrace the tree. I wonder what *it* wants to be? A kitchen cabinet? Woodchips for a suburban yard? The "Arts and Leisure" section of the Sunday paper? Or would it like to be left alone? Up close the bark is a skin of layered plates, as topographically varied as the land it springs from, seamed and cracked and drilled by insects, a shifting skein of grays, of mouse and mole, of lead and charcoal, of wet slate and dried dill seed, of cook-smoke curling in the air . . . With my mouth close to the bark I ask the tree, "What *do* you want to be?" My words are lost in the litter of leaf and needle, twig and bough. I am startled to notice how noisy the insects have gotten. From a nearby tree comes a bustle of wings flapping into flight. Suddenly it's chilly. Again I ask the tree, "What *do* you want to be?" Straining to catch its answer I hear only the sound of a frog breaking the surface of the pond. On the farther side, I watch a crow settle on a withered branch.

The land does not speak. Like an autistic child it cannot *say* what it wants. It can only be. But if it cannot speak, then it can *cast* no spell, it can *recite* no incantation. The bewitchment I ex-

perience—mouth agape, empty-headed in the presence of this singular moment—is something *I* create, is something *I* construct, is a consequence of *my* way of looking, of *my* way of hearing, of *my* way of reading, even as that of the university is a consequence of *its* way of seeing. That there are at least two responses to the being of this land here in Raleigh in the latter part of the twentieth century is evident from no more than the fact that, where I stand in this roseate dusk, looking back across the valley of Walnut Creek at a fringe of birches burnished to an improbable bronze by a final finger of sunlight, is, on the university plans, the apron of the vast parking lot required by the huge number of cars it will take to serve the enormous campus to be constructed here: on the one hand, a vision of light on the land; on the other, a vision of concrete.

Two constructions of reality, two construals, two readings. But this is not, of course, how they are present in us. I do not feel, in what seems to me to be the crying of the land for surcease, *any* role of my own. It seems to me that the land *really* does cry, that these hills, these grasses, that animal which in the dusk I can only hear scuttling off, have demanded that I recognize in them an existence not utterly remote from my own, that I acknowledge in their individual and collective being the claims I expect others to recognize in me. The land cannot speak—in fact, the very word bespeaks no more than a construct, an abstraction of language, not a thing in the world—but it takes no effort of imagination to ascribe to the land precisely as we ascribe to the collective voice of people, a voice that is the collective voice of everything that lives here.

We have just held an election. In it each individual who voted raised an individual voice, but what was heard at day's end was none of these, but all of them taken together. We do this because we do not live as individuals, but as a community in which the life of any is predicated on the life of all. In the complicated, deeply interwoven, thickly matted world of the present this is *evidently* not a poetic conceit. We literally subsist as nodes in a network through which flows, in a kind of human-made "ecosystem," everything we eat and drink, wear and use. Any break in the web is felt everywhere. It is a whole, disaggregatable only in theory. As is the land. What tree, given the possibility of pleading for its life, would plead for its alone? It lives in an ecological reciprocity with other trees of its own species, with trees of other species, with insects and birds, fungi and moss, fire and wind. *This* is its life, as our life is one of ecological reciprocity with other humans, if as well with plants and animals. It is this whole net-

work of life that we call *the land,* this entire web that is responsible for the land's characteristic forms and colors, scales and dimensions, those fugitive *consequential* aspects whose whole is what moves us. The topography stripped bare to the rock is not the land. The land is a composite of those strong forms as they have come into being through the agency of wind and water, sparrow and squirrel, beech and birch. And people. And it is this whole which, when it is acknowledged to be as alive as I am, seems to reach out to me, to lay on me a claim that I may recognize as a love of the land, or as a spell the land has laid on me.

But if the spell I feel is a consequence of the recognition of the land as a *subject,* then from where comes the spell that is experienced by the developer? I have never looked out over the land and where I have seen one thing envisioned another, so I cannot speak to the nature of the experience of those who do so. I have been with them, however, in the grips of such visions, and in their eager, enthusiastic voices I have heard the symptoms of a spell, as though they, too, had an experience in which the land outside themselves seemed to provoke the vision, as though it really did cry out, "Build me! Pave me! Raise me to my best and highest use!" At any rate, I must provisionally give them the benefit of this doubt—that, when they claim to *see* these things latent in the land, they are not lying. But in what conception of the land could such a view be founded? Certainly it must be one which recognizes the land as an *object,* that appreciates the land as a thing void of subjectivity. We understand this relationship only too clearly in the human domain. For example, one man can say of a woman that evidently she wants to be taken home . . . if not had right there on the pool table. It is unnecessary to read the transcriptions of rape trials to know this. It is sufficient to listen to the bragging at the bar or the loose talk of teenage boys. But another can ask, "How can you tell?" "She is acting in a provocative fashion," the first says. "Look at the way she sits with her legs exposed, she's just . . . asking for it!" The double entendre in that final phrase is seldom noted, but isn't this exactly what the developer asserts of the land, that it, too, is *asking for it,* that it, too, *wants* to be raised to its highest and best use?

Needs to be developed . . . needs to be laid, what's the difference? There isn't any. The victim in the rape is never allowed to speak (she has no subjectivity). Her objectifier reads her and constructs for her a social role . . . without her participation. But this is what happens in land development, only here we do not acknowledge that the land even has a voice. There is nothing metaphoric about . . . *the rape of the land.*

It has to be *rape*. I cannot see how it could be otherwise. I have come back again a week later. Again I top the ridge and look out across the valley of Walnut Creek. The leaves turned late this year, but today they are clots of color scrubbed across a dusty sky. October's moon has bloomed and faded, yet in the daytime the warmth of summer lingers on. I follow the track along the ridge, look out across the former fields toward the town of Garner. Water tanks punctuate the line of the horizon and, if your eyes are good, so do the radio towers, more evident at night to mine that are no longer what they were. The grasses and silvered goldenrod are tall enough to hide this view in places, and where the track plunges through them it has another magic. Among the graying skeletons, the purple fuchsia of the pokeberry does its awkward scarecrow dance. On the stalks of summer, Queen Anne's lace sports weathered stars that could be fossils of the aerial trails traced out by fireworks. Here a vine of honeysuckle still holds its bloom, though when I suck for sugar at its tip I find it's fled. The smell is close and husky—sweet—yet sour with the scent of fermentation. Around a bend, and the view opens up again, as the dusty track sinks to the level of the dam before the pond. Today the crows are having an aerial battle—or is it play? A hawk soars on an updraft. Above it the passage of two planes has sketched in the soft azure an evanescent X. Even in this dying time the land is lovely and it is hard for me to imagine that any who took the time to know it wouldn't love it, too. The leathery red-pumpkin yellow of a young maple with the sun on its leaves stops me in my tracks. The sunny side of an oak leaf is livid, yet the underside is green. Rubbing my finger across its surface I reflect on the fact that I know many of those who developed the Centennial Campus master plan. Some were once students of mine. I have to believe they walked these ridges and roads, sketched these views and vistas. They are sensitive people, attuned to the spirit of place that has moved me, experts at catching it on film and paper. How could they think to plot along the shore of the lake where now I walk in the luminescent shade of a grove of pines a hotel and convention center, unless they had resolutely refused to acknowledge the subjectivity of this land, had stripped it of its coat of root and branch, sod and bird song, reduced it to an object, a thing—though really there is no word in our language for this object solely of our will—refused, finally, the gifts of light and life, must and pungence?

What are the costs of this refusal? There are two of them. The land itself is scorched. Before the bulldozer wildlife flees as from a forest fire. Trees are trashed. That reciprocity of life we call the soil is scraped to a dump. What is the difference between

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Sherman's March and that of the developers? But if the land is scorched, so is the subject that scorches it. Is this not what we have been finally forced to acknowledge: that it is not the slave alone who is subverted from his or her humanity; that it is not alone the black whose personhood is perverted by racism; that it is not alone the victim of abuse who is dehumanized; the raped who is raped; but as well the slaveholder, the racist, the abuser, the rapist? And why? Because a *subject* is not simply the locus of a feeling sentience, but the ability to recognize and respond to other subjects. Only to the extent that we do so can our own claims to subjectivity be real. There is here for me no question of philosophy, or even psychology. The reciprocity on which I want to insist is not ethical. It is *ecological*. We are *not* alone, we do not live alone, we do not live as individuals, but as a community; that is, as a network of mutually cognizant subjectivities, a network that simply has to include—because we cannot live *at all* without them—the plants and animals in whose collective reciprocal being we recognize the land.

To objectify any part of the world is therefore to diminish one's own subjectivity, to reduce the extent to which one can be characterized as a subject, that is, as a being capable of feeling thought or thoughtful feeling. One who objectifies is thereby rendered an object. One who brutalizes is thereby brutalized . . . coarsened, hardened, exactly as the flexible, complex, reciprocally living system we call the soil is brutalized, coarsened, and hardened by the blade of the yellow dozer. The land is scorched. The soul is scorched.

I speak generally, almost hypothetically. But we have scorched the land and scorched ourselves already. This is not some parlous future, or a fate reserved to a heinous few. We are already as brutal, coarsened, and hard as the world we have made of concrete and steel, oil and coal. *Poisonous whine* I wrote a few pages back, and I'll bet the phrase was taken metaphorically. But I also meant it for the literal truth it happens to be. The carbon monoxide and heavy metals these stupid, needless machines create are physically toxic. Lock yourself with either of them in a closed space for a few minutes and you *will* die. The carbon dioxides and nitrous oxides are subtler in their effects—slower acting—but in the long run just as deadly. Why rehearse the chilling catalogue? It is a litany that loses force with repetition as we are daily chanted into a black despair. Awareness of these poisons is commonplace today when there is no place on the hundreds of acres of this former farm to escape the stench and stutter of the internal combustion engine. But it is not our lungs alone that scar, but our eyes and

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ears, our nose and mouth; and indeed the metaphoric quality of poisonous whine pointed toward death not by asphyxiation but by racket, by stink, and by incandescent light.

I have walked these paths at night for years, mourning as little by little the darkness shriveled before the lamp, as the refulgence of the star-struck sky dwindled in the glare of the incandescent bulb. I have watched as I-40 slit its way across the farm, seen how the valley, dark once after dusk but for the fugitive glow of Garner, became illuminated by its flickering but continuous candescent ribbon. No longer do the radio towers semaphore their presence by winking a lazy red, but by blinking a phosphorescent white. The scale of time has changed: from rare, to regular, to all the time. The lights around the farm down Avent Ferry, Trailwood, and across I-40 on Saturn and Sierra, have grown more numerous and they are brighter now as well. There is no longer much dark here, and even on this night—sharp and clean in the wake of a hard cold front—it is hard to make out more than Orion and the Dipper, the red eye of Taurus, the bright collar of the Dog. What is the difference between the loss of a species and that of a star? Our world is equally impoverished. But to lose the star field that sprouts like weeds on a dome of night that reaches down to rake the Piedmont and strike the hills until everything rings like the inside of a bell . . . is to lose the universe. It is a loss that coarsens us. What can the world be without the stars? What will the earth be without the sky? What will the day be without the night? We have lost the night. We are losing the sky. Without the stars, can we save the world?

Its *music* is already muffled. It is not too bad today. The wind in the trees is a shifting pleasure and the intermittent warble, click, twitter, and trill are sharp delights. But all around is the steady 50-cycle thrumming of the traffic that batters its way around the Beltline, the irregular but frequent roar of the jet, the thrumping of the helicopter, the rare—and comparatively pleasant—hum of the single-engine plane. Here comes one now. The pitch drops as it approaches. Despite the distance I can *feel* the pounding as if against the insides of my eyeballs. Why knock the kids' boom boxes and bass-drunk pickup trucks? Their parents jetting from here to there have wreaked more havoc, and the land is deafened with their dimming. Once, the sounds each animal made crafted a special place in the acoustical ecology of the land, each sound slotted uniquely into its own aural niche. Our own human voice seems to have been shaped by the acoustical openings available to us in the "soundscape" of the African savannas. To fill these niches

up, to drown them in our own sound making—as the water backed up behind a dam drowns the land it covers—is to abuse—aurally—the fox and the opossum, the junco and the quail. To lose most of the music we grew up with as a species—the bird song and animal chatter, the pattering of leaves sifting through the fingers of the trees, the lisping, gurgling, hissing, burbling of the water slipping through the land—is to deaden ourselves. When we slip off to the beach or into the woods, it is not silence that we seek but *sounds,* those to which our hearts learned to beat and our nerves to tingle.

It is dark now and raining. I slouch through an old field below Lake Raleigh, down along the floodplain of Walnut Creek. Once my eyes adjust, though, it is not so dark, for the light of the city—buzzing with its 60-cycle electric hum—is reflected from the clouds. The damp earth and wet grasses exude a mingled smell. I lay myself flat on the ground, heedless of the wet, and plunge my nose into leaf-trash and grass-mold. It takes a second to clear my nose of the stench of cars, but soon it comes, a penetrating sense of black earth and new-mown hay, of springtime and meltwater, of animal stalls and rot, sour mash and onions, a sharp tone of underarm, roots, grubs, and the undersides of rocks. The grasses may be dying but the earth is alive, pungent with dusky odors. Then I stand up. Even in the rain, the cars are there, at my nose, like an awful accident.

There are people who will not understand what I'm talking about, who will insist that I am going on about this scrubby, one-time farm as though it were Hetch Hetchy or Roanoke Island or the Joyce Kilmer Forest, but I have no illusions about this place that has me in its spell. I have walked here when it was a working farm, amazed to find—just a fifteen-minute walk from my home in downtown Raleigh—cows in pastures, hay in fields, corn and soybeans, nothing "urban" between me and Harnett County except a few lightly traveled roads, Ten-Ten and Holly Springs, Sunset and Penny. Twenty years ago no power lines slashed it like an incision opened with an axe, and there was no I-40 with its swamp of traffic. But there were tractors and farm workers and cattle with wet noses rubbing up against the fence-posts that a three-year-old could touch in fear and wonder. And this farm was cut itself from another, from older Boylan land worked by old man Boylan's slaves, and that was cut from another, and before them came the Tuscarora with their gardens of corn and squash and beans, and others before them for ten thousand years hunting and fishing and harvesting the nuts and the barks, the roots and

the berries. This is not a wilderness, if indeed there can be said to be so much as one square mile of the earth that people have not visited and disturbed and made their own.

Let me acknowledge that I have no interest in an unhumanized landscape: I am a human. If it is no more than a path, suddenly it is home. People who exclaim at the sight of wilderness are as often as not looking at a postcard from the window of a train or at a travel poster through the windshield of a car. If they had to spend the night there, the beautiful would become sublime, soon enough grow scary and turn ugly. I have no grief against people, but against the insistence that there is no limit to our dominion even when, as now, the land we would work again is tired and all but gone. It is the failure of subjectivity that rouses my concern, that stirs my protective instincts, for my sake as well as the land's, here in Raleigh and elsewhere throughout the United States.

Kelly and I have come to find the beavers. It is another balmy autumn day, the blue almost enameled since the wispy cirrus has blown away, the day warm as the night was cold. Effortlessly the hawk gyres now. What does it make of us on our bikes, of the big yellow machines on the red clay that it can see if we cannot? Perhaps it doesn't even see us, knows only that there's less to eat this year than last, and less last year than the year before. It is after school, so after work and above on the slope where the work of converting land to Centennial Campus staggers forward, scraper and dozer are finally still. It's pretty quiet here in the dappled broken light through which falling leaves pirouette and plummet, drift and sail. The afternoon is as golden as Kelly's hair—a kid from the neighborhood with a yen for the wild—and is made more golden by the drooping sun that irradiates the dust scruffed up by life in the fall of the year. There's nothing quiet about us, though, as we blunder through the briars and kudzu thickets. This morning I *had* managed to see a beaver—just for a second before it saw me—but I had sat on the bank for a couple of hours not even writing and we will not see another this afternoon. But still the dams are wonderful, terracing the stream into a staircase of convoluted pools. We cross on one, solid as the Grand Coulee. Kelly is delighted by a quality of the water, the way it forms a shallow sheet stretched out *before* but not *below* us.

"You always have to look down at water, but this was, like, right there *at you,* and so calm and still and glassy with that fence sitting in it," was how he later put it. Rusting and broken, the barbed wire fence ran off the hill and into the water, as irrelevant

now as all the rest of the remnants of the farm. "A nice place to go exploring," is how Kelly put it, "nice and quiet, no cars going by *vroom vroom*," as they do past his house, twelve thousand a day. He would have liked to see a rabbit or a fox. He saw one once, "doing a dance"—which he mimicked in a Kevin Costner sort of way—"over on Old Stage Road." As we worked our way from beaver dam to beaver dam, down to the water's edge and back—for the way was tangled along the stream—the light grew more and more golden. Something huddled off through the bewilderment of kudzu vines. There were tracks on the muddy banks. There was a strong scent of oak. Time had another scale now. Near the valley's end, below a steep bank, we found the beaver lodge, high and snug. It ought to be a cold winter. "What's that up over there?" Kelly wondered about the land above the slope. "Part of the campus they're building," I told him. "Will the beavers stay?" he asked.

We sat on the bank a while and watched the shadows slide up the eastern slope as the sun slid down in the west. The air danced. The sounds of the Belltower chiming five o'clock drifted down with the leaves. How did John Cage put it? "*But one must see that man and nature, not separate, are in this world together. That nothing was lost when everything was given away.*"