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ARTH 284
February 07, 2002
Paper 1 – Visual Analysis

Gauffier's Fish Pond at the Monastery of Vallombrosa with Horsemen and Monks and Turner's
Bonneville, Savoy: The Verb Voice of Nature

Louis Gauffier's work Fish Pond at the Monastery of Vallombrosa with Horsemen and Monks, finished in 1797, exhibits to the viewer a skillful example of conventional late 18th-century landscape painting. Executed in oil on canvas and measuring about 120 centimeters in width and about 80 centimeters in height, the Frenchman's picture presents a meticulously detailed view of a monastery nestled in the rolling hills of Tuscany. James Mallord William Turner's Bonneville, Savoy, dated 1812, shows us a scene on the banks of a river outside a small village in the Savoy Alps between France and Switzerland. His painting is just slightly larger than Gauffier's with a similar aspect ratio at about 130 centimeters in width and 90 centimeters in height and is also carried out in oil on canvas. At first glance, the two pictures appear to share not only the subject matter – the realistic depiction of a contemporary rural landscape – and their horizontal canvas format, but they also show striking similarities in composition and spatial division of the depicted scenes. Consequently, shared or at least related motives and intended messages might be inferred in both artists. However, closer inspection reveals subtle yet significant differences with which the artists characterize the interaction between humans and their surroundings. While Gauffier's nature is a malleable *passive environment*, acted upon by people to accommodate their aspirations, Turner's nature is shown as a far less tamed *active force* that people have to negotiate with and attune to.

The earlier Fish Pond (titles will be abbreviated for succinctness hereafter) by Gauffier offers the viewer an impression of a then-well known traveler's destination in Italy. Gauffier divides his composition into three distinct asymmetrically-arranged, yet balanced, spatial zones. In the foreground, three male figures – a monk and two assumed travelers – stand on a small but steep elevation in the lower

right hand corner of the canvas. The middle ground of the painting is occupied on the left hand side by a complex set of monastery buildings, beyond and to right of which the pond mentioned in the title is seen. Softly undulating hills in the middle ground repeat manifold in the background until they merge in the distance with a relatively high horizon line, created by the elevated position of the viewer looking down onto the scene. Middle ground and background are clearly separated by the use of atmospheric perspective which simultaneously lightens, desaturates and tints the far away forests to a pale ochre-pinkish hue that matches the hazy sky.

Gauffier succeeds in exposing the entire landscape to the spectator before her eyes settle on any of the peculiar details of the scene – the center of the canvas, a natural first point of focus for any viewer, is conspicuously occupied by a dark tree formation that does not provide enough contrast or detail to hold the viewer's attention. Her gaze has to wander around the canvas to the dispersed lighter areas – the bright sinuous curves of the *hinterland*, the illuminated ground on the foreground hill, and most importantly the startlingly steel-blue reflection of the sky in the pond's water which appears to be much brighter and sharper than the actual sky itself. The landscape is revealed in this process as something the viewer can take in, grasp, and comprehend in its entirety.

While the human figures themselves are placed in the shadow, the spectator's attention is nevertheless brought to them by the stark contrast of their dark silhouette against the brighter beige sunlit ground behind them. As the leftmost person looks out of the canvas (but not at the viewer) we cannot know what the object of his look is¹. However, the gazes of the other two figures set up an interesting juxtaposition: while the traveler on the right looks into the distance composed of *organic* hill shapes, the monk looks at traveler, but points with outstretched arm to the *angular* and *rigid* shape of the monastery complex as if trying to reorient the other's attention. Closer scrutiny reveals that the contrast of linear against organic forms reoccurs throughout the painting.

Extending the lines defined by the wooden gutters at the feet of the figures to the left precisely frames the monastery, which itself is of course the most rigidly geometric and most obviously human-

1 While characters looking out towards the viewer have traditionally been used to capture the audience's attention, here the traveler's view does not match that of the spectator and additionally his figure is painted too dark to function as a center of interest.

made object in the painting, while the elements of nature in the middle ground mostly assume irregular, often blob-like shapes, as in the trees in the center of the canvas. The fish pond and the demarkation lines between forest and meadows drawn by roadways in the middle ground represent the locations where human-created structure and the natural forms meet. The meeting is one of unequal partners though: in either case nature is clearly constrained into arbitrary boundaries; humankind has grasped and rationally mastered nature and is now free to control it according to its will.

Gauffier's choice of form reinforces this interpretation. The scene is lit by a sun just above and slightly to the left of the canvas, so as to expose everything there is to the viewer and leave nothing hidden or mystical. Gauffier's brushstroke is very even and mostly undetectable unless inspected closely; it neatly delineates and demarcates individual objects, rendering a fairly static impression that further reinforces the notion that nature is a passive entity for the spectator to hold and behold. Finally, the problematic position of the viewer – she appears to be hovering some feet above the ground - prevents an easy projection of the spectator into the scene and thus separates her from nature by literally placing her *above* all things natural.

Turner presents a superficially quite similar scene in Bonneville. The view exhibited is from along the banks of a river winding through rougher mountainous terrain. In the foreground we see a couple holding a picnic in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas. The couple is not surveying the landscape – rather, their attention is directed inwards, toward each other. Thus the influence of their gaze, which played a pivotal role in Fish Pond, is constrained to a much smaller area of the painting, suggesting a less dominant role of humans in nature. As in Gauffier's work, the figures occupy a relatively small section of the entire canvas space, which firmly places the main focus of the painting on the landscape itself. Beyond the figures a small herd of sheep (and maybe goats) is depicted behind which a village is nestled into the valley. However, even though parts of the village are accentuated in high-key colors, most of it is hidden from our view by yet another group of dark trees occupying the center of the canvas. One can only spot the non-descript roofs of some fabrication plant on the left and a bridge leading over the river to the right of the occluding greenery, but detail is lacking and so the gaze soon wanders on.

Here nature itself is the shaping force of the landscape, and humans have to accommodate to their environment. The chosen depiction of the sky corroborates the interpretation of a more forceful, active nature. The clouds are much more voluminous and have a greater physical presence. Thus, Turner aptly sets up a primacy of nature over human endeavors and structures through sheer scale and ubiquity.

Compositionally, we find an asymmetrically arranged stacking of three distinct spatial zones similar to the division of the Fish Pond – the left, near river bank in the foreground, the occluded village and a large mountain formation in the middle ground, and small, snow-capped distant peaks of an even higher mountain range in the back. The background's color scheme is again attenuated by atmospheric perspective to suggest distance. In contrast to Gauffier though, Turner does not open up the background to the viewer's scrutiny. Instead, the gaze has to zig-zag through the image from right to left and then back to right again, following the path that the river has found through the jagged rock outcroppings – only to be frustrated after the second turn as mountains block further view from both sides. The tension created by opposing small figures with large, rugged mountain masses is never resolved. Hence in addition to the people and structures represented in the image, the spectator's gaze also has to comply with the edicts of nature.

Furthermore, Turner's brushstroke is generally looser than Gauffier's. At times it can become very animated, as in the foliage in the central foreground. This generates an overall dynamism in the work that turns the landscape into a vibrant system of constant flux. In fact, the apparent motion of clouds and fog is more animated than the relatively static poses of the human couple. Additionally, the larger, in comparison to Gauffier more interpretative and less descriptive brushwork leads to a general ambiguation of object boundaries. Hence the distinction between organic and geometric shapes is far less pronounced than in Gauffier's work.

Finally, the spectator's position in Bonneville is less problematic than in Fish Pond. The viewer can easily imagine standing some 20 meters downstream of the couple on the same river bank. As a result of the easier integration, the spectator is also more likely to feel immersed in the scene and surrounded by nature. Overall then, Turner skillfully combines representation and technique to suggest a

dynamic image of nature as an all-encompassing setting from which humankind cannot separate itself and which it cannot subjugate.

After analyzing subject matter and formal attributes of the two paintings, it has become apparent that some significant differences in the painters' perceptions of nature exist. However, it cannot be argued that these differences reflect larger societal shifts in the perception of nature since only a short time span lies between the creation dates. It appears plausible then, that the varying depictions are indicative of differences in the artists' personal philosophies. While neither of the two works appears to be openly political, a distinct undertone of social commentary can be detected. Ultimately, the difference in display of the power relation between humans and nature turns into a statement about the perceived limits of human competence: while for Gauffier, nature is a mostly passive entity acted upon and dominated by humans, Turner offers a view of nature as an active force, which humans have to accept they cannot master and with which they have interact on a humbler level. One indication that Turner's interpretation of the relationship between mankind and nature came to be valued more highly by audiences over time can be found in the fact that his work is currently presented in a far more elaborate, richly decorated gilded frame composed of several ornamental layers, while Gauffier's painting is exhibited in a much less adorned simpler frame hung in a corner of the museum's gallery.