

The Romantic Landscape: A Search for Material and Immaterial Truths through Scientific and Spiritual Representations of Nature

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Landscapes generally bring to mind images of mountains, meadows, and beaches. These images are usually associated in the mind with the beauty of nature. To many, an encounter with nature is an encounter with the divine. While landscapes may evoke notions of nature's beauty or divine mystery, this link is not always recognized consciously. The association derives from a practiced experience instilled by history and culture, particularly through the pictorialization of nature. Landscape imagery has been a significant part of the history of Western civilization but it was most celebrated during the age of Romanticism. While the distinction between art, faith, and science is part of our contemporary world, this segregation did not always exist. To the contrary, it was the interdependency between art, faith, and science in Romantic landscapes that shapes our perceptions of landscapes today. Subjectivity was pertinent to Romanticism, as the modern desire for authenticity and truth emerged from the regimentation of the Enlightenment. Religious faith was one way for the Romantics to obtain truth, particularly, a divine truth found in nature and art. The representation of sublime landscapes allowed Romantic artists to express their own interpretations of truth. Simultaneously, Romantic science provided alternative narratives for the wonders of the world and the truths of nature. Science influenced the perception of nature and the way it was represented. Artistic depictions of plant-life, geology, atmosphere, and the celestial moon show this connection. However, for the Romantics, it was not only landscapes that embodied the tripartite of science, art, and faith. The meaning of life was dependent on the search for revelation in the material and spiritual worlds. Landscape was a vehicle that allowed for this revelation.

Introduction

Awe-inspiring landscapes can sometimes trigger us to ponder about our existence in the world. To some, an encounter with nature is an encounter with the divine. Landscape, as an expression of nature, is often associated with beauty and divinity. The idea of landscapes generally leads to images of mountains, meadows, and beaches. However, the connection between landscape images and the intrinsic beauty of nature is not always a conscious phenomenon. It is partially a practiced experience instilled by history and culture. For example, mountains and waterfalls were not always as appreciated throughout Western history. It was the pictorialization of nature that changed our opinion toward these landscapes. Through pictures, we learn to find the beauty of landscapes:

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“we have defined and judged nature on the basis of its conformity with pictures.”¹

Landscape imagery has long been a significant part of Western civilization. Landscape, as a subject matter in art, flourished exceptionally during the time of Romanticism (c.1770-1850). Evernden described Romanticism as an approach to life.² The Romantic is not one of anti-reasoning, but rather a person who questions scientific authority for the sake of using personal experience to interpret and express reality. The Romantics desired a holistic connection to the world, particularly to nature, and yet paradoxically, the Romantic is a “perpetual outsider,”³ always observing the world at a subjective distance. Thus, landscape becomes the constructed image to represent this incomplete unity with nature. This nature is not just one of plants, trees, and rocks, but also one that corresponds to the relationship one has with the world, in material and immaterial ways. Science and faith allow for discovery in both of these aspects of life; accordingly, they are ways to interpret the physical and spiritual worlds, respectively.⁴

While post-modern society finds comfort in the distinction between art, science, and faith, this split was not yet fully realized during Romanticism. To the contrary, this paper argues that it was the interdependency between the three aspects that shapes our impressions of landscape imagery today. Through various Romantic landscape images, including the works of Caspar David Friedrich, Philipp Otto Runge, J.M.W. Turner, Robert John Thornton, and John Constable, nature is shown as represented through spiritual or scientific perspectives. On one hand, the representation of sublime landscapes allowed Romantic artists to express their interpretations of nature’s divine truth. On the other hand, Romantic science provided innovative narratives for the formation of the world’s wonders, leading to more methodological approaches of representing nature. However, in many cases, the dynamic is not one of either-or. Rather, the images convey a push-and-pull dynamic between rationality and faith. Romantic landscapes therefore embody this oscillating tension as Romantics (and modern humans) navigate between and across these two ways of seeing the world. The Romantic landscape was a balancing of the relationship between faith, science, and subjective experiences, a blending that could be found harmoniously in the works of Johan Christian Dahl. While the Romantic era was a revolutionary time for

1. Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized: “The View” in Landscape History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3.

2. Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

3. *Ibid*, 31.

4. Faith, religion, and spiritual are referred to in this paper in the following ways: Faith is an individual’s belief system towards the divine; religion is the organization of specific doctrines of faith amongst a group of people (i.e. Christianity in the case of Romanticism); and the spiritual relates to the realm of the immaterial, including the divine.

landscape painting, it was not only landscapes that embodied the tripartite of art, science, and faith. The meaning of life, both practically and conceptually, was dependent on the search for revelation in the material and spiritual worlds. Landscape was a vehicle that allowed for this revelation.

Romanticism: The Search for Truth in Divine Nature

Within a Cartesian worldview, Romanticism is portrayed as idealistic, sentimental, and irrational. However, for the Romantics, their ways of life were the epitome of modernity and humanity. Romanticism reveals a paradoxically modern desire for individualism *and* connectivity to a world that is both material and metaphysical. As a reaction to the over-rationality of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Romanticism arose to oppose “the disenchantment of the modern world”⁵ and the increasingly “routine, monotonous, and mechanical”⁶ regimentation of social life. Romanticism was in fact a movement to renew the wonders of life.

Koerner describes Romanticism as “simultaneously reading the world as if it were a book, and imagining, or writing, a book that would be consubstantial with the world.”⁷ This book is open ended. Thus, uncertainty was perceived as motivation against repressing Enlightenment ideals, in support of individuality and subjective freedom. Social and political instability existed in parallel to this intellectual impulse. The circumstances leading to and after the French Revolution created unsettling conditions that brought death, destruction, and the transience of power (themes common in Romantic art) to the forefront. Hence, the Romantics viewed themselves as the “heroes” who braved through the repressions of society and brought forth a modern mixture of sentimental passions and inquisitive wonder.

Early Romanticism (c.1790-1810) was an intellectual cultural phenomenon formed by a group of prominent poets and philosophers in Jena, Germany who were influenced by Immanuel Kant’s writings. These thinkers were not homogeneous in their philosophies, but they were similar in their interests in humanity’s internal and external nature, and the spiritual relationship that linked the two. Romanticism was an approach to understand what it meant to exist in the world. Literature was characterized by extreme individualism and dramatic feelings in the earlier movement called *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Stress”) (c.1770-1790). According to Friedrich Schlegel, Romanticism was found in

5. Deniz Tekiner, *Modern Art and the Romantic Vision* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 6.

6. *Ibid*, 7.

7. Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 31.

“whatever shows us a sentimental subject in fantastic form...Everything that speaks to our sentiment –not our sensual, but our spiritual sentiment.”⁸ This spiritual sentiment was not only about religious piety, the rejection of the modern city’s progress, or the fascination for the natural world. The essence of Romanticism was about how the human spirit was stirred.

Considered as the second scientific revolution, late-eighteenth century Romantic science was based on social and personal enthusiasm for wonder.⁹ As with literature and philosophy, this excitement in science was aroused by the regimentations of the Enlightenment. The first scientific revolution in the seventeenth-century, most notably marked by Sir Isaac Newton’s work on celestial mechanics and optics, rendered a world that could be resolved through deductive reasoning and objective rationality. As the French Revolution emerged from the political repression of a mechanical and regimented society, science took a turn for the organic as an awareness of the limitations of knowledge became apparent with the discovery of imperceptible phenomena such as electricity and electromagnetism.¹⁰ Limitation became opportunity and inspiration. The subject of this thirst for organic ungraspable knowledge was of course nature itself. Not only was nature dissected under the magnifying glass in the laboratory, it was also examined through philosophy, poetry, and painting.

The interest in nature was not based on pure objective curiosity. As a rejection of a mechanically operated nature, the Romantics were seeking for an intrinsic quality to nature that was more than human and more than machine. In other words, the Romantics were searching for a *nature of authority*. Underlying the goal of this expedition for nature’s truth was the question of teleology: nature’s purpose, and consequently, our purpose as humans in relation to nature.

As Richards summarizes, nature prior to Romanticism was “stripped of her authority” by first being separated from humanity as a female figure in contrast to an almighty male God, and then secondly, portrayed as “a fictive creature that disguised humanity’s own hidden desires and inclinations.”¹¹ By contrast, nature for the Romantics was both divinity and humanity. Nature’s means of channeling divinity to humanity was through the creative process. It was through the creative “genius” that the Romantics saw nature’s expression. According to Richards, Goethe believed that the genius not only existed in art, but also in science. The creative genius channeled nature’s authority in the scientific endeavor to reveal more laws of nature. Furthermore, intuitive intellect was considered as

8. Quoted in Hubert Schrade, *German Romantic Painting* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1977), 7.

9. Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

10. William Vaughan, *Romantic Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

11. Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 404.

intrinsically human and archetypically natural. Thus, "God, nature, and intellect are one."¹² Products of human creativity or intellect, including art and scientific discovery, were indirectly products of a divine source.

Art: an Expression of Nature's Truth through the Sublime

While Romantic science was the seeking of truth by revealing God's creation in nature, Romantic art was the representation of God's creation through personal expression. Since God's message was delivered through the creative nature of a human genius, the artist's work must not be merely a work of imitation. Instead, it must be a work of subjectivity. Consequently, no consistent style is found in Romantic art. One constant feature is that these works embody the spirit of Romanticism: finding meaning between one's internal nature and the external nature that holds the world together. What the artist had to personally offer was most important. The notion of personal expression brings to the forefront a major question in the philosophy of aesthetics: what is the purpose of art? For the Romantics, humanity, spirituality, and freedom all played important parts in this question.

Kant, whose philosophies prompted the Romantic Movement, began the inquiry into art's purpose through the relationships among nature, self, and the divine. Vaughan suggests that Kant and his Romantic followers found in the contemplation of nature the existence of a subjective "moral law" that is associated with the divine.¹³ According to Vaughan, Kant acknowledged "that the qualities we recognize in nature are ones that are inherent within us, but also that the contemplation of nature can provide the deepest moments of self-discovery."¹⁴ Romantic art, particularly in the representation of nature, brought out these self-discoveries. Landscape was therefore a subject matter in art one could use to explore the connection between the self and nature. As Schelling stated, "In landscape painting, only subjective portrayal is possible, since the landscape itself possesses reality only in the eye of the observer." A landscape covers up and reveals a higher truth: "The true object, the idea, remains formless, and it is up to the observer to discover it from within the fragrant, formless essence before him."¹⁵

A similar connection between art and human potential is found in Hegel's concept of art. As opposed to philosophy, both art and religion provided ways of

12. Ibid, 90.

13. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*.

14. Ibid, 134.

15. Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

representing truth to humanity.¹⁶ Through beautiful art, humanity is aware of our freedom to sense, feel, perceive, and imagine.¹⁷ The beauty created by the human spirit originates from a quasi-imminent divine. For Hegel, the divine in nature is unconscious; the divine in the conscious human spirit is of higher value. Therefore, art's purpose is to "show us what divine and human *freedom* look like."¹⁸ For Hegel, classical art was the purest, since idea and form were at balance. Romantic art surpassed the classic phase, as "art transcend[ed] itself"¹⁹ to a point where the inner world cannot be merely represented in the outer world, and instead takes on ideal forms. Consequently, Romantic art relied on the ideal, or in some expressions, subjective feelings that were often fleeting and ungraspable.

The sublime is one form of subjective feeling that is both ephemeral and overwhelming. The sublime's relationship to landscape in the Western worldview is influenced by the shifting of modern Christian theology, which was affected by the Romantic notion that God, nature, and humanity were synonymous. Challenged by scientific discoveries, biblical narrations of creation and of a singular God increasingly became mythical. The Romantics put forward two variations of faith in divine nature: pantheism, in that God is nature; and panentheism, in that nature is both part of and somehow still separate from God. Pantheism, while not necessarily rejecting the existence of an almighty divine, at least diminished the concept of an external God figure: a position that was not without controversy. The pantheistic approach was more present in the works of later Romantic science and art, as the explicit reference to a Christian God became greatly reduced and was replaced with nature's materiality. For the most part, panentheism was a complementary position to take: one that established a strong connection between nature and God, and was expressed by a heightened awareness in sublime landscapes.

Historically, landscapes were used as backdrops to portraits or mytho-religious narratives. Claude Lorrain's (1660-1682) landscape paintings featured mythological or biblical figures, but his popularity helped to elevate the worth of "pure" landscapes in the seventeenth century. Protestant aesthetics also helped in the secularization of landscape painting, particularly with the theologies of Martin Luther (1483-1586) and John Calvin (1509-1564). While Lutheran theology allowed the memorialization of religious figures but warned against idolatry and the worshipping of images, Calvinism viewed all religious art as potentially

16. Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016, <https://stanford.io/36x5Lfa>.

17. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, ed. M. J. Inwood, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

18. Houlgate, "Hegel's Aesthetics."

19. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 87.

idolatrous.²⁰ Historical heroes began to replace religious icons, and nature became the new subject for religious narrative.

The shifting of the imaging of Christian faith from prescribed icons to a divine nature encouraged the sublime to be represented in landscape paintings. The secularization of landscape imagery also allowed for more individualistic expression. However, the philosophical concern behind the need to represent the sublime was always a question of humanity's relationship with nature. The contrast between Burke's and Kant's interpretation of the sublime can be found in the tensions expressed in Romantic landscapes. Burke's theories of the beautiful and the sublime were based on the polar emotions of love and hate.²¹ His notion of the beautiful included classical features such as lightness, smoothness, balance, and harmony. The sublime, on the other hand, is the opposite of the beautiful – here darkness, uncontrollability, and mystery flourish. For the Romantics, the “disturbing” became just as important aesthetically as the pleasant.²² Furthermore, as all things beautiful could be traced back to God's design, the sublime also meant for the Romantics the power of God. Fear and repulsion were the feelings evoked when a human is matched against divinity expressed in the form of dominating nature. Landscapes that represent nature's relentlessness, such as shipwrecks in stormy seas, portray this version of the sublime.

As a response to Burke's writings, Kant focused on the human response of the beautiful and the sublime as fundamental processes in human faculties.²³ Kant's beautiful and sublime celebrated humanity's power of rationality over nature. In particular, the sublime results from a complicated dynamic relationship between nature (the external reality and God) and humans. Kant presents two possible characteristics of the sublime. First, it is the mathematical, an element's immeasurability due to its greatness that overwhelms our imaginations; and second, the dynamic, one's realization of the physical limitations of external nature over one's internal self. In both cases reason takes over. For the mathematical, it is our judgement of size that determines what is sublime. We can reason over the immeasurable and unimaginable. In the dynamic sublime, we can engage in reasoning over the fact that humanity's inner nature does not need to submit to the powers of external nature. Thus, the Kantian sublime is a combination of pleasure, when reason surpasses nature, and displeasure, when imagination and physicality in turn becomes defeated by nature.

While many landscape paintings portray the theme of a powerful nature, the

20. Gene Edward Veith, *Painters of Faith: The Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub, 2001).

21. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

22. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*.

23. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

sublime in Romantic paintings was more than straightforward instances of Burke's or Kant's philosophies. Rather, they portrayed the abstracted notion of the sublime as a tension between the powers of nature and the capacity of humans to comprehend and ponder over these powers. The result was landscapes that oscillated between pleasure and displeasure. The Romantic artist who was most characteristic of this trait was the German landscape painter Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840).

Romantic Germany was inclined to mystical approaches of interpretation. While much of Romanticism was characterized by imagination, heroism, and fantastical picturesque ruins, the medieval revival in nineteenth-century Germany was partly a nationalistic endeavor. Like many other German Romantics, Gottfried Herder believed that Gothicism was part of an "innate national identity."²⁴ Herder's doctrine led German Romantics to believe that there was uniqueness to the German soul that was best expressed in literature and the arts. Not only did ruins of Gothic cathedrals appear often in Romantic paintings, the aura of many Romantic landscapes in Germany and throughout Northern Europe maintained a sense of Gothic mysticism and fantasy.

Friedrich's paintings are described as "inhospitable, ancient, and timeless, and in them mankind looks almost like an alien creature."²⁵ Human life is placed in contrast to expansive nature through allegories of lone figures in solemn contemplation against illuminated landscapes. Sometimes the human figure is replaced by a tree or the symbolic cross. In each case, we are exposed to the tensions between mysterious nature and relatable mortality, be it the human body, a personified tree, a ruined building, or a religious artifact. Sometimes Friedrich would use a set of paintings for a continuous allegorical narrative. For example, the hunter who is in harmony with nature in *Landscape with Oaks and Hunter* (1811) is found struggling and desolate in *Winter Landscape* (1811). Eventually he is at rest in *Winter Landscape with Church* (1811), adjacent to the symbolic cross and Christmas firs. The narrative is a metaphor for the man as a faithful servant of God, as well as a human in the face of nature.²⁶

24. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*, 107

25. Ernst W. Veen, "A Dream Comes True," *Caspar David Friedrich & the German Romantic Landscape* (Aldershot, U.K: Lund Humphries, 2008), 11.

26. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*.



Figure 1. Caspar David Friedrich, *Cross in the Mountains*, 1808

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Friedrich took traditional notions of ritual, pilgrimage, and church, and relocated them as ordinary encounters with nature. According to Rosenblum, Friedrich's "need to revitalize the experience of divinity in a secular world that lay outside the sacred confines of traditional Christian iconography" was a personal necessity that was shared by his contemporaries.²⁷ Koerner makes a comparison between Friedrich and Schlegel: "If Schlegel desired that his writings be Bibles, Friedrich fashions the Romantic painter's corollary aspiration: that his canvases be altars."²⁸ The *Cross in the Mountains* (see Figure 1) is an example of Friedrich's aspiration. The painting, framed as an altarpiece, presents landscape as secularized religious imagery. The piece not only ignited a controversial discourse concerning the (ir-)reverence of the divine in landscapes, it also setback Friedrich's artistic career.

Friedrich was not a popular artist during his lifetime, likely because of his reclusiveness and the religiously controversial aspects of his paintings. The increased appreciation for his artwork since the twentieth-century suggests a resonance between modern souls and his portrayal of humanity's vulnerable relationship towards nature.²⁹ In both *Woman before the Setting Sun* (see Figure 2) and *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), the human figure stands before us the

27. Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 14.

28. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 34.

29. Henk van Os, "Casper David Friedrich and His Contemporaries," *Caspar David Friedrich & the German Romantic Landscape* (Aldershot, U.K: Lund Humphries, 2008).

same way we see paintings. The figures, symmetrically placed in the frame, obstruct the view of the scene ahead. We unavoidably identify with these solitary figures in front of infinite nature.³⁰ In contrast, Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (see Figure 3) overwhelms by inverting illuminated nature with dark mystery, as the lone monk stands diminutively in comparison to the expansive sea. In all cases, the sublime is found in the revelation of human presence against infinite nature.



Figure 2. *Caspar David Friedrich, Woman before the Setting Sun, c.1818*
Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 3. *Caspar David Friedrich, Monk by the Sea, 1809-1810*
Source: Wikimedia Commons

While Friedrich's mysticism was as much contemplative as sensual, the work of Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810), Friedrich's German contemporary, emphasized

30. Ibid.

the inexplicable aura of nature. Unlike the paintings of Friedrich in which the detailing never overpowers the structure, Runge's paintings feel like an over-sharpening of a moment in time. Thus, painted elements, including plants and children, seem to contain a supernatural character. *Child in the Meadow* (see Figure 4), a detail from the painting *The Morning*, has a similar feel to Friedrich's *Woman before the Setting Sun*. However, the use of the infant in contrast to the materiality of nature is unique to Runge: "the infant lying in the meadows at dawn with his hands opening before the light like the leaves of the shrubs, naturalism and symbolism become perfectly fused...emotion and idea are one; and Runge's complex mysticism is conveyed...as pure feeling."³¹

Like Friedrich, Runge was successful in the realm of the sublime through the evocativeness of his works. While Friedrich influenced many younger landscape artists, including Johann August Heinrich (1794-1822), Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), and Johan Christian Dahl (1788-1857), these painters opted for more naturalistic approaches. Reservations are even more apparent in the sublime of English Romantics. J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) is perhaps the only comparable English landscape painter. Despite Turner's love of literally depicting "storm and stress" in his numerous storm ship paintings, his choice of colors and brushwork created an entirely different sublime. It was one that was more aligned with Burke's concept than Kant's. His rash blending of strokes and the tendency for softer radiant tones displaced the mysticism of the German sublime. Instead, the mystery of nature was unquestioned and accepted in its overwhelming physical powers.

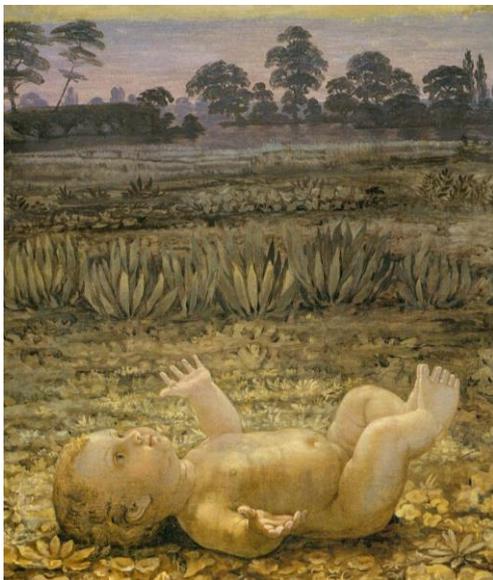


Figure 4. Philipp Otto Runge, *Child in the Meadow* (Detail of the Morning), 1809
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

31. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*, 142.

Science: An Analysis of Nature's Physical and Metaphysical Truth

The conventional notion of science as objective, clear, and methodical is often seen as incompatible with the subjectivity, vagueness, and fluidity of art and faith. Along with this incongruence, science is rarely considered "romantic." However, science in the age of Romanticism had its own sentimental and subjective qualities. Still, Romantic science was a delicate matter, particularly regarding religion. A fine line could make a separation between a science that "would promote safe religious belief or a dangerous secular materialism."³² For the most part, if the position wasn't close to atheistic radicalism, scientific discoveries could be looked on favourably. For the pantheistic or panentheistic Romantic scientist, no conflict existed between science and God. Rather, science was viewed as "a gift of God or Providence to mankind and its purpose was to reveal the *wonders* of His design."³³ Romantic science was considered a mission for truth – the truth behind nature, or more precisely, the truth of God's design of nature.

Despite the pervasive social doctrine of faith, individuals increasingly explored the idea of an atheistic scientific world. Nevertheless, the atheistic position offended both believers in the traditional faith in God and believers in the newly established faith in nature. The atheist who instead displaced his or her faith with objective mechanical science became the archetype for the stereotypical scientist who declares mysticism as ignorance and that all knowledge was within the grasp of human discovery. For instance, the English surgeon William Lawrence declared that science "must avoid 'clouds of fears and hopes, desires and aversions.' It must 'discern objects clearly' and shun 'intellectual mist.' It must dispel myth and dissipate 'absurd fables.'"³⁴ While Lawrence's stance is not much different from the perspective of science today, it was considered radical in the nineteenth-century. It was Lawrence's opposition to John Abernethy's life force theory, a notion that suggested a magnetism-like soul for organisms, which brought forth Britain's first scientific controversy in what was known as the Vitalism Debate.³⁵

The dispute over animal vitalism was not a discourse that was contained within the scientific sphere. It was likely science's contrast to Romantic notions of society, morality, and culture, particularly regarding the existence of "souls," that triggered Mary Shelley's idea for her book *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). It was also probable that part of Lawrence is found in the fictional Victor Frankenstein, considering that Percy Shelley, her poet husband, had been a consulting patient of Lawrence for three years.³⁶ According to Holmes, the

32. Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*, 450.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 313.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

character's German background points to an even stronger resemblance to Johann Wilhelm Ritter, a German physiologist who had invented a dry-cell voltaic battery to experiment on the galvanic properties of animals. One theme of *Frankenstein* questions whether a soul exists, and if there is one, whether it can be created. As one of the earliest examples of science fiction, the novel presents critical doubt concerning humanity –the horror looming behind the physical potentials and moral limitations of human knowledge and scientific manipulation. The importance here in the context of Romantic art was not about whether nature ought to be examined via objective science or divine faith, but rather, it was the predicament of such opposing positions that brought about new desires and approaches to representation.

While objective science and pious faith occupied different ends of a spectrum towards attaining truths of the relationship between human and nature, a mixture of both positions can be found in Romantic landscape paintings. The mechanical vision and impartiality of the scientific process was considered appropriate for understanding nature and representing nature. When Ruskin boldly described Gaspar Poussin's (1615-1675) tree in *View of La Riccia* as a "carrot or a parsnip,"³⁷ we catch a glimpse of Ruskin's strong disdain towards trivial representations of nature. For Ruskin, if the Old Masters failed in attaining truth even with their laborious renderings of foliage, it proved either "their total bluntness of perception, or total powerlessness of hand."³⁸ It was the former reason that Ruskin believed to be of fault. Neglecting to properly observe and render the truths of nature was to disrespect nature and consequently God. While Ruskin most valued Turner's approach in representation (of experiential truth rather than detailed truth), Romantic artists in general were significantly more "truthful" in their paintings than classical painters as each artist revealed in their own way the processes of nature. The need for systematic observation is a law of objective science, but for Romantic artists, it was also a form of respect for nature's law.

The approach to representing nature truthfully came in the form of naturalism. While naturalism as a style was not uniform in presentation, naturalistic artists often selected practical views and experimented with varying techniques of observation and representation. The English painter John Constable (1776-1837) and the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Dahl were two of the most recognized Romantic artists of naturalism. Although artists such as Friedrich and Turner were not characteristically naturalistic, opting instead for symbolism and expressionism, the complex understanding of material nature was not beyond their artistic comprehension and abilities. In fact, Friedrich worked as a topographic draftsman³⁹ and Turner worked as an architectural

37. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*. Ed. David Barrie (New York: Knopf, 1987), 162.

38. *Ibid*, 161.

39. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*.

draftsman⁴⁰ before establishing their careers in landscape painting.

The importance of scientific observation was relevant to naturalism. Not only did observation affect how landscapes were perceived and interpreted, the subject matter for paintings also changed to reflect the scientific developments of the time. While Romantic theories continued to suggest God's design of nature through plant ontology and earth formation, new perspectives in science also began to offer alternative narratives of nature's origins. As the ambitions of scientific knowledge increased and the relevance of divine narratives diminished, what was graspable by scientific observation increased in magnitude. With the aid of scientific approaches, the intangible, ephemeral, and once unattainable aspects of nature could be analysed and represented. Not only were the mysteries of nature unconcealable through the familiarity of a single leaf, they were also accessible through the representations of the faraway celestial moon.

Plant Ontology: Nature as God's Design

A philosophical topic that the Romantics paid much attention to was the question of natural teleology. Theories exploring natural teleology through archetypes and morphology were strong precursors to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which also influenced the way natural elements were perceived and portrayed. For example, a unique energy could be found emanating from the representations of plants and animals, recalling their unique ontologies and their essential teleological purposes. Goethe and Schelling were particularly influential in bringing their studies of natural sciences into the realm of philosophy and art. The foundation to Schelling's *Romantische Naturphilosophie* was the connection between mind and nature. Although the mind was a creation of nature, external nature was considered only a product of the mind. Thus, internal and external nature were considered a priori to consciousness and originated from an absolute ego.⁴¹ Stepping back into the absolute was the essence of identity: the archetype. According to Richards reading of Schelling, an organism evolved from its archetype; and for his reading of Goethe, the archetype was a dynamic force among species. He concludes that Goethe saw nature's morphological genesis from archetypes as not determinate – properties of each stage in succession can appear even when they did not exist before, suggesting the possibility of new organisms. From a teleological perspective, Schelling and Goethe's theories suggest that organisms have unique self-motivating essences. As in the Vitalism Debate, the existence of a soul was a question that persisted among Romantic thinkers. For some artists, such as Runge, the presence of a soul-like quality in plants was certain.

40. "Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)," *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2ta77hv>.

41. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

Runge was particularly interested in the mystical ontology of plants. He described them as “very understandable creatures”⁴² originating from a divine source. Runge studied flowers and plants as “a way to find the mysteries of the supernatural in the smallest of nature’s manifestations.”⁴³ Runge’s project, *Times of Day* (1805), a series of prints using the motifs of flowers, children, and religious symbolism to demarcate the moments of *The Morning*, *The Evening*, *The Day*, and *The Night*, gives insight to his unique beliefs in nature and faith. The precision and detailing of each element in the prints show the respect he paid to the materiality of nature.

While Runge’s approach to botanical representation is more easily explained through a mystical perspective, a direct link between science and botanical art is found in the prints of Robert John Thornton’s *The Temple of Flora* (1798-1807). Erasmus Darwin’s (grandfather of Charles Darwin) writings on plant and animal sensations from *The Botanic Garden* (1789) and *Zoonomia* (1794) were quite influential for Thornton.⁴⁴ While Darwin rejected the idea of electric properties within the nervous system, Thornton advocated for the theory in his series *A New Illustration of the Sexual System of Carolus von Linnaeus* (1798-1807). The first two parts of the publication dealt with Carolus Linnaeus’s taxonomy for organisms, while the third part combined botanical drawings with mythology and poetry. Although some of the prints were allegorical, most of the other prints consist of flower “portraits.” The images express the ontological presence of each flower with precise detailing. The flowers are rendered as specimen plants with clear anatomies, often in unnatural positions in order to provide the best view for identification.⁴⁵

The prints have a vague surreal quality to them. The flowers often seem to float in space in the foreground, while at other times they are drawn to grow in unrealistic conditions. The landscape settings behind the flowers act as backdrops similar to the landscape backgrounds of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraits. One interesting print is Philip Reinagle and Abraham Pether’s *The Night-Blowing Cereus* (see Figure 5). The moon cactus, a native of Jamaica and Cuba that is only grown in greenhouses in England, is shown in a riverside setting.⁴⁶ Bright yellow petals radiating behind the illuminated core, symbolic of the sun’s enduring rays, are contrasted with its night-blooming ephemeral qualities. The full moon, set at midnight, further emphasizes the sublime Gothic feel of the print. In contrast, Peter Henderson’s *The Quadrangular Passion-Flower* (see Figure 6) is placed in front of a ribbed column, giving the colourful flower a

42 Quoted in Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, 148.

43. Ibid, 47-48.

44. Charlotte Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

45. Ibid.

46. Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature*.

wallpaper-like background for a more whimsical feel.



Figure 5. Philip Reinagle and Abraham Pether, *The Night-Blowing Cereus*, 1800
Source: Public Domain Review.

Whether it was the intention of Thornton to showcase the distinctive “souls” of different flowers or to characterize the flowers as unique beings from various environmental contexts, the result of *The Temple of Flora* is undoubtedly the personification of plant material, a common feature found in Romantic botanical paintings. For Rosenblum, Ruskin’s notion of the “pathetic fallacy” is descriptive of this attitude in Romantic art.⁴⁷ For Ruskin, this “falseness in all our impressions of external things”⁴⁸ is based on the notion that feelings triumph over any other literal truths. The fallacy entails the transference of subjective feelings for an imagined reciprocity of nature:

"accepting sympathy from nature, which we do not believe it gives, and giving sympathy to nature, which we do not believe it receives...we fall necessarily into the curious web of hesitating sentiment, pathetic fallacy, and wandering fancy, which form a great part of our modern view of nature."⁴⁹

While all plant material could be personified or portrayed with unique life energy, the tree is often considered to be a symbolic mediator between humanity and divinity. From the tree of life, to the verdant cross, to the cathedral grove, the

47. Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*.

48. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 364.

49. *Ibid*, 374.

tree is a sacred symbol.⁵⁰ Certain Romantic theories of the world's origin help to put the importance of the tree in perspective. In the theory of *Bildungstrieb*, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach described a life force intrinsic to organisms that gave potential to new species.⁵¹ This natural world had divine origins but was self-organized. Alternatively, Johann Gottfried Herder had a similar cosmological teleology but with a specific end goal: "The whole development of the world, in Herder's religious cosmology, arched with deliberate intent toward the crowning achievement, human nature and the perfection of humanity."⁵²



Figure 6. Peter Henderson, *The Quadrangular Passion Flower*, 1802

Source: Public Domain Review.

As the hierarchical threshold between plant life and human life, the tree represented the perfect symbol of nature, humanity, and the aspiration towards the divine. For many Romantic artists, the tree represented human feelings, particularly the lonely human soul. In Friedrich's *Village Landscape in Morning Light (Lone Tree)* (see Figure 7), the tree stands in the centre of the painting like the human figure found in *Woman Before the Setting Sun*. Its rootedness in contrast with its dying crown emphasizes its melancholic situation. In Dahl's *Birch Tree in Storm* (1849), the tree withstands the powers of a greater nature, a circumstance shared by humans. Alternatively, Constable's *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree* (c.1821) is reminiscent of formal portraits, detailed but detached. For the Romantics, trees and flowers were much more than material nature – they had authoritative, discernable souls.

50. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

51. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

52. *Ibid*, 223.



Figure 7. Caspar David Friedrich, *Village Landscape in Morning Light (Lone Tree)*, 1822

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Geology: Alternative Narrations of the Earth's Creation

While the Romantics believed that plants held the genesis of the divine in material nature, the origin of the earth's formation also appealed to their curiosities. Prior to the eighteenth-century, the conventional belief was that the earth originated according to the Christian narrative of the Great Flood. With the development of scientific and mining methods for geological studies, debates increased over the religious narratives of the earth's origins. As nature tourism developed from the Grand Tour through scientific expedition and artistic travel, the representations of geological features also evolved. Mountains and icebergs were not sights only daring explorers could see. Ordinary inquisitive minds also became familiarized with these features. Instead of witnessing them in person, one could experience them through the works of artists.

Fingal's Cave, located in the Isle of Staffa west of Scotland, is a geological feature that showcases the evolution of representation as changing scientific perspectives emerged regarding the origins of the earth's rock formation. With its unique natural physical qualities, the cave has attracted visitors since the eighteenth-century. Earlier prints from Joseph Banks' expeditions suggest the cave as a divine architectural masterpiece.⁵³ The cave is represented as a rigid structure that is both orderly and overwhelming in its cathedral-like character (see Figure

53. Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature*.

8). Geologists argued over the structure's "neptunist" or "vulcanist" origins.⁵⁴ James Hutton, a supporter of the vulcanist theory, proposed a controversial theory that shifted the perception of geology and the representation of the cave: within the striatal layers of rocks were the answers to the mysteries of the earth's formation.⁵⁵ As an alternative to religious narrative, this theory was sacrilegious. However, for some people, it was an explanation that mirrored early morphology theories: God was still the divine designer. Regardless, the debate generated more interest in the rocks themselves. The increased interest to the material and spatial qualities of the cave, generated attentiveness to other potential perspectives and interpretations. Some artists approached the structure objectively, while others looked for picturesque or subjective qualities to represent. The extreme can be found in Turner's *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (see Figure 9) in which the cave is barely visible behind the wind, mists, and waves.⁵⁶ The subjective experience of Fingal's Cave has been interpreted through music by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) in his *Hebrides Overture* (also known as *Fingal's Cave*). The composition, as like other representations of the structure, further shaped the cave as Scotland's famous natural landmark.

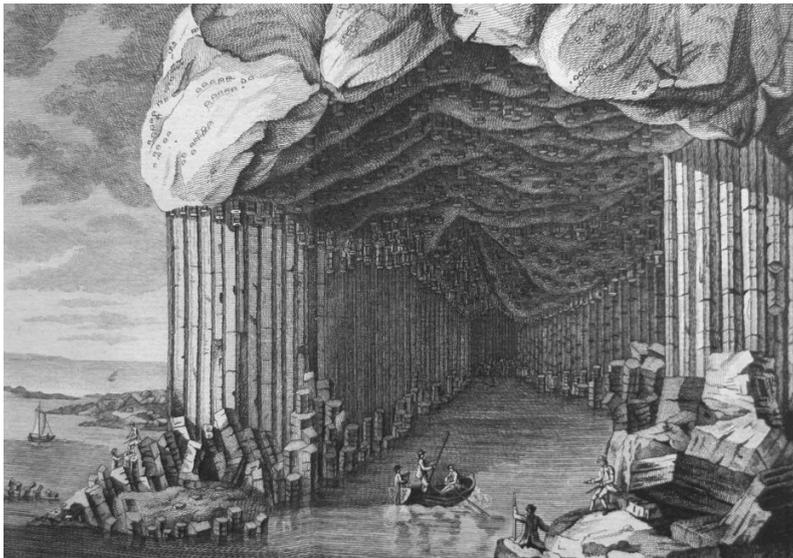


Figure 8. John Clevely, published in T. Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides* 1772, London 1774

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

54. Neptunism was a theory proposing that primitive rocks (basalt in the case of Fingal's Cave) were formed by mineralization in water. Vulcanism, or plutonism, proposed that the rocks were formed by volcanic processes.

55. Klouk, *Science and the Perception of Nature*.

56. *Ibid.*



Figure 9. J.M.W. Turner, Staffa, Fingal's Cave, 1832

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Atmosphere: Nature's Processes as Objective Analytical Phenomena

If rocks excited the spirits of Romantic artists, the ephemerality of the earth's atmosphere was certainly a phenomenon that was equally if not more enticing. Fog, mist, and the ever-changing arrangements of clouds were common subjects in landscape paintings. The obscure transience of the atmosphere in contrast to the rigour of scientific observation encouraged artists to observe and represent nature systematically through naturalism. The most popular subject matter for nature studies were clouds. Dahl, in particular, painted numerous open-air sketches of cloud formations in both daylight and moonlight. Presumably under the influence of Dahl, Friedrich also produced several cloud studies. Opposed to art as scientific representation, as evident from his refusal early in his career to paint cloud studies for Goethe's meteorological research,⁵⁷ Friedrich painted clouds to study changing moods. The relationship between artistic endeavor, scientific development, and approaches to representation was rather muddled. However, for Constable, the accurate portrayal of nature was most important.

Constable's early growth as an artist was mostly self-taught. He spent much of his training copying the works of famous masters, gaining the experience of acute observation and careful approaches to representation. For natural subject matter, he not only observed real specimens but also copied from books and illustrations.⁵⁸ Constable produced over fifty cloud studies during his visit to Hampstead in 1822.⁵⁹ While Constable's studies would have been considered

57. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*.

58. Jonathan Wordsworth, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof, *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

59. Christopher Benfey, "Head in the Clouds," *Slate*, February 2, 2011, <https://bit.ly/38EORNR>.

scientifically ambitious, he was not interested in the taxonomy of cloud patterns. Instead, he was interested in the transience of the sky, marking each composition as a specific moment in time and space by its location, date, and weather conditions.⁶⁰

Rainbows were another atmospheric feature that intrigued Constable and other painters. As a traditional symbol of Christian faith, several Romantic paintings included rainbows as allusions to the divine. In Friedrich's *Mountain Landscape with Rainbow* (c. 1810), the rainbow is a radiant arc across the expanse of dark sky, symbolising the Christian promise of eternal afterlife.⁶¹ Turner's *Rainbow over Loch Awe* (c. 1831) is more suggestive of the symbolic halo, as it illuminates off the surface in an unnaturally tight radial arc. Constable, who went as far as to study prisms and the optics of light, still considered the concept of nature as a Godly creation.⁶² For Constable, painting nature accurately meant representing God's creation truthfully. Painting nature well meant to "understand it from every point of view, see it in scientific terms, and see it as the product of a moment of special intensity."⁶³ Instead of a symbol of divinity, his *Landscape with Double Rainbow* (see Figure 10) portrays nature as it is –the delicate blending of colours and its effect of transient light. To Constable, painting was both a science and an expression of feeling.⁶⁴



Figure 10. John Constable, *Landscape with Double Rainbow*, 1812

Source: WikiArt Visual Art Encyclopedia.

60. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*.

61. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*.

62. Wordsworth et al., *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*.

63. Ibid, 66.

64. Vaughan, *Romantic Art*.

Beyond Earth: A Conquerable Cosmos

For the Romantics, the mysteries of nature were expansive. Romantic art and science attempted to unravel the truths of nature through the mysteries of plant life, the mysteries of the earth, and finally the mysteries of the cosmos. In many cases, scientists and artists worked together in expeditions to reveal new discoveries of the world. Human perceptions of the sky, in unique circumstances like the Northern lights or in more common situations like a starry night, were sentimental to the Romantics. Mythological notions of the sky have existed for millennia. The night sky held stories of cosmic origins and guidelines to a harmonious life with nature. In most cultures, the sky was the heavenly home of godly figures. Alternatives to these mytho-cosmological narratives increased as new astronomic discoveries surfaced prior to and during the Romantic period. During the first scientific revolution, the laws of gravity and motion set a fundamental foundation for a new scientific narrative. In the second scientific revolution, the development of spectroscopy and astrophotography allowed the mysteries of the sky to be analysed and represented, generating a new array of themes and images.

The celestial body most commonly found in Romantic paintings was the moon. Twilight and moonlit landscapes provided both the symbolic reference to long-standing myths and the shifting worldviews of cosmological origins. For Friedrich, the moon was a sacred symbol with a similar purpose as the sun. In *Moonrise over the Sea* (c.1821) three contemporary figures sit contemplatively at the center of the painting awaiting the rising moon and the returning ships. Turner's *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* (1835) adds an element of social commentary, with the moonlight and industrial smoke becoming indistinguishable.⁶⁵ It was Dahl who popularized moonscapes in Romantic landscapes, as he painted numerous nocturnal scenes while he lived in Dresden, Germany, and also during his visits to Copenhagen and Italy. Dahl treated the moon as an atmospheric element. In *Mother and Child by the Sea* (1840) the ambiance of the scene is of an intimate repose. In other paintings, the moonlight sets a contrasting romantic tone to a modern city harbor.

The most common represented moon phase was the full moon. A full moon was associated with mystery and nostalgia, and was the phase that allowed for the most interesting lighting effects on the environment. As increasing studies were made with the availability of powerful telescopes, the moon's obscurities were increasingly demystified. With a reflector telescope made by astronomer Sir William Herschel, portraitist and amateur astronomer John Russell (1775-1806) set off to produce a detailed moon map in *The Face of the Moon* (see Figure 11). His painting is a realistic study of the moon in its gibbous phase, a position

65. Paul Spencer-Longhurst, *Moonrise over Europe: J.C. Dahl and Romantic Landscape* (London: Philip Wilson, 2006).

specifically chosen to capture the most interesting details of the moon's topography with distinct contrasts of light and shade.⁶⁶ By the mid-nineteenth-century, daguerreotype and early photography made it even easier to capture snapshots of the moon. Scientist and photographer John William Draper's (1811-1882) first images of the moon initiated the interest in astrophotography (see Figure 12). Consequently, the moon, which was once a mythological body, became a domesticated part of human scientific knowledge.⁶⁷



Figure 11. *John Russell, The Face of the Moon, 1793-1797*

Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 12. *John William Draper, Moon Daguerrotype, 1840*

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

66. Spencer-Longhurst, *Moonrise over Europe*.

67. *Ibid.*

Science, Faith, and Individualism: The Romantic Landscape Image

The secularization of religious imagery from idolatry to pantheistic/panentheistic interpretations of nature, the desire for truth in science, and the urge for self-expression all shaped Romantic art. On one level, the Romantics looked to nature for divine revelation. On another level, the objective observation of nature's material processes yielded truths into nature's divinity. Lastly, an individual's creativity, which was also seen as a gift from God, provided a means to return nature materially back into the world of humans. Romantic art, thus, had to balance between divine-spiritual connectivity, scientific accuracy, and personal expression. The Romantic artist who best represented the balance of these three aspects was Johan Christian Dahl.

Dahl, who was good friends with both Friedrich and Carus, sought a midpoint between Friedrich's mystic expressionism and Carus' scientific enthusiasm. Dahl was a prolific painter, producing numerous paintings that included many detailed study versions of repeated scenes during his lifetime. However, as productive as Dahl was, his humble craftsman background was maintained in his simple approach to art. Revealing nature's greatness, particularly influenced by the nostalgia for his native Norwegian landscapes, was the essence of his art. Unlike Friedrich, Dahl was not concerned with the transcendental aspects of the human-nature relationship. But in a down-to-earth way, Dahl did relate religious faith to nature by declaring "that the best writings and the most lucid religious ideas and feelings...[come] from statesmen, poets, speakers, and philosophers – and from those who study the natural sciences."⁶⁸ Like many other Romantics, Dahl believed that art and science, along with religion, aspired people to greater truth by "awakening [their] feeling[s] for nature" and that "apart from religion [art and science] are of great importance for the human condition in a spiritual as well as economic sense."⁶⁹

Dahl's beliefs on art and science were much aligned with the Romantic ideologies of his time. Moreover, his pictorial conventions were very picturesque. Like Constable, Dahl was an avid copier of Old Masters' paintings. His earlier works are often suggestive of Claude's pastoral idealism, the lighting effects of Danish painter Jens Juel (1745-1802), and the mountain and waterfall themes of Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682).⁷⁰ Dahl developed his own painting style as he matured as an artist, but his picturesque conventions remained consistent. With the support of many patrons, Dahl was considered a popular

68. Johan Christian Dahl, "Dahl's Statements on Art and Nature," *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788-1857: Life and Works*, trans. Marie Lødrup Bang (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987), 247.

69. *Ibid.*, 246.

70. Marie Lødrup Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788-1857: Life and Works* 3 vols (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987).

artist during his lifetime. By successfully enhancing the image of his native Norwegian landscapes, Dahl is celebrated as a significant cultural figure in his home country.⁷¹ However, in the grand narrative of European art, Dahl is often only mentioned in passing as Friedrich's Norwegian friend and is less studied than other Romantic landscape painters. Perhaps Dahl's style is considered less of a "breakthrough" than his contemporaries within the historical context of European art. Even though he does not represent the extremes of Romanticism, Dahl's paintings are the most demonstrative of the Romantic landscape image. His paintings reveal a mixture of overlapping Romantic concerns, including the search for truth in nature, an objective methodology in exploring this truth, and ways to express the subjective self.

Although Dahl was a son of a fisherman, he did not start painting seascapes until the 1820s when he was already an established artist. Unlike the common nautical prints of his time, Dahl's emphasis was on the contextual landscape instead of the ship.⁷² Shipwrecks were common subjects in his paintings. *Shipwreck on the Coast of Norway* (see Figure 13) shows a detailed scenario that takes place on a rocky coast. The crevices and formations of the mid-ground and background rocks are portrayed while the foreground rocks are in shadow, illuminating the wrecked ship like a theatrical setup. Waves of water and storm clouds are painted in extreme detail with careful use of colour. A sense of hope is felt as a glimpse of light breaks out behind the clouds. Here, like many of Dahl's paintings, the figures are anecdotal. While the boy and his dog were lone survivors in his 1819 painting *Morning after a Stormy Night*, here they sit quietly to the side as the men work diligently to recover their belongings from the wreckage.



Figure 13. Johan Christian Dahl, *Shipwreck on the Coast of Norway*, 1832

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The theme in *Shipwreck on the Coast of Norway* is very typically Romantic. The

71. Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788-1857*.

72. Ibid.

notion of a shipwreck recalls the sublimity of nature – a power that makes humans vulnerable. While Dahl's paintings can be quite melancholic, this one is rather optimistic. The message here is that while nature is powerful, humans can often overcome its forces. Allusions to *The Tempest* are not only apparent in the subject matter but also in the theatrical setup that Dahl created from the spotlight on the working men. The dramatic emotions of the Romantic *Sturm und Drang* are recalled as themes of voyage, misfortune, and fate are explored.

Unlike Friedrich's symbolic symmetry, Dahl often chose standard "postcard" views for his landscapes. The view used in his 1839 version of *Dresden by Moonlight* (see Figure 14) was taken from a familiar vantage point across the river that is almost identical to Bernardo Bellotto's (1721-1780) *View of Dresden* from 1759.⁷³ In Bellotto's version, the details of Dresden's architecture are displayed in clear daylight. Dahl's version has a similar setup but is distinctly romanticized. The dimly lit Baroque architecture instills a sense of nostalgia. It is already dark, but the people on the bank are still working as if it were daylight.⁷⁴ The silhouettes of horses wading in the water and the figure of a woman sitting contemplatively at the bank emphasize the peaceful mood. However, the partially cloud-covered moon and its dazzling reflection on the water are the main highlights of the painting, creating a poignant romantic aura. Dahl painted numerous paintings of Dresden, but almost all were set under a moonlight setting. Although Dahl examined the moon through many sketch studies, he was mostly interested in the ambiance that could be generated in night scenes.



Figure 14. Johan Christian Dahl, *Dresden by Moonlight*, 1839

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The subject matter in which Dahl's personal attachment to nature is most evident is in his Nordic landscapes. Ironically, Dahl spent very little time in

73. Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788-1857*.

74. Reiner Moritz, *Johan Christian Clausen Dahl: View of Dresden under a Full Moon* (ArtHaus Musik, 2012).

Norway as an adult after leaving to study in Copenhagen. Nostalgia for his home country was most likely the reason for this niche of images, as Dahl painted Nordic landscapes even during his visit to Italy in 1821. The soft bright light of Southern Europe likely helped him appreciate the “mood-inducing” Northern climate and “its pronounced seasonal changes.”⁷⁵ According to Bang, Dahl used stock images of Northern landscape elements such as mountains and waterfalls learned from copying works of Ruisdael, Lingelbach (1622-1674), and Lorentzen (1749-1828), to complete many imaginary Nordic scenes. Although these paintings were popular among patrons, they lacked the sense of place and the maturity found in his later Norwegian landscapes.

View of Øylo Farm, Valdres (see Figure 15) is one of multiple large-scale paintings that Dahl completed in his later years despite the lack of purchasers.⁷⁶ Detached from commercialistic pressures, these paintings showed Dahl’s true feelings for the landscapes of his home country. Compared to his earlier Nordic scenes, *View of Øylo Farm, Valdres* has a greater sense of depth, which is created by the receding tonality of the mountains in the distance. For his Norwegian paintings, Dahl generally preferred more distant views than focus on landscape features. For example, the waterfall in *View of the Feigumfossen in Lyster Fjord* (1849) is simply a part of the habitat where goats in the foreground live. Dahl’s wider views were chosen to showcase the splendour of nature through expansive landscapes.⁷⁷ While the landscape of *View of Øylo Farm, Valdres* is a composite of mountains (background), a flowing stream and a specimen birch tree (left), a group of conifers (midground), a rugged path leading to the farming huts (right), and the people and horses living at the farm, each element is painted convincingly.



Figure 15. Johan Christian Dahl, *View of Øylo Farm, Valdres*, 1850
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

75. Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788-1857*, Vol. 1, 50.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

For Dahl, the landscape features, the animals, the people, the changing clouds and the atmosphere are particular to a place: "Every region, or subject has its particular poetry which is often more or less local, even the weather and the form of the clouds – therefore one must study these especially and in each region in particular."⁷⁸ In order to bring out the essence of a region, it was important for Dahl to render every element truthfully. Dahl's inventory of study included the people he placed in his scenes. Though his costumed figures often feel like accessories in the landscape, Bang argues that Dahl's intentions were more than cultural nostalgia. Instead, "he wanted to evoke a feeling of nature's grandeur and dignity incarnated in the life of the inhabitants" and that his "figures belong and are bound to the landscape."⁷⁹ According to Dahl, nature cannot be "transcribed" literally; it can only be referenced through a certain kind of poetry.⁸⁰ The way to overcome the limitations of representation was by careful observation and artistic practice.

Conclusion

When we think of landscapes, we often conjure up images of certain landscape scenes. These images are influenced by memories of places we have experienced and landscape images we have seen. The preconceptions that we have of landscape images subconsciously affect our ordinary responses to landscape itself, for example, the desire to capture a "postcard image" at a scenic tourist destination. The images from the golden age of Romantic landscape art were particularly influential. During a time when life was infused with science, faith, and art, and further infused with a deep notion of the self in contrast to nature, Romantic painting established strong conceptions of a particular landscape idea.

While unraveling the mysteries of the human spirit was most important for the Romantics, the answers always traced back to nature as a divine source. Thus, science and art both became means of exploring the truths of the human spirit, nature, and God. As much as the human mind thirsts for truths, these realities could only be comprehended through representation. As a powerful form of representation, the picture holds tremendous significance. The picture is the most primitive way we visualize and communicate. For the Romantics, the landscape picture embodied truth. Even as worldviews changed from religious to secular, and from mythological to scientific, the landscape image continued to embody the truth of humanity's existence. Furthermore, the practicing of picturesque gardening, nature photography, and mass tourism has made the landscape image

78. Dahl, "Dahl's Statements on Art and Nature," 249.

79. *Ibid*, 134.

80. *Ibid*, 249.

into reality. Thus, the picturesque, beautiful, and the sublime are not just ways to appreciate landscapes; for the modern individual, they are the attributes of landscapes themselves.

Glenn Parson in *Aesthetics and Nature* questions whether we ought to appreciate the starry night sky as a mythological creation, a scientific phenomenon, or a visual pattern.⁸¹ Parson argues that nature should be appreciated *as nature*, in particular, rejecting mythological or religious narrations and formal (visual) acts of appreciation. If we consider the Romantics' appeal to nature and their representations of nature through landscapes, we would hesitate to confirm the validity of Parson's claim. In fact, I would argue that there is no singular way in which we *ought* to appreciate nature. In reality, we *do* appreciate nature because of multiple associations. We may be accustomed to seeing the world through the different lenses of faith, science, and art, but in the context of Romanticism, nature was all of three perspectives collapsed into one.

Even though faith and art have been split from science and are delineated as subjects that are secondary to the essence of modern life, landscapes continue to suggest the connection. No matter how rational the modern mind may be, humans are beings of memories. A large part of cultural memories is formed by images. Particularly, our modern concept of nature is shaped by the history of landscape images. The idealization of landscapes since the Romantic Movement has shaped the way we think and behave in landscapes today. Furthermore, a significant part of the history of Western civilization rests on a continuous exploration of the relationship between humanity and nature. For Schama, these recollections from this ever-shifting relationship are the baggage we cannot let go of as humans.⁸² Landscapes not only retain the memories of the land but also the representations of our historical conceptions of nature. Consequently, we cannot see a landscape separately as myth, science, or image. Each one of these perspectives feeds off the other two. The Romantic landscape image was created from mythical, religious, and scientific ideals. In turn, the Romantic landscape image encouraged certain cultural ideals of nature and beauty. Thus, the Romantics fully acknowledged the power of landscape images and the connection to their self-identities as humans.

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81. Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

82. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

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