

Epochs of nature

Roy Porter

Landscape and Memory. By Simon Schama. HarperCollins/Knopf: 1995. Pp. 652. £30, \$40.

In his typically virtuoso investigation of ideas of landscape, Simon Schama puts history to use to shake up modern beliefs about nature. Endangered species, shrinking icecaps — indeed the shrinking world — have riveted attention on ecological peril. Many feel rightly indignant about endangered species and endangered nature. The Romantic impulse still beats strongly in our breast: the fastnesses of planet Earth — Antarctica, Sun-baked deserts, jungle depths, everything that still resists the intrusive presence of the ‘developed world’ — continue to exert a mighty appeal. We want ‘nature’ to be protected against the depredations of ‘civilization’.

All of which is very well, but Schama tosses a spanner into the works in the form of a welter of evidence, verbal and visual, demonstrating that the pure and innocent nature we respect and revere is all the stuff of myth. Conservationists worship the English countryside and strive to rescue it from motorways and developers. But there is absolutely nothing ‘natural’ about that green and pleasant land: our beloved landscape is itself the product of centuries of human settlement, not least the enclosures imposed (ironically enough) by the capitalist agri-business of yesteryear. Marching behind the standard of nature, green activists are often, if truth be known, merely preserving the historical works of man against the present.

And if we can’t see this, it is because we remain blinded by the legacy of a Romantic movement that drew a fundamental but false distinction between man and nature and invested the latter with positively religious awe. Victorian poets and philosophers treated nature as sacred and to be honoured for its very wildness, its exclusion of man. Views of that kind made no sense at all before modern times. Feudal society was too busy fighting the forest, protecting itself against feral predators and staving off hunger to be able to indulge in daydreams about the magnificence of the wilderness. The mediaeval forest was a hive of industry, not a retreat of hallowed solitude.

Romanticism blossomed as the luxury of the urban intellectual. And Schama and other critics of Romantic excesses would allege that the same stricture applies to Romanticism’s pessimistic heir, contemporary radical ecology. The difference is that whereas Romanticism gloried in the possibility of the poet’s rapt communion with creation, ‘deep’ ecology wants to

debar man from nature altogether.

The roots and ramifications of such crucial issues facing us today are energetically explored in *Landscape and Memory*, a sumptuously illustrated work presenting a dazzling sequence of historical episodes illustrative of man’s interplay, in fact and in fantasy, with forests, rivers and mountains. It’s a work that resists being reduced to any simple chronological thread and refuses to dole out easy answers. Indeed, as in *Citizens*, his acclaimed account of the French Revolution, Schama revels in the

the Nazis were highly “ecologically conscientious”.

Schama’s treatment of the Lithuanian forests epitomizes many of his underlying themes. He shows how even (or perhaps especially) in this secular age, our sense of awe when faced with waterfalls or Alpine crags owes much to residual religious impulses. From early on, theologians chose to incorporate elements of the pagan cults of groves and springs; Church Fathers could find God in the desert; St Francis preached to the birds, and healing shrines such as Lourdes attest the lingering appeal of veiled pantheism. In brilliant passages, bedecked with splendid photographs and reproductions of art works, Schama traces such emblems as the ‘verdant cross’ with greenery creeping around it, symbolically capturing the theological message of the fusing of death and resurrection.

God certainly dwelt in the mountains,



Sunny Morning on the Hudson River by Thomas Cole, 1827. Founder of the Hudson River school of landscape painting, Cole is often viewed as a Romantic artist who invested the American wilderness with religious meaning. From *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* edited by William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (Yale, £35).

twists and turns of history.

Opening his grand tour with the Lithuanian woodlands, renowned as some of Europe’s last surviving forests, Schama lays bare their shifting fate as the territory was successively fought over by Lithuanians, Poles, Russians and Germans. The forests survive today, not, as might be assumed, as some relic of primaevial times but because over the centuries they have been replanted and sustained as royal hunting grounds — in recent times for the benefit of Nazis such as Hermann Goering, who loved enacting Teutonic fantasies there. Ever one to relish history’s wry ironies, Schama, whose Jewish ancestors hailed from the region, notes how

but feelings of popular national destiny were mainly associated with water. Rolling currents have conveyed deep meanings, be it the river of life (latterly the ‘stream of consciousness’) or the hope of tracing the ultimate source of things — it is no accident that Freud compared psychoanalysis to the quest for the source of the Nile. Fountains comprised emblems of power whereas the smooth still waters of lakes were associated with the soul.

All landscape features are thus saturated with meaning and memory; indeed, they are picturesque, like a picture. Only the fanatical Romantic, preoccupied with his unique encounter with nature, would deny these cultural myths (or what Jung

would call the collective unconscious). Driving round Yosemite National Park in California, it might be tempting to fantasize that here at last is pristine landscape preserved as nature intended. But, Schama notes, the very flora and fauna of the park, with its giant sequoias, is the product of epochs of Native Indian husbandry, involving routine forest burning; and in any case our idea of Yosemite is of a landscape from which the white conservationist, tourist or backpacker has peremptorily excluded its former human denizens.

The face of nature everywhere bears the imprint of man, and nowhere more emblematically than at Mount Rushmore National Monument in South Dakota, with its gargantuan presidential visages carved into the very cliff. Meanwhile, be it in the form of zoos, greenhouses or urban parks, civilization incorporates the spirit of nature. This explains why Schama can feel less gloomy than those radical environmentalists who prophesy the wholesale and final ruin of our planet. For his historical message is that man and nature have been engaged in a perpetual exchange in which man's impact on the landscape creates and recreates environmental aesthetics that perennially assume new meanings and emotional investments. "It is in vain", writes Schama, approvingly citing Henry David Thoreau, "to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves".

Schama is a master storyteller, imaginative and immediate. He is also a master of history in a more academic sense, equally at home with the minutiae of mediaeval theology as when discussing a contemporary artist such as Anselm Kiefer. Not least, he interweaves his historical tapestry with autobiographical threads: the boy living along the River Thames just down from Tilbury, penning a schoolboy history of the Royal Navy; watching his father feasting on whitebait at the Savoy Hotel; and then eventually travelling to the Lithuanian forests to unearth those Jewish roots (implausible though it may sound, his mother's Orthodox forebears turn out to have been loggers).

Like a mature greenwood, Schama's work is dense and variegated; and as with all good fairy stories, the path through the forest is twisting, with impenetrable undergrowth and enticing glades and daring detours. Much is omitted — not least, it must unfortunately be said, the history of science and its impact on Western concepts of the environment. Reading *Landscape and Memory*, the happy wanderer may sometimes feel he cannot see the wood for the trees. But Schama might not be discomfited — he would be ready with a quip, quoting the art historian Aby Warburg: "God lies in the details". □

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Monstrous perceptions

Frank Gonzalez-Crussi

The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World.

By Robert Garland. Duckworth: 1995. Pp. 222. £35, \$39. Distributed in the US by Cornell University Press.

AT first blush, no human activity seems simpler than seeing. In fact, none is so complex or so precariously perched above the twin-sloped precipice of ambiguity and misperception. But when the object seen is the human body, the risks are multiplied. For a universal notion that we find irresistible is that the body has a representational function; that it is what it is, as



From *The Eye of the Beholder*

Bronzed beauty — phallic dwarf (early first century AD).

well as 'something else'. It incarnates an interiority, an occult reality, a significance or a 'soul' that projects itself on the visible surface, upon which it leaves, indefectibly, its mysterious mark or imprint. Thus the human body is a cipher, a hieroglyph that must be interpreted; and every age, every society, must provide its particular interpretation. Hence the uniquely apposite title of Robert Garland's new book, *The Eye of the Beholder*, a study of the reactions elicited in the ancient Graeco-Roman mind by the sight of the physically impaired.

Garland is a professor of classical studies at Colgate University, New York. His previous books identified him as an out-

standing scholar with a lively interest in the views held in the ancient Hellenic world on our biological nature, its appalling frailties and inexorable finitude. Garland has now summoned an impressive array of materials to survey the fears, prejudices and superstitions that surrounded bodily deformity, as well as the gallant efforts to transcend the anguish consubstantial to this human tragedy. He draws on vase-painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, ancient medical writings, ethnology, archaeology and mythology. All this is engagingly brought to bear on a learned exploration of the ways in which the ancient Graeco-Roman mind tried to come to terms with the dismal fact of physical incapacitation produced by age or crippling disease.

The picture that emerges is patinated by a certain inevitable callousness, for a society where life was "nasty, brutish and short" — average lifespan of 37 and 44 years respectively for men and women — was not likely to promote warm feelings of genuine concern for the disadvantaged. More commonly, the weak were looked upon with disdain, and contempt was predicated on the unfeeling tenets of a pseudoscientific *physiognomy* that upheld the principle of bodily deformity as an outward expression of inner baseness. Exalted humanists, such as the elegiac poet Theognis of Megara (sixth century BC), bemoaned the fact that the morally depraved are sometimes deceptively handsome, but would not carry this lamentation to the point of challenging belief in the fundamental correspondence between bodily deformity and moral or spiritual wretchedness.

Consequently, the lame, the blind, the ugly and the weak were reviled, turned into scapegoats (*pharmakos*) for the ills that beset the community, then delivered to ritual punishment or execution; released into beggarmod, sometimes after deliberate maiming, as in Seneca's haunting narrative of children brutally mutilated or blinded in order to increase their earnings as beggars; collected as pets in the household of the rich and powerful, there to carry out menial and humiliating tasks, as did the eunuch whose appointed function was, according to Martial, to steady his master's wavering penis over a chamber pot while he was urinating; displayed publicly as oddities, as were dwarfs and giants during the reign of Augustus; sold as outright merchandise in a 'monster market' or *teraton agora*, mentioned by Plutarch in *Moralia*, and which, according to Garland, may have existed side by side with the market of slaves in many cities of the empire. There, the deformed, coveted as exotic 'objects', could command higher prices than the hale. Martial mentions a buyer who demanded his money back when he found out that a slave he had purchased was not an idiot, as he had