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Responses to Nature

1 Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) from Nine Letters on Landscape Painting

Born in the year of the French Revolution, Carl Gustav Carus belongs to the later generation of German Romantics. His *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting* succeeds in bringing together the diverse strands of Romantic thought rather than breaking new ground, and provides an eloquent testament to the force and coherence of Romantic conceptions of nature. Carus trained and practised as a doctor and in 1814 was appointed Director of the new Academy for Surgery and Medicine in Dresden. He published extensively throughout his long career, producing two important textbooks on animal anatomy and gynaecology, illustrated with his own engravings. He also wrote on art, psychology and the philosophy of nature. His work as a painter was strongly influenced by his friendship with Caspar David Friedrich, whom he met in 1817, and with whom he went on sketching trips in Saxony and Bohemia. Written in epistolary form, with the letters following the changes of the season, Carus's *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting* set out to show that reflection upon art is not necessarily inimical to artistic creativity and that thought and feeling complement each other. Carus maintains that landscape painting should not be understood as a mere imitation or mirroring of nature as we find it, but is itself the product of the human mind or spirit. The task of the artist is to intensify the observed particular, whereby the divine creativity bodied forth in nature is reflected once again in the creative work of the artist. Originally published as *Neun Briehe über Landschaftsmalerei, geschrieben in den Jahren 1815 bis 1824*, Dresden, 1831, these extracts have been translated for the present volume by Nicholas Walker from the reprinted edition, K. Gerstenberg, ed, Dresden: Wolfgang Jess, 1955, letters I, II, III and V, pp. 17–23, 31–6, 41–4, 46–9, 89–91, 96–7.

Outside the snow flurries ice-cold at my window pane, a profound stillness surrounds me, the room provides a comforting warmth, and the lamp which has been timely lit against the long bleak evenings of early winter sheds its gentle light about me. At such a time as this, indeed, there can be nothing more welcome than to give free play to one's thoughts in the quiet contemplation of artistic objects, little by little to make oneself utterly at home in the realm of the beautiful, thus consigning our dreary days to oblivion and relinquishing all memory of an earlier, more troubled mood. Perhaps then, dear Ernest, you will graciously receive, as ever, the echo of those thoughts my
mind pursued in hours like these, and perhaps you will also find in these communications the fulfilment of that resolution with which I promised once I should unfold to you my thoughts upon the meaning and the proper end of art in general, and of landscape painting in particular. You may seek in vain here for ordered presentation and sufficient comprehension in these reflections, and you may regard much of what I say as grounded in a personal view of things which lacks all confirmation in the minds of others. Then take these thoughts, to speak with Hamlet, as airy phantoms of the brain, and show me if you can a straighter and more fruitful path to follow.

I would certainly not wish that you believe, along with many others, that all investigation into art and beauty, in spoken or in written form, be counted but a degradation, a desecration even, of the subject, as if it were the case that feeling merely, and sensation, should here hold sway and thus decide that depth and clarity can never be conjoined. – For surely man, when he feels at home with himself, always represents a Unity, and it is only sofar as he manifests himself as a whole that he is capable of attaining all that is elevated and beautiful; why then should it disturb or even cool the spirit if it once can clearly grasp what warms our feelings, and how then could we recognize and inwardly receive in all its depth the beautiful, which in itself is nothing but a perfected whole (kosmos), if not with our whole soul? – Indeed, it is my sure conviction that all art remains dead and buried for us as long as our sentiments are inwardly untouched, that the cold calculation of contrasts and concepts of the understanding can merely give birth to crippled poetry. [...] And I also sense that a truly poetic mood simply represents an elevation of the entire human being and one which rouses all our spiritual powers; I have likewise grasped the error of those who, precisely through a very excess of reflection, themselves repudiate reflection in all matters of art. Hence it is that I no longer shrink from embracing beauty with every fibre of my soul, that I now experience a real and undiminished poetic delight only when the work of art conjoins a living summons to our feelings with a clear perception of inner perfection and a recognition of the artist’s purer will. This is a delight which, grounded as it is in beauty, truth and right, will never weaken with repeated contemplation of the object, and serves to set the seal of classic standing on the work of art. Yielding wholly to this inner pleasure, let us therefore freely spread our thoughts upon the wide and distant fields of beauty; and just as from a mountain peak we can look down with undiminished pleasure having once traversed the tortuous valleys down below, and just as, indeed, the impression of the whole is heightened if we as it were repeat, incorporate the earlier delight we felt at various stages of the way, just so the train of thought which plays around these objects can also never harm the living, joyful pleasure that we take in all the wondrous and mysterious effects of art; and, indeed, just as all genuine study of nature only leads us on towards the threshold of even greater mysteries, and cannot fail to inspire us all the more greatly with a sacred awe, so too we may await the very same from an open examination of art. None the less, it remains true that artists can hardly be blamed for suspiciously resisting the deal of aesthetic sound and fury so widely to be encountered in books and lectures.

And, my dear Ernest, has that moment of re-creation, that repetition of an eternally active world-creation, that free production and reproduction of artistic genius, ever ceased to strike you too as something especially mighty and wonderful? – How otherwise has man proved capable of creating even the slightest of living products, and how otherwise has any science ever been led directly to life itself, if not in the first instance through a process of mortification, that is, through analysis? – We analyse and break down the leaf of the plant into its various cells, its respiratory orifices, its vessels and fibres, and the tiniest of creatures teaches us how to separate out the features of comparative anatomy into even smaller shapes and structures, – and yet! Will all this science ever help us to animate the tiniest of mites, or to reconstitute by its means the tiniest leaf of a plant? – And now simply consider the creations of art which although not themselves alive can none the less appear to us like living things, and which, being produced by human beings, testify to the inner affinity between man and the world spirit.

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Thus the creative power of art continues to exercise its effect, and the world, already lying formed as it does before our senses, arises for us anew beneath our own hands. From all her forms and products something always speaks to us, in a wonderful and distinctive language, offers itself to the purpose of the artist. Sun and moon, air and clouds, mountain and valley, trees and flowers, the most varied of creatures, and the even more varied and elevated individuality of mankind appears as if reborn with all their own authentic power over us, awakening now brighter or now gloomier moods within us, but always raising us up far beyond the commonplace through perception of the divine, namely that creative power within man himself. For this is precisely the reason why art appears to us as a mediator of religion, inasmuch as art teaches us to recognize and brings us into closer proximity with the original power and soul of the world, which the weakness of human insight is incapable of grasping in its totality, and does so by presenting us with it in a miniature form, that is within the human spirit itself; and that is also why, on the one hand, the artist must look upon himself as a sacred vessel that must remain unsullied by everything vulgar, impure and commonplace; and, on the other hand, that is also why the work of art must never approach too closely to nature, but must rather elevate itself above her if the creation of the work through the spirit is not to be forgotten and the relationship of art to man himself is not to be lost from sight.

Let us therefore, dear friend, turn now to a closer examination of the purpose and significance of landscape painting in particular. This is an art which indeed properly belongs to the modern age alone, an art which is much less complete as yet and perhaps only now beginning to approach its fullest flowering, whereas most of the other arts rather resemble a Janus-head that is already half-turned towards the past or an intellectual monument to fairer days now presiding over the graves of the past. But every kind of mimetic art necessarily exerts an essentially two-fold effect upon us: in the first instance by virtue of the imitated object, whose distinctive character affects us even as an image in much the same way as it does in nature, and in the second instance by virtue of the fact that the work of art is itself a creation of the human spirit which in truly expressing its own thoughts helps to elevate every other companion spirit beyond the commonplace (much as the world itself can be regarded in a higher sense as an expression of divine thoughts).

Let us initially consider these two effects of landscape painting separately in order to prepare for a final, shared and fruitful result to our enquiry. What then is the actual effect of landscape and its objects in living nature itself? This is the first question to be
asked, before we proceed to enquire further into the effect of the same in visual art the solid earth, with all of its varied shapes and features like rocks and mountains, valleys and its placid and its rushing waters, the clouds and airy breezes, these are more or less the forms through which the life of the earth reveals itself to us; a life of such immeasurable dimensions in comparison with our own smallness that we human beings are hardly willing or able to regard it as life at all. But then the life of plants seems to stand on a higher level and in much closer proximity to ourselves, and it is this life in its relationship to the aforementioned phenomena which constitutes the distinctive object of the art of landscape. — Now in nature we certainly do not feel ourselves addressed by such phenomena in a passionate or violent manner; they are too remote from us for this, as far as their aesthetic effect is concerned; for it is quite clear that the shipwrecked cannot be expected to appreciate the beauty of the crashing waves, or those fleeing a configuration to dwell upon the beauty of the resulting illumination. Only what touches us directly, only what is most closely associated with us can immediately excite us so profoundly by all its changing configurations, is capable of filling us with desire or loathing. In that free living nature which appears to us in all its calm objectivity all we perceive is a still and constant life, uniformly turned in upon itself: the changing seasons and hours of the day, the passing train of clouds and all the many-coloured splendours of the sky, the ebb and flow of the sea, the gradual but inexorably sustained transformation of the earth's surface, the weathering of naked rocky peaks, whose grains are washed down and eventually come to form fertile land, the creation of springs and sources which follow the path of mountain chains to become streams and finally rivers, all of this obeys its still and everlasting laws, to whose domination we ourselves are also subject, laws which carry us away with them however much we strive to resist, which with secret power force us to behold the mighty and even monstrous domain of natural events, and thereby take us out of ourselves, allowing us to experience our own weakness and insignificance; yet the contemplation of these things also serves to calm and quieten our inner storms and inevitably exerts a general pacifying effect upon us. Go up then to the summit of the mountain, look out across all the distant hilly peaks, contemplate the steady progress of the rivers and every splendour that reveals itself to your gaze, and what feeling is it that then seizes hold of you? — There is a quiet sense of devotion within you, you lose yourself in boundless space, your whole being experiences a gentle elevation and purification, your very self vanishes away, you are nothing and God is everything.

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Behind and beneath everything which we perceive and conceive, behind and beneath everything that exists and everything that we ourselves are, there lies an everlasting, ultimate and infinite unity. There is a profound and most interior consciousness which, precisely because it provides the original possibility of all knowing, demonstrating and explaining, can itself never be explained or demonstrated (just as the proposition a = a is insusceptible to further demonstration but merely represents something which must be recognized as valid in and for itself); and it is this consciousness which provides the firm conviction of such unity in a more or less clear or obscure manner according to the level of development we have attained. Language endeavours to express this immeasurably great dimension with the word: 'God'. — This ultimate dimension is revealed to us inwardly as Reason and outwardly as Nature, but we also feel ourselves to be a part of this revelation, as creatures of reason and nature ourselves, and thus also as totalities which bear reason and nature within us, and to that degree we also partake of the divine. Thus the possibility of pursuing a two-fold path is opened up within the higher regions of our spiritual life: either we can strive to lead the infinite variety of reason and nature back to the original and divine unity, or we can allow the self to become productive in its own right and thus present this inner unity through external variety itself. In the latter case we require a skilful act of doing [können], in the former we require an act of knowing [erkennt]. Knowing gives rise to science as an organized body of knowledge, doing or making gives rise to art. In science man feels himself to be in God, in art he feels God to be in himself. — Thus art certainly cannot be elevated above science, since the latter clearly remains the sublime path which leads mankind into the region of highest unity; but it is also clear that science, as a path directly opposed to that of art, transcends all individual existence, mortifies the body that the spirit may live, and is fully justified in its efforts to do so, as I have already remarked above. Doubtless you will counter me here with evidence of the actual creation of a scientific body of doctrine in order to demonstrate that science too must produce and form itself externally; but this fact does not need to be adduced here precisely because such creative activity belongs no longer to science but to art. For it is only in this way that man can reveal himself as a totality, and although art and science can be separated from one another in analysis, they can never be wholly separated from one another in actuality. The presentation of science can therefore never succeed without art (without the skilful organization of thoughts and words), and the production of the work of art will equally remain impossible without science (as skill without knowledge).

It will be even easier, as I believe, for us to reach agreement on the second issue raised by your remarks. I have indeed claimed that man, in beholding the entire magnitude of nature in all her splendour, becomes aware of his own littleness and insignificance, and further that man, in sensing everything immediately within God, thereby enters into this infinite totality himself, entirely relinquishing, as it were, his individual existence, but I do not believe I have thereby said anything other than what you yourself intended; for there is no loss in such absorption, there is only increase, and what was formerly contemplated in a purely spiritual manner, namely our conviction of unity in the infinite All, is here almost brought directly before the natural eye; thus it is that our distinctive standpoint, our own relation to nature, will have to be grasped in an ever purer fashion.

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That mere truth alone does not yet constitute the really highest achievement of painting, does not yet constitute that which alone draws us to this art, can most easily be seen simply by comparing painting with a mirror image of nature. Attempt this experiment but once, and behold the natural landscape in a mirror! You will see her reflected there with all her many charms, all her various colours and forms, but if you concentrate carefully upon this mirror image, and compare it with that impression which the landscape depicted in an accomplished work of art has already vouchsafed to you, what then do you notice? — Obviously that the latter is infinitely more remote from the former as regards the truth; the appeal of beautiful natural phenomena, the brilliance of natural colours, all of this is barely even half-captured in the painted
image; and yet at the same time you really do perceive the genuine work of art as a totality, as a world in little (as a microcosm) in and for itself; the mirror image, on the other hand, will always appear as something but a kind of individual sample, a single aspect of nature in her infinite wealth, rudely torn from its original organic connections and artificially compressed within unnatural limits; unlike the work of art, it will not appear as the intrinsically self-contained creation of a spiritual power which is essentially related to ourselves, which calls out for us to embrace it, but rather simply as one individual note out of an infinite harmony, as something isolated which, insofar as it always increasingly demands to be supplemented by other things, cannot procure for us that total inner contentment which arises partly from our free and uninhibited exposure to nature herself, and partly from the contemplation of a genuine work of art.

Insofar as our preceding discussion has manifestly revealed that truth in landscape painting does not of itself procure the full satisfaction we have been seeking, it has become clear that in addition we still require what I already demanded of every work of art in my opening letter, namely that we are actually able to feel that the work of art owes its existence to the creative power of the human spirit, and consequently that the work of art, having itself emerged from a unified totality, represents an intrinsically developed and self-contained, and as it were organic, whole. If this is conceded, then it must also further be the case, given that the soul creating the work can only be conceived of in a certain state, in a certain attitude, that the work of art itself should also necessarily express a certain state. This in turn can only transpire in the art of landscape insofar as the landscape in question is perceived and represented in a certain aspect which is congruent with that inner mood. This leads us further still. For since this sense for things can only be expressed through the representation of objects, and since the expression of this sense also intrinsically involves the appropriate choice of depicted objects in the first place... we can now formulate the principal task of landscape painting more precisely as follows:

It is the representation of a certain mood of our affective life (a certain sense) through the reproduction of a corresponding mood in the life of nature (truth).

Above all I cannot conceal how wondrously surprised I was when I finally realized that whereas earlier and ancient times were so highly gifted in many arts and sciences, they nevertheless produced nothing at all in the field of landscape painting proper, and would merely mention here that, on the contrary, this art only emerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and did so at a stroke, like Minerva from the brows of Jove, quite without older models and in total independence. — How could it be, I asked myself, that the Greeks, who felt and brought forth such free, pure and magnificent examples of architecture, sculpture and poetry, should have had no sense or inclination for the imitation of natural landscape? And is it perhaps possible to discover any reasons which would clearly reveal to us why they were actually incapable of entertaining such an inclination? — The answer to this question long remained shrouded in mystery until at last understanding seemed to dawn upon me in the following manner. — For when we look back upon earlier states and conditions of the human race, we find ourselves compelled, for the most part, to apply a criterion drawn from the development of a single individual human life, which is all we can properly have direct experience of. Now if we do so with regard to the problem in question, we cannot fail to remark that in our early youth we are always oriented in the first instance to the perception of human things; the sky and the earth, the plants and animals, initially concern us only in relation to our own human states and conditions. Man feels an active power within himself, the whole of nature lies before him as a potential element for him to form and shape, and he cannot help but regard her in the first instance solely as material for his purposes. Thus in the very beginning he can hardly recognize any other object of aspiration and imagination than man himself and his manifold states and conditions, and indeed he feels compelled by the vivid force of phantasy to ascribe a human individuality even to lifeless things, and further to divine things as well. [...]

As far as the proper art of landscape is concerned this clearly presupposes a higher level of culture and experience. It requires a certain power of abstraction and self-renunciation in order freely to recognize the external world, formerly regarded simply as an element for our own activity, now as something which is also beautiful and sublime in its own right; it requires a certain level of philosophical development to perceive, or at least to intimate, that the entire manifestation of nature represents the revelation of a single infinitely sublime divinity, one which cannot simply be reduced to the human and is indeed inaccessible to the senses, specifically to recognize therefore this elevated beauty in its own right within the totality of the world in general and in those parts of it perceptible to ourselves, and to make it the very end and object of artistic imitation. In short, what is here required is that man must utterly relinquish the egoistic tendency to relate the entire of nature to himself alone, and must rather open himself to the pure intuition of the beauty of the world as a whole. It is therefore only from such an attitude as this (whether it exists as a clear consciousness or merely as an obscure presentiment within the artist) that the art of landscape proper could arise. Man had first to recognize the divinity of nature as the authentic bodily revelation of God, or expressed in human terms, as the language of God, man had first to learn this language, had first to learn how to experience according to the proper sense of nature (for there can be no question of dead reproduction here, as our example of the mirror-image revealed), before he was able, at last, to proclaim the worldly gospel of art to mankind in this very language (and to do so, as is properly said of poets in this regard, with the tongues of angels).

2 Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775—1851) on Colour

Born into an artisanal milieu in London (his father was a hairdresser, and his childhood works were displayed in the shop window), Turner achieved early success as an artist at the Royal Academy schools. He was elected a full member in 1802 and Professor of Perspective in 1807. Described by Constable as possessing 'a wonderful breadth of mind', Turner was widely read in the theory of art. What he did not have, however, was the facility for expressing his ideas in words. His lectures were difficult to understand, and scholars have found his notes nearly unintelligible. Turner gave his lectures twelve times between 1811 and 1828, and the course usually consisted of six lectures. Only one, from 1811,