

Beauty in the Eye of the Evaluator: Thinking on the Poetic Thought of Richard Payne Knight in *The Landscape*

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In the fourth chapter of *Nature*, published in 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson resolutely declared the substance of thought in linguistic exchange to be traceable to material concrete reality, the meanings of all words originating in ‘sensible things’.¹ Etymologically, however, he was quite mistaken.² Notwithstanding, what captured Emerson’s attention in the first place was not strictly the ‘truth’ of a historical linguistic analysis of thought but the path to an objective truth that language makes accessible through a style of poetic thought.³ Differing only in his preference for secularism over Emerson’s pantheistic transcendentalism, modernist philosopher Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970, ends up in approximately the same territory, repositioning truth away from subjective dictation and investing it in a specific object of thought, the artwork.⁴ The truth content contained at the heart of Emerson’s ‘language’ and Adorno’s ‘art’ converges at the coordinates determined by poetic thought, while terms used by the two such as ‘reason’ and ‘critique’⁵ are performative of and superintend the necessary first steps towards that truth. Late eighteenth-century British scholar of antiquities Richard Payne Knight employs in his expansive didactic poem *The Landscape* the same method of poetic thought intimated in the reason of Emerson and employed by the critique of Adorno, demonstrating how such thought functions in the performance of his critical system of landscape appreciation to extract from its object an expression of truth content as mediated nature. Specifically, Knight’s refusal to subscribe to Enlightenment aesthetic practice, and his theories of visual primacy and harmonic intermixture formed in contrast to it, comprises his unique position as a critic to harvest this truth-content from the object of his poem, a generalised yet, as we shall see, unerringly accurate image of the British environment.

Nearly a decade before propounding in-depth his theory of the overpowering visual nature of picturesque beauty achievable within landscape design and painting in *An Analytical Inquiry Into the*

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Nature’, in *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, ed. by James D. Hart and Phillip W. Leininger, 6th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

2 James McKusick, *Green Writing* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 124-125. McKusick proposes Emerson’s expectation for the concept of thought or thinking to originate in a concrete object, only to deflate it by relating that its etymology has forever been abstract. Indeed shaping the concept of thinking into words has by and large remained a cerebral pursuit since Proto-Indo-European.

3 J.H. Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought’, *Textual Practice*, 24 (2010), 595-606. The style of poetic thought here referenced is that addressed by Prynne, who supports Emerson where he writes ‘The activity of [poetic] thought resides at the level of language practice and indeed is in the language and is the language’ (p. 596).

4 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by G. Adorno, R. Tiedemann, and R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002).

5 Adorno writes: ‘Grasping truth content postulates critique. Nothing is grasped whose truth or untruth is not grasped, and this is the concern of critique’, p. 128.

Principles of Taste,⁶ Knight used his poem *The Landscape* as a base from which to offer a precursory formulation:

For nought but light and colour can the eye,
But through the medium of the mind, descry;⁷

The message here appears rather simple, especially from a modern scientific perspective that synonymises colour with the spectrum of all visible light. Merely, we learn that the eye as visual organ sees powered by the mind. Knight's true purpose, though, is to combat the Burkean cult of aesthetic synaesthesia preceding his theories that claimed the eye in its perception to be capable of intuiting smooth or rugged features in a strange associative tactility.⁸ What seems like empirical hair-splitting takes on a more weighty implication when we consider that Knight's point was exclusively concerned with a single object: physical reality entailed by landscape as a generalised environment or, in Adorno's term, a 'cultural landscape' originating in the 'the cult of the ruin'.⁹ Knight provides an example of his recognition of cultural landscapes at points where he extols the features of dilapidated Gothic castles, especially in scenes where 'Some ancient abbey's walls diffuse their shade; |With mouldering windows pierced, and turrets crown'd'.¹⁰ The inclusion of the ruins of ivy-conquered fortresses and tottering abbeys in the ideal landscapes of this period has received much critical attention as an example of the Gothic Revival, a movement concerned to accrue cultural capital as well as aesthetic renown.¹¹

Knight may be disposed by a deep commitment to the framework of his philosophical aesthetics, however, to treat these objects not as nationalistic emblems of a Britain moulded by a succession of conquests, but as material for an imaginative excavation of visually-derived truth content trapped within the mediated landscape as art object. The following stanza builds toward this concept:

As he who shines supreme in every art,
That guides the taste, or elevates the heart
And though successive ages roll away,
Systems on systems triumph and decay,
Empires on empires in oblivion fall,
And ruin spread alternate over all ;
Still lives unclouded in perpetual day¹²

⁶ Peter Funnel, 'Visible Appearances', in *The Arrogant Connoisseur*, ed. by Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), p. 88.

⁷ Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem In Three Books*, 2nd edn (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1795) <<https://archive.org/details/landscapedidacti00knig>> [accessed 15 December 2015], Book I, ll. 263-264.

⁸ Funnel, p. 90.

⁹ Adorno, p. 47.

¹⁰ Knight, Book II ll. 281-282.

¹¹ Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 36.

¹² Knight, Book I, ll. 197-205.

That the presence of ruins figures beyond national imperialistic objectives is made evident by the invocation of an almost deified poetic figure hovering over the *momento mori* of a foregone nation. Forced systems like empire crumble whilst a mediating figure retains access to a purer unburdened reality. The poetic thought inspired by Knight's aesthetic system accomplished in these lines correlates with Adorno's hope that if 'building materials have originated from and been integrated into the surrounding landscape, as for instance with chateaux and castles[...] A rationality that embraced these motifs would be able to help heal the wounds that rationality inflicted'.¹³ What the rationality established by 'integration' of these features of cultural landscape aims to achieve falls nothing short of Knight's entire aesthetic project: to demonstrate that natural beauty occurs most profitably for aesthetic contemplation where features visually meld and in their fusion obscure both their conjoinedness and the artifice allowing it:

The landscape's greatest art is aptly to conceal;
To lead, with secret guile, the prying sight
To where component parts may best unite,
And form one beauteous, nicely blended whole
To charm the eye and captivate the soul¹⁴

Of course, only the skilled eye of a connoisseur steeped in 'every art, | That guides the taste, or elevates the heart' retains the depth of penetration required to detect an abusive sense of 'order'.¹⁵ Positive rationality, then, is upheld and energized by a cognoscente's critique, in turn healing the 'wounds' that correspond to the earlier negative or pseudo-'rational' damage wrought by those who Knight describes as 'improvers', products of Enlightenment thought that seek 'To improve, adorn, and polish [...] | But shave the goddess, whom they come to dress'.¹⁶

Knight was not alone in his criticism of the Enlightenment tendency to mathematically reconfigure and mechanically distort systems demanding more natural effusions, in effect robbing them of a lush ambiguity effected through delicate modulations of sense, taste, and time. Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published a few years prior to *The Landscape*, registers his concerns about the same issues. In discussing the proposed formation of France's departments, communes, and regions, Burke in a sober but somewhat biting tone writes that 'The French builders, clearing away as mere rubbish whatever they found and, like their ornamental gardeners, forming everything into an exact level, propose to rest the whole local and general legislature on three bases of three different kinds'¹⁷ where before 'various accidents [...] settled their bounds'.¹⁸ The reference to 'ornamental' gardeners, of the same sort that Knight castigates, performs no uncertain work. Implications of excessive decoration or decadence underwrite both Knight and Burke's characterisation of an otherwise innocuous occupation.

¹³ Adorno, p.47.

¹⁴ Knight, Book I, ll. 192-196.

¹⁵ Ibid., ll. 197-198.

¹⁶ Ibid., ll. 279-280.

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 173.

¹⁸ Burke, p. 174.

They clip, shear, curtail, occlude, and deform a natural ‘ebb and flow’¹⁹ that prefers a just harmony for its evocation, summarised in Knight’s view as ‘accidental variety’.²⁰ This is not to imply, however, Knight condoned an absolute laissez-faire aesthetic attitude despite his preference for ‘unshorn’ beauty. His was still a system *per se*, functioning on a basis of rule and organisation that achieved certain premeditated and reproducible effects on the viewer, but one that, like Burke’s thoughts on tradition and historical conservative order, was distinguished by the disguise of its operation.²¹

The mysterious manner in which the hidden hand of Knight’s landscape caresses the viewer in the direction of ruminative aesthetic preoccupation, all the while concealing this very process, leads to an unwitting encounter with the truth lying under its surface.²² Immediately upon viewing a landscape designated as such, that is, a topography noted as distinct from others, there begins an ulterior and in many ways unconscious process of decoding in the mind of the viewer. Adorno relates the same phenomenon of a mysterious beckoning toward a hidden truth in art where he writes that ‘The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one [...] By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection’.²³ For Knight, philosophical reflection comes parcelled in the poetic thought that informs the more exacting parts of his delineation of proper aesthetic conventions. While true to say the entire poem attempts to distil an essence of that thought, it is mainly in *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, published nearly a decade after the raw, inspired, and polemical concerns formulated in *The Landscape*,²⁴ that we see a more fully formed presentation of it:

Even if the landscape scenery should be rendered really beautiful [...] its beauty will be that of a vain and affected coquette; which, though it may allure the sense, offends the understanding; and, on the whole, excites more disgust than pleasure. In all matters of this kind, the imagination must be conciliated before the eye can be delighted²⁵

The immoderation of Enlightenment improvement on landscape scenery here mentioned manages to stir the senses, the most immediate and rudimentary of faculties but, for that reason, fails when the higher orders of aesthetic contemplation require stimulation. Were we to exchange Knight’s term ‘imagination’ for Adorno’s philosophical ‘reflection’, both demonstrative of a pivotal meditative interiority, the frameworks undergirding their systems appear symmetrical. The point is that one must reflect subtly,

19 Burke, p. 174.

20 Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 94.

21 Liu, p. 95.

22 Such a motion recalls Martin Heidegger’s ‘most thought-provoking’ from the ninth chapter of his *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), that which as it ‘withdraws [...] keeps and develops its own incomparable nearness’ (p. 381) guiding one into thought.

23 Adorno, p.128.

24 To call *The Landscape* ‘polemical’, although referring to what were incredibly recherché aesthetic debates during the late eighteenth century, is not without justification. The second edition of Knight’s didactic poem opens with critiques of critiques that engage with the aesthetic minds of Lancelot “Capability” Brown, William Gilpin, and Humphry Repton.

25 Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 3rd edn (London: Luke Hansard for T. Payne and J. White, 1806) <<https://archive.org/details/analyticalinq01knig>> [accessed 16 March 2015], p. 170.

allotting the mental energy of thought to decipher the enigma presented by an artwork as in the role of a critic, in order to set about gaining access to the truth content it promises.

Thus art beckons thought, and thinking about art is the work of a critic. This sounds at first entirely reasonable, if not self-evident. For Knight just as much Adorno, though, the fact that the critic or viewer plays a part in the operation of the mechanism behind this beckoning is what truly demands explication. As Prynne reveals, poetic thought naturally flourishes in antagonistic struggle, since it is ‘brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language, by argument that will not let go but which may not self-admire’.²⁶ The conditionality of this statement admits the heightened social position from which Knight forms his aesthetic system; Knight, with his self-styled reputation as a connoisseur of the arcane and an elite visionary arbiter of beauty, enters into the antagonism inherent in poetic thought as a critic par excellence. The whole of *The Landscape* may be viewed, in the essence of its didactic objective, as a self-admiration of Knight’s proprietary emphasis on vision, emotion, and an unmediated mediation, the same ‘hidden hand’ mentioned earlier, in the language of aesthetics. Just as erudition was a necessary precondition to a successfully crafted statement on picturesque beauty in landscape,²⁷ the art critic, Adorno argues, reserves a special prerogative where it regards unpacking the truth of an artwork: ‘Only the pedant presumes to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly in nature, but without such distinction the concept of natural beauty would be empty’.²⁸ Aesthetic appreciation in Knight’s system, no different from the poetic thought that shapes it, relies on an interaction with the inherently dialectical nature of pre-existing claims of value. Adorno and Knight concur where they assert that the art critic commands a principal role in that interaction to contest, to reconcile, and at all ends to shape the truth that emerges from such activity.

Self-admiring or no, what results is an understanding that neither positive nor negative statements from the critic are capable in themselves of capturing beauty or combing through ugliness in a dialectical matrix of thought that necessitates an inherent relationality between the two. In their mutual treatment as part of a critical winnowing of one from the other, a separation that momentarily requires both to be seen in Knight’s term as ‘harmonious’, the objective aesthetic object appears. In a lengthy footnote, Knight is observed teasing out this train of thought where he recalls that ‘Rembrandt, Ostade, Teniers, and others of the Dutch painters, have produced the most beautiful pictures, by the most exact imitations of the most ugly and disgusting objects in nature’.²⁹ Here we see Knight participating in ‘the working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality’,³⁰ attempting to determine how a representational object visually detected modulates the mixture of beauty and ugliness owned by its source. The expositional prose elongates in dry array the poetic thought solidified in the lines it references. Knight’s theory of visual primacy re-emerges to instruct that it is only by means of a synthesis of disharmonious elements into a unified whole, occurring in the mind, that the conditions of beauty in

26 Prynne, p. 598.

27 Andrews, p. 4.

28 Adorno, p.70.

29 Knight, *The Landscape*, Book I, p. 22.

30 Prynne, p. 597.

the ugly materials of the Dutch masters can be generated. In the critical distance achieved from a statement on the interplay that results from such harmonious combination, an objective base from which to approach the enigma of the landscape takes shape.

This base allows for an opening of ontological space through which what Adorno refers to as the ‘spirit’³¹ of an artwork may be confronted. Notably, in his explanation of the relation of the spirit to truth and the methods by which both may be uncovered, Adorno communicates the fundamentals of Knight’s harmonising visual aesthetic theory: ‘By reading the spirit of artworks out of their configurations and confronting the elements with each other and with the spirit that appears in them, critique passes over into the truth of the spirit, which is located beyond the aesthetic configuration’.³² The mental extraction of disparate elements from out of a landscape in order to intermingle them imaginatively and visually in the mind’s eye greatly corresponds to the ‘confrontation’ Adorno describes. A unifying example of this can be found where Knight celebrates the Ancient Greek sculptor Lysippus’s design

Pure abstract beauty’s fleeting shades to trace,
And fix the image of ideal grace:
Combining what he felt with what he saw ;
And penetrating nature’s inmost law:³³

Total fixity of the visual aesthetic object or, in other words, a final settling of the ‘dialectical unsettling’³⁴ in the process of poetic thought, composes the resolution of the struggle to capture the ‘fleeting shades’ of beauty, each separate, flickering, and transitory. Adorno’s contention that ‘what transcends the factual in the artwork, its spiritual content, cannot be pinned down to what is individually, sensually given but is, rather, constituted by way of this empirical givenness’³⁵ resounds here to show the importance of a comprehensive visual management of an artwork in order to grasp its spirit. Knight confronts that spirit coursing through the landscape by championing a combination of ‘thought’ and ‘feeling’, leading to ‘nature’s inmost law’. This proclivity for equating thought and feeling to discover the spirit of an artwork, like other Romantic period authors,³⁶ reveals the method by which Knight realises the ‘inmost’³⁷ place of ‘mediate nature’, or the truth content of an artwork.³⁸ Adorno corroborates the possibility of access to truth content through thought and feeling where he writes that ‘the strongest buttress of subjective aesthetics, the concept of aesthetic feeling, derives from objectivity, not the reverse’.³⁹ Thus adherence to the visual primacy of truth interpreted ‘through the medium of the mind’⁴⁰ determines mediated nature.

31 Adorno, p. 129.

32 Ibid., p. 88.

33 Knight, *The Landscape*, Book I, ll. 71-74.

34 Prynne, p. 599.

35 Adorno, p. 129.

36 David Vallins, *Coleridge and The Psychology of Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

37 Knight, *The Landscape*, Book I, l. 74.

38 Adorno, p. 78.

39 Ibid., p. 164.

40 Knight, *The Landscape*, Book I, l. 264.

As we have seen, the aesthetic system of Richard Payne Knight, in its determination on unmediated visuality, the central station of the critic, and the function of melding and harmonic interplay between isolated features, dilates across time to converge with complementary aspects of Theodor Adorno's own thought, albeit each with its own contemporary objective. By composing *The Landscape*, expressing his critical theory of natural beauty through a style of poetic thought, Knight confronts the mediated quality of a silent nature. Previous Enlightenment period systems of aesthetic thought on landscape stressed the importance of mathematical accuracy and refined proportions determined 'With charts, pedometers, and rules in hand'.⁴¹ As a result, nature found itself divided into symmetrical clumps of byzantine pomp. The problem with this, Knight reveals, is that these systems sought to mediate a nature that was already fully mediated. The framed view from a fixed perspective chosen from a desire to cordon off a visible patch of land from that communicating with it, allowing it physical seclusion and mental space to transmute into a unique art object self-intermingling, made an effort to aestheticize what was already an aesthetic object hopelessly redundant. No tools, at least where their trace would appear visible, are required to coerce the landscape into compliance with art. To even refer to the object by that name, landscape, clues us into its mediated nature: not simply land, but the condition or quality of land, apportioned from and elevated beyond all else. Where Knight inveighs against improvement, we are to understand that in the very performance of aesthetic philosophical critique we are reading, he substitutes for an abstract landscape disconnected by formal rule an image of a Britain that he evokes through critical poetic thought; in *The Landscape*, Knight shows us not simply the formulations of a propriety aesthetic, but *the landscape* per se, the only aesthetic manifestation of natural beauty which it is possible to see unreservedly.

41 Knight, *The Landscape*, Book I, l. 276.

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