

## Commentary on Saint-Exupery's Geography Lesson: Art and Science in the Creation and Cultivation of Landscape Values<sup>1</sup>

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*"But what a strange lesson in geography I was given! Guillaumet did not teach Spain to me, he made the country my friend. Little by little, under the lamp, the Spain of my map became a sort of fairyland. The crosses I marked to indicate safety zones and traps were so many buoys and beacons. I charted the farmer, the thirty sheep, the brook. And exactly where she stood, I set a buoy to mark the shepherdess forgotten by the geographers"* (Saint-Exupery, 1939, 16-17)

In 1926, on the eve of his maiden flight as a mail pilot, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, a pioneer in aerial exploration of the desert and the Andes, is taught that sensory, pragmatic and poetic encounters with landscape are more important than the generalities and abstractions of geographers: *"You think the meadow empty, and suddenly bang! There are thirty sheep in your wheels"* (*Ibid*, 17). This lesson is recounted in Edmunds Bunkse's thoughtful and thought-provoking paper that discusses how geographers (and others) have largely failed to address human subjectivity in the creation and cultivation of landscape values: *"Occasional sallies are made into the humanities, but the home base remains firmly in the social and physical sciences...humanistic geographers have become known for their work beyond the borders of their discipline, but only in a limited sense"* (Bunkse, 1990, 96). For Bunkse, Saint-Exupery's lesson underscores the tendency of geographers throughout history to dehumanize landscape. He believes that art and literature represent an important and different path to "truth" in geography. The exposition of his belief represents an important contribution to geographical scholarship. More broadly, I believe his ideas, as timely now as when they first appeared, offer much to anyone with an interest in the natural and built environment.

Saint-Exupery's lyric interpretations of the world from the air are first presented to give his criticism of geography a particular power. These are, after all, not the musings of a disengaged spectator, but the thoughts and feelings of an active participant in the discipline of geography. Saint-Exupery's writing was admired *"not only on its literary merit but for its value as a record of realities"* (Gide, 1932, xi). Bunkse shows how Saint-Exupery's reflections on his lesson presaged Lowenthal's (1967) influential work on the relationship between geography, experience and imagination. Establishing a link to one of the most respected geographers of this century gives the reader pause; perhaps there is something to Saint-Exupery's writing beyond its literary merit:

*"Those olive trees were no longer just so many trees along the road, whizzing past at 130 kilometres an hour. I now saw them in their natural rhythm, slowly making olives. The sheep no longer merely served to reduce one's speed, they came alive. They ate and gave wool and the grass once again had a meaning, since they grazed on it"* (Saint-Exupery, 1986, 133)

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<sup>1</sup> Bunkse, E.V. 1990 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80(1), pp. 96-108.

And so the stage is set for Bunkse's response to Saint-Exupery, a response that comments on the role of humanism in geography and incorporates the perspectives of art into the work of geographers. The core of his argument is that artists, when they choose to illuminate the human condition, enlarge perception, knowledge, and overall consciousness of the world. Monet's paintings of water lilies, Steinbeck's depiction of the California Dustbowl and Lopez' discussion of the Inuit and their life amid the ice are three of the more prominent examples cited to demonstrate how artists have achieved this end. Bunkse sees, if not the geographer in their work, the promise of what the geographer might be. His hope is that their example will inspire others to not merely describe the earth's structure and processes, but to speak of the human condition and experience in the modern landscape.

Canadian readers will draw pleasure from a case study that is singled out as an exemplar of how humanistic values can be coupled to physical landscape realities: the Sun Yat-Sen Park and Suzhou Classical Garden in Vancouver, B.C. This project, the first full-scale, authentic classical Chinese garden to be built in North America, was the vision of a geographer, Merwyn Samuels. A specialist in Chinese geography, Samuels was also possessed of a humanistic vision of the landscape. He drew on both capabilities to design, finance, and construct this much-admired garden that contributes green space to the Chinatown district and symbolizes the contribution of Chinese immigrants to Canada.

Bunkse recognizes that Cartesian science is the dominant tradition of western scholarship in this century and he is careful to acknowledge its contributions to society. That said, he deftly points out that while it may divine a vaccine for smallpox or create hybrid corn, it cannot address humane values of spirituality and transcendence. These things require not a reduction but an expansion of the human experience. They require a willingness to tap the deeper roots of literary and artistic imagination to find the spirit of landscape. His paper is, ultimately, an exploration of that possibility through the example of Saint-Exupery. Like the geographer-artist who inspired him, Bunkse believes that landscape should be framed as much by poetry and literature as by Cartesian science.

One of the strengths of the paper is its call for a reaffirmation of humanism as an essential lens through which landscape should be viewed. Importantly, this is not about creating something new, but remembering the roots of landscape appreciation and study. Bunkse points out that humanism informed the work of Humboldt (1844), who used the perspectives of both art and science to study nature and the human mind in nature. A few geographers of this century, notably Sauer (1965), Wright (1966), Glacken (1967) and Lowenthal (1985) have embraced humanism, but the majority, in Bunkse's opinion, view humanism as "*yet another data set subject to generalization and reduction*" (Bunkse, 1990, 104). There is a need for geographers to broaden their perspective, to engage in intellectual and artistic activities that foster humane attitudes and perceptions of landscape. The inclusion of sketching and painting as part of the training of geographers, as it is for architects, is used as an example of how this broader, more humane perspective might be fostered. He would also like to see geographers join their colleagues in the humanities and publish novels or poems, and acquire artistic skills in the visual arts.

Another strength of the paper is its impressive list of references drawn from the fields of geography, history, human ecology, landscape architecture and philosophy.

Students will find a rich seam of intellectual inquiry here. Still, as is inevitable in a work of this scope, there are some interesting omissions. Chief among these is Cosgrove and Daniels' *Iconography of Landscape* (1988), an important study of how perceptions and attitudes to landscape have been shaped by the portrayal of landscape in drawing and painting. Turner's *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* (1983), a history of European civilization in the Americas seen through the prism of geography, cultural history and comparative religion, is another source that would enrich Bunkse's argument. On the whole, however, the range of scholarship consulted is admirable.

Bunkse closes his paper with a call for research in three thematic areas. The first is the relationship between modern literary-artistic creations and attitudes towards nature, human nature, and culture. The second is the way cultural relativism informs the treatment of landscape. The third is the relationship between personal, experiential knowledge and official, scientific knowledge in the creation of landscape values. These are big themes. Too big, perhaps, for an old discipline like geography that has traditionally described where places were and what they looked like. To address them geographers must study the processes that transform the landscape emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. Such study requires an interdisciplinary approach in which aesthetics, history, human ecology and landscape architecture play prominent roles. A year after Bunkse's paper appeared, the landscape architect, Alexander Wilson, published *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez* (1991). More recently, the historian, Simon Schama, released *Landscape and Memory* (1995). Bunkse would be pleased at such inter-disciplinary efforts. They reflect an earnest and productive effort to answer his call and lend an artistic voice to the interpretation of the world around us. We still await an eloquent contribution from a geographer who understands, as Bunkse does, that it is not the frame that is important, but what is framed.

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