The Enlarged Freedom of Frederick Law Olmsted

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If there is “any pleasure which all persons find at all times in every park,” Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) once wrote, it undoubtedly resulted “from the feeling of relief, experienced by those entering them, on escaping from the cramped, confined and controlling circumstances of the streets of the town; in other words, a sense of enlarged freedom.” Along with his more rural contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Olmsted would return again and again to the idea that cities commonly “give the human senses not room enough.” Indeed, he often conjured images of urban existence that recall Edgar Allan Poe’s stealthy and frenetic “man of the crowd”: “Whenever we walk through the denser part of a town, to merely avoid collision with those we meet and pass upon the sidewalks, we have constantly to watch, to foresee, and to guard against their movements”—conditions that compel us “to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously,” looking “closely upon others without sympathy.” Only a landscape of “undefined limit” seemed to offer the kind of “tranquility and rest to the mind” needed to guarantee the “health, strength and morality” of city dwellers.¹

Such reservations would hardly seem significant had Olmsted not also seen the city as one of the most positive and liberating forces in human history. In a paper read at the request of the American Social Science Association in 1870, he adamantly resisted any impression that the nation’s “strong drift townward” represented the “sort of moral epidemic” that Thomas Jefferson had famously condemned in his Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) and that Andrew Jackson had sought to mitigate by opening up the west. Singling out “the intimate connection which is evident between the growth of towns and the dying out of slavery and feudal customs,” Olmsted heralded “the multiplication of books, newspapers, schools, and other means of popular education” as well as “the adoption of improved methods of communication and transportation” that were characteristic of cities. Considered strictly “as elements of human progress,” he declared, “the more apparent forces under which men have thus far been led to gather together in towns are yet growing; never more rapidly than at the moment.”

Hoping to enhance this “strong drift townward,” while also alleviating its ill effects, Olmsted would become one of the nation’s most insistent and eloquent advocates of a fully engineered landscape—a landscape he defined as “organized, systematized and public.” Of the many events and ideas that link his early years as a farmer to his designs for Central Park in Manhattan and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, among the most important was an obsession with drainage systems. Certainly it was the “utter want of system and order” that made him so critical of the slave states during his travels through the South in the early 1850s. And he would have vigorously seconded Henry Adams, who later wrote of the “complete Virginia education” he received on the potholed road to Mount Vernon: “To the New England mind, roads, schools, clothes, and a clean face were connected as part of the law of order or


divine system. Bad roads meant bad morals.” Though Olmsted often rued the rule of right-angled planning—the “square form of division” that made the United States such a rigorously partitioned landscape—it was not that this form of design seemed overly engineered to him but that it seemed under engineered, as blind to the singularity of local terrains as to humanity’s enduring pursuit of novelty and contrast.3

Clearly, this orderly and systematic public sphere was a model of enlarged freedom—with public parks its most expansive and beautiful element. Inhabiting an era in which Americans endlessly debated whether the nation was growing too fast or too slowly to secure its hard-won experiment in freedom, Olmsted always sought to close the gap between the reality of everyday life and the ideals of a republican nation as he saw it. Most of these ideals derived from a view of knowledge and experience that had shaped the liberal values of his native New England—and out of them would emerge a distinctly urban landscape in which the “tendency to regard others in a hard if not always hardening way” was steadily softened by the “undefined limit” of mutual regard.4

To say that cities did not give the human senses “room enough” implied something very specific in the nineteenth century. It was generally assumed that all we know and believe began with the senses, especially the sense of sight. Much of this can be traced to Francis Bacon, who spoke of the mind as a perfect mirror that reflects “the genuine light of nature.” “All depends on keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature,” he declared, “and so receiving their images simply as they are.” Acutely aware that the minds of most people were anything but perfect—less like “a clear and equal glass” than “an


enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture”—Bacon repeatedly insisted that the ideal observer possessed “unimpaired senses, and well-purged mind.”

Bacon also argued that the senses would most nearly grasp the truth “if the human intellect were even, and like a fair sheet of paper with no writing on it.” Rejecting a long-held view that fleeting and fragmentary sensations were secondary to a knowledge of ideal forms, philosophers such as Bacon often evoked the metaphor of a *tabula rasa*. Easily the most famous example appeared in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)—and it was there, or in works influenced by the *Essay*, that most Americans encountered the metaphor. Suppose, Locke wrote, with his usual concentration and clarity, “the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE.” By the middle of the nineteenth century the lessons of the *Essay* had become so ingrained that Henry Tuckerman could begin an essay entitled “The Philosophy of Travel” with a simple pronouncement: “If there is any self-evident truth, it is that we are created to be moved within by impressions from without.”

One of the most radical aspects of Locke’s epistemology was its nominalism. As a theory of language, it suggested that though words “stand for ideas,” and “all our notions and knowledge” depend on “common sensible ideas” that are later “transferred to more abstruse significations,” language itself is

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a relatively arbitrary process in which “the names that stand for things” are always “made by men” and mediated by history. Less abstractly, Locke’s views implied a *sociology* of knowledge in which the nature of our impressions, our ideas, and our conduct is largely determined by such social factors as upbringing and education—or what Locke himself called the “law of opinion or reputation.” Speaking of virtue and vice, for instance, Locke claimed that whereas they are usually “names pretended and supposed everywhere to stand for actions in their own nature right and wrong,” they are really “attributed only to such actions as in each country and society are in reputation or discredit.” Thomas Hobbes had expressed much the same sentiment in *Leviathan* (1651), arguing that “the Actions of men proceed from their Opinions; and in the wel governing of Opinions consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord.”

Perhaps the most important consequence of this sociology was its emphasis on public opinion, for it implied that such undesirable elements as evil and vice were less a matter of malevolence or greed than of error arising from “superstition and imposture.” Hobbes believed that only a strong sovereign would guarantee “the wel governing of Opinions,” while Locke felt that order depended (in Neal Wood’s words) on “a plurality of freely contending opinions and groups” that mimicked both the conduct of empirical science and the off-setting powers of government. But each philosopher assumed that the malleability of the human mind required a society fit to shape it for the benefit of all. As Wood further explains, “To make happy, virtuous, and cooperative individuals dedicated to the common good, the social context” had to be “rendered amenable to such ends.” In short, the various cultural, political, and legal institutions of a society had to become “positive instruments in fashioning the human raw stuff according to some

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ideal model, either by gradual alteration and reform, or by the radical restructuring of society."\(^8\)

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Such was the philosophical context for the essay commonly considered the origin of public parks in America, Andrew Jackson Downing's "A Talk about Public Parks and Gardens" (1848). Framing the piece as an imaginary dialogue between an "editor" and a "traveller" who had just returned from the recent uprisings in France (the so-called February Revolution, which had quickly spread to nearly every other nation in Europe before order was restored), Downing argued that the "outward influences" of a public "pleasure-ground" would retard the inclination toward "rowdysim" and anarchy by bettering "the condition of a people as good citizens, patriots, men." Three years later he exemplified his point in "The New-York Park" (1851), an essay that specifically endorsed a large central park for Manhattan: "Even upon the lower platform of liberty and education that the masses stand in Europe," he wrote, "we see the elevating influences of a wide popular enjoyment of galleries of art, public libraries, parks and gardens, which have raised the people in social civilization and social culture to a far higher level than we have yet attained in republican America." For Downing, as for many others, the anticipated "social influence of such a great park in New-York" made it a necessary addition to the city.\(^9\)

Ironically, Olmsted chose to turn Downing's pronouncements against him—concluding that his plans for buildings and grounds were "far less excellent with reference to their ostensible ends, than they were with reference to the purpose of stimulating the exercise of judgment and taste in the audience addressed." Despite his illustrious reputation, Downing

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\(^8\)Wood, "Tabula Rasa," pp. 664, 647.

was never more than a secondary influence on Olmsted, except as an advocate of scientific farming. A far more decisive figure in his life was the eloquent and controversial Horace Bushnell (1802–76)—not only one of New England’s most liberal and prominent theologians but a lifelong friend of Olmsted’s, the Olmsted family’s minister, and a force behind the first publicly funded municipal park in the United States. Olmsted was particularly indebted to four essays or addresses Bushnell published during the 1840s: A Discourse on the Moral Tendencies and Results of Human History (1843); “Unconscious Influence” (1846); Barbarism the First Danger (1847); and “A Preliminary Dissertation on Language” (1848).10

Though written last, the “Dissertation on Language” was Bushnell’s most fundamental analysis of social influence. Like Emerson’s essay “Nature” (1836), it was conceived as a somewhat paradoxical exercise—endorsing Locke’s notion of “common sensible ideas” while rejecting his nominalism. Bushnell admitted as much when he wrote that Locke’s epistemology seemed “to be identical with that which I have advanced” yet “is seen really” to agree with “no one of its important consequences.” Above all, Bushnell rejected the notion that there was no “natural connection between words and ideas” and “no analogy whatever between the bases or types of words, and the thoughts they are seized upon to represent.” As Emerson had explained, “Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in

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10 The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, vol. 1, The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852, ed. Charles Capen McLaughlin and Charles E. Beveridge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 76–77. Though the Swiss physician Johann George Ritter von Zimmermann was also an early influence, he too seems secondary in this context (see Olmsted, Papers, 1:203, 205). The same goes for John Stuart Mill. Olmsted valued Mill’s views on free labor, quoted from Principles of Political Economy (1848) in Seaboard Slave States, dedicated The Cotton Kingdom to him, and later revered On Liberty (1859). But Mill’s writings seem to represent, if in a more perfect form, ideas Olmsted already felt strongly about. As for the municipal park: It was approved in 1854 by the town of Harford, Connecticut—Olmsted’s birthplace and the site of Bushnell’s parish after 1833, and thus the geographical nexus of their enduring relationship. Naturally Bushnell asked Olmsted to design the park, but the town procrastinated for so long after setting aside the land that Olmsted had to refuse because Central Park was under construction. The park still exists, and when it was redesigned during the 1940s, the town awarded the contract to Olmsted’s son, whose firm was located in the Brookline, Massachusetts, building that now houses the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. See www.bushnellpark.org.
a simple, double, and three-fold degree”: “1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.” But whereas Emerson opposed “understanding” to “reason,” Bushnell opposed “noun” or “physical” language to the “language of intelligence.” The first comprised “the names of all physical objects and demonstrations”; the second represented “the vast analogy in things, which prepares them, as forms, to be signs or figures of thoughts”—which, as words “passing into sound,” eventually allows them to “drop out, so to speak, their gross material quality, and become words of spirit.”

Despite his caveats and protestations, Bushnell agreed with at least one of Locke’s “important consequences”: he remained attentive to the errors of false opinion, which Emerson’s “Nature” had largely ignored. Turning to “matters of moral and religious inquiry,” Bushnell openly acknowledged that “there are no words, in the physical department of language, that are exact representations of particular physical things. For whether we take the theory of the Nominalists or the Realists, the words are, in fact, and practically, names only of genera, not of individuals or species.” Thus “the opportunity, in language, for endless mistakes and false reasonings.” Nor was “the spiritual department of language” any freer of these “endless mistakes and false reasonings,” for theologians, in particular, commonly thought of words “not as signs or images, but as absolute measures and equivalents of truth,” which resulted in “the distractions, the infinite multiplications of opinions, the errors and sects and strifes of the Christian world.”

Looking beyond religious matters to society as a whole, the “Dissertation on Language” implied a process in which the “elevating influences” Downing spoke of gradually passed from


one person to another—reducing the errors of false opinion, enlarging freedom of thought and action, and creating what, in “Unconscious Influence,” Bushnell called “one consolidated social body, animated by one life.” He had already said something to this effect in the Discourse on the Moral Tendencies and Results of Human History, explaining that “life itself is an open court of legislation, where reasonings, opinions, wants, injuries, are ever drawing men into new senses of duty, and extending the laws of society, to suit the demands of an advanced state of being. All art and beauty, every thing that unfolds the power of outward criticism, enters into this process.” Yet in the “Dissertation on Language,” Bushnell seemed to assume that as the “power of outward criticism” actually unfolded, “there will be different measures of understanding or misunderstanding, according to the capacity or incapacity, the ingenuousness or moral obliquity, of the receiving party.” “Words,” he went on, “are legitimately used as the signs of thoughts to be expressed. They do not literally convey or pass over a thought out of one mind into another, as we commonly speak of doing. They are only hints or images, held up before the mind of another, to put him on generating or reproducing the same thought; which he can do only as he has the same personal contents.” In the short term, anyway, Bushnell seemed to believe that the uplifting elimination of error was apt to depend upon an educated, Christian elite capable of prompting an answering or mirroring truth among the less fortunate. But it is clear that he also believed the more enduring solution would be a network of hardened institutions that encouraged every member of society to develop an equivalent “personal content”—an infrastructure, if you will, of understanding, virtue, and freedom. When Barbarism the First Danger was republished in 1864, among the eleven other essays accompanying it was an oration on the need for city planning and another on the liberating effect of roads. To invert Henry Adams’s succinct formula: “Good roads meant good morals.”

What we find, then, is that Olmsted began to formulate his view of public parks—and began to analyze the city itself as a hardened institution—within the context of a tradition where even the salutary effects of sunlight and air were expected to ameliorate false or mistrustful attitudes. If he was not exactly looking to create the unimpaired senses and well-purged mind of Bacon’s ideal observer, he was undoubtedly hoping for a society of individuals able to convert their susceptible, ingenuous senses into civilized, discriminating minds. A similar ambition had inspired Emerson’s “Nature” and Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond—and nothing came closer to defining the arc of New England thought at the time.

It could be said that each of Olmsted’s public parks was conceived with the opening paragraph of Bushnell’s *Discourse on History* in mind: “It is then a law, I will say, of humanity, in all its forms of life and progress, that the physical shall precede the moral. The order of nature is—what is physical first, what is moral afterwards.” Certainly this organizing principle is evident as early as the so-called Greensward plan that Olmsted and Calvert Vaux submitted for the competition to design Central Park. Resisting the various allusions to classical and allegorical landscapes that seemed to preoccupy every other contestant, Olmsted and Vaux emphasized the topography of the area—what was often referred to as the “genius of the place”—and set forth “the leading characteristics which present themselves as all-important to be considered in adapting the actual situation to our purposes.” They divided the park into two regions: the upper region was described as having “horizon lines” that were “bold and sweeping,” possessing “great breadth in almost every aspect in which they may be contemplated,” and representing “the highest ideal that can be aimed at for a park” in that they expressed the “most decided contrast to the confined

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and formal lines of the city”; the lower region they described as “far more heterogeneous in its character,” requiring “a much more varied treatment” that emphasized “the long rocky and wooded hill-side lying immediately south of the Reservoir” as well as the “irregular table-land” of the lower park’s central and western parts and the “series of graceful undulations, suggesting lawn or gardenesque treatment,” of its eastern parts.\textsuperscript{14}

In effect, Olmsted and Vaux chose to envision Central Park as something approximating a “site-specific” work—specific to the terrain and specific to a city they alone seemed to grasp in its entirety. At the same time, however, they planned to turn the nearly barren and shanty-strewn site into a model of pastoral freedom—further envisioning it as a physical object meant to represent the “vast analogy of things” and the “sign or figure of thought.” As Olmsted later said of the need to relax the mental powers that had been “tasked” by the narrow pursuit of work and the even narrower confines of the street, “This unbending of the faculties we find is impossible, except by the occupation of the imagination with objects and reflections of a quite different character.” The “best possible stimulus is found to be the presentation of a class of objects to the perceptive organs, which shall be as agreeable as possible to the taste, and at the same time entirely different from the objects connected with those occupations by which the faculties have been tasked.” In other words, the only way the greedy, exhausted, mistrustful, crowded, unhealthy, and stratified inhabitants of New York would look closely on each other with sympathy and understanding was if the city included an area that encouraged them to do so. An ideal society needed an ideally differentiated landscape.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15}Olmsted and Vaux, “A Park in Brooklyn,” pp. 100–101. Speaking of an ideal society, a case could be made that Olmsted’s conception of Central Park was basically
To elaborate this liberating and differentiated “class of objects,” Olmsted and Vaux turned to the language of the picturesque—an aesthetic that emphasized novelty, irregularity, and the kind of contrast that allowed for a harmonious mixture of compression and breadth. Olmsted himself had succumbed to the picturesque with the “hardly conscious exercise of reason” typical of his late teens. It was then that he found himself “sufficiently interested” in the topography and pleasures of landscape “to get some understanding of what such men as Price, Gilpin, Shenstone and Marshall thought upon the subject.” In fact, the books of Gilpin and Price became so valuable to him over the years that he later wrote, “I put them into the hands of my pupils as soon as they come into our office, saying, ‘You are to read these seriously, as a student of Law would read Blackstone.’”

For their Greensward design, Olmsted and Vaux merely implied they were drawing on the picturesque—framing the proposal as an aesthetic consideration of terrain meant to diversify both the park and, in what might be called a scalable form of contrast, the city as a whole. But eight years later, in their plan for Prospect Park in Brooklyn, they were far more explicit. “A scene in nature is made up of various parts,” they wrote, and “each part has its individual character and its possible ideal. It

an inversion of the New England township—with the church, formerly at the center of town, dispersed to the various neighborhoods; and the woods and meadows, formerly the outlying areas, representing a new commons or town square.

16Olmsted, Papers, 1:117; Frederick Law Olmsted to Elizabeth Baldwin Whitney, 16 December 1890, quoted in Charles E. Beveridge, “Frederick Law Olmsted’s Theory on Landscape Design,” Nineteenth Century 20 (Fall 2000): 32–37. The classic treatise on aesthetic categories is Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757). Burke argued that the sublime derived from vastness, uniformity, magnificence, terror, and awe and the beautiful from smallness, smoothness, sweetness, and grace. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, prompted by the landscape designs of “Capability” Brown, Humphry Repton, and William Shenstone, not to mention an emerging tourist industry in England that often included visits to the country estates they had designed, theorists like William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight began to posit the picturesque as an unstable middle term—indicating that a scene was “like a picture,” or worthy of being pictured, but also that it possessed elements of novelty, irregularity, abruptness, or extreme variation.
is unlikely that accident should bring together the best possible ideals of each separate part, merely considering them as isolated facts, and it is still more unlikely that accident should group a number of these possible ideals in such a way that not only one or two but that all should be harmoniously related one to the other.” Of course, much the same thing could be said of any art work. Gilpin had observed that “exact copies can scarcely ever be entirely beautiful, whilst he who works from imagination, culling a distance here, there a foreground, will probably make a better landscape.” But as Sidney K. Robinson has argued, what made the picturesque so unique was that it actually displaced our attention from “the best possible ideal of each separate part” to the relation among the parts. And since it also made a virtue of the artificial—essentially eliminating any distinction between the physical reality of raw nature and the virtual reality of its engineered effects (which later looked as if they’d been “natural” all along)—it became a perfect paradigm for Olmsted. Both the park itself, and the park as a contrasting scenic element within the mortared and macadamized confines of the city, added to a landscape that was steadily more “orderly, systematic, and public.”

This concept of a relation among elements led most remarkably to the series of parks known as Boston’s “Emerald Necklace”—conceived, on the whole, as the picturesque raised to the level of city planning. Olmsted introduced his iconoclastic plan by observing that “the Boston of today is largely made up of what were formerly a number of distinct local communities, each habituated to regard its public affairs from an independent point of view, and sometimes in a spirit of competition and jealousy toward the others.” He went on to acknowledge that “there is now a habit of looking upon the proposed parks of

the city, each apart and independently of its relations to others of the system, as if it were to be of little value except to the people of the districts adjoining it.” Choosing not to buck tradition but to capitalize on it, Olmsted came up with a proposal that would honor the singularity of each locality while linking them together in a synergistic sequence of contrasts:

A site for a park to stand by itself and be little used except by those living near it should be a very different one from that for a park designed for more general use, and especially for a park which is to stand as one of a series. In the latter case the fitness of a site will largely be found in its adaptation to supply some form of park refreshment that others of the series are ill-adapted to supply or are naturally excluded from supplying. The qualities of a park which the West Roxbury site offers in generous measure at a very moderate cost, could not, for example, be gained in a tenth part of that measure at ten times the cost on the proposed park-site near Chestnut Hill,—“Brighton Park,”—or on any other which the city has had under consideration.

Though most of the Boston proposal was devoted to identifying and describing the special characteristics of each site, Olmsted insisted from the start that “the aim of the design under the policy of the city which your Commission has been so long trying to establish, can only wisely be to develop qualities in each locality which will give it a more distinctive and grateful interest because of the development of quite other distinctive qualities elsewhere.”

Coincidentally, this harmonizing trait of the picturesque had long been associated with political freedom. Both Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price served in Parliament as allies of the liberal Whigs—and each, by preferring “compositions built up from distinctive smaller parts combined and mixed together by means neither wholly rationalized nor completely random,” believed that the picturesque was the aesthetic equivalent of Locke’s freely contending forces. According

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(once again) to Robinson, liberty operated as a kind of “middle term” in the late 1700s—a “continuously negotiated balance” between tyranny, on the one hand, and anarchy, on the other—that more or less corresponded to an aesthetic that “blended” the contrasting categories of beauty and sublimity but also left them “perfectly distinct.” As Robinson goes on to explain, this anxious oscillation between mixed but distinct elements implied that without liberty the picturesque could not exist: “Constraint either in its making or in its perception,” he declares, “closes down the free play of discovery that engenders the Picturesque. In order for a patterned sensory experience to reach full effect in a viewer, the mind must be free to take it in. Only when the ‘imagination was at liberty’ would it produce its ‘fullest perfection.’”

Price, especially, viewed both landscaping and government “as aspects of a common activity he identified as ‘improvement.’” As a country squire, Price plainly had an interest in improving the land; but as a critic of such landscape designers as “Capability” Brown and Humphry Repton, he refused to conceive of improvement as an arrogant exercise in “the blind, unrelenting power of system.” After all, he asked, “who would choose to settle in that place, or under that government, where the warnings, indications, and all the free efforts of nature, were forcibly counteracted and suppressed?” Out of such beliefs emerged one of the most eloquent and encompassing declarations of aesthetic freedom to appear during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

A good landscape is that in which all the parts are free and unconstrained, but in which, though some are prominent, and highly illuminated, and others in shade and retirement—some rough, and others more smooth and polished, yet they are all necessary to the beauty, energy, effect, and harmony of the whole. I do not see how a good government can be more exactly defined; and as this definition suits every style of landscape, from the plainest and simplest to the most splendid and complicated, and excludes nothing but tameness

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and confusion, so it equally suits all free governments, and only excludes anarchy and despotism.²⁰

Olmsted embraced the picturesque during an era in which the United States was rapidly expanding westward—with Americans almost evenly divided over whether this movement represented the tyranny of too much government and institutional control or the anarchy of too little. Between 1840 and 1854 the United States not only took possession of all Mexican claims to Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and California but negotiated a treaty with Britain that ended joint occupation of the Oregon Territory, secured the northern and southern boundaries of what would become the lower forty-eight states, and admitted Texas and California as states. One historian, Major L. Wilson, has rather astutely chosen to define this tumultuous period as a basic conflict over progress—and his analysis seems singularly apt in the case of Olmsted. Couching progress itself as an issue of freedom, Wilson argues that “it mattered greatly whether one brought to the task of building society a view of freedom as something complete at the beginning or the end of the process.” In the first instance, “freedom might lead to unfreedom” as society “thickened” and developed over time; in the second, a more perfect freedom would arise only “as richer social conditions were created.”²¹

Whigs of the day, especially New England Whigs, subscribed to the second proposition. For them, the nation was not “a political arrangement” for some already existing form of free society but an instrument for accelerating the “positive means” by which such a society might emerge. Worried about too little development rather than too much, they found the

²⁰Robinson, Inquiry into the Picturesque, p. 74; Price, quoted in Robinson, Inquiry into the Picturesque, pp. 75–76, 74, 88–89.

so-called American System of internal improvements to be a particularly fine blueprint; and with the urgency of an involuntary reflex—the kind of reflex that kicked in when Henry Adams found himself on the meager, barely improved roads of Virginia—they viewed the western frontier as a looming menace to the nation. In addition to being a sphere of lawlessness and chaos, its seductive emptiness threatened to drain the existing labor force and loosen the ties that secured the social compact. “Nothing is more certain,” Horace Bushnell exclaimed in *Barbarism the First Danger*, “than that emigration, or a new settlement of the social state, involves a tendency to social decline. There must, in every such case, be a relapse towards barbarism, more or less protracted, more or less complete.”

Andrew Jackson and his followers felt quite differently. For Democrats, the frontier was both a constant source of hope and renewal and the sine qua non of nationhood. Whereas Whigs believed the republic had to consolidate or delay itself in space in order to advance itself in time, Democrats insisted that the only way to enlarge the nation’s freedom was by capitalizing on the availability and purity of space to retard the corruptibility of time. Summoning Isaiah Berlin’s notion of “positive” and “negative” freedom—where positive freedom signifies “freedom for” and is implied in all acts for the public good (of which civil rights legislation and the right of eminent domain can be seen as examples), while negative freedom signifies “freedom from” and signifies such diverse phenomena as the opening words of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” (“I heartily accept the motto—‘That government is best which governs least’”), the draft riots of the 1860s and 1960s, and the open world of the internet—Wilson argues that Jackson believed western expansion would lead to a nation of relatively unlimited space, ruled by a government of relatively limited powers. When Jackson appealed to Congress to reduce the price of public lands in

the west, he was adamant that “the speedy settlement of these lands constitutes the true interest of the Republic.”

As it happens, nothing comes closer to defining Olmsted’s philosophy of design than the idea that freedom was enlarged, not diminished, by calculated, systematic, restrained improvement. His most sweeping statement on the subject—a projected history of American civilization that eventually amounted to several hundred pages—was never completed (though in a letter written at the time, he claimed that if he could just “put six month’s of library work upon it,” it would matter more than “Bushnell’s sermon on the Tendency of emigration to Barbarism”). However, he also considered the issue in one of his most important essays, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns” (1870)—and in a way that identified it as a rejoinder to the Democrats of the 1840s. For after addressing the general trajectory of human progress, Olmsted declares:

Examining our own country more particularly, it is to be considered that we have been giving away our public lands under a square form of division, as if for the purpose of preventing the closer agricultural settlement which long and narrow farms would have favored, and that we have used our mineral deposits as premiums for encouragement of wandering and of forms of enterprise, individual, desultory and sequestered in character, in distinction from those which are organized, systematized and public. This policy has had its day; the choicest lands have been taken up; the most prominent and easiest worked metallic veins have been seized, the richest placers are abandoned to Chinamen, and the only reaction that we can reasonably anticipate is one from, not toward, dispersion.

Once again, the origins of Olmsted’s view of freedom and progress can be traced to Bushnell’s interpretation of Locke. Locke himself had treated freedom as both inherent and

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achieved. In the second of his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), he had argued that children “are not born in” a “full state of equality, though they are born to it. Their parents have a sort of rule and jurisdiction over them when they come into the world, and for some time after, but it is a temporary one,” because “age and reason” eventually loosen these bonds, “till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free disposal.” Parlaying the second *Treatise* and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* into his *Discourse on History*, Bushnell chose to formulate freedom as a kind of social version of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. Just as the child “begins his career as a creature of muscles and integuments,” he wrote, spending “whole years” in “making acquaintance with the body he lives in” before discovering himself “through this organ” and finally rising to “a character of intelligence and moral gravity,” so did “the world itself” begin as “a lump of dull earth, a mere physical thing seen by the five senses,” before “thought, a little farther on, begins to work upon it and bring out its laws,” and “a condition of civil liberty”—which, as “we know, belongs to the advanced stages of history”—is finally achieved.²⁵

Olmsted would adopt Bushnell’s view of improved freedom both willingly and intact, and it is apparent that he had fully assimilated it by the time he traveled to England in 1850. After observing the state of rural laborers in Hereford, Monmouth, Gloucester, and Wiltshire—laborers whose “purpose of life and whose mode of life” seemed no better than “that of domestic animals”—Olmsted composed what might be considered a manifesto of improved freedom:

> In America we hold that a slave, a savage, a child, a maniac, and a condemned criminal, are each and all *born*, equally with us, with our President, or with the Queen of England, free and self-governing; that they have the same natural rights with us; but that attached to those natural rights were certain duties, and when we find them, from whatever cause,—no matter whether the original cause be with them,

or our father or us,—unable to perform those duties, we dispossess them of their rights: we restrain, we confine, we master, and we govern them. But in taking upon ourselves to govern them, we take duties upon ourselves, and our first duty is that which is the first duty of every man for himself—improvement, restoration, regeneration. By every consideration of justice, by every noble instinct, we are bound to make it our highest and chieftest object to restore them, not the liberty first, but—the capacity for liberty—for exercising the duties of liberty—which is their natural right. And so much of the liberty as they are able to use to their own as well as our advantage, we are bound constantly to allow them,—nay, more than they show absolute evidence of their ability to use to advantage.26

Augmenting the “capacity for liberty” would be pivotal to Olmsted’s view of life, and it helps to explain the intersection of improvement and positive freedom in his work. To insist that the governing elite were not merely bound to enlarge the liberty of those still uneducated to “the duties of liberty,” but bound to do so even in the absence of any “absolute evidence” that the uneducated were able to use it to their own or society’s advantage, was a candid declaration of positive freedom. Though John Winthrop’s Modell of Christian Charity can be seen as a prototype for such a claim, Bushnell’s Discourse on History was probably the more immediate precedent. In the midst of a tract devoted to the “legislation” of freedom and virtue, Bushnell emphatically affirmed that “the statutes of revealed law may be divided into two classes—those which positively command, and those which only permit or suffer. The former . . . will stand as roots of progress, and society will do them honor, by going on to amplify them and make them the basis of a perfect code.” A similar precedent can be found in the early debates over Central Park. Downing’s emphasis on the “social influence of such a great park in New-York”—an influence that would speak to the “higher social and artistic elements of every man’s nature,” which “lie dormant within him”—openly argued for a public good that served something other than private interest.27

Expressions of positive freedom take many forms in Olmsted’s writings and works, but they generally rely on a pillar of Whig politics: the idea that local and national institutions, notably government, ought to broadly and actively assist the improvement of society. Olmsted had been particularly appalled by the lack of improvement he witnessed in the South. For him, traveling ever deeper into the seaboard slave states proved to be a disheartening journey into barbarism—a journey in which the “peculiar institution” of slavery relentlessly suppressed free labor while harshly and dismally prolonging “the evils that properly belong only to a frontier”: “Beasts and birds of prey, forests and marshes are increasing; bridges, schools, churches and shops are diminishing in number, where slavery has existed longest. The habits of the people correspond.” In a letter to Charles Loring Brace written after he met a plantation owner who forced him to acknowledge the “rowdyism, ruffianism,” and “want of high honorable sentiment” among Northern farmers and workers, Olmsted anxiously announced that “we need institutions that shall more directly assist the poor and degraded to elevate themselves. Our educational principles must be enlarged and made to include more than these miserable common schools. The poor & wicked need more than to be let alone.” Expanding on this theme, he went on to say that he believed “Government should have in view the encouragement of a democratic condition of society as well as government—that the two need to go together as they do at the North in much greater degree than at the South or I suppose anywhere else. But I don’t think our state of society is sufficiently Democratic at the North or likely to be by mere laissez aller.” No doubt it was his loathing of laissez aller that later prompted him to argue that urban parks must be “something more than a mere exemption from urban conditions”; they needed to offer a lively “antithesis of objects of vision to those of the streets and houses.”

So imperative was Olmsted’s commitment to assisted freedom that it even shaped his understanding of the picturesque. Space, he thought, ought to develop—and ought to keep on developing in an ever expanding sphere of blended but dissimilar elements. After walking the grounds of Eaton Park in England, he was moved to exclaim, “What artist, so noble, has often been my thought, as he who, with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outline, writes the colors, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions.” Obviously it was something he felt deeply about, for when he and Vaux noted in their Greensward plan that it would take another twenty years for the city to enclose the park, they also made it clear that the commissioners needed to consider what would “at that time be satisfactory,” since it was “then that the design” would have “to be really judged.” “No longer an open suburb,” they wrote, “our ground will have around it a continuous high wall of brick, stone, and marble. The adjoining shores will be lined with commercial docks and warehouses; steamboat and ferry landings, railroad stations, hotels, theatres, factories, will be on all sides of it and above it: all which our park must be made to fit.” Somewhat later, Olmsted claimed that as he and Vaux worked on their plan for Central Park, they had actually “determined to think of no result to be realized in less than forty years.” And toward the end of his life, in yet another assertion of positive freedom, Olmsted claimed that the majority of his

1853, in The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, vol. 2, Slavery and the South, 1852–1857, ed. Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 232–36; Olmsted and Vaux, quoted in David Schuyler, The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 85. “Educational principles” were an especially longstanding concern of New Englanders. For instance, when Congress passed the land acts of 1785 and 1787, mandating the immense grid of ranges, townships, and sections that would make the United States (in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins) the most strictly “plotted and pieced” landscape in the world, members from New England were among the most adamant that one section of each township be set aside for a school. Despite Olmsted’s comment about “miserable common schools,” this was the impetus for the impressive system of state colleges that arose in the Midwest and West.
designs were “a hundred years ahead of any spontaneous public demand, or of the demand of any notable cultivated part of the people. And they are having an educative effect perfectly manifest to me—a manifest civilizing effect. I see much indirect and unconscious following of them.”

Of course, none of this explains how we really experience the freedom of Olmsted’s fully engineered landscapes. Only by considering the artistry of these landscapes can we truly begin to grasp both their enlivening effect and their enduring impact. Despite his ventures into what Herbert Spencer (an important influence at one point) called “social statics,” Olmsted was not a sociologist or a political theorist but a landscape designer—an artist, if you will—motivated by an aesthetic of enlarged freedom.

Olmsted’s prized edition of Price’s essays on the picturesque included an introduction by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder which claimed that Price, like Edmund Burke before him, “had erred in seeking any inherent qualities in objects, capable of being established as the sole, invariable, and direct productive causes of beauty, of sublimity, or of the picturesque.” Hoping to promote the “associationism” of Archibald Alison’s Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790) instead, Lauder’s prefatory remarks were both a précis of Alison’s aesthetic theory and a call to read Price in the same light. Though Olmsted’s reaction to the introduction is unknown, and its influence is uncertain (he may have also been familiar with an edition of the Essays published in his hometown of Hartford in 1821), some form of associationism undoubtedly helped to shape the basic tenets of his aesthetic.


Alison’s theory was essentially a model of how we experience the beauty and sublimity of nature as a “reflection of our own inward emotions”—and of how this experience can enlarge our sense of freedom and virtue. Near the end of the *Essays* is a passage that concisely summarizes these interlocking themes:

While the objects of the material world are made to attract our *infant eyes*, there are latent ties by which they reach our *hearts*; and wherever they afford us delight, they are always the signs or expressions of higher qualities, by which our moral sensibilities are called forth. It may not be our fortune, perhaps, to be born among its nobler scenes. But wander where we will, trees wave, rivers flow, mountains ascend, clouds darken, or winds animate the face of heaven; and over the whole scenery the Sun sheds the cheerfulness of his morning, the splendour of his noonday, or the tenderness of his evening light. There is not one of these features of scenery which is not fitted to awaken us to moral emotion; to lead us, when once the *key of our imagination* is struck, to trains of fascinating and endless imagery; and in the indulgence of these, to make our bosoms either glow with conceptions of mental excellence, or melt in the dreams of moral good.31

Obviously there are many elements of this passage that anticipate Bushnell’s theory of language—most conspicuously in that each separated direct or simple sensation from “the vast analogy in things, which prepares them, as forms, to be signs or figures of thought.” This very separation would be axiomatic to Alison: “Matter in itself,” he wrote, “is unfitted to produce any kind of emotion. The various qualities of matter are known to us only by means of our external senses; but all that such powers

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of our nature convey, is Sensation and Perception.” Even the beauty and sublimity of material objects, he continued, “is to be ascribed, not to the material qualities themselves, but to the qualities they signify; and, of consequence, that the qualities of matter are not to be considered as sublime or beautiful in themselves, but as being the signs or expressions of such qualities as, by the constitution of our nature, are fitted to produce pleasing or interesting emotion.” Clarifying this point, Lauder concluded that material objects are beautiful or sublime only insofar as they exist as “the natural signs and perpetual concomitants of pleasurable sensations” or as the “analogy or fancied resemblance to things with which these emotions are necessarily connected.” Emerson had posited more or less the same resemblance when he wrote, “Right means straight; wrong means twisted; spirit primarily means wind; transgression, the crossing of a line.”

Alison’s theory did rely on a nominalism of sorts. He repeatedly stressed that a material object could look different to different people at the same time, different to the same person at different times, and different no matter what if it changed context. Taking his interpretation a step further, he explained that even when we feel “the beauty or sublimity of natural scenery,” we are “conscious of a variety of images in our minds, very different from those which the objects themselves” actually “present to the eye. Trains of pleasing or of solemn thoughts arise spontaneously within our minds; our hearts swell with emotions of which the objects before us seem to afford no adequate cause.” Thoreau, for one, would confirm this basic insight throughout his work—as when he observed, “I perceive in the common train of my thoughts a natural and uninterrupted sequence, each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs, it is occasioned by a new object being presented to my senses. But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable

transition, is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called common sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one.” Emerson had even allowed himself a suppressed pun on the notion: “What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car!” The very structure of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s essays—abrupt, digressive, experiential—seems to derive from the nominalism of association.33

Alison’s emphasis on the analogous yet inconclusive nature of experience eventually led to the issue of design. Alert, as always, to the social implications of associationism, he realized that the formal properties of art were a way to encourage or provoke an analogy between beauty and order. Alluding to the kind of contrast that was so essential to the picturesque, he conceded that “the mere union of similarity and dissimilarity does not constitute a beautiful form”; rather, only when disparate objects seem to have “some determined character of expression” do they become beautiful. But as soon as such an “impression” was made by a scene, “as soon as we feel the expression of the scene, we immediately become sensible that the different forms that compose it are suited to this character; we perceive, and very often we imagine, a correspondence among these parts, and we say accordingly that there is a relation and harmony” to the composition that allows us to “yield ourselves willingly to its influence.”34

Correctly understood and composed, almost any landscape could tap into our capacity for “relation and harmony.” For “wherever the appearances of the material world are expressive to us of qualities we love or admire; wherever, from our education or connections, or habits, or our pursuits, its qualities are associated in our minds with affecting or interesting emotions, there the pleasures of beauty or sublimity are felt, or at least are capable of being felt.” So while denying that the material world


was inherently beautiful or sublime, Alison was suggesting that any work of art designed to elicit a single “unmingled emotion” would set in motion the analogous associations “most fitted to awaken us to moral emotion.” Lauder would conveniently reduce this complex and engaging argument to a scenic formula: “The great secret of good Landscape Gardening, seems thus to consist in the accurate preservation of the character of every scene, whether that character be originally there, or created in it.”

That this was also Olmsted’s scenic formula ought to be clear. Even if the origins of his associationism are uncertain, Olmsted’s cardinal aim in designing public parks—enhancing the opportunity to experience what he called “unconscious or indirect recreation”—undoubtedly exceeded anything to be found in the theories of Gilpin, Price, or Knight. Price, in particular, was primarily interested in examining the distinctly picturesque qualities of “roughness,” “sudden variation,” and “irregularity,” and when he discussed the “prevailing characteristic” of a landscape, it was mainly to demonstrate that every landscape must be beautiful, sublime, or picturesque. Despite his comparison of “a good landscape” to “a good government,” Price looked to a strictly categorical definition of landscape, not the associative state of mind that might allow us to perceive it as a “sign or expression of higher qualities.” For Olmsted, however, “the landscape character of a park” was “that of an idealized, broad stretch of pasture,” with “attractive promises in every direction”—a far more nominalist mirror for our inward emotions of freedom.

Whether or not associationism also prompted Bushnell’s notion of unconscious influence—and, again, the link is suggestive, not conclusive—the theories do overlap or converge in Olmsted’s public parks. Significantly, neither theory considered the “exercise of imagination” an entirely voluntary process. As

Lauder explained in his introduction, Alison held “it to be essential to the production of a full perception of beauty, that the mind should be borne away into a half active and half passive state of dreamy imagination, in which it may generate trains of thought allied to the character and expression of the object.” Or, as Alison himself put it in the Essays, the state of mind “most favorable to the emotions of taste” is that “in which the attention is so little occupied by any private or particular object of thought, as to leave us open to all the impressions which the objects that are before us can produce. It is upon the vacant and unemployed, accordingly, that the objects of taste make the strongest impression.” So universal was this attitude by the 1830s that it provoked one of Emerson’s more aristocratic aphorisms: “You cannot freely admire a noble landscape if laborers are digging in the field hard by.”

In Olmsted’s case, associationism led to the belief that urban parks ought to offset the mistrustful, unsympathetic way people encountered each other in the street. Olmsted often spoke of sunlight and health, but his greater concern was always contrast, “undefined limit,” and receptivity. Surrounded by block after block of ever accelerating traffic and construction, the quiet, expansive meadows of Central Park become a leisurely invitation to bring our minds “into close dealings with other minds”—resulting in the equivalency of “personal contents” Bushnell spoke of in his “Dissertation on Language,” the “one consolidated social body, animated by one life” he spoke of in “Unconscious Influence,” and what Olmsted would call “communitiveness” in his notes on American civilization. “Consider,” Olmsted relates in “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,”

that the New York Park and the Brooklyn Park are the only places in those associated cities where, in this eighteen hundred and seventieth year after Christ, you will find a body of Christians coming together, and with an evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes

largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each.

Summarizing the state of mind induced by the New York parks, Olmsted declared: “I have several times seen fifty thousand people participating in them; and the more I have seen of them, the more highly have I been led to estimate their value as means of counteracting the evils of town life.” Simply put, the New York parks created a beautiful and orderly analogy between the free association of ideas and the free association of people.\(^\text{38}\)

So it is that “unconscious or indirect recreation” turns out to be a compelling form of reverie. For all his talk of “exertive” and “receptive” forms of recreation, Olmsted was most concerned with the kind of openness that resulted from “a pleasurable wakefulness of the mind without stimulating exertion”—an obvious paraphrase of Lauder’s “half active and half passive state of dreamy imagination.” Olmsted assumed that this “pleasurable wakefulness” would “stimulate and keep alive the more tender sympathies, and give play to faculties such as may be dormant in business or on the promenade; while at the same time the cares of providing in detail for all the wants of the family, guidance, instruction, and reproof, are, as matters of conscious exertion, as far as possible laid aside.”\(^\text{39}\)

But by admitting that a dormant receptivity would never amount to anything without “opportunity and inducement,” Olmsted also implied that a public park must be safe enough for a state of reverie. Sadly, it was something he had to address in almost everything he wrote, since the fears of “rowdyism” that had shaped Downing’s “Public Parks and Gardens” would persist for many years. Echoes of this apprehension can be heard as late as Walt Whitman’s Specimen Days (1882). In a section subtitled “Central Park Walks and Talks,” Whitman

\(^{38}\)Olmsted, Papers, 5:659; Olmsted, “Enlargement of Towns,” p. 75.

tells of sitting “placidly, early afternoon, off against Ninetieth street” and of falling into conversation with “a well-form’d sandy-complexion’d young fellow”: “He is a New Yorker born and raised, and in answer to my questions tells me about the life of a New York Park policeman, (while he talks keeping his eyes and ears vigilantly open, occasionally pausing and moving where he can get full views of the vistas of the road, up and down, and the spaces around.)” Because Whitman begins the section by indicating that he visits “Central Park now almost every day, sitting, or slowly rambling, or riding around,” the policeman’s vigilance signifies a park safe enough for him or anyone else to enjoy “a pleasurable wakefulness.”

Here, as in many other instances, it helps to recall Locke’s wary maxim: “Where there is no law there is no freedom.” That a placid, rambling wakefulness was even possible proved that Olmsted had created an orderly and secure sense of enlarged freedom. Certainly, a feeling of security becomes the “key to our imagination” whenever we enter one of his parks. It makes us “sensible that the different forms” Olmsted juxtaposed and combined in his designs were suited to express an unconscious or indirect form of freedom while allowing us to “yield ourselves willingly to their influence.” When Olmsted said that the “essential qualification of a park” was “range” (or, as Bushnell might have put it, the “natural figure” or analogy of range), he had something more in mind than “the assemblage and movement of great crowds within the park—of crowds much greater than will occur anywhere else in the town.” It was the transparency permitted by range, the relatively harmless prospect it created for seeing and being seen, for “coming together” with a “common purpose,” “each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasures of all others,” that made it such a noteworthy feature. A visibly secure comity, constructed as a picturesque contrast to the encircling city and experienced as a form of reverie, was one reason to believe “a tendency to regard others in a hard if not always hardening way” might

actually morph into a yearning for “one consolidated social body.”

In the end, nothing was more emblematic of a latent freedom in Olmsted’s eyes than a world that was orderly, systematic, public, and safe. But as he weighed the future of a nation whose inevitable “drift townward” eased the effects of ignorance and barbarism but forced its inhabitants to walk as “watchfully” and “unsympathetically” as those who trod the western frontier, nothing seemed closer to this ideal at the time than his native New England. Olmsted’s response was both logical and unequivocal: from his very first proposal, he chose to enlarge the language, the associations, the institutions, and the landscape of urban America by extending the liberal values of his birthplace. For him, there was no better way to enlarge the freedom of the nation than by engineering the “law of order or divine system” to encourage a “friendly flowing toward” each other.


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