I

Toward a theory of ‘landscape’ and landscape perception

The need for an historicist aesthetics

The contours of landscape in poetry perhaps cannot be satisfactorily mapped. The subject tends alarmingly to enormity and amorphousness, veering simultaneously towards trackless continents of cultural immensity and into the finest tissues of subjective inwardness. Poetic approaches to natural description indeed easily assume the aspect of an incommensurable difference. Within what framework of common analysis may we seek to meditate not only lines such as those of the Hellenistic poet, Anyte –

I, Hermes, have been set up  
Where three roads cross, by the windy  
Orchard above the grey beach.  
Here tired men may rest from travel,  
By my cold, clean, whispering spring

but those also of a Hebrew prophet’s exultant affirmation:

ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

And what relation, if any, may be established between these passages, these singular forms of discrepant sensibility, and a phenomenon, for example, such as the popular hyperbole of English Cavalier poets of the seventeenth century?

We all Pearles scorne,  
Save what the dewy morne  
Congeals upon each little spire of grass;  
Which careless shepeards beat down as they pass;

1
Poetry, space, landscape

And gold ne’re here appears,
Save what the yellow Ceres bears.¹

How, moreover, may we connect these with the canvasses of the great European landscape painters? An historicist approach to the subject has seemed to me the only answer, on three important counts.

First, in order to reconstruct as fully as possible the landscape-consciousness of an earlier poet, we must outstep the limits of the text, and endeavour to reconstruct its enabling cognitive world. For, given the problematic plenitude of the external world, the infinite of the visible in any landscape, presenting ‘nature’ is a task analogous to confronting the irreducibility of the Godhead: metonymy is inescapable. God and world alike must be consigned to formulae. Reductive encoding of landscape in verse will be governed by the decorum of genre: landscape is amplified, for instance, in secondary Epic but sparse in the classical Ode. Paradoxically, while aesthetic conventions banish entire dimensions of contemporary landscape perception and response, they retain full intelligibility only in balance with the tacit social complex of relations with nature. Vincent Scully, for example, insists of Greek art that ‘the very absence of landscape background in most ... vase paintings and reliefs may be better taken as indicative of the fact that archaic and classic Greeks experienced the landscape only as it was, at full scale ... all Greek art, with its usual sculptural concentration upon active life and geometry, may be properly understood and adequately valued only when the Greek’s counter-experience of his earth is kept in mind.’² Intellectual ‘comprehension’, as the word suggests, entails a comprehensive whole: to comprehend representational form, we must try to grasp the assumed whole which assigns determinate meaning to the figurative part.

Second, the landscape-consciousness of every culture is historically distinct and subjective, a fact often belied by superficial continuities of landscape presentation: the traditions of tree and flower catalogue, the propagation by medieval rhetoricians of the Greco-Roman locus amoenus, the deference of Renaissance painters to the authority of inventories of landscape content found in Vitruvius and Pliny.


Toward a theory of ‘landscape’

Third, fundamentals of aesthetic development in landscape-consciousness can be seen to correspond, in fact, to broad stages of historical development. In the light of this, we can begin to grasp why it is that the idea of ‘landscape’ itself arises in world history only with classical Greece, not to recur within the cycle of European civilization until the fifteenth century in Flanders and Italy. If, as Ruskin suggested, there is ‘a science to the aspects of things, as well as of their nature’, it is by an historicist aesthetics that we must seek it.

Most recent approaches to the question of landscape aesthetics overlook this. On the one hand we find a reckless atavism, reducing man’s topographic imagination to that of a beast; and on the other, studies of poetic landscape that package the forms and features of the literary surface – topos, motif, catalogue, archetype – in disconnection from the mental climate that generated them. Fin-de-siècle studies, such as Geikie’s *The Love of Nature among the Romans*, subscribe to timeless topologies, but more recent studies, such as those of Curtius, Hansen and Ptehler are similarly deplete through a methodological disinclination to acknowledge the implications of an ‘essential “historicity” of the eye in regard to perspective, volume, distortion and codes of chromatic or gestural meaning’.3 The works of Kenneth Clark and Pearsall and Salter4 are in this respect outstanding, bedding ways of seeing and centuries of landscape art in the sensibilities of their historical moments.

The ‘habitat theory’ of Jay Appleton, however, is a controversial recent version of the essentialist approach. It offers ‘the proposition that aesthetic satisfaction, experienced in the contemplation of landscape, stems from the spontaneous perception of landscape features which, in their shapes, colours, spatial arrangements and other visible attributes, act as sign-stimuli indicative of environmental conditions favourable to survival…”Habitat theory” thus asserts that the relation between the human observer and the perceived en-

Environm ent is basically the same as the relation of a creature to its habitat. 6 From this principle Appleton deduces that the landscape beautiful is that which facilitates survival in the world of predation: a ‘balanced landscape’ equally strong in ‘prospect’ (to detect prey) and ‘refuge’ (for stalking or flight). Loveliness, one deduces, conciliates seclusion and clean visibility, preserves alike from exposure and claustrophobia. ‘Open glades and close woodland’ thus ‘will be found to be a common feature of much poetry’. 7 Occasionally, as with the eighteenth-century ‘sublime’ movement, ‘hazard’ values will be emphasized – these consisting in ‘all kinds of potentially dangerous phenomena’. 8 Moreover, an unconscious symbolism extends such values. We respond positively to ‘indirect prospect symbols’ which symbolically invite the speculation that they command a further field of vision’. Such phenomena include high places, ‘pointed objects’, mountains, trees, clouds and spires. Light itself is ‘the ultimate prospect symbol’. 9

The theory is exciting, promising the firm granite strata of scientific certitudes beneath the lush emotionalism and flowering rhetorics of our nature-feeling. Beyond agreement, however, that a pleasant landscape will usually contain (among much else, and surely almost unavoidably) a certain degree both of visibility and ‘cover’, I can find little with which to concur. Indeed even here there are marked exceptions. The fresco of the Garden of Livia from Prima Porta, a masterpiece of classical Roman landscape painting, presents an unbroken wall of trees and foliage, gammed with birds and fruit, fresh, exact, delicate, yet without even the most shallow prospect (plate 4). This is an ‘unbalanced’ extreme of ‘refuge-dominant’ landscape, yet has drawn enchanted comment now just as presumably it did then.

Appleton’s postulated ‘atavistic’ consciousness is elusively general (is it Mesolithic? Neolithic? or perhaps still that of tree-bound Ramapithecus?) and his identifications appear wild: that of pleasure in clouds, for example, with the unconscious conviction that they would prove a fine coign of vantage. Moreover this ‘unicausal’ scheme is perceptibly ‘underdetermined’: what possible ecological advantage is conferred on man by the flower?

8 Poetry of Habitat, p. 18: Experience of Landscape, pp. 95–101.
9 Experience of Landscape, pp. 85–109; Poetry of Habitat, pp. 13, 33, 37.
Toward a theory of ‘landscape’

Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens;  
And thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.  
Thy righteousness is like the great mountains.  
I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills  
From whence cometh my help.  

Clouds here are not utilitarian vantage-points, and the mountain symbolism is surely mediated from secondary, tactile qualities: permanence, superhuman inviolability, and by association, fortitude. Flowers incarnate gentleness, innocence or delicacy, sources of human well-being far subtler than the imperatives of nutrition and slaughter.

Moreover it is a commonplace of anthropology today that the concerns even of earliest man, given his richness of psychic integration in the welfare of the total natural community of his environment, were far from exclusively instrumental. ‘Untamed’ thinking pays more attention for its world-view to what animals eat than to which animals can be eaten.11 Eliade recalls that Australian aboriginals continued visiting and worshipping in their sacred landscapes even after they had come to depend for their food and whole economy upon white men. ‘What they sought from these places was to remain in mystical union with the land and with the ancestors who founded the civilization of the tribe’.12

But the cardinal criticism of ‘habitat theory’ must be that it misconceives the character of human cultural development, assuming ‘atavistic mechanisms’ to be simply overlain, lying dormant but intact13 in a more technologically advanced environment, activated sporadically by such activities as fox-hunting and rock-climbing.14 To take the transcendental Neanderthal as the universal human subject-position is to ape, in fact, the discredited essentialist and positivist assumptions of much nineteenth-century thought: to miss the dialectical construction of environmental ‘reality’ through the interplay of the physical with the psychical universe. Man’s landscape values are not predative but occupational and ideological; and ‘habitat theory’ ignores the historical reformations of nature-sensibility as man modifies and extends his habitat through the developments of pasturage, agriculture, commerce and the metropolis.

10 Psalms, 36.5–6; 121.1–2.  
13 Experience of Landscape, pp. 67, 70.  
14 Ibid., pp. 184, 187.
Poetry, space, landscape

Another version of essentialist aesthetics, this one rooted in mythicist–religious rather than ‘scientific’ impulses, is argued by Mircea Eliade. For Eliade, the mind of man has always grouped the infinite plurality of natural phenomena into a ‘canon’ of seven paramount features, whose sacramentality and essential identity of meaning endures across all cultural frontiers, being compatible even with the abstract metaphysical systems of the higher religions.¹⁶ The inaccessibility, infinity, eternity and creative power (rain) of the sky, its shining and its soaring height reveal a transcendent creator-deity (‘Our Father who art in heaven . . .’), and some scholars have argued for a primitive sky-monotheism.¹⁶ The primeval pair of earth and sky are virtually universal in mythology, the earth signifying the foundation of the universe, repository of sacred forces, the eternal Tellus Mater.¹⁷ The sun has not inspired universal worship, but had often been amalgamated with the sky-god as a supreme being, before ‘slipping’ downwards into a magico-religious fertility role, solar heroes ‘rescuing’ fertility from ‘death’ in night and winter.¹⁸ The moon’s essence is her cyclical mystique, her mode of being rhythmic and imperishable, ‘exhaustible in her own regeneration’¹⁹ as she governs and unifies all the natural spheres that are of ‘eternal returning’: water and rain, plant-life, fertility and the menstrual cycle. ‘That is why the symbolism and mythology of the moon have an element of pathos and at the same time of consolation, for the moon governs both death and fertility, both drama and initiation.’²⁰ Water stands for the formlessness of primal substance, and the myths of the Deluge and cataclysm, as well as the rituals of immersion, show a ‘temporary reintegration into the formless’, a dissolving of all form, that may purify. But the ‘water of life’ is also latent, containing in its babbling, flowing life ‘the seeds of things’: and hence belief in the curative properties of magic wells, and the mythological identity of sperm, rain and rejuvenation.²¹ Rock, on the other hand, incompressible, invulnerable, has a reality, force and permanence beyond the precariousness and renewals of the life-flow. ‘Its reality is coupled with perenniality’,²² and it shows man as ‘an absolute mode of being’.²³

¹⁵ Patterns in Comparative Religion, pp. 6–7, 268, 384, 465.
¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 239–64.
¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 144–53.
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 158.
²⁰ Ibid., pp. 154–87; quotation p. 184.
²³ Patterns, pp. 216–38; quotation p. 216.
Toward a theory of ‘landscape’

Rock and mountain are the dwellings of spirits, the monuments of the dead, the markers of sacred places, and centres of energy at the heart of magico-religious activity as incorruptible instruments. Vegetation, finally, is the yield of ‘the living cosmos’, the ‘bio-cosmic sacredness’ of energy that flows through all. ‘Trees and plants in general always embody inexhaustible life—which, in primitive ontology, corresponds to absolute reality… The forces of plant life are an epiphany of the life of the whole universe.’25 The apparent pluralism of vegetation cults is ‘merely an illusion of modern vision; basically they flow from one primitive ontological intuition (that the real is not only what is indefinitely the same, but also what becomes in organic but cyclic forms)’.26

Eliaed’s erudition is superhuman, his style sorcerously lovely and his thesis romantically entrancing. His professed contempt, however, for the empty temporality of the realm of history,27 blinds him to the concrete fortunes of his timeless canon. The ‘myth of the eternal return’ is a myth indeed, for the symbols returned to in each case possess unique determinate meaning. The Tree of Life in Eden, Yggdrasil in Nordic mythology and the Lotus in Indian may all symbolize ‘inexhaustible life’, but ‘mean’ to their believers perhaps incomunicably more than this abstraction. Moreover, with secular cultures and their advanced, pictorial art, natural features are increasingly apprehended within a new epistemological framework: beheld primarily in visual rather than mythological terms, as objects in space rather than vocabulary of the cosmic narrative. Rock and moon assume new modes of prominence as leading images in pictorial compositions. We shall see how the values behind ‘landscape’, their rationalizing ‘entzauberung’ (or ‘dis-enchantment’),28 banish the light of mythological seeing.

A further important counter-example is the locus amoenus. We may remark here what the compartmentalization of disciplines has I think kept hitherto unseen, the continuity of anthropology’s ‘sacred microcosm’ with literary criticism’s locus amoenus. Eliaed, following Przyluski and Mus, has noted that ‘the most primitive of the “sacred places” we know of constituted a microcosm… a landscape of stones,

Poetry, space, landscape

water and trees’, and he cites many examples from primitive cultures of this miniature landscape as a sacred ‘imago mundi’, a place of absolute reality as converging the everlastingness of stone, the endless cycle of vegetative life, and the ‘latencies, seeds and purification’ of water. It is precisely this miniature landscape that Curtius has documented as the locus amoenus of Greco-Roman poetry: appearing as the haunts of the nymphs and Calypso’s grotto, as gracing perfect harbours, and, in later verse reappearing in the Theocritean harvest-home, in Virgil’s eclogues and his Carthaginian harbour, and Ovidian forest grotoes.30 Pace Curtius, it does not however recur in the Middle Ages, which customarily abstracts the element of rock, preferring flower-carpets, breeze and birdsong.31 ‘Archetypal’ imagination is thus once again demonstrably subject to transforming cultural specificity: it is surely the Christian conviction of earthly impermanence that finally deletes the imperishable element from amongst ‘the charms of landscape’.

An alternative approach: innate drives within historical transformation

Against the reductive tendencies of such theories as those outlined, dehistoricizing, depoliticiized, offering to unlock a universal natural aesthetics by a single interpretive key, this book will foreground scrutiny of historical change as the condition for comprehension of human landscape perception.

We can usefully emphasize the historical subjectivity of landscape perception by momentarily borrowing, I suggest, the terms of ‘reader-response’ literary theory, and saying that a landscape, no less than a text, is ‘read’ by mutable ‘interpretive communities’, each with its distinct ‘horizons of expectation’. Historical communities and individuals, intimately conditioned by social, economic and ideological

forces, will project varied structures of attention onto external nature, thereby actualizing different configurations of feature and meaning. No landscape can ever thus be ‘autotelic’ — bearing a perennial and ‘objective’ appearance and significance independent of its ‘reader’: cultural projection by a landscape’s beholder will complete its necessarily partial ‘self-formulation’. No poet, we shall see, remarked a sunset before the Italian painters of the Quattrocento ‘discovered’ them; autumn tints are a leap in perception as rare in Renaissance verse as they are inescapable in the eighteenth century. Again, the viewer of an eighteenth-century ‘picturesque’ prospect perceives a particular code of appearances invisible to an eye uninitiated in this taste, and one whose enabling structure of occlusions renders its ‘reality’ historically relative.

This book will accordingly seek to map certain historical varieties of landscape perception and poetry in three ways. First, mindful of the primacy of cultural horizons, we shall seek to demonstrate that ‘landscape-consciousness’ with its apparent ‘immediacies’ of perception always in fact subsists within broader, historically local structures of ‘nature-sensitivity’ that condition, direct and limit it. Within our historical survey we shall accordingly seek to characterize each period’s nature-sensitivity, which is always a product of its particular economic structure and its working relations with the earth, its social conditions and formal thought; and then suggest the mediated, peculiar forms of landscape-consciousness, reconditioning our perceptual drives, and crystallizing fresh descriptive figures in poetry.

Second, we shall structure our survey further by seeking to document the answer to a question of childlike simplicity, which, in the proverbial fashion of a child’s questions, turns out to raise issues of a daunting magnitude: why was it the Greeks, apparently, who invented landscape painting in the fifth century bc? Why didn’t earlier civilizations produce painted and poetic landscapes, and why did these again disappear with the fall of Rome not to reappear for around a millennium? To transpose this into more formal terms: why is it that the very concept of ‘landscape’ — the concern for an organized visual field, for localized and circumstantial description, replete with exact optical effects — transpires to be but an historically contingent form for the representation of ‘nature’, and not a universal of human art?

In answering this, it will be necessary hereafter to distinguish between ‘landscape’ and ‘landskip’: the latter term (popular in the
Poetry, space, landscape

seventeenth century) will designate the narrower, technical concern, in painting or poetry, for naturalistic, pictorial effects and the composed ‘view’. Landskip derives, we shall argue, from the particular complex of values by which a highly advanced commercial civilization, of secular and materialist tendencies, engages and construes the natural world. Indeed we can, as it were, ‘unearth’ from landskip five constitutive cultural elements, five forms of interest in space, which have come gradually into being and accumulated over the centuries. In effect we shall thus be arguing the case for an economic and social determination of the taste for landskip, the more so since we shall try to suggest that each of the five structural elements, emerging at a certain stage of historical development, is itself an economically conditioned development. These elements we shall analyse as managerial, comparative, quotidian, possessive and rational space: terms we shall explain in our following chapter. Chapter two will accordingly expound and chart the successive stages of emergence of these architectonic conditions of landskip in the ancient world, characterizing nature-sensibility in its evolutions from that correlative to the hunter-gathering livelihood to that of the Roman empire. Our medieval chapter (chapter five) will locate the incremental reappearance of these categories of interest in space, a millennium later, as pictorial landscape is gradually reborn. Chapter six will then examine the poetry of seventeenth-century England, illustrating the birth of landskip in English verse, and noting the revival of that increasingly metropolitan, secular and materialist relation to nature that encourages a personalized, empirical and affective engagement of landscape. Close readings of Milton, Marvell and Vaughan in particular will demonstrate this return to an affective individualism in landscape response, a subjective ‘liberation of the image’, such as had characterized the descriptive approach of the poetry of Theocritus, Apollonius Rhodios and Virgil in the epoch of ancient metropolitan greatness. Earlier chapters – on nature-sensibility in the Bible and in late antiquity – will serve both to establish a continuity of survey of its western development, and to demonstrate through contrast the extent to which landskip is but one, historically contingent form of conceptualizing and perceiving natural space, dominant though it has become since the seventeenth century.

Our analysis of landscape in poetry will incorporate a third and final analytical principle. Whilst surveying historical change, in the form of varied structures of nature-sensibility and the development of the