Nature and her effects are the materials offered to our pattern of imitation with the combinations of the science of art which we received [?]; which tho asserted in the commencement by theory, here fall far short of perception, and invention and practice, and the uppermost range of art. And in the science of colour, if she were to stipulate for hues and tones of colour beyond mechanical principles, she would step to self destruction; for recipes of colour would but extend mediocrity, and such practice could but generate manner instead of style. Nature and her effects are every day offered to our choice of imitation, to be collated with the science of art, and united by theory to practical inference. [As to] rules, here, in the uppermost range of art, perception ventures not beyond mechanical principles. These are the double affinities by which every one works in his own way; but Scylla and Charybdis lie [?] in the path; the little more, or less; the ridiculous, or sublime. Recipes for colouring or [the] quantum of light and shade could but extend into mediocrity, and general practice into manner instead of purity of style.

3 William Hazlitt (1778–1830) ‘On the Picturesque and the Ideal, a Fragment’

Hazlitt was caught up in the legacy of the French Revolution. Questions of democracy and authority and the popular will informed his political writings, as he strove to counter the ‘old, obscene, drizzling prejudices of superstition and tyranny’. In the field of art these sentiments associated him with the move away from the authority of the classical canon, as it was enshrined in the Academies. However, in common with others such as Wordsworth and Constable, Hazlitt was also becoming sceptical of the eighteenth-century fashion for the Sublime. In the present essay, which he himself subtitled ‘A Fragment’, Hazlitt tackles a distinction which had exercised many since the Enlightenment, and was to remain a preoccupation of the Romantic movement: the distinction between that which is striking for its exaggeration, its peculiarity, its excess; and that which impresses itself by its wholeness, its proportion and its harmony. Both have their place in art. But Hazlitt finally, and despite his antipathy to the canonical, values the Ideal the higher. Originally published in Hazlitt’s Table Talk in 1821–2, the present extract is taken from the Everyman edition, London: J. M. Dent, 1908, pp. 317–21.

The natural in visible objects is whatever is ordinarily presented to the senses: the picturesque is that which stands out, and catches the attention by some striking peculiarity: the Ideal is that which answers to the preconceived imagination and appetite in the mind for love and beauty. The picturesque depends chiefly on the principle of discrimination or contrast; the Ideal on harmony and continuity of effect: the one surprises, the other satisfies the mind; the one starts off from a given point, the other reposes on itself; the one is determined by an excess of form, the other by a concentration of feeling.

The picturesque may be considered as something like an excescence on the face of nature. It runs imperceptibly into the fantastical and grotesque. Fairies and satyrs are picturesque; but they are scarcely Ideal. They are an extreme and unique conception of a certain thing, but not of what the mind delights in, or broods fondly over. The image created by the artist’s hand is not moulded and fashioned by the love of good and yearning after grace and beauty, but rather the contrary: that is, they are ideal deformity, not ideal beauty. Rubens was perhaps the most picturesque of painters; but he was almost the least Ideal. So Rembrandt was (out of sight) the most picturesque of colourists; as Correggio was the most Ideal. In other words, his composition of light and shade is more a whole, more in unison, more blended into the same harmonious feeling than Rembrandt’s, who stagers by contrast, but does not soothe by gradation. Correggio’s forms, indeed, had a picturesque air; for they often incline (even when most beautiful) to the quaintness of caricature. Vandyke, I think, was at once the least picturesque and least Ideal of all the great painters. He was purely natural, and neither selected from outward forms nor added anything from his own mind. He owes every thing to perfect truth, clearness, and transparency; and though his productions certainly arrest the eye, and strike in a room full of pictures, it is from the contrast they present to other pictures, and from being stripped quite naked of all artificial advantages. They strike almost as a piece of white paper would, hang up in the same situation. – I began with saying that whatever stands out from a given line, and as it were projects upon the eye, is picturesque; and this holds true (comparatively) in form and colour. A rough terrier-dog, with the hair bristled and matted together, is picturesque. As we say, there is a decided character in it, a marked determination to an extreme point. A shock-dog is odd and disagreeable, but there is nothing picturesque in its appearance: it is a mere mass of flimsy confusion. A goat with projecting horns and pendent beard is a picturesque animal: a sheep is not. A horse is only picturesque from opposition of colour; as in Mr. Northcote’s study of Gashill, where the white horse’s head coming against the dark scowling face of the man makes as fine a contrast as can be imagined. An old stump of a tree with rugged bark, and one or two straggling branches, a little stunted hedge-row line, marking the boundary of the horizon, a stubble-field, a winding path, a rock seen against the sky, are picturesque, because they have all of them prominence and a distinctive character of their own. They are not objects (to borrow Shakespeare’s phrase) ‘of no mark or likelihood.’ A country may be beautiful, romantic, or sublime, without being picturesque. The Lakes in the North of England are not picturesque, though certainly the most interesting sight in this country. To be a subject for painting, a prospect must present sharp striking points of view or singular forms, or one object must relieve and set off another. There must be distinct stages and salient points for the eye to rest upon or start from, in its progress over the expanse before it. The distance of a landscape will oftentimes look flat or heavy, that the trunk of a tree or a ruin in the foreground would immediately throw into perspective and turn to air. Rembrandt’s landscapes are the least picturesque in the world, except from the strait lines and sharp angles, the deep incision and dragging of his pencil, like a harrow over the ground, and the broad contrast of earth and sky. Earth, in his copies, is rough and hairy; and Pan has struck his hoof against it! – A camel is a picturesque ornament in a landscape or history-piece. This is not merely from its romantic and oriental character; for an elephant has not the same effect, and if introduced as a necessary appendage, is also an unwieldy incumbrance. A negro’s head in a group is picturesque from contrast: so are the spots on a panther’s hide. This was the principle that Paul Veronez went upon, who said the rule for composition was black upon white, and white upon black. He was a pretty good judge. His celebrated picture of the Marriage of Cana is in all likelihood the
completest piece of workmanship extant in the art. When I saw it, it nearly covered one side of a large room in the Louvre (being itself forty feet by twenty) — and it seemed as if that side of the apartment was thrown open, and you looked out at the open sky, at buildings, marble pillars, galleries with people in them, emperors, female slaves, Turks, negroes, musicians, all the famous painters of the time, the tables loaded with viands, goblets, and dogs under them — a sparkling, overwhelming confusion, a bright, unexpected reality — the only fault you could find was that no miracle was going on in the faces of the spectators: the only miracle there was the picture itself! [...]

I imagine that Rubens’s landscapes are picturesque. Claude’s are ideal. Rubens is always in extremes: Claude in the middle. Rubens carries some one peculiar quality or feature of nature to the utmost verge of probability: Claude balances and harmonizes different forms and masses with laboured delicacy, so that nothing falls short, no one thing overpowers another. Rainbows, showers, partial gleams of sunshine, moonlight, are the means with which Rubens produces his most gorgeous and enchanting effects: there are neither rainbows, nor showers, nor sudden bursts of sunshine, nor glittering moonbeams in Claude. He is all softness and proportion; the other is all spirit and brilliant excess. The two sides (for example) of one of Claude’s landscapes balance one another, as in a scale of beauty: in Rubens the several objects are grouped and thrown together with capricious wantonness. Claude has more repose: Rubens more gaiety and extravagance. And here it might be asked, Is a rainbow a picturesque or an ideal object? It seems to me to be both. It is an accident in nature; but it is an inmate of the fancy. It startles and surprises the sense, but it soothes and tranquillizes the spirit. It makes the eye glisten to behold it, but the mind turns to it long after it has faded from its place in the sky. It has both properties then of giving an extraordinary impulse to the mind by the singularity of its appearance, and of riveting the imagination by its intense beauty. [...]

A number of sheep coming to a pool of water to drink, with shady trees in the background, the rest of the flock following them, and the shepherd and his dog left carelessly behind, is surely the ideal in landscape-composition, if the ideal has its source in the interest excited by a subject, in its power of drawing the affections after it linked in a golden chain, and in the desire of the mind to dwell on it for ever. The ideal, in a word, is the height of the pleasing, that which satisfies and accords with the inmost longing of the soul: the picturesque is merely a sharper and bolder impression of reality. [...]

The individual, the characteristic in painting, is that which is in a marked manner — the ideal is that which we wish any thing to be, and to contemplate without measure and without end. The first is truth, the last is good. The one appeals to the sense and understanding, the other to the will and the affections. The truly beautiful and grand attracts the mind to it by instinctive harmony, is absorbed in it, and nothing can ever part them afterwards. Look at a Madonna of Raphael’s: what gives the ideal character to the expression, — the insatiable purpose of the soul, or its measureless content in the object of its contemplation? A portrait of Vandyke’s is mere indifference and still-life in the comparison: it has not in it the principle of growing and still unsatisfied desire. In the ideal there is no fixed stint or limit but the limit of possibility: it is the infinite with respect to human capacities and wishes. Love is for this reason an ideal passion.