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Re-Drawing the Borders of Vision; or, The Art of Picturesque Travel

Jason N. Goldsmith
Butler University, jngoldsm@butler.edu

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Re-Drawning the Borders of Vision; or, The Art of Picturesque Travel

[T]he greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion—all in one.

—John Ruskin, Modern Painters, Vol. III

I.

Somewhere in Iceland a volcano smolders. I should be home, with a wife and child I haven’t seen in three weeks. Instead I’m sitting in a clutch of frozen grass atop Helvellyn, a small tray of watercolors balanced on my knees, sketching the exposed spine known as Striding Edge (Figure 1). A fitful wind tugs at the corners of my sketchbook, threatens to spill my brushes over the snow-covered lip of mountain meters to my right. The cold seeps through my legs, rises into my back while I float tendrils of pigment through pools of water as clear as the air at this altitude.

Shadows have stretched and deepened across morning. Though
still early, I need to cover some twelve miles before reaching my hostel on the northern rim of Windermere. I pack my pencils and brushes; with a word of thanks to the mountain, tip the small cup of water to earth; and turn south towards Nethermost Pike. In airports across Europe, travellers slump over luggage, immovable as these hills.

As my boots scrape stone, I am reminded of another set of travellers who, inspired by Thomas West’s Guide to the Lakes (1778) and William Gilpin’s various Observations (1792) on picturesque beauty, came to the Lake District in search of these same scenes. With my journal and sketchbook, I’m not so different from the unheralded Frederick Baylays and Elizabeth Fletchers who ‘S[alt] perched with book and pencil on their knee, /And look[ed] and scribble[ed], scribble[ed] on and look[ed]’.¹

I realize, ‘Heaven preserve [me]’ (l. 1), that in comparing myself to the picturesque traveller, I run the risk of appearing ridiculous (Figure 2). Scrambling over fell and scarp in search of those observation

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¹ William Wordsworth, ‘The Brothers’ (ll. 7–8). This and all subsequent quotations of Wordsworth’s poetry from Stephen Gill, ed., William Wordsworth: The Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). Hester Lynch Piozzi suggested something of the popularity of the Lakes as a tourist destination when she remarked: ‘There is a Rage for the Lakes we travel to them, we row upon them, we write about them, & about them’ (quoted in Malcom Andrews, In Search of the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 153).
points or, 'stations', indicated in guidebooks, the picturesque tourist quickly devolved into a recognizable type: the amateur artist more concerned with aesthetic rules than natural realities. Wordsworth famously derided the fashion of '[l]iking, by rules of mimic art ... things above all art' (Prelude, 1805 XI, ll. 154-55), and his characterization of the picturesque traveller as a casual tourist out of tune with the local rhythms of life persists to this day.

As one modern critic put it: ‘Equipped with a mirror or oval glasses, the picturesque traveler could turn reality into representations; equipped with notebook and sketch pad, he or she could contemplate the natural through its reflection’. This is the kind of remark that someone with little experience drawing would make. Correlating the sketch to the tinted Claude mirror, which framed and reduced the landscape, it presumes that both apprehend nature at second-hand. While it is true that a sketch offers the viewer an experience of the scene that is highly mediated, the act of sketching demands an intensity of observation suggestive of an altogether different relationship. Drawing in situ brings the individual into a direct and active relationship with the natural world. And this, I suspect, is how Gilpin understood it as well.

Taking up the pencil or brush we counteract the habit of labelling phenomena, and, 'with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy', as Wordsworth put it, 'We see into the life of things' ('Tintern Abbey' ll. 48–50). While my reference to 'Tintern Abbey' suggests a correlation between Romantic aesthetics and image making, my argument about the benefits to be gleaned from drawing can be traced back to the Lake District’s other famous literary resident, John Ruskin, who developed a course of drawing instruction intended not to train artists but to refine the perception of ordinary individuals. Like Ruskin, Gilpin was writing for you and

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me, people who wouldn’t ever make a career out of art, but who, nonetheless, might benefit from the kinds of attention that drawing opens to us. My aims this morning are two. First, in comparing Gilpin to Ruskin, I hope to recuperate his image from persistent mischaracterization. ¹ Second, I want to encourage you to try your hand at sketching during your time here in the Lakes. Even a little of it can prompt a shift in perception, intensifying firsthand experience.

II.

![Figure 3: Eskdale from Hardknott, 2008. Pencil, 5½ x 8 inches](image)

We crest the hill on a cold afternoon. In the valley below, the walls of an isolated farmhouse glow briefly before gathering clouds swallow the last of the light. How bleak and desolate this place. Low stone walls hint at the past, bones rising from the heavy earth. Poised atop a spur of mountain, the Roman fort at Hardknott was one of the most remote and inaccessible outposts in Britain. Little has changed since the early second century when it was garrisoned by five hundred soldiers from the Dalmatian coast. There is earth. There is wind.

¹ Kim Ian Michasiw notes that the ‘picturesque has been, in our century, programmatically misunderstood’ as superficial and morally suspect (76). See his ‘Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque’, *Representations* 38 (Spring 1992), 76–100.
There is water. I shiver as those troops must have shivered, far from home and faced with such savage desolation. A damp wind blows in from the coast bearing the fugitive odour of sea, a faint echo of their former lives. It brings, too, rain. Inhospitable, fat, and biting.

Taken quickly, this small sketch (Figure 3) retains for me what Paul Horgan has called ‘impressions of actuality’. Its simple lines translate the pent-up energy of the storm, while the lack of tonal variation flattens the perspective. This tension is echoed in the diagonal trajectories, which lead the eye into the valley where line dissolves in a smellato-like haze. The paper is buckled from the rain that hurried us back to the car.

We make such sketches not to display in public, but to aid visual memory. ‘Half a word fixed on, or near the spot’, observed Gilpin quoting Thomas Gray, ‘is worth all our recollected ideas. When we trust to the picture, that objects draw of themselves on the mind, we deceive ourselves. Without accurate, and particular observation, it is but ill-drawn at first: the outlines are soon blurred: the colours every day grow fainter’. Memory is fleeting. But a sketch ‘fixes’ the object. We delineate its features as we perceive them. What is more to the point I wish to make this morning, Gray implies, correctly I believe, that sketching alters the very way in which we see. The act of recording one’s impressions occasions, in his words, ‘accurate, and particular observation’. When we draw something we don’t just look at it, we see it.

‘A few scratches’, Gilpin informs us, ‘... will serve to raise in our minds the remembrance of the beauties they humbly represent, and recall to our memory even the splendid colouring and force of light, which existed in the real scene’ (Three Essays 51). A sketch is deceptively simple. Its spartan lines evoke visual details—‘the splendid colouring and force of light’—unrecorded on the page. This is what I see when I look at my sketch (Figure 4). The value of a sketch, then, is its potential to activate the imagination. ‘There may be more pleas-

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ure’, Gilpin continues, ‘in recollecting, and recording, from a few transient lines, the scenes we have admired, than in the present enjoyment of them’ (Three Essays 51). For Gilpin, the sketch was a catalyst to the imaginative recuperation of emotional experience in much the same way that poetry was, for Wordsworth, emotion recollected in tranquillity.¹ This is because a sketch does not simply represent a scene; it recreates an experience. An exceedingly direct response to the moment, my sketch of Eskdale, for example, records not just what I saw but what I felt when faced with the immediate fact of this place, its sheer materiality. The spare lines tell of solitude beyond human scale; a correspondence of discontinuities; and the violent beauty of that strangeness.

III.

When Wordsworth claimed in his Intimations Ode ‘The things which I have seen I now can see no more’ (l. 9), he might well have been talking about how we process visual information. We see rather little

¹Gilpin goes on: ‘But, in general, tho’ it may be a calmer species of pleasure, it is more uniform, and uninterrupted’ (Three Essays 51).
of what lies before our eyes. Our very physiology works against it. Although the horizontal field of view for humans is approximately 180 degrees, visual acuity, the area our eyes can bring into focus, is slightly less than two degrees (that's about the width of your thumb when held at arm's length). Further, only twenty percent of the fibres leading to the primary visual cortex come from the retina. The remaining eighty percent come from regions of the brain dealing with other functions such as memory. Perception is a complex mental operation in which visual stimuli are processed and compared to symbolic representations stored in memory. Once an object has been matched to one of these symbols, the brain provides a label—"tree" or "pen"—and our attention typically moves elsewhere. We see the tree or the pen without really regarding it.

While the tendency to form schematic representations allows us to recognize objects quickly, it induces us to see the world in terms of stored memory knowledge. 'Shades of the prison-house begin to close' about us as concrete things are replaced by symbols (Ode 1. 68). Such symbols, of course, fail to register the discrete features that distinguish this one, unrepeateable grasshopper from all other grasshoppers.

Although he could not have been aware of the neural systems underpinning vision, John Ruskin understood how our tendency to symbolize inhibits perception: 'we always suppose that we see what we only know, and have hardly any consciousness of the real aspect of the signs we have learned to interpret', he explained. For Ruskin, seeing was a sacred act, 'poetry, prophecy and religion;—all in one'. And in both the Elements of Drawing (1857), which built on his experience as drawing master at the Working Men's College, and the lectures he delivered as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford (1870), he emphasized not so much technical facility but rather 'the habit of

accurate observation’.¹ "[T]he sight', he maintained throughout his life, ‘is a more important thing than the drawing’ (Elements 13).

Drawing encourages us to attend to the world directly, to begin to see again. For to draw well ‘demands intense, almost breathless concentration’.² You look at what’s in front of you and consider what you see in a way that identifies form, attends to structure and proportion, notices colour, light, and detail. Drawing, as Ruskin put it, ‘forces our indolence into attention and precision’ (Elements 41).

![Figure 5: Coniston, Old Man, 2010. Sanguine Crayon, 5 x 16 inches](image)

These two sketches show the view from Brantwood, Ruskin’s home on Coniston Water (Figures 5 and 6). The first, a study of form and volume, depicts the corrugated flanks of the Old Man of Coniston, given mass by a tracery of contour lines that reveals the interrelationships between these forms in space. Made immediately afterwards, the watercolour sketch sought to capture an altogether different aspect of the mountain, what seemed to me its curious lift. The pale light that morning had made the Old Man appear paper-thin and weight-less. Each sketch is a record of selective observation. Each was an attempt to learn something specific about the mountain: it’s structure, the way it held light and colour.

Every time you draw you learn something new about your subject. Ruskin, whose studies of the mountains near Chamouni resulted

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¹ John Ruskin, Lectures on Art, intro. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 1996), 208. Ruskin believed that ‘the excellence of an artist ... depends wholly on the refinement of perception, and ... it is this, mainly, which a master or a school can teach’ (Elements 12).

in the geological insights on mountain form in the fourth volume of Modern Painters (1856), assured his students that “the comparatively slight effort necessary to obtain so much skill as may serviceably draw mountains in distant effect will be instantly rewarded by what is almost equivalent to a new sense of the conditions of their structure” (Lectures 146), and after making these sketches I began to know this fell. Not intellectually, of course. I understood it intuitively, through the pulse of furrow and ridge, the ineluctable pull of its lines.

Communicating the world to us through the hand rather than the head, drawing roots vision in the body, leading us back, in a sense, to that primal moment when touching, grasping, gripping, lifting, turning, gripping made the world comprehensible. Clasp a pencil between your fingers and you learn that drawing is a physical act. You draw from the shoulder, paint from your back. To open your sketchbook is to open yourself to the chase of wind, the blister of rain, the curiosity of bees. The tactile qualities of drawing—the pressure by which you shape line, the hitch of charcoal across the paper surface—enrich observation as Ruskin recognized. “[Y]ou will find’, he announced during his inaugural lecture at Oxford, ‘that the mere necessity of using the hand compels attention to circumstances which would otherwise have escaped notice, and fastens them in the memory without farther effort’ (Lectures 63). Scratch the landscape on the page and it lingers in you, lines scored on the fibre of paper and the fibre of muscle.

As I wait for the launch to take me back to Coniston, where Ruskin lies beneath a Celtic cross of green slate quarried from these hills, I think about how Ruskin’s father purchased a collection of miner-
als as a gift for his son. The ‘little yellow bits “of copper ore from Coniston”’ inspired in the young boy a lifelong passion for geology: ‘No subsequent possession’, Ruskin would later recall, ‘has had so much influence over my life’.

In the stillness I imagine Ruskin sitting here near the end of his life, his blue eyes matching the intense blue of sky over Coniston, gazing across the water at these hills, studying their veins and fissures, turning them over in his mind as though his very childhood.

IV.

In 1793, the London printer William Bulmer published ‘An Essay on the Study of Nature in Drawing Landscape’, a slender pamphlet critical of the vogue for picturesque sketching. I’m interested in this piece because its author, William Marshall Craig, dwells on the relationship between the representation of a landscape and the attention one brings to bear on the scene represented, or, more simply, between drawing and seeing. Craig, who was painter in watercolours to Queen Charlotte, denounces the method of sketching recommended by Gilpin as a ‘manner of drawing by signs’ (10) that renders unnecessary the careful observation of nature, and advises the reader instead to ‘imitate Nature exactly’ (24).

I might here note how the verisimilitude espoused by Craig fails to acknowledge the inherent limitations in sight, in which the slightest tilt of the head changes the way lines curve. I might also mention that art, if it is to recreate our experience of the world, must evoke forms accurately yet incompletely, as one might encounter them at the instant of observation if that moment could be sustained. Or I might point out how Gilpin dismissed what he called ‘literalists’ (quoted in Barbier 151). ‘[T]o comprehend too much’, he declared, ‘... turns a picture into a map’ and cautioned his readers not to copy with that ‘painful exactness’ that was ‘a sort of plagiarism below the


dignity of painting’.  

Figure 7: Tree Study #5, 2008. Pencil & Charcoal, 9 x 12 Inches

This is sound advice. For all art is abstraction. Even Ruskin, whose meticulously detailed renderings of moss and stone demonstrate an extraordinary fidelity to natural forms, professed: ‘Good drawing is ... an abstract of natural facts; you cannot represent all that you would, but must continually be falling short ... of the force, or quantity, of nature’ (Elements 200). So we organize our composition around our initial interest in the scene. Was it the way a soft, pliant light washed over the indifferent sheep that caught your eye? Not all lines, shapes, or arrangements are equally significant. Before we can render the thickening joins of a wind-lashed oak (Figure 7), we must identify what Gilpin called its ‘discriminating features’ (Three Essays 160). For it is through such features, what Ruskin fifty years

later would call its ‘leading lines’, that we attain ‘a kind of vital truth [in] the rendering of every natural form’ (Elements 91).

As Gilpin saw it, the aim of art was not to provide ‘an exact resemblance of nature’, but rather to engage the involvement of the viewer by providing ‘those bold, those strong characteristic touches which excite the imagination’ (Lakes II. 11). Although we might take pleasure in a highly naturalistic portrait, we will not be moved by a picture ‘unless the force of our own imagination aid ... the painter’s art, exalt the idea; and picture things unseen’ (Lakes II. 11).

This distinction between mere pleasure and a more active emotional engagement helps explain Gilpin’s fondness for the sketch, which ‘pretends not to delineate with exactness’ (Three Essays 87–88). ‘The virtue of these hasty, black-lead sketches’, he claims, ‘consists in catching readily the characteristic features of a scene .... It is enough if you express general shapes; and the[ir] relations .... A few lines drawn on the spot, will do this’ (64). This drawing of the Scafell taken from Great Gable is deliberately stylized (Figure 8). It sacrifices detail and topographical accuracy in order to emphasize a more poetic truth: the ridgeline’s lyric austerity.

It is this tendency to disregard precise details for more general forms that Craig found so vexing. But if Gilpin’s sketches are a ‘short-hand kind of representation’, as Craig put it, they are anything but short sighted (‘Essay’ 20). In fact they are the result of precise and sustained attention.

The problem is not in the move from the particular to the general, which is fundamental to art. Wordsworth’s poetry, for instance, passes through the particular to offer us something more evocative of the human experience of grief. Rather the problem arises when we forgo considered observation and rely instead on shared conventions or memory knowledge. That this happened all too frequently is clear from the many derivative ‘pikteresk’ accounts that have come down to us from the nineteenth century.¹ But Gilpin himself resisted this tendency. He arrived at general truths by keen attention to what

Wallace Stevens called ‘the exquisite environment of fact’.¹ ‘He who has seen only one oak-tree’, observed Gilpin, ‘has no compleat idea of an oak in general; but he who has examined thousands of oak-trees, must have seen the beautiful plant in all its varieties; and obtains a full, and compleat idea of it’ (Three Essays 51). We induce the underlying principles of nature’s forms, its leading lines, through repeated encounters with the world of concrete things.

V.

In the orange light of evening, a commotion of passengers disembarks from the Windermere launch. They drift in pairs and small groups, chatting or snapping photos of one another, while a horse-drawn carriage waits to shuttle them to Ambleside, a short mile north. Wooden rowboats with names like Doris, Vera, and Maple—retiring names that evoke an earlier time—are strung along the pebbled shore where children chase golden-eyed ducks and toss bread to the swans that swirl the water’s edge. I wend through the crowd, the dust of

Helvellyn still in my boots, and settle on a bench, bone-tired, as twilight curls itself over a darkening ribbon of lake.

This view across Windermere was ‘no subject for a picture’, according to Gilpin. Yet it ‘afforded an admirable collection of mountain-studies for a painter … particularly … the front screen, in which the lines of the mountains were beautiful, and various …— the promontories; with the deep shades they projected—and above all, the mountain-colouring, which was the most splendid we had ever seen [Figure 9]. Vivid tints of yellow, green, and purple’ (Lakes I. 154–55). If the search for the picturesque often went unfulfilled, it involved Gilpin in a sympathetic consideration of nature, even in stretches of terrain that seem devoid of visual interest. Of ‘that tract of barren country’ between Newcastle and Carlisle, ‘a waste, with little interruption, through a space of forty miles’, Gilpin calls our attention to ‘[t]he interchangeable patches of heath, and greensward’. ‘Often’, he observes, ‘… on these vast tracts of intersecting grounds we see beautiful lights, softening off along the sides of hills’ (Three Essays 55). There is an intimacy here, I think, more reminiscent of John Clare than Dr. Syntax. That phrase—‘lights softening off along the sides of hills’—exhibits an extraordinary sensitivity to the
changeable conditions that shape our experience of the landscape.

In fact, Gilpin’s attention to the atmospheric conditions of visual experience is central to his understanding of nature. ‘No one can paint a country properly unless he has seen it in various lights’, he writes in the preface to his *Observations* on the Lakes, an object lesson in active visual engagement (*Lakes* I. vi). And in preparing my talk, I found that I had made some twenty sketches of this prospect at Waterhead. I drew it burnished copper at dawn (Figure 10); dead flat in the grainy light of evening (Figure 11); deliquescent at sunset (Figure 12); suspended in a pale gray mist (Figure 13).

‘These local variations’, Gilpin insists, ‘cannot be too much attended to by all lovers of landscapes’ (*Lakes* I. viii). And this, we might say, is the object of Gilpin’s extensive writing on the picturesque: to encourage us to observe nature at first hand, unclouded by routine and our tendency to symbolize. In this age of the instant image, when I can snap a photo on my phone, modify it with any number of pre-set filters, and upload it to Facebook or Instagram, Gilpin reminds us that ‘we must look for a long time before we can see’.1 When we sit down to draw, we are not simply rendering a

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1 Henry David Thoreau, ‘Natural History of Massachusetts’, *The Dial* (July 1842), 19–40, 39.
scene, we are, in effect, re-drawing the borders of our vision, expanding our capacity to experience the world directly rather than through the filter of our preconceptions. A devoted lover of nature, Gilpin asks us to come to the world with open eyes and an open mind, with, as Wordsworth would have it, ‘a heart / That watches and receives, (‘The Tables Turned’ ll. 31–32).

And it is in that same spirit that I want to ask you to put aside your cameras and to try your hand at drawing before our conference ends. You will likely feel embarrassed sketching in public. You will probably get frustrated as well. Our skill rarely matches our ambition. Don’t let this dissuade you. What matters is not the drawing, but drawing. The act is the end. Let me leave you with some encouraging words from that great Romantic, Goethe, who, writing from Rome, admitted: ‘What little technical skill I possessed was barely sufficient for a humble sketch, but I found my perception of the objects in the landscape ... had become sharper and I felt reconciled to the pain which had thus heightened my sensibility’.  

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Figure 12: Sunset over Windermere, 2010. Watercolour, 5 x 8 inches

Figure 13: Across Windermere, 2010. Watercolour, 5 x 8 inches
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