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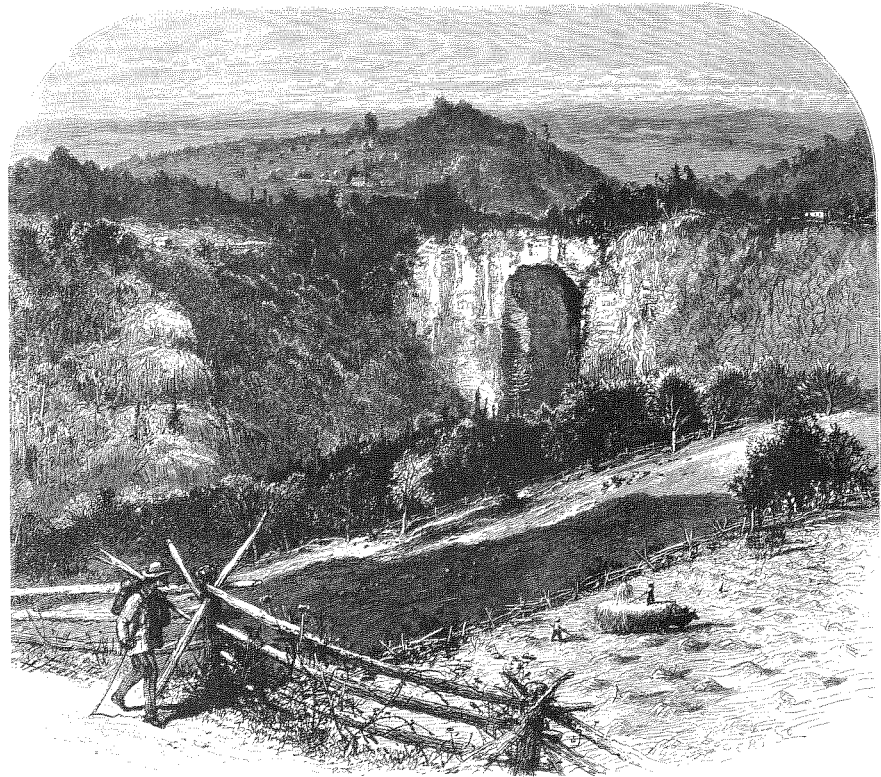
The Even More Extraordinary Jefferson

Walter Creese

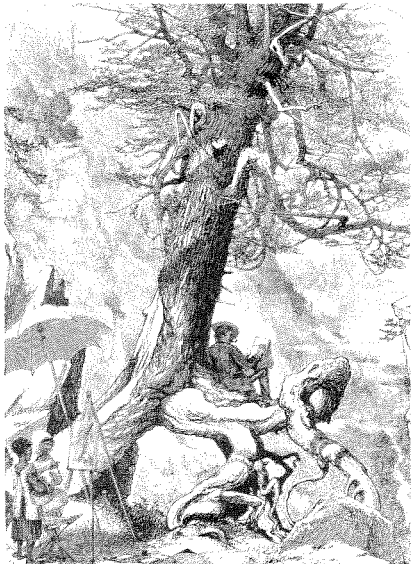
Thomas Jefferson's awareness was more scenic than that of many later architects; hence his architecture never quite crystallizes outdoors but exists in flux with its landscape surroundings. To understand the comprehensiveness of his approach, therefore, it may be more useful to glance first at his thought processes as they relate to landscape and afterward return to his architecture in situ. His presuppositions about landscape are well demonstrated in his discussion of two locations, the Natural Bridge and Harpers Ferry, both of which he described in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* of 1787. They were dear places to him because they inferred initiative and direction, landfalls toward which to steer in order to establish a national sensibility.

I

Jefferson's habitat, Charlottesville, is situated between parallel ranges of hills, varying from 500 to 1,300 feet, many of which he described in his writings as "mountains." Monticello stood out among them at 850 feet. Jefferson measured and described these "mountains" as individual entities. Earth forms had a special fascination for him because they were features to relate to, concentration points to rally around, permanent peaks to admire, in a nation that as yet displayed very few monumental buildings and nurtured still fewer longstanding traditions. At this time Americans approached natural features such as mountains more readily because there were no squares, castles, or palaces already in place. Jefferson bought the Natural Bridge and 157 surrounding



I Natural Bridge, near Lexington, Virginia. Jefferson owned the bridge from 1774 until his death in 1826. This was a "wonder of the world" for him, but it blended easily with its local surroundings. From William Cullen Bryant, *Picturesque America* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1872).



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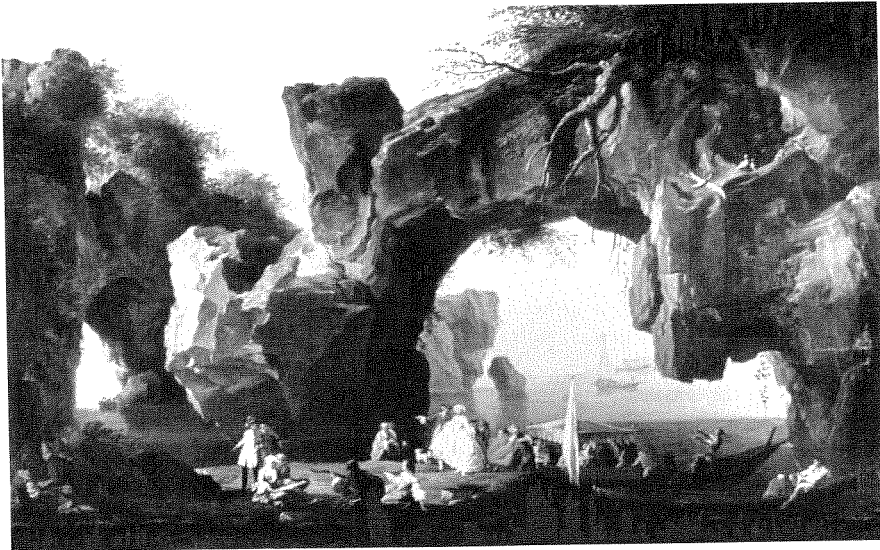
2 Cedar Creek Gorge from the Natural Bridge. Jefferson would never have tempted fate by sitting on such Baroque roots, as this later romantic artist does. From Bryant, *Picturesque America*.

acres in Rockbridge County, near Lexington, Virginia, on July 5, 1774, and kept it the rest of his life, even after his bankruptcy. He turned his private resources and initiatives toward open public benefit. Natural Bridge could almost be called the first national park, for it was kept inviolate, in its remote spot, for the novel arch it contained. Although Jefferson attempted to have the bridge recorded on canvas a number of times so that its image might be better recognized publicly, it actually was not so sensational, rising only 215 feet, with a 90-foot span, and otherwise melding into its bucolic setting. In his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson managed to make the site *sound* twice as exciting as it really was: “Though the sides of this bridge are provided in some parts with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and knees and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach.” His psychosomatic reaction might be thought more British than American, since the feeling of fright obviously derives from Edmund Burke’s mid-eighteenth-century English Sublime conceptualization. As Walter Hipple explains in his book on *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*, “Greatness of dimension . . . fills the mind with that ‘delightful horror’ which is the essential effect of sublimity.” It was typical of Jefferson to want to share terror in this amicable way.

When Jefferson described the descent from the deck of the bridge to Cedar Creek below, he presented a quite different mood: “If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme . . . ; so beautiful an arch, so light, and springing as it were up to heaven, the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable!” Down below was the domesticated prettiness and charm that he often cultivated inside his architecture. This lower register had so much exuberance and spring that it might even be called a French aspiration, for Joseph Vernet of France painted in the middle of the eighteenth century a number of pictures, such as *The Italian Gondola*, in which a natural stone arch framed a romantic and playful scene. And Jefferson had visited the Paris Salon of 1789, which exhibited as many as twelve of Vernet’s paintings. Both Jefferson and Vernet spoke in the language of reverie and good humor in the midst of apocalyptic events (a strange inconsistency to twentieth-century eyes, of course), as 1789 was the year of the French Revolution.

II

Jefferson’s view of Harpers Ferry on a visit in 1783 was more expansive but bound to be more tragic and thwarted. According to him, Harpers Ferry “is worth a voyage across the Atlantic. Yet here, as in the neighbourhood of the natural bridge, are people who have passed their lives within half a dozen miles, and have never been to



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3 The Italian Gondola, by Joseph Vernet, 1745–1750. The French painter Vernet included shipwrecks and natural arches in his more fanciful marine landscapes. Jefferson knew his paintings. From Florence Ingersoll-Smouse, *Joseph Vernet, Peintre de Marine* (Paris: Etienne Bignou, 1926).

4 Harpers Ferry from Jefferson Rock by moonlight. Jefferson's vantage point of Jefferson Rock is at the left, with the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal seen at its tip. The view is east down the Potomac River, the Shenandoah coming in from the right. The Catholic church (1833) has a spire, and St. John's Episcopal Church (1852) behind it has a two-stage cupola. From Bryant, *Picturesque America*.

survey these monuments of a war between rivers and mountains, which must have shaken the earth itself to its center.” Why did these natives fail to take inspiration from these wonderful, indigenous scenes? It was a potential fault of a republic that citizens would live down to its liberties and privileges rather than up. He observed in *Notes on Virginia* that some of them in Virginia were unable to aspire architecturally above the level of the shack.

The “war between rivers and mountains” was a naturalistic facsimile of the American Revolution of a decade before. And thus it ought to carry a heavy impact. So he says in *Notes on Virginia*, “The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand on a very high point of land [Jefferson Rock, or just above it]. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea.” The reader senses the full force in natural phenomena, translated from the political, of the American Revolution, the final breakthrough. However, after the breakthrough, a strange thing happens. Usually Jefferson kept the foreground formally composed; the distance he allowed to be more incidental and spreading. In this instance, however, the reverse relationship prevails.

In *Notes on Virginia*, he says, the “distant finishing” of the picture “is a true contrast to the fore-ground. It is as placid and delightful, as that is wild and tremendous. For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon, at an infinite distance in the plain country, inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. Here the eye ultimately composes itself.”

Three aspects of this quaint description are of interest to us here. The drama climaxes by splitting apart only one mountain, when no such single mound is dominant in the actual scene. He moves a mountain apart to create a satisfactory focal point, just as he hypothetically elevated the Natural Bridge to a dizzying height. Second, Jefferson did not include middle distances in his descriptions. The viewer was either here or there. Vertical planes had to be pried apart for more dramatic effect. He entitled those elementary zones the “Near” and the “Distant” (which he flip-flopped in the act of perception at Harpers Ferry). It wasn’t until the later visions of the Hudson River School painters that the Renaissance device of a middle distance was reinvoked in the landscape vocabulary of the nation. The third notable aspect of this description arises from the “small catch of smooth blue horizon,” lying twenty miles beyond at Frederick, Maryland, and “the fine country around that.” “That” represents “the infinite distance in

the plain country,” yet if one goes to Harpers Ferry and actually looks, this farthest view is hardly discernible. How can we explain Jefferson’s exaggeration again in this regard, particularly when “Near” and “Distant” are this time reversed? The simplest account is that after the violent breakthrough of the Revolution (that is, the powerful river through the resistant mountain), domestic peace has to lay just beyond in space as well as time. The “smooth blue horizon” was a tabula rasa of his political hopes for after the Revolution, for his vision of what the peaceful and bucolic country could become. For Jefferson, the foreground was always a leaping-off place.

The good times would never come so easily, however, and nothing shows that opposite scenario better than the intensely human, rather than natural, drama of this very spot of Harpers Ferry. All good intentions sank like a gritty residue to the bottom of its two major valleys; the Jeffersonian bubbles expired so rapidly. By 1796, only thirteen years after Jefferson’s visit, a federal armory was established there, partly because of the remoteness and security of the site. In 1840, environmental hate was first registered against Harpers Ferry by that practiced observer of the Hudson River scene, Nathan P. Willis, in his *American Scenery*. Willis resented the intrusion of industry into the previously untroubled setting: “The unpicturesque new village of the white man, his mill or his factory, does not convey to my imagination an image of happiness; and I regret the

primitive rover of the wild [the Indian], who neither blackened nature with smoke, nor violated her harmony with brick and shingle.” The benign Jeffersonian gaze was turning negative and bleak. The industrial intrusion was more resented because of the fastness of the location. Only nineteen years after Willis’s visit came the attack on the arsenal by John Brown and his eighteen followers, and the calculated disdain of Willis shrank to a cold hysteria in the chilling drizzle of October 16, 1859. No papers have indicated that Brown took notice of the esthetic potential of the unique surroundings. In environmental terms, genuine awfulness and fanaticism took over from Jefferson’s moderate sponsorship of the awesome outlook. In 1861 and 1862 the town was repeatedly attacked by Confederate soldiers with the gunmaking machines being shipped off to Richmond in 1861. Everything ended with a too immediate and pragmatic result, and Jefferson’s happy vision of the national future evaporated in the heat of regional and partisan strife.

III

Did Jefferson’s panoramic way of looking at the landscape bear any relation to the manner in which he conceived his architecture? It did, because the latter was always a part of the effect of an outdoor amphitheater, a kind of “builded scenery.” The two Ranges of the Lawn at the University of Virginia resemble the panoramic, parallel run of the Blue Ridge and the Southwest mountains from



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5 Harpers Ferry under Confederate occupation, May 1861. The covered bridge was burned by the Confederates in July 1861. The roofless structure to the right is the arsenal that was the target of John Brown’s raid in 1859; it was gutted by Union troops on April 16, 1861. From *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*.



6

6 Awkward Junction of Porticoes, East Range, University of Virginia. With Jefferson, one rose or fell, went forward or back, rather abruptly. Photograph by Ralph Thompson.



7

7 Pavilion X, East Range, University of Virginia. The students are hardly visible. Timelessness and purification were Jefferson's aims here. Photograph by Phillip Neuberg.

northeast to southwest as best seen from Monticello. Within the Ranges the same abrupt and awkward shift of Jefferson's attention that takes place in his landscapes can be witnessed when a portico is suddenly lifted to respond to a rising terrace. More spectacular yet is the buildup of the pavilions into distinct "mini-mountains." The rows of the Ranges frame the Lawn on each side, so that "Here the eye ultimately composes itself," as Jefferson said about the Frederick Town perspective. Pavilion X on the Lawn encapsulates the effect, if one can draw near enough to it. Pavilion X would appear even more monumental and mountainous today if the original parapets above the entablature were still in place. Jefferson commands our attention by suddenly upgrading the scale over the domestic by placing a bigger portico over two smaller ones. There is another degree of exaggeration in it, as in his descriptions of the Natural Bridge towering over the spectator, Harpers Ferry stretching away from the spectator, and the Southwest and Blue Ridge mountains from Monticello streaming by. The luminosity of the porch represents a mesmerization of the spectator by the singling out of a facade. The wooden material is structurally cumbersome but systematically very pleasing because the members are nevertheless all present and accounted for. One suddenly wants to register and reregister the white columns and entablatures as they press forward and back along the perspective of the East Range. Robert Venturi christened this

Jeffersonian effect of architectural cues as "contrasting adjacency" in his discussion of the Lawn in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). Jefferson sought out the right components (for him) and then froze them at the most poignant moment to obtain the highest degree of manifest Classicism, much as people iron autumnal leaves between wax paper to capture the tints. It is the same kind of freezing that takes Shaker furniture and family houses above and beyond the Federal style. The bafflement for the average spectator today comes from seeing such "conventional" elements turned into such a variety of clasped positions. One can hardly believe that Classical features were meant to be that stark or pure. That is what makes them American rather than European. The puristic luminosity registers so strongly that it even draws attention from whomever moves in the shadows below and behind the columns, white drawing forward and away from black. Jefferson's archaic approach captures immediate attention for eternal aims. It is the American formula for "ever after." His architectural motifs, especially the porches, bays, and terraces, are, in a way, cages he is constantly springing open for the escape of the spirit. Escape or release is an American intention. To let his spiritual birds escape from amidst the artificial mountains, the Lawn was originally opened toward the southwest, to soar ninety feet above the prospect below, and two wooden terraces were provided at Monticello to allow his guests to stand tall to look over his "Sea

View" to the south and the Blue Ridge on the north. He was an amateur all right, but how few professional architects since have worked so hard at vesting their environmental experiences or succeeded in making them as vivid, so vivid that their images can hardly be shaken off even today?

Jefferson belongs among us as an American because he was so individualistic in his public appearances. And that individualism found its strongest expression at quite opposite poles. He spaced the pavilions slightly farther apart along the Ranges as they became more distant from the dominant Rotunda. This creates optical differences in the way it is viewed, from one end or the other. He remained entirely silent, in his usually candid writing, about what he had done. He "hid" the students in the shadows under the porticoes, failed to humanize them, in an antidomestic effort to achieve a mini-monumental scale. He took up an eminently rational style, the Classical, distilled and "purified" it, and yet kept it mysterious and elusive. Sociable, buoyant, and courteous as he was, Jefferson could also force the smaller dome, column, or railing, however inadvertently, to become the very apotheosis of personal loneliness when silhouetted against the distant landscape and sky. These selfcontradictory gestures make his work, as exaggerated and genius laden as it is, extraordinary and American.