Landscape Painting and the Romantic Movement
B3.7

In this lecture I propose to deal then with some aspects of the romantic movement and landscape painting. Landscape painting, like most other forms of art, experienced a profound change during the last years of the 18th century and during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet just what did happen, I feel, has never been adequately explained. I propose, then, to suggest a line of approach which is in some respects a novel one—and for this reason I should hope that you will adopt a critical and cautious attitude to what I have to say, rather than accept it out of hand.

First of all, one or two preliminary remarks. The first half of the nineteenth century is, at the present time, a most unfashionable period. The popular view is that the nineteenth century brought with it a servile imitation of nature which brought artistic standards to a particularly low ebb. Informed opinion does not differ radically from the popular view. The approach to nineteenth century art is still largely a biographical one. This biographical approach is one of the more doubtful legacies which we have received from the Romantic Movement. To the romantic the great artist is a genius who rises far beyond the mediocrity of his fellow artists, he breaks from the laws which bind them, and creates a style of his own. With this assumption in their minds man critics have been able to write about such artists as Constable, Turner, Delacroix and Manet as geniuses who rose above the prevailing bad taste of their times. Indeed, the prevailing pattern for looking at the nineteenth century is that of the artist in revolt against bourgeois volsks. In consequence, we have little real understanding of the prevailing visual language of the nineteenth century. Whereas we have some notion of the visual language of the High Renaissance, of Mannerism, of the Baroque and Rococo, what can we say in general terms about the visual language of the nineteenth century? When we look in the art histories for an answer to this question the most we find is the belie that artists now surrendered themselves to the claims of naturalism. Th artist sought only to imitate nature. And as most art historians or art critics of the present day have grown up with the modern movement in art, and possess a natural sympathy with the aims of modern art, there is a tendency to turn away with some distaste from a period which apparently sought to do little more than imitate nature. The tacit assumption is that the nineteenth century artist not only sought to imitate nature, but did in fact succeed in imitating nature with a considerable degree of success. But such a programme was, a mistaken view of the purpose of art, so runs the view still widely current.

Now the weakness of this approach may be stated quite simply. Artists have often sight to render some aspect, some segment of the visible world as truthfully as possible, just as the philosophers—I use the term in its wider sense—have sought to tell us the truth about the nature of the universe. But neither the artists nor the philosophers have, of course, wholly succeeded in their task. Absolute naturalism is a
goal just as unattainable for the artist as a complete truth is for the scientists and philosopher. The artist’s vision and perception is circumscribed by his knowledge of the world. We see what we know, and we try to see what we are trying to know. Whenever we use the work naturalism in art we should be aware that we may be begging a question. For there is no such thing as pure naturalism in art. The little girl who, when asked how she drew, replied, ‘First I think, then I draw a line around my think’ was stating quite a general truth about the nature of art. The line of thought is drawn around all art, bit it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish.

It has been particularly difficult to distinguish for the art of the nineteenth century, mainly because we are the direct heirs of the romantic movement and there is a difficulty in separating our own assumptions about nature from those of the nineteenth century.

The problem, therefore, is to find some means to get behind the apparent naturalism of nineteenth-century art to the conceptual background which determined the prevailing ideas of the time, determined the presupposition of the art. I think we can find a clue to our problem in a comment made by John Constable, perhaps the finest landscape painter of the time. One occasion Constable wrote: ‘the art of seeing nature is a thing almost as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphics’. Nature to Constable is a mystery, but not an unfathomable mystery; it is a difficult riddle, but if you succeed in getting the key, you can crack the code of nature, and read its meaning. Now the artists of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century looked at nature with a passionate curiosity as a riddle to be read, and later I shall suggest some of the ways they went about reading it. But before I do this let us direct our attention to a different quarter. Let us contrast the prevailing view of the universe held by educated Europeans about 1760 with that prevailing about 100 years later. For a tremendous change took place, and this change had a great effect upon the course of landscape painting during the same period.

The cosmology, the view of the universe, which prevailed in educated opinion in Europe about 1760 has been brilliantly outlined by the American philosopher and historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, in his book The Great Chain of Being. The picture which he draws from philosophical, scientific, literary and popular material concerning the nature of the universe, as understood at that time, is probably the most detailed and accurate one that has been attempted. We may describe the idea of the universe as the eighteenth century understood it quite accurately as being neo-classical in order. It derived ultimately from Platonic thought. It looked upon each species of mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms as so many immutable and indestructible links in a vast ladder or chain of being which reached from the lowest forms of matter step by step to the inhabitants of the heavenly kingdom and to god Himself. Now this view provided scientists with an a priori view of the universe, but
it also provided them with a programme, because not all the links in the chain were yet known, and it was the business of science to make them known.

This scientific programme was stated clearly enough by Carl Linnaeus, one of the most influential scientists of the later eighteenth century. In a famous oration he proclaimed:

It is the peculiar privilege of reasoning man to walk with God through the garden of Creation, and be initiated into the different plans of his providence in the construction and economy of all these various beings: to study their dependencies upon one another in an infinitely complex chain, every link of which is essential; and to trace all these various uses and benefits to every branch of the animal creation… In this point of view no natural philosopher, nor any enquiry trifling under the guidance of the scientific mind.’

From Linnaeus’s statement two facts emerge: first, the world is pre-conceived as an ordered and harmonious chain, and second, it is desirable to find out as much as possible about it. And this view though expressed in a variety of way had prevailed in European thought since the time of the Renaissance. We can find an exact parallel to the view expressed by Linnaeus in the work of artists interested in the analysis of the world of visible nature, in the period between the Renaissance and the end of the eighteenth century. I shall only have time to deal here with four such artists very briefly: Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Claude and Ruisdael.

Both Leonardo and Durer bring as keen an eye and as dispassionate an analysis to the visual forms of nature as any artists before or since. But when they use the results of their empirical sketches of nature in a finished composition, the rules which they have won from their empirical observation of nature. They are those rules of clarity, closed composition, the unity of independent parts, which Woelfflin has analysed for us. They are rules which Renaissance artists derived from their contemplation of the writings and marbles of classical antiquity.

It is the same with Claude. Claude made wonderfully truthful brush drawings of the Roman campagna—but in his finished work he seeks like Leonardo and Durer for a classically ordered harmony. But Claude, unlike Leonardo and Durer, in seeking to attain his ordered unity, depends to a much greater extent upon the evocation of a mood in the beholder: the composition is so ordered as to evoke a unified mood of quiet, peace, melancholy resignation.*

And this is true too of the landscapes of Ruisdael, the Dutch landscape painter who comes closer perhaps than any other painter to the degree of naturalism attained by John Constable. In Ruisdael, as in Dutch landscape generally, the structural framework of neo-classical composition is at times hardly discernible: but we are not
presented, therefore, with objective transcripts of nature. Ruesdael’s natural forms, his clouds, watermills and old oaks, are carefully assembled to evoke a unified poetic mood about nature. Nature is not presented to us in its naked truth, but ‘sickled o’er with the pale cast of thought’. That of course does not render them one wit the less worthy as works of art.

Now in the compositional structure and the unity of mood which artists like Leonardo, Durer and Ruysdael impose upon their empirical observations of nature we have a close parallel in the field of art, to that classically ordered structure, the great chain of being, which was assumed by most scientists until the end of the 18th century to lie behind their empirical observations.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, however, the belief in the universe as a great chain of being was increasingly questioned upon all sides. A period of about a century followed when ideas about the nature of the universe were very much in dispute. Then towards the end of the nineteenth century the theory of organic evolution came to be generally accepted in scientific circles.

This movement from a belief in the universe as a great chain of being to a belief in the universe as the product of organic evolution was closely associated with a change in the emphasis in scientific activity itself. The Renaissance had greatly promoted the study of mathematics and the sciences most closely associated with mathematics, astronomy and physics. Medical science too—anatomy particularly—advanced considerably. The visual arts derived much from these sciences—perspective and anatomy, for instance. But mathematics, physics and astronomy can be pursued without any great call upon the artist, since they are to a large extent concerned with the movements of abstract bodies in space—not with the visible appearance of things.

The theory of organic evolution, on the other hand, arose from the speculations of scientists who were concerned for the most part with geology and the biological sciences, such as botany, zoology, entomology, anthropology and so on. All these sciences are highly empirical in their methods. Geology had to collect and describe its minerals before it could

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which occurs in the Philosophical Transactions for 1768, places the bird in a rocky southern landscape—Tierra del Fuego is intended. [Thornlin, Temple of Flora*] Now the relation which the artist here sets up between the bird and is landscape is of quite a different order from that which Claude sets up between his shepherds and Arcadia, or the relation which Ruysdael sets up between his storms, watermills, rivers and oak trees. For Ruysdael and Claude, relations are in a priori relationship imposed upon the landscape motifs in order to obtain a reconceived result. But the relationship between
the penguin and its habitat is an objective relationship established by the empirical nature of the science itself. The relation is not an arbitrary one but one which is involved in the whole of truthful representation of the bird itself. You will see therefore that such sciences as botany and zoology, while concentrating upon the material objects of their study, which were to be rendered with a special and close-focus accuracy, were at the same time giving rise to an incipient form of landscape because of the interest in the ecological aspects of their science. (Ecology is that branch of biology which deals with living organisms, habits, modes of life, and relations to their surroundings).

[A somewhat parallel development takes place in the growth of the new science of geology, which grew from the interest virtuosi took in extraordinary natural phenomena such as the eruptions of Vesuvius and basaltic formations like the Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland. Here is an illustration drawn from the Philosophical Transactions which shows Vesuvius in eruption in 1767.** Some years later an English painter Joseph Wright of Derby was exhibiting pictures of erupting Vesuvius in the Royal Academy, not once but many times. An eruption of Vesuvius providing an admirable occasion or combining documentary truth with an essay in the sublime and terrible so much sought after by the romantic imagination. On our next slide we see another illustration from the Philosophical Transactions, 1769.* The artist Tichbein is depicting the exact formation of the basaltic structure of the rocks for a scientific paper. But notice how unconvincingly he represents the rocks upon the top of the ground. He has not grasped how the rock structure beneath the soil provides the whole structure of the landscape. In our next slide, of the geological structure of the Isle of Staffa, the artist, Miller,* who began as a botanical illustrator, has grasped how the geology determines the nature of the terrain. And here is an illustration of Fingal’s Cave on the Isle of Staffa.*

Or take the case of meteorology, a science coming into prominence a the end of the eighteenth century. It was the business of scientific expeditions to record meteorological phenomena with great precision. On his Second Voyage, Captain Cook ran into three waterspouts in Cook’s Straits.* It caused tremendous excitement and all the scientists aboard wrote long accounts of the event. William Hodges made a drawing which was used to illustrate the Astronomical and Meteorological Observations of the Voyage, which we see in our next slide. But Hodges did not leave the matter rest there. He also painted a landscape which he called View of Cape Stephens,* which he exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1778. It combined his documentation of the waterspouts with an academic essay in the sublime. The painting looked back to the Ceyx and Alcyone* of his master Richard Wilson. In such paintings the requirement of science and the requirements of art were beginning to come together. His painting entitled the Cape of Good Hope, now in the National Maritime Museum, actually records with careful precision the state of the weather at the Cape when Cooks two vessels called in there during November 1772. For the
actual weather reports can be read from the manuscript Journal of William Wales who was Hodges close personal friend on the voyage. It was this close friendship which appears to have given Hodges’ work a breadth of handling which his contemporaries did not appreciate. One newspaper critic wrote concerning his art. ‘It is surprising that a man of Mr Hodges genius should adopt a ragged made of colouring: his pictures all appear as if they were unfinished, and as if the colours were laid on the canvas with a skewer.’ An interest I atmosphere naturally led to a breadth of statement.

It has been shown that John Constable was also greatly interested in the activities of meteorologists. He appears to have read Luke Howard’s book The Climate of London, in which the classification of clouds into cumulus, nimbus, stratus, cirrus and so on, was first made. And Dr Badt, in his book John Constable’s Clouds,* has argued, I think convincingly, the Constable was prompted to make his cloud studies after reading Howard’s book.

Examples could be multiplied but I have said enough perhaps to show how the sciences of botany, geology and meteorology could each in their own way affect landscape painting.

There were three sciences at the end of the eighteenth century which drew the material objects of their study from the world of visible nature: geology, botany and meteorology. The landscape painter, too, was concerned with the rock structure of the earth, its vegetative cover, and the atmosphere which enveloped it. By about the year 1820 it was theoretically possible for a man to take up a position and look down upon a view and analyse it visually according to three distinct disciplines: botany, geology and meteorology. The geologist would be concerned above all with the structure and contour of the land, the botanist with the nature of the vegetative cover of the earth, the meteorologist with the visual quality of the atmosphere through which plants and rocks were viewed. But it is equally clear that it was simply impossible to look at the landscape from the three points of view at the same time. This, may I say in passing, is, it seems to me, the dilemma at the heart of the art of JMW Turner.

Now during the first half of the nineteenth century a great amount of artistic ability that might have gone into the painting of churches and palaces in earlier times was used to cope with the programmes of the science of visible nature, and the pressure continued until the invention of photography in 1839; and even then it only eased gradually. After the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, European scientists and travellers began to engage wholeheartedly in collecting and classifying the rocks, plants and animals of the whole world. Artists were closely associated with this vast programme. Many of the artists who exhibited at the Academies and the Salons had themselves been members of scientific expeditions. And it was from the vast collection of new knowledge won from the empirical sciences of visible nature that the theory of organic evolution emerged in the writings of Charles Darwin, Alfred
Russell Wallace, Joseph Dalton Hooker and Thomas Henry Huxley. And any one who has read the writings of these men know with what a passionate intensity they studied the visible record for a clue to the meaning of the nature of the universe. Let us recall Constable’s remark once again: ‘the art of seeing nature is a thing as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphics’. Anyone who has read Darwin or Hooker will agree that this was precisely the approach which they too brought to their study of nature.

I am suggesting then that the disciplines of the sciences of botany, geology, and meteorology may provide us with a clue to the way in which landscape painters looked at the world. It is true that not all landscape painters were attached to scientific expeditions or even interested in science. It is equally true that not all the artists of the Renaissance who used perspective were interested in the scientific analysis of nature became an increasing facto in the mode of perception of the landscape painter. That does not mean, as I said at the out set, that the artist descended to mere naturalism. They painted nature not according to some abstract notion of naturalism, but according to certain prevailing scientific concepts of the time, grounded in certain disciplines. Rocks were no longer seen as rocks but as representatives of their species, even the clouds the clouds in the sky were seen not as clouds but as representatives of species of clouds, cumulus, cirrus, nimbus and so on. This meant that there was a greater analysis brought to visual representation. Objects in a landscape were carefully scrutinised; because they were to be the romantic artist enigmatic, the hieroglyphs of nature. Only by careful scrutiny and equally careful delineation could they be made to yield up their secret. Furthermore, the relations which exist between the objects within a landscape, between the rocks, trees and atmosphere cease to be arbitrary relationships imposed according to theories of harmony and co-ordination. The relations are determined by nature herself, they are necessary and determined relations existing in the very nature of things.

One final point. It might be objected that the influence of botany, geology and meteorology is only relevant for the documentary landscapes of the time. Can we say that these sciences provide us with a clue to the more imaginative art of the time? I think it does, and to a surprising degree. Take two of John Martin’s highly romantic landscapes. First, his Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still.* With its vortex of light, its belting storm and flashes of lightning it is a kind of meteorological fantasy. And not how prominent the rock structure is in his composition. The same is true of his Deluge*. The great rock arch at the back might have been drawn from Cook’ voyages were such rock arches appear. Or take this small landscape by Samuel Palmer*. Note how carefully the trees and the clouds are drawn, even the birds and the small flowers in the foreground. To find the true literary parallel for this one must turn to Gilbert White’s Natural History of Selborne, the naturalist who wrote the natural history of his own village with such loving care. But the effect of the new science of visible nature upon the world of art is to be seen most fully in the writings
of John Ruskin and the landscapes of he artist he championed. Before Ruskin became the most influential art critic in England he pursued the study of geology ad meteorology wit the greatest devotion, and he had much to say throughout life about botany and indeed most of the natural sciences. Ruskin proclaimed Turner to be a great artist because he could incorporate the truths about nature revealed by botany, geology ad meteorology, in a work of art while at the same time endowing it with a feeling of grandeur and sublimity as for instance in Turner’s *Great Fall of Reichenbach*.

If then we are to understand the landscape art of the first half of the nineteenth century we must appreciate the nature and the organisation of science during the period. The great change which took place between 1760 and 1860 may be underlined by means of two quotations. In 1759 Dr Johnson proclaimed in his *Rasselas* that ‘the poet does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of verdure in the forest’. And Reynolds said that it was not the business of the landscape painter to do such things either. But exactly one hundred years later John Ruskin proclaimed with equal conviction ‘if you can paint one leaf you can paint the world’. Landscape art during the first half of the nineteenth century, we may conclude, was a naturalistic art, but it was a naturalism firmly grounded in the concepts of the sciences of visible nature, more particularly, botany, geology and meteorology.
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