

ACADEMIC WORK: THE VIEW FROM CORNELL

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Many American universities were founded outside cities, often in places that evoke the admiration of European visitors for their beauty and sometimes their surprise as well that one would think of having a university in such an environment. The attempt to separate the university from the rest of society continues even where the city has caught up to the university, as, for instance, in the case of Harvard. Every attempt is made to keep the boundaries of the American university clear; what belongs to it and what is excluded from it is a matter of concern as it is not in European academic institutions.

I hope to show that the question of the setting of universities is connected to notions of academic work and thus affects the imaginative scenario of being a student or faculty member. I will use the study of a particular institution, Cornell, to do so. Settings vary from place to place; what is true of the particulars of Cornell need not hold anywhere else. But it may be that there is a relation between the settings of other universities and the conception of work there.

The condition Ezra Cornell made for his contribution to the establishment of a university was that it be located on a site "overlooking the village of Ithaca and Cayuga Lake" ("Proposal Made by Ezra Cornell to the Trustees of the Agricultural College in September, 1864," reprinted in Carl Becker, *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1943], 16-161). He had a particular site in mind which he donated to the university, the crest of a hill "overlooking" the town and lake and offering a view of a range of hills to the west. He needed to convince even those who thought the university should be situated in Ithaca that it belonged so far up the hill. Cornell felt that only his location offered the necessary space. Those who disagreed with him he accused of lack of vision. He would take visitors to the hilltop and, to their objections to the site, say, "You appear to be considering [...] half a dozen buildings [...] whereas you will live to see our campus occupied by fifty buildings and swarming with thousands of students" [reported by Ezra Cornell's son Alonzo B. Cornell, as quoted in Kermit Parsons, *The Cornell Campus: A History of Its Planning and Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 31-32]. The trustees all wanted a site closer to the town. Cornell, however, brought them up the hill. "Then," according to A. D. White, the

university's first president, "we viewed the landscape. It was a beautiful day and the panorama was magnificent. Mr. Cornell urged reasons on behalf of the upper site, the main one being that there was so much more room for expansion" and the board agreed [as quoted by Parsons, p. 32 and also Morris Bishop, *A History of Cornell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 19620, p. 70; see also W. T. Hewett, *Cornell University: A History* (N.Y.: University Publishing Society, 1905), I, p. 77]. One can understand that a view could provide a pleasant context for a university and that the Board would find Ezra Cornell's site appropriate for that reason. But Cornell's choice of a site made it difficult to reach the university from the town. Considering the difficulties his choice would entail—the need for new housing on the hillside, and the distance created between the school and the library Cornell had earlier founded in Ithaca, the pleasantness of the view seems too casual a consideration to make a difference in deciding the location of the university. Nonetheless, the view seems to have figured prominently in the decision to locate the university where it is today.

Kermit Parsons has pointed out that, before Ezra Cornell, others may, upon seeing the view, have thought of a university. De Witt Clinton, for instance, found the view "alternately picturesque, beautiful and sublime" and added that "before the revolution of this century, this country [Ithaca] will become consecrated to classical inspiration." Parsons also notes that for Ezra Cornell the association of the view with the university had something to do with death. Indeed Cornell's plan seems to have been shaped by the thematics of the Romantic sublime, which practically guaranteed that a cultivated man in the presence of certain landscapes would find his thoughts drifting metonymically through a series of topics—solitude, ambition, melancholy, death, spirituality, "classical inspiration"—which could lead, by an easy extension, to questions of culture and pedagogy. A book published locally earlier in the century, thirty-one years before the founding of the university, can provide us with some telling instances of the particular inflection sublime motifs took in upstate New York. It is Solomon Southwick's *Views of Ithaca and its Environs* [Ithaca: D.D. and A. Spencer, 1835], a typical combination of locodescriptive prose and interspersed poetry. Here, for instance, are some lines from Southwick's concluding ode:

Farewell, lov'd Ithaca!—from thee I part.
But not without a sign that rends my heart:
For still, whene'r remembrance shall renew
The smiling landscape, the romantic view:
The rushing cataract, that ever fills
With nature's melody thy vales and hills;
The gulf profound: the eminence sublime:
Those everlasting solitudes of Time! [...]]
Ithaca shall prove
Through time, the seat of science and of love. [...]

Earlier, Southwick had stationed himself at the Ithaca cemetery, "delightfully situated, on a lofty eminence, as all graveyards ought to be, and surrounded very nearly by beautiful prospects" [Southwick, p. 12]. It is while he speaks of this view that Southwick comes to think about learning and particularly about writing. He begins with some general remarks: "These communings with the dead, and the dust that covers them, and the grass and wild flowers that wave over their tombs, are refreshing to the soul; and cannot be too often repeated, whenever a temporary release from the cares and duties of life will admit of them. Though the grave be dark and silent, and the clods that cover it be dumb; yet do they hold most eloquent discourse, and speak in a voice which reaches both the head and the heart" [p. 11]. The "silent" dead "speak" to Southwick when he is aware of their presence, that is, when the grass and wild flowers that grow over the tombs cause him to remember that the dead are unaware of them. But Southwick's thought takes a curious and interesting turn shortly after this, when he begins to describe the cemetery itself:

*But the careless manner, in which it has been left open to the inroads of cattle — the prostrate and broken grave-stones — and quaint rhyming inscriptions, on many of the monuments which are left standing, made an impression upon me, blending so much of the ludicrous with the serious, that I wished myself out of the place, lest I should profane it by the indulgence of improper feelings. As a specimen of the Inscriptions take the following: ***But stay my pen; for it would not be right to ridicule inscriptions, which, however, quaint, or inane, or ludicrous in themselves, are the offspring of a feeling which ever is, and ever ought to be, held sacred by all mankind. [p. 12]*

For Southwick, “quaint, rhyming inscriptions” and broken tombstones lead to “improper feelings,” that is, feelings about the inscriptions themselves and what they are written on. The ridicule these inspire is deserved. It is, nonetheless, out of place, “improper,” because it does not take cognizance of the presence of the dead. The situation at this point is reversed from the time of Southwick’s first musings on death. When he said that the graves, “though dark and silent [...] speak” he meant that looking at them, he had death in mind. When, however, Southwick sees the “prostrate” tombstones and reads their inscriptions he is no longer thinking of the dead while nonetheless remaining aware that he is in a cemetery and should be thinking of them. His thoughts are “improper” because there is something in the world—death—which is also on his mind but he feels is not given expression.

To have death in mind when it ought to be in mind means being aware of its presence in the world. Awareness of the presence of the dead comes for Southwick only when the language of the tombstones does not divert him from its intended reference. When language functions as it ought to, the dead are locatable in the world—in the grave, to be precise. To be distracted by inept inscriptions means for Southwick feeling the presence of the dead in an uncomfortable way. It results in an undesirable mixture of things that should be kept separate: the “ludicrous” and the “serious”; the “quaint” or “inane” which nonetheless is “the offspring of a feeling which ever is [...] held sacred by mankind.” When, however, the inscriptions are as they ought to be, boundaries are drawn between different kinds of thoughts, keeping each in their place. When the dead are thought of ‘properly’, they are thought of in their tombs, where they belong (“these communings with the dead [...] and the wild flowers that wave over their tombs. [...]”)

When Southwick felt that the tombstone inscriptions were inadequate and that his thoughts were thereby infected with notions he found to be out of place, he proposed to write an “Essay on grave-yards and tombstones” [p. 12.] With such a manual at hand, people would know how to write epitaphs and Southwick would, thus, no longer have to fear finding himself in the uncomfortable situation he experienced in the Ithaca cemetery. Thoughts about death not fully brought to mind but nonetheless seeming to mix with other thoughts thus impel Southwick to tell of his experience in his account and to propose to consolidate what he knew in writing his “Essay.” It is this recourse to language that keeps thoughts of the dead pure, in effect keeping the dead in their tombs rather than having them haunt the living.

Ezra Cornell’s thinking was something like Southwick’s; it was mediated by the same tradition. (Today we know his thinking on the subject only through the stories recorded by W. T. Hewett and others sometime after the fact. These stories may be inaccurate, but if so it is in the interest of mythologizing the view, which is precisely our topic.) Here is Hewett’s account:

In the summer of 1863 [Ezra Cornell] was seriously ill for several months. As he recovered he said to his physician, “When I am able to go out, I want you to bring your carriage and take me upon the hill. Since I have been upon this sick bed, I have realized, as never before, by what a feeble tenure man holds on to life. I have accumulated money, and I am going to spend it while I live.” They drove subsequently to the hill, which constitutes the present site of the university, to what was then Mr. Cornell’s farm. He spoke with the greatest

enthusiasm of his determination to build an institution for poor young men. Mr. Cornell described the buildings which should crown the hillside, and pointed out where they should stand. [Hewett, I, 74f.]

The university, coming to mind when Cornell “realized as never before by what a feeble tenure man holds onto life” was to be his project “while I live.” Cornell’s house was just above the graveyard Southwick described. It was in this house that Cornell came to think about the imminence of his own death. His statement shows that when he thought of the university he thought also of leaving the house and going to the top of the hill. The house and the cemetery would have been visible from the top of the hill. Usually, however, it is assumed that the view referred to was the sight of the lake northwest of the university, whereas the cemetery and house were to the southeast. To see the lake would have meant turning one’s back to Cornell’s house and the graveyard. The trustees’ inclination was to build the university in the vicinity of Cornell’s house and the cemetery. In countering the trustees’ opinion by arguing that the university should be at the top of the hill, Cornell also removed the university from reminders of death.

Cornell’s argument, we know, was not that the view itself was essential but that only at the top of the hill, where the panorama was available, was there room for future expansion. The university today, however, extends down the hill and occupies the land Cornell rejected as its original site. I know of no reason why it could not have begun lower on the hill and expanded upwards if room for expansion really was what Cornell had in mind. The advantage of the site to Cornell seems, rather, to have been its separation from death.

It is not that Cornell, anymore than Southwick, wanted to deny death. Rather he wanted to place his efforts in the proper relation to it. The university was to be the embodiment of his efforts “while I still live.” In that sense thoughts of death would not be out of place in regard to the university; on the contrary, Cornell may have thought of the university as a tribute to himself that would extend beyond his lifetime. But the question of room for expansion suggests more than merely the building of a useful institution within the compass of the abilities left to Cornell in his lifetime. It is rather an insistence on his continued vitality just when that vitality had been severely threatened. When Cornell said “you will live to see [not a half dozen buildings but] our campus occupied by fifty buildings and swarming with thousands of students” he was insisting on his continued power. Putting his efforts in relation to death thus meant expelling thoughts of death, giving himself time and energy enough to ensure the building of a university equal in size to his aspirations.

Cornell seemed to feel he saw what no one else did: “you appear to be considering half a dozen buildings [whereas I].” The trustees, in any case, saw him as speaking with “inspiration.” His son Alonzo Cornell, who was present when the site was chosen, reported that “his remarks were astounding to his hearers who remained in silence for many minutes.” [Alonzo Cornell, Ms. history of Cornell, Cornell University Archives, 47/1/26, p. 41.] Cornell was not ordinarily an eloquent man. The university’s first president characterized him as “saying little and that little dryly” [quoted in Carl Becker, *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1943), p. 66]. His unwonted eloquence in the face of the view may have had nothing to do with anything inherent in the view itself. It may rather be that on the top of the hill he felt as Southwick did when the latter proposed to write an essay on the proper composition of epitaphs. Placing the university away from the graveyard meant it would embody his living energies freed from any threat of imminent death. That Southwick wanted to recover thoughts of death and Cornell wanted to put them behind him does not matter; both wanted to keep ideas of death and life uninfected by each other. It may have been his sensing of death and the attempt to push it away that impelled Cornell to his unusual recourse to rhetoric. In any case, Alonzo Cornell’s report shows him turning his back to the view, but more explicitly turning his back on the proposed sites near the graveyard at the moment he made his decisions. Alonzo Cornell reports that at the top of the hill directly above the cemetery he listened to the

trustees' proposals to have the university further down the hill. "Finally he was asked where he thought the location should be made. Turning upon his heel and facing the east [thus away from the view and with his back to house and cemetery] he swung his arms north and south, saying, 'here on this line extending from Cascadilla to Fall Creek [the names of the two gorges], with their rugged banks to protect us from uncongenial neighbors, we shall need every acre for the future necessary purposes of the University'" [Alonzo Cornell, p. 41].

Cornell's wish, later inscribed on the university seal, was to "found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study," the condition being that it could not be founded just anywhere but in a particular location.¹ His hope seems to have been that in the face of the view the university would stand removed from the site of his awareness of his death and thus in a sense in opposition to it.

Today the opposition between the university and life on the one side and death on the other still stands, as we shall see. It is, however, no longer the cemetery and Cornell's house (no longer extant) but the view itself which has come to suggest death. The view is now accessible to most people from the bridges which span the gorges running through Cornell on its north and south (see illustration 1). Looking west from



Illustration 1

them, or downstream, one looks over the gorges, some more than two hundred feet in depth, with streams running west that empty into the lake. These bridges are approximately four hundred feet above the town about a mile distant, with the lake somewhat further on. About five miles west there is a line of hills which rise a thousand feet from the town to mark the horizon. The lake runs roughly north and south but at its northern end bends west so that its furthest western rim is not visible. The lake and the hills together thus delineate the western or downstream horizon.

In order to look into the question of the view, for the past three years I have had students in my class on Ethnographic Description interview pedestrians as they looked downstream and then upstream from the bridges (the order is sometimes reversed).²

¹Morris Bishop believes the wording of the seal was actually that of A. D. White, though he does not doubt that the sentiment was Ezra Cornell's [A History of Cornell (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1962), p. 74].

²A total of sixty such interviews were conducted in the Spring of 1978, 1979 and 1980. Students were first introduced to methods of transcription, learning to listen to their informants and then

Two such interviews follow:

I—Down Stream

I want to jump.

How come?

Oh, not because right now it makes me want to jump so much as because it's just such a thing about these gorges.

What do you mean? Because you have passed by so many times and thought things and that's what you think now?

No, no. It's the gorges and what there is about them.

You mean the history and that you know that people jump?

Yes, the history but also just because of what I think added to it. I always want to jump.

Well, what is it? Just look at it and say what it is.

Well, it's so far down. And it's water you know and somehow it seems a beautiful way to die.

To go out with it.

Up Stream

I don't want to jump here.

Why not?

It goes the wrong way. The other way you get the feeling it will take you away when you're feeling you don't want to be here. This one won't. It's desolate. It's kind of like if you were going to kill yourself with a knife. You could throw yourself on it. But to drive it into yourself would be so hard.

(She displays these movements by the stone wall of the bridge and mimes a look of quick horror when she thinks of putting the knife in herself.)

II—Down Stream

This makes me very self-conscious. I could take it from so many different levels. I could take any of the paths.

Take whichever of the ones you can find the words for most easily.

I guess, well, what it makes me think about the most is time. Because of Geology class, you know the field trips we had to take walking up this gorge. I could talk about all the details. I was a real pain in the ass that day. I asked the TA so many questions. I mean I couldn't ask enough. I wanted to know what was there, what had happened when to put things the way they were. I was just amazed by the amount of time that the earth has changed in. And I wanted to get it down to the details, as far as the TA knew about, as much as he knew, the salt layer and further down. It wasn't enough. (Pause)

But about time. I really got into thinking about that, the vastness of earth's time. When I was little I'd think about the huge dragon flies and brontosaurus but it didn't seem like this world. I couldn't imagine the world having really changed so much as to accommodate this. But I was getting into it last year, I wanted to know every particular. (Pause)

I guess in some ways the intellectualness of it takes away from the wholeness somehow. Somehow it wasn't so good for my ideas of time to study the sciences so closely. I was studying things like astronomy to just see if I could feel the hugeness of the numbers. But in some ways it seems to take away from it.

to record what was said immediately afterward, a common practice in anthropology today. Alternatively students were allowed to take down what was being said in the course of the interview, as was the case in the three interviews here.

Students were not told the purpose of the interviews until they had already conducted them both in the topic at hand and the others that follow. Students also kept notebooks in which they recorded observations, comments and conversations. Where material is taken from these notebooks it is so labeled.

All material is used with the permission of the recorders.

Also, I guess I just thought of something else. I was working in a pizza parlor. I think about the cracked heads down there you know when people jump. These people I worked with also worked for the fire department picking up the bodies afterwards. They're split right open they said. (Pause)

Like ripe fruits?

Well, no, maybe. But they said it was just like they weren't people, bones and mangled. They talked about how the friends would come in and be so disgusted.

But this gorge is really young compared to like Fall Creek. Only 10,000 years and that's short geologically but it's such a scarring of the earth.

In both of these interviews, as in most others, only the western or downstream view promotes thoughts of death (usually suicide). This association, we see in the first interview, has to do with the distance ("it's so far down") and with being carried away ("to go out with it"). The second interview spells out the meaning of "distance." The speaker is confused about the number of ways she could explain her thoughts ("I could take it from so many different levels. I could take any of the paths"). The distance down from the bridge is translated into time, geological and then astronomical, the two idioms containing the longest spans of time. The interest in quantity is expressed also by the number of questions she reports asking ("I asked the TA so many questions I mean I couldn't ask enough") and the amount that the TA knew ("as much as he knew.") The exhaustiveness of her questioning ("I wanted to get down to the details") leads her to think of the sheer "hugeness of the numbers." This quantity is more than she can conceptualize ("I guess in some ways the intellectualness of it takes away from its wholeness somehow. Somehow maybe it wasn't so good for my ideas of time to study the sciences so closely.") And this failure to image or to conceptualize leads her ("I just thought of something else") to substitute strong images for what she can no longer think. These are the images of "cracked heads" and, by association, of the look of a pizza, a splattering of whites and reds.³

Facing downstream the horizon is in front of one. Measurable distance gives way to the space of the horizon. The effect is compounded by the movement of the water which seems to pull one away or to evacuate one, doubling the sense of the vacuity of one's thoughts. The view upstream works differently. There the bottom of the gorge seems nearer. It is so, in fact, but the difference in distance does not seem great enough to account for the difference in feeling. Looking upstream, since one is on a hillside, the earth and not the horizon is in front of one. The difference between looking downstream and looking upstream is that between seeing into a void and having 'something' come rushing at one, as the following interview shows:

III—Down Stream

I think of its vastness. I like heights. I like to work at heights I think because the feeling of danger and its bigness [...] I respect it. It doesn't scare me. I don't feel out of control, but sometimes I like to have to walk on a narrow line.

What work have you done at heights? Well, I've worked on boats where I had to go aloft a lot. And I like to rock climb.

Up Stream

It's not as far down. That's the first thing I can think to say. You know what it reminds me of in comparison to distance is you know on a ski lift when you are going up and the ground is coming up towards you from between your skis it doesn't look steep at all. But all you have to do is turn around and look down and it's very steep. You know what I like to do sometimes is look at the water rushing over the

³I have taken the term 'strong image' in relation to the sublime from Neil Hertz and am indebted to him for his ideas on the relation of textuality and the sublime, as will be apparent below. See Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime" in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text (Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1976-77, New Series, no. 2, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).*

With ropes and things?

Yes.

rocks. I like to do this really more from the side than straight on like this. But there's two ways you can look. You can either watch one rock and the water blur over it as it passes. Or else you can keep your eyes on a single drop of water and follow along so that the rocks blur under it.

To describe looking upstream it is necessary to resort to metaphor just as in the case of looking downstream. But metaphor here does not pertain to a quantity which is too great to be described and which is therefore 'nothing,' but to the constant filling-up of space. When the person speaks of 'blurring' it is not because something is blanked out, but because space is overcrowded to the extent that he must attend to one impression at a time, something he feels competent to do.

The frequent mention of death and particularly of suicide in these interviews is often a function of the logic of sublimity. The mind, set in motion by all that is seen, is not able to match what is seen with a stable image. One seems to be in the presence of more than one can think about. To imagine death by leaping is to expel the felt absence in one's mind into the scene one is viewing. The fear of losing oneself in the abyss expresses nothing about the abyss itself, but something about the inability of the mind to think all that it feels it is trying to think. The thought of suicide in the circumstances is comforting; even if it is frightening it is better than the panic that comes with rushing after images always beyond one's control.

The person in the second interview speaks of geological details which, added up, express the profusion of things that she can not grasp. What she hopes for, however, is a set of details which express the whole in a compass compact enough for her to understand. She finds this, finally, not in geological detail, but in the image of cracked heads, the result of suicidal leaps. When the person interviewed on the bridge thinks of suicide it is as though the image of the body were a body part, a detail which has separated from the whole. Though the thought of suicide may be horrifying, it is again basically comforting because it establishes death as "there" whereas the speaker is on the bridge "here."

The logic of 'here' and 'there' encountered in mental representations of suicide may explain the strange association of suicide and food. In one interview, suicide is brought up in conjunction with pizza. In another interview it takes this form: *If one jumped and committed suicide it would probably really hurt to fly down all those rocks. Jesus, you could end up in some restaurant down in Ithaca and that would really be tacky.* After the idea of suicide has established the distance between the speaker and the image of his demise, food is pictured as something that can be retrieved and re-incorporated. What is lost is thereby re-conjoined.

In addition to thoughts about suicide, the bridges prompt a sort of self-consciousness about thinking, as in this example: *It's a place to think. If you're really thoughtful, you really need to just think, this is the place to go. I guess that's why people jump here. Like, you know, you could jump off a scaffold, you really could, but you just can't think on a scaffold.* The thoughts about thinking in this excerpt are a way of conceptualizing the person's own thoughts. It is a means for the respondent of bringing herself into the picture, of finding something of interest equal to the view but opposed to it; once she has a picture of her thoughts, she is 'here', thinking while the view is 'out there'. The distance between the two is thus stabilized.

The oscillation between thoughts of suicide and thoughts of thinking and particularly of language occurs again in the following excerpt: *Yeah, the library is right next to the gorge. (Pause, looking over the edge.) I guess the other think you think about up here is suicide—not that I'd ever do it myself or anything—but it's always talked about and written about and everything—they make a big thing out of it up here.*

The library is not part of the view; it is not visible from where the respondent stood on the bridge and it is not on the edge of the gorge. Suicide is here sandwiched between the library and talk and writing, thus embedded in an ideality that stands opposed to the view.

Looking downstream many people spoke of feeling a "pull." We have seen this already in earlier quotations. Here is another excerpt: *I'm sort of attracted to the bottom of this side; I think it's because I feel with the flow and not against it. I wonder which side of the bridges most people jump off of?*

Compare this thought, looking upstream: *I feel a good sense of order and place looking up there, it makes me feel introverted, closed, nice and compact.* The pull is the sense of collapse of the distance between oneself and the horizon or the bottom of the gorge: More accurately, it is the feeling that accompanies the sense that one's mind is not adequate to the view and that therefore the opposition of viewer and view has collapsed. This feeling has another aspect as well which is most vivid in this excerpt:

How do you feel about the other side? upstream?

It's easier there because it's not so far down. I feel more pulled, downstream. Over there I don't feel so pulled.

When you look, where do you look?

Straight down. I look down and that pulls me out. It draws me downstream. Like, against my will it could pull me over the railing. If I looked down too hard, it'd really do it, like in the cartoons, when someone's body is just—zooot—pulled over. (Pause) I really, let's get off now.

What is interesting about this excerpt and the one above is that the bridge appears in the respondent's replies only in connection with the feeling of being attracted or pulled by the view. Looking upstream it is not mentioned. Looking downstream the bridge, and in particular the railing, is erected in imagination in response to sensing the collapse of self into the distance. One thinks of Southwick's disturbance at the sight of prostrate and broken tombstones with their inadequate inscriptions or of Ezra Cornell pointing out where the first buildings, which cut off the view, were to be erected. In each case it is a matter of a line drawn, across which the sense of absence in the mind is transferred to the world and thus conceptualized and stabilized.

In upstate New York there are many places with gorges and bridges over them. Only Cornell (and not, even, Ithaca), however, so far as I am aware, is known as the "suicide capital" with its own term for suicide, "gorging out." It appears to be the case that Cornell has no more suicides than most universities; of the suicides at Cornell, a majority are not from the bridges.⁴ The myth of suicide at Cornell—the idea that Cornell has an exceptionally great number of suicides and the association of suicides with the bridges—comes about not only because the logic of the sublime confronts students and faculty as they cross the bridges to the university, but because there is an interest in putting suicide, suggested by the view, in relation to work.

Suicide became an issue at Cornell along with the question of work, in the fall of 1977 when there were three suicides. Students demonstrated for a fall term recess, claiming that the pressure of work was too great. The pressure of work and suicide were so closely linked in the minds of most people that it was necessary, according to the *Ithaca Journal* of December 13, 1977, for "those who work with troubled students to

⁴Statistics on rates of suicide at different universities are difficult to come by. My information comes from the statement of Nina Miller, director of the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service of Tompkins County made in the Cornell Campus Council Suicide Barrier hearings, Sept. 27, 1979, who has informal access to such information. Statistics on suicide at Cornell were furnished me by Lt. R. H. Hausner of the Cornell Department of Public Safety. They show 11 of the 26 suicides between 1966 and November 1977 were by leaps from the bridges. Statistics published in the *Cornell Sun* based on data furnished by the Ithaca Police Department show that ten of twenty one suicides between 1970 and May 3, 1979 of people affiliated with Cornell occurred from the bridges. A spokesman for the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service of Tompkins County is quoted in the *Cornell Daily Sun* as saying, "The suicide rate at Cornell is about the same as at any other university of approximately the same size and status. This is contrary to prevalent myths" ["Dean Examines Evidence on Student Health," Nov. 14, 1977, p. 11.]

downplay the idea that academic pressure is the major culprit" [see also the *Cornell Daily Sun* of November 16, 17, and 18, 1977]. The connection between work and suicide in this assumption is not that work causes death, but that not being able to work does so. Not standing up to pressure, one is overwhelmed. But so long as one does work, one stands up to it, one lives. As one faculty member put it, "for some students the high suicide rate provides confirmation that they go to a tough school and are tough enough to survive it" [Eldon Kenworthy of the Government Department, in a letter to the *Cornell Chronicle*, Nov. 17, 1977]. The line that sets a boundary to the view also establishes something on this side of the line. If the view downstream is associated with sublimity, absence and death, the other side is associated with presence, the positive, the university and work.

When suicide and the pressure of work became issues at Cornell, the view became an issue too. It was proposed to establish barriers from the College Town bridge to hinder suicidal leaps. The opponents to these barriers, the vast majority of those who spoke up, did not say that the view was innocuous or merely pleasant, but rather that the view was worth preserving because it was more than pleasant [*Ithaca Journal*, November 14, 1977]. As one faculty member wrote, "being able to 'commute' across the suspension bridge was worth at least a thousand dollars a year in salary."⁵ His fear was not that barriers would make the bridge impassable, but that they would block the view. The arguments against the barriers were in part that they would be ineffective or even counterproductive; that the depression caused by loss of the view (and the thoughts of suicide on seeing the barriers instead of the view) would promote suicide. [See the depositions of Professor Jay Orear and Larry Kananoff read at the Cornell Campus Council hearings on the erection of suicide barriers on September 26, 1979. These depositions are on file with the Cornell Campus Council office.] In part they were that even if the barriers would be effective, the loss of the view would still not be justified. In all cases the motivating factor in the opposition to the barriers was the desire to preserve the view. One faculty member claimed that blocking the view would mean "destroying the essence of the university" [Professor Jay Orear in testimony before the Cornell Campus Council].

No one in the controversy over the suicide barriers spoke in favor of death. Those who spoke in favor of the view assumed it was in some way "life enhancing," in a phrase often used. One thinks of their mournful tone when talking of being deprived of the view, as in this letter, about the suspension bridge, on which suicide barriers had already been raised, included in a deposition to the Cornell Campus Council hearings on suicide barriers:

*I wonder how many other people felt like weeping when they saw what has been done to our once beautiful suspension bridge. A few weeks ago one lingered across its light airy openness as an intimate part of the beauty of Fall Creek gorge. Now the serried ranks of close-spaced bars make a prison corridor. A few weeks ago the bridge blended into the green of its surroundings. Now it glares at the transient hurrying through its claustrophobic channel with a honky-tonk garishness worthy of Las Vegas. A few weeks ago the hand of man was unobtrusive. Now silver paint coats not only the bridges, but grass, ground, bushes and trees; weary smears reminiscent of New York subway cars mess the still unrepaired walkway. [I. MacNeil, published in the *Cornell Chronicle*.]*

Someone had responded to the letter, originally published in the *Cornell Chronicle*; the letter writer included the response in his deposition:

I received a letter in response expressing the view that 'saving even one young life is so much more important than saving the bridges as they have existed

⁵Professor Ian R. MacNeil of the Law School in a letter to the *Cornell Chronicle*, September 7, 1977 and repeated in a memorandum to the Cornell Campus Council, September 19, 1979. An exposition of his argument follows.

for so many years.' My reply to which I still adhere two years later: '[...] I do not believe life can ever be so protected as to achieve the goal you suggest, nor should it be; a society in which suicide is impossible would be an intolerable physical and psychic prison. Moreover, efforts to create such a society are almost sure to be self-defeating. Many people were and are truly depressed by the prison-like atmosphere created by the 'cure' applied to the suspension bridge. Simple survival is not the absolute value in this or any other society. Safety is, and always will be one of our values. Freedom fostering self-responsibility and aesthetics have their place, and they are by no means always consistent with maximum safety. Thus I do not take it as a given truth that saving one young (or old) life from self-destruction is to be weighed more heavily than the rare opportunity the suspension bridge once offered thousands of people every year to be immersed very closely in God's beauty.

In saying that the view from the bridge is worth the possibility of suicide the writer acknowledges the association of the bridges with death. The bridge, with its "light airy openness" an "intimate part of Fall Creek gorge," offered the "rare opportunity" to be "immersed very closely in God's beauty." "Very closely" but not totally. To be totally immersed in the view would be to expend all one's thought in it, to have nothing left for "oneself." To be only "very closely immersed" in the view is not to lose oneself in it totally, not to be suicidal. In that distinction rests the connection between "self-responsibility and aesthetics." Without "absolute safety" one risks immersion in "beauty" from which "self-responsibility" holds back.

The "depression" that goes with the suicide barriers has two causes. The first is being deprived of nature ("a few weeks ago the hand of man was unobtrusive.") The second is being imprisoned (the writer goes on to say, "one would as soon linger in a jail") with "garishness," associated with Las Vegas, thus with gambling and risks taken imprudently and, since the chief cause of Las Vegas "garishness" is its enormous signs, with writing. The "silver paint" that smears the gorge reminds the writer of "New York subway cars" and thereby recalls graffiti. The suffering that comes with being deprived of the view thus comes from being shut up with writing. To be deprived of the opposition of writing and view (which is that of work and view) is to become depressed, to think of death and even, in an extreme case, to become suicidal ("who knows whether that added sense of oppression will tip the scales in a particular case.")

When one has risked total immersion in the view and won, that is, held back, the view is established as the place of death. The view is valuable precisely for being the place of death, the site where death may be safely located, because that place is not 'here', not the university. The particular myth of suicide at Cornell, however, indicates that, though the view itself suggests death, to become mythologized something more is needed. One also needs a notion of "academic pressure" or some equivalent. The availability of suicide, the bridges and Cornell for mythologizing depends on looking at the view from the standpoint of work. From there, the interest in the view is an interest in creating a place to which notions of absence arising within work can be expelled, as we shall see.

II

The relation of work and view is one of mutual support but also mutual exclusion. One suggests the other as its replacement. This can be seen in the way the view is accessible at Cornell. The gorges were designated by Ezra Cornell as the boundaries of the university. Today the university extends over both sides of the gorges. There are no markers indicating that one enters Cornell when one crosses the bridges, but the gorges are still felt as the limits of the university. Most people insist on thinking that the gorges mark the university boundaries even when they know it not to be the case. *I think the boundaries of Cornell [pause] well, I don't know [pause] mostly between the gorges—it's natural. The boundaries are not literally between the gorges—but in a sense.*

Once one has crossed the bridges into Cornell, the view disappears from sight, to be glimpsed again only from certain locations. The university buildings themselves are what shut out the view (see illustration 2).



Illustration 2

Indeed the history of the construction of the university's first quadrangle, reveals an interesting tension between the wish to integrate the view of the west and the wish to shut it out, practice always favoring the latter. The first buildings constructed—Morrill Hall (1866), White Hall (1867) and McGraw Hall (1869)—were placed in a line running north-south of the western edge of what was to become the Arts Quadrangle. Originally the plan was to locate the eastern edge of the quadrangle on higher ground, thus preserving the westward view over the rooftops of Morrill, McGraw and White. But this plan was abandoned: the line of buildings which now forms the eastern edge of the quadrangle is level with the original structures. Again, in the original plan, Morrill, White and McGraw Halls were separated from each other in order to prevent the spread of fire; this had the effect of allowing the view to be glimpsed from almost anywhere in the quadrangle. But A.D. White, the university's first president, planned to fill up the gaps between the original structures with fire-proof buildings; although this did not materialize, the area was subsequently landscaped and a statue of Ezra Cornell placed in such a way as to block the view. Looking west across the quadrangle today, one sees the form of the Founder outlined against the sky. Another plan—this was the suggestion of Frederick Law Olmstead—was to place a terrace on the west side of the original buildings, thus orienting them towards the view. Their main entrances were intended to face west, opening onto the terrace. Now, however, they face east, into the quadrangle: the terrace, discussed off and on for over ninety years, was never built.

Nowadays, from inside the Arts Quadrangle, the view to the west is blocked by the strong line of the three earliest—and architecturally similar—structures. Through what space remains between these buildings one can only catch sight of the tops of the hills across the valley and thus, once again, the horizon. The ridge of hills to the west, about five miles distant, however, brings the horizon considerably closer than a continuously open perspective would allow. An effect similar to that connected with the gorges is noticeable, nevertheless, although in this case the view of the distance is transformed not into thoughts of suicide but into assumptions about the age of the buildings which form the line barring the view. Asked to estimate the dates of construction of the buildings surrounding the quadrangle, students invariably overestimate the age of the

original three in relation to their only slightly younger neighbors. This would seem to be a way of conferring a special authenticity on the western wall of the quadrangle, as though one were reading the age of the buildings as a sign not of their dilapidation but of their archaic strength. It is as if the buildings were petrified, or immovable natural outcroppings, incapable of being overturned or demolished. By a trick of the mind the infinite distance associated with the view to the west is converted into a depth in time, and this monumental quality is transferred to the structures that serve as a protective barrier against the view.

The place of the view with respect to the Arts Quadrangle becomes still clearer when thought of in connection with the main library. Though the library is on the south side of the Quad, its height, making possible views over and between Morrill, McGraw and White, allows it to be oriented to the horizon (see illustration 3). The windows of the library open out to the view but they stand in a certain relation to the books as well.



Illustration 3

The pattern of the windows is such that there are no long views wherever there are books. In the stacks windows are small and offer, therefore, only framed views, mostly of familiar sights, to anyone not directly next to them. They function more to let in light than to allow one to see out, especially since the stacks are located directly in front of the windows. The west side of the library, however, does have uninterrupted views from large windows. These views, however, are either from the seminar or study rooms where the books are limited to furnishing specific needs. What one can see from the stacks is familiar, controllable and thus, put in conjunction with the books, reassuring.

On the seventh or top level, however, there are views of the horizon that stretch from one end of the stacks to the other along the north and south sides. The peculiarity of these windows is that they are set back about five feet from the edge of the top of the sixth floor. A single railing runs around the rim of the building (see illustration 4). There thus appears to be a walkway between the glass wall of the seventh floor and the edge of the roof. The railing marks off the rim and, thus, the view. There are really two scenes. One is down from the seventh floor to the Arts Quad or the university directly south of the library and the other is out beyond the university to the hills, lake and sky.

The salient feature of both of these scenes is that viewers describe them not simply by remarking upon the landscape but as though the view were itself a representation. Here are three responses.

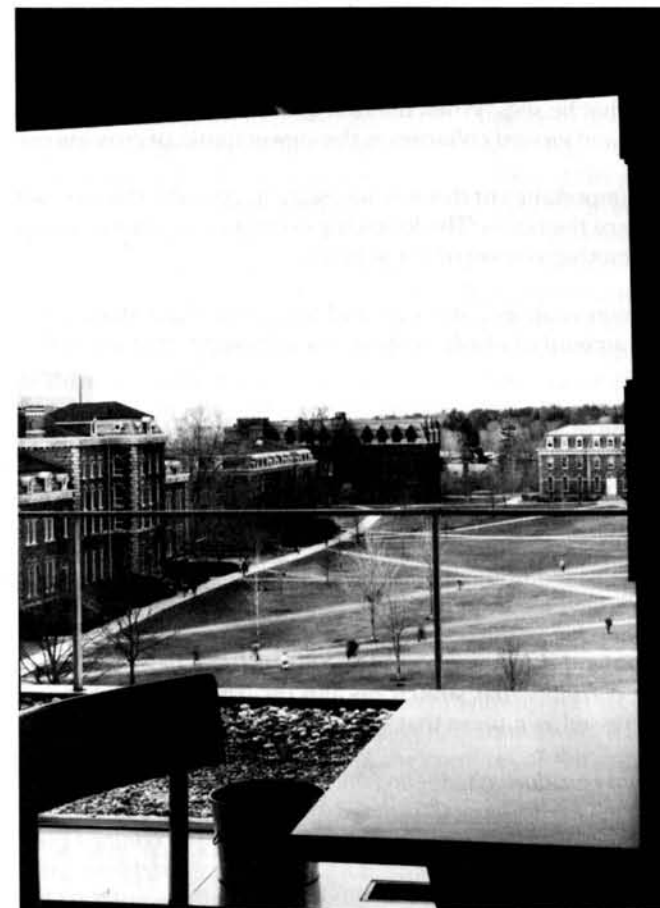


Illustration 4

*It's like a giant mural of 'Cornell, an Ivy League School.'
I could be looking at a very intricate Breughel picture where hundreds of little things are happening at once.
I am reminded of looking out into a visualization, a visualization of a vivid scene in a book.*

People looking at the view from the 7th floor do not seem to notice the railing until it is called to their attention. For instance, after describing the view one person asked about the railing said: *I had a carrel up there for two years and never noticed it. Wait a minute; I used to watch the rain drip off it. I used to have a carrel on the 7th floor. The view was relaxing. It wasn't distracting. I don't know why the railing is there, but it doesn't really obstruct the view.* As we see in the following excerpts, when the railing is mentioned, the idea of falling or of death comes to mind.

It's stupid, useless. You can't go out there anyway. It definitely destroys part of the view. It's straight and everything down there is not straight. It's not solid, it's weak, an unsafe railing. Ridiculous. Railings usually protect you from falling off but since no one's allowed out there anyway, I've no idea what this one's for. Maybe to make you feel safer in here. [Pause] Even if you were allowed outside, you couldn't fall.

The following respondent, asked "What is the railing for?" had a precise idea of its role. *It's to keep you from falling off in your mind. It directs your vision above the railing when what your vision wants to do is just drop off.*

These interviews suggest that the view from the library when it excludes the railing appears as a representation. When it does so, it establishes the viewer safely at a distance from what he sees. When the railing is called to mind, however, the distance between viewer and viewed collapses as the viewer thinks of crossing over the railing or falling.

To see the importance of this it is necessary to consider the view within the library itself—the view of the books. The following excerpts from interviews indicate that the books furnish another version of the sublime:

My first impression as I stroll around the fourth floor stacks of Olin is the incredible amount of words, sentences and thoughts that are all bound in this small area.

I get a feeling of futility, of chaos [...] the mass of the books, number of them. [Pause] If you imagine that every word printed has been vocalized by someone, and if all those words were vocalized at the same time, what a terrific chaos it would be.

In the face of such a profusion of impressions there arises a feeling of incomprehension: *Because the windows are so thin [that is, narrow] and the rows of books block them, I feel like I'm penned in by the books. The books look very dark and foreboding. Most of them are in foreign languages, or so it seems, so I feel like they're inaccessible. The books are like corridors that stretch on and on. The feeling of incomprehension is sometimes expressed as a sense that there is something hidden:*

I see straight corridors, channeling my thoughts, directing me. I see layers and layers of shelves, horizontal, ordered knowledge, then, books and books of recorded thought. I look down the straight aisles and contrast them with the winding paths, wandering people, partial buildings and disorder down below. I feel trapped between the catalogue of books and the building right in front of me. Something feels hidden. There is an urge to be directed and an urge to figure out the mysteries of the obscured view.

In this interview as in others the straight lines of the corridors are contrasted with the curves in the views from the windows. From the perspective of the books, the curves outdoors seem to be linked to the features of the landscape they designate whereas the straight lines of the rows of books repeat themselves regardless of the particular books they stand for. In the passage above this repetition immediately precedes the sense that something is “hidden” and the urge to figure out the “mysteries” of what is felt to be obscured. It would be by interpretation, by reading the books, that this woman would be freed of the sense of being “trapped” or of having repetition “channel [her] thoughts.” The choice is either to be controlled by repetition or to sense that something is hidden by it, thus allowing her to be free of it by finding out that which is hidden. (“There is an urge to be directed and an urge to figure out the mysteries of the obscured view.”) Another version of this logic appears in the next excerpt:

In the central corridor, looking at all the books, I have a feeling of not recognizing them as books qua books en masse. A feeling that I need to personalize my relationship to a particular book; by reading a title, by opening a book and reading something. A feeling of blocklike stolidity and of immovability. The way the stacks are arranged in the attempt to be symmetrically parallel reminds me of 'op' art, of optical illusions done with parallel lines in order to deceive one about the distance or space between certain lines.

Here the books have lost their identity because of their great number. The view of the stacks as series of parallel lines expresses the multiplication of the books in another

form. If the parallel lines can be said to form an optical illusion, it is only necessary to expose that illusion to restore intelligibility.

In nearly all fifteen interviews in the library there is a sense of being “caged in” as one person put it, or “trapped” as we have seen in the excerpts quoted. This sense of being in forced proximity to the books is an expression of being in the grip of language over which one has no hold. The view from the windows, either the small framed views of similar sights from the lower stack levels or the view as stable representation from the seventh floor, offers the reassurance of an outside to which one can always turn for escape. The condition for academic work, however, is that one remain turned toward the books. It is then that we see “academic pressure” rising. It is possible, in the library, to turn to the view for relief. But when one feels unable to stand up to one's work, thoughts of suicide arise. Associated as they are with the boundaries of the university, in particular the downstream side of the bridge, these are thoughts of breaking out after having been “caged in” or turned toward the books. It is then that the view becomes thought of as a place of danger. But by the same mythologizing thinking, ability to do one's work is taken as an indication of one's own safety. The sequence is as follows: first the view appears as a stable representation establishing the viewer apart from it and thus in confrontation with his work. Then, as one feels the pressure of work and feels inadequate to its demands, the distance between viewer and viewed seems to collapse. This collapse calls to mind boundary markers, such as the railings on the seventh floor of the library. More pertinently, it is the bridges, the boundaries of the university, that come to mind when ‘academic pressure’ is associated with suicide. The summing up of these boundaries reestablishes them with a reversal of signs. Once suicide is the result of academic pressure, the ability to do one's work is associated with life while death has been expelled from within the confines of the university.

