



# The Aesthetics of landscape\*

Henryk Elzenberg

## I. What landscape is

For a “fragment of visible reality” (which would be the *genus proximum*) to be regarded a landscape, it would appear that two properties are required:

1. It should be a sufficiently extensive fragment for a person to be *small* in it (it would be going too far to say they would “vanish” in it). The branch of a cherry tree or even the entire cherry tree depicted by a Japanese painter does not of itself make a landscape. Poussin (1647) still manages to be a landscape, while Millet’s *L’Angelus* Millet (1857-1859) is probably no longer a *paysage*: the boundary is obviously fluid. (Transition: landscape with staffage [...]).<sup>1</sup>

2. It should be a fragment where natural objects clearly outnumber man-made artefacts. Yet surely one can construe the word “landscape” more broadly? One can speak of the “landscape of roofs and chimneys”, the “landscape of a mining region” with the slag heaps, headframes, power lines etc. But this is not the typical and characteristic meaning of the word. The chimneys may be there, even more so the houses, haystacks etc.—but trees, sky, sea, clouds, hills and so on and so forth should predominate.

## II. Aesthetic moments inherent in landscape as a mere visible object

As with every visible object, a landscape may exert an aesthetic effect by means of purely sensory elements (as “pure painting”): colour, line, shape. In principle, this phenomenon is not unique to landscape. Still, a certain specific trait in this respect may be indicated, notably the peculiar quality of colours and their aesthetic significance here. Given that landscape is situated directly in natural light (sunlight or possibly the moonlight, though the latter represents a special case), it is saturated with that light, but the colour there is more a light [...]; it is a *modification of light*. This is opposed to the situation with interiors, still lives etc. With landscape, we

\* Henryk Elzenberg (1887-1967) was a Polish philosopher whose research focused on aesthetics, ethics, and axiology. This translation is based on a manuscript kept in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, ref. no. III-181, file 69 (85).

1 Note in the margin: “Do not give examples from art, but from nature! (Tree seen through a window).”

deal not so much with colour surfaces, illuminated in one way or another, but with objects *woven out of light*, as it were (the light itself containing many colours, of course). The Impressionists went too far there, taking things one-sidedly, yet they did bring to the fore key elements for our attention. In landscape, the seas (in the sky and in the distance I most strongly note [...]) delight us due to their *singular* character.

It still remains to be considered whether there are some unique aesthetic features to be found in the lines and shapes of landscape.

### III. Aesthetic moments relating to the definition

1. Expanse and space. A number of landscapes (sea, desert, steppe) exert their effect by virtue of the *immensity* of space—their vastness, boundlessness—the fact that a person becomes indistinctly minute, disappears in them. This entails a peculiar sense of sublimity etc.

A person engages with some landscapes lightly and smoothly, without the feeling of being overwhelmed. There is a whole spectrum of possibilities. Aside from absolute dimension, the *segmentation* of landscape (varying in degree, obviously), the arrangements of its lines etc. also play a role. A tremendous scale of possibilities and hues exists here, depending on how a person feels as they engage (including in their imagination) with a given landscape. This instant of *uniting* or *joining* is fundamental. The landscapes may be cosy, inviting, repulsive, or engrossing landscapes.

2. Naturalness and absence of artefacts. What we enjoy in landscape is undoubtedly (this is most universally known) communing with natural objects, ones “untouched by human hand”, “unblemished by the human” (to a greater or lesser extent, because fields and roads are “touched” and yet delight us greatly).

At this point, I immediately pose the classic question: is aversion of people and dissonance with respect to society a precondition of the love of landscape (“nature”)? [...] To this I answer in the negative. This dissonance is a frequent phenomenon, reinforcing the love of landscape and making it more “keen”—but it is not indispensable. (Mickiewicz etc.; arguments from everyday observation and from literature). A moment of relief and relaxation: oblivion in the midst of human labour, human strivings, the absence of all distortions which are imposed on nature by force. All that without the disinclination or dislike of people. [...]

### VI. Landscape as a symbol (or abstract) of the world

The peculiar trait of each object which constitutes a feature is that by making contemplation more profound it becomes a “symbol” or an “abstract” of the world for the subject who contemplates it. We yield to the suggestion that not only the object in question and the world in its entirety is such-and-such. This occurs in landscape more forcefully than elsewhere, because landscape *is* a world itself, as it were,

a *quatemus* in the particular moment and place we happen to see the landscape. This continuation, expansion, enlargement, extension of the mood to encompass the entire world is a vital moment of the corresponding aesthetic experience.

(As far as I remember, in the note from Zakopane I placed this part of the discussion near the beginning, right after the definition, having assumed that it would have a bearing on all that followed. Yet I did so without complete certainty. Now, I do not wholly know what to think of it and how it fits in with the rest.)  
[...]