

Environment as a Challenge to Aesthetics

Chapter One

~~~~~ Aesthetics, as the theory of the arts, would seem to have little to contribute to any discussion of environment. To the unreflective eye, in fact, no two interests must appear less related. The one, aesthetics, is an esoteric discipline, the philosophically minded inquiry into the nature and meaning of the arts. And the arts, whatever else they may be, stand in the minds of most people as the epitome of contrivance, a manipulation of materials such as stone, wood, metal, paint, sound, and words that carries them far beyond their ordinary appearances. Nothing seems further removed from environment than this, for environment in its purest form connotes the natural world, while the arts represent the height of artifice.

This apparent discordance actually masks a deep relevance. For what at first glance seems the juxtaposition of quite different worlds turns out on reflection to be a complex relation of mutual support. In fact, aesthetics traditionally encompasses the appreciation of natural beauty and of the sublime in nature, in addition to the philosophy of art. But apart from Kant, Schelling, and a few others, most attention has been directed to the arts and not to the natural world. Yet the connections between aesthetics and environment are provocative. We bring aesthetic appreciation to environment when we exclaim

over the fragile beauty of a yellow starflower in the spring woods, admire the rolling expanse of a broad landscape, watch the luminous progression of a sunset with silent wonder, or guide our car along a road as it curves through the hills that border a river valley. Aesthetic ideas enter in our attempts to understand such experiences, as well as those occasions when we are awed by the crashing waves on a stormy Maine shore, by the powerful torrents of water surging over Niagara Falls, or by a giant redwood in a California valley towering four hundred feet above us. Applying concepts such as beauty, appreciation, and sublimity to environment forces us to rethink our basic assumptions about what constitutes appreciation, a work of art, creation and, indeed, human experience in general. The usual explanations that were formulated in relation to the arts fail to respond to the demands of environmental experience.

On the other hand, approaching environment from a philosophical, especially an aesthetic standpoint, requires us to revise our ideas about what environment is. The idea of environment, like all basic ideas, harbors deep philosophical assumptions—about the nature of our world, our experience, our selves. Their implications are as vast as a seascape, affecting not only environment from an aesthetic standpoint but ethical, social, and political theories, policies, and practices. These last are beginning the lengthy process of transformation, at least in Western industrial nations. As has usually been the case in the past, however, this cultural change precedes its philosophical vindication. With the idea of aesthetic environment, philosophy may yet join the vanguard.

The study of both aesthetics and environment, then, can have mutual benefit in this process of change, each enlightening the other. Let us begin by pursuing both directions, identifying some of the pertinent questions and reconsidering various answers, after which we can press the issues in particular ways. But it is necessary first to raise them.

The very notion of environment is problematic. What constitutes environment? The usual answer that it is our natural surroundings obviously will not do, for this overlooks the fact that most people's

lives are far removed from any kind of natural setting, yet everyone is involved with environment. Indeed, such a setting is even difficult to identify, since nature, in the sense of a landscape unaffected by human agency, has long since disappeared in nearly every region of the industrialized world. Most wilderness areas are not primeval nature but regions that reflect the earlier and ongoing consequences of human action in the form of land clearing, erosion, strip-mining, reforestation, acid rain, modifications of the surface of the land and in the distribution of water, alterations of climate induced by the vast expanses of paved surfaces in urbanized areas, introduced species of flora and fauna, and now the dessication of the ozone layer, from whose consequences in global warming and increased solar radiation no area of the planet is immune.

Yet the question of what environment denotes merely begins the process. For even if we expand the concept beyond the mythology of a pristine Eden to encompass the reshaped landscapes and built structures in which an increasing proportion of the world's population now lives, that does not settle the question. To think of environment in the usual sense as surroundings suggests that it lies outside the person, a container within which people pursue their private purposes. This is the geographical equivalent of the philosopher's external world. 'Environment,' moreover, is rarely defined by cultural geographers and cultural ecologists, whom we would most expect to face the question directly. Environmental researchers seem to assume that there is some *thing*, an environment, and that this environment is constituted by our physical surroundings. Philosophers tend to agree, sometimes including the cultural and spiritual setting. While custom and etymology may lead us to think of environment as surroundings, this idea harbors certain philosophical assumptions that are open to challenge on empirical as well as conceptual grounds. In spite of the readiness with which we speak of environment, the idea remains complex and elusive.<sup>1</sup>

It may already be apparent that I do not ordinarily speak of "the" environment. While this is the usual locution, it embodies a hidden meaning that is the source of much of our difficulty. For "the" environment objectifies environment; it turns it into an entity that

we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Where, however, can we locate “the” environment? Where is “outside” in this case? Is it the landscape that surrounds me where I stand? Is it the world outside my window? The walls of my room and house? The clothes I wear? The air I breathe? The food I eat? Yet the food metabolizes to become my body, the air swells my lungs and enters my bloodstream, my clothes are not only the outermost layer of my skin but complete and identify my style, my personality, my sense of self. My room, apartment, or home defines my personal space and world. And the landscape in which I move as I walk, drive, or fly is my world, as well, ordered by my understanding, defined by my movements, and molding my muscles, my reflexes, my experience, my consciousness at the same time as I attempt to impose my will over it. Indeed, many of us spend much of our lives in the electronic space of television and computer networks. “The” environment, one of the last survivors of the mind–body dualism, a distant place which we think to contemplate from afar, dissolves into a complex network of relationships, connections, and continuities of those physical, social, and cultural conditions that describe my actions, my responses, my awareness, and that give shape and content to the very life that is mine. For there is no outside world. There is no outside. Nor is there an inner sanctum in which I can take refuge from inimical external forces. The perceiver (mind) is an aspect of the perceived (body) and conversely; person and environment are continuous.

The biological science of ecology has begun to force a recasting of our sense of environment. Ecology, the study of the adaptive interaction of organisms with their total environment,<sup>3</sup> began in the latter part of the nineteenth century as a conceptual shift away from the analysis of the single species and its place in a hierarchical order of nature. It recognized that a process of mutual interaction takes place between the organism and the multitude of factors that constitute its environmental setting.<sup>4</sup> Like evolutionary theory of which it is a consequence, the ecological conception of environment requires a major conceptual shift whose acceptance is slow and painful. Even today, more than a century later, it remains locked in conflict with

anthropocentric attitudes that still regard environment as a place that is essentially opposed and hostile to human interests or at least separate and apart, and so properly subject to domination and exploitation.

Yet the ecological view continues to develop and gain in influence as part of the present-day emergence of widespread environmental consciousness. And at the same time the scope of the idea has become larger. The notion of an ecosystem has expanded the organism–environment interaction to encompass an entire community of bacteria, plants, and animals, joined with the physical, chemical, and geographical conditions under which they live. Moreover, proposals like the Gaia hypothesis, which James Lovelock originally proposed to explain the integrated self-regulating totality of Earth and its atmosphere, have been extended to envelop the entire planet as a complex, unified organiclike system of interdependent parts. We are slowly beginning to realize that no domain of our planet can any longer be regarded as an independent and sovereign realm. Indeed, the concept of environment as outside, external to the human organism, is a comforting notion now utterly discarded both by ecological studies and post-Cartesian philosophy.

We do not yet have language that can easily express these ideas of inclusion and continuity. The very word ‘landscape,’ for example, institutionalizes the conventional objectification of environment. Dictionaries reflect this attitude, commonly defining *landscape* in conformity with its etymology as either “an expanse of natural scenery seen by the eye in one view” or as “a picture representing a section of natural, inland scenery.”<sup>5</sup> Such a simple definition incorporates all sorts of tendentious suppositions, among them that landscape is visual, that it is bounded, and that it is distant.

One might expect representations of landscapes, one of the established genres of the visual arts, to reflect the same objectifying and distancing concepts. While this is sometimes true of landscape photographs, it is not the case with painting. While often conforming to the convention that frames landscapes as though they were being viewed through a window, paintings actually evoke scenes of compelling intimacy and immediacy. The work of Hobbema, the

van Ruisdaels, Corot, Constable, and many others, when seen from close up, typically lead the viewer into the space and features of the landscape, so that instead of an objectified panorama one can enter the space of the painting and join the scene. The viewer can move along the path in Jacob van Ruisdael's *Landscape with Footbridge*, no longer as an observer but as an active participant in the landscape. One can walk along the bank of the stream in Constable's *White Horse*, or move through a stand of trees to gaze across the water in Corot's *Ville d'Avray*. Painting can provide a lesson in the transmutation of landscape into environment.<sup>6</sup>

What would happen if we freed ourselves from the dictates of the dictionary? Despite the conventional connotation of the term 'landscape,' the experience of landscape need not offer us a visual expanse of the natural world, circumscribed by a frame or demarcated as a single visual field. Geographers speak of a cultural landscape, one shaped by the objects and changes by which people have imprinted their practices on the land through distinctive field patterns, farming practices, architectural styles, and settlements. The concept of an aesthetic landscape also emerges in their discussions, denoting the imprint of human attitudes, meanings, values, and sensibilities on their natural habitat. This is the beginning of an integrative view.

To grasp the landscape "as an intellectual, moral, and aesthetic statement of man as a human and a humane being" is far different from seeing it as a single visual array.<sup>7</sup> Here the landscape becomes the field of human action, not merely a visual object. Entering and participating in the landscape requires full sensory involvement. As an engaged participant, we approach the painterly landscape influenced by our meanings and our perceptual involvement. This is equally true whether the landscape be cultivated or wholly reconstructed by human agency into towns or cities. And it holds whether the landscape be primitive or wild, for humans have left their mark on every region once inhabited. Art and geography converge here.

There is yet a more fundamental concept that underlies our grasp of both environment and landscape, the very idea of nature itself. What do we mean by nature and the natural? While these are rich questions that have been discussed from many standpoints—sci-