

Looking at Landscape

Even those who are most resistant to describing “nature” as “culturally constructed” will readily agree that “landscape” is very much a matter of “culture.” “Landscape,” in fact, begins as a term of art, referring to paintings of inland scenery; and although it is now also used of almost any and every type of “real” environmental prospect (including urban vistas), it still arguably retains a legacy (at least in its lay usage) of its origin as a term of art. Not only do we continue to think of landscape, typically, as in some sense enframed — as that containable within a human viewpoint afforded from a given vantage (even if that vantage can today include the panoramic view from the air); we also think of natural landscape as that scenery which is, as we say, “scenic.” In other words, the landscape concept carries within it the idea of aesthetic attraction, hence pleasure in the natural environment purely as observed phenomenon. Actual, as opposed to represented, landscapes are scenes in nature which are akin to representations in being conceived primarily as aesthetically compelling rather than as instrumentally valuable.

But landscape is a matter of culture in the further sense that tastes and fashions in natural scenery or for landscape design and its pictorial and literary representation have always been determined by those in positions of socio-economic power in ways that have reflected their privileged sense of the world and interest in cultural endorsement. The history of landscape appreciation in Western culture is a record of the ways of seeing and feeling of the upper and upwardly mobile classes: it refers to a privileged prospect on nature, the viewpoint of the “outsider” who enjoyed the leisure requisite to aesthetic contemplation. Pleasure in landscape, on this account, requires a certain distance, a standing back, both social and spatial, from which it looks upon, and which is not available to, or at any rate quite different from the experience of, those

whose laboring activity and means of livelihood render them “closer” to the land and more immersed within it.¹ The landscape gaze, moreover, has typically regarded the rural scene as reflecting not discord and social division, but an organic unity, a harmonious and naturally ordained order of wealth and reproduction, and thus as confirming the privilege and status of the viewer. Typically, too, as Raymond Williams has brought so powerfully to our attention, this naturalization of a social order goes together with a nostalgic and retrospective yearning for older ways of life (and artistic or literary depictions of them) as being (or capturing) something more authentic in humanity-nature relations, because it is purportedly closer to nature, and therefore relatively less remote than the present from a mythical pre-cultural point of origin.

But it is not only in respect of the *pastoral* landscape and its representation, that such considerations apply, since the taste for the sublime landscape has also symbolically endorsed a particular conception of humanity-nature relations, and has been invested with normative import for human self-understanding and behavior. The appreciation and theorization of the natural sublime in the late 18th century may be regarded in the first instance as a response to Enlightenment de-deification: God in a sense gets saved by finding his attributes (immensity, infinity) in the vastness of the cosmic space of nature.

But there is no doubt, too, that the sublime was primarily associated with a lifting of the burden of the past and an influx of power over earlier authorities, and hence with the emerging sense of human control over natural forces and release from bigotry and superstitious fear. The frisson induced by the sublime was emblematic in this sense of a new-found confidence in human moral autonomy and capacity to contemplate the terrors of nature without quailing: attitudes which find their philosophical confirmation in Kant’s analytic of the sublime as reliant on a transcendence over nature rooted in the distinctively human power of reason. (By a process of mistaken subreption, according to Kant, we impute the sublime to nature when in reality it is nature that directs us to the sublimity of the human mind, and specifically to the superiority of its powers of reason over those of the faculty of

¹See, D. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 18-27 Cf; J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Palladin, 1973).

sensibility.²) But if the sublime aesthetic can be said to be symbolic in a general way of Enlightenment selfhood and responses to nature, it was also confirming the political ascendancy and socio-economic priorities of an entrepreneurial, bourgeois elite blessed by commercial success and the cultural benefits that went with that (and, as such, it was opposed to the beauties of the Arcadian landscape favored by a decadent — and allegedly “effeminate” — aristocracy). And for the poets, painters and philosophers of the Romantic period, there is little doubt but that the appreciation of the sublime is the mark of a refined sensibility and virile moral feeling denied to the mass of mortals, or at any rate viewed as achievable only through culture and education. Wordsworth, for example, argued that although it is “benignly ordained” that all of us should easily find affection for the “ordinary varieties of rural nature,” the taste for wilder nature is not a common property, but has, as he puts it, to be “gradually developed both in nations and individuals.”³ Kant also viewed the aesthetic appreciation of nature as the mark of a superior moral soul, and although his transcendental analytic is “democratic” in the sense that it allows that everyone in principle (since it has its foundation in human nature) can relish even the sublime, he does acknowledge that a measure of culture is requisite to doing so.⁴ The taste for the Romantic sublime is thus presented as that of the sensitive and solitary nature lover, and it is a definite intimation of much of the commentary on it, that if it is transmitted to the common masses it is passed down only in a banalized and inauthentic form. What is important, in some sense, to the very quality of the experience is that it be an exclusive taste, the appreciation in nature of a vista confirming the subtler instinct and sensibility of the viewer.

Landscape, then, according to these perspectives, only comes into its own (i.e., prospects in nature are only constituted as object of aesthetic appreciation) at the point where nature no longer terrifies, and even then it only figures as a source of pleasure for those freed from the necessity of working on the land themselves. Or to put the point more

²I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, W. Pluhar, ed. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), esp. pp. 114-115.

³William Wordsworth, “Letter on the Projected Windermere Railway,” in Peter Bicknell, ed., *The Illustrated Wordsworth’s Guide to the Lakes* (Exeter: Webb’s Bower, 1984). For further discussion of Wordsworth’s views on this, see Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth & the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1991); Martin Ryle, “After Organic Community: Eco-criticism, Nature and Human Nature,” forthcoming in John Parham, ed., *Literature and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Ashgate, 2001).

⁴Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-25.

strongly, the appreciation of landscape is here presented as definitionally elitist, since it is only the economically advantaged echelons, in any historical period, who are said to be in a position, socially and culturally, to experience an aesthetic reaction to their environment. Cosgrove, for example, has suggested that for the “insider” who labors on the land the external world is unmediated by aesthetic conventions (and, so it is strongly suggested, the experience of it is all the more authentic).⁵ Adorno has claimed somewhat comparably that those immersed in working the landscape were incapable of responding to it aesthetically (although he falls short of suggesting that their response is the more genuine). He writes:

Times in which nature confronts man overpoweringly allow no room for natural beauty; as is well known, agricultural occupations, in which nature as it appears is an immediate object of action, allow little appreciation for landscape. Natural beauty, purportedly ahistorical, is at its core historical; this legitimates at the same time as it relativises the concept. Wherever nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified.⁶

Now it is quite true, that the evidence for regarding an aesthetic of nature as inherently patrician and elitist is overwhelming — or rather, it is very difficult to gainsay it in the absence of any countervailing tradition. All the same, some caution may be called for here. For while it is certainly mistaken to treat the sentiments expressed for nature of a particular group or class as if they had universal application and were those of humanity at large, there is also a presumption in supposing that the feelings which have been given expression are exclusive to the fraction of humanity that gave voice to them, or that the absence of a cultural record indicates an absence of sentiment. In insisting, moreover, on the socially exclusive nature of a distinctively aesthetic response, we might seem to be denying any aesthetic sensibility to the mass of ordinary people, and thereby also denying the existence of anything more commonly shared in human responses to the natural environment.

⁵Cosgrove, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, cf. and 26.

⁶T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. and introduction (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 65.

In *What is Nature?*⁷ I argued that while we may not want to claim “evidence” in any conclusive sense of a collective aesthetic response to nature, it is nonetheless difficult not to feel that myth, religious imagery, and the more publicly available forms of art and literature suggest some shared and relatively unmediated appreciation of natural phenomena, including some of the forms of landscape. To suppose otherwise would seem implausible in its denial of any phenomenological response to the beauties of nature; it would be to suppose that cultural forces entirely determine rather than mold or mediate what is or is not an object of aesthetic pleasure. Adorno, to return to him once more, makes the interesting point in this connection that:

Although what is beautiful and what is not cannot be categorically distinguished in nature, the consciousness that immerses itself lovingly in something beautiful is compelled to make this distinction. A qualitative distinction in natural beauty can be sought, if at all, in the degree to which something not made by human beings is eloquent: in its expression. What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be more than is literally there. Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience.⁸

Sensibility “discovers” beauty in nature, in a sense imbues it with “expression,” but the object must prompt the response initially. Likewise, the historical mediations will always inflect the subjective response to landscape, but the landscape must also present itself, or figure beforehand as a possible object of the cultural mediation.

Let us add, too, that comparably to the way in which we see the scientific and secular view of nature gaining general acceptance in the Modern period, so we are witness to certain epochal shifts in the aesthetic tastes in landscape whose general form is shared across divisions of class and wealth. The very widespread contemporary preference for wild nature would seem an obvious case in point, for even if this begins as a more purely bourgeois aesthetic, the general preference today can hardly be satisfactorily accounted for without some

⁷Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (Oxford: Basis Blackwell, 1995).

⁸T. Adorno, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

reference to the more collectively shared experiences of environmental transformation that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, if such general social shifts of feeling can be said to have come, at least in part, in reaction to the industrial encroachment upon nature and reflect some commonly shared concern for what has been lost in that process, they are also indicative paradoxically of an underlying trans-epochal communality in human responses. If our current tastes in landscape can be seen as the effect of human transformations of the environment and the particular forms of loss and destruction involved in these, then they are tastes that also in a sense unite us across time with those in the past who, it may be said, did not esteem what we do now precisely because they had yet to experience its demise. What they valued less because of its abundance, we value more because of its progressive erosion. In this sense, one might claim that such shifts in the aesthetic taste in nature speak to something more universal in the patterning of Western responses to it.

Overall, then, one may argue that an eco-political approach to landscape needs to recognize both sides of a nature-culture dialectic: both the extent to which aesthetic responses to the landscape, and the environment more generally, are, indeed, culturally formed or constructed, hence relative to particular times, places and constituencies, and hence the carriers of ideological outlooks determined in their making by the existing social relations of production; but also to recognize the limits on this construction, and the extent to which the claims of a democratically motivated green politics to represent the pleasures and solace to be found in the natural landscape presuppose, however problematically, some more commonly grounded aesthetic feeling. T.J. Clark has suggested in the case of art that to opt for the arbitrariness of the sign and the entirely constructed quality of art's matter, is in practice to exit from the hope of art's inhabiting a public, fully translatable world,⁹ and maybe something comparable can be said in respect of the aesthetic of nature: that a too exclusive emphasis on the plurality and construction of taste makes too little allowance for any collective insight into our common ecological predicament. In other words, although we can recognize the political reasons for thinking it illegitimate to lay claim to any universal human feeling for nature or collective aesthetic response to it, we should also recognize that we deny any such common aesthetic only at the cost of undermining that part of the argument for a green politics which appeals to the value we

⁹T.J.Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 130.

collectively set on nature as a source of pleasure and sensuous gratification.

Obviously, this is not the sole, or even the main, value placed on nature, and many, including myself, would give at least as much weight to its instrumental value as the only supplier of resources for our own and future generations, and hence to the paramount importance of moving away from the capitalist growth economy and its current structure of consumption. But I would also want to suggest that the aesthetic and utilitarian impulses are inter-dependent, and that what tends to the erosion of nature as a source of aesthetic pleasure also tends to distract from the interest in a more sustainable use of resources. There is a difference, of course, at the individual level, in the relative status or importance of the aesthetic and the utilitarian requirement, for while an individual can live without the pleasures of landscape, survival is impossible in the absence of food, warmth, and other basic utilities. It is also the case that when we are deprived of food, the need for it nonetheless persists, whereas when deprived of any experience of the pleasures of nature, the aesthetic need will atrophy and no longer figure as in any sense an experienced need.

But even at the level of the individual, the failure to sense that one is missing this source of aesthetic satisfaction does not mean that some loss has not been sustained that will have impact on the general quality of life and interest in sustaining it; and this might be even forcefully argued to be true at a more collective level, in the sense that communities persistently deprived of aesthetic gratification in nature are also in the long run likely to care less for long term human survival and well-being.

