

Returning to Nature

Part 1: Educating the Eye

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Prior to the 18th century, unproductive land was regarded as unsightly. It did not conform to the classical ideals of order, reason and restraint. From the 18th century the situation was reversed and wild scenery, the landscape garden and Gothic Architecture were widely admired. It is argued that this dramatic change in sensibility is a result of growing urbanism and increased domination of nature by man. A counter-effect is created of increased emotional involvement with the natural world, albeit a tamed one. This culminates in our present day fascination with forest parks, nature reserves, city greens, wildlife programmes and tree preservation.

Part 1 traces the emergence of the taste for scenery.

In 1423, John Whetamstade, an abbot of St. Alban's, when travelling to Rome described the landscape around Lake Bracciano as *Locum horroris et vastae solitudinis*, (Labarge, 1982). The description typifies attitudes to wild scenery, to the barren and the useless, commonly expressed by commentators and travellers until well into the 18th century. James Howell in the 17th century objected to the "monstrous abruptness" of the "Pyreney Hills" and found the Alps "high and hideous" and "monstrous excrescences of nature". (Rees 1975). 'Natures pudenda' was another favourite epithet. As late as 1733 a compendium of knowledge for children — Pluché's *Spectacle de la nature*, presented the orthodox view of mountains, including a justification for their existence on the basis of their utility as storage places for water that sustained life by supplying rivers, and as a means of fostering gratitude to God by reminding us "what uncomfortable quarters would have been allotted to us had it not been for Divine Goodness" (Sprague-Allen 1969). Similarly in America early settlers rejected all in nature but the practical and the useful. A Jesuit described the Niagara Falls in 1659 as "a vast and prodigious Cadence of Water which falls down after a surprising and astonishing manner . . . The waters . . . do foam and boyle after the most hideous manner imaginable, making outrageous noise". (Huth 1972). Aesthetic qualities in nature were not considered in these early reports of America. Outside settlements, nature is seen as uncouth.

A waste and howling wilderness
 Where none inhabited
 But hellish fiends and brutish men
 That Devils worshipped (Wigglesworth in 1662)

Elizabethans travelled extensively but only described the useful, the fertile and the small, such as cornfields, meadows and prosperous towns. The taste was for the tamed and fertile landscapes of human cultivation and care. Celia Fiennes travelled around England on horseback in the early 17th century, and admired the wide prospect of cultivated countryside. She visited the Lake District, later frequented by pilgrims of the picturesque, but she thought the steep hills "made travelling tedious and ye miles long . . . Looking upwards I was as farre from the top which was all rocks and something more barren tho' there was some trees and woods growing in ye rocks, and hanging over all down ye brow of some hill". Hills interfered with the view except of "ye clouds" and were so full of loose stones that it was very unsafe to ride down them (Manwaring 1925).

The taste for the fertile man-made landscapes of Europe was not expressed until early in the 15th century. Medieval Christianity encouraged an aloofness and puritanism from earthly things, embodied in Petrarch's famous description of his ascent of Mount Ventoux in the 14th century. He admired every detail until he reached the top, and then he read a passage out of the Confessions of St. Augustine on the renunciation of earthly pleasures and "angry with myself, I closed the book. Long since I ought to have learned . . . that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself" (Cassirer 1948).

Earlier travel writing was bald and factual, and did not generally describe the countryside. An exception was Gerald of Wales. He travelled around Ireland in the late 12th century. His descriptions combine fanciful speculation with passages which clearly derive from observation and experience (O'Meara 1951). Another writer of the time, Gilles Le Bouvier, says that Ireland was notable for the pilgrimage to Lough Derg, and the fact that it was the poorest country in the world (Labarge 1982).

Early journeys, dating from 500 A.D. were religious wanderings and pilgrimages impelled *pro remedio animae* for the love of God and to gain a country in heaven. The pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and Rome were fraught with danger from wars, robbers, wild beasts in forests and unfriendly inhabitants in towns. Indeed Europe during the Middle Ages knew few periods of peace. Latini in 1294 spoke of open manor houses in the Ile de France and Froissart in the next century spoke of times "when the

countryside was fat and full of good things" (Tuan 1979). But such peace was shortlived. The violence in the countryside would have an influence on the medieval landscape. In 1285 a statute enacted in Winchester required a clearance of 200 feet on both sides of the road to deprive robbers of hiding places. (Salisbury 1948). Antagonistic attitudes towards the wilderness of forest and mountain would derive from memories of this violence. In Medieval Europe, people on the plains saw mountains as haunted with demons, because mountain dwellers lived outside the feudal system and mountains were retreats for persecuted sects and for outlaws. The etymology of the words *wilderness* and *forest* indicate the former association with fear and terror. Wild comes from the old English weald or woeld i.e. forest, and wild-deor is the place of the wild beast. Forest and foreigners share the base word *foranus* meaning *situated on the outside*. A forest was a maze through which wayfarers would venture at their own risk — the risk being disorientation, or violence from bandits or witches. A present day connotation of wilderness would be any place where a person feels lost or perplexed. *Savage* and *silva* similarly share a common root. When Elizabethans spoke of a wilderness they meant a dense wood. To them, the Irish remained wood-born savages. To take a person out of the woods was to civilise them (Nash 1967).

Although conditions for the lone traveller in Europe did not improve until the 1700s, the number and category of travellers did increase from the middle ages. They ranged from exiles on purposeful vagrancy to adventurers, monks, diplomats, and from the 13th century, scholars in pursuit of learning. The specifically religious journey gave way to journeys which combined scholarship, *gentlemanly* pursuits and Christian devotion. The first travel book, *Pylgrymage* by Guyeforde, was published in 1506 (Shepard 1968), and during this time, a growing interest in the notion of cultivated landscape being an object of beauty is expressed. In the memoirs of Pope Pius II of the early 15th century, he refers to "the indescribably lovely" country around Siena, and admires "its gently sloping hills planted with cultivated trees and vines, or ploughed for grain" (Glacken 1973).

Despite the proclaimed horror of mountains, the Swiss Alps were toured and described by Johannes Stümpf in 1548. His descriptions were confined to people and curiosities observed. He did not express any pleasure he may have derived from the Alpine scenery. (De Beer 1966). An indication of what may have been understood by *gentlemanly pursuits* is given in Fynes Morrison's record of a visit to a Swiss spring in 1692. The Swiss springs were reputed to have therapeutic properties from earliest times and attracted travellers

"many having no disease but that of love. Howsoever they faine sickness of body, come hither for remedy, and many times find it". Naked ladies entered the baths, apparently surrounded by men sitting in galleries joking and chatting and "refreshing their minds as women enter and leave the water" (De Beer 1968).

It was not until the end of the 17th century that the Alps and other forms of wilderness began to be circumspectly scrutinised. In 1688, the English critic John Dennis crossed the Alps and experienced "a delightful horror, a terrible joy, and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled" (Nicholson, 1959). He felt an enlargement of the spirit never produced in him by familiar beauty — that is the beauty of fertile man-dominated landscapes and the beauty associated with regularity and proportion. Addison toured in 1699, and though he expressed relief at the sight of the plain after the Alps, he retrospectively admired the Alps and defined what became known as the sublime, i.e. the awe experienced in confronting the vastness of nature and as revealing God in his greatness.

In 1732, a Swiss poet, Albrecht von Haller published "Die Alpen", a series of poems which introduced the Alps to literature and by the middle of the 18th century Thomas Gray was able to write "not a torrent, not a cliff but is pregnant with religion and poetry".

From the 1740s onwards, travellers began to enjoy the natural scenery of Ireland and England. In 1779 Young published his *Tour of Ireland*, and gloried in the lakes of Killarney. Earlier in 1750, Mrs. Delaney found the lakes of Killarney *enchanted*. William Ockenden in 1760 also visited Killarney and his party "were quite transported with a marvellous scene of pure nature . . . more exquisite than I had ever seen, either in France, Italy or England . . . We rested upon our oars within the bowery bosom of this sublime theatre . . . and remained there for some time enraptured with the beauties we beheld". Derrick travelled there in 1760 and enjoyed the driving mist and wind and "the showers posting round the borders of the mountains, upborn by the wings of the wind. The impetuous cataracts and the mountains in some places bald, white and naked . . . in others crowned with flourishing trees". They awakened his religious emotions to such a pitch that he described one of his letters as a "travelling rhapsody" (see Sprague-Allen 1969). As the feeling for scenery grew, the word tourist was coined for a person hunting for scenery. Sprague-Allen (1969) finds the word in use in 1789, in the obituary of Mrs. Boswell "wife of a celebrated tourist". *Beauty* could now be seen in what was previously regarded as barren and chaotic.

The 18th century was pre-occupied with discussions on aesthetic theories. They defined the categories — the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque. Edmund Burke distinguished the beautiful from the sublime on the basis of sensations elicited. The sublime was a source of terror, but a terror associated now with the awe and delight to be had from natural landscapes. William Gilpin in 1792 defined the picturesque as the pleasing qualities of nature's roughness, irregularity and intricacy. The word itself shows the link between painting and scenery. An earlier definition of the picturesque was the scenery's capabilities of being formed into pictures. It has been argued (Manwaring 1925, Hussey 1927) that the taste for scenery was formed by Italian and Dutch landscape paintings of the 17th century.

The Italian paintings were those of Claude, Poussin and Rosa, of whom Claude is regarded as the most important in the development of landscape aesthetics. He painted scenes of the Roman Campagna and the Alban hills and imbued them with a mood and serenity which invoked an ideal world of the past lived tranquilly in pastoral groves. His sources were the literary tradition of the pastoral from Virgil and Horace. His discovery of pastoral beauty liberated the abstraction *scenery* from nature and this form of beauty still continues as a dominant aesthetic by which the visual world is perceived. The Dutch naturalistic school of the 17th century painted familiar unidealised views of the countryside where man and nature were prospering amidst tilled fields, roads, rivers and seascapes.

The emergence of landscape paintings in the 17th century is significant because it was new. Prior to the 17th century, art had to deal with historic or religious subjects, with landscape only as a background. 17th century landscapes became an accepted subject of art. They provided the visual foundation for landscape aesthetics and to that of seeing the natural world as scenery. They provided criteria by which the visual world could be perceived. Landscapes were reconstructed in imagination according to principles of composition that had to be learned. Gentlemen carried a *Claude* glass, a tinted convex mirror which framed the scene and reduced local colour to the brown monochrome of a Claude.

The pursuit of the picturesque and the reverencing of nature was rampant by the end of the 18th century. Itineraries were planned so that the best way of approaching the landscape for viewing would be achieved. In 1857, the Baltimore-Ohio railroad company arranged a journey along the *Picturesque Line* of America for writers, artists, and photographers, with all comforts provided including dark rooms for immediate processing of photographs (Huth 1972).

Picturesque aptitudes of the landscape were criticised as if an art exhibition was being reviewed. Artists did not think it amiss to make adjustments to remove blemishes in their depictions of a landscape which did not conform to picturesque rules. Gilpin's *Forest Scenery* (1791), discusses the handling of woodland as picturesque material. He regarded the oak as the most useful in this respect, adding dignity to the ruined tower and new grandeur to the pastoral scene. The ash was less picturesque, the lightness of its foliage redeeming it somewhat. The elm was better suited to receiving light and shade essential to picturesque effect. He thought poplars were no use, but the horse chestnut and the birch were particularly picturesque. He was one of the first to admire Scot's pine, and tried "to rescue it from disgrace and establish it as a picturesque tree" (Hussey 1927). Despite Gilpin's love of nature, he still found it necessary to adjust nature to principles of art — to the adjunct, paint what you think, not what you see.

By the end of the 18th century, the rapture was becoming commonplace, and the picturesque was becoming obvious. The finer minds did not require the picturesque in their communing with nature. Wordsworth was proud of his immunity

'Although a strong infection of the age,
Was never much my habit-giving way
To a composition of scene with scene
Bent overmuch on superficial things,
(Prelude. Book XII)

It was now possible to enjoy nature and scenery for their own sake, in the sense that painterly criteria were not required to mediate between man and nature. Wordsworth nevertheless objected to a proposed railroad from Kendal to Windermere by playing down the idea of a spontaneous aesthetic response to landscape. He argued that a long course of aesthetic education was necessary to instil a taste for barren rocks and mountains. The urban lower classes could derive no benefit from immediate access to wild nature. What they needed was a preparatory course, starting with Sunday excursions into nearby fields — (Wordsworth's Guide to the Lake in Thomas 1983).

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