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# Aesthetic and Other Values in the Rural Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses some relationships between aesthetic and non-aesthetic reasons for valuing rural landscape, i.e., landscape shaped by predominantly non-aesthetic purposes. The first part is about the relationship between aesthetic reasons and considerations of utility and argues for an intimate connection between them. The next part considers the relationship between aesthetic and other non-instrumental reasons for valuing landscape and argues that there are important contingent but no essential connections between them. The third part considers the strength or weakness of aesthetic reasons for resisting landscape changes that would result from changes in land use.

## KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, beauty, utility, instrumental value, preservation

## INTRODUCTION

Rural scene, a rural scene,  
Sweet especial rural scene.

In this paper I shall be concerned with the aesthetic significance or interest of rural landscape,<sup>1</sup> meaning by that land which is populated by human beings and worked on by them, exploiting its natural resources, especially by agriculture, aquaculture and silviculture; but excluding areas densely built over and housing human beings living and working in close proximity.<sup>2</sup> Rural landscape is an important object of aesthetic interest and enjoyment; aesthetic reasons are among the reasons people have for valuing rural landscape. But they are only one kind of reason for valuing rural landscape. The object of this paper is to distinguish aesthetic reasons from reasons of other kinds and to examine some important relationships between aesthetic and non-aesthetic reasons in this context. I discuss first the relationship between aesthetic reasons and reasons of utility; then I distinguish, and consider the often subtle relationships between, different non-instrumental kinds of interest in rural landscape. Finally I suggest the bearing on the problem of landscape preservation of the preceding discussion of aesthetic and non-aesthetic reasons for valuing rural landscape.

## BEAUTY AND UTILITY: THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN LANDSCAPE APPRECIATION

Rural landscape is to a greater or lesser extent artefactual.<sup>3</sup> Most of it is not designed to reward aesthetic contemplation, though some is. In England the extensive parks surrounding the great houses of the aristocracy were designed in accordance with conscious aesthetic principles. The landscapes thus created may be regarded as large scale works of art. Utilitarian elements, such as farms and their buildings were either hidden or incorporated into the design. But however extensive such estates they are not typical of rural landscape. Most land that has been cultivated has been shaped by predominantly non-aesthetic purposes, even if aesthetic notions have played a minor role. Land that has been shaped for purposes of utility, as farm land or woodland, has aesthetic character, features that can be viewed aesthetically, found beautiful, ugly etc.; but – a crucial difference – these aesthetic features are consequences of the use for which the land has been primarily designed. It is in this kind of case, rather than in the artistic landscape, that the relationship between the aesthetic and the utilitarian or practical is especially problematic.

It is certainly possible for the aesthetic and the practical points of view to come apart. They may compete in a practical way, and either may be subordinated to the other. When farmers plant large fields of rape, producing huge areas

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of bright yellow in the landscape, or clear hedgerows to make the best use of machines, there is a marked change in the aesthetic character of the landscape, and, in the opinion of many, a loss of aesthetic value. On the other hand when farmers are paid to replace hedges, or to maintain them, to compensate them for the loss of income from intensive cultivation, reasons that are in part aesthetic – wildlife conservation is also commonly invoked – are used to displace reasons of farming utility.

It is possible in theory to make a distinction between a purely practical point of view, that of the farmer *qua* farmer for instance, and a purely aesthetic point of view, that of the connoisseur of landscape beauty. In practice of course the two points of view commonly coexist in the same person and interact in various ways. For one thing the practical viewpoint has its own aesthetic: many, perhaps most, craftsmen and women believe that if some article of use, such as a teapot or a chair, is well made it is aesthetically pleasing, at least that being well made is a necessary condition of aesthetic worth, and a positive contributing factor. An example relevant to the aesthetics of landscape appreciation is the attitude of farmers who regard tidiness as a sign of good farming, and whose aesthetic sense is offended by the sight of untidy fields. In a survey by the British Countryside Commission of post WW2 changes in agricultural landscapes it was noted:

... that a farmer's view of amenity is very much conditioned by his role as a food producer. This results in the frequently expressed view 'if it's farmed well, it looks good'. Thus many farmers do not object at all to bare landscapes provided that the farming is technically efficient. Conversely, an area, which is liberally supplied with overgrown hedges, copses and wet places, although of delight to the naturalist [and to the connoisseur of landscape], will usually generate a strong desire to 'tidy it up'. Indeed it was not unusual to find 'visual improvement' expressed as a major reason for hedge removal by farmers in the study areas, particularly if the hedges had begun to look weak and ragged.<sup>4</sup>

The implicit aesthetic may be criticised as inadequate. Being well farmed is too indeterminate, indeed too contested a notion to provide a criterion of aesthetic quality. A specification of good farming that itself lacked any aesthetic requirement would surely fail as a sufficient condition of aesthetic worth. The cited example of hedge removal illustrates this point. Although there may be aesthetic compensations for their removal it is implausible to suggest that changes in the landscape dictated by agricultural need will automatically result in aesthetic improvement. It is hard to suppress the suspicion that economic interest may produce a false aesthetic sensibility. An aesthetic wholly determined by practical concerns is one-eyed.

An aesthetic wholly detached from practical concerns is however equally one-eyed. There is no doubt that many of us find aesthetically pleasing the traditional enclosed landscape characteristic of the agrarian practices of the three or so centuries preceding the recent growth of mechanisation. Many of

the aesthetic qualities that are valued are consequences of particular methods of cultivation. But it is possible to view a pattern of small fields divided by hedges in abstraction from the farming needs to which its appearance is indebted. What objection can there be to a form of aesthetic appreciation that disregards the utilitarian aspect of the object it contemplates? Why should the connoisseur of landscape not say that the aesthetic qualities are what he or she is interested in; how they come to be is immaterial?

A reply might be not that such an approach is inadequate from an aesthetic point of view, but that a purely aesthetic response to landscape, at least if that means a response to its formal and sensory qualities alone, is inadequate just because it is purely aesthetic. At best an appreciation of countryside that dwells on such qualities is likely to be limited and superficial; at worst it may be grotesquely insensitive to facts that it is not decent to ignore. This objection may be developed by considering John Ruskin's critique, in *Modern Painters*, of the contemporary school of picturesque painting. Ruskin distinguishes between the lower and the higher or noble picturesque (Turner being of course the outstanding exponent of the higher).

To illustrate the difference he compares two pictures of windmills, one by Clarkson Stansfield, the other by Turner. Stansfield's mill is a romantically dilapidated object in the landscape: its roof is 'nearly as interesting in its ruggedness as a piece of the stony peak of a mountain'; the clay wall is 'as beautiful as a piece of chalk cliff, all worn into furrows by the rain'. These signs of decrepitude, which contribute to its 'merely outward delightfulness', are not essential to it, indeed are detrimental to it, as a mill. Turner's mill on the other hand conveys accurate information about structure and function; it depicts what a windmill *is*, which is inseparable from what it *does*.

The objection to depicting it as just an interesting rustic feature, ignoring its function as a *mill*, is not only that this is to withhold information, but that in so doing it ignores the human beings whose way of life depends upon it, who work it, supply it, and eat its products. To depict objects for the sake of variety of form and colour, 'without any regard for the real nature of the thing, and without any comprehension of the pathos of character hidden beneath' constitutes the lower or 'surface' picturesque. The distinction between the higher and lower forms, then, rests on whether the painter has 'communion of heart' with the things he depicts:

For, in a certain sense, the lower picturesque ideal is eminently a *heartless* one; the lover of it seems to go forth into the world in a temper as merciless as its rocks. All other men feel some regret at the sight of disorder and ruin. He alone delights in both; it matters not of what. Fallen cottage – desolate villa – deserted village – blasted heath – mouldering castle – to him, so that they do but show jagged angles of stone and timber, all are sights equally joyful. Poverty, and darkness, and guilt, bring in their several contributions to his treasury of pleasant thoughts. The shattered window, opening into black and ghastly rents of wall,

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the foul rag or straw wisp stopping them, the dangerous roof, decrepit floor and stair, ragged misery, or wasting age of the inhabitants, – all these conduce, each in due measure, to the fullness of his satisfaction. What is it to him that the old man has passed his seventy years in helpless darkness and untaught waste of soul? The old man has at last accomplished his destiny, and filled the corner of a sketch, where something of an unshapely nature was wanting.<sup>5</sup>

Ruskin is talking here about painting. But the point he is making is about the attitude to its *subjects* revealed in the painting. His point therefore applies more generally, not just to painters of landscape, but to anyone who looks at landscape with that attitude.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion of his critique of the lower picturesque is that the aesthetic standpoint, so far as cultural objects, including landscapes, are concerned, cannot legitimately be isolated from non-aesthetic considerations, certainly not from considerations about the quality of life of people and animals who use the objects or occupy the landscape.

The contemporary urban visitor to the countryside may not be *heartless*, but his enjoyment of the landscape may well be *heedless*. By heedlessness I mean either simple unawareness of significant facts about the landscape or deliberate disregard of such facts. The former produces an aesthetic appreciation that is uninformed and hence superficial, the latter one that is at worst perversely whimsical.

The most extreme form of unawareness is failure to recognise the part played by human activity in creating the character of the landscape. It is only relatively recently that it has been widely recognised that what were supposed to be wilderness areas in the New World owed their character, or important features of it, to the activities of people who were there when it was 'discovered'. Awareness of the extent to which the landscape has been formed by generations of human occupation, and of how it has been formed, is still probably quite limited on the part of the majority of lovers of rural landscape. One misapprehension then may be that the rural landscape is purely natural. Such comprehensive ignorance is hard to achieve in a country, such as the UK, most of whose land has been shaped by agriculture in ways that are quite obvious. But a detailed understanding of the forces, technological, social and economic, that conspire to determine the character of the landscape of a particular time and place is not automatically available on the mere survey. The changes in agriculture in recent decades have led to a widespread recognition that new methods of cultivation can transform a landscape, but without necessarily shifting, indeed perhaps reinforcing, the assumption that the preceding landscape was natural, the immemorial setting of an idyllic rural life. This, the Arcadian myth, may be barely conscious, the misty remnant of impressions gained from stories, poems and pictures.

The person I have termed the connoisseur of landscape beauty – perhaps a strawman – may be unimpressed by Ruskin's critique. He can agree that to be ignorant of the human significance of rural landscape is deplorable. But he may still contend that the aesthetic aspects of the landscape are in principle separable

from and may be appreciated in abstraction from its utilitarian, and indeed from its moral and social, aspects. The aesthetic character of the landscape is a causal consequence of the land's having been formed for particular purposes. But once created that aesthetic character exists in its own right and is there to be perceived and appraised without awareness of why and how it came to be there.

The first response to make to the connoisseur is to concede that a possible mode of aesthetic response is to concentrate upon the sensory and formal qualities of a landscape or of particular objects within it in abstraction from their practical aspect. A rural landscape may be viewed as a rich tapestry of forms, colours and textures, sounds and smells, varying with the seasons and atmospheric changes. So viewed there are no fields, hedges, walls, gates, barns or sheepfolds, no pasture, ploughed fields, copses, haystacks or muckheaps. These are all functional concepts and we are supposing a mode of perception in which nothing is perceived as falling under such concepts. There is no need to deny that the aesthetic interest of rural landscape is in part, even in large part, due to elements that can be described in broadly sensory terms, and certainly in non-functional terms. That these elements are the consequence of particular methods of cultivation does not mean that they cannot be perceived and enjoyed without knowledge of their reason for being there. But they are not commonly perceived in isolation. It would be a difficult, though not an impossible, feat to describe a particular landscape without using functional concepts, and that indicates that such an abstract mode of perception is highly artificial. The experience yielded by it would be impoverished by comparison with the fuller composite experience which incorporates awareness of other, non-aesthetic aspects of the landscape. An analogy would be looking at a football match simply as a temporally extended pattern of swiftly evolving spatial configurations, in abstraction from its being a contest between two sets of more or less skilful human players, the spatial configurations being the result of the players' attempt to score. The act of abstraction may be worth doing from time to time, to heighten awareness of one aesthetic element in the total experience. But it is the total experience that matters.

But this response concedes too much if it implies that the abstracted formal and sensory aspects exhaust the aesthetic element in the total experience, for that is to concede that the aesthetic character of landscape is in principle separable from its character as, for example, farmland. That would be to ignore the existence of what Kant called dependent beauty, that is to say beauty that can be attributed to a thing only on account of its being a thing of a certain kind. I shall illustrate the notion by taking as example the product of a rural craft. Swill-baskets, traditionally used for many purposes on the farm and in the home, are woven from riven strips of coppiced oak, on bools (hoops) of hazel which form the basket rims. These baskets are to the uninstructed glance attractive enough, but their aesthetic interest is much enhanced by an understanding of how their shape is determined by the requirements of use, facilitated but also limited by

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the properties of the materials and the manipulative skill of the maker. Why have a basket this shape? How can these materials take this shape? What manipulations are necessary to form them? One will not have these items of information consciously in mind, but they inform the perceiving eye. The shapes are simple but graceful: the shallow or deep curves are the curves that riven oak naturally takes when bent. The strips are under stress, giving the basket liveliness and tension, but they are tough and substantial, giving it a robust and businesslike appearance. The basket is handsome and handy; its handsomeness is inseparable from its handiness, for it results from a cooperation of material and maker in the production of an artefact perfectly adapted to a practical use.<sup>7</sup>

It will not do in such cases to say that the abstract gaze can in principle separate the formal aesthetic qualities of the object from its character as a utensil. Admittedly it would be possible to place one of the baskets on a plinth in an art gallery, and a visitor ignorant of its use might admire its proportions, viewing it as a piece of abstract sculpture. As an abstract sculpture, however, it might seem rather crude, lacking in delicacy, too chunky to be really graceful and quite roughly finished. These qualities do not detract from its attractiveness as a basket. Greater refinement and delicacy would make it appear fragile and insubstantial, a bit flimsy. Viewed, and even more used, as a basket, it is satisfyingly tough, yet light and springy, balances comfortably on the hip, and the unstripped bark is agreeably rough to the touch.

I have been making use of Frank Sibley's illuminating treatment of the distinction between predicative and attributive uses of adjectives in aesthetic judgements.<sup>8</sup> To say, predicatively, that a basket is beautiful is to say that it is beautiful – for instance that it has a beautiful shape – and, as it happens, is a basket. In this case the judgement that the basket is beautiful does not require the knowledge that it is a basket. To say, attributively, that this is a beautiful *basket* is to imply some essential relationship between the object's being a basket and its being beautiful. Sibley's suggestion, which I follow, is that in attributive judgements the noun – 'basket' in my example – indicates standards of appropriateness for the application of the adjective. Thus, in my treatment of the example, I have argued that if and only if one knows what a swill basket is one knows what qualities are and what are not appropriate to it as the kind of utensil it is; one's assessment of a particular basket as a handsome one of its kind employs that knowledge. It is this essential connection between aesthetic judgement and an awareness of the uses of elements of the rural landscape that I wish to emphasise. It goes beyond the idea contained in my first response to the connoisseur, that the aesthetic aspect is but one element in a complex composite experience, and one that is in principle separable, if not often in practice separated, from the practical aspects of the composite. That aesthetic judgements of rural landscapes are mostly and most importantly attributive I have not by any means established. I set it down as a plausible claim. To support it I might suggest for consideration a few random examples: why the encroachment of



bracken on fell grazing is aesthetically unpleasing; why well constructed dry-stone walls are immensely impressive, while picturesquely dilapidated ones are unsightly; why overgrown hedges, gappy at the bottom, unlike dense and neatly layered ones offend the eye; why a ploughed field with evenly spaced furrows in sweeping lines following the contours of the land is a magnificent sight. A full demonstration would require an examination of a variety of rural landscapes and would be a large undertaking.<sup>9</sup>

The case for an aesthetic approach to rural landscape that is informed by an understanding of the practical functions of that landscape does not require rejection of the abstracted, non-functional, view. The functional approach however greatly extends the range of qualities available for aesthetic appreciation, and may reveal qualities worthy of appreciation in landscapes that would otherwise appear aesthetically neutral or even ugly.<sup>10</sup>

Such an approach is, of course, a non-user's approach. An aesthetic interest in the practical aspect of a landscape is not a practical interest. The user is, strictly as such, not interested in the aesthetic qualities of the landscape at all.<sup>11</sup> The aesthetically engaged non-user is interested in the utilitarian features as bearers of the aesthetic qualities that she values. Practical reasons are one kind of instrumental reason. The farmer, *qua* farmer, is interested in the land as productive of crops; he values it as a means to a further end. Aesthetic reasons, on the other hand, are non-instrumental. To have an aesthetic interest in the land is to value it, not for the sake of some further end, but simply for its beauty.<sup>12</sup> That is still true when the beauty is specifically the kind of beauty that a landscape has *as* an agricultural one.

#### AESTHETIC AND OTHER FORMS OF NON-INSTRUMENTAL INTEREST IN RURAL LANDSCAPE

Aesthetic reasons are non-instrumental reasons, and aesthetic interest a form of non-instrumental interest. But there are other forms of non-instrumental interest in landscape, and it is worthwhile to consider the relationships between some of these on the one hand and aesthetic interest on the other. First I list four different varieties of non-instrumental interest in landscape, other than aesthetic, of which the first applies to landscape of any kind, the other three to cultural landscape specifically.

First is the non-instrumental interest of the geologist, the geographer, the natural historian or the ecologist (using these terms to include the professional and the serious amateur practitioner), when the aim of the scientist is simply to understand nature, not to control it or exploit its resources.

Second is the interest of the historian or the archeologist (again including the well-informed layperson as well as the professional) in the landscape as the product and record of human activity in the past.

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Third is a more specialised and personally motivated kind of historical interest: a person's interest in the landscape of an area historically associated with his or her own people, nation, community or family, an interest typically shared with other members of the group.

Fourth and last (but not least) I put the interest arising from a person's attachment as an individual to a local landscape which is home, the place where one belongs and knows one's way about.

These are all cases of interest in knowing. In each case the reasons for acquiring knowledge may, by some persons and on some occasions, be instrumental. But I shall assume that in each case knowledge may also be pursued for its own sake, not for any further end that it may serve. It may seem needless to remark that the scientific, the historical and the aesthetic are different forms of non-instrumental interest, but there is a possibly influential view that would assimilate any disinterested activity or interest to the aesthetic just on account of its being disinterested, in the sense set out by Kant in his account of 'pure judgements of taste'.<sup>13</sup> The activities or kinds of interest I have mentioned have disinterestedness as a common feature, in so far as they are pursued without a further end in view, but their different objects, beauty and various forms of truth, distinguish them from one another. Nor is the aesthetic the prime exemplar of disinterestedness, so to use it as a broad category serves no useful purpose and obscures important differences.

If the connections and disconnections I discuss in what follows seem obvious, I can only plead that experience of philosophical discussion convinces me that what is obvious can differ disconcertingly from one person to another.

The non-aesthetic kinds of interest are themselves related to one another in various ways. For example, natural history may look at the way plant communities in a particular area, from a region to a field, have changed with changes in land use. Interest in the history of landscape in general may enhance one's sense of the past of one's native landscape. The relationships that I propose to look at, however, are between each of these four and the aesthetic interest in landscape.

First some remarks on the relation between the aesthetic and biological or ecological interest. Conservationists sometimes seem to assume a correlation between them, but naturally have more to say about the criteria for assessing biological value. There may be a relationship in that a landscape that is rich in species is likely to be visually as well as biologically diverse. The preference for hedgerows, for instance, can be justified in both ways. Much of the diversity of species, however, is only visible to the naturalist who knows about the insect life under the detritus of fallen and decaying matter in the hedge bottom. That is not to say that there is no beauty in the view that the naturalist gets crawling on all fours in the undergrowth. Nature reveals different aspects of its beauty at different focal distances. But when we speak of areas of natural beauty we mostly have in mind the broad view, and in that perspective biodiversity mat-

ters aesthetically only as it affects elements that contribute to that view: variety of species of tree, wild flowers and grasses, species of fauna, especially birds, butterflies, and dragonflies, the most visible and, in the case of birds, audible inhabitants of most temperate landscapes.

So there is a non-accidental association, but not an invariable one and certainly not a necessary one. Diversity of species does not necessarily imply aesthetic interest, nor does lack of diversity mean lack of aesthetic interest. An ecological change that is biologically an impoverishment may be an aesthetic enhancement, or simply a change in aesthetic character. A good example is the change in the landscape of Huntingdonshire described by N.W. Moore, one-time ecologist with the Nature Conservancy Council. Looking back to the 1940s from the late 1980s he writes of:

a closed secret world of little grass fields surrounded by thick overgrown hedges ... It was rather a claustrophobic place. However, the lack of view was made good by the interest of things at one's feet: the meadow was full of conspicuous plants like cowslips and inconspicuous ones like Adder's Tongue ferns. Today Huntingdonshire has a totally different atmosphere. It is an open land with wide views – one can see the shape of the low rolling hills. They are now covered with wheat and barley ... It is a good county to drive through but a dull one to walk in.<sup>14</sup>

If there is a reason to prefer the earlier landscape it seems less likely to be an aesthetic than an ecological one.

There is some reason to think that aesthetic taste can follow ecological interests. Landscape architects contrast the aesthetic and the ecological style of associating different plants together, and there is a movement in the taste of practitioners towards preference for the association of plants grouped together because they are ecologically compatible: such groupings come to look better.<sup>15</sup> This kind of adaptation tempts one towards relativism about taste, but that may be too hasty. Once the eye is accustomed to the new kind of association one may become aware of more subtle harmonies of form and texture and colour. This then may be an example of the eye being trained to notice beauties of a less obvious kind. It is still not an example of an ecological value being itself an aesthetic value.

To turn to the relation between the aesthetic and the historical, I find another example of Moore's instructive. He discusses in his book the value of lowland heath, in particular the heathland of Dorsetshire. After giving some examples of rare species to be found there, which make the heath of great biological interest, he goes on without pause to give two further reasons for finding it interesting: 'When heather and gorse are in flower they are spectacularly beautiful. They have changed little for hundreds of years, except in extent, and thus they provide landscapes which we share with our forebears'.<sup>16</sup> Heathland has no economic value now, but it had once. It results from human activity in the distant past,

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and had, until comparatively recently, an economic function, as grazing and a source of bedding, fuel and fodder, as readers of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* know. So a historically aware viewer is likely to look at it not simply as visually beautiful but as the still visible testimony to a way of life with which she can feel continuous. The phrase 'landscapes that we share with our forebears' calls to mind Alan Holland's cogent argument for the importance of historical perspective in making judgements of the value of natural features: 'The value of these situations which we should be seeking to uphold lies in the way that the constituent items and the places which they occupy are intertwined with and embody the life-history of the community of which they form a part'.<sup>17</sup> What I wish to add, in relating this insight to the aesthetic dimension, is that the fact that a community's way of life has produced a beautiful landscape is one reason to be interested in and moved by that landscape's history. Conversely, to understand the history of the landscape enriches and adds poignancy to the enjoyment of its aesthetic features.

However much the experience of landscape may be enriched by their coexistence in consciousness, we can still distinguish between the historically interesting features of the landscape and the contingently related aesthetic quality of these features. They can be quite independent. In the first place we can clearly respond to a scene as pretty, lovely, beautiful, commonplace, bland, dreary and so on, without knowing anything about its history. Equally we can know the history of a landscape from a written account without having first hand experience of it. While the historical narrative may be moving or fascinating, so that following it is an aesthetic experience, I think we would hesitate to say that this would be enough to justify speaking of an aesthetic response *to the landscape*. For that one needs some first hand experience. If however one follows the narrative on the ground, perhaps with a guide who can point out the significance of its observable features, that may constitute an aesthetic experience, one which has a major intellectual component. It may be an engrossing one even though, viewed ahistorically, the landscape is a dreary decaying one.

The kind of aesthetic experience that is most intimately involved with history is that of the landscape associated with a person's own history, or with that of his or her family or community. The two may be the same, but urbanisation ensures that for most they are different. For the town dweller to visit the country is often to recover in imagination the sense of being part of a more natural environment. Our feeling for natural beauty is, in Collingwood's words, concentrated upon 'the spectacle of a rural society living in the pursuit of traditional arts and deeply rooted in a landscape which has in part created it and in part been created by it. Such a society is the pit whence we were digged; it is what we all were before the industrial revolution.'<sup>18</sup> The response to the beauty of the landscape is more intense because of the sense of connectedness, and may be further intensified by an accompanying sense of a connection lost. One can become attached to a landscape because of its beauty, quite independently of any personal connection

with it. But it is perhaps more commonly the case that attachment to the beauty of a landscape results from, or is reinforced by, a different kind of attachment, either personal or ancestral.

That is especially so in the case of the landscape in which one's aesthetic sensibility was formed, and whose features are associated with significant events in one's early life. This is complicated, reinforced and enriched if that was also the landscape of one's ancestors. One's identity is then bound up with two intertwined histories, of the landscape and of the people who made it. The personal association functions in three ways. Firstly, one is likely to be fond of a place that one has known and received one's first impressions from, and being fond of a place, like being fond of a person, normally means liking the look of it, even though, viewed impersonally, it is not very beautiful. Secondly, knowing something well means being sensitive to those aspects of it in which beauty is to be found, but only by the discerning and accustomed eye. Thirdly, love of a place as home and love of its beauty are mutually reinforcing.

This last is an association that is brought out movingly in Gerard Manley Hopkins poem 'Binsey Poplars', which provides the epigraph to this paper.<sup>19</sup> The poem begins with a very personal lament for 'my aspens dear': 'All felled, felled, are all felled'. But personal regret for a particular loved scene prompts reflections of a more general kind about the fragility of country, and its transience: 'Aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been./ Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve/ Strokes of havoc unselved/ The sweet especial rural scene'. There is nothing inevitable about any of these associations. One can feel alienated from one's home landscape and indifferent to its beauty, or remember it as reassuringly familiar despite being ugly.

I conclude this discussion of the relation of aesthetic with other non-utilitarian sources of interest in landscape with a general comment. The aesthetic character of a landscape is logically independent of its having characteristics that make it scientifically or historically interesting, or of its being connected to oneself or one's people. In that sense its aesthetic character is a distinct feature, and I think it follows that, judged impersonally, the aesthetic value of a landscape is independent of other kinds of value. Viewed as aspects of an individual's experience, however, there are important ways in which aesthetic and non-aesthetic elements interact. The discussion has emphasised two in particular. First, acquiring knowledge, scientific or historical, of a landscape is revelatory; it makes the observer aware of attributes whose aesthetic significance would otherwise not be apparent. Secondly, there is a kind of osmotic process by which one kind of experience transfers intensity to another. As the student of ferns becomes adept at identifying different species, she becomes increasingly sensitive to their various aesthetic features, and susceptible to their aesthetic appeal. Such a case exemplifies both the revelatory and the osmotic: the opening up of a realm to be explored, and the transfer of feeling, from the passion for discovery to love of the beauty of the discovered.

## AESTHETIC AND OTHER VALUES

## AESTHETICS AND THE PRESERVATION OF RURAL LANDSCAPES

Agricultural land is valued for both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. It is land that is cultivated to serve essential human needs. It is also valued for its beauty and for its scientific and historical interest. Changes in the use of land brought about for reasons of utility may threaten other values, aesthetic, ecological or historical. It may happen, for instance, that the lover of landscape values highly the aesthetic qualities of a landscape that is obsolete from the user's point of view. The appearance of the fell-country in the English Lakes, for instance, depends on a system of hill farming that is increasingly uneconomic<sup>20</sup>. Should it be maintained in order to preserve the familiar beautiful landscape, or does that invert the proper relationship between the practical and the aesthetic?

I shall assume that any kind of non-instrumental value provides a *prima facie* reason for wanting something that has it to continue in existence. This is of course not so with utility value, being a kind of instrumental value. That something has instrumental value means that it is valuable as a means to an end, and if the end ceases to be wanted the means, if *merely* a means, no longer has value. The problem about rural landscape is that its character is largely the product of its utility; if it no longer has utility it loses its prime reason for existence. Loss of utility, however, does not mean loss of non-instrumental values, so the problem is whether a landscape's surviving non-instrumental values are sufficient reason for preserving its character.

In particular, how important is it to conserve beautiful rural landscapes simply for their beauty? It may be helpful to consider how similar or different are the principles of art conservation and landscape conservation. If we assume that paintings are produced to have certain permanent characteristics, then conservation may reasonably aim to retain or restore those characteristics. The natural processes that change tonal relationships may result in a different aesthetic character that some art lovers prefer, but there are strong reasons to ignore those preferences. The situation is not the same with land. Growth and decay, climate change, geological change, even without different land use policies, effect changes in the landscape, with concomitant changes in aesthetic character; there seems no reason to think that the aesthetic character of a landscape at any particular point in time has a privileged status.

Change often results in a different aesthetic character, but not necessarily an inferior one. The Huntingdonshire example is instructive. The hedgeless landscape favours the appreciation of the quick tour, but why, from a simply aesthetic point of view, is that a less valid kind of appreciation than that of the slow walker? For those who grew up among the little grass fields, accustomed to the interest at their feet, the change is a loss; but without accepting a wholly subjectivist view of natural beauty, it is possible to say that only familiarity stood in the way of people recognising that they were experiencing a change but not a loss, or a loss of one *kind* of beauty, compensated for by an equal beauty of

another kind. Moore remarks that few people in Huntingdonshire, because they were too young to remember, were acutely conscious of the change.

The mere fact of familiarity, that we are used to our landscape having a certain character, is surely of little weight, and not obviously a reason for favouring one form of aesthetic quality over another, and attempting to halt change that is not demonstrably change for the worse.

Aesthetic considerations provide rather weak support for attempts to preserve landscapes and the activities that maintain them when social and economic change renders them no longer self-supporting. It might be objected that this is no different from the preservation of certain kinds of artistic activity, playing early music on authentic instruments for instance. But the analogy fails because this is not an activity whose primary function is a non-aesthetic one. The problem with obsolete farming methods is that their function was non-aesthetic, though they produced landscape with a particular aesthetic character, and involved activities and artefacts with a particular aesthetic character, as consequences of the primary function. These aesthetically pleasing things were the unintended result of activities engaged in for quite different reasons. Preservation of the methods for the sake of the aesthetic aspects is an inversion of the original and natural relationship between the utilitarian and the aesthetic.

The aesthetic preference for the landscape of labour intensive mixed farming is reinforced by dubious history. We find it pleasing partly because of associated ideas of the good, simple, wholesome rural life, ignoring the fact that the life of the farm was laborious in the extreme. There is a kind of charm in the fictional pastoral idyll. We no longer dress up as shepherds and shepherdesses for our country picnics, but to the extent that we think of the countryside as the setting of a happy peasant life, close to the earth and in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons, and so on, we are getting aesthetic pleasure based on an illusion. It would be priggish to be disapproving of harmless indulgence in a conscious fiction. But realism about the past, rather than nostalgia for an idealised past, is likely to induce a correct valuation of landscape as it now exists, and a more constructive approach to landscape change.

The argument just set out requires some important qualifications. First it gives no weight to the kind of intense personal attachment to a particular landscape and its beauty that were discussed in the second section of this paper. The thought that a new set of aesthetic qualities can compensate for the loss of an old presupposes a temporally and personally neutral standpoint. It is not at all obvious that such a standpoint is the only rational one from which to evaluate change. The sense of loss, of something uniquely precious having vanished, is not mere sentimentality. The cost to those for whom the loss is a personal one can be severe. The best that can be said for the neutral standpoint is that when change is inevitable it provides a wider view, the possibility of a more detached estimate of gains and losses. Within that view what is a reason for regret may not necessarily be a reason to oppose the cause of it.

## AESTHETIC AND OTHER VALUES

Second, changes in land use may be undesirable for many reasons, the aesthetic being only one. Industrialised farming may be an unsustainable form of cultivation, may result in loss of biodiversity, may efface the record of human and animal occupation, and may at the same time replace a varied with a monotonous landscape. Aesthetic reasons then may quite legitimately contribute to rational opposition to some sorts of change. It is not part of my argument that any sort of economic reason for change is dominant over non-instrumental reasons for resisting it.

Third, despite the fact that the taste for country ways and products – the country itself and the artefacts displayed in folk museums and at craft fairs – may get some of its popularity from spurious history, that is not to deny that there are authentic, non-illusory, aesthetic qualities in many traditional countryside activities. Even though they may be kept going only by the efforts of heritage preservation bodies, a neatly laid hedge, a dry stone wall, a hazel hurdle, a handmade basket, a ploughed field, a coppice, may be beautiful and the record of beautiful work. One cannot help regretting the passing of activities with inherent grace and skill, and if they can be given a genuine role in the work or leisure of the region to which they belong their preservation or revival is a good thing. But there is increasingly a development in which tourism replaces the primary economic activities of rural areas, and those activities – methods of cultivation and associated crafts – are continued as part of the theatre laid on for visitors. Increasingly upland farming is maintained to preserve the landscape and its way of life. In an important sense, however, it is impossible to preserve the way of life when its primary motivation is so radically changed. The farmer becomes a museum curator, or a theatre director. The distinction I made at the beginning of the first section between rural landscape and the landscaped grounds of great houses disappears. Both are works of art, with the important difference that the former pretends to be something else.

In the paper from which I quoted earlier Holland and O'Neill contend that the question that should be asked when we are faced with the problem whether and how to conserve some feature is '*how best to continue the narrative ... what would make the most appropriate trajectory from what has gone before?*'<sup>21</sup> They do not offer a formula by which this question can be answered. Indeed they consider the attempt to produce some sort of value calculus to be fruitless. Instead they offer, in an Aristotelian spirit, two 'guiding considerations', in brief that the pace and scale of change should be moderate, and that change should preserve narrative integrity: 'above all is the thought of being 'true to' what has gone before'.

It might be thought that following these guiding thoughts should lead one to favour the preservation of the Fells just as they are. After all they look much as they have looked, except for changes due to, for example, over-grazing, for generations. Why is their continuing to look that way not an appropriate future trajectory? Holland and O'Neill however point out that too little change can be



as disruptive as too much, and that conservation efforts can be disruptive in that they stifle change and transform 'the lived world into a museum piece'. I would amend this by submitting that such transformation cannot be called too little change. My argument in this section has been that to preserve the appearance of a landscape when the function which produced that appearance has lapsed is to bring about radical change, even though the landscape bears no sign of that change on its face. The overt aesthetic features remain, but an uneasy sense of artificiality may spoil one's appreciation of them.

### CONCLUSION

I have not argued for a single thesis, but have tried to elucidate some relationships between aesthetic and other kinds of interest in rural landscape. The tentative conclusions I arrive at are these: first, that although there are important connections between aesthetic and other non-instrumental reasons for valuing rural landscapes, none is a necessary relationship, but the aesthetic is a logically independent form of non-instrumental value; secondly that on the contrary there are some aesthetic judgements of rural landscape that are necessarily dependent on its characterisation as land cultivated in a particular way for particular purposes; and thirdly that the *undesigned* aesthetic character of rural landscape puts in question the force of aesthetic reasons for preserving rural landscapes which have lost their primary traditional function.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have to confess to worse than insularity, in that all my examples are of English rural landscape, the only one I know at all intimately. How far my remarks might apply more generally I cannot tell.

<sup>2</sup> Or, as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* concisely puts it, 'the countryside rather than the town'. I prefer the terms 'country', 'countryside' or 'land' to 'landscape' with its implicit reference to the representation in painting of a view from a particular standpoint. I intend to use the term without this implication, as I take it do most of those who use the phrase 'cultural landscape'.

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<sup>3</sup> Emily Brady has a good review of the gradations of artefactuality in humanly modified environments; see Brady, 2003: 55–60. In a recent paper (Brady, 2006) she analyses the varied dialectical relationships between natural processes and human activity at work in the production of traditional and modern agricultural landscapes.

<sup>4</sup> Westmacott and Worthington, 1974: 44. The parenthesis in square brackets is mine.

<sup>5</sup> Ruskin, 1904: Vol. 4, Part V, ch 1, ‘Of the Turnerian Picturesque’, §§ 7–12. The extended passage and all quoted phrases in the preceding two paragraphs are from these sections of Ruskin’s work, which includes a plate of the two paintings.

<sup>6</sup> Poetry, just as much as painting, can provide examples of the noble picturesque. Wordsworth’s description of the leech gatherer in ‘Resolution and Independence’ or of the thorn in the poem of that title could be taken as a paradigm of it. Neither is seen as enhancing a landscape by being picturesquely rugged.

<sup>7</sup> I owe my appreciation of these baskets to the work of Owen Jones, a fine Cumbrian maker. (email: owen.swills@virgin.net). See <http://www.woodsmithstore.co.uk> for pictures.

<sup>8</sup> Sibley, 2001: 176–89.

<sup>9</sup> Good examples of the kind of detailed work I have in mind are provided by Emily Brady’s discussion of hedge-laying and stonewalling (Brady, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> This point is convincingly argued in relation to the landscapes of industrial farming by Allen Carlson (Carlson, 1985). Carlson has further elaborated his functional approach in a more recent paper (Carlson, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> The persons I call the ‘user’ and the ‘non-user’ are ideal types. I am not supposing that farmers, for instance, are without aesthetic appreciation of their own work and the land they work. Moreover, a non-user may admire some artefact, say a tool, and know what it is for, but only a user can fully appreciate its aesthetic qualities.

<sup>12</sup> Some philosophers contend that an aesthetic interest is instrumental in that the beautiful object is contemplated for the sake of the experience enjoyed by the subject, and hence is not valued for its own sake. This view is mistaken: see my *Environmental Ethics*, chapter 2 (Benson 2000).

<sup>13</sup> In an interesting paper, ‘Nature connoisseurship’, Allan Greenbaum (2005) suggests that those who hold nature to be intrinsically valuable, i.e. value it for its own sake, do so by virtue of an ‘aesthetic disposition’, which he characterises by reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s account of Kant. Kant however certainly did not assimilate the scientific understanding of nature to the aesthetic appreciation of it.

<sup>14</sup> Moore, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> I owe this observation to Isis Brook, in conversation.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, 1987: 35

<sup>17</sup> Holland and O’Neill, 1996: 4.

<sup>18</sup> Collingwood, 1964: 106. The quotation is from Collingwood’s interesting discussion of the aesthetic appreciation of nature in his early *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925).

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins, 1948, poem 43.

<sup>20</sup> Uneconomic, that is, in a farming context as traditionally understood: farmers cannot make a living by selling their produce, viz. meat and wool. But as Michael Mumford has pointed out to me, economics is about the efficient use of resources, and within the

context of the economy of the region it may well be an efficient use of resources to maintain sheep farming on the fells by subsidy. This does not alter the fact that farming has a new *raison d'être*, and the appearance of the land is no longer merely a consequence of farming it, but its purpose.

<sup>21</sup> Holland and O'Neill, 1996: 4.

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