

The Experience of Landscape

OLIVIER BERGRUEN

You might think that aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful—almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include what sort of coffee tastes well.¹

In lectures delivered in the summer of 1938 in private rooms at Cambridge, Ludwig Wittgenstein cautioned his students against the delusion of treating aesthetics as if it were a *prescriptive* science—a set of rules that can ensure our emotional or critical satisfaction. Since aesthetic objects invoke the expression of emotions such as delight, rapture, joy, melancholy, or sadness, we might be misled into thinking that there is a common essence to those varied feelings. But the actual realm of experience is different in each case, and it is only the *description* of aesthetic reactions that unifies these.

Aesthetic attention valorizes a variety of structures—a chair, a funerary cloth, a tiara, a work of art, the falling snow. The realm of the purely sensible (the *taste* or *aroma* of a particular wine, for instance) is only a part of this awareness. We might say that the sensible is formed by thought. Pure sensation is not a being that exists by itself. It is informed by customs, traditions, forms of discourse, defined by a community of people whose

existence is inscribed within a social and geographical space. Thus we can say that the aesthetic experience lies somewhere at the juncture between two different realms: the sensible and the cultural sphere within which aesthetic objects acquire their meaning.

In all cases the aesthetic experience is intentional—that is, directed at an object or performance. Furthermore, it will be enhanced if we have the ability to give ourselves *over* to that object or performance. The experience puts us in touch with certain emotions, and the work of art, if successful, evokes in us some of these feelings. All this is true of the wine-drinking experience. The practice itself is ancient, as attested by depictions of Dionysian excesses on Greek drinking cups—a youth, Dionysus, wearing a crown of ivy, holding the fertility symbol known as a thyrsus, attended by maenads clad in animal skins or vestments, whirl in a frenzied trance. Deeply ingrained in our own cultural traditions, wine and its rituals are widespread



Pablo Picasso, Horta de Ebro (Houses on the Hill), 1909, oil on canvas, 25⁵/₈ x 32 inches (65.09 x 81.28 cm)



Pablo Picasso, Woman in an Armchair, 1910, oil on canvas, 37 x 29 1/2 inches (94 x 75 cm), Daix 344, National Gallery in Prague

among other peoples, places, and times. For wine has the ability to disclose something very precious and rare—the memory of distant landscapes, the aroma of forgotten gardens, the spirit of the countryside.

Recently I had the experience of drinking several vintages of a great California cabernet. I found myself reminded instinctively of a distant past that, though hazy or lost, still lingers deep in my consciousness. Did the scents of cassis, chocolate, and licorice evoke certain ideas of virtue and truth? Perhaps, because feelings of purity and innocence may be what we all subconsciously crave. When it comes to considering wine, there is something that goes to the core of our being—something that starts with color and progresses to an aroma that is reminiscent of the earth and its variegated manifestations. There is also an awareness of complexity—something sensed at first, but fully disclosed only over time.

I am reminded of Picasso's landscape *Horta de Ebro* (1909) (page 128), with its deep ridges running vertically. Each of the ridges forms its own world in which we can lose ourselves (each becomes an object of contemplation), but at the same time an overall sense of the work emerges. The work of art unfolds before our eyes, releasing various aspects contained within the folds of the mountainous landscape, until the viewer synthesizes the elements into an organic unity. It is a remarkable fact that Picasso then thought of transposing the forbidding ridges of this Pyrenean landscape to other works, to the extent that in subsequent canvases he paints the hair of his mistress Fernande Olivier in the same manner.

I found just as many ridges, in a manner of speaking, in the wine that I drank. Its complex character revealed scents of ripe cassis fruit, aromas of black currant, of oak and cedar, whiffs of chocolate and licorice. Over time, it also disclosed a fruity quality intertwined with the scent of brown spices, black olives, and minerals. It had a softness, and a restrained sweetness. And as I continued to taste it, I found myself oscillating between black currant, floral, oaky, peppery, plummy, and velvety sensations, all of which came together in a balanced, satisfactory way. The same can be said of the experience of looking at Picasso's

landscape. When I view it, I tend to lose myself in—or simply pay particular attention to—a particular aspect of the work, such as the folds of the mountains. My gaze then moves on to the houses, painted like cubes or rectangles, and then on to the sky. My eye absorbs the composition in its entirety, and is seduced by certain aspects or details; it shifts back and forth, and aesthetic pleasure is enhanced by this activity. I found that the wine, by virtue of its complexity, allowed for a similar experience, though gustatory rather than visual.

I must also mention a sensation of landscape and a longing for nature. As I was tasting these wines, I tried to imagine the estate that it came from before it was settled, forbidding in its silence, a silence that its early settlers may have found frightening but that also underscored the beauty of an unconquered territory containing the promise of riches to be unearthed. I envisioned tracts of land covered with oak, manzanita, and redwood, clinging, thriving in a spartan soil on the hillsides. I thought of the land and its original inhabitants, the Wappo Indians, hunters whose traces are not entirely invisible (if only in our imagination). I still do.

Complexity in these wines is not achieved at the cost of organic unity—the distinguishing feature of many successful works of art. And like a great work of art, none of these wines is a fragment or collection of fragments but rather a whole that can reveal a profound truth about the world. The painter Balthus had this to say in an interview toward the end of his life: "Painting is an incarnation. It gives life and expression to the vision that carries it. One needs a very long approach, infinitely patient and often haphazard, in order for the picture to conform to that vision as exactly as possible. The vision is interior. But it is nourished through the permanent contact with reality."²

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966, p. 11.
2. Balthus, *Les meditations d'un promeneur solitaire de la peinture*. Entretien avec Françoise Jaunin. La Bibliothèque des Arts: Lausanne, 1999, p. 16 (my own translation).