Robert Kelly

HOTVEDT'S HORIZON

Landscape painting in Europe took three forms, depending on where the eye is led to the center: where in the canvas the horizon tended to be found.

The Dutch put their horizon low down, close to the bottom, so the world we see is a world that is for all its richness something like a part of the sky, an afterthought of heaven, thrown against cloud. It is a world of sublation, a world of property austerely offered to the Principles on high. The sky speaks louder than the earth, as is logical and theological at once, since earth is a speck of matter in the sky. What it is that we see of earth is all the more so insistently substantial, thick, pleasant, domestic, close, edible, above all *nice* , a word the Dutch should have invented. The thin layer of life on this airy globe is so precious, let us live in it, inside the dense luster of polished wood, pewter, wool, rain light in tiny windows, the smell of skin.

The French locate the horizon high, so we get to see a lot of earth: the trees in the midground, the peasants in the foreground, the animals, the milkmaids, the strolling philosophers, the dying heroes—it is a human world with plenty of room for action and commodities. The divine world of heaven is just a pleasant band of color near the top; le bon dieu is at home, but not worried about us, nor we about Him. People rich and poor move easily about a social earth. The truth of things is down here, in relationship, in attitude, in degree.

The English, ever moderate, locate the horizon close to the center of the canvas, and whether it's wild Turner or docile Constable, there is finally a neat division between the business of heaven, far and comfortable and august, and the business of earth (waves, fields of grain). People are never comfortable in English landscape; cows and dogs are more at home, and when you see a man, he's likely to have a horse between him and the all too earthy earth.

One day in Lawrence, Kansas, we stood in Paul Hotvedt's studio and studied his many landscape paintings he was quietly, modestly, displaying. Watching them, I found myself suddenly aware of the distinctions offered above, the three kinds of landscape, as determined by the placement of the horizon line:

because horizon means bounding, the boundary. And in the painting, by a strange paradox I have yet to study, the boundaries are not the edges but the center. The horizon line is the internal boundary of the seen.

At first glance, this small beautiful cloudscape of the Kansas prairie seems resolutely Dutch—that's probably why I liked it so at first glance. A bare half-inch or so of yellow lines the bottom of the picture: receding amplitude of grain. And above that stands most of the picture, clouds piled on clouds, and a blue sky above grey clouds, a blue sky with scudding stratocumulus white in it, the highest value in the picture. So the painting works from earth to heaven, from dark to light, and holds firmly all the soon-to-be-human world—because the prairie is not fully *menskr*, human work, yet, not yet fully co-opted or controlled or even understood by human society.

But it makes this man dream:

A horizon is history. A horizon is dream. Dream is the furthest reach of the mind, as horizon of space. It makes me see.
A prairie is not a spectacle. A prairie is something all around, like an idea that's loud in the mind when you're looking at something else.
I see far off things the paint doesn't say but the colors see. Know how to make me see. The far-off things whose shadows are this place.