The Desert Blossoms as a Rose:
Toward a Western Conservation Aesthetic

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Between the vision of the Tourist Board
and the true Paradise lies the desert where
Isaiah's elations force a rose from the sand.
– Derek Walcott[1]

Since John Wesley Powell first explored the Green and Colorado rivers and reported his findings to the U.S. government, voices of warning have continued to express concern that the aridity that defines the Intermountain West should dictate the limits of growth. Those warnings, however, have not had far-reaching effects, and Western cities now boast booming populations and suburban sprawl. Bernard DeVoto, Wallace Stegner, and Marc Reisner, among others, have insisted that Isaiah's mantra to make the desert blossom as a rose characterized development throughout the West and is at heart a refusal to learn to live in balance with aridity. The West's demise, runs the argument, began when Mormons introduced irrigation into the Great Basin and witnessed what seemed to be a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: arid land was miraculously transformed into cultivated gardens and orchards. Instead of yielding to the desert, the Mormons set the pattern for working to make the desert yield to man.[2]

Since the first decades of the twentieth century, we have seen a boom in innovations in the science of irrigation, exploitation of groundwater, and dam building that resulted in a complete transformation of the vacant American desert into the busy nexus of cities and suburbs we see today in Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado.[3] The American West is subject to drought and is precariously positioned on an ever-lowering and disappearing water table, yet there is little sign that growth or water use have been curbed. The consequences of this refusal are evident now where green golf courses, blossoming

gardens, and New England landscapes proliferate in gleeful defiance of arid truths. Western optimism is occasionally sobered by these truths when routine droughts of a few years cause minor alarm, but glee rebounds when the returning rains and snowfall seem to confirm the divine sanction of the West's desert sprawl. This is despite the fact that we know that drought is cyclical in the West and is the reason why the Anasazi and other early inhabitants in the region failed to sustain themselves. Scientists have most recently suggested the sobering possibility that the Western drought of the past six years may be indicative of a more permanent climate change and that we cannot expect a permanent return to the wet cycles of yesteryear.[4]

More importantly, the consequences of our temporary triumphs are psychological. We are reassured by our technological capacity to transform the land into an image of a place our ancestors once came from. The result is that we are divorced from local ecology, we believe we are the exception to nature's rules, and what is real to us is only what technology can make visible and palpable to us. All that we see, therefore, is what we expect to see, and thus we are confirmed in our belief that there is no difference between the world around us and the world in our minds. Like Don Quixote, we have willed a mental geography onto the world around us to the point that we are willing to see only that which confirms what we had already imagined. This mental landscape has not been shaped by medieval novels of chivalry, of course, but by art, literature, and life in the green climates of the European continent, which was then exported to the New World. The cost has been our capacity to see aesthetically and to live in balance with the desert.

The Desert Blossoms as a Rose

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly. . . . For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water." These are the words of Isaiah (35:1–2, 6–7). Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that they refer to the last days, to the building up of Zion and the gathering of the righteous. Like many such passages throughout the Bible and the Book of Mormon, it teaches a profound and important principle that God blesses the land according to our righteousness and that our ability to feed ourselves and prosper is enhanced by divine environmental intervention when we live according to the commandments of the Lord. There is no doubt that such a doctrine has been misused to justify a passive Panglossian attitude that the environment is on automatic pilot and that it matters little how we treat it, as long as we are good to one another. But Isaiah's principle is more profound. It teaches that human and environmental health and spiritual and physical well-being are interdependent and should therefore be mutually nurtured.[5]

In his people's desperate struggle for survival, Isaiah's words express the hope of many desert peoples for a promised land, a land that would finally capitulate and return in kind what was given to it. In the early days of pioneer effort to make the desert a new home, Isaiah's words seemed to promise a literal climatic transformation, and this was precisely because there were many experiences of poignant failure. An ancestor of mine, Eliza Briggs, survived the freezing weather of the Martin Handcart Company that took the life of two siblings and her father. She was later called to serve in the Muddy River Mission of southeastern Nevada, where she and her husband, James Stratton, failed miserably in the brutal heat to make the desert blossom, despite their faithfulness, and where she eventually died in childbirth. Ironically, that region is now under the vast waters of Lake Mead.

There are some who might argue that this aquatic burial of their failed homestead is an appropriate symbol of our eventual divinely

blessed triumph over the desert. But must we understand Isaiah's prophecy only literally? Must we assume that he is referring to the eventual triumph of technology that has created seeming oases in the contemporary American West? If a blossoming desert is a mantra for the technological transformation of a place that inherently lacks the colorful beauty of northern European climates, we might miss one of the desert's most fundamental facts: a great variety of its native plants blossom with striking colors, and its aridity and geological history, Utah's in particular, provide more extraordinary exposure to the earth's native colors than almost any other landscape. We might also make the mistake of assuming that God's hand in our environment is manifested only by what our technology does to it, which seems dangerously close to a form of idol worship. I prefer a view that appeals more to our inner spiritual life. Even the English translation of Isaiah's verse into "rose" loses the richer meanings implied in the original Hebrew, which can signify a crocus or narcissus, with colors ranging from bluish-purple to yellow, pink, and white.[6] Perhaps, then, the notion of a blossoming desert need not imply merely a transformation of the external environment but of our internal cognitive perception.

Such appreciation has been difficult in the West because the environment and climate of the region have defied facile representation according to the aesthetic norms we inherited from Europe. As Wallace Stegner explains: "Our first and hardest adaptation was to learn all over again how to see. . . . You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time."[7] What further complicates matters is that our urban environments in the West are so fundamentally altered by now that to speak of this need for adaptation already seems anachronistic. Children who visit the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix are regularly quizzed: "How many of you have ever lived in a desert?" Most will not raise their hands, assuming the docent is speaking of some faraway place of nothing but sand and camels.

Most of us in the West concern ourselves first with the aesthetics of gardening and lawn maintenance before we ever get around to knowing native desert plants. Such native knowledge is so hard to come by today that we have to rely on others to teach us what has become "expert" knowledge, the stuff of books and museums. And again, even a modest attempt to learn the flora and fauna of the West becomes anachronistic since a great number of our trees, wildflowers, and weeds have European origins. Even the peach of the Old World, which is today endangered in Utah by rapid development and is becoming a symbol of the Utah's prior pristine environment,[8] spread its seed early and became a wild "weed" in the continent before the French and Spanish first began to cultivate it on this continent.[9] Although we talk and teach a great deal in America today about our European heritage, we focus almost exclusively on the cultural heritage and ignore the "biogeographical realities" that facilitated European successes and made of the entire hemisphere a blossoming, although often consequently degraded, desert.[10] Biotic colonialisms like the peach that were widespread throughout the Americas inspired historian Alfred Crosby to call the Old World pioneer "a sort of botanical Midas, changing the flora with his touch."[11] Thus, today what appear to us to be native biota cover an even more deeply indigenous environmental history hidden from immediate view.

Terry Ball and Jack Brotherson explain that the Mormon "pioneers' farming practices, introduction of new plant species, and introduction of domestic livestock can all be considered major agents of change in the Great Basin ecosystem."[12] Crosby argues that domesticated animals proved more violent in their capacity to alter the physical environment throughout the Americas than "any machine we have thus far devised."[13] Despite the fact that they may have proven their

rugged individualism on the frontier, biologically speaking, Old World pioneers came as part of a "self-replicating and world altering avalanche" on a scale never seen before or since in world history.[14] But it is crucial to recognize that New World environments were irrevocably changed in ways that went far beyond European intentions. Settlers could not possibly have foreseen, for example, that the majority of their domesticated animals would reproduce so rapidly and bring such enormous and deleterious changes to landscapes wherever they went, and that diseases slowly cultivated over centuries in the barnyards and fields of European agricultural communities would spread with such indifferent violence throughout Native America, that European weeds would prove so dominant in New World lands that had previously received little if any cultivation, and that early environmental changes in the unforgiving deserts were *not* evidence of long-term sustainable progress.

Restoration of Natural and Human Histories

Faced with such seeming inevitability etched into the very landscape of the New World, it is not hard to understand why views of the European arrival in the New World have become polarized; their arrival, it seems, is cause for either categorical regret or monumental elation. Seeing Europeans as playing multiple roles, as complex moral agents who wrought positive *and* tragic changes (the full extent of which could not have been foreseen), would be closer to the truth of history. Unfortunately, we prefer our history to read like a well-orchestrated drama with finite and knowable conclusions. While that may certainly be possible in the eternal perspective of things, it is not clear that such knowledge is readily obtainable or even presently desirable.

It is worth noting that the Book of Mormon depicts the westward expansion of European empire as resulting in simultaneous continuity and disruption. As the great and sacred New World text, it prophesies and spells out the benefits of the Gentile arrival, to be sure, but it also warns of the mixed blessings that will come from a people arriving with incomplete knowledge of New World history, a partial knowledge of the word of God, and a tendency toward arrogance and ingratitude (see in particular 1 Nephi 13 and 3 Nephi 16). Both the faithful and errant ways of Western civilization mean that portions of its past are lost while others are retained. The Book of Mormon account shows that the work of restoration becomes necessary in order to unite the disparate knowledge of Old and New World peoples. We read in Alma 46:40: "And there were some who died with fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent in the land—but not so much so with fevers, because of the excellent qualities of the many plants and roots which God had prepared to remove the cause of diseases, to which men were subject by the nature of the climate." The loss of such knowledge of native plants in the New World desert was one of the greatest casualties of European settlement. One wonders if the great work of restoration might include the recovery of this kind of folk biology, a crucial form of local biotic knowledge that, as in this case, is earned through intimate contact with the land and helps to sustain life over time.[15]

What our complex history asks of us is greater patience and judiciousness in assessing our role in environmental events. As Stegner warned, "We may love a place and still be dangerous to it."[16] Learning to tolerate the inherent ambiguity of nature as both part of and separate from human communities has never been easy. It is especially difficult when it becomes apparent, as it has increasingly with recent advances in ecological understanding, that our impact on nature has not always been benign even when our intentions have been. Our reactions to these "sins against nature" often result in either nostalgia or denial, neither of which puts us in a position to make amends. The impulse to regret our tracks and the changes we brought to the land is nostalgic and misanthropic (hence the tendency for environmentalists to assume things were always

better before and are only workable in the present with fewer people). However, the opposite reaction is futuristic and what I would call "mistopic"; it glosses over the past in the interest of the future, which categorically holds the promise of being better, and it chafes at the idea that we might wish to limit our social and economic designs according to the particular ecologies of the places we inhabit. That is, it assumes that what we can make of our places is always better than what they can make of us, and this is facilitated by a penchant for being tourists in our own homes. Such has been the directive of much of New World history, characterized as it is by transplantation of peoples, boosterism, and increased rapidity of transportation and exchange.

To fight this kind of futurism, our yearnings for natural innocence tempt us back to the natural world of pre-Columbian times or perhaps even further, in order to have a clear idea of what the New World Eden was like before the arrival of Europeans. However, it is erroneous to assume that all Native American contact with the land was innocuous. Historian Richard Grove posits that especially in large continental regions such as North America, where the immediate effects of human intervention are more difficult to trace, "rapid and extensive transformations in the natural environment" occurred long before Europeans arrived.[17] For this reason, despite the European tendency to see large areas in the New World such as the American West as a Garden of Eden innocent of all prior history, Thomas Dunlap notes that ironically, "the opposite was more nearly the case. They were people with little history coming to lands that had much."[18] So the modern concern for environmental restoration is a vexed one: How far back do we have to go? What constitutes the environment's prior purity? Do we have to go back to that moment when human beings first came into contact with this hemisphere, even though such a moment, currently theorized to have taken place some thirty thousand to forty thousand years ago, is likely too remote to be of use to us.

I provide this context in order to suggest that categorical criticism of the legacy of irrigation is ineffectual and historically shallow; it is a desire to wish away over 150 years of history, which often leads to nostalgic and anachronistic dreams of life before the fall of the western Eden. When such criticism is sponsored by those unfamiliar with Mormon history, it is typically a symptom of a misanthropic resentment for the mere fact of a Mormon population in the desert. Marc Reisner, for example, irresponsibly remarks that early Mormons "banished themselves" to the desert,[19] and Bill McKibben writes that "Mormons have made a great project of subduing nature, erecting some towns in places so barren and dry and steep that only missionary zeal to conquer the wild could be the motivation."[20] This whitewashed history is directly symptomatic of a deep nostalgia for a nature with no human (or at least Euro-American) history, and it exposes the irony that even though nostalgia looks to the past, it is ultimately uninterested in history.

Understandably, this look to the past is an attempt to keep the developers of the West from continuing at will to use technology to transform the dry, brown desert into suburban gardens. However, such nostalgia would seem to deny the fact that sustainability is inherently a question of human design. Human design of the natural environment is inevitable (indeed it is arguably the very driving force of all human history), but it is not inevitably unethical or unsustainable. There is nothing inevitable about excessive watering, landfill, billboards, sprawl, traffic, or pollution, but we will nevertheless always have to make hard choices that will leave an impact of some kind. Wishing away people and our past mistakes is a denial of a fundamental truth and therefore blinds us to alternative solutions for the future. There is wisdom in recognizing what can no longer be changed, as Ball and Brotherson argue: "At this point, even if the land were vacated, the Great Basin ecosystem could not return to its presettlement condition. Consequently, our best and only course of action is to assess the

condition of the system at present and guide it to a new position of health and stability."[21]

Like any other form of repentance, change must begin with an honest reckoning of the consequences of our actions and a commitment to restitute all that we can. It would seem to be our human predicament that deeper love and belonging are forged paradoxically only after a long and intimate history of trial and error has inspired us to make improvements in our behavior. While the history of nature's conquest in the New World may have blinded Americans to the particular qualities of the places they occupy—especially in the American West, where the differences from Europe are even more striking—it is nevertheless also true that conquest of nature paradoxically produces knowledge of it and more importantly "an understanding of [our] place in the land."[22] Indeed, our greatest hope for sustainability may lie in that transition from wanting to remake nature to wanting to "become settlers and to value the land for what it was, or had been."[23] Even if the Euro-American transformation of the West began with the Mormons, Utah history is distinct in the region for its more deeply rooted settlement history, characterized less by boosterism, water importation, and rapid urbanization than, say, Phoenix, Las Vegas, or Los Angeles. It is strange, then, that Utah's beginnings would be seen as a cause for lament rather than as a possible source of inspiration to make amendments for a New West.

For any meaningful response to ecological degradation to become likely, we must understand that human action and health have a direct relationship to the environment and its long-term health. This idea, although scientifically erroneous in its earliest manifestations, was latent in European thought for centuries but came to fruition in the westward course of empire and eventually led to the foundation of modern environmental thought, according to Richard Grove. Columbus was known, for example, to have postulated the idea that deforestation caused drought; the reverse was later assumed to be true: if you plant, rain will come. (This desiccation theory originates in the thinking of Pliny and Theophrastus before him, but it distorts scientific fact: trees and other vegetation clearly protect soil fertility, provide shelter from the sun, prevent erosion, and can sometimes collect moisture in the air, but they cannot cause rainfall.) Consequently, the New World saw massive tree planting and transplanting campaigns, bringing European, Asian, and New World flora together to create diversified plant communities that, it was hoped, would help foster rainfall.

The notion that "rain follows the plow" was important to many settlers of the American West, arguably because of the dry conditions, and became the view of Brigham Young, who regularly promised the pioneers that if they planted diverse trees and dressed the land (and, of course, proved themselves worthy), the Lord would provide. As various historians have noted, it is somewhat ironic that westward expansion into the American desert happened simultaneously with one of the wettest cycles the area has seen, prompting a kind of religious fervor about the potential for environmental transformation.[24] Many interventions inspired by this belief in the climatic effects of human action were carried out in relative ignorance of their long range effects. Grove argues, however, that the deleterious effects of this view were tempered by the development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of what he calls a new Protestant "empirical aesthetic" of nature. This aesthetic, influenced by Calvinism and the writings of Honoré D'Urfe, held that the "natural world [was] a path to a knowledge of God or as a means to re-create a (social) paradise on earth."[25] Seventeenth-century Calvinism began to question the idea that the fall of man and of nature were parallel events, and as colonial experience began to widen into regions previously unknown to Europeans, God was seen as a "Creator of a world containing many wonders and beauties," and thus it became possible "to recognise nature's qualities rather than its 'defeat.'"[26] This willingness to allow

nature to become our empirical teacher and aesthetic inspiration tempered the desiccation theory and allowed "a well-developed caution about the impact or desirability of the works of man upon the 'New World'" to emerge.[27]

There is little reason to doubt that this aesthetic is inherent in Isaiah's theology. The intertwining of divine will and natural law implies that God communicates to us, in part, through the natural world and that knowledge of natural processes is an important means of understanding His hand. This is clearly taught in the restored account of the Creation, when the Lord declares: "And out of the ground made I, the Lord God, to grow every tree, naturally, that is pleasant to the sight of man; and man could behold it. And it became also a living soul. For it was spiritual in the day that I created it; for it remaineth in the sphere in which I, God, created it, yea, even all things which I prepared for the use of man; and man saw that it was good for food" (Moses 3:9). Note the priority of aesthetic pleasure over utilitarian purpose, which is also apparent in this passage from the Doctrine and Covenants: "Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart; yea, for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul. And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion" (59:18–20). The last caution here about proper use implies that we must start with an aesthetic appreciation of God's gifts in order to make a more measured judgment about their use. An empirical aesthetic would seem to be necessary before we take action; otherwise, in our lusty haste to consume, we would fail to read what God wishes to communicate to us: "All things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath" (Moses 6:63).

Pleasure in nature leads to care and devotion much for the same reason that we love children, for example: not because they are good but because they are beautiful.[28] And, of course, even though one might insist that not all children are beautiful, they are always beautiful, it would seem, to those whose love and labor have produced them: their parents. My point is that faithful effort spawns aesthetic appreciation, which in turn inspires increased affection and devotion. Alma's parable of the seed that becomes a blossoming and fruit-bearing tree states that it is only after the aesthetic sensation of "swelling motions" and the recognition that it is "delicious" that we conclude, "It must needs be that this is a good seed" (Alma 32:28). Alma teaches that we must learn to suspend disbelief first and imagine what is possible by "looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof," and that when we discover that the fruit exceeds our expectations, as is usually the case in aesthetic experience, we commit ourselves to further acts of diligent love (Alma 32:40).

Aesthetic Experience and Nature

Aesthetic experience is both an intimate response to the particulars of our environment and a heightened awareness of our subjective differences from that world. In other words, aesthetic experience allows our subjectivity and the world's objectivity to interplay without collapsing one into the other. Failing to distinguish ourselves from what surrounds us is either the worst kind of egotism or the worst kind of naïveté. Our humanity lies in this capacity to sense our independence from our surroundings, so it is not really a question of whether we choose to transform our environment, but how. Moreover, without knowledge of the particulars of the environment, we stand little chance of preserving them. Those particulars fade from view when our minds grow lazy from habit or from passive

acclimation to what technological and virtual forms of representation make available to us. The purpose of art has always been to teach us to see anew, to hear the old words in new ways, to see strangeness and wonder in the old and familiar, to convince us that despite the habit and repetition of experience, the highest part of human life lies in our capacity to be reborn without necessarily being displaced into the strange and the new. Our mobile society, however, demands no apologies for our impatience with the familiar; rather, it convinces us that renewal lies in the physical transformation of the environment or in our physical displacement to another place. Art, on the other hand, teaches us to transform ourselves in relation to where we already are, to breathe new life into our locales, to take the habit out of habitations. Art helps us to see the surprise and awe that can be found in the most ordinary and unexpected places.

An aesthetic response to the environment is the opposite of ownership because it teaches humble and respectful detachment from the physical world. Detachment does not imply indifference, however; on the contrary, it is impassioned but deferential love. This is the best alternative between the view that the physical world, as is, is an enemy, or on the other hand, the almost pathological belief that we are indistinguishable from our environment. When it gets to the point that the land provides us with perpetual surprise, we can finally rest assured that our imagination has learned to depend on, rather than threaten, the land's integrity. Isaiah promises joy to those who witness the desert's blossoms: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 35:10). After all, we should remember that Don Quixote died of melancholy because dialogue with the world ceased when he finally got what he thought he wanted.

More to the point, while impatience may have once led the early pioneers to wish away the realities of heat and aridity, the irony is that it may now take a new kind of ecological impatience with our environment to detach ourselves and see beyond the more superficial and most immediately perceptible particulars of a blossoming garden in order to perceive and work to retain its still-native desert qualities. Aesthetic experience in the West might mean that in our designs of homes, cities, landscapes, and other living spaces, and in our modes of transportation and cuisine, we would find less ostentation; less sprawl; more air-friendly transportation and industry; more value placed on ecological particulars such as watersheds, microclimates, and the biodiversity of native fauna, vegetation, and produce; and more appreciation for an open palette of colors in our landscaping that goes beyond the green demands of a New England. At the same time, we might see less divisive rhetoric between the so-perceived natives and Johnny-come-latelies and be more concerned about what is worth preserving for future generations. We would appreciate art not simply because it is beautiful but because it teaches us something integral about our relationship to the world beyond the canvas, and therefore we would be less likely to bicker over definitions of wilderness areas and would be more in fundamental agreement about their needed protection. We would worry less about how many people are born into families and more about the kind of resourcefulness with which people are brought up. We would shun excessive watering practices and innovate our landscape designs to correspond more intimately with local conditions.[29] We would pray for rain but also for the resourcefulness to use what providence grants us. Ultimately, our goal would no longer be to distance ourselves from the conditions of the desert through conquest but to shape ourselves according to its demands through deference and respect.

Such an aesthetic is consistent with the philosophy of the great naturalist author, Aldo Leopold. Leopold writes: "Some paintings become famous because, being durable, they are

viewed by successive generations, in each of which are likely to be found a few appreciative eyes. I know a painting so evanescent that it is seldom viewed at all, except by some wandering deer. It is a river who wields the brush, and it is the same river who, before I can bring my friends to view this work, erases it forever from human view. After that it exists only in my mind's eye."[30] In other words, artistic representations of nature, when they end up on museum walls or on calendars, are really nothing more than captured fragments of memories of the ever-dynamic, ever-changing *natural* work of art that is the Creation. Human design of nature, whether it be a home or a painting, ought to be considered an expression of mourning for what it inevitably fails to remember or capture regarding the natural world. That way, designed landscapes on canvas and on street corners alike are less likely to rigidify into postcard clichés or predetermine our environmental imagination. A more creative and sympathetic eye for the artistic process and the natural world to which it responds, rather than an eye for artistic results, can help us to be aware of the fragility of nature and of our relationship to it. Regular and direct contact with our physical environment can go a long way to this end since it provides experience with the very dynamism of nature which all of art tends to elide. Our ability to make meaningful judgments of art and literature depends on our ability to compare what we see with what we don't see. If we don't have much to draw on to imagine what is not there, we stand little chance of being surprised with the final product before our eyes. We might all end up like the little children at the Phoenix museum, unable to recognize the desert we occupy.

Many critics have complained of art's power to structure our visual experience of the physical world in this prescribed way. We may never be able to see Yosemite without thinking of Ansel Adams, or upstate New York without thinking of Frederick Church or Thomas Cole. And in a sense, we may never, therefore, really *see* those places at all. And a thirst for the postcard version of natural experience, say, at the Grand Canyon motivates as many as five million people a year to visit the place without spending more than two hours on average at the location, just enough time to get out of the car, use the rest room, take a snapshot, and eat a hot dog. Not long ago, the average visit was two weeks (and not surprisingly, fewer were willing to endure such intense experiences). In our visually obsessed culture, paintings are particularly vulnerable without this kind of imagination to help ground them and prevent them from floating freely into the virtual space of our commodity-driven culture. Whether it is Dali's melting clocks, Monet's lily pads, or Van Gogh's swirling sky, even the greatest art can become cliché when we lose the capacity to perceive its newness despite the fact that such images, like Warhol's Campbell Soup cans, have been monotonously reproduced in calendars, commercials, and dorm room posters.

Therefore, although it is true that we are aesthetically impoverished, the solution is not simply more art. We recreate more than ever, so the solution is not more trips to national parks and monuments either. Art is less likely to become a postcard cliché when it is local and when it is appreciated by local residents who are committed to both staying in a place and learning their home's particulars. A recent study of environmental history of the Hudson River Valley argues that the aesthetic values of the Hudson River School caused an environmental turnaround in the region, not because of the area's tourists nor the many outside admirers of these artists but because of the commitment of local residents.[31] Those painters were responding to a world that they saw was disappearing, and today, partly because of the power of images created by great artistic minds, images that were adopted and internalized by generations of those who lived and worked in those lands, many of those landscapes have been allowed to recover much of their original freshness. If our aesthetic experiences are based solely on what we derive

from photography and paintings, we may never have the understanding that the aesthetic values we so appreciate in an Albert Bierstadt or a Thomas Moran painting come from the aesthetic values inherent in the Creation. Likewise, an agricultural society that never aestheticizes its environment may remain indifferent to its beauty and integrity as an ecosystem or may remain unaware of the long-range effects of human presence in the land. The nature that we think we love often isn't really the environment we inhabit, either because we are not required to have frequent contact with it or because we never learn aesthetic reflection in relation to place. Elation in response to earthly particulars as opposed to valuing predetermined clichés of paradise, as Derek Walcott's epigraph teaches, is perhaps the most ethical way to make the desert blossom.

The current battles over wilderness protection in Utah all too frequently get bogged down in skirmishes over its definition, and we lose sight of the common goals of those who want roads and those who do not; both presumably want to enjoy and pass on the natural legacies of the wild, but instead this is portrayed as a conflict between lawless Mormon rednecks and godless federal tree huggers. Leopold suggests we move beyond superficial definitions of wilderness and consider the more profound fact that "it is the expansion of transport without a corresponding growth of perception that threatens us with qualitative bankruptcy of the recreational process. Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind."[32] As he simply puts it, "The outstanding characteristic of perception is that it entails no consumption and no dilution of any resource."[33] Aesthetic experience does not necessarily prohibit consumption, but it cannot occur unless there is a willingness to wait indefinitely, if only because we recognize that nature is not ours to own or consume at will. Perhaps we allow a road, perhaps not, but in any case we must ask first what aesthetic values inhere and deserve protection before we define an area's use. This means taking time for expressions of gratitude and preparing for consumption with "singleness of heart" (D&C 59:13) so that our times of deprivation as well as our times of fullness can be consecrated for our good. But because we are slow to learn, meaningful aesthetic pleasure often is not reached until after gluttonous satiation proves unfulfilling. We have experienced enough of the latter in the West that the time is ripe for making hard and needed choices to show more restraint. We need an environmental fast.

Elder Orson Hyde understood the measurably sustainable results of such creative work of the inner self when he chided the early settlers for wastefully using the land instead of using their imaginations:

> I have no objections to men obtaining wisdom and learning from books, whether old or new. . . . but I consider it is better to have the Spirit of God in our hearts, that we may know the truth when we hear it; and not only when we hear it, but be capable by that Spirit of bringing forth things that we never heard. I feel that is our privilege . . . to have this principle dwelling within us; and when I see men laboring through books, ancient and modern, to find but little that is good, I am reminded of those who run over forty acres of land in a superficial manner, and reap a little, when a small quantity of land, well watered and well cultivated, would be sure to yield a rich harvest.[34]

We need an imaginative capacity to perceive the rich opportunities there may be in staying put and living simply within our limitations, which will grant us the power to perceive the bounty that nature has already offered us freely, like grace.

Clearly, the early pioneers who came into contact with this desert environment could feel little else but an intense desire to see the land transformed into a blossoming garden, which they understood to signify God's favor. It was a scramble for survival as a result of persecution, so I do not blame the pioneers or wish away their history; I welcome the heritage they have left us.

We don't have to look at the Wasatch Front or small desert towns with categorical regret or as categorical signs of God's favor, because the final story of our relationship to the desert has yet to be written. I want to seize the opportunity to use my best judgment to imagine our proper human place in this land, undetermined by the past and intimately responsive to what I perceive around me in the present. That does not mean I am not appalled by overwatered business parks, by our fondness for billboards, our unimaginative and ecologically unsound architecture, or our seeming indifference to poor air, because I also recognize that we have a unique opportunity that the early settlers never had. We are in a position of comfort, so we no longer have to fight to transform the land; our human signatures on it no longer need to signify our triumph over it. We have the privilege of aesthetic experience and the responsibility to design our communities accordingly. Such notions were a luxury to the pioneers. As Lyman Hafen has written of Dixie's history: "Beauty is hard to see through shimmering waves of scorching heat and wilted crops and dying children. A pristine sandstone canyon was nothing more than one more obstacle to cross. A billowing cloud was one more false hope."[35] Precisely because of the gains and losses of those early struggles, we now have the vantage point of understanding the natural history of the desert with greater clarity. As Terry Ball, Jack Brotherson, and Thomas Alexander have reminded us, the pioneers may have made their share of environmental mistakes, but they also showed the courage to make technological, moral, and aesthetic corrections by returning to the most basic principles of stewardship in the restored gospel.[36] We would be fortunate to be so wise.

Notes

1. Derek Walcott, *The Bounty* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992), 3.

2. It is not clear that Mormons were the original innovators of irrigation in the West. It is believed Native Americans of the Southwest and Spanish colonials made earlier efforts. See Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Random House, 1992), 79.

3. For a complete history of the development of modern water use and abuse in the West, see Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

4. Thomas R. Karl and Kevin E. Trenberth, "Modern Global Climate Change," *Science* 302 (December 5, 2003): 1719–23.

5. I have discussed this principle in more detail in my essay "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 187–211.

6. I am indebted to Terry B. Ball for this insight.

7. Stegner, *Lemonade Springs*, 52, 54.

8. For a history of the decline in orchard cultivation in Utah Valley, see April Chabries, Richard Kimball, and Gary Daynes, *The Best Crop: A History of Orchard Farming in Orem, Utah*, videocassette, directed by April Chabries (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2002).

9. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 156–57.

10. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 196.

11. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 160. Coming from the other side of the Old World, Nephi records a similar result: "And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance" (1 Nephi 18:24).

12. Terry B. Ball and Jack D. Brotherson, "Environmental Lessons from Our Pioneer Heritage," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 77.

13. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 173.

14. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 194.

15. I borrow the term "folk biology" from Thomas Dunlap, who argues that such local knowledge of biota has been crucial to the survival of most peoples prior to the advent of the written word and modern scientific knowledge. See his *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23–24.

16. Stegner, *Lemonade Springs*, 55.

17. Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism, Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 16.

18. Dunlap, *Nature*, 7.

19. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 34.

20. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 75.

21. Ball and Brotherson, "Environmental Lessons from Our Pioneer Heritage," 77.

22. Dunlap, *Nature*, 6.

23. Dunlap, *Nature*, 17.

24. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 36.

25. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 15.

26. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 47.

27. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 47.

28. My thought is a slight amendment to the dictum by Charles Hartshorne, who said, "Babies are more beautiful than they are good."

29. Utah State University is a state leader in this area. The landscape architecture and environmental planning master's program regularly emphasizes the importance of design that is harmonious with local conditions, as do many of the university's other environmental programs. USU's Roger Kjelgren in horticulture recently examined water use in Utah and demonstrated that in some cases, Utahns were overwatering up to three times the amount provided by an average rain forest. While the trend has been to curb water use generally, it remains the case that a small minority of residents and 80 percent of businesses still account for more than 80 percent of excess water use, in some cases enough to grow rice. "There's an emphasis on wanting to make the desert bloom. . . . If they're putting on a couple hundred inches of water, they could grow rice on that" (quoted in Toby Hayes, "Utahns Overwatering Lawns" in the *Deseret News*, July 7, 2003, A1).

30. Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 51.

31. Kirk Johnson, "From a Woodland Elegy, a Rhapsody in Green; Hunter Mountain Paintings Spurred Recovery" *New York Times*, June 7, 2001, metropolitan section.

32. Leopold, *Sand County*, 176.

33. Leopold, *Sand County*, 173.

34. Orson Hyde, "Instructions Concerning Things Spiritual and Temporal" in *Great and Peculiar Beauty: A Utah Reader*, ed. Thomas Lyon and Terry Tempest Williams (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1995), 459.

35. Lyman Hafen, "Sacred Ground" in *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community*, ed. Terry Tempest Williams, William B. Smart, and Gibbs M. Smith (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1998), 19.

36. Thomas G. Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Autumn 1994): 340–64.