

# The Concept of Landscape

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## I

At first sight the concept of landscape seems to be used in three main ways: (1) to designate certain areas, not always precisely bounded, of the earth's surface; (2) to designate a certain kind of painting; (3) in combination with other concepts, as when we speak of landscape gardens or landscape gardening. Two points about the idea of landscape immediately strike me: first, the concept applies to art and to real things, that is, it covers the first two uses just identified; and secondly, certain of the cognate terms which we use for landscape seem archaic, obsolete or literary, that is, conspicuously vulnerable to historical change of one sort or another.

"Landscape" (1), as designating an area, is a geographical concept. Under this we think of such things as the making of the landscape, that is, of how to explain changes over time in the appearance of a certain tract of land or terrain. Such matters as the geological causes or morphology of landscape forms are relevant here—for example, what precisely characterizes a desert landscape or how the geological properties of limestone determine karst-type scenery, &C.

On reflection: (1) seems capable of further refinement. We might value the appearance or look of a certain area without thinking about it much geographical detail. Here we are appreciating the land in question aesthetically. Landscape may be a work of art or it may be a real thing: the distinction caught by the difference between (1) and (2). But a landscape painting is only available to be appreciated aesthetically, whereas in the case of a real landscape we do not have to think of it aesthetically. We may, for example, know a lot about the geography of a particular landscape without being very much interested in how it looks. Young geographers, we are told, want satisfactory scientific results from the study of landscape—the remedy, they discovered, lay in mathematics and statistics;<sup>1</sup> though, as I shall suggest, if something is recognized by the public as a landscape (as opposed to its merely figuring in geography textbooks for the purpose of analysis as landscape) that does imply that the territory in question is of aesthetic interest.

The concept of landscape is by no means a simple one but has some complicated ramifications. For example, I can employ landscape gardeners to do something about the untidy and littered land surrounding my new suburban semi, but when they have turned the mess into lawns, rockeries, flower beds and may be have even added a fountain or a little pond, it would be pretentious of me to describe the results as a landscape gardeners whilst

I was indoors reading or writing on the aesthetics of landscape. The term "landscape garden" seems to be reserved for the large-scale achievements of say Stowe or Stourhead, whereas "landscape gardener" is a term in use for work done in every town and suburb and not only reserved for those who design or work on grand gardens.<sup>2</sup>

"Landscape" is a concept, then, that seems to weave in and out of the arts at one extreme designating painting, at the other natural scenery. Other concepts in this region have this same double feature—for example "scenery" itself, where we may be speaking of the look of some terrain outdoors or, on the contrary, of what is firmly indoors, such as the scenery on the wings of a theatre stage. But then again theatres themselves may be outdoors, particularly in hot dry countries such as Greece—and an outdoor theatre may or may not dispense with "scenery" on its stage. Moreover, outdoor theatres themselves may range from being striking artificial creations, that is, grand works of architecture, to natural features where a hollow place or some similar feature need scarcely be adapted from what nature has provided ready made. Thus a pageant in a local village near my home makes use of a natural formation, a fern-clad hill, from which St Margaret descends to open the proceedings by addressing the audience seated at its base.

I've mentioned "scenery" which of course we need to distinguish from "scene" and "scenic", though they are obviously interconnected in meaning and all often used in defining "landscape". For "scenery" the Oxford English Dictionary gives, among other definitions:

(3) The general appearance of a place and its natural features, regarded from the picturesque point of view; the aggregate of picturesque features in a landscape.

(4) A landscape or view; a picturesque scene; also, the pictorial representation of a landscape. Now rare.

For "scene" the OED gives, among other definitions:  
[with reference to the theatre]

(6) The material apparatus, consisting chiefly of painted hangings, slides, etc. set at the back and sides of the stage, and intended to give the illusion of a real view of the *local* in which the action of the play takes place. . .

(9) A view or picture presented to the eye (or to the mind) of a place, concourse, incident, series of actions or events. . . .

And for "scenic" the OED gives, among other definitions:

(3) Of or belonging to natural scenery. In recent use: Abounding in fine scenery, affording landscape views.

(4) With reference to painting or sculpture: Representing a "scene" or incident in which several persons are concerned.

## II

I am inclined to stress the distinction between a real landscape and a landscape painting, but it has to be confessed that most people, at any rate many writers on landscape, don't seem overly concerned about the difference. On the contrary, much writing on land-

scape is indifferent to whether it is painting or the real thing that is under consideration. Whereas I am inclined to dramatize the distinction between real landscapes and landscape pictures, probably under the influence of all those accounts in recent aesthetics which emphasize the gulf between a work of art and "the real world", Appleton, for example, judging by his practice in his book *The Experience of Landscape*, sees nothing of any significance to give us pause in the difference between a work of art and real things. Rather, using the same analytical framework throughout, he passes seamlessly from chapters discussing landscapes in the several arts to discussions on the aesthetic potential of real places.

The modernist doctrine, however, is that the work of art calls attention to itself as art, artefact, fiction, so that knowing we are dealing with a work of art, and not with something which we have been deceived or even made to believe into thinking confronts us directly, such as a piece of nature or a drama in human lives, enters centrally into what it is to experience the work of art. This idea seems to have left landscape studies untouched, where the opposite idea seems to prevail. Thus even when a landscape *painting* is ostensibly the subject of interest, the fact that it is a painting is easily discounted in favour of attention to the subject depicted in it by the painter—so interest is as readily, if not more, engaged by, say, Dedham Vale, the Stour valley on the Suffolk/Essex border, as it is by Constable's rendering of it. And tours of Hardy's Wessex are booming business these days, where this means not reading the books but joining a coach or walking tour, or at any rate joining the tour after reading the works, as if, contrary to modernist doctrine, the work of art were not enough, sufficient or autonomous unto itself. I mean by these remarks to suggest that Appleton, and I take him only as and for an example, subjects real and painted landscapes indifferently to his prospect/refuge analysis of landscape and for these purposes doesn't seem to think a painted landscape introduces relevant considerations not present in the real thing. Likewise we zoom in and out of regarding Hardy's Wessex now as a real place, now as an imaginary place. In his January 1895 preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Thomas Hardy says: "In the present edition it may be well to state, in response to inquiries from readers interested in landscape, prehistoric antiquities, and especially old English architecture, that the description of these backgrounds in this and its companion novels has been done from the real". Thus we easily lapse into talking of how Marlott has changed since Tess's day. On the other hand, Hardy, somewhere I seem to recall (though I have been unable to locate the reference), speaks of Wessex as partly a dream and imagined landscape. If so, I would suspect this as the ruse of a crafty old fox to prevent us from unearthing the real places buried under the imaginative prose.

I remember myself when looking at photographs of landscapes in topographical books enjoying them as a substitute window on landscapes that alas I was not then seeing, but thanks to the arousal of my curiosity by the photographs, intended to visit at the first opportunity. But these books sometimes also included reproductions of landscape paintings, e.g., by Paul Nash, as well as landscape photographs, and I recall, before my consciousness of the art nature of art had been developed by too much aesthetics, criticism and art history, trying to discount what, thanks to Gombrich, Wollheim & Co, I would now conceptualize as the particular painter's stylistic treatment of the scene in question, in order

to get at the landscape as it would be in itself without the irrelevant distractions of art, when finally I got round to seeing it for myself. According to this philistine approach of my youth, artifying a scene by painting it ( why wouldn't a photograph be sufficient? ) would be comparable to the Chelsea and Kensington bridge gentrifying an artisan dwelling or peasant cottage. One seeks to discount their efforts in order to imagine what the original had looked like.

The standard line is of course to compliment the artists for allowing us to see with their eyes what we would not otherwise see; without them, it is sometimes said, we would not have landscapes. Landscapes are the inventions of artists. But the extent to which we can now forget the difference between landscape as painting and landscape as the real thing is the extent to which we regard landscape as perfectly within our own competence to see, unaided by any art. I may need a Rembrandt to bring out the significance of human faces for me and teach me to read a human character ( though I've got some doubts about what the casual order is here ) but the view from the hill I can manage for myself. Against this, the standard line, of course is that I would not even know that the hill afforded a view, had not the artists discovered what views were and taught me to see them. But even if it were true that without the artists humankind would know nothing of landscape, given that landscape has been discovered, how dependent am I now on the artists for what I see when I take some panoramic tour ? Incidentally the OED entry for "panorama" tells us the name was invented by R. Barker, c 1789 and means :

(1) A picture of a landscape or other scene, either arranged on the inside of a cylindrical surface round the spectator as a centre ( a *cyclorama* ) or unrolled or unfolded and made to pass before him, so as to show the various parts in succession.

(2) An unbroken view of the whole surrounding region.

Again notice the double duty the word "panorama" does : it may mean an artefact or a real scene. "Panorama", however, is not cross-referred to under the entry for "landscape" in the OED.

### III

What does seem beyond dispute is that the painterly sense of "landscape" came first, came, that is, before the sense of "landscape" as applied to a "real place". The Oxford English Dictionary entry for "*Landscape*" notes various forms, including "landskip":

"The word was introduced", it says, "as a technical term of painters; the corrupt form in — [ "landskip" ] was according to our quote a few years earlier than the more correct form".

Meaning for "landscape" offered by the Dictionary are :

- ( 1 ) A picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, portrait, etc. [ Earliest use listed, 1603 ]
- ( 2 ) A view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view, a piece of country scenery.
- ( 3 ) In generalized sense ( from 1 and 2 ) : Inland natural scenery or its representation in painting.

- (4) In various obsolete transf. and fig. uses.
- (a) A view, prospect of something.
  - (b) A distant prospect; a vista.
  - (c) The object of one's gaze. [ This is an interesting one in view of the interest recently shown in notation of the gaze in feminism and film theory. ]
  - (d) A sketch, adumbration, outline; *occas.* a faint or shadowy representation.
  - (e) A compendium, epitome.
  - (f) A bird's-eye view: a plan, sketch, map.
  - (g) The depiction or description of something in words.

Then the Dictionary entry, that "landscape" developed as a term within art discourse, therefore any tendency to apply the term to a tract of nature in apparent innocence or independence of arts is a subsequent development though an explicable one. If the term began life designating that which represents nature, it is not difficult to see how the term also came to denote what was represented by the representation, namely nature, and to ignore as it were the fact of the representational medium itself.

Why are so many terms to do with landscape obsolete, archaic or literary? This is not obvious in the case of "landscape" itself, so long as we avoid the more poetic (I was tempted to say Miltonic) "landskip", but does become apparent when we look at some of the cognate terms: for example, "prospect" or "vista".

For "prospect" the OED gives, among other definitions: a look out, view, .....

- (b) A place which affords an open and extensive view, a look-out.
- (2) An extensive or commanding sight or view; the view of the landscape afforded by any position.
- (3) That which is looked at or seen any place or point of view; a spectacle, a scene; the visible scene or landscape.
- (b) A vista; a long, wide, straight street; an avenue of houses ..... [ St Petersburg ]
- (5) A pictorial representation of a scene or the like; a view, a picture, a sketch.

The explanation one may hazard why the language of "landscape" is so visible to the ravages of history is that landscape was importantly bound up with the way of life of one particular social class at a particular time and place, namely the English (*sic*) upper classes of the eighteenth century. We are no longer (if many of us ever were in the class of) gentlemen in possession of our own vistas and prospects. Social and historical change has taken its toll. Landscape then was associated with wealth, leisure and aristocracy particularly in the eighteenth century.

But my hypothesis is a fragile one and my hazard risky. Landscape may have reached its apotheosis in the eighteenth century. But Kenneth Clark in his book, *Landscape into Art*, takes a wider view: "The landscape of fact", he says, "is a bourgeois form of art"

<sup>3</sup> in which seventeenth-century Holland was the great epoch. And coming forward in time, while in the literal sense eighteenth century aristocrats landscaped their parks, such landscaping lived on in vestigial form in the people's municipal parks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I would insist too that the leisure now associated with landscape is not aristocratic but is that of mass tourism, in which indeed landscape plays an important part. Byron is followed to Sounion by we tourists in our coaches doing the highlights of Greece in a few days. More generally, a taste for landscape rests on a certain freedom from material want. Nan Fairbrother says in her *New Lives, New Landscapes* that liking for mountains is in direct proportion to the comfort of urban living. "The seventeenth century was not yet comfortable enough for mountains to come into their own. Horace Walpole is the typical early admirer of rugged prospects, for the eighteenth century was beginning to provide both the easy life essential for contrast and necessary roads for coach journeys to remote areas"<sup>4</sup> And Kenneth Clark observes that to the mediaevals, the fields, that is, nature, "meant nothing but hard work (today's agricultural labourers", he adds, "are almost the only class of the community who are not enthusiastic about natural beauty)". [ I don't know how he knows this. ]

#### IV

It is an unfortunate fact that between the writing of *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* and *The Principles of Art* R. G. Collingwood changed his mind in one respect for the worse. In the earlier book he offered an account of natural beauty.<sup>6</sup> Not only has this disappeared from the later book, but *The Principles of Art* leaves no logical space for any account of natural beauty. But now Collingwood, like the heartiest of Hegelians, is identifying aesthetics with the philosophy of art, which unsurprisingly but not trivially takes no interest in natural beauty.

In this paper, however, I want to consider not his account of natural beauty but another point which Collingwood makes in *Outlines*. Sibley is famous for his account of aesthetic concepts<sup>7</sup> in which he distinguished two broad groups of remarks that may be made about works of art— first, remarks that may be made by anyone with normal eyes, ears and intelligence, for example, a poem is "tightly - knit", "this picture lacks balance", certain characters "never really come to life" or an episode "strikes a false note". "Unified", "balanced", "integrated", "serene", "sombre", "dynamic", "powerful", "vivid", "delicate", "moving", "trite", "sentimental", "tragic", and such terms feature in the remarks which spring to mind under this division. Sibley calls such terms aesthetic terms or aesthetic concepts. There is an earlier and lesser known attempt than Sibley's in aesthetics to draw a related distinction. In *Outlines* Collingwood says :

Certain predicates attached to works of art are intended and taken as implying a judgement on their aesthetic quality; others are not. If we call a work of art sublime or idyllic, or lyrical, or romantic, or graceful, we mean to call attention to something in the character of the work itself, and what we say about it amounts to praise or blame of the artist as such. On the other hand, if we call it a seascape or a villanelle or a fugue we are attaching to it a

predicate with no aesthetic significance whatever, and we are therefore neither praising nor blaming it ( *Outlines* 31 )

Whereas Sibley's examples of non-aesthetic remarks are of description of the representational content of a work of art, Collingwood's are of genre concepts. Presumably Collingwood is continuing here the Crocean tradition of rejecting genre concepts as lacking aesthetic significance. This is a mistake, since while "this is a novel", "this is a romance, are certainly not *ascriptions* of aesthetic qualities or properties, nevertheless the correct application of these concepts supports or determines appropriate aesthetic ascriptions, that is, assists in directing our attention to the perception of aesthetic qualities appropriate to the work thus approached. Thus it is important in approaching the so-called novels of John Cowper Powys to remember that they are romances which, if approached in the frame of expectations formed by the reading of realist or naturalistic, will inevitably lead to misunderstandings and disappointments.<sup>8</sup>

Collingwood's Crocean assumption, then, that e. g. "fugue" is merely a classificatory concept of no aesthetic interest overlooks the fact that such classifications affect the manner in which we approach something aesthetically, so the difference between one genre concept and another is not one only of convenience or of interest to say, librarians alone.

One of Collingwood's examples of a term of no aesthetic interest is "seascape". He would, I assume, argue the same for "landscape", so that to describe a work of art as landscape painting is not to make an aesthetic remark about it. According to this line of argument, "landscape" is a predicate of no aesthetic significance. I do not deny the strict truth of this, but again, as in the case of the [ other ] genre concepts already mentioned, it is relevant to the aesthetic we take in a landscape painting that we should know that it is a landscape painting we are looking at. Of course it might be asked how, standing before a Gainsborough or a Claude, could we fail to know this. How could we miss so obvious a fact that it is a landscape painting here that is engaging our interest? Now that landscape is a fully accepted and indeed beloved art form it may be obvious that when we are looking at a landscape painting we must know that this is what we are doing, but this was not always so. While the genre was developing and making its way against opposition, all sorts of inappropriate demands stood in the way of appreciating landscape paintings; when it was expected for example, that paintings should be of heroic or historical subjects, such demands had to be contested and pushed aside. Kenneth Clark observes that in spite of classical traditions and the unanimous opposition of theorists, landscape painting became an independent art.<sup>9</sup> Michelangelo, for example, "saw quite clearly that landscape was inimical to this ideal art; and he also saw that it was a Flemish invention".<sup>10</sup> So what to us is the obvious common-sense fact that such a painting is a landscape painting is an inherited convention. It does not follow, moreover, that because something is an obvious fact it has no bearing on our aesthetic discrimination.

More importantly, there is, I believe, an interesting difference between calling a *painting* a landscape, which as Collingwood says is not an aesthetic ascription, though recognition of it, I suggest, is important for appropriate aesthetic ascriptions, and calling a

piece of *territory* or *terrain* a landscape. I wish, then, to acknowledge that it has particular aesthetic significance. "Landscape" and cognate terms such as "view", "prospect", "scenery" are already aesthetic in meaning, whereas the nondescript territory I may drive through on my way to the beach is neither prospect nor view nor landscape.

In other words, so far as natural beauty, though not art, is concerned, we are already responding aesthetically when we identify some segment of nature as a *landscape*. More accurately, in that something, e.g. the Wye Valley, has been recognized as landscape, it has been identified as of particular aesthetic interest. "Landscape", I am suggesting, functions intransitively as an aesthetic identifier term. Admittedly, as in the case of genres according to the Crocean account, the fact that something is a well-known landscape does not of itself *entail though* it does *promise* (in the manner of a Gricean implication) that the visitor to it will *get* an aesthetically rewarding experience. "Landscape" applied to real terrain, I am suggesting then, is an aesthetic concept not in Sibley's sense but in the sense that in regarding a piece of terrain as a landscape one has thereby singled out that territory as suitable for aesthetic attention. On the other hand, to say that "landscape" is an aesthetic concept in Sibley's sense, which I am *not* claiming, would be to say that, in calling something a landscape, I am drawing attention to a particular aesthetic quality— but no one wishes to say that. For to adapt one of Sibley's arguments, if I tell you that something is a landscape, you will not be able to infer from that what its aesthetic character is, whether dramatic, restrained, menacing, charming, &C. On the other hand, it *is* a consequence of my view that propositions such as "this landscape is of no aesthetic interest", "nobody finds this landscape aesthetically interesting", are, or amount to, self-contradictions.

My suggestion that the identification of an area as a landscape means the aesthetic qualities of certain tracts of countryside have been recognized, are familiar and well known, is intended to draw a distinction between tracts of territory where this is the case and tracts where it is not. Thus the Wye Valley is a landscape but the Lea Valley is not (or was not when I was last in that part of outer London — but it could easily have been developed as a landscape, that is, in this case physically landscape, since then). The South Downs is a well-known landscape but the countryside fringes of some of the neighbouring towns enjoy no such reputation; no one visits them for their aesthetic interest since they do not enjoy or command designation as landscape. In other words, some bits of physical terrain, e.g. in England, have been singled out or privileged as landscapes, while much of its terrain has not.

## V

There is an interesting difference between "landscape" and "seascape". "Landscape" is equivocal as between a geographical location and a picture whereas a seascape can only be a picture, a sea picture. "Seascape", that is, seems by analogy only to be instantiated in (2) (the second main use of the concept of landscape which we identified at the beginning), namely a certain kind or form of painting, and is not used for the real thing, a portion of the sea. I am not aware, that is, that visitors seek out to admire particular portions of the surface of the ocean that have received the prior accolade of "seascape", in

the expectation of enjoying certain aesthetic experiences, as they seek out particular portions of the earth's land surface, designated landscapes. But this is a mere contingency. There seems to be no philosophical or conceptual reason why there should not be physical seascapes as there are physical landscapes. For all I know, there may already be boating trips on certain seas to enjoy their aesthetic qualities, say the colour of the water, a kind of extension to coastal boating trips, say to the Blue Grotto in Capri. I'm not sufficiently experienced in seafaring to be sure but there seems to be no difficulty in principle why tracts of the sea could not be appreciated aesthetically. One ocean or portion of it can have a different aesthetic look from another. This is obvious in extreme cases such as the arctic Ocean. Indeed the whole point about seascapes (in the painting sense of course) is that painters can capture aesthetic differences which we assume are there to be seen or which can be seen if we take to voyaging across the seas rather than through art galleries. One of the main differences, however, between landscapes and seascapes, when we are speaking "for real" as opposed to speaking of paintings, is that landscapes will display many more morphological features and structures than the sea and so will offer a wider range of aesthetic rewards.

But as things are, no portions of the sea have been privileged, then, as seascapes, so "seascape" unlike "landscape" is not what I have called an aesthetic indicator term. Collingwood is right, moreover, that seascape, meaning a kind of painting, is not a concept of aesthetic significance, though again a kind for other genre concepts, provide appropriate aesthetic or orientation on how to look at certain pictures, namely pictures of the sea.

There are many variants of "landscape" besides "seascape": the term "townscape" for example. This seems to be more often in use for the real thing than for paintings of views of towns, though again there is no reason why we should not speak of certain drawings and paintings as "townscapes". And a poem such as Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" is a townscape (or cityscape) not in a painting but in a poem. As Passmore takes pleasure in pointing out, this poem about a view of city from the pen of our leading nature poet is not itself a nature poem.<sup>11</sup>

We can think too of other "scape phenomena" of aesthetic interest in a double sense, that as captured in paintings and as seen "in the real". Take for example cloudscapes, whether as seen *in* paintings by Constable or seen *as* Constable and other painters have taught us to see them, particularly those dramatically dominating the visual field above the horizon, for example the clouds seen above the flat countryside of East Anglia or the Netherlands, or in this age of air travel, clouds which are seen from a position above them, that is, when we look down from an aircraft to the clouds below spread out like vast snow-fields, where no human foot can tread.

The aesthetics of landscape is complicated then by the double sense I have identified. Whatever the historical origins of the case, it is now possible to love what I have called real landscapes without being interested in art, and possible to love landscape paintings without venturing out of doors very often to take a look for oneself at the real thing. Of course, it is possible to love both and I suppose, though I find it difficult to imagine, to care for neither. The question this duality for me is whether a unified aesthetics can or should

deal with both categories of landscape or whether there are, as I have hinted but not developed here, significant aesthetic differences to be acknowledged and understood in our approaches to art and to, what by way of finishing, I shall provocatively call, nature.

### Notes and References

1. Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1975), P.9.
2. William Morris has a nice example in Chapter 3 of *News from Nowhere* (various editions available). William Guest deplors as philistine the work of landscape gardeners in the nineteenth century in (or is it on?) Epping Forest. "I was very much shocked then to see how it was built-over and altered; and the other day we heard that the philistines were going to landscape-garden it". In the same chapter, incidentally, Dick tells Bob the Weaver that he does not want to "go into your the new science of aesthetics".
3. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (1949; Penguin Books, 1956), p.43.
4. Nan Fairbrother, *New Lives, New Landscapes* (Architectural Press, 1970; edition used: Penguin Books, 1972), p.142.
5. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (1949; Penguin Books, 1956), p.18.
6. "The Beauty of Nature" appears as Chapter 3 of Collingwood's *Outlines....*(London: Oxford University Press, 1925).
7. F.N. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts", *Philosophical Review* lxxviii (1959), pp. 421-50.
8. This is only an example and like most things in aesthetics is controversial. A book has just been advertised in the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) (No 4866; 5 July 1996, p. 31) which aims to deny the distinction between novels and romances. The advertisement, for Margaret Anne Doody's *True Story of the Novel*, published by Rutgers University Press, runs: "Wonderful and truly revolutionary. With fascinating detail Doody obliterates the arbitrary distinction between the Novel and Romances."
9. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (1949; Penguin Books, 1956), p.16.
10. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (1949; Penguin Books, 1956), p.40.
11. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p.109.

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