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More than a Feeling

Why the Lewis and Clark Expedition Did not Experience “the Sublime” at the Great Divide when Crossing the American Continent

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Abstract

When in the early summer of 1805 Meriwether Lewis for the first time sights the great mountains of the American West, he merely reports “an august spectacle.” The word “august” was not then an aesthetic category, nor did it usually describe visual contact with landscape. Categories used for these purposes were the picturesque and the sublime. Whereas there are numerous examples of the picturesque in the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the sublime draws a blank. In my contribution, I will be offering several reasons for the absence of description in the sublime mode: (1) Like their contemporaries, Lewis and Clark held nature up to the yardstick of utility, calculating the agricultural potential of the land or the navigability of a river. (2) The Lewis and Clark expedition was a military expedition, sent out by President Jefferson not to stand in awe at sublime grandeur but to document a useful landscape. (3) Seeing mountains as sublime was essentially a matter of an individual imagination. The Corps of Discovery was a group, whose success depended on cooperation. Hence, the individual imagination must take a back seat. (4) The actual experience of hardship and adversity during the crossing of the Rockies would have obviated any description in the “grand style.” (5) Finally, the Corps of Discovery was not even prepared to encounter the great mountains of the West, expecting instead gentle rolling hills that would enable an easy portage to the Columbia River and, if anything, call for picturesque description.

Keywords: Clark, William; Lewis, Meriwether; Lewis and Clark Expedition; Rocky Mountains; the sublime

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Why the Lewis and Clark Expedition Did not Experience “the Sublime” at the Great Divide when Crossing the American Continent

Heinz Tschachler

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States geared up for the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition. American filmmaker Ken Burns launched his riveting television documentary *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (1997) and even President George W. Bush paid tribute to the achievement that “changed the face of our country forever. It opened up the American West for future development.” Bush further claimed that the Lewis and Clark expedition “increased our knowledge of our natural resources,” helped “gain a better understanding of America’s native cultures,” and that the expedition “will stand forever as a monument to the American spirit, a spirit of optimism and courage and persistence in the face of adversity.”¹ Mountains figure prominently in nineteenth-century explorations and they have held a prime position in travel since. Today, high mountains are among the prime tourist attractions and are often regarded as the most beautiful and spiritually uplifting places on earth, and as the cause of pleasurable, even ecstatic feelings by a large majority of writers and artists. Their attraction is frequently associated with the state of the sublime and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Mont Blanc” (1817), perhaps the most famous literary celebration of mountain sublimity.

This article argues that despite the high currency of the sublime, the Lewis and Clark expedition did not habitually resort to this category in their reports. It investigates the reasons for this absence and asks how the members of the expedition responded to the high mountains of the American West. Altogether in the *Journals*, the word “sublime” occurs a mere four times, and only in Meriwether Lewis’s writings, as only Lewis had the refined sensibility to associate the landscape with European art, literature, and thought. But even Lewis used the category of the sublime only in describing the Great Falls and the White Cliffs of the Missouri, scenes that somehow fit the aesthetic sensibility that he had acquired in the East. That sensibility proved to be inadequate at the Great Divide. If sublimity was not the main defining category to make sense of the mountains encountered in the American West, what were the qualities chosen for representation?

Lewis's record of "a most beautiful and picturesque view of the Rocky mountains" is truly enthusiastic, yet what he described is a static tableau.² This was the trademark of picturesque description, that is, of "the habit of viewing and criticizing nature as if it were an infinite series of more or less well composed subjects for painting."³ Derived from landscape painting, the term "picturesque" references an ideal form of nature and may be described as "feeling through the eye."⁴ By contrast, beautiful landscapes were light, pastoral, and pleasing. Flattering a sense of our own power, they evoke cheerful and harmonious reactions. Though aesthetic categories were not part of the expedition's "surveying catalog," on occasion such categories did enter their observations. We find examples for as long as the actual landscape somehow corresponded to what they had been told to encounter— truly pastoral stretches or gentle rolling hills that would enable an easy portage to the Columbia River. As we will see, in the actual crossing of the Rocky Mountains, the view is neither beautiful nor picturesque. By contrast, the sublime might have qualified as a representational category. Literally, sublime means "(on) high, lofty, elevated." Used as "a term of aesthetic approbation," its effect is "simultaneously to make one conscious of one's own comparative weakness in the face of natural might and to produce a sense of the strength of one's own faculties."⁵

Originally, "sublime" denoted a writing style that was calculated to prompt the strongest emotions. By the eighteenth century, it had gone well beyond that, to a theory of emotional experience that shaped not only literary representation but also the arts as well as the experience of landscape, in particular of features of overwhelming grandeur such as the high Alps. Edmund Burke elaborated as early as 1757 that the sublime, especially the sublime in nature, causes a specific "passion," that is, "Astonishment." This is a mingled passion, comprising both enjoyment of beauty, which evokes feelings of "joy and pleasure," and "some degree of horror." Most importantly, in sublime moments, "the mind is so entirely filled with its [sublime] object, that it cannot . . . reason."⁶ In this way, and always from a safe distance, sublime encounters transform landscape into a baffling wilderness, bringing the observer face to face with a lack, or rather inadequacy, of human comprehension and agency, producing a sense of powerlessness and insignificance vis-à-vis the infinite. In other words, the sublime "bespeaks pleasure in an object that is without bounds not merely in appearing infinite but in having no form."⁷

In the remainder of this essay, I will probe the following three reasons for the absence of the sublime mode in the Rocky Mountains section of the journals: (1) The Lewis and Clark expedition was a military expedition by order of President Jefferson. Their mission was to find a practicable water communication and not to stand in awe at sublime grandeur. (2) Mountain tops have been valuable viewpoints in colonial exploration and were used to assess the agricultural and navigational potential of an area from a bird's-eye view. Holding nature up to the yardstick of utility did not necessarily lend itself to aesthetic appreciation. (3) When the Corps of Discovery, as Thomas Jefferson had called the group, encountered the great mountains of the West, there was an awareness of the mountains' grandeur, but nothing that would qualify as a powerful aesthetic experience. The actual experience of hardship and adversity constituted what Michel Foucault called the "limits and forms of the sayable."⁸ Hardship and adversity thus ruled out description in the grand style.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition as a Military Expedition

On January 18, 1803, President Thomas Jefferson sent a confidential message to Congress:

The river Missouri, & the Indians inhabiting it, are not as well known as is rendered desirable. . . . It is however understood that the country on that river is inhabited by numerous tribes, who furnish great supplies of furs. . . . An intelligent officer with ten or twelve chosen men . . . might explore the whole line, even to the Western ocean. . . . The appropriation of two thousand five hundred dollars . . . would cover the undertaking.⁹

The phrase "an intelligent officer with ten or twelve chosen men" leaves no doubt that from the beginning, the Lewis and Clark expedition was a military expedition, though its purpose was not military conquest so much as exploration framed by commercial interests. Jefferson made plain the expedition's purpose in his instructions to Meriwether Lewis: "The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal streams of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean . . . may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce."¹⁰ Jefferson also insisted that simply making the journey and finding a practicable water communication was not enough. In order for the expedition to be utilized for military purposes, acquired knowledge had to be recorded through writing, drawing, and map making. Jefferson directed Lewis accordingly: "Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy" and "to be entered distinctly, & intelligibly for others as well as for yourself."¹¹ As a measure of precaution, the president urged Lewis to produce one copy of his notes on birch bark, as that material was "less liable to injury from damp than common paper."¹² In his lengthy directions, Jefferson overlooked nothing. The Corps of Discovery was tasked to draw maps, make detailed observations of soils, minerals, crops, animals, topography, and weather. In addition, they were to meet

the Indigenous population and record their languages, customs, religions, food, clothing, and, their willingness to trade with the Americans. Thus, a great many of the expedition's journals contain notes that reveal the expedition's interest in knowing the land and the people sought to conquer.

Military interests required a thorough knowledge of topography. Faithfully following the instructions that he had received, Lewis made use of a valuable viewpoint for assessing navigational potential of the land stretching below him. On May 26, 1805, for instance, he noted that he had sighted a few of the most elevated points above the horizon, the most remarkable of which by my pocket compass I found bore N. 65° W. being a little to the N. of the N. W. extremity of the range of broken mountains seen this morning by Capt. C. these points of the Rocky Mountains were covered with snow and the sun shone on it in such manner as to give me the most plain and satisfactory view.

In other instances, scientific notes contain climatological observations, as in Lewis's journal entry of June 14, 1805— that sudden and immense torrents would issue at certain seasons of the year; but the reverse is absolutely the case. I am therefore compelled to believe that the snowy mountains yield their waters slowly, being partially effected every day by the influence of the sun only, and never suddenly melted down by haisty showers of rain.

Notes of this kind make for rather dull reading. Yet the original journals were never meant for public scrutiny but as records of military men writing under orders; they were intended for the eyes of the President, the intelligentsia who were stirring with national fervor at the time, and politicians in favor of westward expansion. But president, intelligentsia, and politicians for all their Enlightenment rationalism were all guided by a set of misconceptions, chief among them the theory of the Northwest Passage (a theory stretching back to Christopher Columbus).

Supporting the Northwest Passage theory were two geographical concepts: the "pyramidal height of land" and "symmetrical geography."¹³ The pyramidal height of land was a mythical spot in the West where all the major rivers of the continent had their sources. From this commanding height, armchair explorers imagined the possibility to travel in all directions by river. Symmetrical geography projected onto the West what was known of the East. Reasoning from known to the unknown, geographers assumed all kinds of resemblances—between the Missouri and the Ohio, the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, the Columbia and the Potomac. In their minds, the West became a rough mirror image of the East, often even better. Symmetrical geography—one of the guiding principles of neoclassical aesthetics—must have had a special appeal to Thomas Jefferson, whose Monticello also faithfully reflected symmetry. If the beauty of symmetry reflected God's mind, it was only reasonable to assume that the North American continent would obey the same rules.¹⁴ An 1803 map of western North America by the government cartographer Nicholas King bears out the era's misconceptions. Although it reflects the

most accurate geographical information available (it has the continent's width absolutely correct because the coasts' longitudes had been precisely measured by the British Royal Navy), the map is also saturated with wishful thinking. Instead of showing the Rocky Mountains as an unbroken north-south chain, it shows intermittent hills that end a little south of the 49th parallel, complying with Jefferson's description of them as "highlands" rather than mountains. A tributary of the Columbia River even interlocks with a southern branch of the Missouri, illustrating the President's claim that the Missouri offered "continued navigation from it's source, and, possibly with a single portage, from the Western Ocean."¹⁵

Safety and survival are of paramount importance for military expeditions. The Lewis and Clark expedition was no exception in this regard. After more than two years and with nearly 8,000 miles behind them, the Corps of Discovery returned to Saint Louis safely, having lost only one man on the way. As Lewis wrote in his report to Jefferson, dated September 23, 1806:

It is with pleasure that I announce to you the safe arrival of myself and party at 12 O'clk. today at this place with our papers and baggage. in obedience to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean, and sufficiently explored the interior of the country to affirm with confidence that we have discovered the most practicable rout which dose exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers. . . . Meriwether Lewis, Capt. 1st U'S. Regt. Infty.¹⁶

The report must have delighted Jefferson, not just because of the safe return of the expedition's members but also because of the safe arrival of their "papers and baggage." Jefferson could look forward to a huge amount of useful knowledge, recorded through writing, drawing, and map making, and, following his directions, taken "with great pains & accuracy."¹⁷ Jefferson, who envisioned the western United States as an agrarian paradise, would especially relish knowledge of the usability of the land.¹⁸

Mountains and their Utility

Reconnoitering the land around the Great Falls of the Missouri on June 14, 1805, Lewis, after climbing a hill, enjoyed "a fine prospect of the adjacent country." He wrote, "from hence I overlooked *a most beatifull and extensive plain* reaching from the river to the base of the *Snowclad mountains to the S. and S. West.*" Overwhelmed by the human scale and clearly perceived limits, Lewis found beauty in the pastoral plain extending beyond him, which left him in a cheerful and harmonious mood. Lewis had experienced a similar reaction along the Maria's River, which, he noted on June 8, 1805, passes through a rich fertile and one of the most beatifully picteresque countries that I ever beheld, through the wide expanse of which, innumerable herds of living anamals are seen, it's borders

garished with one continued garden of roses, while it's lofty and open forrests, are the habitation of miriads of the feathered tribes who salute the ear of the passing traveler with their wild and simple, yet s[w]eet and cheerfull melody.¹⁹

More specifically, the passage reveals that "beautiful" did not exclusively mean aesthetically pleasing in the sense that the French painter Claude Lorrain saw it or that modern tourists might see a landscape today. There is a clear implication of use, and use was inevitably connected to commercial agriculture. In a letter Lewis sent his mother from the expedition's winter quarters at Fort Mandan, he not only pronounced the region "one of the fairest portions of the globe," but also declared that nowhere else was there "a similar extent of country, equally fertile, well watered, and intersected by such a number of navigable streams."²⁰ And just before the expedition arrived at Maria's River, Lewis once again managed to conjure an agrarian paradise out of the land: "the whole country," he wrote on June 4, 1805, "in fact appears to be one continued plain to the foot of the mountains or as far as the eye can reach; the soil appears dark rich and fertile yet the grass is by no means as high nor dose it look so luxurient as I should have expected, it is short just sufficient to conceal the ground."

We find a similar rhetoric of agricultural potential in William Clark's description of the prairie world. In his entry of July 4, 1804, he duly acknowledged "one of the most butifull Plains," in which "nature appears to have exerted herself to butify the scenery by the variety of flours <raiseing> Delicately and highly flavered raised above the Grass, which Strikes & profumes the Sensation and amuses the mind." The cheerful and harmonious reaction that the landscape evokes in Clark no doubt references the beautiful as defined by Burke. Yet Clark quickly went on to note that the grassland stretching to the horizon was "well calculated for the sweetest and most norushing hay." Moreover, he ends with a regret that "So magnificent a Senerey" can "be enjoyed by nothing but the Buffalo Elk Deer & Bear . . . & Savage Indians." For Clark, aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from use, that is, use in terms of European-style commercial agriculture. Only when grass would be hay and trees timber might the land's beauty be appreciated by the "Sivilised world." Lewis and Clark, like many of their contemporaries, Thomas Jefferson included, were faithful disciples of the British agriculturalist Arthur Young, who considered agriculture to be "beyond all doubt the foundation of every other art, business, or profession."²¹ In his wake, the American West was envisioned as a garden or, more precisely, an agrarian paradise. And that was what Jefferson promised. The West, he claimed, would "yield an abundance of all the necessities of life, and almost spontaneously; very little labor being required in the cultivation of the earth."²² There are good reasons, then, to refer to the rhetorical mode employed for the journal entries quoted here as "pastoral."²³

There were exceptions to the newfound Garden of Eden on the western plains. Shortly after leaving the expedition's winter quarters at Fort Mandan, the Corps of Discovery came through a badland of high buttes and eroded gullies. "Soar eyes is a common complaint among the party," Lewis noted on April 24, 1805. "I believe it originates from

the immense quantities of sand which is driven by the wind from the sandbars ... so penetrating is this sand that we cannot keep any article free from it; in short, we are compelled to eat, drink, and breath it very freely." A month later, the expedition reached the Missouri River Breaks, a rugged and broken terrain with endless mazes of bluffs and coulees, which Clark on May 26, 1805, called "the Deserts of America, as I do not Conceive any part can ever be Settled." Not every part of the West was, then, a Garden of Eden for its agricultural potential. If there had been a few isolated stretches of "useless" land along the Missouri River, in the high mountains of the far West even looking for an agrarian paradise was utterly pointless.

Hardship and Adversity at the Great Divide

Already Lewis's first sighting of the Rocky Mountains on the far western horizon reveals that hardships encountered via impassable terrain, bad weather, and starvation marked the crossing of these rugged mountains. It was Sunday, May 26, 1805, when the captain climbed out of the valley of the Missouri River and for the first time saw what he thought were the Rocky Mountains. Gazing at the distant peaks gave him a "secret pleasure," but already it was tempered by the prospect of "the sufferings and hardships of myself and party in thim." Still, optimism prevails: "As I have always held it a crime to anticipate evils I will believe it a good and comfortable road untill I am compelled to believe differently." In the following weeks, a sense of danger builds up, though Lewis's optimism prevails. "We all beleive that we are now about to enter on the most perilous and difficult part of our voyage," he recorded on July 4, 1805, "yet I see no one repining; all appear ready to met those difficulties which wait us with resolution and becoming fortitude" and "all appear perfectly to have made up their minds to suceed in the expedition or purish in the attempt." Two weeks later, the first range of the Rocky Mountains loomed ahead. The river cut through them in an awesome gorge that the men called Gates of the Rocky Mountains. The cliffs, Lewis wrote on July 19, "rise from the waters edge on either side perpendicularly to the hight of [NB: about] 1200 feet. every object here wears a dark and gloomy aspect. the tow[er]ing and projecting rocks in many places seem ready to tumble on us."

The crossing over the Great Divide, which Stephen Ambrose calls "one of the great forced marches in American history,"²⁴ became a grueling 165-mile, eleven-day ordeal in which the Corps of Discovery teetered on the brink of starvation and came its closest to complete failure. Conditions got so bad that the men ate their last colt, the rest of their portable soup, about twenty pounds of candles, and a little bear's oil, and Clark named a stream "Hungery Creek." "This morning was very cold," Lewis scribbled in his journal on August 21, 1805, "the ink feizes in my pen." And Joseph Whitehouse noted on September 10, "Though the day is warm, the Snow does not melt on the mountains a short distance from us . . . The Snow makes them look like the middle of winter." Nothing in their experience of mountains had prepared the explorers for the Bitterroot Range of the

Rockies. Led by an elderly Shoshone, whom the captains called Old Toby, the men found their path blocked by deep snow, twisted undergrowth, and steep hillsides. And there was that awful weather. "I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life," Clark wrote on September 16. Two days earlier he had written, "The Mountains which we passed to day much worst than yesterday, the last excessively bad." The day before, Clark had recorded a dismaying sight from a vantage point—"high rugged [rugged] mountains in every direction as far as I could see." When "we awoke this morning," Whitehouse noted on September 16, to our great Surprise we were covered with Snow which had fallen about 2 Inches the latter part of last night, and continues a verry cold Snow Storm. . . . Some of the men without Socks rapped rags on their feet . . . Set out without any thing to eat, and proceeded on.

John Ordway, too, was dismayed. "The mountains continue as far as our eyes could extend," he wrote on September 18, "they extend much further than we expected."

Crossing over the Great Divide pushed the Corps of Discovery to the breaking point, not only physically but also mentally and intellectually. Confronted with hitherto unknown physical hardships, the men also confronted an epistemological void, a pictorial vacuum, a blank. With the basis of the journals gone in dashed hopes for a Northwest Passage, the failed expectations drowned out any familiar aesthetic templates. It was Lewis, with his refined sensibility, who suffered the most from the erosion in his categories of description, and all but vanishes as a narrator. (More of the narrative crisis anon.) As the dream of a "practicable water communication" faded, so did Lewis's account—stopping in mid-sentence on August 26. A long and pessimistic entry ends with an incomplete thought and an empty stomach: "I had nothing but a little parched corn to eat this evening. This morning Capt. C. and party—." Then, there is nothing at all until the explorers are way over the Bitterroots. Finally, on September 21, Lewis admitted in his journal, "I find myself growing weak for the want of food and most of the men complain of a similar deficiency and have fallen off very much." On September 22, the expedition staggered out of the Bitterroot mountains, more dead than alive. The men had already ascended the Missouri in a keelboat, had spent a bitter cold winter at Fort Mandan, had labored hard at the Great Falls, had gotten their canoes up the Jefferson River, and every time they had such an experience behind them, they agreed that it had to be the worst, and that they could not possibly endure anything worse. Only to have it get worse. Understandably, Lewis wrote on September 22, "the pleasure I now felt in having triumphed over the rocky Mountains and descending once more to a level and fertile country where there was every rational hope of finding a comfortable subsistence for myself and party can be more readily conceived than expressed."

Altogether, the record that those "writingest explorers of their time," as Donald Jackson exuberantly calls the Corps of Discovery's members,²⁵ left behind from this most arduous part of their journey amounts to a case study in perseverance against continual adversity. It is no exaggeration to say that the explorers speak to us as "men . . . with the

will and the hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive.”²⁶ Nor does it come as a surprise that on the return leg, the rigors of those mountains were constantly on the captains’ minds. “That wretched portion of our journey,” Lewis noted in his journal entry of June 2, 1806, “where hunger and cold in their most rigorous forms assail the varied traveller; not any of us have yet forgotten our sufferings, in those mountains in September last, and I think it probable we never shall.” And on June 14, Clark “shudder[ed] with the expectation of great difficulties in passing those Mountains [one more time], from the depth of snow and the want of grass sufficient [for] our horses.” Lewis, observing, on May 17, the increasing run-off from the snowmelt, was more hopeful that “that icy barrier which separates me from my friends and Country” will soon be behind them. Yet looking at snowbanks twelve feet deep, he marveled on June 17, “Here was winter in all its rigors.” It was not until June 30 that the Corps of Discovery finally descended “these tremendous mountains . . . in passing of which,” Clark noted, “we have experienced cold and hunger of which I shall ever remember.” What Clark as well as the other men will remember from the crossing over the Great Divide is being pushed to the breaking point, not standing in awe at the mountains’ sublime grandeur. Aesthetic appreciation was a matter of less threatening landscapes, most notably of landscapes that somehow corresponded to what the men had been told to encounter—truly pastoral stretches or gentle rolling hills that would enable an easy portage to the Columbia River.

Aesthetic Eccentricities and Discontinuities

There is a striking contrast between the rhetoric of hardship and adversity that marks the crossing over the Great Divide and Meriwether Lewis’s enraptured listening, on the plains off the Maria’s River, to the song of “a small bird which in action resembles the lark,” characterizing it as both “sweet” and “plaintive.” “The larks,” he remarked on June 4, 1805, “add much to the gayety and cheerfulness of the scene.” Even more remarkable for its sense of wonder and awe at the marvels of nature is Lewis’s observation of the Great Falls of the Missouri. “I hurried down the hill which was about 200 feet high and difficult of access,” Lewis noted in his journal on June 13, 1805, “to gaze on this *sublimely grand spectacle*,” which he then calls “the grandest sight I ever beheld.” He instantly took out his notebook and recorded what he was seeing. Painfully aware that he lacked artistic skills, he wished “for the pencil of Salvator Rosa or the pen of [James] Thomson, that I might be enabled to give to the enlightened world some just idea of *this truly magnificent and sublimely grand object*, which has from the commencement of time been concealed from the view of civilized man.” When Lewis, who has verbally positioned himself as a typical landscape painter, mentions Salvator Rosa, he likely recalled the Italian painter’s dark landscapes art (of which he may have seen reproductions). He also may have remembered reading (or hearing about) James Thomson’s cycle of poems, *The Seasons* (1730). Perhaps he even remembered what he himself had seen, such as “the celebrated falls of Potomac or Soolkiln &c.,” which, however, are not up to par with the Great Falls. “This falls,” he recorded for June 14, 1805, “is incomparably a greater cataract and a more noble interesting object.” Rosa’s paintings of sublime landscapes, Thomson’s descriptions

of dark winter landscapes, as well as personal recollections condense into a template providing a vocabulary that came to bear on Lewis's response to what is now partly submerged under the lake behind Ryan Dam.

For Lewis, the Great Falls provided a preeminent locale for the picturesque, the beautiful and, with some reservations, for the sublime in nature. So did, to a lesser degree, the White Cliffs of the Missouri. In his entry for May 31, 1805, Lewis marvels at the "most romantic appearance" of the White Cliffs, those "scenes of visionary enchantment." The sight left him full of cheer and harmony, yet once again he recalled an image from back East, this time of "some of those large stone buildings in the U. States." What Lewis discovered is made meaningful by placing it in the context of European intellectual traditions. This is also true of William Clark, who saw the White Cliffs in terms of "antient ruins some like elegant buildings at a distance," a phrase that John Ordway repeated almost verbatim, while to Patrick Gass, one of the Sergeants, the cliffs seemed "as if built by the hand of man, and are so numerous that they appear like the ruins of an antient city." In each instance, the scene is seen through a lens formed by images from European art, literature, and thought. Moreover, what is being described are landscapes that are non-threatening, landscapes that somehow corresponded to what the men had been told to encounter—which the great mountains of the West did not.

Failed Expectations and Narrative Crisis

The lens formed by images from European art, literature, and thought would take the Corps of Discovery only so far. In August 1805, the expedition had reached a point on the Missouri that was as far as their canoes could go. Lewis was amazed about the gentle ascent to so high an elevation. "If the Columbia furnishes us such another example," he wrote on August 10, "a communication across the continent by water will be practicable and safe." Yet Lewis had had some forebodings about that prospect ever since the Corps of Discovery had arrived at the Three Forks. His main concern was to find horses and trade for provisions to cross a section of the country where subsistence would be "precarious." The expedition had reached the edge of the geographical information they had gleaned from the Hidatsa people the previous winter and, as Lewis noted on July 27, was now "without any information with respect to the country not knowing how far these mountains continue, or wher to direct our course to pass them to advantage or intercept a navigable branch of the Columbia," or whether they would find enough suitable timber to build canoes. Still, Lewis remained hopeful, taking "consolation" from the fact "that from our present position it is impossible that the S. W. fork [the Jefferson] can head with the waters of any other river but the Columbia."

None of the men had had any firsthand experience of high, rugged mountains, nor any mental images thereof. Their landscape vision had been shaped by eastern experiences and a decidedly Atlantic sensibility. Forests and meadows, farmsteads and villages, navigable rivers, clearly defined seasons, and a paramount green color were the dominant

features of their landscape world. Images derived from the men's Atlantic sensibility lost their representational force once the Corps of Discovery reached the Continental Divide, on August 12, 1805. After a moment of elation and exuberance for having accomplished "one of those great objects on which my mind has been unalterably fixed for many years," that is, for having discovered the headwaters of the mighty Missouri, Lewis "proceeds" to the top of the ridge. However, beyond Lemhi Pass lay not the Columbia River, nor the green slopes leading down to a western ocean, as Jefferson's instructions had led him to expect, but an immense jumble of daunting, snow-capped mountains where mountains were not supposed to exist, "immense ranges of high mountains still to the West of us with their tops partially covered with snow." Lewis never wrote about what he felt as he first saw the Bitterroot Range of the Rocky Mountains, though in those mountains, the myth of a Northwest Passage finally died. In his summary report to President Jefferson, drafted in late September 1806, Lewis was, then, quite straightforward about the portage from the Missouri to the Columbia: it was a passage of 340 miles, 200 along a good road, the other 140 over "tremendous mountains which for 60 mls. are covered with eternal snow." With those words, "Lewis put an end to the search for the Northwest Passage."²⁷ There simply was no "practicable waterway" across the North American continent as Thomas Jefferson had expected and as the British cartographer Aaron Arrowsmith's 1802 map (which the explorers had with them) promised.²⁸ Instead, there was a snowy barrier to the west of the explorers, "the most terrible mountains I ever beheld," in the words of Sergeant Patrick Gass of September 16, 1805.

These mountains not only made the duration of the expedition much longer than anticipated; they also completely lacked what the explorers would have seen as usefulness—agricultural potential of the land or navigability of rivers. In fact, the explorers were not even expecting the height and breadth of the Rocky Mountains but rather a single line of low ridges promising an easy half-day portage from the Missouri to the Columbia. The notion of a half-day portage had received additional fuel by what Hidatsa people told Lewis at Fort Mandan in the winter of 1804–1805. As Lewis wrote in his report to Jefferson, the northern of the three rivers at Three Forks is navigable to foot of chain of high mountains, being the ridge which divides the waters of the Atlantic from those of the Pacific ocean. the Indians assert that they can pass in half a day from the foot of this mountain on it's East side to a larger river which washes it's Western base.

What the Hidatsas said they saw from the top of the mountain was exactly what Lewis and Jefferson hoped for and expected: "The Indians inform us that that the country on the Western side of this river consists of open & level plains like those they themselves inhabit."²⁹ Understandably, Lewis wrote to Jefferson on April 7, 1805: "I can foresee no material or probable obstruction to our progress, and entertain therefore the most sanguine hopes of complete success ... You may therefore expect me to meet you at Monachello in September 1806."³⁰

Arrowsmith's map of 1802 was not the only faulty marvel that misguided the Corps of Discovery and led to their failed expectations. In 1802, Thomas Jefferson also received a copy of Alexander Mackenzie's account of his voyage to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. Published in 1801, the account reports of an easy one-day portage over a low mountain pass to a westward-flowing river. What remained below Jefferson's radar was that the river was not navigable, and that Mackenzie had reached the Pacific a full five degrees north of the Columbia. Nevertheless, Jefferson reasoned that if the mountains four hundred miles south were similar to those Mackenzie had crossed, the portage would also be similar. A year later, in 1803 and just in time for the explorers' departure, Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury, supervised the creation of a map of western North America by the government cartographer Nicholas King. Although the map summarized current knowledge of the West, it too showed a blank filled with a major misconception—that the Rocky Mountains were not in the way of, as Jefferson had written in his instructions to Meriwether Lewis, a "direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purpose of commerce."³¹

Explorers, as "they go out into the unknown, are 'programmed' by the knowledge, values, and objectives of the civilized centers from which they depart."³² Lewis and Clark were no different. They had fully internalized the implications of a "geography of hope."³³ In crossing the Great Divide, the Corps of Discovery, hapless victims of fanciful geography that they were, confronted an epistemological void, a pictorial vacuum, a blank. With the basis of the journals gone in dashed hopes for a Northwest Passage, "the gap between ideological and geographical landscapes would become too wide to mend through description. A narrative crisis resulted."³⁴ Lewis, who habitually cast himself in the persona of an enlightened explorer, full of a refined sensibility, established back East, had reached a limit to the range of his writing. With the premise behind the narrative exhausted, he was no longer able to incorporate physical terrain and categories of description. As we have seen, he stopped writing altogether, disappearing as narrator during the most difficult leg of the journey and never completing the blank pages of the expedition log. Thus, what the explorers left behind from the crossing are climatological and other scientific observations, records of their encounters with Indigenous people, words of appraisal to Thomas Jefferson and other representatives of U.S. officialdom, as well as ample records of, as President George W. Bush put it, "adversity."³⁵ They also left behind a map, begun by William Clark in 1804 and completed by him at Fort Clatsop in February 1806. At more than four feet wide, this masterwork, which Clark kept updating in his office in St. Louis, not only is a historically relevant summary of the geographic knowledge of the West at the time, but, as a marvel of accuracy, also retains evidence of the discontinuities and terminations that were part of the expansion into the West of enlightened America.³⁶

Failed expectations explain why the Corpse of Discovery did not experience the sublime at the Great Divide. The great mountains of the West were anything but gentle rolling hills; they had no agricultural potential, the rivers were not navigable, and what passed

for a road often was, as Lewis noted on September 19, 1805, “excessively dangerous . . . a narrow rocky path generally on the side of steep precipice, from which in many places if ether man or horse were precipitated they would inevitably be dashed in pieces.” The explorers, like mountaineers in earlier times, took to the Rocky Mountains fearfully, grimly, resenting the necessity, and only on rare occasions, if at all, suggesting the slightest aesthetic gratification. Overall, there was too much danger to give the explorers time to reflect upon the mountains’ beauties, to recollect the encounter in tranquility, that is, from a safe distance. Accordingly, there is nothing in the journals that would qualify as a powerful aesthetic experience, least of all one that elevates the great mountains to symbols of, in Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s words, “that ‘more beyond’ to which imagination persistently aspires, of the eternity and infinity that are the unattainable goals of the imagination.”³⁷ We find all of this in Shelley’s poem on the glory of Mont Blanc:

. . . how hideously
Its shapes are heap’d around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarr’d, and riven.—Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea Of fire
envelop once this silent snow?
None can reply—all seems eternal now.³⁸

The poem is subtitled “Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni,” which marks it as the product of the safety and comfort of a chalet, the ideal setting for emotions to be recollected in tranquility. In the journals of the Corps of Discovery, the great mountains of the West are confronted directly, as a potentially life-threatening phenomenon. They are represented as adversaries, as foes to humankind, monsters to be conquered, vanquished, or engaged in pitched battle—like the grizzly bears that the members of the Corps of Discovery killed by the dozen.³⁹ This is how Lewis put it in his report to President Jefferson: “We suffered everything Cold, Hunger & Fatigue could impart [as well as] the Keenest Anxiety excited for the fate of [our] Expedition.”⁴⁰ Vision and emotion, direct and personal confrontation with the natural world, later to be recollected in tranquility and turned into symbols of eternity and infinity—these became the trademark of the tradition of the Romantic west, of explorers *after* Lewis and Clark.⁴¹

If the Lewis and Clark journals do not exhibit multiple references to the sublime, they also do not frame the expedition in relation to America. As regards references to the sublime, accompanying the Yellowstone expedition of Captain Stephen Long in 1820 were two painters, Titian Peale (the youngest son of the great Charles Wilson Peale) and Samuel Seymour, who created landscapes and character studies that were cast through a haze of romantic interpretation.⁴² Ten years later, romantic landscapes and portraits by Alfred Jacob Miller, George Catlin, and Karl Bodmer appeared, as well as, landscape artists from the late 1850s like Albert Bierstadt. They all drew on the evocative power of America’s wild spaces to create a visual myth of mountain sublimity that celebrated national

expansion and dazzled—both with the size of their canvases and their subject matter—domestic and international audiences. In the writings of Lewis and Clark’s successors the travel narratives too came more and more from individuals recognizing themselves in a landscape they have already

identified as American. The most powerful assertion of authority in these later writings—in Zebulon Pike’s journals as well as in John Charles Fremont’s narrative—is the trope of aesthetic appreciation articulated in the rhetoric of the sublime. For these explorers, the sublime became a dominant cultural investment, in which the grandeur of the mountains spelled, not so much knowledge of the external world as the grandeur of the American nation, yet to be built.⁴³

In the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition, there is little or no identification of “American” self and the land. Already Jefferson’s instructions were specifically meant for “after your departure from the United States.”⁴⁴ And once the Corps of Discovery had crossed the Divide, leaving the territory of the United States behind, the men were invariably referring to things “back in the States.” For them as well as for the president, manifest destiny was not yet a familiar concept. Knowledge, useful knowledge, that is, was the order of the day. Hence the journals are chockful of detailed scientific observations, which the men compiled per Jefferson’s instructions. But the journals are also punctuated by discontinuities that were clearly outside the expedition’s “surveying catalog.” Such discontinuities appear, for instance, in the form of enthusiastic descriptions of “seens of visionary enchantment” (Lewis, May 31, 1805), as well as, importantly, of representations of the great mountains of the West as a purely present landscape, what Willa Cather later called “the great fact . . . a vast hardness.”⁴⁵ Hardness and adversity came to structure what the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition could see and think and say about the Rocky Mountain experience. Unsurprisingly, the prevailing mood in the journals from this section is one of mountain gloom rather than of mountain glory.

Notes

- 1 George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at the Bicentennial of Lewis and Clark’s Voyage of Discovery, The East Room,” *The White House Archives*, July 3, 2002, [https:// georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/07/20020703-9.html](https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/07/20020703-9.html).
- 2 Meriwether Lewis in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gray E. Moulton, June 12, 1805, <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu>. There are many editions of the journals. Moulton’s edition, published in eight volumes by the University of Nebraska Press between 1987 and 1993, is by far the best and also available online. My quotations throughout the article are taken from the online edition, cited in the original spelling, and with all emphases added. I have not annotated quotations from the journals because it is just as easy to look up the original by searching for the date of entry as by following URLs like <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.jrn.1805-05-26#lc.jrn.1805-0526.01>. Also, relying on the date will allow those who wish to see the full entry to do so in the Reuben Gold Thwaites eight-volume edition, or the Biddle paraphrase, or any of the various other editions.
- 3 Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (New York: Putnam, 1927; repr. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), 1.
- 4 Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 25.
- 5 Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1230.

- 6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 19, 42, capitalization in original. Elsewhere, Burke describes beauty as “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (73–74).
- 7 Preminger and Brogan, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 1231.
- 8 Michel Foucault, “Politics and the Study of Discourse,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59.
- 9 Thomas Jefferson, message to Congress, January 18, 1803, quoted in Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 8.
- 10 Thomas Jefferson, “Jefferson’s Instructions to Lewis,” in *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783–1854*, ed. Donald Jackson, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 61.
- 11 Jefferson, “Instructions to Lewis,” 69.
- 12 Jefferson, “Instructions to Lewis,” 69.
- 13 Carolyn Gilman, *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 56–57.
- 14 Stephen E. Ambrose records the things that Jefferson believed in in *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 54–55.
- 15 Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783–1854*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 12.
- 16 Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson, September 23, 1806, transcribed and ed. Gerard W. Gawalt, *Library of Congress*, accessed April 15, 2020, http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.036_0912_0917.
- 17 Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 12.
- 18 See Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), esp. 360–71 and 383–93.
- 19 Lewis, “A Summary view of the Rivers and Creeks,” undated, winter of 1804–1805, in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gray E. Moulton, <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.jrn.1804-1805.winter.part1>.
- 20 Lewis to Lucy Marks, March 31, 1805, in *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783–1854*, ed. Donald Jackson, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 223–24.
- 21 Arthur Young, quoted in Gilman, *Lewis and Clark*, 39.
- 22 Thomas Jefferson, quoted in John Logan Allen, *Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 114.
- 23 Bruce Greenfield, “The Problem of the Discoverer’s Authority in Lewis and Clark’s History [by Biddle],” in *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exotism, Imperialism*, ed. Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 24–25, DOI: [10.9783/9781512800371-002](https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512800371-002).
- 24 Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 298. For a detailed map of the route across the Bitterroots, see 296–97.
- 25 Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vii.

- 26 William Faulkner, "The Bear" (1941), in *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 191. 27 Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 407.
- 28 For "practicable waterway," see Jefferson, "Instructions to Lewis," 61. For the Arrowsmith map, see Gilman, *Lewis and Clark*, 55.
- 29 Lewis, "A Summary view of the Rivers and Creeks." 30 Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 196.
- 31 Jefferson, "Instructions to Lewis," 61–62. On Mackenzie's account and the hope that it raised for the Lewis and Clark expedition, see Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 74–75.
- 32 William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 199, quoted in Gilman, *Lewis and Clark*, 52.
- 33 John Logan Allen, Interview, in *Lewis and Clark: The Archive*, PBS, 1997, <https://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/allen.html>.
- 34 Thomas Hallock, "Literary Recipes from the Lewis and Clark Journals: The Epic Design and Wilderness Tastes of Early National Nature Writing," *American Studies* 38, no. 3 (1997): 61.
- 35 George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President."
- 36 Clark's updated map is in the Library of Congress, map division.
- 37 Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, 393.
- 38 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, ed. Harry Buxton Foreman, vol. 6 (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 203.
- 39 See Duncan, *Lewis and Clark*, 90–94; Gilman, *Lewis and Clark*, 179–83.
- 40 Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 339.
- 41 See William H. Goetzmann, *The West as Romantic Horizon* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); John L. Allen, "Horizons of the Sublime: The Invention of the Romantic West," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no. 1 (1992): 27–40, DOI: [10.1016/0305-7488\(92\)90274d](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-7488(92)90274d).
- 42 Patricia Trenton and Peter H. Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 20–30.
- 43 Allen, "Horizons of the Sublime," 28–38.
- 44 Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 61.
- 45 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 11.

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