

Caspar David Friedrich at the edge of the imaginable

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Johannes Grave
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The six syllables “Caspar David Friedrich” reliably bring to mind a certain strong flavour, a flavour commonly labelled “the Romantic sublime”. You get the full force of that flavour standing before “The Watzmann” in Berlin’s Alte Nationalgalerie – at five-foot-six wide, one of the artist’s largest canvases. In fact a keen taste of it comes through from the reproduction in Johannes Grave’s magnificently produced new monograph: for even in small scale, the image giddies and chills. Your imagination is, as it were, knocked off its feet by a foreground that falls tumblingly away, while at the same time a rush of angular forms drives it upwards – from cold to glacial, from uninhabited moor to unattainable altitude, from not much of anywhere to a visionary nowhere. The peak provocatively pokes at the canvas edge, as if at the very edge of the imaginable.

If the picture grips you, it may be because on some level you have a yearning for this chill. Although a substitute hike is not quite what the composition provides – for it offers no point at which to enter the path that rises up leftwards – you might walk the mountains with much of this agenda at heart: to be sent endlessly out of yourself, endlessly upwards, to jettison the homely and the social and submit to the cold vastness of space, as if with nothing human to fall back on. The picture’s remit, therefore, is not so much topographical as poetic. You register that it has been conceived in strong emotion – in a longing, in fact, to transcend emotion – and in that light, the most quoted of all Friedrich’s remarks on his art may start to make sense. “Close your physical

eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring what you saw in the dark to the light, so that it may have an effect on others, shining inwards from outside.” To which the artist added: “A picture must not be invented, it must be felt”.

Quite how to track that process of image creation, however, remains a conundrum. Grave’s thoughts on the issue follow those of Helmut Börsch-Supan, long the leading scholar in the field, and the dazzling literary performance of Joseph Leo Koerner in his *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990). The evidence Grave supplies shows that in the case of “The Watzmann”, the line dividing “invention” from “feeling” ran very fine indeed. Friedrich, who was fifty-one when he first exhibited this canvas in 1825, had never cast his physical eye on the mountain in

question, because he had never travelled as far south as the Bavarian Alps. Instead, his spiritual eye was supplied with two items immediately to hand in his Dresden studio. One was a watercolour vignette of the peaks painted five years earlier by a favoured pupil of his named August Heinrich. The sheet had come back to Dresden after Heinrich's untimely death while touring Italy, a loss discreetly commemorated, I suspect, by the most homely component of this unhomely painting – its central, monumental pyramid of boulders. This particular rock formation, however, is one that Friedrich had indeed studied at first hand. He had sketched it fourteen years before composing the canvas, on a walking tour of Saxony's Harz Mountains. What "shines inward" from the dark of his spirit is a crafty splicing of two separate vistas and geologies, over 200 miles apart.

Was it purely an impulse of memorial piety that inspired the pictorial matchmaking? There was in fact a third party involved. The year before Friedrich displayed his picture at the Dresden Academy, the city's public had been captivated by another "Watzmann" – the painter in this case being the twenty-one-year-old Adrian Ludwig Richter. Richter's résumé of the Bavarian Alps, which shuttles down from the sublime peak, via forests and cascades, to a charming woodman's cottage, made an imposing debut for an artist who would become one of Biedermeier Germany's most popular landscapists. Nature – so the young man asserted – opens up to us "a broad, beautiful, enlivening space" in which "everything expresses itself", and therefore it is wrong to use nature's forms "as signs and hieroglyphs", projecting on them a "morbid melancholy". This salvo was explicitly aimed at Friedrich, whose "gloomy, feverish images" betrayed, Richter claimed, the "tension, weakness and sickness . . . of our times".

For his part, Friedrich despised the type of balanced and rationalized panorama that Richter was now promoting, dubbing it a bid "to unite all sensations, as though mixed together with a twirling stick". Instead of attempting to combine the sublime with the beautiful, "every truthful work of art must express a definite feeling" – a singularity, extreme and provocative if necessary. His own pictorial return of fire seems indeed to have provoked when exhibited, leaving viewers uneasy and discontented. For as the writer Karl Töpfer explained, in the Friedrich Watzmann you are shown no way either of judging scale by looking down into the valleys, nor yet of attaining the summit: you are pitched into "a bleak void without comfort, standing high up yet not uplifted".

Grave seizes on that last phrase as he argues that Friedrich was rebutting not just Richter, but all contemporary approaches to "the sublime". After Edmund Burke popularized the aesthetic category in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1757, polite society had come to savour the sense of danger occasioned by encounters with nature at its unruliest and least representable. Kant, writing in 1790, examined how this sense of danger could in itself be a pleasure, provided the viewer had a secure vantage point: ultimately, Kant said, such encounters reaffirmed the power of human reason. Friedrich, however, had no truck with "the self-empowerment of the rational individual", Grave contends, nor with too easy pleasure. A "deeply Lutheran faith" would have caused him to regard "human claims to the sublime as an act of hubris". Pushing representation into a colder, less comfortable corner than any of his contemporaries, his art accords with more recent notions of the sublime, advanced by postmodern theorists, but not his own age's. For the viewing public in Germany, the reaction to "The Watzmann" marked one more stage in a progressive disengagement from an artist "ridiculously fond of peculiar and tasteless effects".

The episode comes relatively late in a highly consistent career, distinguished across three decades by the production of startlingly immediate and original landscapes – images that were at the same time intricately bound up with art-theoretical debates. This working pattern, it's true, only settled in during Friedrich's early thirties. The sixth child of a candlemaker, Friedrich had been born in the midst of Lutheran Europe – at Greifswald on Germany's Baltic coast, as of 1774 ruled by Sweden. Training at first took him north to Copenhagen's Academy of Art. The scant records of his time there reproduced in the new two-volume catalogue raisonné of the drawings, edited by Christina Grummt, bespeak a hesitant soul, uncertain as yet what genre to pursue. It was only following Friedrich's relocation at the age of twenty-four to Dresden, the glamorous "Florence of the North", that the practice of pen-and-pencil sketching, on walks out of town, properly took root.

The chief visual habit evinced by his sketches could be seen running through much of Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century: like Ingres in Paris or John Flaxman in London, Friedrich reduced his object of depiction to the leanest of linear notations. Throughout his career, his mark-making remained impeccably light, hardly ever nudging

the corporeal, let alone the sensual. And yet it was always intent to develop supple responses to rhythms observed in nature. Nature on one level being an item-by-item repertory: trees, more than anything else, fill the thousand sheets collected in the catalogue raisonné, followed by boulders, crags and crevices, Gothic ruins and the odd boat or barn. Oak, pine, fir or hawthorn: each prompts its own deft shorthand. Nature on a larger level – landscape receding to a horizon – was analysed with equal economy, but Friedrich's vistas of fields, hillsides and bays soon started to prod at the question latent in so much of the era's neoclassical idealism. What relation, if any, do the clean lines scoring the white of the paper bear to the world in which we stand and move? Friedrich's impulse was to answer as quizzically, indeed as negatively, as possible: he kept cutting away the foreground, removing routes of entry, as if to deny that the picturable and the inhabitable were cut from the same fabric. If he overlaid his line drawing with tonal washes, the effect was more to draw attention to his own picture-making than to open up an illusionistic window.

Grave plausibly situates this problematizing cast of mind deep in Friedrich's religious outlook. Alongside his assiduity and precision, he had imbibed a "Protestant critique of false trust in the senses" that invigilated over his studio activity. As he himself wrote, "Any kind of illusion has a repugnant effect, like any kind of deception. A painting must stand as a painting, made by human hand; not seek to disguise itself as Nature". At the same time, Friedrich was surely encouraged to take up landscape by the innovative "seashore sermons" preached near his hometown by the Lutheran pastor Ludwig Kosegarten, homilies described by the prudent Grave as "sailing perilously close to pantheism". The two aspects of Friedrich's formation came into sharp apposition in 1808, in almost the first oil painting he completed. (He had kept to pen and watercolour throughout his twenties.) The so called Tetschen Altar presents, within a specially designed hieratic frame, a scene of sunset rays silhouetting a mountain-top crucifix – its Christ figure being turned away, its face towards the light. "Seek God in Nature", the frame seems to urge. "But don't expect to meet Him in mere pictures of Nature", its contents seem to add, twisting the proposition.

Boldly exhibiting the artwork in a chapel-like installation, Friedrich was trying out the gambit later perfected by Malevich and Duchamp – to confront the art-loving public with a visual proposition that was at once didactic and paradoxical. Equally, he was intervening in the argumentative hubbub that connected the salons and literary reviews of Dresden to those of Weimar, Jena, Berlin and Hamburg, in the early years of German Romanticism. The more that Goethe, who had shown interest in his earlier sketches, recoiled from his sharp provocative flavour, the more younger writers such as Heinrich von Kleist hailed it in astonished salutes: "It is as if one's eyelids had been cut away" was the latter's response to the radically minimal "Monk by the Sea", painted not long after the "Tetschen Altar".

It has to be said that as a guide to the interplay of voices and ideas during this period, Grave's sober and scholarly text suffers by comparison with the 1990 study of Friedrich by Joseph Leo Koerner. Koerner, developing his argument around reactions to the "Tetschen Altar", acknowledges that in its conceptual dexterity and incisive wit, the two-century-old German critical culture he is exploring rebukes the standards of our own age, and so eloquently rises to meet the challenge that he becomes an impossible act to follow. Koerner also manages smoothly to integrate politics into the flow of his discussion. Friedrich, defending that new-age altar of his in 1809, mentioned how Jesus had presided over "the death of an old world" because that is exactly what he and his fellow Germans had themselves just witnessed. Napoleon's final liquidation of the ancient Holy Roman Empire pointed to a need to reinvent the nation, and possibly religion itself. Grave sidesteps the allusion, keeping issues relatively compartmentalized.

Nationalist aspirations are often readable in Friedrich's choice of landscape imagery during the war against the French, and around 1817 his reveries over Gothic ruins were counterpointed by ambitious perpendicular designs for a never-to-be-built new church. This was just before he settled down with a young wife, at the age of forty-three. In his remaining two decades of landscape painting, the pointers to a new Germany dwindled to a fondness for dressing the figures in "Old German" costume – the garb of Romantic liberals, resistant to the repressive post-war settlement. The initiative of the day passed over to the likes of Ludwig Richter with his emollient supersession of Romantic "sickliness", and the best remaining option for the increasingly marginal and querulous Friedrich was to attend to his picture-making's internal dynamics.

Nowadays, however, all these local contexts, conceptual and political, lie hidden out of sight: and it may even be argued that this is for the best. So thought the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Dahl, who was based in Dresden through

the 1820s and who wrote that his friend Friedrich had been much misunderstood:

“His contemporaries saw his pictures as constructed ideas without any truth to nature. Many bought them, therefore, as no more than curiosities or, especially during the wars of liberation, because they sought and found in them a particular – one might say politically prophetic – meaning . . . Artists and art connoisseurs saw in Friedrich only a kind of mystic, because they themselves were only looking out for the mystic. They did not see Friedrich’s faithful and conscientious study of nature in everything he represented. For Friedrich knew and felt quite clearly that one does not or cannot paint nature itself, but only one’s own sensations, which must, nevertheless, be natural. Friedrich saw in a particularly tragic way – which, if not affected, was certainly exaggerated – the limits of what can be represented in painting.”

While Grave does not quote these words of Dahl’s, they seem to converge significantly with the view of the art he wants to advance, as he tries to insert new commentaries between those offered by his predecessors. While his efforts are at points laborious (once or twice, abandoning every precept of art criticism, I caught myself muttering “You’ve simply been looking at that picture for far too long”), Grave’s central insight holds good: namely, that the pictures “do not illustrate particular thoughts, they transform them into a genuinely pictorial way of thinking”. When Friedrich uses his vocabulary of motifs drawn from nature to fill a rectangle of paper or canvas, he may line them up parallel to the rectangle’s edge, or use them to prod at that frame. He may marry them off in emphatic architectonic symmetries, or yoke them together in baffling, disrupted perspectives. Frequently and distinctively, he sets between them and the viewer an averted figure, half to provide that viewer with a proxy and half with an obstruction – an invention most famously pulled off in the iconic “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog”. All the while, he refuses to provide any footholds for the process of imaginative rambling around which so much of landscape art has always revolved. In that sense, Friedrich is the genre’s anti-Claude, the antithesis to the master of the luminously seductive recession. A Friedrich landscape, Grave argues, “declares its own pictoriality and artificiality to the viewer”, using its art to criticize art. The artist’s profound Protestantism is therefore prophetic of modernist values, as twentieth-century criticism would come to know them.

To my eyes Grave’s argument works – but only up to a point. Representing Friedrich as a highly original yet punctilious conceptualist who happens to work in paint, it doesn’t fully escape Dahl’s stricture against treating the pictures as “constructed ideas”. Whereas looking again at the reproductions in this imposing volume, in all their gorgeous amplitude, it strikes me that Friedrich’s art with its northern motifs and Claude’s with its southern are not so fundamentally dissimilar. The ingredient that remains undiscussed in Grave – or for that matter anywhere else in the sophisticated critical literature this artist has generated, as far as I can tell – is the way that tonal relations are progressively and with infinite patience, glaze upon glaze, evolved into colour. I see in that steady application of the sable brush an unqualified love for the use of the eyes, however distinct that may be from the word of God: I see in it great beauty, great pleasure. That, surely, is what keeps us looking.

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