



25 OCTOBER 2017

ENGLISH LANDSCAPE: THE PICTURESQUE

PROFESSOR MALCOLM ANDREWS

A century ago this was the popular image of England, perhaps even of Britain. The landscape is stylized and distilled into simple components: rolling hills, worn smooth to make pasture and arable land accommodating for livestock and plough; fields neatly partitioned by hedgerows of uneven growth; cottages nestling in the folds and embowered by larger trees. Formal affinities link the various natural and man-made components. Thus the softly rounded thatch roofs echo the rolling contours of the hills, and the sheltering trees billow gently like the clouds above. All is harmony. There's just one human figure, the woman in the garden. But she is enough to strike the keynote: in effect the whole landscape is feminized, with the cottage homes embosomed in the soft curves of the domesticated landscape.



Where are the menfolk? Here they are:



Theirs is now the responsibility to protect this precious national state, written so eloquently into the landscape imagery. 'Your country's call': does that mean your home countryside, or your country England? The ambiguity is highly charged. 'To me, England is the country, and the country is England', said Stanley Baldwin in 1924. (Speech to The Royal Society of St George, 6 May 1924). By the time of the First World War this image of thatched cottages, hedgerows and patchwork fields could be iconized to denote the national identity. The ensemble is essentially drawn from the countryside imagery of southern England, but it is made to stand for the whole country. By the beginning of the twentieth century the concept of 'South Country' -- mainly Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire -- had become very potent as a representation of the heart of England. *The Heart of England* (1906) and *The South Country* (1909) were the titles of books by the poet and essayist Edward Thomas, and Thomas took his title for the latter from Hilaire Belloc's poem 'South Country' in which he rhapsodises about the Sussex landscape, in particular the Weald and 'the line of the Downs / So noble and so bare':

I will build a house with deep thatch
To shelter me from the cold,
And there shall the Sussex songs be sung
And the story of Sussex told.

Thomas's evocative books were written and published just a few years before War broke out. Thomas responded to the call of the recruitment poster. He signed up in 1915, discovered a very different landscape, and was killed in action in April 1917.

* * *



This lecture series is part of an attempt to trace the evolution of this iconic landscape imagery and its adoption as representative of the distinctive personality of England's country scenery. I shall be tracing it in the work of some late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painters and writers: principally, in these three lectures, the Picturesque tourists and theorists, Jane Austen, John Constable and John Clare, and Samuel Palmer. This is part of a larger study, which takes the story on from Palmer to the cottage scenery paintings of Myles Birket Foster and Helen Allingham, and the writings of Richard Jefferies and associated landscape artists up to the end of the nineteenth century.

Jane Austen and the Picturesque

Here is a quotation that strikes some of the keynotes in this broad theme:

It was a sweet view – sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.

(Jane Austen, *Emma*, Ch. 42)

These are the sentiments of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Emma is viewing Donwell Abbey, the country estate of Mr Knightley, the gentlemanly character she is eventually to marry. The landscape she so approves is an index of the moral qualities of Englishness, as the repetition of 'English' underlines. Comfort, control, moderation. 'English culture' here means the activity of human tending, as in the words 'agriculture', 'horticulture': it does not quite carry that anthropological sense of a group's or a nation's way of life and system of values, though it is to modulate into that meaning later in the century.

The situation of Mr Knightley's house, and the character of the house itself, all contribute to this reassuring sense of Englishness:

[the house's] suitable, becoming, characteristic situation, low and sheltered – its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight – and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up. – The house was ...rambling and irregular, with many comfortable and one or two handsome rooms. – It was just what it ought to be, and it looked what it was.

The house and its land are manifestations of English naturalness and sincerity, and a reflection of their owner. Mr Knightley is a man of transparent integrity and unpretentiousness, and his old-fashioned gentlemanly values are externalized in his estate and home. The house seems to have grown over time in a natural, organic way, to fulfill changing domestic functions; it is not an off-the-peg, designer mansion, e.g. in the fashionable Palladian style. The garden likewise resists fashionable tastes, preferring the 'old neglect of prospect' (i.e. carefully landscaped vistas) and the husbanding of timber. As an example of its antithesis one might use Stowe, the magnificent neoclassical country house and estate of Viscount Cobham. It commands a spectacular prospect, and it boasts a classical symmetry.

'Neither fashion nor extravagance' has influenced the Knightley estate. English landscape gardening tastes had long reacted against French formality, those huge straight avenues of Versailles, geometrical parterres, and trees turned into topiary. The English aim was to free the garden to return closer to nature. Here is Horace Walpole in 1771 describing the changes in modern English gardening (and I have highlighted some of the telling words and phrases as Walpole presses his point):

The gentle stream was taught to serpentine seemingly **at its pleasure**, and where discontinued by different levels, its course appeared to be concealed by thickets properly interspersed, and glittered again at a distance where it might be supposed **naturally** to arrive. Its borders were smoothed, but preserved their **waving irregularity**. A few trees scattered here and there on its edges sprinkled the tame bank that accompanied its meanders.... The living landscape was chastened or polished, not transformed. **Freedom** was given to the forms of trees; they extended their branches **unrestricted**, and where any eminent oak, or master beech had escaped maiming and survived the forest, bush and bramble was removed, and all its honours were restored to distinguish and shade the plain.



Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England...to which is added The History of Modern Taste in Gardening* (London, 1782, 2nd ed), 4, 291-92

Note the strongly libertarian agenda; the garden is organized to flourish in an unrestricted manner. This is managed naturalness; designer irregularity. Walpole is promoting the new style of gardening as an antidote to the high formal geometrical gardening practices in France and Holland – particularly France. As we will see in next week's lecture, the practice of defining a nationalist aesthetic by caricaturing its loathed antithesis (usually France) is a large part of the development of cultural attitudes. The covert anti-French agenda (perhaps implied in that reiterated emphasis on English verdure, English culture...) can be glimpsed in Jane Austen's characterization. Mr Knightley's apparent rival for Emma's affections, Frank Churchill, is a disruptive outsider in the village community, a flighty stylish personality. Emma defends him as being very 'amiable; to which Knightley replies: 'No, Emma; your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very "aimable," have very good manners [etc.]...but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people, -- nothing really amiable about him.' (Ch. 18).

Some of these English values are carried into the Picturesque aesthetic which so dominated tastes in landscape in the period of Jane Austen: the veneration of the natural, the irregular and the indigenously long-established, even the superannuated. It is in Jane Austen's work that we find some of the most trenchant and entertaining critiques of this new fashion for the Picturesque, though she has a liking for some of its ideas. Let us sample some of Austen's attitudes, as expressed by a number of her characters.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Edward Ferrars discusses tastes in landscape appreciation with Marianne Dashwood, the character marked as having an excessive sensibility. Edward is ironically defensive about his antipathy to picturesque tastes.

“...Marianne — remember, I have no knowledge in the **picturesque**, and I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste, if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep, which ought to be **bold!** surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be **irregular and rugged**; and distant objects out of sight, which ought only to be **indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere.**”

Sense and Sensibility was written in the 1790s but not published until 1811. The 1790s was (as we'll see later in this lecture and in next week's), the heyday of Picturesque theorising, and the fashion for displaying the new connoisseur vocabulary in appraising landscape. That is what Edward is archly alluding to – 'bold', 'irregular and rugged', 'indistinct', 'hazy atmosphere'. This is the jargon of the new aesthetic. It finds great attractions in a kind of rough, unkempt beauty.

Edward continues:

“You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can honestly give. **I call it a very fine country — the hills are steep, the woods seem full of fine timber, and the valley looks comfortable and snug — with rich meadows and several neat farm houses scattered here and there. It exactly answers my idea of a fine country, because it unites beauty with utility** — and I dare say it is a picturesque one too, because you admire it; I can easily believe it to be full of rocks and promontories, grey moss and brush wood, but these are all lost on me. I know nothing of the picturesque.”

Edward's aesthetic judgement is married to his moral and economic and social values. A 'fine country' is one that 'unites beauty with utility'. The countryside and its farms and villages are there for human convenience. The woods are full of 'fine **timber**' – i.e. they may look beautiful but they are also going to provide the materials for building the villages and sustaining the British navy. Likewise the meadows are 'rich' – i.e. lush pasture-land or burgeoning with crops for food. The farmhouses are neat – and neatness is a symptom of efficiency and productivity. Note also that the valley commends itself to Edward because it is '**comfortable and snug**'. That notion of comfort is to be very important to the evolving idea of English landscape personality. It was there in Emma's summarising view of Donwell and its setting – 'English comfort'.



So what are Marianne's Picturesque interests in terms of favoured landscape components? They prioritise rocks, promontories, grey moss, and brushwood: in other words, a repertoire of landscape components unproductive in terms of furnishing comfort and sustenance for living. Marianne's inspiration is this kind of pictorial model of landscape: Salvator Rosa.



But this for Edward is anathema:

"I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight, and flourishing. I do not like ruined, tattered cottages. I am not fond of nettles or thistles, or heath blossoms. I have more pleasure in a snug farm-house than a watch-tower,- and a troop of tidy, happy villagers please me better than the finest banditti in the world."

'Oh dear – alright' concedes Marianne:

"It is very true," said Marianne, "that admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon. Everybody pretends to feel and tries to describe with the taste and elegance of him who first defined what picturesque beauty was. I detest jargon of every kind, and sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning."

Marianne acknowledges that the Picturesque is a new vogue that has generated its own jargon. She refers to the man 'who first defined what picturesque beauty was'; and it's now time to meet him and his revolutionary new ideas about landscape and beauty. This is the Revd William Gilpin. Jane Austen's early fondness for Gilpin is testified to by her brother, Henry:

She was a warm and judicious admirer of landscape, both in nature and on canvass. At a very early age she was enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque; and she seldom changed her opinion either on books or men.

Henry Austen, 'Biographical Notice of the Author', prefacing Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (1818)

William Gilpin & Picturesque Connoisseurship

Gilpin was a clergyman, schoolmaster, writer and amateur painter. He was the author of several books on landscape appreciation in the 1780s and 1790s, each given the formula title *Observations on [location]...relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty*.

We can identify the launch of Picturesque tourism with a trip he took in the summer of 1770, a boat journey down the river Wye, from Ross to Chepstow. He wrote a journal of his tour, complete with pen and wash drawings of some of the scenes. It circulated in manuscript for several years. When the new technique of aquatinting became available in the 1780s, these drawings with their wash effects could be reproduced accurately; and so his Wye tour could be published, over a decade after its original composition.

This was the key publication. *Observations on the River Wye...Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (1782). It went through four editions by 1800. The Wye book formally launched Picturesque tourism. Its text and illustrations



guided the viewer on how to assess landscape scenery, its structure, distribution of masses, tonality and so on. It turned the countryside into an aesthetic amenity. Here is how Gilpin introduces it:

The following work proposes a new object of pursuit, that of not barely examining the face of a country; but of examining it by the rules of picturesque beauty: that of not merely describing; but of adapting the description of natural scenery to the principles of artificial landscape; and of opening the sources of those pleasures, which are derived from the comparison.

--Or as one tour writer put it so succinctly: "The picturesque traveller reviews the scenery of nature and the rules of art, with which he is already acquainted, and in imagination adapts to this standard the scenery, which he expects to behold." (John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery* (1801))

Gilpin started at Ross-on-Wye. The manuscript of his tour shows how much he worried at the text as he worked out his criteria for what constituted *Picturesque* beauty. One of the first arresting views downriver from Ross was Goodrich Castle.



This view, which is one of the grandest on the river, I should not scruple to call *correctly picturesque*; which is seldom the character of a purely natural scene... Nature is always great in design; but... is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole. Either the foreground, or the background, is disproportioned: or some awkward line runs across the piece: or a tree is ill-placed...

The point is that, as Gilpin remarks, 'the painter, who adheres to the composition of nature, will rarely make a good picture.' So, how do you go about correcting Nature?

In general however he [the Picturesque artist] may obtain views of such parts of nature, as with the addition of a few trees; or a little alteration in the foreground, (which is a liberty, that must always be allowed) may be adapted to his rules; though he is rarely so fortunate as to find a landscape completely satisfactory to him.

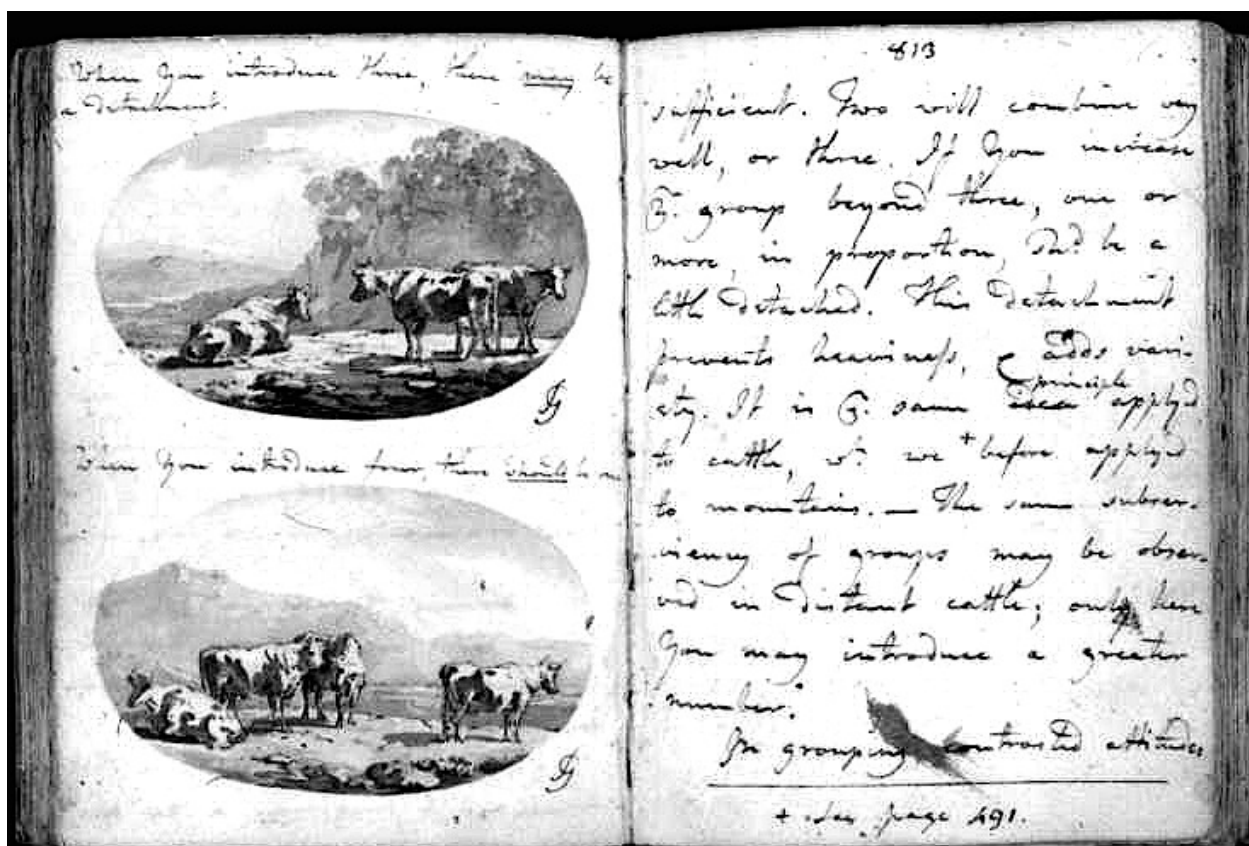
So if, for instance, you come across a beautiful view that has all the right ingredients except the regulation foreground framing tree or two, then you just add them to your drawing.

Gilpin taught the British to look at their landscapes with a concern for the scenery's special character as well as its artistic potential. His ideas of ideal picturesque landscape composition derive principally from the paintings of the seventeenth-century artist Claude Lorrain.



These examples, from Claude's *Narcissus* landscape and Gilpin's landscape composition, illustrate the influence: the framing side-screen trees, the darkened foreground, the more brightly lit middle distance, with an architectural feature, and the background melting into the sky. This kind of structural orthodoxy became part of the tourists' viewfinder mindset.

In his other books Gilpin gave meticulous advice on the minutiae of picturesque organisation, such as how to group sheep and cows in a landscape:



Two will combine very well, or three. If you increase the group beyond three, one or more, in proportion, should be a little detached. This detachment prevents heaviness, & adds variety. It is the same principle applied to cattle, which we before applied to mountains...

William Gilpin, *MS Observations...Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (c.1773). Illustrations by Sawrey Gilpin.

This kind of fastidiousness was mocked by some of Gilpin's contemporaries, not least Jane Austen. In *Pride and Prejudice* (Ch.10), there is a scene in which Elizabeth has been invited to join a group of three for a walk. She politely declines, and invokes Gilpin's principles:



“No, no; stay where you are. You are charmingly group’d, and appear to uncommon, advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth. Good bye.”

(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Ch.10)

Gilpin had travelled across to the Wye from Kingston in Surrey and he has some brief comments on the countryside en route. Here is one of particular interest in view of the discussion earlier about the criteria for picturesque beauty and whether or not utility should have some part in it. He has come into the Cotswolds and sees the cottages of the spinners and weavers dotting the hillsides and their cloths exposed on drying lines. He’s unhappy with this:



Anon, View of Wallbridge, Stroud (c.1790). copyright ©Museum in the Park, Stroud.

Many of these vallies are greatly injured in a picturesque light, by becoming scenes of habitation and industry. A cottage, a mill, or a hamlet among trees, may often add beauty to a rural scene: but when houses are scattered through every part, the moral sense can never make a convert of the picturesque eye. (*Observations...River Wye*)

This is a key statement in its implications: it expresses the incompatibility of the moral and the Picturesque senses. Austen’s sensible characters deplore the Picturesque when it is taken to such extremes that comfort, utility and social morality have to be sacrificed to picturesque pleasures.

However, the Picturesque as it develops over this period strays further and further from utility as a criterion. It is increasingly drawn to scenes of poverty and decay, partially ruined people as well as ruined buildings. It finds gipsies and beggars aesthetically attractive. In another notorious statement, Gilpin argues as follows:

Moral, and picturesque ideas do not always coincide. In a moral light, cultivation, in all its parts, is pleasing; the hedge, and the furrow; the waving corn field, and the ripened sheaf. But all these, the picturesque eye, in quest of scenes of grandeur, and beauty, looks at with disgust. It ranges after nature, untamed by art, and bursting wildly into all its irregular forms.... It is thus also in the introduction of figures. In a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object, than the loitering peasant: in a picturesque light it is otherwise. (*Observations...Lakes II*, 44)

The Picturesque launches itself in an oppositional frame of mind, in order to establish its priorities clearly – even stridently. Picturesque beauty has nothing to do with utility, with comfort: almost the reverse. But as it develops through the nineteenth century, and is questioned and modified again and again, the tastes it initially stimulated – for the rough and irregular, the wild and natural – gradually become reconciled with the more comfortable criteria championed by those such as Edward Ferrars. This I think is the essential line of development in the evolution of tastes for English scenery.



Let us return to the Wye tour. Gilpin identified particular viewpoints on the voyage down the river Wye, from which the tourist could experience the most Picturesque arrangement of natural features and ancient ruins (as at Goodrich Castle), and this proved an inspiration for subsequent travellers exploring Britain's countryside.

On the second day of his river tour Gilpin arrives at Tintern Abbey. There he declares dissatisfaction with the majestic ruins: 'a number of gable-ends hurt the eye with their regularity; and disgust it by the vulgarity of their shape. A mallet judiciously used (but who durst use it?) might be of service in fracturing some of them...'. The rigidly straight lines of the gable ends offend the Picturesque eye. 'Nature abhors a straight line', the landscape designer William Kent is reported to have said. Irregularity, as we have seen, is one of the hallmarks of the Picturesque: variety, roughness and irregularity. The hand of time or the hand of mallet-wielding vandals can convert monumental buildings into picturesque ruins to decorate the landscape. Among the artistic vandals we should be particularly grateful to are Oliver Cromwell and Henry VIII:

What share of picturesque genius Cromwell might have, I know not. Certain however it is, that no man, since Henry the eighth, has contributed more to adorn this country with picturesque ruins. The difference between these two masters lay chiefly in the style of ruins, in which they composed. Henry adorned his landscapes with the ruins of abbeys; Cromwell, with those of castles. I have seen many pieces by this master executed in a very grand style; but seldom a finer monument to his masterly hand than this [Scaleby Castle, Cumberland]. He has rent the tower, and demolished two of its sides; the edges of the other two he has shattered into broken lines.

Gilpin, *Observations...Cumberland, and Westmorland* (1786) II, 122-23.

These inspired Picturesque vandals helped in the cause of promoting native architectural adornments in the landscape, as opposed to classical imports. Egyptian and Grecian temples in the English countryside or parkland are increasingly regarded as a foreign nonsense. This is a point made by a slightly later Picturesque theorist, Richard Payne Knight, in his didactic poem *The Landscape* (1794):

Such buildings English nature must reject,
And claim from art the appearance of neglect:
No decoration should we introduce,
That has not first been naturalized by use. (The Landscape, Book II, ll. 308-311)

- Such as our ruined castles and abbeys.

Gilpin had started a fashion that was to spread throughout the country. And in doing so he drew attention to the components and aesthetic value of British scenery. I want to explore this evolving fashion now with particular focus on the nature and value of English scenery. This surge in interest happened at a peculiarly apposite time. The Wars with France from 1793 more or less through to 1815 – i.e. most of Jane Austen's career --closed the continent to English tourists and helped to force attention on English scenery.

Revaluation of British Scenery

Here is one tourist, in 1773, travelling in the Lake District : 'When ever I have read the descriptions given by travellers of foreign countries, in which their beauties and antiquities were lavishly praised, I have always regretted a neglect which has long attended the delightful scenes at home.' (William Hutchinson, *An Excursion to the Lakes* 1774) Such sentiments became more and more common over the next two decades. Rising nationalism had followed imperial conquests abroad in the mid-eighteenth century (in Canada and India, for example), and the huge expansion of trade and influence fuelled the call in England for increased attention to native, local assets and a raising of the profile of national identity. Those English innovations in landscape gardening mentioned earlier in this talk, where natural freedoms should be exercised in the management of landscape features, were sometimes seen as a horticultural analogy to the state of the nation. This was conspicuous in the writings of Horace Walpole, one of the key figures in the development of English tastes:

The reason why Taste in Gardening was never discovered before the present Century is that it was the result of all the happy combinations of an Empire of Freemen, an Empire founded by Trade, not by a military and conquering Spirit, maintained by the valour of independent Property,



enjoying long tranquillity after virtuous struggle & employing its opulence and good Sense on the refinement of rational Pleasure.

Horace Walpole: ‘the English Taste in Gardening is thus the growth of the English Constitution’. [*Satirical Poems by William Mason and Notes by Horace Walpole*, (Oxford 1926), ed. P. Toynbee, pp.44-45].

In 1795 the landscape gardener Humphry Repton described English gardening as ‘the happy medium between betwixt the wilderness of nature and the stiffness of art; in the same manner as the English constitution is the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages, and the restraint of despotic government’; and he went on to praise the benefits of ‘these middle degrees betwixt extremes’. (‘A Letter to Uvedale Price’ 1794: Uvedale Price *Essays on the Picturesque* (1810) III, 10). The Picturesque flourishes in that oscillation ‘betwixt extremes’, and, as I have suggested, arrives at a partial reconciliation to construct something distinctive in the aesthetics of English scenery.

The raising of the status of British and particularly English scenery was part and parcel of a broader review of what constituted English national identity in the later eighteenth century. (‘English verdure, English comfort, English culture’). What was this Englishness? Englishness had for some time been defining itself as everything (more or less) that was antithetical to perceived French character, sharpened of course in the last decade or so by the reactions to the French Revolution and the war with France. ‘Every thing we have done is in the style of hostility to France, as a nation’, wrote Edmund Burke (letter Oct 7 1793). The stereotypical French character was seen by the English as effete (effeminate), deceitful, given to artifice, and morally frivolous; antithetically English national identity was constructed as manly, sincere, natural, and morally earnest. Typical of this cultural patriotism is the poem by William Shenstone (writer and garden designer) –‘Elegy XIV. Declining an invitation to visit foreign countries, he takes occasion to intimate the advantages of his own.’ And those advantages are both scenic and cultural.

While others lost to friendship, lost to love,
Waste their best minutes on a foreign strand,
Be mine, with British nymph or swain to rove,
And court the genius of my native land.

.....

No distant clime shall servile airs impart,
Or form these limbs with pliant ease to play;
Trembling I view the GAUL’s illusive art,
That steals my lov’d rusticity away.

(*The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone, Esq.*, (Dodsley, London, 1764) I , 47 & 48)

The historian Gerald Newman has written on this late-eighteenth-century English Nationalism:

the increasing primitivism of contemporary literature [in the so-called Pre-Romantic period] was the natural consequence of rising anti-aristocratic feeling and the propagation, very often through the convenient and historically appropriate device of anti-French oppositions, of a supposedly English system of morality and aesthetics, a system with distinct social as well as national orientations, calculated to confront French supremacy, abase the frenchified great, and glorify the British many as the ‘true’ source of national virtue... the aesthetic revolution...was an integral part of a still larger *nationalist* revolution...

(Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism* (1987), 119-120)

Typical of this culturally competitive spirit, given the tyrannical dominance of foreign models of landscape beauty, is Henry Wyndham’s *A Gentleman’s Tour through Monmouthshire and Wales* (1775). Here is what he said about the scenery he travelled through:

This place would afford a charming retreat for a painter, delighting in romantic nature, as its environs abound with scenes, every way picturesque. Woody hills, naked mountains, rocky rivers, foaming cataracts, transparent lakes, ruined castles, catch the eye on every side of this sequestered spot, which seems to want nothing, but fine weather and a serene sky, to afford as rich studies as the neighbourhood of Tivoli or Frascati.



Increasingly travellers in Britain were asking why the beauties of their own country were so habitually compared unfavourably with the landscapes of Italy as immortalised in the canvases of Claude Lorrain. Hybrid landscape paintings became popular; those in which a Claudean idiom was grafted onto British topography, as in John Varley's much copied north Wales views.

But why classicise British landscape scenery in this way? It is as foolishly incongruous as constructing classical temples or Chinese bridges on one's garden. If one is going to mediate English scenery through another cultural idiom, is there no alternative and more appropriate landscape painting tradition that could be applied and naturalised? There was indeed, and one Picturesque theorist pointed it out: 'Scarcely any parts of our island are capable of affording the compositions of Salvator Rosa, Claude, and the Poussins; and only the most picturesque parts those of Rysdael, Berghem, and Pynaker; but those of Hobbima, Waterlooe, and Adrian Vandervelde...are to be obtained every where'. (R.P.Knight, *The Landscape*, 1794, note 27). This comment was made in 1794, almost exactly around the time when (as we'll see next week) the young John Constable was learning to sketch Suffolk scenery precisely in the style of Waterloo. But there was one persistent problem with trying to promote the landscape example of the Dutch as a more appropriate idiom for tackling English scenery: the great arbiter of national art, The Royal Academy (founded in 1768), had long been institutionally contemptuous of Dutch painting. So the habit of classicising English scenery in the high Claudean manner held sway, even though, as Gainsborough remarked, 'with regard to real Views from Nature in this Country, he [Gainsborough] has never seen any Place that affords a Subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gaspar or Claude'. (Thos Gainsborough, letter to Philip, 2nd Earl of Hardwicke, c.1770?: *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. J. Hayes, New Haven & London, 2001, p.30)

In 1762 Horace Walpole had called for a school of British landscape painters:

In a country so profusely beautified with the amenities of nature, it is extraordinary that we have produced so few good painters of landscape. As our poets warm their imaginations with sunny hills, or sigh after grottos and cooling breezes, our painters draw rocks and precipices and castellated mountains, because Virgil gasped for breath at Naples, and Salvator wandered amidst Alps and Apennines. Our ever-verdant lawns, rich vales, fields of haycocks, and hop-grounds, are neglected as homely and familiar subjects. The latter, which I never saw painted, are very picturesque, particularly in the season of gathering, when some tendrils are ambitiously climbing, and others dangling in natural festoons.

(Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762--: 1849), Vol. II, 717)



Paul Sandby, 'A Distant View of Maidstone,
from *XII Views...in South-Wales* (1776)



Paul Sandby, 'The Entrance to Chepstow Castle'
From *Lower Bell Inn, Boxley Hill* (1802)

As if responding to such calls directly, the artist Paul Sandby begins in the next few years to issue sets of aquatints of British scenery.



By 1782, the year of Gilpin's Wye tour publication, the poet and literary critic Joseph Warton could record that the celebration of local scenery had at last really got under way: 'It is only within a few years that the picturesque scenes of our own country, our lakes, mountains, cascades, caverns and castles, have been visited and described.' (*An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 1756). England has a wealth of natural scenery, castles and abbeys, but, as Henry Wyndham had remarked, such scenery 'seems to want nothing, but fine weather and a serene sky.' (*A Gentleman's Tour through Monmouthshire...*, 1775) True our weather is not serenely Mediterranean, but that needn't be a problem for the landscape artist. Little by little, even our troublesome skies were converted into a national asset. Joseph Pott in his *Essay on Landscape Painting* (1782) remarked: 'We...have a great advantage over Italy...in the great variety and beauty of our northern skies; the forms of which are often so lovely and magnificent, where so much action is seen in the rolling of the clouds.'

Increasingly the distinctive features of English landscape and climate are promoted, no longer as poor cousins of Mediterranean scenery but as distinctive native attractions, requiring a new set of aesthetic lenses for their appreciation – the Picturesque. Rich cloudscapes become a national asset. Another is the greater density in our atmosphere. This prevents our having luminously clear Claudian vistas, but it offers beautiful effects for the watercolourist's washes. Gilpin praised 'The moisture, and vapour heaviness of our atmosphere, which produces the rich verdure of our lawns' [*Observations...Lakes*, I, 10]. This is Jane Austen's 'English verdure'. And where Edward Ferrars had mocked the Picturesque connoisseur's preference for seeing objects made 'indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere', it was the effects on landscape of that atmosphere that increasingly won the attentions of painters and tourists around the turn of the century.

Gilpin's comment on the English atmosphere, made in his 1786 tour of the Lake District, is part of a larger sequence of paragraphs extolling the peculiar natural aesthetic advantages of English landscape:

From whatever cause it proceeds, certain, I believe, it is, that this country exceeds most countries in the *variety* of it's [sic] picturesque beauties. I should not wish to speak merely as an Englishman: the suffrages of many travellers, and foreigners, of taste, I doubt not, might be adduced.

In some or other of the *particular species* of landscape, it may probably be excelled. Switzerland may perhaps exceed it in the beauty of it's wooded vallies; Germany, in it's river-views; and Italy, in it's lake-scenes. But if it yield to some of these countries in *particular* beauties; I should suppose, that on the *whole*, it transcends them all. It exhibits perhaps more variety of hill, and dale, and level ground, than is any where to be seen in so small a compass. It's rivers assume every character, diffusive, winding and rapid. It's estuaries, and coast-views are varied, of course, from the form, and rockiness of it's [sic] shores. It's mountains, and lakes, tho they cannot perhaps rival, as I have just observed, some of the choice lakes of Italy – about Tivoli, especially, where the most perfect models of this kind of landscape are said to be presented; yet in *variety*, I presume, equal to the lake-scenery of any country.

William Gilpin, *Observations... Lakes* 1786, I, 5-9

The keynote is *variety*, and the fact that that variety is concentrated in such a small compass. Gilpin argues that England has small-scale versions of all the great and famous scenic attractions of Europe.

Here is another characteristic of the native landscape, the distinctive patterns of mixed woodland, hedges and fields which are peculiar to English scenery:



But besides the *variety* of it's beauties, in some or other of which it may be rivalled; it possesses some beauties, which are *peculiar* to itself.

One of these peculiar features arises from the intermixture of wood and cultivation, which is found oftener in English landscape, than in the landscape of other countries. In France, in Italy, in Spain, and in most other places, cultivation, and wood have their separate limits. Trees grow in detached woods; and cultivation occupies vast, unbounded common fields. But in England, the custom of dividing property by hedges, and of planting hedge-rows, so universally prevails, that almost wherever you have cultivation, there also you have wood.



Now altho this regular intermixture produces often deformity on the nearer grounds; yet, at a distance it is the source of great beauty. On the spot, no doubt, and even in the first distances [i.e. foreground], the marks of the spade, and the plough; the hedge, and the ditch; together with all the formalities of hedge-row trees, and square divisions of property, are disgusting in a high degree. But when all these regular forms are softened by distance – when hedge-row trees begin to unite, and lengthen into streaks along the horizon – when farm-houses, and ordinary buildings lose all their vulgarity of shape, and are scattered about, in formless spots, through the several parts of a distance – it is inconceivable what richness, and beauty, this mass of deformity, when melted together, adds to landscape.... Thus English landscape affords a species of *rich distance*, which is rarely to be found in any other country. ...



...– You have likewise from this intermixture of wood and cultivation, the advantage of being sure to find a tree or two, on the foreground, to adorn any beautiful view you may meet with in the distance.

* * * * *

Let me recap some of the main themes emerging now, at the start of the nineteenth century. We witness antagonisms between those who favour domesticated and cultivated landscape and those who are drawn to wilder scenery; we are aware of the growing taste (promoted by the Picturesque) for freedom and irregularity in landscape views; there is now an explicit relish for English verdure, for the softer, denser atmosphere in English landscape distances, for those features absent in Claudean landscape idylls; the recognition that England has a uniquely concentrated variety of different scenery within a small compass: and the characteristic combination in English scenery of closely juxtaposed mixed cultivation and wilder landscapes, of reassuring comfort side by side with the stimulus of wilder, freer natural forms – all within a single view. Remember that troublesome incompatibility between moral and picturesque responses mentioned earlier, and between commons and cultivated? The kind of scenery Gilpin is reviewing as typical of English landscape appears to reconcile that incompatibility, under the umbrella of variety and contrast.

William Gilpin's Picturesque arrived in the last third of the eighteenth century, at a time when English nationalism was particularly intense, when English landscape gardening had asserted a particular kind of patriotic naturalism. As Picturesque theory developed in the 1790s and the European continent closed to English tourists, English landscape aesthetics (for decades dominated by the new Royal Academy) shed some of its original Claudean dependency. Gainsborough's impact as well as the popularity of Dutch landscapes, were very significant in this respect, and opened the way to Constable's celebrations of English scenery. These are changes that we will continue to explore in the next lecture.

© Professor Malcolm Andrews, 2017