Prologue: Cloud over Chicago

The smoke of Chicago has a peculiar and aggressive individuality, due, I imagine, to the natural clearness of the atmosphere. It does not seem, like London smoke, to permeate and blend with the air. It does not overhang the streets in a uniform canopy, but sweeps across and about them in gusts and swirls, now dropping and now lifting again its grimy curtain. You will often see the vista of a gorge-like street so choked with a seeming thundercloud that you feel sure a storm is just about to burst upon the city, until you look up at the zenith and find it smiling and serene.

—WILLIAM ARCHER, America To-Day (1900)

My earliest memories of Chicago glide past the windows of an old green and white Ford station wagon. I was not yet in grade school. Each summer, my family drove from our home in southern New England to my grandparents’ cottage on Green Lake, in central Wisconsin. Most of what remain are backseat memories: looking at comic books with my brother, checking odometer readings to measure the tunnels of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, counting different state license plates on passing cars. I remember the dramatic vistas of the Appalachians, and the descent into Ohio, but as we moved deeper into the Middle West the landscape became at once more uniform and less interesting. Little of it survives in my memory.

Until Chicago. The city announced itself to our noses before we ever saw it, and we always pressed our faces against the windows to locate the sweet pungent odor that was Gary. (Gary and Chicago blend in my child’s eye view as a single place, united in a child’s mythic name: The City.) The forest of smokestacks, the great plumes of white and unwhite steam, were unlike any place that I, middle-class child of a nurse and a professor, had ever lived. The place remains in my memory as a gray landscape with little vegetation, a clouded sky hovering over dark buildings, and an atmosphere that suddenly made breathing a conscious act. I remember especially one smokestack with dense rusty orange vapor rising like a solid column far into the sky before it dissipated. We always saw it there, every year, and it signaled our entrance into The City.
The orange cloud of smoke was a signpost warning us of our entry into an alien landscape. As the highway rose above city streets to give an elevated view of the South Side, I saw a world that simultaneously repelled and fascinated me. Beneath the rush and noise of traffic, lined up beside the factories, were block after block of two- and three-story houses arranged in neat rows like barracks. The landscape’s natural flatness lent a sense of endless uniformity to the scene, and the buildings only added to the monotony. No matter how they were actually painted, their color in my oldest memory is always gray.

I was too young to know anything of the people who lived in those buildings, their class or the color of their skins, but I could see the shattered windows, the litter, and the dirt, and I knew this was a place in which I had no wish to linger. Not even the skyscrapers of the Loop made a favorable impression on me, and I barely remember them from those early trips. The one positive image I can conjure up (and this not until we made our way north out of the downtown) is a large white and red neon billboard advertising Budweiser beer, flashing what then seemed an astonishing variety of colors. It was my brother’s and my favorite part of the trip through Chicago, not least because it was a landmark showing the way out of The City.

A few years later, my parents moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where I grew up. There, I came to know and care for a landscape that few who are not midwesterners ever call beautiful. Travelers, whether in the air or on the ground, usually see the Midwest less as a destination than as a place to pass through. Only after a long while does one appreciate that the very plainness of this countryside is its beauty: the farms with their fields of yellow corn and stench of fresh manure, the great fence-line bur oakings long-vanished prairies, the dark lakes and woodlands of the hill country to the north, the small towns with their main streets of stores and bars and bakeries. When people speak, usually with some ambivalence, of the American heartland, this is one of the places they mean. For me, it came to be home.

At the edge of this landscape, somehow in its midst without seeming to be quite part of it, was Chicago, which I eventually visited on day trips that introduced me to its museums and skyscrapers, not just its views from the highway. Never having lived in a great city, I had no idea how little I understood it, but my continuing instinct was to mistrust and dislike it. Loving the rural landscape—and later, as I discovered the West, loving still wilder lands as well—I felt quite certain that I could never call the city home. Like many who came to adult consciousness during the environmentalist awakening of the late sixties, I wished to live close to “nature.” If asked to choose between city and country, I’d have felt no hesitation about my answer. More important, I’d have thought it perfectly reasonable—perfectly natural—to pose the choice in just these stark terms. Chicago represented all that was most unnatural about human life. Crowded and artificial, it was a cancer on an otherwise beautiful landscape.

One of the pleasures of childhood and adolescence is that one can experience emotions of this sort without worrying too much about their possible contradictions. These feelings came easily—my love of nature and the pastoral countryside, my dislike for the city, and, beneath them, the romanticism which had schooled me in such perceptions. It took me a long time to realize that I had learned them from a venerable tradition in American and European culture, and an even longer time to suspect that they were distorting my sense of city and country alike. I can’t pinpoint when it happened, but I gradually began to sense that my own life (including my affection for things natural) was not so free of the city and its institutions as I had once believed.

Reflecting on the various expeditions I made between my parents’ Madison home and assorted rural retreats around Wisconsin, I became troubled by what seemed a paradox in my easy use of the word “natural.” The more I learned the history of my home state, the more I realized that the human hand lay nearly as heavily on rural Wisconsin as on Chicago. By what peculiar twist of perception, I wondered, had I managed to see the plowed fields and second-growth forests of southern Wisconsin—a landscape of former prairies now long vanished—as somehow more “natural” than the streets, buildings, and parks of Chicago? All represented drastic human alterations of earlier landscapes. Why had I seen some human changes as “natural”—the farm, the woodlot, the agricultural countryside—but not the other changes that had made “nature” into “city”? How could one human community be “natural” and another not?

My puzzlement did not end there. In my eagerness to reject Chicago and embrace the rural lands around it, I had assumed that there was little chance of confusing the two. I had only to look at any midwestern map to see the same reassuringly sharp boundaries between city and country I had experienced so strongly as a child. And yet the moment I tried to trace those boundaries backward into history, they began to dissolve. City and country might be separate places, but they were hardly isolated. Chicago had become “urban,” spawning belching smokestacks and crowded streets, at the same time that the lands around it became “rural,” yielding vast grass and red-winged blackbirds but wheat, corn, and hogs. Chicago’s merchants and workers had built their warehouses and factories in the same decades that farmers had plowed up the prairie sod and lumberjacks had cut the great pine trees of the north woods. City and country shared a
common past, and had fundamentally reshaped each other. Neither was as “natural” or “unnatural” as it appeared.

This insight disturbed me. More and more, I wondered whether it made sense—historically or environmentally—to treat city and country as isolated places. Might I not be fooling myself to think that I could choose between them? I began to see that the word “city” depended for its meaning on its opposition to the word “country,” and vice versa. Unpleasant as it might be to admit, the city helped define—might even be essential to—what I and others felt about the country. My passion for rural and wild landscapes would have lost at least some of its focus without my dislike for Chicago to serve as counterpoint. The city was the what the country was not: in loving the one, I expressed a certain contempt, but also a certain need, for the other. And beyond this linguistic question, city and country also had close material ties. Would these Wisconsin farms be here without the city in which to sell their crops? Could the city survive if those crops failed to appear? The answer to both questions was surely no, but then why did it make sense, in trying to understand rural nature, to draw a boundary between it and the urban world next door? The more I pondered that question, the more I began to doubt the “naturalness” of the wall that seemed to stand so solidly between the country I thought I loved and the city I thought I hated.

If that wall was more a habit of thought than a fact of nature, then decrying the “unnaturalness” of city life in a place like Chicago was merely one more way of doing what my own environmental ethic told me to oppose: isolating human life from the ecosystems that sustain it. Putting the city outside nature meant sending humanity into the same exile. And yet this is precisely what I and many other modern environmentalists have unconsciously often done, following the lessons we learned from nineteenth-century romantic writers like Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir. The boundary between natural and unnatural shades almost imperceptibly into the boundary between nonhuman and human, with wilderness and the city seeming to lie at opposite poles—the one pristine and unfallen, the other corrupt and unredeemed. Gauged by how we feel about them, the distance we travel between city and country is measured more in the mind than on the ground. If this is true, then the way we cross the rural-urban boundary, the way we make the journey into and out of Chicago, exposes a great many hidden assumptions about how we see the larger relationship between human beings and the earth upon which we live.

This book, then, is a series of historical journeys between city and country in an effort to understand the city’s place in nature. I choose Chicago in part because it loomed large in my own childhood as a dark symbol of The City, so that writing these travelers’ tales about the past serves as a kind of exorcism of a way of thinking I now believe to be wrongheaded and self-defeating. But Chicago is also an appropriate focus for a less personal reason—it has been raising similar questions about the city’s place in nature for well over a century now. I was certainly not the first to visit it with deeply conflicted emotions. During the nineteenth century, when Chicago was at the height of its gargantuan growth, its citizens rather prided themselves on the wonder and horror their hometown evoked in visitors. No other city in America had ever grown so large so quickly; none had so rapidly overwhelmed the countryside around it to create so urban a world. Those who sought to explain its unmatched expansion often saw it as being compelled by deep forces within nature itself, gathering the resources and energies of the Great West—the region stretching from the Appalachians and Great Lakes to the Rockies and the Pacific—and concentrating them in a single favored spot at the southwestern corner of Lake Michigan. The image is not one I would have appreciated as a child, but for these nineteenth-century observers Chicago looked for all the world like a city destined for greatness by nature’s own prophecies: Nature’s Metropolis. And so the journey between urban Chicago and the rural West carries a much more than autobiographical significance.

Descriptions of the cityward journey became almost a leitmotif among those who wrote about Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hamlin Garland, Waldo Frank, Louis Sullivan, Robert Herrick—all tried to capture in words the railroad ride that first brought them to the new metropolis of the Great West. However they felt about the journey, each described a passage between two worlds that could hardly have been more alien from each other. Starting in the agricultural terrain of the surrounding countryside, the railroad became a vehicle that symbolically transported its passengers as much through time as through space. At journey’s end stood a city that represented the geographical antithesis of the lands around it, and the historical prophecy of what America might become as it escaped its rural past.

Travelers recognized the city long before they came to it. The air changed. “I shall never forget,” wrote the novelist Hamlin Garland of his youthful first visit to Chicago in the 1880s, “‘the feeling of dismay with which...I perceived from the car window a huge smoke-cloud which embraced the whole eastern horizon, for this, I was told, was the soaring banner of the great and gloomy inland metropolis....” Even admitting his literary embellishments, Garland’s was a prototypical Chicago journey which suggests what many rural visitors and other travelers undoubtedly felt as they approached the city. As he saw the farmhouses give way
first to villages and then to Chicago's outer suburbs, Garland began to believe that the railroad's "tangled, thickening webs of steel" were carrying him into radically unfamiliar terrain. From a countryside that was, if anything, oppressive in its openness and plainness—a commonplace country, flat, unkempt and without a line of beauty—he moved toward a city whose oppressiveness was of another sort entirely. The more urban the landscape became, the more its space contracted and its time accelerated; the deeper he penetrated its interior, the more he had to fight off feelings of claustrophobia and vertigo.

At his home in Iowa, the young Garland had dreamed of the day he might finally visit Chicago for himself. Country boy that he was, he had needed a long time to summon the courage to go there, feeling "safe only when in sight of a plowed field." Now, as he stepped out into the train station, he was confronted with crowds that seemed as dark and foreboding as the city itself. Writing three decades later about his feelings of fear and alienation at that moment, he sketched a frightening portrait of the hackmen who tried to grab his baggage and drive him for some outrageous fare to his hotel. Their eyes were "cynical," their hands "clutching, insolent... terrifying," their faces "remorseless, inhuman and mocking," their grins "like those of wolves." Such were the first people he met in Chicago.

Garland's language is literary and exaggerated, but it outlines the symbolic conventions of the Dark City—in counterpoint to the Fair Country—all the more effectively because of its caricature. For Garland, the forces that had created the city and beclouded its horizon had also stolen from its citizens something of their humanity. Repulsed by the dirty atmosphere, stunned at "the mere thought of a million people," and fearful of the criminal "dragon's brood with which the dreadful city was a-swarm" in its "dens of vice and houses of greed," he and his brother spent less than a day exploring Chicago before continuing their railroad journey to the east. And yet not all was negative about their experience. The tall buildings of the downtown were like none they knew back home, and at every turn they found things they had never seen: "nothing was commonplace, nothing was ugly to us." "To me," Garland concluded, Chicago "was august as well as terrible." Such a double-edge description, in varying combinations of praise and revulsion, would be offered by virtually every traveler who visited the city.

A decade after his first visit, writing one of his earliest novels, Garland portrayed a Wisconsin farm girl, Rose Dutcher, making the same journey for the first time. Once again, a cloud on the horizon marked the transition from country to city:

Rose looked—lat to the south-east a gigantic smoke-cloud soared above the low horizon line, its shape like an eagle, whose hovering wings extended from south to east, trailing mysterious shadows upward over the city. The sun lighted its mighty crest with crimson light, and its gloom and glow became each moment more sharply contrasted.

It would be hard to imagine a more ambivalent image. The great eagle, blood red in the light of a rising sun, betokened urban growth and national pride,sent soaring skyward on jet black wings by ten thousand tons of burning coal. Seen from afar, it was alive, almost magical. Whatever the claustrophobic darkness that might lie beneath it, its very presence was proof that the lands below had been remade by human industry. Chicago wore its cloud like a black halo, and few visitors failed to notice the symbolism. To transform not merely the earth but also the heavens above; this surely was a mark of great human achievement, "august" as well as "terrible." The cloud that Hamlin Garland and Rose Dutcher saw from their train windows had nothing to do with the natural atmosphere of an Illinois prairie. Only coal, human labor, and a multitude of furnaces and steam engines could produce it. Glorious and abhorrent at the same time, the polluted eagle was a wholly human creation, and carried within it all the contradictions of human progress. "See that cloud?" someone on Rose's train had asked. "That's Chicago."

Chicago's murky horizon was the most immediate sign of its urban transformation, but everything about its environment, including its citizens, suggested that the place had broken from nature. As Rose Dutcher made her way out from the train station, she encountered the city beneath the cloud: "Terrors thickened. Smells assaulted her sensitive nostrils, incomprehensible and horrible odors. Everywhere men delved in dirt and muck, and all unloveliness." In the face of such experiences, a new arrival in the city was bound to be reminded of its rural antithesis. Like her creator, Rose suddenly recalled the home she had left behind. An image of her father's farm rose in her mind: "At that moment the most beautiful thing in the world was the smooth pasture by the spring, where the sheep were feeding in the fading light..." That pastoral scene had all the natural loveliness that the city lacked, but it was already a thing of the past, a nostalgic glance backward toward an abandoned world. Like Garland and like Chicago itself, Rose had chosen her course and could no longer turn back from her urban future. Her old country moorings were gone. "She was aloft," Garland said, "and retreat was impossible."

Many other writers joined Garland in seeing their passage from country to city as an entrance into a perpetually shrouded landscape in which the darkness of the sky was proof of a moral transformation in humanity.
and nature alike. Such descriptions almost always suggested the city's vast power and its ability to inspire awe; but, as in Garland's cloud-eagle, power and awe flowed from deeply troubling roots. The city's beauty inverted nature and turned humanity inward upon itself. In choosing to live in such a place, one ran the risk of putting human creation above the works of God. "The manufactories," wrote Charles Dudley Warner of his visit to Chicago in 1889, "vomit dense clouds of bituminous coal smoke, which settle in a black mass... so that one can scarcely see across the streets in a damp day, and the huge buildings loom up in the black sky in ghostly dimness."15 Things were no better thirty years later. "Here," wrote Waldo Frank in 1919, "is a sooty sky hanging forever lower." For Frank, the Chicago atmosphere was a nightmare out of Dante's Hell, in which the dismembered corpses of the stockyards' slaughtered animals descended to earth in a perpetual rain of ash: "The sky is a stain: the air is streaked with runnings of grease and smoke. Blanketing the prairie, this fall of filth, like black snow—a storm that does not stop..."16 As Frank's railroad swept him in "toward the storm's center," it entered an environment so entirely dominated by humanity that sun and sky both seemed to be in retreat. "Chimneys stand over the world," wrote Frank, "and belch blackness upon it. There is no sky now."17 Whatever natural appearance the place might once have had had vanished when the sunlight died. But however foreboding Chicago's clouds and darkness might seem, its landscape also inspired awe. One might fear the degree to which the city had declared its independence from nature, but at the same time one could hardly help feeling wonder at its audacity. The more visitors came to believe that Chicago had broken with the rural nature that surrounded it, the more fascinating it became in its own right. Only the most alienated of tourists failed to experience an unexpected attraction to the place. Whether or not they thought it ugly, most Americans still believed they saw in it one of the wonders of the Republic. Exploding in two or three decades from a prairie trading post to a great metropolis, Chicago was among their proudest proofs that the United States was indeed "nature's nation."18 Not by accident did Garland transform Chicago's smoke cloud into an image of the same bird that adorned the great seal of the nation. Especially in the years following the devastating fire of 1871, when it seemed that the city had miraculously resurrected itself from its own ashes, Chicago came to represent the triumph of human will over natural adversity. It was a reminder that America's seemingly inexhaustible natural resources destined it for greatness, and that nothing could prevent the citizens of this favored nation from remaking the land after their own image.

Seen in this light, the city became much more compelling. The Italian playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, who had initially called the place "abominable," finally admitted that its energy and industry had led him to see in it "a concept of actual life so clear, so open-minded, so large and so powerful" that it made him think better of his earlier disgust.20 Chicago was destiny, progress, all that was carrying the nineteenth century toward its appointed future. If the city was unfamiliar, immoral, and terrifying, it was also a new life challenging its residents with dreams of worldly success, a landscape in which the human triumph over nature had declared anything to be possible. By crossing the boundary from country to city, one could escape the constraints of family and rural life to discover one's chosen adulthood for oneself. Young people and others came to it from farms and country towns for hundreds of miles around, all searching for the fortune they believed they would never find at home. In the words of the novelist Theodore Dreiser, they were "life-hungry" for the vast energy Chicago could offer to their appetites.21

So attractive was the city that it seemed at times to radiate an energy that could only be superhuman. Called forth by the massed resources of western nature, the city—at least in literary descriptions—became almost a force of nature itself. Mere human beings might try to manipulate or control its energy, but never to create it. This most human of places seemed to express a power that belonged less to people than to the god whose name was Nature. "It was," wrote Garland of Rose Dutcher's train journey,

this wonderful thing again, a fresh, young and powerful soul rushing to a great city, a shining atom of steel obeying the magnet, a clear rivulet from the hills hurrying to the sea. On every train at that same hour, from every direction, others, like her, were entering on the same search to the same end.22

Garland's metaphors may seem a little curious as descriptions of a city, but he followed a favorite literary convention of his day. His urban metaphors are all natural: the city was the great ocean, to which all fresh streams must flow and become salt. It was the magnet, projecting invisible lines of force that determined the dance of atoms. By so massing the combined energies and destinies of hundreds of thousands of people, the city, despite its human origins, seemed to express a natural power. As Rose stood remembering her father's spring and pasture, she felt herself to be "at the gate of the city, and life with all its terrors and triumphs opened just before her."23 For those like Rose who heard its call, Chicago could appear to encompass a universe of living possibilities precisely because it was so thoroughly human a place.
Among those who answered the city's siren song and embraced its possibilities was the architect Louis Sullivan. Arriving as a young man in Chicago a couple of years after the Great Fire of 1871, Sullivan was instantly struck by the vision and sense of destiny of those who were rebuilding the city. In prose that sometimes seemed as windy as his chosen city, he declared that one could see in Chicago "the primal power assuming self-expression amid nature's impelling urge." For Sullivan, although Chicago's energy sprang ultimately from nature, nature expressed itself only when mortal men and women followed their own inspiration. Such people, he wrote, "had vision. What they saw was real, they saw it as destiny." In the light of Sullivan's romantic wonder, Chicago was less a place than a feeling; it was "all magnificent and wild: A crude extravaganza: An intoxicating rawness: A sense of big things to be done."

For Sullivan, the wonder of Chicago was the wonder of nature transformed; the more nature had been reworked by an inspired human imagination, the more beautiful it became. It served as the vehicle and occasion for expressing human spirit. Nowhere was this more true than in cities, and in no city more than Chicago. Seen through Sullivan's eyes, the great buildings rising beside "the boundless prairie and the mighty lake" were the stuff less of brick and mortar than of visions and dreams. Imagination far more than nature had made their creation possible, and so their conquest of Chicago's skyline represented the triumph of "the crudest, rawest, most savagely ambitious dreamers and would-be-doers in the world." Sullivan thought them and their creation wonderful, and their energy "made him tingle to be in the game."

Garland and Sullivan describe the same city, but from opposite directions. By the end of the nineteenth century, those who visited Chicago had at least two general views about how "natural" or "unnatural" the city might be. For those like Garland who feared Chicago, nature became the symbol of a nonhuman creation damaged and endangered by the city's growth. For those like Sullivan who loved the city, nature became the nonhuman power which had called this place into being and enabled its heroic inhabitants to perform their extraordinary feats. Whichever perspective one held, Chicago acquired special significance, for few other American places seemed to raise so strong a question about the city's special relationship to nature.

The writer who best captured this paradoxical sense of a city within and without nature was probably Robert Herrick. "Chicago," he wrote in his 1898 novel, The Gospel of Freedom, "is an instance of a successful, contemptuous disregard of nature by man." The city at its founding, he argued, had none of the natural advantages found in great cities elsewhere around the world; built in the midst of a great level swamp, it had no fertile valleys, no great harbors, no broad rivers. Instead, its creation depended solely on the force of human will. "Man," Herrick wrote, "must make all"—buildings, streets, even the green plants—"for left to herself nature merely hides the plain with a kind of brown scab." Where nature offered such feeble support to human endeavor, the triumph of Sullivan's "dreamers and would-be-doers" became all the more extraordinary.

Carrying his readers on the same railroad journey from outskirts to city center that Hamlin Garland and others had experienced so negatively, Herrick reveled in the urban growth one could see beneath the "pall of dull smoke." First came the plank walks, drainage ditches, frame houses, and electric wires that marked "the advancing lines of blocks" that were "the Chicago of the future." Here visionaries were still pursuing the metropolitan destiny which Sullivan had seen just after the fire. Then came the boulevards, the green parks, and the great houses to which the wealthy could retreat when they wished to catch their breaths in the clear air beside the lake. And when the train pulled into its station, after passing through a landscape that had become "hotter and fiercer mile by mile," the traveler stepped out into the heart of a great commercial and industrial city, where the horizon vanished altogether behind skyscrapers and darkened air.

Like Garland, Herrick had carried his readers into the heart of darkness, but with a much more ironic moral at journey's end. Here nature had no place, having become at last what Emerson had once called the mere "double of the man." In a remarkable passage, Herrick showed just how far a writer could go in proclaiming the city's liberation from the natural world:

Life spins there; man there is handling existence as you knead bread in a pan. The city is made of man; that is the last word to say of it. Brazen, unequal, like all man's works, it stands a stupendous piece of blasphemy against nature. Once within its circle, the heart must forget that the earth is beautiful. "Go to," man boasts, "our fathers lived in the fear of nature, we will build a city where men and women in their passions shall be the beginning and end. Man is enough for man."
houses. He too choked on the city’s “stale air and the filth,” and although he might imagine hearts that could “forget that the earth is beautiful,” his own could not. His soliloquy on behalf of the unnatural city reflects his own foreboding at every turn.31

Moreover, Herrick’s claim that Chicago was “made of man” rings hollow, for real women and real men were no more present in the city he described than real nature. Individual people and their real landscapes had dissolved into that favorite device of literary naturalism, the abstract dichotomy between man and nature.32 In an opposition that was far more ideological than real, man was masculine, singular, active, and all-controlling, while nature was feminine, singular, passive, and ever more controlled. Their relationship was larger than life, played out upon a landscape of heroic mythology. Vast forces created and moved through the city, but they were the work of “man,” not individual people. The city, no more than a flood or a storm in the wilderness, could hardly be called the creation of particular men and women—save perhaps for the bourgeois captains of industry with whom this image of “man” was most closely identified. If nature had been exorcised to create Herrick’s mythic city, so had history and its human actors. For so human a place, the city had surprisingly few people, and that too characterized this genre of antinaturalistic urban description.

Herrick’s Chicago is a curiously disembodied place, isolated from its natural landscape much as its inhabitants are isolated from each other. One of his characters says of Chicago, “When you are in it, you are cut off by a vacuum, as it were, from the surrounding world. You can’t see outside, and you hear the voices of the others only faintly.”33 Off to the east, Lake Michigan sends out its quiet message of natural beauty at every instant, even though few bother to observe it “shifting, changing, gathering light to itself, playing out the panorama of nature close at hand for the unheedful benefit of this creature, man.”34 For some of Herrick’s Chica­goans, the separation from nature and the rest of the world offers the very feeling Louis Sullivan had embraced so enthusiastically—of liberation, of freedom from the “fear of nature,” of being able to realize big dreams without the constraints of natural limits or close community. Men and women could be on their own in the city and make as much or as little of their talents as they wished or were able.

But such freedom was also a kind of prison, a retreat from the sources of value that gave human life a larger meaning: closeness to neighbors, a sense of rootedness in the soil, a feeling of belonging, faith in something larger than the self or the merely human. In the city, even amid all the crowds and the human artifacts, one stood curiously alone. At the end of Herrick’s novel, his central female character decides not to marry an artist who embraced this vision of urban freedom in all its sterility, “You have abandoned your own people,” she tells him; “you have sneered at your own land. And what is worse than all, you have failed—to add one beautiful thing to this sore old world!”35 She had nearly followed him in a behavior which mimicked that of the city: “You have taught me,” she says, “to climb the same desolate hill where you have perched yourself. I have my freedom—I am alone now—but it would be better for me to be dead.”36 Here was a moral for the city itself. In Herrick’s Chicago, by taking dominion so completely over servile nature, humanity had declared its freedom but lost its birthright: to see human passions as the beginning and end of existence was to blaspheme against creation and humanity itself. To see one’s world as a self-created place opened the doorway to heroic achievement, but finally denied any other Creator, be it Nature or God.

Herrick’s dark praise for Chicago’s conquest of nature carries me back to my own youthful revulsion at the city. As I read him, I remember my fervent belief that the people of the city had indeed cast aside nature in favor of a wholly human creation, apparently indifferent to the ugliness they created in so doing. All these earlier visitors to Chicago had made the same journey, from a rural landscape of prairies, cornfields, and pastures to the grid of city streets, the soaring buildings of the downtown, and the dark cloud of coal smoke hanging over all like a sentry. And yet each traveler could still experience the symbolic endpoints of the journey quite differently. My own childish passage from rural beauty to urban ugliness was matched by a multitude of other possible journeys: from pastoral simplicity to cosmopolitan sophistication, from rural bondage to urban freedom, from purity to corruption, from childhood to adulthood, from past to future. Each possible journey forms a powerful narrative trajectory, a compelling token of the divided world we inhabit—and yet each also reproduces that divided world. All these rural—urban passages share one underlying assumption which is itself deeply problematic. They all assume that city and country are separate and opposing worlds, that their divisions far outweigh their connections. And so all reinforce our widely held conviction that people can somehow build a world for themselves apart from nature.

Such beliefs are deeply embedded in Western thought. We learned our city-country dichotomy from the nineteenth-century Romantics, who learned it in turn from pastoral poets stretching back to Virgil. From these traditions, we discover how to make country—city journeys of the sort I have been describing, journeys which present themselves as a passage between alien worlds.37 On the one hand, our willingness to see country and city as separate, even opposite, is our most powerful reason
for agreeing with Herrick that civilized humanity has been able to escape the bonds of earth. We “moderns” believe, even in a postmodern age, that we have the power to control the earth, despite our deep ambivalence about whether we know how to exercise that power wisely. On the other hand, our nostalgia for the more “natural” world of an earlier time when we were not so powerful, when the human landscape did not seem so omnipresent, encourages us to seek refuge in pastoral or wilderness landscapes that seem as yet unscarred by human action. Convinced of our human omnipotence, we can imagine nature retreating to small islands—“preserves”—in the midst of a landscape which otherwise belongs to us. And therein lies our dilemma: however we may feel about the urban world which is the most visible symbol of our human power—whether we celebrate the city or revile it, whether we wish to “control” nature or “preserve” it—we unconsciously affirm our belief that we ourselves are unnatural. Nature is the place where we are not.

The oddity of this belief becomes most evident when we try to apply it to an actual place and time in history. At what moment, exactly, did the city of Chicago cease to be part of nature? Even to ask the question is to suggest its absurdity. Herrick’s literary conceit—that Chicago was “made of man,” “a stupendous piece of blasphemy against nature”—becomes meaningless as soon as one tries to look past the city’s smoky horizon to see Chicago in its proper landscape. The journey that carried so many travelers into the city also carried them out again, and in that exchange of things urban for things rural lies a deeper truth about the country and the city. The two can exist only in each other’s presence. Their isolation is an illusion, for the world of civilized humanity is very nearly created in the continuing moment of their encounter. They need each other, just as they need the larger natural world which sustains them both.

The urban-rural, human-natural dichotomy blinds us to the deeper unity beneath our own divided perceptions. If we concentrate our attention solely upon the city, seeing in it the ultimate symbol of man’s” conquest of “nature,” we miss the extent to which the city’s inhabitants continue to rely as much on the nonhuman world as they do on each other. We lose sight of the men and women whose many lives and relationships—in city or country, in factory or field, in workshop or counting-house—cannot express themselves in so simple an image as singular man conquering singular nature. By forgetting those people and their history, we also wall ourselves off from the broader ecosystems which contain our urban homes. Deep ecology to the contrary, we cannot solve this dilemma by seeking permanent escape from the city in a “wild” nature untouched by human hands, for such an escape requires us to build the same artificial mental wall between nature and un-nature. We fail to see that our own