In search of the natural sublime : the face on the forest floor

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IN SEARCH OF THE NATURAL SUBLIME:
THE FACE ON THE FOREST FLOOR

In the *Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke presents a description of "the celebrated Campanella", who by composing his features to replicate those of other persons was able to replicate their thoughts and their passions. There is much more to be said about such derivative or contagious affect. My discussion here, however, concerns a successor to and reconfiguration of that problem – namely, the difference that it makes to the understanding of passions for one to count natural beauty as part of aesthetic experience. Kantian aesthetics, by systematically recognizing the importance of the imitation of the passion of insensate intentionless things, makes the sublime the arena in which aesthetic experience involves less the imitation of an action than the imitation of an object, and in which the passions are less a registration of the alternate communicability and privacy of experience than a strange ventriloquism of identity.

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William Gilpin, in one of his numerous books of *Observations ... Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty,* steps aside from his descriptive excursion on the natural compositions awaiting the traveller to make a point about the appeals of certain dreary sites. The Edystone Lighthouse, he admits, has many drawbacks as a primary residence: its briny atmosphere makes breathing unhealthy; darkness and stench surround its living quarters; and stormy weather makes it impossible for boats to "touch at Edystone for many months" at a stretch.

> [...] The whole together is, perhaps, one of the least eligible pieces of preferment in Britain: and yet from a story which Mr. Smeaton relates, it appears there are stations still more ineligible. A fellow, who got a good livelihood by making leathern-pipes for engines, grew tired of sitting constantly at work, and solicited a lighthouse man's place, which, as competitors are not numerous, he obtained. As the Edystone-boat was carrying him to take possession of his new

habitation, one of the boatmen asked him, what could tempt him to give up a profitable business to be shut up, for months together, in a pillar? "Why", said the man, "because I did not like confinement."[1]

I shall be concerned here with the evolution of British travel literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and with its recurrence to a particular set of contradictions – between intimacy with the domestic landscape and a sense of the confinement of society. The cultivation of the pleasures of a domestic and British – rather than continental – landscape burgeoned, at the same time that the very cultivation of the landscape presented itself as an escape from the society of other Britishers.

What I shall be arguing here is that the Romantic discussion of landscape and the natural sublime absorbs and redirects anxieties implicit in the eighteenth-century conception of theatricality. Theatricality, as Michael Fried has compellingly traced it in his book *Absorption and Theatricality*[2], becomes less a vivid metaphor than a problematic as the mere consciousness of being beheld comes to be seen as a version of lying. In the terms of this suspicion of theatricality, to be conscious of being seen is always to be in the position of mugging, putting on one's expressions for the sake of one's audience. Moreover, because works of art are inevitably made to be beheld, this eighteenth-century suspicion of theatricality poses a major challenge to the notion of art itself. Art thus looks like a deceptive practice not so much on the grounds of the maker's intention to deceive but on the basis of the more unsettling charge that the beholder's gaze renders it impossible for the artist to be anything other than deceptive. An apparent impasse about the validity of art objects thus installs itself at the center of discussions of art. Yet one of Fried's major claims is, essentially, that major French eighteenth-century painters converted an ontological problem into a strategic one; continually painting subjects who appeared so thoroughly absorbed in their activities as to have no consciousness of being beheld, these painters borrowed from their own subjects the authority of unconsciousness.

The impact of this line of thinking upon the genres of painting and upon the handling of particular examples of those genres is clear. Both

1 William Gilpin, *Observations on the Western Parts of England, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty,* London, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1798, pp. 220-229.
2 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

history painting and portraiture, as Fried very convincingly shows, must reformulate their explicit claims to public attention. Moreover, such a reformulation is necessary not merely because painting should not reveal its designs upon its audience's attention but also because that attention itself comes to count as an assault on the painting, the gaze that makes it lie.

The Kantian treatment of the sublime extends such an eighteenth-century obsession with the production of duplicity along with visibility by locating aesthetic pleasure in nature – outside, that is, of the question of design or intention. For if the process of trying to make one's consciousness present to another consciousness continually ends in the theatrical suspicion of deceptiveness, the sublime account of nature continually offers the possibility of an individuality that feels uncompromised. Against the theatrical fear of a diminution of consciousness produced by the very act of communication, the sublime establishes nature as the instrument for the production of individuality itself. The experience of pleasure in a nature that is, by definition, indifferent to your reactions, produces self-consciousness as a version of imagining where any kind of meaning might originate; the experience of pain or fear in nature, moreover, makes such self-consciousness look merely natural, like the forced product of nature's coercive force. From Burke's account of the self-preservative purposes of sublime terror to Kant's dynamical sublime, nature's might provides the model for an extraordinarily productive confusion. The theatrical world of society may make it appear that one cannot represent oneself even to oneself. The world of nature makes it appear that talking only to objects with which one shares no language guarantees individuality.

The function of guidebooks obviously shifts under this socio-aesthetic pressure. The ever-growing list of guidebooks in the eighteenth century describes for prospective travelers places they might want to see, how to get to them, and what they look like, but these guidebooks also begin to describe the landscape in terms of possibility of on-the-spot constructions of sublime, beautiful, and picturesque views – what cannot be described because it has not yet been seen in exactly that way, from that spot, by that viewer.

Earlier, for Defoe writing his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* between 1724 and 1726, the obsolescence of the travel guide had seemed like a marketing opportunity (rather than a virtually formal feature for the dissemination of individuality). The work, Defoe

writes, "itself is a description of the most flourishing and opulent country in the world"[3]. As the country continually changes, so the descriptions must change, having already created an opening for Defoe's *Tour* and inevitably establishing future needs in that line. "Whoever has travelled Great Britain before us, and whatever they have written, though they may have had a harvest, yet they have always, either by necessity, ignorance or negligence passed over so much, that others may come and glean after them by large handfuls" (43). Even had there been travel writers more numerous and more diligent, Defoe says, there would still be room for further work, "For the face of things so often alters, [...] that there is matter of new observation every day presented to the traveller's eye" (44). In sum, "the Fate of things gives a new face to things", and "new matter offers to new observation" (44).

The limitation of Defoe's guide is, thus, its proudest boast; its subject continually renews itself even as the description remains fixed. Its point as a document of the country's shape is to preserve the past as a standard by which to measure subsequent growth; it solicits the traveler to see how much things have changed – specifically, to see how much things have been *improved* – since the time Defoe made his observations:

> But after all that has been said by others, or can be said here, no description of Great Britain can be, what we call a finished account, as no clothes can be made to fit a growing child; no picture carry the likeness of a living face; the size of one, and the countenance of the other, always altering with time: so no account of a kingdom thus daily altering its countenance, can be perfect. (46)

The living face of Great Britain becomes on this account a large-scale version of the "garden of liberalism", in which the free growth of the face past its representation in the *Tour* becomes emblematic of its capacity to incorporate change, improvement, and the marks of human industry. Britain's face, moreover, is most natural when most populous, when marked by the presence of human settlements and commerce. Defoe thus finds fault with Westmoreland for its desolation, describing it as "a Country eminent for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales it self", and proceeds to correct himself, to think more positively:

3 Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, abridged and edited by Pat Rogers, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1979, p. 43. I cite this edition for its general availability.

But 'tis of no Advantage to represent Horror, as the Character of a Country, in the middle of all the frightful Appearances to the right and left; yet here are some very pleasant, populous, and manufacturing Towns, and consequently populous[4].

"Pleasant, populous, and manufacturing Towns, and consequently populous." The word "populous" recurs with a startling insistence. We could, of course, relate its reappearance to the breakneck speed of Defoe's compositions and point out his tendency to get exemplary service from a corps of words that he continually presses. Yet the word "populous" does not merely echo itself, it also is called in to be a causal explanation for itself. Towns that are "populous, and manufacturing Towns" do not merely have population but also produce it. The logic can easily be made plausible: because one needs a certain number of people for manufactures, manufactures are drawn to populous towns, and manufacturing towns draw and retain populations by providing work for people to do.

As populousness becomes simultaneously cause and effect of itself, Defoe establishes a model that speaks feelingly not just about his preferences in landscape but about the nature of those preferences. Just as the words "new", "increase", "variety", "luxuriance", and "improvement" resound throughout his *Preface* to the First Volume, so here "populous" bespeaks a process of self-generation and self-extension that seems curiously disconnected from any description of what those populations might be – or even what they might look like. (Thus, Defoe in the *Preface* to the first volume, begins with novelty before introducing examples: "If novelty pleases, here is the present state of the country described, the improvement, as well in culture, as in commerce, the increase of people, and employment for them" [43].) In Defoe's account of how populousness produces populousness, we see an instance of how he never allows for a moment in which the type might have to be drawn from specific examples. He is, instead, calling upon types continually to demonstrate their typicality by manufacturing individual versions as merely more of the type. Manufactures, thus, operate exactly as nature does for him, as a process of replication that extends itself seemingly infinitely because it

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4 The Rogers edition silently eliminates "and consequently populous" the reading that appears in Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Britain*, ed. G.D.H. Cole, London, Peter Davies, 1927.

never links itself to individual identities that have any particular limitations in time.

For Defoe, then, it is not merely that nature looks most beautiful when it is, as in the Swiss Alps, relieved by the presence of human settlements and centers of commerce[5]. It is also that manufacturing and commerce involve taking a lesson from Defoe's version of nature, in which the notions of exchange and self-replicating types and processes combine with more than a little indifference to individualities. His *Tour* functions less, that is, as a history than as a natural history (a description of natural process extended into a social and naturalized world). For even though historians have relied extensively on the *Tour* for information about eighteenth-century Britain, it not only announces bluntly that "the looking back into remote things is studiously avoided" (43) but also reveals a striking indifference to the project of getting the names of individuals straight. He seems, that is, unconcerned both with individuals and with the names and mortality that mark them as individuals.

Thus, Defoe's nature, like Defoe's commerce, makes theatricality look like a solution rather than a problem, because it never calls up a moment in which the typical and the individual, the general and the particular, are in any kind of collision or competition with one another. In fact, the *Tour* begins to look like a pretext for reading *Moll Flanders* as if it were not so much about the misrepresentations available in a world in which one must represent oneself to others as it is about a process of developing various self-presentations that, ultimately and additively, serve to make one typical.

What I am calling typicality here clearly underwrites a number of eighteenth-century rational enthusiasms for processes in which human systematization improves upon nature in a relatively impersonal way. Almost anyone (with the ironic exception of Arthur Young, the most active writer on scientific husbandry in the late eighteenth century) could learn and deploy scientific principles of agricultural management. Agricultural improvement, being a techne, had little discernible signature. Thus, Young sounds remarkably like Defoe when he catalogues the changes in the landscape that indicate human activity generically rather than particularly.

5 Defoe, *Tour*, ed. Rogers, p. 549.

> [Once] all the country from Holkam to Houghton was a wild sheep-walk, be-
> fore the spirit of improvement seized the inhabitants; and this spirit has wrought
> amazing effects; for instead of boundless wilds, and uncultivated wastes,
> inhabited by scarcely anything but sheep; the country is all cut into enclosures,
> cultivated in a most husband-like manner, richly manured, well peopled, and
> yielding an hundred times the produce that it did in its former state[6].

The advance of the enclosure movement (accelerated with the passage of
the Acts of Enclosure in 1801) had increased the amount of land that
gave evidence of new ownership in new fences and hedges[7]. And while
new fences clearly bespoke active owners, they also bespoke the relative
interchangeability of the humans connected with the land through that
ownership. The steady progress of enclosures in the countryside led to
the rise of farming (and the concomitant decline of shepherding); and the
proliferation of the steam engine after the 1775 patent of Boulton and
Watt expired in 1800 promoted the accumulation of people in cities (as
factories no longer needed to be built next to fast-running streams in
mountainous areas but could instead be constructed in centers of human
energy, population centers that became "therefore, populous"). The
generic equivalence of one person's ownership and another's, of one
person's technical knowledge and another's, and of one person's con-
nection with one place or another produces the satisfactions of visible
productivity.

Against the improved and improving landscape that will accommo-
date the pleasures of utility, the travel writing of a Gilpin or a
Wordsworth sets an increasingly particular series of observations. And
specific details about places and objects become less important for
demonstrating that one has seen a particular place than for demonstrating
how particulars do not lose themselves in types. The implicit claim
staked for the individuality and specificity of natural objects, however,
runs counter to an understanding of nature's capacity to be nature and
endure by virtue of creating particulars as versions of the same basic

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6 Arthur Young, *A Six Weeks Tour throughout the Southern Counties of England and
   Wales*, Third edition, London, W. Strahan, W. Nicoll, T. Cadell, 1772, pp. 3-4.

7 See particularly Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century:
   An Outline of the Beginnings of the Modern Factory System in England*, Chicago,
   University of Chicago Press, 1983. The chapters entitled "The Redistribution of the
   Land", pp. 136-185, and "The Beginnings of Machinery in the Textile Industry", pp.
   189-219, provide an especially lucid survey of the economic reorganization that
   manifested itself in the land.

type. The very notion of biological classification – along with Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" – tends to stress the persistence of the type in terms of a relative indifference to the specificity of its examples. An oak, from this perspective, is less an individual than an exemplar of a class; a nightingale's song can be immortal because the species nightingale endures even as individual nightingales die. Yet Gilpin's travel writing reverses such an attention to the persistence of natural types by being careful of the particular.

In fact, Gilpin organizes his *Forest Scenery* as a progression that moves through various forests so that one can come to know the trees. The first volume, moreover, presents the various different genera of trees – the oak, the ash, the beech, the elm – in much the same way that a field guide to birds might, so that one will be able to recognize them when one sees them. Having divided trees into deciduous and evergreen, Gilpin begins with the oak, which he characterizes as having an especially strong grasp on the earth and as having unusually stout limbs. These comparatively invisible traits soon give way, however, to the oak's appearance to the eye:

> Examine the ash, the elm, the beech, or almost any other tree, and you may observe, in what direct and straight lines the branches in each shoot from the stem. Whereas the limbs of an oak are continually twisting *huc illuc*, in various contortions [...] There is not a characteristic more peculiar to the oak than this[8].

Now the Linnean system establishes classification on the basis of one's being able to discern that certain characteristics are peculiar to certain kinds of plants and animals. It claims, in other words, that all trees do not look alike. All of Gilpin's observations that I have cited thus far are perfectly consistent with the relatively straightforward taxonomies of natural science, in that they rely on distinctions between kinds of trees without insisting upon the individual trees.

Thereafter, however, through a process of almost relentless personification, Gilpin sharpens his distinctions. The oak may be, as the rubric attached to Gilpin's drawing (along with traditional hierarchy) declares, "the king of trees", but names become increasingly proper, as

8 William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views, (Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty) Illustrated by the Scene of New-Forest in Hampshire*, second edition, London, R. Blamire, 1794, I:31-32.

with the "Cheltanham Oak"[9]. These are "celebrated" individual trees, heroes of the vegetable kind. For the progress of the first book (of the three of *Forest Scenery)* is one in which Gilpin moves from considering trees as "single objects" to giving "the specific character of each" kind of tree to giving "a short account of some of the most celebrated trees which have been noticed" (I:iii). Trees, important for him as "the foundation of all scenery" (iii), first appear as "single objects" to suggest their usefulness for larger picturesque units, but ultimately the narrative returns to the individual (rather than the merely unitary) tree.

Trees with names, these are trees with histories. Gilpin, that is, discovers everywhere the importance of age in trees. The oak's longevity gives it its particular distinction as the most picturesque tree. It endures long enough to become a vegetable contortionist. Trees as single objects, for Gilpin, frequently are trees that are freaks. Their idiosyncracies develop, however, less as original natural lapses than as scars, signs of the accidents that a tree has sustained through time. Thus, although he maintains that "all forms that are unnatural, displease" (I:4), he also demonstrates a particular fondness for many picturesque ideas that "are derived [not from utility] but from the injuries the tree receives, or the diseases, to which it is subject" (I:7).

The tree as single object must be a tree that demonstrates that it has never been single, that shows its age less in terms of the rings that would be discovered were one to do a cross-section of its trunk than in terms of its subjection to injury or disease. Longevity, that is, may give the look of singularity, but that look is produced by the tree's having been constantly in its own version of society, a confinement in which the tree's very identity has been determined by its incorporating accidental shocks into its development. The tree's organic wholeness and continuity with itself yields to its having a history, which is equivalent to its telling the history of things external to itself.

Old trees, "splendid remnants of decaying grandeur, speak to the imagination in a style of eloquence, which the stripling cannot reach: they record the history of some storm, some blast of lightning, or other great event" (I:9). The incursion of other plants is even more important than the operation of weather in promoting picturesque effects. For example, Gilpin relates, it is

9 Gilpin, *Forest Scenery*, I:123.

> not uncommon for the seed of trees, and particularly of the ash, to seize on some faulty part of a neighbouring trunk, and there strike root. Dr. Plot speaks of vegetable violence of this kind, which is rather extraordinary. An ash-key rooting itself on a decayed willow: and finding, as it increased, a deficiency of nourishment in the mother-plant, it began to insinuate it's fibres by degrees through the trunk of the willow into the earth. There receiving an additional recruit, it began to thrive, and expand itself to such a size, that it burst the willow in pieces, which fell away from it on every side; and what was before the root of the ash, being now exposed to the air, became the solid trunk of a vigorous tree. (I:39-40)

The ash's "vegetable violence", the production of one tree's beauty (and mortality) out of the growth of another, culminates a series of discussions of beauty-inducing parasites, mosses, lichens, liver-worts (along with near-parasites like ivy and hops). These "tribes" of parasites, Gilpin says, "make no pretence to independence. They are absolute retainers. Not one of them gets his own livelihood, nor takes the least step towards it" (I:16).

Parasites, neither productive nor beautiful in themselves, are the cause of beauty in others. They produce the individuality of trees by making trees look sociable, and by making society look like a process in which the independent becomes individual and beautiful by dying for the generations of trees. The commitment to producing individuality for trees by making their beauty generational, moreover, explains what might otherwise seem like Gilpin's almost insane commitment to natural forests rather than artificial plantings of trees. The artificial plantation sets all trees out simultaneously. And all plantation trees, planted equally, develop under conditions that are all external.

> When we characterize a tree, we consider it in its natural state, insulated, and without any lateral pressure. In a forest, trees naturally grow in that manner. The seniors depress all the juniors that attempt to rise near them. But in a *planted* grove, all grow up together; and none can exert any power over another. (I:31)

Gilpin's version of individuality, the visibility involved in picturesqueness, constitutes more than good design. For it rediscovers all the generational terms of society in what he repeatedly calls the tribes of trees. To make this argument, however, is to call attention to the process by which an apparent retreat from society becomes identical to a recreation of it. Personification, it would seem, involves a substitution of unreal persons for real ones, a substitution that appears that much stranger

or more disingenuous for the knowledge that senior trees do not affect junior persons in the way that trees affect trees, and persons, persons.

The process of translation through which trees and landscapes come to speak to humans introduces a new pressure for sequence into Gilpin's narratives. That is, Gilpin's insistence upon foregrounds is not merely a technique for insisting that one can look at natural landscapes using exactly the same conventions that one has learned from looking at Salvator Rosa or Claude. Instead, it emphasizes the ways in which the recognition of objects has become increasingly externalized. The identity of this oak becomes dependent not merely on the regulative natural type oak, or even on the operations of one tree in the forest on another. Rather, it doesn't even count as a tree unless it has been personified by being seen in human perspective, with foreground.

It may be useful to recall Defoe by way of contrast here. For the *Tour*, as for *Moll*, the episodic format becomes the vehicle for typicality – if only because the episodic serves continually to make the representations of individuality seem superfluous. Thus, Defoe writes the *Tour* as series of thirteen letters that describe circuits of travel (based on "seventeen very large circuits, or journeys [...] taken through divers part separately, and three general tours over almost the whole English part of the island") that he can claim to have seen himself. And if he insists that "the accounts here given are not the produce of a cursory view, or raised upon the borrowed lights of other observers" (45), one of the striking things about the *Tour*, at least by comparison with later landscape guides, is that its narrative has very little specificity of direction. One sets out from London in one direction or another, observing the various sights and frequently interjecting comments about the relationship between one place and another, but one could, easily enough, follow one of Defoe's circuits in reverse. The first-hand testimony of the viewer makes the circuits of the guide marketable, gives them the freshness and topicality that Defoe is continually promoting, but it never suggests that the perspective of the viewer has any important role in constituting the sight.

This point is worth establishing largely for the extraordinary contrast it makes with the mode of later travel writing and all its emphasis on composition – in a curious revival of devotional "composition of place" that insists that one must compose even the natural scene that a writer like Defoe might merely have confronted. As is well known, a writer like William Gilpin composes his guides to picturesque travel as a way of reconciling nature with art, making the walking tour itself the near rela-

tion and opposite number to the eighteenth-century landscape garden. The reconciliation takes the specific form of finding nature recurrently incomplete, and in need of an observing eye that abandons the project of imitating nature for one of giving nature a finish that it would otherwise lack. As Martin Price has observed, "Gilpin does not expect nature to provide him with finished works of art"[10], because nature is, in Gilpin's description, "always great in design, but unequal in composition"[11].

The picturesque becomes, on this account, what we might think of as a "grace beyond the reach of nature". Art may need nature in order to discern the elements of design, but nature needs art to compose it, to make its elements come together. Like perception that is half-creation, composition makes natural design look humanly comprehensible. Moreover, when Gilpin explains that nature "works on a *vast scale;* and, no doubt, harmoniously, if her schemes could be comprehended", his project sounds like one of mere translation, the adequation of natural forms to human scale, "to adapt such diminutive parts of nature's surface to his own eye, as come within its scope"[12].

Picturesque travel recasts art with nature just as Gulliver recasts England with Lilliput and Brobdingnag, so that a formally composed foreground comes to seem as crucial to Gilpin as the idea of a telescope or microscope to Gulliver. Yet there is a difficulty with the adequation model. For Gilpin proposes that nature's deficiencies at composition come from skill at particularity – the design that renders individual shape from hopeless inadequacy at rendering particularity – the "diminutive parts of nature's surface". Nature, working on a vast scale, is adept at the striking particulars that design singles out, but no good at all on composition if we understand that process as one of organizing particulars within harmonious relationships.

Composition, then, involves supplying a middle distance. And if the sublime aesthetic continually produces scenes in which the limitations of individual perception become tributes to the ability of human reason to think past those very perceptions, Gilpin's picturesque uses composition as a more routine way of insisting upon the centrality of the individual viewer. Mediating between nature's vastness and the particulars of

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10 Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in Order and Energy from Dryden to Blake*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1965, p. 379.
11 Gilpin, *Three Essays*, 1792, p. 70. Cited in Price, p. 379.
12 Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 70.

nature's design, the picturesque traveler searches for composable scenes. Gilpin's recurrent complaint about numerous natural sites is that "there is no foreground" – an objection that can only be meaningful if one imagines that the process of composition is one of discovering, from the landscape's offering itself to painterly versions of perspective, the place in which the viewer stands.

The importance of the notion of composition lies, then, not so much in the idea of proportion or harmony. For what Gilpin discovers in his picturesque handling of landscape is not so much that landscapes can be pictured or that pictures can affect our viewing of natural landscapes but, more importantly, that painterly perspective on natural landscapes implies the necessity of the human gaze.

The process of composing, moreover, involves not just a process of giving the viewer a place to stand. It also particularizes the natural site by its very insistence upon approaches and foregrounds. The viewer is personified by this process, as someone to see in the human terms of artistic perspective becomes a demand of the landscape; and the natural scene is personified as the notion of foreground makes it appear that one needs to see a landscape from a particular angle – *as if it had a face,* a front and a back as human bodies do. When Gilpin judges of one "great scene" in the English Lake district that "It was too extensive for the painter's use", he glosses that view by saying " It is certainly an error in landscape-painting, to comprehend too much. It turns a picture into a map"[13]. The map provides a perspective that no one ever has – or could have, so that it disappoints Gilpin's insistence upon the inclusion of the observer. Moreover, the map leaves a site looking schematic, like a mere element in a series; it is not, in short, a portrait.

Gilpin, converting the likeness of the landscape from maps to portraiture, makes both landscape and observer singular – reciprocally singular. The viewer creates a singular nature by seeing a face in the landscape; the landscape creates the singular viewer as the projection of its perspectival movement. Yet this very insistence on the production of singularity obviously contradicts the guide's usefulness as a vehicle for introducing the traveler to specific places. For the kind of obsolescence that Defoe sees in his *Guide* is the kind of obsolescence inherent in any

13 Gilpin, *Observations, ... Made in the Year 1772, On Several parts of England; Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland,* third edition, 1792, pp. 153-54.

account that describes things at a particular moment in time (it cannot anticipate the future of things that are continually changing and being changed). The obsolescence of Gilpin's views cuts deeper, to suggest why guides kept being written and kept being denounced. Once the description came to involve both the mutability of grounds and the mutability of foregrounds, it became virtually irreplicable. The guide could only concern methods of seeing rather than objects of sight, because objects were picturesque – picturable and visible – only through an aestheticization that did not so much point out the similarities between nature and art as the singularities of the relationship between the object and the viewer.

For William Hutchinson, whose *Excursion to the Lakes in Westmoreland and Cumberland* was published in 1773 (as well as in 1774 and 1776 editions), and for Thomas West, whose *A Guide to the Lakes* was published in 1778 (going through 10 editions by 1812) the question of replicability revolves around the person of the guide[14]. Hutchinson chants a litany of abuse about the native informant, the person who would share his experience of a region with the uninitiated traveler: "... so liable are strangers to be deceived and imposed on by their guides, on whose veracity they are sometimes obliged to rely for the information they obtain"[15]; "This is a second instance, in this little tour, how little the relations of guides are to be depended on" (151); and the corruptions of contested elections "exposes travellers to this reverse: a nasty, leaky fishing-boat, with an impertinent, talkative, lying pilot" (176). West, in fact, offers his guide book as a substitute for the native informant; the book will "relieve the traveller from the burthen of those tedious enquiries on the road, or at the inns, which generally embarrass, and often mislead"[16].

It is, moreover, unclear whether the lying guide is worse than the truthful one, the one who continually prepares for one's confirming perceptions. The very justification for picturesque travel, for Gilpin and others, lay in the particularity of *what* one saw and in that particularity's

14   See William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, note xi-xii.

15   William Hutchinson, *Excursion to the Lakes in Westmoreland and Cumberland*, third edition, London, T. Wilkie and W. Charnley, 1776, p. 69.

16   Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire*, fourth edition, London, W. Richardson and W. Pennington, 1789, p. 3.

enabling a reflexive sense of individuality in the traveller. The application of art to nature was, that is, a flight from the ways in which even art might issue not in particularity but in a kind of typical particularity – the mannerism of individuality, or signature. From Gilpin's standpoint, the advantage of nature over art was that it remained various. The "one great distinction between [nature's] painting and that of her *copyists*" is that

> Artists universally are mannerists in a certain degree. Each has his particular mode of forming particular objects. His rocks, his trees, his figures are cast in one mould; at least they possess only a *varied sameness*. The figures of Rubens are all full-fed; those of Salvator spare and long-legged: but nature has a different mould for every object she presents[17].

The English Lake District, like any other watery region, creates problems for its guides, whether they be persons or books, because of its constant mutations. These problems become, moreover, the lakes' opportunities, their defeat of the mannerism of individual aesthetic perception. Lake-scenery is, from one standpoint, "less subject to change" than forest scenery, because the water, like the forest land that could always become farm land, "remains unaltered by time"[18]. The water, however, continually casts up different pictures of objects – pictures that are strangely causeless and disconnected from any original. "There is," Gilpin says

> another appearance on the surfaces of lakes, which we cannot account for on any principle either of optics, or of perspective. When there is no apparent cause in the sky, the water will sometimes appear dappled with large spots of shade. [...]. (106-107)

If it is hard for any guide to represent himself/herself as typical, as seeing what others will see, the objects of sight in the Lake District have, without human agency, become even more singular than Gilpin's emphasis on perspectives and foregrounds could have predicted.

For if Gilpin's techniques of observation implicitly focus on the production of a face for nature and a reciprocal consciousness of the face of the observer whose perspective is itself foregrounded, Wordsworth makes it difficult to locate the "speaking face of earth" that travel writing had seemed designed to produce. Publishing in 1810 his own *Guide to*

17 Gilpin, *Forest Scenery*, I:9.
18 Gilpin, *Observations* ..., cit., p. xiii.

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the Lakes, Wordsworth writes to "reconcile a Briton to the scenery of his own country" (106). He writes, that is, to demonstrate the scenery as familiar, as personal. Moreover, with Gilpin and others, he describes itineraries not merely in terms of objects but in terms of the approaches one should ideally make towards those objects. A "walk in the early morning ought to be taken on the eastern side of the vale" for the light, but on the western side "for the sake of the reflections, upon the water, of light from the rising sun" (98).

Directions for the tourist like these, however, give way to histories of unrecoverable sights – particular optical illusions he has experienced – in the "Miscellaneous Observations".

> Walking by the side of Ullswater upon a calm September morning, I saw, deep within the bosom of the lake, a magnificent Castle, with towers and battlements, nothing could be more distinct than the whole edifice; – after gazing with delight upon it for some time, as upon a work of enchantment, I could not but regret that my previous knowledge of the place enabled me to account for the appearance. It was in fact the reflection of a pleasure-house called Lyulph's Tower – the towers and battlements magnified and so much changed in shape as not to be immediately recognized. In the meanwhile, the pleasure-house itself was altogether hidden from my view by a body of vapour stretching over it and along the hill-side on which it stands, but not so as have intercepted its communication with the lake; and hence this novel and most impressive object, which, if I had been a stranger to the spot, would from its being inexplicable have long detained the mind in a state of pleasing astonishment. (108)

For Wordsworth, as for Gilpin, optical illusions epitomize the particularity of a particular sight. Their nonreplicability – or rather, the virtual impossibility of replicating them by manipulating the laws of optics or perspective – makes them even more distinctive than Gilpin's compositions that give natural objects faces that return, through perspective, the gaze of their viewers. One must approach from this angle, see in that light, at just that moment, for the illusory image to appear. The optical illusion, unlike the landscape above Tintern Abbey, does not remain, though changed, to be seen.

Wordsworth, meanwhile, has described a strange case of visual parasitism in this optical illusion. The tower, whose physical form occasions to reflection, is obscured from view even as the unreal castle is distinctly visible, so that the illusion arises as a curious competition between images. As with Gilpin's trees, the aesthetic perception revolves around the perception of one object's interfering with or suppressing another.

While Wordsworth claims that the lakes provide "beautiful repetitions of surrounding objects on the bosom of the water" (107), that is, the repetitions do not merely point to the ways in which a thing and its reflection can look alike but also, sometimes, insist upon the reflection taking precedence over an occluded original.

The hiding of the occasioning object is crucial, because it registers the optical illusion as a fundamental challenge to the project of achieving human translation of natural design. While Gilpin moves towards a version of landscape drawing as portraiture, that captures the distinctive face of a naturally designed object, Wordsworth depicts natural reflection as a likeness-taking that seems, quite literally, to take away the thing whose likeness it assumes. Natural portraiture, or, rather, the self-portrait by nature, thus achieves the kind of reconciliation between nature and art that Gilpin would have wished. It does so, however, by establishing natural art as a process of hiding causal connection (such as that between Lyulph's Tower and the castle in the lake) that no amount of supplementary perspectival framing can replace. The empirical connections between images and the objects that cause them (all that would be explained by the laws of optics) fail here, and the perspective that is Gilpin's instrument of practical idealism similarly fails to make it possible for a viewer to connect designed objects with their compositions.

Nature, by reflecting its own objects, creates its own art, one that is as varied and unmannered as Gilpin would have wanted. It takes the same thing (Lyulph's Tower) and makes it look different (like a castle in the lake). Nature, doubling images of objects, produces typicality as more of the same and particularity as the way that the sameness always looks like a variation. And while Gilpin would make nature complete by seeing its artistry, Wordsworth would see as nature sees – would see nature's self-doubling as marking out the only point at which nature identifies its perspective rather than relying on human composition. This project of natural seeing involves extrapolating the perspective that nature must have on its own images so far as to identify the place where the human viewer must stand. Instead, that is, of having the human perspective compose a scene that nature has designed but not put together, Wordsworth imagines the reflections as identifying an already composed perspective with which the viewer must align herself or himself.

Occupying nature's perspective is, in Wordsworth's *Guide*, substituting the mannerism of human guides with the leadings of nature itself. The human viewer, thus, does not merely approach from the west or the

east, by way of this shadow-producing image or that impressive promontory. He/she moves from what looks like a human translation of natural production (Gilpin's perspective) to a site where no translation is necessary, where nature's artistry produces a standpoint. The only problem is that this location repeatedly turns out to be "the bosom of the lake". And Wordsworth, supplying only once a boat with which one might occupy the bosom of the lake, employs the phrase and the perspectival location persistently enough to suggest that it should guide one towards what he also persistently refers to as "tranquil sublimity".

This "tranquil sublimity" is sublime because it raises questions of individual identity, about one's ability to be particular and continue to exist as more than an optical illusion, a peculiar epiphenomenon of the ways that light falls on objects. And the strangeness of the anxiety about existence that is provoked here is that it occurs in what feels like a mere following out of the laws of experience. Kant's dynamical sublime plays empiricism off against transcendentalism as the terror that one feels at the implicit power of an imposing natural object yields to a consciousness of the power of the human reason that can supply that idea of might to nature. Wordsworth's tranquil sublime plays empiricism off against empiricism, as if the process of reconciling the split between your memory of what you have seen before (as someone who is not "a stranger to the spot") and the illusory image you now see were a process merely of seeing from the proper, the natural, standpoint. This is the place at which one cannot stand without, oneself, being absorbed into the steady bosom of the lake in a natural act of translation that discovers human identity and uniqueness as merely the variety that nature always lends to her types.

The drive towards particularity – the precipitation of individuality for observers and objects of sight – has moved from a substitution of the guidebook for the guide to the elimination of guidebook descriptions in favor of processes of composition, to the eradication of the viewer altogether. Nature, creating its own reflections, its own imaginary images, becomes its own best portraitist, as it produces objectless images that obscure real objects (such as Lyulph's Tower) for distinct unreality (the castle in the water). In this version of natural narcissism, the theatricality of representations is no longer an issue. Humanity is. For the process of occupying the best vantage point, not so that one can see nature in terms of art but so that one can see natural art, is the process of being received into the steady bosom of the lake. It is the process of becoming a part of

nature's production of variety (which can vary even the same thing to image both substance and shadow). It is the process of becoming so particular and particularized that one becomes as typical as it is possible for a human to be – by dying into nature. Nature's variety, it turns out, depends on its not being composed, subject to the mannerism, the varied sameness, implicit in an actual human gaze and in its according humans the same variation they have been seeking[19].

19 A substantially similar version of the foregoing essay appears as a chapter in my book *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation*, New York, Routledge, 1992. Readers interested in the issue of depicting landscape may wish to consult John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973 and *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980; Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideoloqy: The English Rustic Tradition. 1740-1860*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986; Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989; Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982; and David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*, New York, Methuen, 1987. For a discussion of the problems raised by the consideration of nature in nineteenth-century American writing, see Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, especially Chapter Three, "Natural Relations".