

Parnassus and Paradise, or the Anthropocene and the Reversal of a Mode of Consciousness

When did the new epoch begin? We have now, for quite some time, been hearing a discussion of the Anthropocene: the age of the human being. The term refers to the epoch in which human intervention has grown to be universal and leaves its imprint everywhere and on everything. Paul Jozef Crutzen, the atmospheric chemist who invented the term, proposes to date this epoch as having begun with the invention of the steam engine; others see its beginning in the invention of the atom bomb, and thus in that technology which holds the potential to annihilate the very thing that gives the new epoch its name: the human being.

The Anthropocene, however, means first of all that everything is landscape: that everything is *designed*. Nothing can any longer present itself as true and proper nature. There are no more sacred places. An alternative option for the beginning of the Anthropocene might therefore be found in the discovery of nature as landscape, which came about in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance as the human individual grew separate from the divine whole of nature, and thus entered the mode of consciousness that specifically hinges on the discovery of the *Self*. Landscape and the *Self* are dialectically interdependent, with each relating to the other as both precondition and result.

The Discovery of the Landscape

The landscape is not simply what lies out there. It is not simply the domestication or culturalization of nature into parks where the individual is free to roam about in a purely aesthetic frame of mind: free, that's to say, of all obligation to *do* anything, which is something that parks and museums share. Landscape comes into existence as an expression of a specific frame of mind: as an integral part of a specific mode of consciousness. Even if we choose to hold fast to the *grand recit* of the discovery of the landscape—to Petrarch's ascension of *Mount Ventoux* on April 26, 1336—and nothing for the mo-

ment advises us not to do so—we will see it already to present the whole of the range of motifs that are inherent to the phenomenon of landscape, even if still to some degree contrariwise. For Petrarch, the climbing of *Mount Ventoux* was still an “inscrutable undertaking.”¹ The original goal of his climb was to achieve a recognition of Divine omnipotence and the wholeness of God’s work; and while therefore calling it a “pilgrimage,” he was unaware that his undertaking harbored a thought which would shake the very foundations of the Medieval worldview.

Joachim Ritter tells us that the contemplation of nature up until the threshold of the Renaissance was devoted to embracing the “all-comprehending whole” and the “Divine.”² Nietzsche writes, “Nature—uncomprehended, frightful, mysterious nature—must have presented itself [to the individual of former times] as the realm of freedom, of choice, of a higher power, as a seemingly superhuman level of existence, as God.”³ Petrarch, however, with his ascension of *Mount Ventoux* encountered the experience, quite to the contrary, of stepping outside of nature, and that experience had only in part to do with the elevation and the overview. Faced with a vision of a nature that disappeared into the distance, Petrarch suddenly began to reflect not on the oneness and omnipotence of God, but on himself, and on his past as well as future life. He hadn’t expected that. On the summit of *Mount Ventoux*, the center of his reflections came to be occupied not by God, but by his personal Self. “Thus I revolved in my thoughts the history of the last decade.”⁴ Petrarch thought back over his life. Ten years previously he had returned to Avignon and been ordained as a priest. And now, on *Mount Ventoux*, he found himself in “the struggle of the new and the old wills.”⁵

The immediately subsequent and irrepressible need to look for reassurance led him to seek it in Saint Augustine, the late-Roman Church Father whose *Confessions* were his constant companion, and which he also had with him now. He opened the book arbitrarily, to any page at all, “with the intention of reading whatever might occur to me first,” and was shocked.⁶ In the passage to which he opened, he read that “the high mountains” and “the vast floods of the sea” can lead men astray. The admiration of earthly things was an affront to God. Attention to outward things led “men ... to desert themselves.” Petrarch broke off the experiment. “I was stunned, I confess. I ... closed the book, angry with myself that I still admired earthly things.”⁷ He had seen enough of the mountain, receded into himself, and henceforth trusted only in the contemplation of God and in that “inner eye”⁸ which nonetheless could see and apprehend a great deal more than might be taken in by the gaze from the highest of mountains. He averted his gaze and asked for forgiveness, feeling that he deserved God’s punishment. Petrarch still had no grasp of the new. It was only briefly that the landscape had revealed itself, and only briefly that the modern mode of consciousness had flashed into a light within him.

1 Ritter 1993 [1963]: 7.

2 Ibid.: 10.

3 Nietzsche: Aph. 111.

4 Petrarca 2014 [1336]: 21.

5 Idem.

6 This experience reflects a similar moment in the writings of Saint Augustine, who tells us that while leafing through the Epistles of Paul, he turned his eyes by chance to a passage that proved to be central to his conversion.

7 Petrarca 2014 [1336]: 23.

8 Ibid.: 24.



Fig. 1 Of the Church Walls several Grave-stones are placed.

The Discovery of the Self

Petrarch's ascension of *Mount Ventoux* was the beginning of a new mode of consciousness, the beginning of the process of the discovery of both landscape and the Self. Landscape comes into existence where the human being steps outside of the sphere of divine oneness, and it uniquely results from a process of knowledge in which landscape and the Self are reciprocally inter-related. The discovery of landscape thus found its definitive realization in the transition from symbolic and thereby semiotic ways of thinking—in which everything is divine sign and miracle—to a new and different mode of consciousness that find its basis in rational cognition and a theory of knowledge. The result—with the beginning of the age of humanism—was a new understanding of things. One had to engage with them, and to examine them carefully. Rather than exclusively religious, this is also an aesthetic attitude, and the first media in which it found expression were poetry and painting, both of which are practices that separate things from nature, and then newly recombine and reassemble them in art. Art makes nature an object for the perusal of experimental thinking. Nature becomes an object to be approached by way of theory. As Ritter puts it, “Nature as landscape is the fruit and invention of the philosophical mind.”⁹ This new mode of consciousness finds exemplary expression in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. We see the figure of a woman against the background of a strangely distanced landscape. Jan Hendrik van den Berg tells us that this is the “first landscape which was made for the sake of landscape as such, as pure landscape, and not simply as decor of human destiny. Nature, here, exists in a way in which the Middle Ages never knew it: as a self-enclosed, self-sustaining, ‘autarchic’ exterior.”¹⁰ And then there is that smile that seems no less to entrust us with something than to conceal it from us. Contemporaries, according to van den Berg, would have perceived that smile to embody a new way of living, a new mode of consciousness which previously had never existed: “They saw the face of coming generations.”¹¹

Leonardo's painting separates a closed interior from a no less distanced exterior world. The modern Self is indebted to a process of extraneation which is also a process of objectification. Both the landscape and the Self become alien and enigmatic, and these, precisely, are the qualities that made them visible. Yet, all the same, *Mona Lisa*'s smile reflected Leonardo's understanding of the world. Far from in any way typical of its times, it expressed his humanistic vision of an enlightened, emancipated human being. And that vision was also charged with still another new state of mind: with melancholy, with the feeling of alienation that arises when an extant—in this case medieval—order begins to fall apart, and the new—here humanistic—order that's destined to supplant it is not yet recognizable.

The Disintegration of Order

This disintegration of order is to be seen most tellingly in Giorgione's enigmatic *The Tempest* (Fig. 2), which was painted in 1508, in the same period as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. On its right we see a mother with child and with

9 Ritter 1993 [1963]: 13.

10 van den Berg 1960: 233.

11 Ibid.: 233.



Fig. 2 Giorgione, *The Tempest*, 1508

a curiously absent gaze. László F. Földényi writes, “She is staring into the void, and her frame of mind is so melancholy because the world around her has fallen to pieces.”¹² Even the fashionably dressed young man at the painting’s left edge—cut off from her by an expanse of water—is unable to attract her gaze. The nursing mother is both Maria and not, since she lacks all traits, if not for the child, through which she might be identified as such. Maria, moreover, is never depicted naked. So, it’s more likely a question of a Naiad, a Greek water nymph. But, conversely, a water nymph—perhaps Thetis with Achilles—is never represented as a nursing mother. So, one returns to wondering if it is not, in fact, Maria, after all. We’re dealing with an ambivalent image that speaks with equal indecision of both Christian and Greek-Hellenistic mythology.

The same, moreover, is true of the youth at the left of the painting. His vicinity to the pseudo-Maria might briefly suggest that he’s John the Baptist, as might also be implied by his shepherd’s crook. But the staff is surmounted by no sign of the cross, as would be usual with John the Baptist, and ends simply with a forking branch. As well, he seems to hold his left hand behind him, virtually refusing to show it, whereas the free hand of a John the Baptist should be pointing upwards at the heavens. Here again, images which are far from unequivocal; degenerated signifiers.



Fig. 3 Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514

And then there is still a third element: the fragment of a column, if not of two columns, on a plinth. It’s presented as a ruin, but it’s not a ruin in any proper sense, and not even so much as a column. Here again it lacks all features, such as ornaments, that might allow its attribution to a specific style, time, or culture. There’s no indication of whatever in any past might have been its context. It’s more a pipe than a column, and thereby just a “something” that can’t be integrated into the picture. It’s referenceless, like the nursing mother and the shepherd. Földényi writes that “the absence of God, if he were ever once removed from the created world, might most tellingly be indicated by such an architectural ruin.” This ruin is all-gone-lost transcendence: “a monument to the missing God.” It is also reminiscent of another enigmatic object: of that polyhedron in Dürer’s etching *Melencolia I* (1514) (Fig. 3), of which one cannot summon even so much as an inkling as to how many sides it has. It resists all attempts to fathom it: it points to nothing, refers to nothing. A simulacrum.

The longer one looks at this painting, the more alien it becomes. One gazes at one and the same time into two different worlds, if not into more than two: a background free of all human presence, and the scene depicted before it. The two are held separate by a kind of portal that’s formed by a combination of natural and architectural objects. On the stage to the rear—and thereby only apparently real—the river landscape; on the proscenium—and thus in the viewers’ space—the tableau with the no less distanced figures. What connects them is the body of water, which disappears as a river at the threshold of stage and proscenium and then, as if by way of a subterranean channel, reappears before it as a brook. The water nymph might have some-

thing to tell us. She might lead us to see the stream as the mythical River of Styx or the Acheron, which springs from the underworld. Those who bathe in the Acheron—according to the legend—become invulnerable, like Achilles, who could only be wounded at the heel by which his mother Thetis had held him while dipping him into it. And on the other hand, a stream flanked by John the Baptist would be the Jordan. Separate worlds are brought together here, yet without so much as touching one another. A world in disintegration, left guideless and in melancholy: Greco-Hellenistic and late-Roman-Christian myth, the Acheron and the Jordan, Achilles and Maria, Thetis and John the Baptist, the bath in the Acheron that offers immortality, and the equal certainty of eternal life through Christian baptism in the Jordan—Parnassus and Paradise.

The Reversal of a Mode of Consciousness

Whereas the Renaissance discovery of the Self and of nature as landscape essentially took place in literature and painting, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw a shift in their media of expression. The deployment of the arts for the observation and representation of the world was no longer seen to suffice; and the very tradition of humanism was further understood to demand “an active confrontation with reality, with the goal [...] of transforming the world and of giving it a rational order.”¹³ On the one hand, the notion of synesthesia lent greater energy to sensual imagination; and the senses themselves, on the other, were seen to possess autonomous faculties of knowledge. Focus on the individual arts abated, and another art found its beginnings: landscape architecture. The medium *par excellence* of synesthetic experience. Its conjunction of corporeal and sensual experience with the notion of a subject who acts in accord with reason made it the vehicle of a new mode of consciousness. An example will be found in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (*Wahlverwandtschaften*). The novel begins with the enigmatic episode in which Charlotte bit by bit has the gravestones in the old church cemetery removed and set up along the outside walls of the chapel. By removing the signs of divine presence which previously had occupied the place, Charlotte made room for the new age. She had “known how everything was to be arranged so as to create the aspect of a pleasant place on which the eye and the imagination were happy to linger.”¹⁴ There was now no further hindrance to the transformation of nature into landscape and to the development of the modern mode of consciousness. Intuiting that every order also contains the possibility of a new disorder, Eduard—romantically and melancholically—pressed his wife Charlotte’s hand in his own, and “tears stood in his eyes.”¹⁵ Eduard’s tears and Mona Lisa’s smile. Both reveal an inner life: romantic, on the one hand, humanistic on the other. The inner life grows visible, but not recognizable.

The appearance of the landscape as an organized physical reality—as the landscaped garden and park, and later as the industrial park—effected a reversal of perspective. Nature transformed into landscape became a screen for projections of the interior lives of human beings. The distinction between out-

13 Keßler 1997.

14 von Goethe 1981 [1809]: 254.

15 Idem.

side and inside grew scumbled. This is exemplified most perfectly in Tischbein's painting of *Goethe in the Roman Campagna*. Like Giorgione's figure of a woman, Goethe too looks off into the distance, but his gaze is no longer vacant and melancholy: these are the eyes of a curious and inquiring mind. The landscape too has undergone a change. It is no longer alien, distanced and autarchic as in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, and instead has become a mirror of the human soul. Goethe's inner life is recounted in and by way of the landscape: it is no longer something hidden. It is also no longer in the background, and there is no division between stage and proscenium. Goethe sits in and not in front of the landscape: it extends beneath him all the way to the painting's bottom edge.

Landscape in the Age of Reason became a screen where an inside is projected onto an outside; and that function conceals its origins, which are also the origins of the modern mode of consciousness. Nietzsche writes, "We present-day men experience precisely the reverse [...]. Like Goethe, we recognize in nature the great means for soothing the modern soul; we hear the beat of the pendulum of the greatest clock with a longing to rest, to become settled and still."¹⁶ He critically notes, moreover, that we have always imagined ourselves into a spurious humanization of nature: men first imbued it with "their evil and capricious qualities," and "it was then that they invented 'evil nature.'" Then later, in the age Rousseau, they imagined this frame of mind away, and invented "good nature."¹⁷ But there is something that Nietzsche did not see: it is not into "nature," but into "nature as landscape" that modern individuals project themselves, insofar as they construct it as they best see fit.

16 Nietzsche: Aph. 111.

17 Nietzsche: Aph. 17.

Slag Heaps and the Anthropocene

In *The Wanderer and his Shadow* [Der Wanderer und sein Schatten] Nietzsche remarks of the alpine landscape of the Upper Engadin that it seemed to be a meeting place of Italy and Finland. He writes, "We never see such things as they are, as *Ding an sich*, but always veil them in a delicate spiritual sheath, which then is what we see. Inherited sensations and feelings of our own are awakened by these natural things." We don't know things in and for themselves, but only their images in the mirror of our souls. These too, however, can shift. Theodor W. Adorno recounts of this same landscape of the Upper Engadin that the moraines of its alpine valleys resemble "the slag heaps and mounds of debris of mining operations."¹⁸ He continues, "Both the scars of civilization and the pristine, untouched nature that lies up above the tree-line [...] stand in contrast to the notion of nature as a source of warmth and comfort in the service of the human being." In the middle of the twentieth century, we no longer had a meeting place of Italy and Finland, but of Italy and the Ruhr. On the ways in which modern societies now treat nature, Adorno then continues, "Where human exploitation of nature destroys that soulful and deceptive image, the place that remains seems nearly to approach a state of transcendental mourning." We speak today of the Anthropocene as the fulfillment of the Biblical injunction that the human being establish domin-

18 Adorno 1997 [1966]: 327.

ion over all the earth. But like Adorno we also espy a new insecurity. Things once again fall apart: the illusion of a unity of humankind and the landscape shows cracks. Just as in Giorgione's *Tempest*, a new melancholy appears on the horizon.

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Figures

Fig. 1 Erik Schramm (ed.): <http://www.etzleben.de/media/images/etzleben-2009-88-large.jpg> (17 January 2016).

Fig. 2 Wikimedia Foundation (ed.): https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giorgione_019.jpg (17 January 2016).

Fig. 3 Wikimedia Foundation (ed.): https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%BCrer_Melancholia_I.jpg (17 January 2016).

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