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- 29 A huge topic to document, but see for example Baudelaire's protest: "Art, the beautiful, the useful, morality. A grand scrimmage is in progress, in which, owing to a lack of philosophical wisdom, each contestant grabs half the flag and says the other half is valueless." Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 111.
- 30 I am grateful to Graham McFee for his most helpful criticisms of an earlier draft and to the University of Sussex Philosophy Society for its illuminating discussion of this essay. I have made revisions and incorporated suggestions accordingly but am responsible for any undetected errors that may remain.

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## Trivial and serious in aesthetic appreciation of nature

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The aesthetic appreciation of both art and nature is often, in fact, judged to be more – and less – serious. For instance, both natural objects and art objects can be hastily and unthinkingly perceived, and they can be perceived with full and thoughtful attention. In the case of art, we are better equipped to sift the trivial from the serious appreciation; for the existence of a corpus, and a continuing practice, of criticism (and philosophical study) of the arts – for all their internal disputatiousness – furnishes us with relevant criteria. In the case of nature, we have far less guidance. Yet it must matter, there too, to distinguish trivial from serious encounters. When we seek to defend areas of "outstanding natural beauty" against depredations, it matters greatly what account we can give of the appreciation of that beauty: how its value can be set alongside competing and vociferously promoted values involved in industry, commerce and urban expansion. If we wish to attach very high value to the appreciation of natural beauty, we must be able to show that more is involved in such appreciation than the pleasant, unfocused enjoyment of a picnic place, or a fleeting and distanced impression of countryside through a touring-coach window, or obligatory visits to standard viewpoints or (should I say) snapshot-points.

That there is much work to be done on this subject is of course due to the comparative neglect of natural beauty in recent and fairly recent aesthetics. Although it was the very center of concern for a great deal of eighteenth-century aesthetics and for many of the greatest Romantic poets and painters, subsequent movements such as Symbolism and Modernism tended to see the natural world in a very different light. Darwinian ideas of nature were problematic and disturbing compared with theistic and pantheistic perspectives. Some later aesthetic theories made sense when applied to art, but

little or none applied to natural beauty. Formalist theories require a determinate, bounded and shaped artifact; expression theories presuppose an artist behind an art-work.

What, first of all, do we mean by "aesthetic appreciation of nature"? By "nature" we must mean not just gentle pastoral landscape, but also tropical forest, tundra, ice floes, deserts, and objects (and events) made perceptible only by way of microscope or telescope. If nature's materials are vast, so too is the freedom of the percipient. We have endless choice of scale, freedom to choose the boundary of attention, choice between the moving – whether natural objects or the spectator or both – and the *static*. Our choice of viewpoint can range from that of the underwater diver to the view of the upper surface of clouds from an aircraft or an astronaut's view of the planet as a sphere.

What sort of aesthetic responses and judgments occur in our encounter with nature? We may speak of "beautiful" objects in nature, where "beauty" is used in a narrower sense, when we respond with delight, with love and with wonderment to objects before us. In that sense we may see beauty in the gradations of sky- and cloud-colors, yellow-orange evening light transfiguring a summer landscape, early morning sun-rays seen through mist in woodland, water calm in a lake, or turbulent or cascading in the mountain stream that emerges from the lake. The *feel* of moss or rock. Sounds – curlew, oystercatcher, lark – and where a single bird's cry makes the surrounding silence the more vividly apprehensible. We may see beauty in formal qualities: flower-patterns, snow- and wind-shapes, the balancing of masses at the sides of a valley: in animal forms and in the grace of animal movement.

"Beauty" is, however, also used more widely. It may cover the aesthetically arresting, the rewarding-to-contemplation, a great range of emotional qualities, without necessarily being pleasurable or lovable or suggestive of some ideal. Tree branches twisted with age or by wind, a towering thundercloud, black water beneath a steep rocky hillside.

We need to acknowledge a duality in much aesthetic appreciation of nature, a *sensuous component* and a *thought-component*. First, sensuous immediacy: in the purest cases one is taken aback by, for instance, a sky color-effect, or by the rolling away of cloud or mist from a landscape. Most often, however, an element of thought is present, as we implicitly compare and contrast here with elsewhere,

*actual with possible, present with past*. I say, "implicitly"; there may be no verbalizing or self-conscious complexity in the experience.

We cannot deny the thought-element, and it cannot reasonably be held (as such and in general) to fight with the aesthetic character of an experience. Consider that paradigm case of aesthetic experience of nature – the fall of an autumn leaf.<sup>1</sup> If we simply watch it fall, without any thought, it may or may not be a moving or exciting aesthetic object, but it must be robbed of its poignancy, its mute message of summer gone, its symbolizing *all* falling, our own included. Leaf veins suggest blood-vessel veins – symbolizing continuity in the forms of life, and maybe a shared vulnerability. Thus the thought-element may bring analogies to bear on the concrete particulars: this autumn is linked to innumerable other autumns: to the cycle of the seasons.

Or we watch the flight of swifts, wheeling, screaming; and to our present perception is added the thought of their having, in early summer, just returned from Africa – the thought (schematically) of that huge journey, their seeming-frailness, their frantic, restless, frightening burning up of energy, in their nearly ceaseless motion. All that is directed to (and fused with the perception of) the tiny, never-still bird-forms themselves. Maybe we think of a wider context still, in relation to the particular animal-form (or rock-form) under our gaze – awareness of the wide evolutionary procession of forms: or one may even be aware of the broadest metaphysical or religious background of all – the world as divinely created – or as uncreated, enigmatically *there*. Not even in the latter sort of case is the thought extraneously or externally juxtaposed to the perception of the natural object or scene. The union, or fusion, is much closer. There is an overall modification of awareness, in which the feeling and thought elements and the perception all interact.

Although analogies with art suggest themselves often enough about how to "frame" the objects of our aesthetic interest, where to establish the momentary bounds of our attention, on other occasions the objects we attend to seem to repudiate any such bounding – to present themselves as essentially illimitable, unframable, or to be in a way surrogates for the unbounded. This is particularly the domain of elemental experience, of the awesome and the sublime. There is an essential, though contested and variable, thought-element here again: it is particularly obvious in the Kantian versions of sublimity, where imagination aspires, but is unable, to cope with a great magnitude or energy of nature. It recoils, but its defeat is compensated for by the

realization of moral and intellectual capabilities which are not daunted at all, but whose supreme worth is vividly brought home to the subject. Coleridge descending Sca Fell enacted that Kantian reflective content of sublime experience:

The sight of the Craggs above me on each side, and the tempestuous clouds just over them ... overawed me. I lay in a state of ... Trance and Delight and blessed God aloud for the powers of Reason and the Will, which remaining, no danger can overpower us.<sup>2</sup>

Other theories, Schopenhauer's, for instance, saw the moment of ascendancy in our proving able to take a contemplative attitude towards hostile nature.<sup>3</sup>

Without an adequate thought-element, particularly self-image, counterbalancing the daunting external powers, the experience of the sublime may shrivel, or never establish itself in a subject. To some – Mikel Dufrenne, for one – it remains the chief moment in the aesthetic experience of nature: whereas others, for instance Adorno, see the sublime as a historically ephemeral and by now faded mode of sensibility.<sup>4</sup>

To chronicle the effects rather than the components of aesthetic experience of nature would require a much longer story than can be attempted here. Among the most general of these, clichéd though it is, must be the "life-enhancing" effect of beauty, release from the stress and anxiety of practical, manipulatory, causally engaged relations with nature into the calmly contemplative. These work together, I suggest, in the case of natural beauty with a lasting, or always renewable, sense of mystery or wonder that it should be there at all.

Can we then make any reasoned case for distinguishing trivial from serious in this field? If it is a form of perception-and-reflection that we are considering, then as I said at the start, we know that perception (taking that first) can be attentive or inattentive, can be discriminating or indiscriminating, lively or lazy: that the doors of perception can need cleansing, the conventions and the simplifications of popular perception can need resisting. The reflective component, likewise, can be feeble or stereotyped, individual, original or exploratory. It can be immature or confused. And indeed we may secretly be anxious that the thought which sustains our valued experience of nature is in the end metaphysically untenable. To *discard* these issues, to narrow down on a minimally reflective, passive perception, would seem to trivialize in another way. Adorno suspected that our very concept of nature is "idyllic, provincial, insular."<sup>5</sup> I would argue that it is not

always so: but it can be, and from comfortable selectivity comes trivialization by another route.

Some of these points, then, suggest the following first approximation: that an aesthetic approach to nature is trivial to the extent that it distorts, ignores, suppresses truth about its objects, feels and thinks about them in ways that falsify how nature really is. All this may be coupled with a fear that if there is to be some agreeable aesthetic encounter with nature, call it trivial if you will, one had better not look too attentively nor think too hard about the presuppositions (the thought-components) on which one's experience rests. To break open the parcel might dissipate the aesthetic delight and set one an over-arduous task to regain at some deeper, more serious level what one had possessed at a more superficial one.

If it trivializes to see nature in terms of ready-made, standard "views," so does it also to see oneself merely as the detached viewer – or indeed as a noumenally free and rational ego. There is a deepening of seriousness when I realize that I am myself one with, part of, the nature over-against me. So, I want to say, an aesthetic appreciation of nature, if serious, is necessarily a self-exploration also; for the energies, regularities, contingencies of nature are the energies, principles and contingencies that sustain my own embodied life and my own awareness. Nature may be "other" to us, but we are no less connatural with it. We do not simply look out upon nature as we look at the sea's drama from a safe shore: the shore is no less nature, and so too is the one who looks.

On a superficial reading of nature, objects tend to have an invariable, univocal expressive quality. Fused, however, with less conventional thoughts, considered in wider or less standard contexts, these qualities admit of endless modification. It is reasonable, then, to include among the trivializing factors bland unawareness of that potential variability, and among factors making for serious aesthetic appreciation of nature must be a background realization of it.

Anticipating later discussion, I need to say here that "seriousness" or "depth" in aesthetic experience of nature cannot be correlated in any simple way with intensity or fullness of thought-content. Some thoughts (perhaps of causal explanation of the phenomena at the level of particle physics) might not enrich but neutralize the experience, or at least fight and fail to fuse with its perceptual content. Or they might trivialize. Other thought-contents again, and in contrast, relate to quite fundamental features of the lived human state, and bear directly upon the perceptual, phenomenal dimension, which

their presence cannot fail to solemnize and deepen. Think, for instance, of that realization (thought and sense experience in fusion) of the whole earth's motion, in Wordsworth's skating episode in *The Prelude*, as he suddenly stopped in his tracks while skating in the dark:

So through the darkness and the cold we flew,  
 And not a voice was idle; with the din  
 Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;  
 The leafless trees and every icy crag  
 Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills  
 Into the tumult sent an alien sound  
 Of melancholy not unnoticed, while the stars  
 Eastward were sparkling clear, and in the west  
 The orange sky of evening died away.  
 Not seldom from the uproar I retired  
 Into a silent bay, or sportively  
 Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,  
 To cut across the reflex of a star  
 That fled, and, flying still before me, gleamed  
 Upon the glassy plain; and oftentimes,  
 When we had given our bodies to the wind,  
 And all the shadowy banks on either side  
 Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still  
 The rapid line of motion, then at once  
 Have I, reclining back upon my heels,  
 Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs  
 Wheeled by me – even as if the earth had rolled  
 With visible motion her diurnal round!<sup>6</sup>

A second important duality characterizes an aesthetic concern with nature. On the one hand, it is nature, nature's own forms, structures, sequences, that we seek to contemplate; and the more serious our engagement, the more earnest will be our regard for, and our respect for, the integrity and the proper modes of being of the objects in nature themselves, inanimate and animate. We see sentimentality, for instance, as trivializing in its tendency, because it may falsely posit human feelings and human attitudes in the nonhuman – or more likely posit *failed* human life and human attitudes instead of *successfully* attained nonhuman life. To put it very schematically, a serious aesthetic approach to nature is close to a Spinozistic intellectual love of God-or-Nature in its totality. It rejects Kant's invitation to accord unconditional value only to the bearers of freedom and reason, and to downgrade phenomenal nature save as it hints at a supersensible, an earnest of which is furnished in nature's amenability to be perceived, its purposiveness without purpose. It rejects,

likewise, Hegel's downplaying of natural beauty in favor of the spirit-manifesting practice of art.

But there is another side: even when we discard the excesses of anthropomorphism, to admit no more than this other-respecting concern is to exclude too much. The human inner life has been nourished by images from the natural world: its self-articulation and development could hardly proceed without annexing or appropriating forms from the phenomenal world. They are annexed not in a systematic, calculating, craftsmanlike fashion, but rather through our being imaginatively seized by them, and coming to cherish their expressive aptness, and to rely upon them in our efforts to understand ourselves. Not all of this can be categorized as strictly *aesthetic* encounter or *aesthetic* contemplation: some of it can, and the lines of connection are obvious and important.

That may serve us as a sketch of the duality within our commerce with nature – a respect for its own structures and the celebrating of those, and the annexation of natural forms. Though divergent, those approaches are not opposed: nature need not be misperceived in order to furnish symbols for our inwardness. But their focus and their intention are distinct. Each presents some problems in relation to the spectrum between trivial and serious.

First then we are to consider and contemplate nature in its own terms. This is an aim that sets one serious goal for aesthetic appreciation. What *problems* come with it?

One interpretation of the phrase "in its own terms" would prompt us towards supplying a scientific thought-component. Now, it may well enrich our perception of a U-valley to "think-in" its readily imaginable glacial origins. But, as I claimed earlier, one could not have an obligation to think-in *perception-transcending* ideas or explanations. These might be explanations in physical theory of transformations at the molecular and atomic level that produced the rock of which the valley is made. We cannot oblige ourselves to think-in what must fragment or overwhelm or dissolve the aesthetic perception, instead of enriching it. Aesthetic experience must be human experience – episodic, phenomenal. To destroy it can hardly be to *deepen* it!

We spoke of "respect" for natural objects, and particularly for living beings. But a further and different problem arises when we recall that nature itself shows only a very limited respect for its individuals. For me to respect something is to perceive it as intrinsi-

cally valuable. I affirm, even rejoice in, its being and in its manner of being. Suppose, however, I do that with (say) a zebra or a brilliantly colored butterfly newly emerged from its chrysalis. I am going to be hurt and saddened when a lion tears the zebra to pieces, and a bird snaps up the butterfly when it has scarcely tried out its wings. That bleak thought of the vulnerability and brevity of individual life can easily attach itself also to perceptions of *flourishing* living beings, and there is no doubt that to perceive them so is to be closer to the truth of things than not to. Does it follow that in the interest of "depth" one must cancel or at least qualify every response of simple delight at beast or bird? There is conflict here. On the one hand, to seek depth or seriousness seems to rule out optimistic falsifications: but on the other hand, since we are *also* trying to attend in a differentiating and appreciative mode, we surely cannot claim that an undifferentiated consciousness of nature's dysteleology must always predominate in any aesthetic experience.

There is poignancy, too, in the thought that some of the most animated, zestful and aesthetically arresting movements of living beings are directed at the destruction of other living beings – the ballet of swifts feeding on the wing, lithe and rapid movements of panthers or leopards. If we are tempted to abstract from, or attenuate or mute the disturbing thought-content in any such case, is that not to move some way towards the trivial end of our scale? Nature, that is, can be made aesthetically contemplatable only by a sentimentalizing, falsifying selectivity, that turns away from the real work of beak, tooth and claw. That would indeed be to move, and very significantly, in the trivializing direction, and to shirk the challenge to the would-be appreciator's own creativity.

In some situations at least aesthetic appreciation of nature may be made sustainable – without falsification – through fashioning less simplistic (and less inappropriately moralized) concepts of nature's processes and energies. If, for instance, we can celebrate nature's overall animation, vitality – *creative and destructive* in indissoluble unity – we may reach a reflective, or contemplative equilibrium, that is neither unqualified by melancholy nor disillusioned and repelled.

Rather than follow that strenuous route, we may be tempted, as some aestheticians have been, once more to deny that we are properly concerned, in aesthetic experience, with how things actually are; but we should be concerned only with their immediately given perceptual qualities, the sensuous surface. To accept such a limitation,

however, though it would lead us thankfully past a great many puzzles and problems, would leave us with a quite unacceptably *thin* version of aesthetic experience of nature. The falling autumn leaf becomes a small, fluttering, reddish-brown material object – and no more: the swifts only rapidly flitting shapes. The extreme here is to purify away, regressively and evasively, all but the merest sensuous show: nature dissolving, fragmenting to kaleidoscopic splinters.

We are working here, implicitly, with a scale. Near one end of it aesthetic experience attenuates towards the perception-transcending substructure of its objects. We do not have an obligation to place ourselves there: with the aesthetic, it is on the phenomenal, the *Lebenswelt*, concrete and abstract both, that we must focus attention. At the other end of the scale, as we have just noted, we exclude all thought, and leave sensuous immediacy only. At both extremes we lose what John Findlay singled out as aesthetic essentials, the poignant and the perspicuous in combination. These opposite dangers are run only when the ready-made stereotyped snapshot appreciations of nature are transcended, and the subject is actively seeking his or her own synthesis – maximally poignant and perspicuous – with nature's materials perceived and pondered. *Between* the extremes, 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.

In my second approach to nature the forms of nature are annexed in imagination, interiorized, the external made internal. Is there in this, in contrast with the previous theme, a suggestion of the solipsistic or at least the narcissistic? Not necessarily: since if we share a common environment, the annexed forms can range from the universally intersubjective, through the shareable though not universal, to the highly individual and personal. Basic natural forms are interiorized for the articulating of a common structure of the mind. Through these, the elusively nonspatial is made more readily graspable and communicable. We speak of depths and heights – in relation to moods or feelings or hopes or fears: of soarings and of glooms. We are lifted and dashed, chilled, spiritually frozen, and thawed. We drown, we surface; we suffer dark nights of the soul. Again, there is no simple one-to-one correlation between mental state and natural item. I may interiorize the desert – as bleak emptiness, *néant*: or I may interiorize it as unscripted openness, potentiality ...

As already suggested, metaphor is of the essence in such appropriations. No aestheticizing of natural objects can occur in these ways unless we have discovered metaphor. And that gives us the clue we need in order to apply the distinction between trivial and serious to this area. Many metaphors we use constantly to articulate conscious life are dead metaphors: some are at any time capable of reanimation. But on occasion (and we can let Wordsworth mark for us the extreme point in metaphorical appropriation), a person catches from events in the natural world "a tone, / An image, and a character" so deeply and individually apt that they re-organize or re-center his life. But these too need not be incommunicably private; they may be "fit to be transmitted and made visible / To other eyes." Wordsworth, for instance, saw in the workings and self-transformings of nature on the grand scale (as he narrated in *The Prelude* XIII, on the effects of mist and moonlight on Snowdon) metaphors for the poet's understanding and evaluating of his own imaginative transforming activity, in the fashioning of his own poetry. He explicitly acknowledges the co-presence of perception and thought. "By sensible impressions not enthral'd, / But quicken'd, rous'd, and made thereby more fit / To hold communion with the invisible world."

The "invisible world" is the world of spirit, of mind, the spiritual being precisely articulated and modified by its imaginative annexing of the outer world – that is, the sensible impressions derived from it, but also imbued with thought. Our topic is not simply the search for the descriptively apt metaphors from nature for the structure and the ongoings of human inwardness, structures and ongoings that would exist or occur identically and independently whether or not the search is successful: but the annexing is also a molding and making of that inwardness, reflectively or perfunctorily achieved. No doubt some of this can be done by images drawn from domestic or urban life; but there is more than a little suggestion of anxious self-protectiveness in such restriction to the man-made environment. The gain would be that we screen ourselves from the natural immensities that daunt us; the loss that we cut ourselves off from that "renewal of our inner being" which the Romantics saw as derived from meditating on the great permanencies of nature.

A person may find it hard not to take certain natural sequences as generalizable and significant, though enigmatic, "messages" of nature. For instance, the natural sequence of events in a sunrise or the clearing of weather after a storm may seem to carry an optimistic message. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, writes of the "yearning for

what is promised but never unveiled by beauty" . . . "a message seems to be inscribed" on some aspect of nature, "not all is lost yet." But, he adds, "the statement that this is how nature speaks is meaningless, nature's language is not propositional."<sup>7</sup> Analogously, on listening to a particular piece of music, I may swing between saying (a) What I am enjoying is simply the emotional quality – a cheering, happy quality – of this sequence of tones and rhythms; and (b) this expresses a generalizable cheering, a justified hopefulness. Perhaps in both nature and music, to go to the stronger claim must be to risk illusion. To be safe, I would have to keep to the cautious, and certainly valid inference: because this state is actual, this state is at least a human possibility, and (I may add, still fairly cautiously) a renewable one.

What would trivializing be, here? I think it would be either to be "fundamentalist," literalist about "messages of nature," or to reject the whole topic, again in a literalist spirit – that or nothing. More adequate, and with a claim to seriousness, is to be aware of the metaphoricality and the enigmatic quality, and to allow that awareness to characterize the thought-side of the experiences.

The combination of distanced and yet intimate or enigmatically meaningful, is nowhere more intensely realized than in *dreams*. Indeed it has been claimed that in any strikingly beautiful landscape there is an element of the dreamlike. The interiorization seems half-completed in nature itself, imparting an almost mythological character to any figures such a scene contains. All are apprehended with a mysterious sense that the components (or some of them) deeply *matter* to us, though one cannot say how: the shape of a hill, the precise placing of a stand of trees, or a solitary rock. To decide that there is no readable significance is not necessarily to discredit such an experience or to show it up as illusion. Any discrediting is again the work of literalism. Naively serious, and thus trivial. We seem invited to "transcend the sheer sensible impressions": we do transcend them, but only into our state of perplexity and wonder. But no demythologizable message could be more memorable than these half-perceived, half-dreamed visionary scenes.

Another respect must be noted in which there occur large individual differences in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. This is in the degree to which imagination is active in connecting diverse separated natural forms. I am thinking of the relating of object with object, structure with structure, searching out analogies between features of otherwise very remote phenomena. We may see the hills as "lifting

themselves in ridges like the waves of a tumultuous sea." Or we see "high cirrus cloud" as "exactly resembling sea sand ribbed by the tide." (Wordsworth and Ruskin, respectively.)

To be imaginatively alert to such common structures has an obvious unifying, integrating effect – enhancing the sense that we are dealing with a single nature, intelligible in its forms. In at least two ways, however, pursuit of resemblances and analogies can become absurd or one-sided, and so can trivialize aesthetic perception of nature. Some wholly fortuitous, fanciful likeness may be made the object of an excessive wonderment, as when the guide to a system of limestone caves introduces a stalagmite as the Virgin Mary. Again there can result a falsely comforting simplification and idealization of nature. For not *all* is intelligible structure or perspicuous geometry. The veining of rocks, wind-shaping of clouds, undulating of hills – all of these have (as well as their undoubted symmetries) their elements of arbitrariness and opacity, at the phenomenal level. To Kant's important claim that nature looks as if made for our cognitive faculty, we have surely to add the equally important antithetical claim, that in some respects it looks *not at all* as if it were made for us to perceive and to know. Nature's otherness is as real and as aesthetically significant, if we are "serious," as is its readily perceptible chiming forms.

This combination, in our aesthetic perception of nature, of the readily graspable and the opaque, sheerly contingent and alien, merits more than a sentence. The realization that the combination characterizes our aesthetic dealings with nature in general must again count as a mark of seriousness. It is a distinction vital, for instance, to a monotheistic view of nature. If the world of nature were itself divine, then one would expect intelligibility to prevail throughout. If the created world were distinct from God, though the product of his all-rational mind, one would expect a nature with a magnificently intelligible structure, but with signs of the insertion of divine *will* – the contingent, the might-have-been-different. Even if we do not hold a theistic belief-system, there can be a parabolic application of this duality, indicating truthfully enough that the distinction runs very deep in our experience of nature.

What is more, we are able to make aesthetic use, to make a topic of appreciation, of that dichotomy. There would be an aesthetic thinness or emptiness, if the perceptible forms of nature, its skylines and contours and living beings, could all be generated by mathematicians' equations of relatively simple kinds. Perhaps wind-formed

sand-dunes and wave-patterns come near, though even there the complexity soon defies our perception of intelligible form. Realizing the duality is one main element in our perceiving of a natural configuration such as one may see on many shores: strata in a rock-face, tilted to an arch, but crumbling and weathered, supporting grasses and the nests of seagulls on its ledges and shelves.

So far, the aspects of aesthetic appreciation of nature which we have considered have sustained our intuition that appreciation can be more, or less superficial, more or less serious. It is possible, however, to be moved by skeptical thoughts which suggest that the *whole* of this area of experience is nothing other than trivial, that aesthetic experience of nature – being founded on a variety of illusions – can never really be serious.

Aesthetic experiences of nature, it may be said, are fugitive and unstable, wholly dependent upon anthropocentric factors such as scale, viewpoint, perspective. The mountain that we appreciate for its majesty and stability is, on a different time-scale, as fluid as the ripples on the lake at its foot. Set any distinctive natural object in its wider context in the environment of which it is a part, and the particular aesthetic quality you are enjoying is likely to vanish. You shudder with awe at the base of your cliff towering above you. But look at the cliff again (if you can identify it in time) from an aircraft at thirty thousand feet, and does not the awe strike you as having been misplaced, as somewhat theatrical and exaggerated, childish even? Can an experience be serious, if it can so readily be undermined?

First of all, something not very different can be true of art-experience as well. A too-remote viewpoint, or a too-distant listening-point can ruin the impact of a picture or performed music; and without a sympathetically and elaborately prepared mental set, and the appropriate context of attitudes and ideas, many works of high art can strike one as grotesque, fatuous, bathetic, or comically solemn. Yet these familiar facts about the conditions of satisfactory art-experience do *not* seem to undermine its worth when the conditions are in fact happily fulfilled.

It is not quite the same with art as with nature. The appreciators of nature have in one way more to do than the art-appreciators; they play a larger creative role in fashioning their aesthetic object. They have to find their viewpoint, decide on boundaries of attention, generate the thought-content. The experience is more of a cooperative product of natural object and contemplator. But what lurks behind

the more comprehensively dismissive and skeptical movements of mind with regard to nature is an assumption about what we might call "authority." The view from an aircraft allegedly shows you what the cliff *really* is like and shows that your awe was misplaced. Likewise, in the case of the "majestic" and "stable" mountain, a skeptical critic may appeal to the facts of the oneness, the connectedness of the items of the natural world, and of the universality of change and flux; and these are taken to annul or destroy our serious appreciation of the perceptual qualities of a self-selected fragment, our perceptual snapshot or "still" – artificially isolated (as these qualities are) from the whole and the "becoming" of the whole.

To occupy the discrediting perspective is being understood as entitling the critic to say: "I know (or I see) something you are not aware of! From my distance – or from my height – your awe is shown up as misplaced." Or is there something deeply amiss in that comment? And could not I (at the foot of my cliff) say something very similar? "You in your aircraft, though you can see a great deal, are simply unable to perceive and respond to the perceptual qualities that generate the awe I feel. Your viewpoint has its limitations too." What happens very often, I think, is that the ironical, anti-Romantic, belittling, levelling reaction tends uncritically to be favored today as the authoritative reaction ("You won't put anything over on me"). Why this should be so for many people in our society, would need study in the sociology of religious, moral and aesthetic values in their interconnections. What I should certainly want to say myself is that a readiness to conform to such a social trend can be a factor on the side of trivialization, not the side of seriousness, in aesthetic appreciation. Our aesthetic experience of nature is thoroughly dependent on scale and on individual viewpoint. To fail to realize how deeply would surely trivialize. Coming to realize and to think-in to one's aesthetic experience the fact of that perspectivity is certainly a factor in the maturing of this experience. But what is highly contestable is the implicit claim that one perspective, one view, one set of resultant perceived qualities takes precedence over another, and so can discredit or undermine another – or even all the others: that one of them has, in an aesthetic context, greater authority than another. It is easy enough to deal with the art examples. Generally speaking, the painting we can assume to have been *made* to be viewed from the distance at which its significant detail can be discriminated and its overall structure seen as a unity; and the music to be heard closely enough to occupy our auditory attention with all its detail.

But the analogy with art may be developed in a further way, one that carries important implications. In the subject-matter of art there is no "authoritatively appropriate" and "inappropriate." Equally fitting objects of attention are substances, relations, events, the abstract as well as the concrete, the momentary, the minute, the everlasting, the insubstantial, even the perceptually illusory. Any of these may be the subject of, say, a poet's celebration and scrutiny. (A study which argues vigorously for this "ontological parity," as its author calls it, is Justus Buchler's *The Main of Light* – particularly chapter 6, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974]). Is there any reason why this principle should apply any less plausibly to the aesthetic appreciation of nature? It would legitimize any viewpoint on any subject-matter – substance or shadow, any perceptual qualities, physical materials, mica, quartz, sand, or more elusive perspective-dependent qualities like the blueness of the sky, the colors of the rainbow, the enhancement of distance-perception on an atmospherically clear day, or the merging of objects in mist. It would of course follow that if I denied special authority to any perspective whatever, I would have to deny it to the perspective which I (still at the foot of my cliff) would very willingly judge to have some preferred status. That it could not have.

The reader will have been aware, as I have been aware, that two recurrent elements in the account I have been giving exert pressures in different directions, or (if you like) remain in stressful relation with one another. On the one side, one way to seriousness in our aesthetic dealings with nature involved a respect for truth – more accurately, for the objective truth such as the sciences pursue – so long as that path does not carry us beyond what can be incorporated in still essentially *perceptual* experience. The terminus in that direction, then, would be the thinking-in to our perceptual experience of what we know to be objectively the case. Remember the examples of glaciation as once shaping the now green valley, and anxiety coloring our response to sighting the wild animal whose predator is seldom far off. There is a correcting or guiding of our episodic experience through an objectivizing movement of mind.

Nevertheless, we have also felt the attraction of a radically anti-hierarchical, in some respects antiobjectivizing movement, towards acceptance of "ontological parity." And according to *that*, the perceptually "corrected" and veridical has no stronger or more serious claim to aesthetic attention than has the illusory.



Is there any way, then, of dealing rationally with these conflicting pressures? Should we say: all this is, ultimately, about a game we play with nature, for enjoyment and the enriching of our lives. In any particular situation follow whichever option promises more reward. We are free to respect, or to ignore, the objectivizing option. To feel bound always to pursue it is not really to show commitment to so-called seriousness, but rather to show a profound misunderstanding of the aesthetic. Or would that be simply and shockingly, at the very end, to capitulate to the trivializers?<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 For a treatment different from my own, see Pepita Haezrahi, *The Contemplative Activity* (Allen and Unwin 1954), ch. 2.
- 2 *Tour in the Lake Country*, 1802. cf. also, David Craig, *Native Stones: A Book about Climbing* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), p. 132.
- 3 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, (New York: Dover Books, 1969) I. paragraph 39.
- 4 M. Dufrenne, *Esthétique et philosophie*, I, "Expérience esthétique de la nature," p. 45. T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 103.
- 5 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100.
- 6 W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk. I, lines 438–60.
- 7 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 108–9.
- 8 Versions of this essay were given as lectures at Lancaster and Boston Universities.

## The public prospect and the private view: the politics of taste in eighteenth-century Britain

JOHN BARRELL

### I

I want to offer a comment on some ideas about landscape that are commonly found among writers on art, on literature, and on various other subjects in the second half of the eighteenth and in the early years of the nineteenth centuries in Britain. The main point of my doing this is to show how a correct taste, here especially for landscape and landscape art, was used in this period as a means of legitimating political authority, particularly but not exclusively within the terms of the discourse of civic humanism. If we interrogate writers of the polite culture of this period on the question of what legitimates this claim, one answer we repeatedly discover, though it may take very different forms, is that political authority is rightly exercised by those capable of thinking in general terms; which usually means those capable of producing abstract ideas – decomplex ideas – out of the raw data of experience. The inability to do this was usually represented as in part the result of a lack of education, a lack which characterized women and the vulgar; and because women are generally represented in this period as incapable of generalising to any important degree, I shall be in this paper very careful *not* to use a vocabulary purged of sexist reference: when I speak of what men thought, of Man in general, of the spectator as *he*, I am doing so with forethought, and in order to emphasize the point that, in the matter of political authority, legitimated as I have described, women were almost entirely out of the question, and the issue to be determined was which men could pass the test of taste.

To develop the ability to think accurately in abstract terms required more, however, than an appropriate education: one further condition in particular is necessary: a man must occupy a place in the social