

Central Park in the Dark:
The Aesthetic Intersection of City and Countryside

For better or worse, American man is now urban man, or at the least, megapolitan man...The city is now our home; in the most traditional and profound sense of the word, it is our land.

John J. McDermott
“Nature Nostalgia and the City”

One of the truly great cities of the world, Rome, can teach us how to build a human city. In Rome, the old and the new, the elegant and the proletariat, the monumental and the occasional are married day by day as people of every persuasion, of every ability and every desire, mingle in a quest for the good life.

John J. McDermott
“Glass Without Feet”

I would begin with a series of introductory comments. The first is that we take as our point of departure the work of John McDermott; he is the contemporary philosopher who best exemplifies, indeed embodies, the spirit of pragmatism, and he has done so for more than 50 years. His work combines the philosophical acumen of a James or Dewey, the poetic sensibility and rhetorical skills of Emerson, and the appreciation of the quotidian of Franklin. Across McDermott’s many essays he takes up a wide range of themes; the two that will most interest us here are the aesthetic emphasis on the ordinary and the relation of city to countryside.¹

The second introductory point has to do with the geographic scope of our interests. On the one hand pragmatism has been and in some ways remains a distinctly American philosophical perspective. On the other hand, as the location and national origins of most of the participants in this conference attest, there is reason enough to put to work pragmatist philosophical perspectives anywhere in the world. So there is something American at least in pragmatism’s origins and initial contexts, but there is nothing uniquely American about its intellectual potential and ramifications. Both McDermott and I are Americans, and he especially has American contexts in mind when he writes, but I confess to having the same orientation in some measure. So while examples and other points of reference may tend to be American, let us understand that the broader meaning and implications are generally not geographically bound.

Finally by way of introduction I would like to say a word about the contrast between city and countryside. When McDermott deals with this topic he tends to talk about city and nature, but I prefer not to speak about nature in this way. I do not mean to say that nature does not properly have the meaning as something that can be contrasted with the urban; it certainly does have that meaning. But it has many meanings, and when I use the word “nature” as a philosophical concept I tend to use it to mean “whatever there is”, as would be appropriate in the context of philosophical naturalism. So to avoid any conceptually awkward moments that might result from these different meanings of the term “nature” I will speak about the relation not between city and nature but between city and countryside.

I

McDermott is, we may say affectionately, a city boy. He was born, raised, and educated, and he spent nearly his first fifty years, in New York City. In his late 40s he moved from New York to what to a typical New Yorker would appear to be the wilds of rural Texas. McDermott’s sensibilities were well enough attuned to America as a whole, however, that for him such a move was not a banishment to the wilderness but an opportunity to expand his direct experience of America in more of its variety and diversity. Nevertheless he remained profoundly urban, and his appreciation for the many experiential virtues of the city informs his sense of the aesthetic and aesthetic experience.

Indeed much of his writing on aesthetic matters is directed to articulating the aesthetic significance of the city, to some extent by contrast with the countryside. At first glance it would appear a bit odd that someone writing on art and aesthetic experience in the latter half of the 20th century would find it necessary to highlight the urban in aesthetic experience. After all, modernism in 20th century art was a decidedly urban phenomenon, as were the post-WWII developments, especially in the visual and performing arts. Furthermore, in the American context New York City was the center of much of it. Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s, Pop Art in the 1960s, Conceptual Art in the following years, and a good deal of performance art and installations, are all to a considerable extent New York products. And this is not to mention the impact and influence of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Guggenheim, and all the smaller museums and galleries throughout the city. The

situation in music is similar. With its construction in the 1960s Lincoln Center became the beating heart of the American musical world, with the Metropolitan Opera on one side of the plaza, and Leonard Bernstein's New York Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall adjacent to it. The third building on the plaza, the New York State Theater, currently named for David H. Koch, was and remains the home of George Balanchine's New York City Ballet, which, along with the Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, and other New York based modern dance troupes, defined the American dance world for decades. And one need only mention Broadway and its impact on the rise and development of both modern musical theater and serious theater in general. Why, given this rich urban aesthetic environment, and in his own hometown, would McDermott feel the need to highlight the significance of the urban in aesthetic experience?

There are two reasons, one of which concerns the broader context while the other deals with the character of aesthetic experience. Concerning the context, in the years around the time that McDermott began to write about these matters there was a decidedly romantic, "back to nature" mood in American culture. The American counter-culture of the 1960s had a distinct non- and even anti-urban character, and it drew on an American strain of romanticism that had its most profound expression in the nature writings of Henry David Thoreau in the first half of the 19th century. There was in the counter-culture a strong pull of the sensibility Rousseau had stated as directly as one can imagine in the opening sentence of *Emile*, in which he said, and I paraphrase, that everything is good as it emerges from God, and everything is corrupted in the hands of man. Thus Rousseau recommended that the most important thing one could do for the education of Emile was to get him out of the city. Much of American counter-culture had the same idea.

Furthermore, at this time the American city was in a severe crisis, in some measure social and in some measure economic. For much of the 20th century black Americans had been migrating from the rural south to the northern cities. By the 1950s and 60s the deep racism in American culture had its effect as white urban dwellers tended to leave the cities for the suburbs, thus to some extent undermining the economic strength of the cities and changing their social character. At the same time the economy was undergoing a profound transformation, and in many American cities the industrial base that had made their development possible eroded, leaving what is still often referred to as the "rust belt" across the northeastern part of the country. The racial tensions in the cities and the economic malaise, combined with the civil rights

movement, caused a series of urban problems that in the middle years of the 1960s left many cities literally in flames. Even ten years later, in the mid-1970s, the problems had not been solved because at that point New York City itself was on the verge of bankruptcy.

In such a context it was not surprising that many people would find it difficult to see the city as a place of aesthetic significance. It was, rather, and as Rousseau had prescribed, a place to flee. If there was indeed an aesthetic dimension and value in the urban experience, it was not obvious. Thus it is entirely sensible that McDermott would make a special effort to articulate it. The other reason he would do so has to do with his understanding of the significance of the aesthetic, a sensibility he derives more than anywhere else from John Dewey. The most obvious point to make in this regard is that for McDermott, as for Dewey, the aesthetic is a dimension of experience, not a kind of experience distinct from the ordinary. The aesthetic dimension of experience is not something that can be set off from the quotidian, but something that permeates it. This is the reason that the many fine museums and theaters that we have mentioned do not suffice to encompass what is important about art and the aesthetic. While no one, including McDermott, would deny their importance, they also present a danger for, even a threat to, our understanding of aesthetic experience because by their nature they set off art and our interaction with it from our daily, normal, and routine experience. The danger is that they can reinforce the mistaken impression that art and the aesthetic is something that properly belongs in museums and not in our streets and homes, indeed in our ordinary experience. Thus much of what McDermott wishes to do is to rescue, we may say, art and aesthetic experience from its museums and theaters and to direct our attention to the fact that our homes, streets, and daily experience are imbued with the aesthetic. And this is the case in urban environments no less than elsewhere, in the cities no less than in the countryside.

From McDermott's point of view, again drawing on Dewey and to great extent William James, the aesthetic must be understood in terms of experience, and there is a distinctive conception of experience in the background. As James famously said, experience grows at the edges. It is not, as the empiricists had it, and too much of recent philosophy also posits, a matter of sense perception. Experience, rather, is a relational matter, a 'transaction' in Dewey's terms, with the environment; it is in fact a constitutive relation between an experiencer and her environment. Experience is by its nature creative because the ongoing relation is continuously broadening, constricting, changing, and developing. Both the experiencer and her environment

are in a constant process of development, with consummatory experiences, again to use Dewey's term, along the way. It is in this process that the creative, aesthetic dimension of experience lies.

We may still find something of aesthetic value in the cyclical, peaceful, and bucolic sense of the countryside that we derive from the romantics, but to regard that as the model or proper home of aesthetic value is to miss the creative character of daily experience. And if, as McDermott says, most of us by now live in urban environments, then an adequate understand of the aesthetic dimension of our own experience requires that we grasp it in our urban contexts; thus the importance of an urban aesthetic. For most of us in our current time our daily experience is in the city, often many cities. It is in this or these urban environments that through our interactions we create our lives and their meanings. It is in and through these shifting boundaries and the creative dimension of our experience that its aesthetic dimension is to be found.

II

McDermott no doubt has done a great service by giving voice to the aesthetic character of the city and of urban experience. He has made it possible for those many of us, perhaps as he suggests the majority of us, who live in cities to understand our own daily experience in its aesthetic dimension without banishing the aesthetic to the museum, or to a weekend at the theater or a concert, or to occasional visits to the countryside. I would like to push McDermott's insights one step farther, though, and think about not a rural aesthetic or an urban aesthetic, but about the relation between the city and countryside in aesthetic experience. There is an obvious justification for looking into the relation between city and countryside, which is that whether we inhabit a rural or urban locale, our societies and our lives are complex enough that none of us are simply "urban" or "rural". In the contemporary world, and probably long before the contemporary world, it is impossible to make sense of our experience without taking account of the constitutive relation between city and countryside; neither prevails without the other. And if relations are constitutive, as James, Dewey, McDermott, I, and in fact the entire pragmatic naturalist tradition, think they are, then the city and the countryside constitute one another. Their relation contributes to their identity. Given that fact, it is not surprising that artists in their own exploration of experience would find the relation significant, and relevant to their own understanding of nature, of themselves, and of aesthetic experience.

To be more precise, I would like to consider not aesthetic experience in the abstract in this regard, but to look at several works of art that themselves inhabit, express, or develop the relation between the city and countryside. What, I would like to ask, have insightful artists had to say about the interaction between the two? We may find that the aesthetic consideration of the relation between city and countryside can push our understanding of the aesthetic dimension of experience beyond merely the rural or urban and into the creative relation between them, while at the same time revealing meaningful dimensions of both.

There is no doubt a great number of works of literature, poetry, visual art, music, and dance to which we could turn to examine this question, and I hope that at some point I or some other interested soul will be in a position to do so more thoroughly and systematically. For now, I would like to turn our attention to three works of art that take as a theme the city and countryside in their relation to one another: Claude Monet's paintings of the Thames, Charles Ives' *Central Park in the Dark*, and Bedrich Smetana's *Vltava*. We will also say a few words about Aaron Copeland, easily the most important American composer of the 20th century, whose whole body of work encompassed the complex, constitutive relation between city and countryside.

Probably the most well known of Monet's paintings are those of water lilies and other aspects of his extraordinary garden in Giverny. However Monet, like other French Impressionist painters, was no less interested in urban scenes and settings, often in, though not restricted to, Paris: Camille Pissarro was seemingly as much at home depicting street scenes in Paris and London as he was among the fields and farms of northern France; Renoir is as famous for depictions of dance scenes and other crowds as for anything else; Degas is most well known for his dancers and scenes in the theater; and Toulouse-Lautrec, if we may regard him in the same company, belonged more than anywhere else in the night life of Montmartre. The pictures that interest us here, though, are those Monet made of the Thames during his visits over several decades to London.

The earliest such pictures date from 1870-71, when Monet had traveled to France to escape the impact of the Franco-Prussian War. He returned, and completed the bulk of his paintings of the Thames, around the turn of the century. The interesting feature of these paintings, for our purposes, is that they address explicitly the relation between the urban traits of central London and the river itself. He did not travel outside the city to depict the river in its rural

character, but studied it as it appeared in the heart of the city. Industrial London at this time was rather a mess, and the environmental impact of its factories and industry was fouling both water and air. The pollution in London had an effect on sunlight as it was perceived in the center of the city, and Monet's Thames paintings portray, among other things, the river as it might be seen in the light refracted through London's smog. Monet's interest in light, its perception, and its depiction, is well known, and it is one of the defining traits of the impressionist style in Monet and the others. That interest was as crucial for the Thames paintings as it was for everything else Monet painted. He was interested in how the river would appear at different times of day, when the sun was in various points in the sky, and from different points in the city. This is the reason there are so many Thames paintings. Some were done in the morning, others in mid-day, and others still in late afternoon and twilight; different paintings depict different bridges and were done from different sides of the river, and the most well known of them have a view of Parliament.

From whatever angle and at whatever time of day, the paintings explore not just the Thames, but the Thames as it passes through central London. We might be tempted to say that the river is a feature of the countryside that as it happens passes through the city, though the relation is not as haphazard as that if only because the city is where it is because of the river. In any case, the river has some traits in the countryside and quite others in the city, as the light plays differently on its surface and movement in the complex relations among the river, the city, its atmosphere, and the light. We may describe the aesthetic impact of the paintings in many ways. We may emphasize the fact that through his distinctive vision and methods Monet is able to pick out for us dimensions of the river, the city, and their interaction, that we may not have noticed otherwise. Or we may point out that the paintings help us to realize dimensions of our own experience with a city and its river that we may have passed over. In this respect the paintings can enrich our experience and provide it with an aesthetic character we may otherwise have overlooked.

The same may be said of the potential impact of other artistic forms. Like Monet's Thames paintings, Smetana's portrayal of the Vltava and its journey through Prague explores the relation between river and city. In Smetana's case, because he is working with an artistic medium that is by its nature temporal, unlike painting, he can bring to our attention the changes in the river as it passes through the city. In this respect he is able to describe both the city's effect

on the river and to use the river as a vehicle through which to announce the profundity of the Vysehrad Castle in Prague, a symbol of Bohemian national identity. The relation between city and countryside in this case takes on a political dimension.

The *Vltava* (Ger: Moldau) is the second movement of the symphonic poem *Ma Vlast* (My Country), which Smetana composed in the 1870s. It depicts the river as it emerges from two springs south of Prague, travels through the countryside, enters and passes through Prague, and eventually flows into the Labe (Ger: Elbe) in the north of Bohemia, now the border with Germany. The piece begins with sprightly and light passages in the woodwinds that depict the springs from which the river arises. Soon the strings enter and we hear the full theme that depicts the river, a beautiful melody that because it is partially in dotted rhythms is able to convey marvelously the sense of flowing movement. The river passes through a village and a village wedding (we can hear dance music along the way), and before long reaches its dynamic climax as it enters Prague and passes below the castle and under the Charles Bridge. The music at this point is dramatic, and we know that it represents the castle because it uses themes from the first movement of the poem, which is devoted to the Vysehrad Castle. As the river leaves the city and as day passes into night, the music becomes quieter, we can 'hear' the moonlight rippling on the flowing water, and the river fades into the Labe.

This is a thoroughly nationalistic piece, as is the entire symphonic poem, and it uses the relation of the countryside and the city to express a general sense of Bohemian pride. Prague and the castle clearly convey the Czech sense of the importance of historical place, and as the river arises and flows through the fields and villages it serves to unite countryside and city and to portray the critical importance of both to Bohemian and Czech identity. Art is clearly political in this case, and in Smetana's hands political identity is thoroughly aesthetic, an understanding that he accomplishes through the interrelation of city and countryside.

Charles Ives' *Central Park in the Dark* is something different. In this case the countryside is the park, which is itself an engineered effort to imbue the urban with an experience of the rural. The park is itself an urban phenomenon because of its location and purpose, and the city is enhanced by the presence in its heart of the fields, woodlands and water that constitute the park. In this short piece for chamber orchestra Ives uses the park not as a representation of the countryside, but as a vehicle through which to convey a dimension of the experience that is New York City, more specifically mid-town Manhattan, at night.

If one asks oneself what comes to mind as the prevailing sounds of mid-town Manhattan, the answer is likely to be traffic sounds – automobile horns, the thousands of passing cars and busses, and the sirens of police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks. A century ago, in 1906 when Ives composed *Central Park in the Dark*, and before the combustion engine dominated the aural character of the city, the experience would have been different. The piece uses the park as its setting because the relative peacefulness and quiet encountered there allows one to bring into focus the many sounds that emerge from the surrounding city. Ives was a musical visionary and an early master of atonal and polytonal techniques in composition, all of which are used to great effect in the piece. Even before car horns and sirens, the sounds of the city were chaotic, the representation of which begs for atonality and polytonality to capture its character. And Ives does not disappoint. One hears different sorts of sounds emerging from all directions, from bands playing to jazz themes, popular songs of the day to the cries of newsboys. We are able to hear this chaos, and to make experiential sense of it, by hearing it in the context of a more or less rural setting. The park gives the surrounding urban environment a chance to emerge, just as the urban setting gives the park its character and purpose. And the whole has an aesthetic dimension in our experience that Ives captures profoundly.

I indicated earlier that I would also like to mention Aaron Copeland in the context of the aesthetic in the relation of the countryside and city. There is no one piece that I want to discuss, but I would draw your attention to the whole body of Copeland's work because as a whole it is an extraordinary illustration of the way the rural and urban, the countryside and the city, engage one another in the development of our aesthetic experience. Copeland was easily the greatest of 20th century American composers, and his music has become iconic of American experience. This is especially true for rural America, which Copeland's music embodies so well in his ballets and his only opera. *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*, two of Copeland's ballets, contain themes, some of which he composed and some of which he borrowed, that are used over and over again in many contexts from films to advertising to convey an American atmosphere. The music of *The Tender Land*, his only opera, has the same effect, underscored by its setting on a Midwestern American farm.

All of this, combined with such pieces as *Lincoln Portrait* and *Fanfare for the Common Man*, present Copeland as a musical embodiment of Middle America in the central decades of the century. Yet this is only a partial picture of Copeland, and one that if not filled out

misrepresents his art. Copeland was a product of the city, New York as it happens, and his musical development was immersed in the artistic tendencies of his time. He grew up around the jazz and developing modernist trends of the early years of the century; soon after the Great War he traveled to Europe where, as so many other great composers of the century did, he studied composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He returned to the US and spent most of his life living in Manhattan and immersing himself in the musical, and to some extent political, life of the city. Many of his compositions reflect his mastery of the compositional developments of his time. In fact the pieces that have come to represent America, even “Americana”, are themselves steeped in the modernist compositional techniques and styles that Copeland mastered in Paris and New York. This American composer and American music are in the end products of the urban aesthetic experience and rural motifs of America at the time. If there is a person in the American context whose aesthetic achievements reflect the interrelation of city and countryside it is surely Aaron Copeland.

III

I have discussed several examples of the aesthetic dimension of the intersection of town and country, and the selection of examples has been idiosyncratic. Others might have chosen differently. If I were to go on, the next examples to discuss would be the photographer Alfred Stieglitz and the painter Georgia O’Keefe. And we could indeed go on indefinitely.

The point, to draw this to a close, is that the conception of aesthetic experience that emerges from pragmatism and from the relational understanding of things that defines pragmatic naturalism opens for us a range of conceptual possibilities. John McDermott has done us the considerable service of highlighting the urban dimension of aesthetic experience. I would simply like to have complemented McDermott by taking seriously his emphasis on relationality and the urban, and to have pointed to the importance of the relation of city and countryside in the great art of our traditions and by implication in the aesthetic dimension of our own experience.

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1. A valuable collection of McDermott's essays is John J. McDermott, *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Douglas R. Anderson, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007. See especially "Nature Nostalgia and the City: An American Dilemma" (167-184), "Glass without Feet: Dimensions of Urban Aesthetics" (204-218), "To Be Human is to Humanize: A Radically Empirical Aesthetic" (345-371), and "The Aesthetic Drama of the Ordinary" (390-402). For an insightful discussion of McDermott's aesthetic ideas and their background see Richard E. Hart, "Landscape and Personscape in Urban Aesthetics", in James Campbell and Richard E. Hart, eds., *Experience as Philosophy: On The Work of John J. McDermott*, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006, pp 140-161.