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Nature, fine arts, and aesthetics

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Our starting point is Lindisfarne, or Holy Island.

The island is off the coast of Northumbria and connects to the mainland by a causeway that floods at high tide. Much of its early history is known only through Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. In 635 King Oswald granted the island to Bishop Aidan to found a monastery. A cult grew around the king following his death in battle against the heathen Mercians in 642. Bede writes that people began to collect dust from where the king had fallen with which to cure sicknesses in themselves and their stock.

> About this time, another man, who was of the British nation, is said to have been crossing the place where this battle had been fought; and seeing that one spot was more green and more beautiful than the rest of the field, he came to the wise conclusion that there could be no other explanation for this exceptional greenness than that some person of greater sanctity than anyone else in the army had been killed there. So he took away some of that earth wrapped up in a linen cloth...[1]

The Briton found that piece of earth valuable because the color and beauty he saw signified something more. The depth of color and quality of that patch of grass had moral magnitude because the earth, nature, and its workings were affects of divinity. Bede goes on to relate that the house where the Briton spent the next night caught fire. Only the beam from which he had hung the earth in its linen wrap remained undamaged – miraculously. Subsequent inquiry established that that particular part of the field was where the martyred King Oswald had fallen. For Bede this confirmed the Briton's wisdom in thinking that the site was holy because it was green and beautiful.

Bede's history of the land and its people came to have its own importance. King Alfred ordered scholars to translate the *History* into

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English, intending its study to sustain a cultural identity against the encroaching Danish forces. Thereby he invested the *Historia* with a cultic resonance. The Christian myths, the land, its aesthetic qualities, and its people became united in the construction of an identity.

Such associations of nature, beauty, and a sense of order, together with the secular role they play, still structure the understanding of landscape in nature and painting. Our conceptions of nature may vary and each version may find independent reasons for thinking its object beautiful and purposeful. Perhaps the more verdant is not straightforwardly more beautiful when it results from a spillage of nitrogen fertiliser. Nor need aesthetic values signify sanctity at all, since science,[2] politics,[3] and commerce[4] provide alternative readings of nature. Nevertheless, the understanding of nature and its beauty depends on our construction of order and purpose.

At present, natural beauty is so riddled with conceptions derived from painting and poetry that landscape refers ambiguously to parts of nature *and* representations of nature in paintings, photographs, and film.[5] Perhaps this is a result of the history of landscape. In his seminal paper on "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape,"[6] Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich argues that the theory of landscape painting, denoting the artists' creative genius, among other things, preceded the practice of representing actual instances of natural beauty. Passages in Leonardo's notes explore "the motive powers of the creative process itself," issuing in the claim in the *Paragone* that if an artist "desires valleys or wishes to discover vast tracts of land from mountain peaks and look to the sea on the distant horizon beyond them, it is in his power;. . .In fact, whatever exists in the universe either potentially or actually or in the imagination, he has it first in his mind and then in his hands, and these [images] are of such excellence, that they present the same proportional harmony to a single glance as belongs to the things themselves."[7] The apocryphal story of the "invention" of landscape is that an artist in his studio set down on canvas his friend's recollections of his travels: his landscape owed little to the painter's eye and much to his imagination.[8]

What deserves to be accounted for in this understanding of landscape is "this movement in a 'deductive' direction from artistic theory to artistic practice, from artistic practice to artistic feeling" – until by the eighteenth century artistic categories were read into nature. Gombrich cites a guide book through the Lake District that promises to lead the tourist "from the delicate touches of Claude,

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verified at Coniston Lake, to the noble senses of Poussin, exhibited at Windermere Water, and from that to the stupendous romantic ideas of Salvator Rosa, realized in the Lake of Derwent."[9]

The result of these developments is that human creation and nature so interpenetrate in our understanding that they apparently preclude the likelihood of producing clear conceptual distinctions. Human beings are a fragment of nature, and nature is a figment of humanity. Similarly, the painterly and representational perspective that landscape ordinarily connotes, that determines the natural "prospect," loses its authority when ascribed to the work of the artist's imagination. It suggests, instead, a concern with constructing landscapes, both on canvas (or film) and in the land itself. Prospects in representations depend on the artist's imaginative construction and, in reality, look out onto land whose cultivation requires laborers, artisans, animals, tools, and a whole aesthetic, economic, and social order.

These characteristics of the conception of landscape, natural beauty, and nature, and the difficulties they suggest in the way of making clear conceptual distinctions, undermine any attempt to produce an hierarchy of concepts that will constitute a definitive foundationalist grasp of their complex interaction. Nature is not *the* most fundamental concept of natural beauty or landscape, and the attempt to resolve issues about the experience of natural beauty by deriving its vocabulary from such concepts is likely to fail. Better then to deal with natural beauty by showing the cluster of concepts that make up the parameters of our present understanding, without worrying about the metaphysical certainties that a determinate foundationalist schema promises.

To set out these parameters, this volume begins with essays by T. J. Diffey and Ronald Hepburn. One way to develop the problematic of natural beauty and landscape is to ask how people must talk of nature in the context of aesthetic values. For Bede nature was charged with a meaning derived from God and an appropriate eschatology. Such metaphysical commitments no longer determine conceptions of nature as clearly as they might once have done; nor is there obvious need for a commonsensical damper on thinking of earth as anything but "dirt."[10] In this context, some clarification of how "Nature" operates without metaphysics is surely welcome, especially if it promotes sense on the relation of natural to artistic beauty.

In his exploratory essay on "Natural Beauty without Metaphysics,"

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T. J. Diffey considers that problematic from a particular perspective. He begins by attending to a present-day popular account of beauty. This avoids many of the "metaphysical lucubrations" that have engaged past thinkers while it also clarifies our conception of natural beauty by comparison at times with fine art. He finds that most people accede to a relativism and subjectivism about beauty that ascribes complete autonomy to individuals. They are very reluctant to give any external or public criteria authority over their own certainty about their own relation to objects, especially as a general agreement about which objects or landscapes are beautiful seems to validate their own independent choices.

Philosophers usually think this subjectivism and relativism untenable. Indeed, they seem unable to make a space for natural beauty at all. Its territory is carved up "between three leading ideas: beauty as the object of biological or sexual interest; beauty as disinterested appreciation of a rational mind; and an idealist rating of art above beauty in importance."[11] Yet none of these offers very substantial appreciations of natural beauty: neither sexual interest in nature nor the privileging of art seem germane or helpful, and a disinterested delight, in its desacralized contemporary version, seems too thin to generate much significance.

Diffey does not intend his inquiry to secure firm and final answers. But to counter the lack just outlined, to make some headway into grasping natural beauty, yet without any traditional metaphysical commitments, he begins with a claim with which everyone must agree, regardless of how they choose to explain its validity: a prospect of the Sussex downs "is *undoubtedly* beautiful. . .I have never heard it doubted nor would I understand anyone who did deny it. . ."[12] He then asks how "natural" this object can be. Very few prospects dominate areas that lack all signs of human agency (and this determines any human perceiver's interest), and unspoilt terrain is not beautiful simply by virtue of being unspoilt. Nor is there a neutral account of nature as a component of natural beauty. Diffey refers to Arthur Lovejoy's "'Nature' as an Aesthetic Norm," which argues that there is no unequivocally identifiable subject of attribution. Nature in natural beauty operates in association with concepts such as landscape, view, and prospect, all of which are already aesthetically evaluative.

These ambiguities may suggest that perhaps people should look more closely at works of art. Nature's beauty became accessible in part because poets and painters made it clear through their work and

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made it plausible through its implicit contrast with and relation to artistic beauty. However, the same difficulties infect any attempt to determine the latter independently of the former: it is not some uniform thing; people consider the aesthetic issues of art just because beauty in nature seems too nebulous; the decline in talk of beauty coincides with the emphasis on art. All these suggest that the aesthetic issues about art have their source in aesthetic issues about nature, implying a need to understand artistic beauty through natural beauty rather than the other way around.

This still leaves open the issue of the basis for finding nature beautiful. Subjectivity and relativism ill serve attempts to protect beautiful places; but, in any case, these concepts may not grasp the popular conception wholly, since people also find sustenance in natural beauty.[13] If contemporary materialist philosophers are reluctant to identify that sustenance as religious or spiritual, Diffey suggests, it is because they too easily identify Christianity with all religion and reject the latter because of their problems with the former. Once spirituality is unhooked from its particular Western Christian version, by contrast, nature may appear as the repository of transcendent values.

Art may not seem to be the obvious model for exploring that transcendence: talk of beauty became unseemly because of the post-Hegelian stress on art. Yet art too has become a refuge for "religious and noumenal truth,"[14] even for atheists. Both art and nature make available a notion that "through the senses paradoxically one is in the presence of something supersensible." This sense of the ineffable, of the broad issue of whether the order of nature has room for humanity and its highest aspirations, underlies popular reverence for the countryside, and appears in philosophical and literary reflections. Poems like Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" or Auden's "In Praise of Limestone," while they resonate with intensely private (and sometimes subterranean) sensibilities, make the latter transcendent by referring them to nature – and this to such an extent that references to nature not only seem completely appropriate to thought of beauty, Diffey suggests, but that at times its beauty seems enough to inform nature with a transcendent meaning.

Yet the last claim does not fully answer the issue. While beauty and nature gain stature and depth through their reference to each other, art seems to develop best when unfettered by beauty. The ineffable quality of natural beauty is incapable of clear expression in the sense

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that "beauty, and therefore natural beauty, is *dumb*," whereas by contrast "art *speaks*, is or is like *language*."[15] Art can be true in a way that a prospect or a segment of countryside cannot. The inarticulateness of natural beauty, its simply *being*, seems to prevent it from being "about anything," whereas art embodies a process of reflection and construction that gives it fluency, even about the nature of its beauty. That fluency is the basis of an interest in art; but if a combination of beauty and transcendence in nature allows beauty to substitute for transcendence, when "there is only [nature's] beauty to contemplate and enjoy," then there is need for some further justification of our interest in natural beauty.

Traditional answers rely on a spiritual transcendence that is less useful in this more faithless age. Any more satisfactory answer, a critic may hold, must conserve advances in scientific knowledge, its technological control of nature, and a moral sensitivity for their proper relation to the environment. Ronald Hepburn leads to some of these issues by considering what it is to talk about "The Serious and Trivial in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." He too takes up the theme of the interaction between talk of nature and of art. The fluency of art and the corpus of writing and thinking about its production, reception, and character suggest criteria for discerning serious appreciation. Conceptions of art are fluid too, of course, but that seems to follow from the reflectiveness that art has always claimed. Natural beauty has much less to go on: its vocabulary until recently depended too much on metaphysical and other assumptions because nature was supposed to be the permanent crucible for human endeavor and being. If that conception now seems redundant, there is still a lack of clearly non-metaphysical vocabulary or tradition for talking about nature and exploring the seriousness of its beauty.

Yet without the last, its preservation has little foundation or value. Certainly, nature must include more than English pastorals and their American variants. It must take cognizance of the freedom of the percipients, who are themselves a part of nature. Similarly, Hepburn proposes, beauty must cover much more than delight and wonderment in the look, feel, or formal quality of things. Sensuous and thought components are both necessary, as is some sense of the "life enhancing" quality of beauty.

Do these, though, unequivocally ground ascriptions of seriousness to natural beauty? Hepburn argues that the sensuous element can reveal detailed or indiscriminate access to natural objects; reflection can be feeble, immature, or haphazard; yet rejection of either com-

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ponent trivializes by impoverishing the full possible range of subjects' relations to nature. Perhaps a trivial approach falsifies the conception available in a fuller account of nature or in a deeper grasp of the subjects' participation in constructing that conception.[16] Yet this does not imply that a fuller thought content will necessarily make an experience more serious: a work that succinctly refers the viewer "to quite fundamental features of the lived human state" can be more serious than one that fritters all its energy at some arbitrary node. Superficiality can enter also from the side of perception, when it fails to give due weight to the objects of nature themselves, and ends by anthropomorphizing them. Sentimental approaches posit in nature a "*failed* human life and human attitudes instead of *successfully* attained non-human life."[17] Further, a deep appreciation must include the nourishment that images of the natural world have given to human inner life.

These two elements – the autonomy of nature and the human annexation of natural forms – raise distinctive issues of seriousness and triviality. To understand nature "in its own terms" can invite a scientific understanding, given that many other systematic accounts of nature seem obviously metaphysical. But that cannot be necessary, so far as "thinking-in" these explanations may also disrupt rather than promote aesthetic appreciation. Nor can an "undifferentiated consciousness of nature's dysteleology. . .always predominate in any aesthetic experience."[18] Even though a truthfulness to nature requires cognizance of the ephemerality of an individual, too rigid a hold on this thought seems to preclude an appreciation of the beauty of a butterfly before a bird snaps out its life or of the lithe balance of a leopard's movements before it springs to kill a gazelle.[19] Perhaps, then, nature becomes an aesthetic object only by falsifying its scientific or dysteleological character – which surely militates against the seriousness of an aesthetic appreciation of nature.

One way to escape this impasse, Hepburn proposes, is to construct a less simplistic account of nature. Aesthetic appreciation too can stand more scrutiny. Some aestheticians prefer to stress the perceptual qualities of objects over the thought component and its problems. But that yields a very thin account of natural beauty just because its conceptions of nature and beauty lack depth. Perhaps the answer lies in the practice of aesthetic discrimination: between the extremes of too little thought or too little sensuousness. "We might find an acceptable ideal for serious aesthetic perception in encouraging ourselves to enhance the thought-load *almost* to the point, but not *beyond* the point, at which it begins to overwhelm the vivacity of the particular perception."[20]

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The attempt to interiorize or annex nature raises its own issues of seriousness and triviality. Hepburn identifies metaphor as "the essence of such appropriations," in which natural forms articulate inner events – for example we suffer dark nights of the soul – and argues that their seriousness depends on their power. Metaphors mold and make that interiority powerfully or merely perfunctorily, with those borrowed from nature's power being perhaps less restrictive or anxious than ones derived from a human-made environment. This appropriation yields an experience that is both distant and intimate. Arguably, so far as it fragments the experience of nature to incorporate it into the alternative wholeness of aesthetic valuation, the meaningfulness of natural beauty has some of the intensity of dreams. While he does not explain this dreamlike quality in the way just suggested, Hepburn cites that quality to explain how in natural beauty "the interiorization seems half completed in nature itself," its figures "apprehended with a mysterious sense that the components ... deeply matter to us, though one cannot say how."[21] Similarly, imaginative comparisons unify diverse features of nature in our experience – clouds with sand, hills with waves in the sea.

These associations can be trivial or serious when they are more or less arbitrary and more or less appropriate. Perhaps seriousness here resides in recognizing the continuing otherness of nature, its incongruity with our capacity for aesthetic response. If every one of its features signaled some precise and determinate relation with some deeper meaning, natural beauty would not merit any special attention. Its instances would merely repeat the same determination. Rather, its seriousness consists in part at least in trading on the real possibility that nature has no regard for human sensibility or aspiration.

Both these approaches, of annexation and autonomy, while they may indicate distinctive senses of seriousness, can together fall victim to a scepticism about natural beauty generally: that it is so closely tied to a human scale, is so Κατ' ἄνθρωπον, that it is quite superficial when considered from any larger measure. A cliff face that appears awesome when viewed from its foot may seem inconsequential when seen from an airplane at thirty thousand feet.[22]

Hepburn suggests that this kind of criticism relies on some sense of what things are *really* like, that undermines the validity of a human viewpoint. And rather than entertain this skepticism, he warns that "our aesthetic experience of nature is thoroughly dependent on scale and on individual viewpoint. To fail to realize *how* deeply would

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surely trivialize." Moreover, the central assumption that there is some single perspective that yields what things are really like – and that establishes authoritatively *the* meaning of nature – is highly contentious. Just as the subject matter of art is not restricted, so too the aesthetic appreciation of nature can attend to any qualities, and that precludes privileging some single perspective on a part or whole of nature.

The recognition of parity between perspectives, when seen in relation to the respect for truth set out earlier, generates apparently irresolvable pressures in the conception of natural beauty. One militates towards an exploratory interrogation of nature and a consequent subjectivization of its various orders, undetermined by any single explanatory principle. The other pushes towards an exteriorization of sensibility, interrogating human interiority as a by-product of acknowledging nature's separateness. The notion of truth or some determinate explanatory principle seems to apply less easily to this second sense. Each approach promotes a distinctive method for grasping natural beauty, which is not obviously commensurable with the other. But perhaps that is as much as a philosophical reflection on method can deliver. A choice between the approaches depends on what the actual instance needs in order to merit serious consideration, and it may be that the seriousness or triviality of aesthetic appreciation follows not simply from the texture of experience – its sensuousness or rationality, the ordering that results from a privileged explanatory principle or the engagement that allows an annexation of nature – but from the uses it makes available.

Be that as it may, the essays by Diffey and Hepburn raise a number of issues. Both suggest that too simple a conception of nature, especially one that tries to establish *the* meaning of nature and thence of natural beauty, trivializes its experience. In addition, both essays usually explain natural beauty by reference to art. Arguably, this is more than accidental, since the more thoroughly developed vocabulary of art should cast light on the other, recently released from connotations of sanctity and piety, and since both engage with the matter of beauty. Hepburn's distinction between a sensuous and thought component of aesthetic responses to nature, for example, echoes Schiller's division between feeling and rational form in understanding fine art.

That extrapolation from art to nature invites consideration of the concept of nature as it emerges in art. Natural beauty draws on the conventions that constitute artistic beauty – which, like its counter-

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part, exists in the way people talk about it and the means they can use to represent it. In the two essays immediately following, "The Public Prospect and the Private View: The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth Century Britain," by John Barrell and "Landscape in the Cinema: The Rhythms of the World and the Camera" by Philip Sitney, the authors explore nature's appearance in the visual arts of painting and film. These modes of representation allow a particular access to nature that determines the object and the texture of its appreciation. The needs and conventions of society and media, the critics' concerns and the technology available for representing objects, determine the conception of nature and so of natural beauty.

In "The Public Prospect and the Private View" Barrell explores the social construction of nature and the viewing subject. He argues that a correct taste for landscapes in nature and art came to legitimate political authority. The latter needed people "capable of thinking in general terms, of producing abstract ideas out of the raw data of experience," writers maintained, and a proper taste for natural beauty evinced possession of the necessary disposition. Only men have this ability by nature, and only some of them have the opportunity to nurture and realize that ability.[23] The opportunity fails to occur if a man has to work to support himself and his dependents: his occupation will cause a narrowing of his interest; his sensibility, determined by his experiences at work, will not allow for ideas of wide enough scope; and, as mechanical work deals with objects, it does not sustain abstract reasoning. Only those of independent means have the disinterested public sensibility – a capacity for gaining a prospect of the whole social order – needed for participation in a government that serves the public interest. Only they have the capacity for engaging in the liberal arts – which, Barrell says were then still the arts of those who were free or liberal. The others, including mechanicals, women, and children, are thwarted by a sensuality that leads them to an interest in "consumption and possession."[24]

Barrell argues that this political distinction between the governors and those they govern correlates with an equally complex distinction between two kinds of landscape. Citing the work of Coleridge, Reynolds, and Hazlitt, he focuses on Sir Joshua Reynolds' riddle of whether or not a painter should represent accidents of nature such as rainbows, storms, and movements. Accidents signify the occurrence of changes: by representing trees bent over by the wind, the artist reminds his audience that the state depicted in the painting will be

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