

Empirical Studies of Nature

Neither in the Romantic nor in the classical and idealistic view of art can the empirical Nature study be an end in itself. Even when painted in oils, it does not constitute an autonomous work of art. There are several reasons for this. According to classical principles, the mere imitation of Nature is inartistic: the work becomes art only when the natural prototype is purged of contingent individuality, by reference either to an absolute idea that dwells in the artist himself or to an absolute artistic norm sanctified by tradition. Nature study forms part of the artist's training, but from the outset he aspires to leave this transitional stage behind him and to graduate to the highest form of art, the exemplary history piece, defined by ideal form in perfect harmony with the absolute validity of the action shown. For norm and form to coincide, there must be an external point of reference with some claim to objectivity: the monarch, the Church, organized society, or some representative of these interests.

Romantic still incorporated much that was classical; but under the pressure of history the centre of balance had shifted towards fidelity to Nature – whether this appeared in the guise of humility, or of scientific aspirations, or of Nature mysticism, or of all three at once – and also towards the subjective observer, who was enabled to find himself by the presence of Nature. Allegiance to monarch, Church or community was no longer perceived as a norm, and at the same time the hierarchy of genres (with history painting at the head) lost some of its significance. The subjective observer recognized his or her own image, whether in Nature or in history, and reflected on the lesson learned, but no longer expected any direct guidance on how to act in the present.

The intensified Romantic concentration on the phenomena of Nature implied a sense of alienation from Nature, and the desire to make Nature one's own again through visual contemplation. This faculty of contemplative appropriation was – or so the Romantics were firmly persuaded – a particular gift of the artist. For

Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, visual art stands 'as an active bond between the soul and Nature, and can be grasped only in the living middle between the two'. Any one-sided concentration on the 'soul' too easily becomes shallow; conversely, a mere imitation of Nature misses the essence of the thing depicted, producing a dead image. Science, says Schelling, approaches Nature by endless laborious degrees; art can reach its goal at a single bound. Art grasps the essence of Nature by bringing out what is *characteristic*. This can be done neither by beauty of form alone nor by the 'empty shell or demarcation of individuality'. Art discerns the eternal archetype within the individual form, 'and he who has grasped the essence must not fear hardness and rigour: otherwise life could not exist'. The artist descends to minute detail, and does not even shrink from painful form, in the effort to extract the essence of the works of Nature.

These observations, while based in a philosophy of Nature, also have an entirely practical bearing on the artist's work. Hardness and rigour of form; extreme concentration on the individual phenomenon, in order to penetrate to the heart of it; imitation, as a means to possession and knowledge that is scientific but also transcends science: only such an understanding makes it possible to assess the Romantic study of Nature, and to give a meaningful account of the nuances of theory and practice that separate individual artists.

In 1815, when Goethe became acquainted with Luke Howard's terminology of cloud description, it seemed to him that at long last a systematic approach to meteorology had become possible. For Goethe, ever since his second visit to Switzerland in 1779, geology – principally as mediated by Horace Bénédict de Saussure – had been the linchpin of the sciences. But he could make nothing of the Swiss geologist's atmospheric measurements: they seemed to have no correlative in visible phenomena, and he could not meaningfully integrate them into his understanding of the operations of Nature. It was Howard's classification of clouds into stratus, cumulus, cirrus and

nimbus that seemed to him to make meteorological sense of the form, formation and transformation of clouds. This was also in harmony with his own ultimately mystical and cabalistic conception of the workings of the animate earth, the 'Earth Body'. Howard gave him back the sky, which the secular Enlightenment had unpeopled of its heavenly hosts. Now, at last, the sky in all its manifold appearances could once more serve as a linguistic image in Goethe's poetic cosmos. A scientific discovery seemed to have given it back its harmony.

The central importance of this for Goethe's world view is the sole explanation of his special and long-lasting interest in the modest English scientist. It also accounts for his urgent insistence on seeing the new insight reflected in painting. In 1816, on the suggestion of his associate, Johann Heinrich Meyer, he applied to Caspar David Friedrich for some cloud paintings – and was turned down flat. To Friedrich it seemed unthinkable to force the clouds into a system. As he saw it, mechanical observance of the new classification would lead to a revolution in landscape painting: where now the painting, steeped in the sensibility of the artist, gave Nature its soul, a preconceived abstraction would regulate its appearance and squeeze the breath of life out of it.

Friedrich had no idea that Goethe, too, was concerned with the breath of life in Nature, and that to him, natural science was not an end in itself but the equivalent of the exploration of being that Friedrich, after studying Nature in detail, sought to detect within himself and to express in his work. For Friedrich, the essence of things became visible only if brought out – exactly as suggested by Schelling – through the hardness and rigour of the artist's intervention; but hardness and rigour of artistic form emerges, in the Romantic view, only in the moment of self-concentration that permits an intimation of universal connectedness. Moreover, formal hardness and rigour acts as a pointer to the viewer's response to the work. In the act of perception the viewer actualizes the meaning that the artist has placed in the work in a state of potentiality. In Friedrich's view, Howard's system would prevent just this.

Friedrich's *Mist in the Elbe Valley* (c. 1821; colour plate, p. 231) was interpreted as a study of Nature, but

also as a Christian allegory in which the foreground stands for this world, with a hint of the world beyond emerging through the mist as the goal of the future eternal life; the bridge was seen as the link between the two spheres. Here, once more, we agree with Schelling who said that every true work of art is 'capable of an infinity of interpretations ... and yet one can never say whether this infinity resided in the artist or whether it simply resides in the work.' More specifically, we would say that this deliberate interpretative openness is specific to the Romantic work of art. Specific, partly because by its very nature – that is, in its whole artistic approach – the Romantic work of art 'delivers an oracle with many meanings'.

The objects in Friedrich's painting – tree in leaf, leafless tree, bridge, smoke from a human habitation, morning mist – may be read as signs; the painting permits this interpretation. But this reading is not the only interpretation of the painting. Rather, the painting demands an approach that opens a range of possible experience and interpretation. It does so by discreetly, but repeatedly and therefore unmistakably, emphasizing the central vertical axis. The position of the sun, as revealed by its rays; the highest point on the hill; and above all the only clear notch or angle in the whole picture, where the corner of the building in the middleground meets the line of the foreground terrain: all these lie precisely on the central axis of the painting. The viewer is thus gently manoeuvred into position in front of the painting. This contains no human action; but smoke and mist blow across it, so it is not frozen into immobility. It depicts a single moment, and yet – as Schelling puts it – it seems to exist outside time: it embodies pure essence, pure being. This is what Schelling means by bringing out the essence of Nature. Only when the painting, through the hardness and rigour of its form, sets the viewer pondering the connectedness of things, does Friedrich regard it as a fully valid work. However, this pondering is not abstract reflection: it takes place in the process of visual contemplation itself – or rather *as* visual contemplation.

It is certainly untrue that there are no pure Nature studies by Friedrich. There certainly are; but they are drawn on principle and for a purpose: trees, rocks, plants and views, architectural or technical details, mostly dated precisely to the day, with details of place

and, more rarely, of colour or distance. The trees are shown with all the characteristics of their species, and mostly drawn early in the year so that their salient feature, the arrangement of their branches, is still clearly recognizable. This is reminiscent of Alexander Cozens's set of tree drawings, published in 1771, which showed the 'Shape, Skeleton and Foliage' of thirty-two different kinds of tree: in these, too, the structural pattern of the skeleton remains visible beneath the garment of leaves, as a kind of abstract of visual observation. To this, Friedrich adds light and shadow, in clear gradations of drawing. Thus, the drawing of an oak is a precise reproduction of Nature, but also a structural analysis of a thing perceived, and so it provides the artist with knowledge that he can use freely in a painting while retaining truth to Nature.

However, there seem to be a few exceptions to the rule: in one short period, between 1820 and 1824, Friedrich painted a small number of oil studies that were not made with a view to inclusion in a pictorial composition and therefore lack a referential dimension. These would probably not have existed without the influence of Johan Christian Dahl. Dahl had come to Dresden in 1818 and had immediately become friendly with Friedrich, and we have Nature oil studies of his, made in the neighbourhood of Dresden in 1819. In the winter of 1820–21, while Dahl was away in Italy, Friedrich painted close-up views in oil of ice-floes and ice breaking on the Elbe, and these he used directly as sources for *Sea of Ice* in 1823–24 (colour plate p. 97); three of them were in Dahl's studio at his death and bear inscriptions in his hand. Friedrich no doubt considered that, for this rare phenomenon, mere drawings with indications of colour were not enough. He captured the shapes and gradations of colour of the ice-floes in oil studies, such as had long been customary in painting plants or rock formations for use in the foregrounds of composed landscapes.

Before he left for Italy, Dahl was prompted to make oil studies by Christopher Wilhelm Eckersberg (who had returned from Italy in 1816); while he was in Italy, his principal influences in this respect were Achille Etna Michallon and François Granet. It was certainly Michallon, pupil of Pierre-Henri Valenciennes and teacher of Corot, who played the more important intermediary role. His master, Valenciennes, not only painted

oil studies himself, with particular emphasis on changeable atmospheric states and their effect on objects, but was the leading advocate of the establishment of a Prix de Rome for landscape painting, for which the submission should consist both of a large finished landscape composition and of an oil sketch of a landscape. The first such prize, awarded in 1817, was won by Michallon. The result was a flood of French oil studies.

The first German artist to respond to this seems to have been Maximilian Johann Georg von Dillis, who was in Rome in 1818 with the Crown Prince of Bavaria and there painted oil studies of the view from Villa Malta. Dillis owed another debt to Valenciennes: in his *Eléments de perspective pratique* of 1799–1800 Valenciennes recommends a careful study of clouds, recorded in drawings with colour notations, with a view to capturing the shifting state of the weather. On his return from Italy between 1819 and 1824 Dillis made over 150 drawings of clouds, but in these other influences were probably at work too.

It was long supposed that Valenciennes's oil studies, now in the Louvre, and mostly dating from the 1780s, were invariably painted from nature. It was therefore taken for granted that this also applied to the hundreds of surviving oil sketches by Dahl. In both cases, however, some caution is in order. The format, the free handling and the material of the support – mostly cardboard or paper on cardboard – do not necessarily prove in themselves that these studies were done in the presence of Nature. In many cases it is quite conceivable that a summary, drawn notation underlies the work, and that this was almost immediately translated into a painted sketch in the studio. This would explain why many of Dahl's sketches reveal a degree of pictorial organization, as exemplified by the golden section and by formal and proportional analogies. It can even be assumed that without these the intrinsically worthless and evanescent motifs in question would have had no right to appear in art at all. Even for Dahl, however, oil studies were not an end in themselves: in his *Liber veritatis* they do not appear as paintings in their own right, and he subscribed all his life to the demand for classical perfection in official landscape painting, just as Valenciennes did.

Pure cloud studies became increasingly frequent in Dahl's work in 1823 after his visit to Italy. There were

probably two reasons for this. One was that in that year he moved within Dresden to a house on the banks of the Elbe which he shared with Friedrich; the cloud studies could have been painted from a window of the house. The other, and probably more important, was that Carl Gustav Carus would have drawn his attention to Goethe's work on Howard. Published in full in 1822 in the fourth instalment of Volume 1 of *Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt* ('On Natural Science in General'), this consisted of the essay '*Wolkengestalt nach Howard*' ('Cloud Form According to Howard'); an expanded version of the poem '*Howards Ehrengedächtnis*' ('In Honoured Memory of Howard'); and Goethe's own translation of Howard's autobiography. Carus read this at once, and its importance was crucial. He stopped work on his *Landschaftsbriefe* ('Letters on Landscape') for more than a year and a half, and resumed them only at the end of 1823 with Letter 6, in which – to cut a long story short – he renounced the Romantic Nature mysticism of Friedrich in favour of a more scientific, Goethean attitude.

Carus's paintings underwent a corresponding shift. He continued to agree with Schelling that art was capable of truly fulfilling the aspirations of science. However, this was no longer to be done in an intuitive, subjective leap but in familiarity with the observation of Nature; this was the scientific aesthetic to which Goethe – and with him, above all, Alexander von Humboldt – subscribed. In the seventh of his letters on landscape painting, written in 1824, Carus discussed Goethe's '*Howards Ehrengedächtnis*' in specific detail and coined the term *Erdlebenbildkunst*, 'pictorial art of earthly life' which was to dominate his own *Briefe über das Erdleben* ('Letters on Earthly Life') composed from 1826 onwards. In these he called for the Romantic mood landscape to be replaced by a conception of landscape based on natural law and indebted above all to geology (together with meteorology). The first traces of geological thinking, concerned above all with geological models of the origins of the earth, can be discerned in Carus's painting from 1820 onwards.

In the early 1820s, and especially from 1822 onwards, there were thus some members of Friedrich's circle who subscribed to an antisubjectivistic view of Nature, based on objective observation and insistent on natural laws

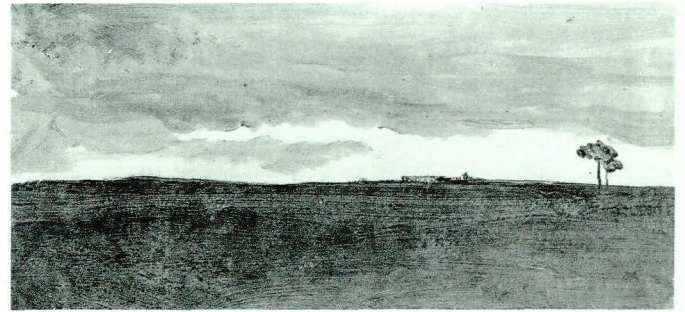


Fig. 1 Carl Blechen, *Cloud Study*, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett

which could not have left Friedrich entirely unaffected. In 1824 he painted three oil sketches – including the celebrated *Evening* now in Mannheim – which limit themselves to the 'pure' rendering of Nature. Friedrich makes this absolutely plain: not only does he adopt the convention of the oil sketch by painting in oil on cardboard – as he rarely did elsewhere, even in small paintings – but he writes in the time of day and the date, 'October 1824', far too large and in the case of the Mannheim work scratched in the narrow dark strip of earth. This ensures that all three paintings remain studies. But in contrast to the Mannheim painting – which consists of nine-tenths sky and a narrow, violet-black, wholly undifferentiated strip of earth – the *Evening* study in a private collection shows two of the Dresden churches, with the Hofkirche sporting a Gothic helm roof instead of its onion dome, and both rising needle-like on the misty skyline. Even here Friedrich cannot resist including interpretative hints.

In 1823 yet another artist came under Dahl's influence: Carl Blechen, who visited Dahl and probably Friedrich in Dresden in that year. A series of pure cloud studies in oil on paper directly reflect the stimuli he received, but the influence did not last. For in 1824, on Karl Friedrich Schinkel's recommendation, Blechen was appointed set painter to the Königstädtisches Theater in Berlin. This work affected his painting; he came to favour a Romantic theatrical *frisson*, based on literary sources, with a clear popular appeal, yet tinged with his own instinctive gloom. Subliminally, even here, a realistic

intention persisted, and this became dominant after he gave up his theatrical work, both before and during his visit to Italy in 1828–29. Blechen's Italian cloud studies (fig. 1), with their audacious use of colour and their free, fluent handling, outdo Dahl and often rest content with summary but remarkably telling hints. They often use against-the-light effects, and anticipate his official Italian landscapes. These now seem to us entirely conventional, both in staffage and in composition, but contemporary critics condemned their harsh colouring and sketchy handling as violations of all the rules of art. One reviewer wrote of Blechen's *Afternoon on Capri* (1832) that the sheer brilliance of the sunlight made the effect garish, as if it were the work of a crack-brained man; the whole thing looked 'like a lye contaminated with dull-red and bluish ingredients'.

Even before the experience of the Italian light, however, Blechen was quite capable of doing justice to natural phenomena. A study of rocks, clearly and proudly dated 1828, and known, probably wrongly, as *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (on the strength of a supposed visit to the island in that year) is utterly direct (colour plate, p. 236). It dispenses with any anecdotal or ennobling embellishments and limits itself to two ranges of tone, from brown to yellowish-white for the cliffs and from grey to weak blue for the section of sky. The chalk or limestone cliff is convincingly reproduced, both in its phenomenal appearance and in its geological structure.

Blechen was declaring his adherence to a tradition that had begun with the geologically exact illustrations to Humboldt's travels in which draughtsman, painter and engraver followed Humboldt's own designs in the endeavour to emphasize structural features and thereby show not only the characteristic form but, in accordance with the Romantic tradition, the essence of a landscape. Humboldt himself hoped that these works would lead to the emergence of a new art of landscape painting; only this would compensate aesthetically for the lost wholeness of Nature.

There is an evolutionary connection between these works and Carus's views of Fingal's Cave on the Hebridean island of Staffa which reflect not only mythological associations but also geological theories of the origins of the earth (cat. 35). After earning Goethe's approval in 1820 by painting the pillar-like basalt for-

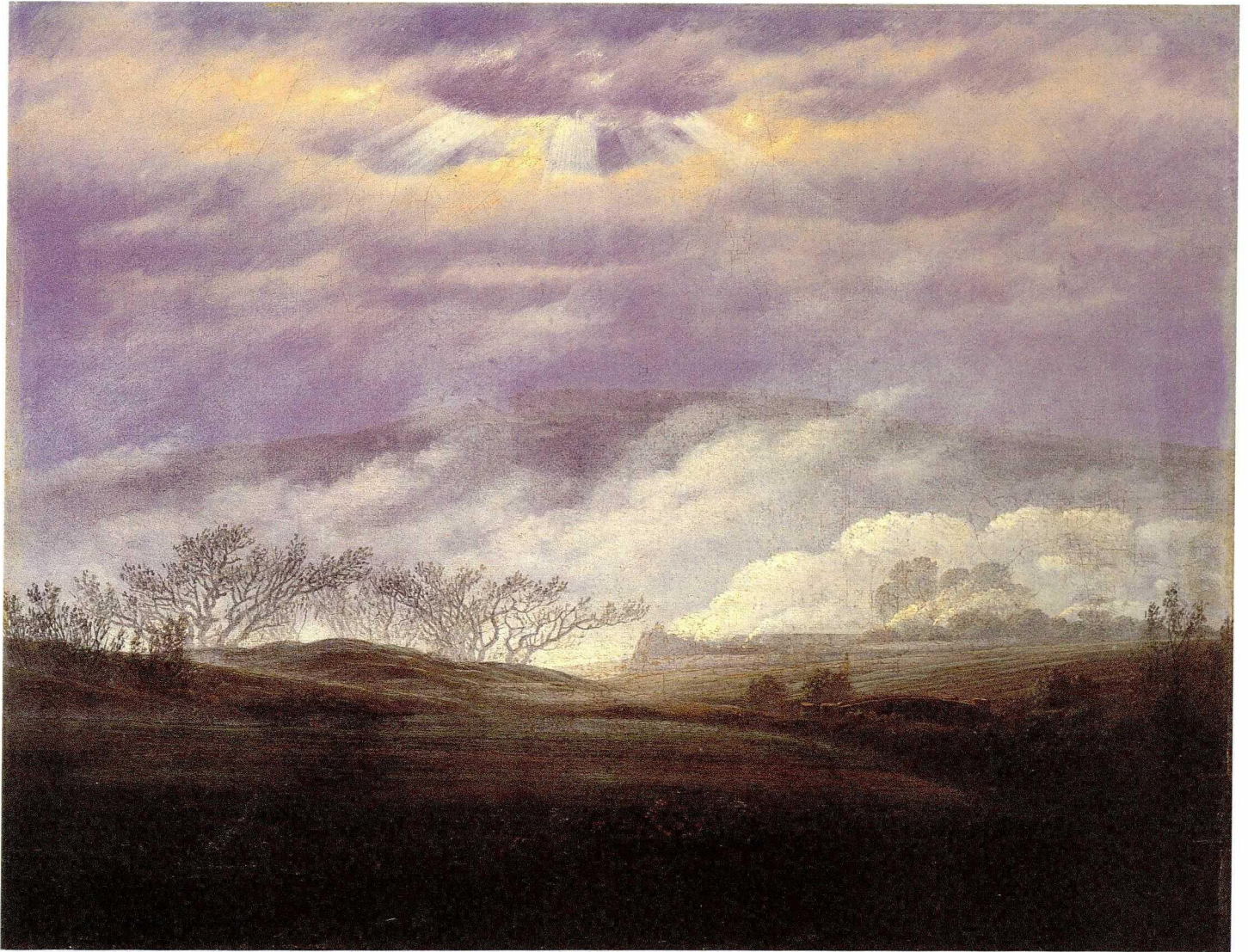
mations near Zittau, Carus in his turn founded a tradition of what he himself called 'Geognostic Landscapes', which found successors in German art as late as 1850, as exemplified by Carl Rottmann. Romantic and scientific elements combined in the key term 'characteristic', the meaning of which Goethe and Friedrich Schiller had explored as far back as the 1790s.

Werner Busch

Translated from the German by David Britt



Caspar David Friedrich
Sea of Ice, c. 1823-24
Hamburger Kunsthalle



Caspar David Friedrich
Mist in the Elbe Valley, c.1821
(cat. 41)



Carl Blechen
Chalk Cliffs on Rügen, 1828
(cat. 33)