

The Shepherd on the Hill: Comparative Notes on English and German Romantic Landscape Painting 1810-1831.

Conference paper

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Abstract

The solitary figure in the landscape can be understood in relation to certain, fundamentally Romantic traits – solitude, contemplation, oneness with nature – and is most notably found in the work of Caspar David Friedrich. Less recognised however is the fact that the solitary figure can also be found in the landscape paintings of many English artists of the early nineteenth century, particularly within depictions of commonly held pastoral landscapes. Within the traditional terms of English art history, the landscape genre of this period has also been closely associated with the concept of Romanticism.

This paper will study the use of the solitary figure in paintings of open, common field landscape, and will compare two paintings: Caspar David Friedrich's 'Landscape with Rainbow (The Shepherd's Complaint)' of 1810, and John Sell Cotman's 'The Shepherd on the Hill' of 1831. It will examine the more conventional Romantic resonances of Friedrich's painting in order to question whether Cotman's shepherd is a comparative example of Romantic solitude and contemplation, or whether it was more of a prosaic image of a typically English 'rustic type' at a time when a particular sense of national identity was emerging that was closely associated with the countryside and country life. From there, it is hoped that we can begin to reconsider the conventional Romantic image of English landscape painting in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

This paper derives from my obsession generally with artistic depictions of common land, specifically from the period which has been referred to as the Romantic Age, from c1789 to, say, 1832. Some interesting paintings of common land are produced in this period, both in England and, as we shall see, in countries such as Germany. Because of the physical and topographical nature of unenclosed common land, these paintings also tend to be of very wide, open and empty spaces. From this I'm also interested in the social and psychological perceptions of space and freedom in common land – and it's this which led me to consider the solitary figure in paintings of this type of landscape.

The depiction of the solitary figure can be immediately understood in relation to certain, fundamentally Romantic traits – solitude, contemplation, being at one with nature – and is most notably found in the work of the German Romantic landscape painter, Caspar David Friedrich. Less recognised however is the fact that the solitary figure can also be found in a few landscape paintings by several English artists of the early nineteenth century, and particularly within depictions of common land. As such, this paper will study the use of the solitary figure in paintings of common land, and will largely compare two works, Friedrich's *Landscape with Rainbow (The Shepherd's Complaint)* of 1810 (Formerly Staatliche Kunstsammlungen. Weimar) and John Sell Cotman's *The Shepherd on the Hill*, of 1831 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

I want to examine the perhaps more conventional Romantic resonances of Friedrich's painting in order to question whether Cotman's shepherd is a comparative example of Romantic solitude and contemplation, or whether it was more of a prosaic image of a typically English 'rustic type', at a time when a particular 'English' sense of national identity was emerging that was closely associated with the countryside and country life. From there, I hope that we can begin to reconsider the conventional Romantic image of English landscape painting in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

Friedrich (1774-1840) and Cotman (1782-1842) were near contemporaries to one another. In the traditional scheme of art history, it is clear that Friedrich can be considered as a Romantic painter and that Cotman has also been frequently seen in

similar terms – Hugh Honour, in his book *Romanticism*, specifically stated how the movement could ‘bind together artists as diverse as Runge, Friedrich, Turner, Constable and Cotman ...’¹ The development of certain Romantic ideas in both Germany and England are similar. Writing in 1798, Coleridge described how he and Wordsworth planned the *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly noting that they wanted to combine a truth to nature with the power of the imagination. In the same year, the German Romantic poet Friedrich Novalis, wrote of ‘endowing commonplaces with lofty significance – the ordinary with a mysterious aspect’. In doing this, he went on, ‘I am Romanticizing’.²

On the face of it, the solitary nature of both of these otherwise quite ordinary shepherds supplies at least the potential to ‘endow the commonplace with lofty significance’, but they are a reminder of the differences as well as the similarities between both landscape painting and cultural attitudes to nature in England and Germany. In his book on Friedrich, William Vaughan states that the fundamental distinctions in the depiction of nature and the landscape were that Friedrich’s landscapes were more meditative, whereas the work of his English contemporaries – Turner, Constable and Cotman – tended to be more vivid and painterly.³ As we shall see, this is certainly true here – but there are further distinctions to be made by looking at these two paintings – not just stylistically, but in their meaning and in relation to their respective cultures.

Friedrich was based in Dresden when he painted *Landscape with Rainbow* but the scene, where a shepherd is gazing at a rainbow, is of common grazing land on the northern German coastline near Friedrich’s native town, Griefswald, looking across

the Baltic towards the island of Rügen. The painting was conceived as a response to a love poem written by Goethe in 1803, *The Shepherd's Complaint* or *Shepherd's Lament*, depending on the translation.⁴ The landscape depicted here is one of Friedrich's favoured types – open, panoramic, low-horizoned common meadow. He frequently painted common meadow land in this manner, on the outskirts of his native Griefswald, such as in *Meadows near Griefswald* of 1820-22 (Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg) and of common land near Dresden, such as *The Large Enclosure* of 1832 (Gemäldegalerie de Dresden).

In contrast Cotman's *Shepherd on the Hill* possibly relates to the landscape of the South Downs that Cotman painted in the late 1820s when based in London. *Shepherd on the Hill* is a sparse but bold composition, of a dramatically featureless, open expanse of common grazing land. Taken as a whole, these paintings show the romantic artist's common fondness for extensive, open landscapes that would emphasize the nuances of natural space and light and therefore increase the spectator's sense of intimacy with nature. This was a constant element in the work of many landscape painters of this era, including Friedrich, Cotman and other near contemporary English landscape painters such as Peter DeWint (1784-1849), for instance in his *Lincolnshire Landscape (near Horncastle)* of c.1813-1826 (Usher Gallery, Lincoln) which uses a long, relatively narrow canvas to emphasize the almost unbroken field and sky line, and broad, imprecise washes of colour to evoke a heightened sense of space and light within the open Lincolnshire landscape.

Despite these aesthetic similarities however, more fundamental, cultural differences of national identity and philosophy between German landscape painters like Friedrich

and his English contemporaries remained, and it's these I'd like to explore further in relation to the two paintings in question. The academic and philosophical climate that surrounded Friedrich in Dresden helped him to develop a landscape art that looked inward as well as outward. This attitude coincides with the aesthetic theories of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) Kant discusses aesthetic judgment and, like his predecessors, took his examples as readily from nature as from art. Kant gave central prominence to the notion of 'aesthetic ideas', where the artist tries to communicate through sensuous representations of the outward, natural world something that goes beyond the world of sense. Friedrich's work essentially sought to do this – to bring the workings of the inner self into contact with the outer world – in a Kantian sense, that what you saw before you was influenced and affected by your internal state of mind. Hence the literary reference of Goethe's *The Shepherd's Lament*, where a shepherd laments that he sees the landscape before him and recognizes its beauty but cannot take it in because of a lost love and the inner turmoil he feels. The shepherd is shown gazing at the rainbow, lost in his reverie while his sheep wander off in the distance and almost out of his control. The landscape itself is open and rugged, and found under a darkening, stormy sky, with only some shafts of sunlight coming through. The mild desolation of the scene and the emotional state of the shepherd is emphasized by dead tree trunks in the foreground.

Romantic artists such as Friedrich exalted the importance of art, seeing it as a source of insight and a central means of self-expression. Art was no longer thought of as the mere imitation of inert nature but as an expression of feeling and imagination, and a medium for achieving an intuitive insight into the true nature of reality. This notion

was clearly present in the work of the early-nineteenth century English nature poets such as Wordsworth, but in English landscape painting it was tempered somewhat by a different, more pragmatic, English cultural outlook. Generally, English artists would not wholly share this Kantian, Germanic, philosophical view of our relationship with the world.⁵ German national identity grew out of the country's cultural and intellectual renaissance of the later-eighteenth century – with Kant in the field of philosophy, Goethe in literature, and Beethoven in music. But it was also shaped in Friedrich's time, between 1806 and 1814, by a reaction to the occupation of Prussian territories by Napoleon, when a particularly 'Germanic' sense of identity was forged by a mood of resistance to a situation where even the militaristic Prussia was humiliated. Conversely, and despite perhaps real fears to the contrary, Britain was never actually threatened by invasion or occupation at this time, and remained free to develop a national identity purely on the back of the country's pride in its burgeoning industrial, agricultural, commercial, military and economic success. A yearning for nature played one part in the cultural make-up of English culture, but the more Germanic, deeply felt and inward tendency to reflect this yearning back in on oneself was not always apparent in England's more materialistic and pragmatic social, economic and cultural climate. The outward expression of the English countryside was more important during this period as a mirror for an emergent notion of 'England' and 'Englishness', particularly during the years of the Napoleonic Wars, when the image of a grassy down or, more particularly, a golden cornfield was used as a popular and patriotic visual metaphor for all that was morally and culturally good about England as a nation.

These cultural differences can be stressed by looking specifically at the role of the solitary figure itself in these paintings. German references to and analyses of the solitary figure in Friedrich's paintings are detailed and definitive: in German culture at this time the term 'Rückenfiguren' was specifically derived to describe the solitary contemplative depicted looking at a landscape with his or her back to the viewer of the painting. This, in turn, was seen in terms of what the Germans called 'Innigkeit', a process of contemplation viewed as being typically German in its inwardness and depth.⁶ In comparison, there are no similar philosophical references to such figures in English culture at this time. Throughout the years of the Napoleonic Wars, solitary figures do appear in English landscape paintings, for instance in John Crome's *Boy On Mousehold Heath* of 1812-15 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), but they are depicted not as contemplatives, but merely as types, and types that were fretted over by the English establishment as to their lack of outward industriousness and their potentially dangerous independence within the common land system. The comments of the famous agriculturalist, Arthur Young, are typical. For instance in 1771, Young noted with outrage how an individual commoner had the effrontery to lazily 'bask himself all day in the sun, holding a cow by a line to feed on the balk'.⁷ He could almost be writing about this boy and, indeed, Cotman's shepherd on the hill. Cotman himself however has been recognised as artistically ambitious, yet socially and politically conservative, and who strived to attract and maintain a small circle of aristocratic patrons.⁸ At the time *Shepherd on the Hill* was painted, he was settled in Norwich as a well-to-do and fairly successful drawing master. This painting was carried out at a time when he was trying to increase his own artistic and commercial success by producing what can be seen as more vivid, Turner-esque landscapes. In doing this, he particularly adopted a technique of mixing rice flour with watercolour

in order to produce a brighter, more intensified and immediate palette. The striking but somewhat gaudy and decidedly un-naturalistic result can be seen in paintings like *The Shepherd on the Hill*.

It could also be argued that in doing this, he was choosing what he might have thought to be more commercially appealing subject matter. By the 1830s, and in the eyes of the typical patron of English landscape painters at this time – the moralistic landowner or businessman – the Shepherd was beginning to stand as one ‘authentic’ character of English culture, at a time when an emerging English national identity was acquiring a deeply retrospective quality, which increasingly dwelt upon the ‘traditions’ of the countryside and country life in the face of creeping industrialisation. Such a cultural construct is abundantly illustrated in a publication by the artist WH Pyne, called *Microcosm*, which was first published in 1806. *Microcosm* consisted of a great number of minute studies of workers in different trades, a large part of which was devoted to agricultural work, including shepherds. In the context of the social, political and economic climate in England at this time, *Microcosm* can be seen as a catalogue, a pattern book, and an almost scientific attempt to analyse and typify the labouring population. Against this more prosaic, rational cultural climate we can therefore suggest that Cotman’s *Shepherd on the Hill* is a strikingly beautiful but ultimately flimsy painting of a commercially generic, un-differentiated ‘type’ – any hill, any shepherd, any dog, some sheep. The Arthur Young-like criticisms of the lazy and therefore dangerously independent commoner is neutralised by the simplified, almost cartoon-like nature of this shepherd figure who turns his head away from the spectator, demonstrably and properly applying himself to his work – an

attitude that is in clear contrast to the complete lack of industry shown by Friedrich's disconsolate and inattentive shepherd..

There might be some Romantic nuance in the shepherd's anonymity and his solitude, or in the breezy colouristic and atmospheric effects of the painting itself, but the only thing this shepherd is contemplating is his sheep and perhaps what to do with them next. A sheepdog, not found at all in Friedrich's painting, looks expectantly at his master, waiting to work, waiting to be told what to do. In the context of an English requirement for artistic depictions of honest, industrious 'rustics' – calculated to gratify the patriot as one art historian recently put it – this shepherd, no matter how strikingly composed or vividly painted, is very different to Friedrich's. This man remains simply as a 'type' – a virtually faceless labourer – which is how the English landowning classes preferred these people to be. The expectancy of Cotman's shepherd is not of nature romantically revealing some inner truth, or giving some succour to a broken heart as with Friedrich's shepherd, but of work and work only.

Notes

¹ Hugh Honour, *Romanticism*, London: Allen Lane, 1979, p. 118.

² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³ William Vaughan, *Friedrich*, Oxford: Phaidon, 2004, p. 5.

⁴ *The Shepherd's Lament*

ON yonder lofty mountain
A thousand times I stand,
And on my staff reclining,
Look down on the smiling land.
My grazing flocks then I follow,
My dog protecting them well;
I find myself in the valley,
But how, I scarcely can tell.
The whole of the meadow is cover'd

With flowers of beauty rare;
I pluck them, but pluck them unknowing
To whom the offering to bear.
In rain and storm and tempest,
I tarry beneath the tree,
But closed remaineth yon portal;
'Tis all but a vision to me.
High over yonder dwelling,
There rises a rainbow gay;
But she from home hath departed
And wander'd far, far away.
Yes, far away hath she wander'd,
Perchance e'en over the sea;
Move onward, ye sheep, then, move onward!
Full sad the shepherd must be.

⁵ Indeed, it is near certain that the important English Romantic painters such as J M W Turner would not have read Kant. One recent study, *The Early Reception of Kant's Thought in England 1785–1805*, has had to rely mainly on reviews and articles in literary journals, and the few translations and commentaries that appeared on Kant's work in England between those years. The findings are telling: the English paid little interest in Kant's philosophy, and were even less understanding of his central ideas. He was perceived mainly as a political writer and, in the English cultural climate during the years of the French Revolution, a subversive one at that: encouraging his followers to reject the established political order, religious belief, and moral values. With the exception of Coleridge who had spent time in the universities of Germany between 1798 and 1800, Kant remained a closed book to English thinkers until the 1830s.

See: <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/articles/kantinfl.html>. Date accessed: 16 November 2005.

⁶ Vaughan, *op cit*, p. 177-8.

⁷ Arthur Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England*, London, 1771, p.175

⁸ Adele M Holcomb, *John Sell Cotman*, London: The British Museum, 1978, p. 39.