Figure And Landscape In The Work Of John Anderson

In the nineteen fifties, in England, the cultural historian C.P. Snow introduced, for better or for worse, the idea of a cultural war, in our way of looking at the world, between the sciences and the so-called humanities, the latter term representing a somewhat loose amalgamation of disciplines which, for Snow, included literature and the arts, the historian himself apparently unaware at the time that he was drawing his famous – or infamous – distinction that a person was about to be born, in Yorkshire, who, in the course of his life would prove the irrelevance of such mutually exclusive categories by embodying both poles of the opposition not only in himself but in his work, both as a neuro-scientist at the ETH and as a painter in Switzerland.

John Anderson was born in Hull, on the East Coast of England, where the River Humber flows into the sea. Even as a school-boy he drew and painted, though he had to wait until he turned thirteen to discover oils, for that was when he received as a gift from his father, an inveterate smoker, his first paint set, a bonus to a faithful customer from the local cigarette company. Though John might not have known it at the time, he was on his way to becoming a landscape painter. Heir to that world of changing elements, of land and sea and sky, weather and water, how could he have become anything else – if not a neuro-scientist?

Oddly, though, if we look at the development of landscape painting as an independent genre, if we follow even if only for the briefest of moments the history of turning "landscape into art", in the words of the British art historian Kenneth Clark, we discover that we cannot follow the story without referring not only to what appears to happen in the course of time but also to what appears to disappear. Think, if you will, of the gold background we find in the paintings of Giotto, himself a magnificent observer of nature in his work, a background which is often associated with an unchanging "eternity", and its replacement with the variously colored – "temporary" – skies of later "naturalistic" painting. Think, for example, of what happened to Fra Angelico's "Crucifixion", now in the Louvre, when the painter's original gold background was painted over, later, by an unknown artist, "modernized", so to speak, and made black, with all that that change might imply. Think of the idealizing landscapes of Claude, reprised by Turner, and in the course of Turner's work think of the gradual freeing of the painting from any recognizable narrative, religious, mythological, or historical, from any namable object, or thing, until what we see, or think we see, is light itself, in its effects, its colors. Think, too, of the work of the French Impressionists, especially that of the later Monet, and, more recently, of the land- and seascapes of Nicolas de Stäel; and you will see that in the

course of figurative painting what we can observe is the gradual disappearance of the figure from the landscape.

It is sometimes said that people began to write poetry in praise of nature in England only at the time that it was being destroyed; that Wordsworth, for example, the great English Romantic poet, rather than being the celebrant of the British countryside was actually its great mourner, as the Industrial Revolution removed exactly what it was he could only refigure in art. A similar claim could be made for the unpeopled landscapes of the later Impressionist painters in France, that far from simply celebrating the harmonies of nature they were actually expressing a longing for what was in danger of being lost right before their eyes.

And yet….

All landscape painters are visionaries, in the sense that they present us with a vision of what they see, of landscape, and that John Anderson belongs, at least in part, to this tradition of seeing can be seen by us here in his painting of the River Humber, where the river flows out into the sea near Hull. This flowing is also a part of the movement of the painting, though our experience of the pictorial world is different than what we would actually see regarding that scene, as our regard rises, literally, on the flat surface of a canvas into what, metaphorically, is both a series of planes receding from us and a depiction of the suspended place of union, or re-union, the "horizon", where sky and water meet and difference dissolves: in human terms, Eros and Thanatos at once.

But John Anderson can also be a playful visionary in his way of "seeing things", as when, looking down from the balcony of his apartment on Zurich's Clausiusstrasse at the lines tarred into the asphalt, he saw emerging the figure of a woman, and refigured the imagined seen, the greys of the street surviving in the greys of the opulent forms of the feminoid figure in the painting.

But there is a more disturbing visionary at work here as well, a listener to dreams, an habitué of nightmare visions.

We have a glimpse of this "visionary" aspect of John Anderson's work in his handling of a figure taken from a Mapplethorpe photograph, where the painter, in a dream, saw that the figure he had been painting would have to be rotated ninety degrees: no longer vertical, as in Mapplethorpe's photograph of a sitting man, but horizontal, in an "impossible" position, in other words, with no real "support" – at least impossible for realistic painting; but an occasion, for the visionary artist, to liberate the painting from exactly that photographic "realism" that was its source in order to discover a further real: in this case, a psychological

study of the confinement of the figure, even – depending on how we "read" the vertical bars added by the painter to the original image – as a form of imprisonment within the work of art.

In John Anderson's paintings there is almost no perspective, not in the traditional sense of the term, and in only one work, "Crouching Figure", do we find an interior space drawn somewhat as in traditional painting, partially receding from us; but unlike the space in a traditional perspective painting this "vision" appears to go nowhere, only into the dark. It is, in fact, only the left window that is "done in perspective" (and remember that the word, perspective, means "seeing through", as in a window), only we can't see anything in this window. It seems to recede from us, to indicate a depth of a different sort, a darker space, altogether unknown, and thus mysterious; while a crouching human figure, confined within a separate space, a space with no perspective at all, appears menaced and afraid.

In the large blackish painting we discover, instead of a recession into space, the emergence of a figure from the interior: an ape-like figure, looking out at us, haunted and haunting at once, and perhaps not without relation – secret as that link may be – to the work John Anderson does as a neuro-scientist. Only here the tables have been turned on the examiner, and it is the dream-like figure that surges forward to regard us. Notice how in this work what we have come to think of as traditional landscape painting has suffered another knock at the hands of the painter: the defining horizontals of landscape space have gone vertical; the division into fore-, middle-and background has been elided; and rather than a receding and diminishing interior what we have is its opposite: the coming out of a spectral figure to challenge us in our own place of vision.

In his earlier paintings John Anderson applied paint mostly with a brush; more recently, he has used the palette knife; and in the most recent works has turned to a piece of cloth or a rag, dabbing and daubing the pigment onto the surface in such a way that the possibility of a smooth "finish" is destroyed in the very process of creating the work. It may be that this rough texture is what will continue to link the work of John Anderson to that of Lucien Freud, just as John Anderson's rejection of a certain "beauty" – difficult as such a rejection or refusal is to maintain given the sheer seductiveness of paint – will continue to remind us of the surfaces of Frank Auerbach's work. It may be that the love of his native Yorkshire countryside will one day connect him, in ways still unknown to us, to David Hockney's recent landscapes.

We will have to wait to see.

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