9

Pressure and Counter-Pressure

The Pictorial Paradigm of Modernity and Its Curbing in the Renaissance

Introduction

In attempting to come to a closer understanding of the early phase of the development of modernity's pictorial paradigm, including the role played by the landscape image, we run into a significant complicating factor which it is necessary to unravel here: the historical movement known as the Renaissance. Since the Renaissance itself – and reinforced by Jacob Burckhardt and the 20th century's conventional cultural history[1] – we have been taught that this movement ushered in a new and enlightened era, the beginning of modernity, and that it did so by supplanting the hitherto dominant epoch, the dark Middle Ages, with a re-actualisation of a past culture, antiquity. Art history in particular accepts that the naturalistic pictorial paradigm of modernity was only possible when artists moved onto the dual track: nature *and* antiquity. But what veracity can be attributed this myth if we take the Renaissance's self-definition as a reawakening of the antique cultural heritage at face value?

In this chapter I shall propose the thesis that the Renaissance's pictorial paradigm only constitutes an idealised subset of modernity's, and that this is because the Renaissance is to be understood more as a conservative time-pocket in an already semi-developed modernity *field* than as a source from which modernity rises. The argument has its fulcrum in the relatively simple observation that the antique pictorial gaze, the Rieglian normal sight – in its original and reawakened form alike – has its focus in a closed and supra-temporal body, whereas modernity's pictorial gaze, the Rieglian distant sight, rather moves attention from this body and out towards the infinite space marked by temporal change, including, in particular, the landscape. In other words, the Renaissance pictorial space appears

as a selective and beautified subset of the paradigm of modernity – a subset which, in accordance with the neo-antique canon, highlights plastic ideality and represses arch-mimetic phenomena such as oblique angles, distant wide expanses, confused compositions, amorphous spots, hyper-definition, fragments, particularities, ugliness, indeed, simply the prosaic in general.

But if the Renaissance is not the origin of modernity, then what is? In accordance with my own overarching evolutionary model, I shall again point to the Middle Ages, especially the Gothic late medieval period, as a likely candidate. While in the previous chapter I brought in arguments pertaining to the histories of consciousness and cosmology, in this chapter I shall rely chiefly on arguments relating to historiography and to internal aesthetic considerations of art. In a historiographical perspective, the idea of the Renaissance as generator of modernity would thus seem to be a peculiarly Italian construction, which despite specifically re-actualising the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean region also manages to spread to the Northern cultures. However, this construction has an element of coup to it, for if we trace the history of the term 'modern', we will find a late medieval link to the Northern Gothic culture.

The Gothic potential for modernity can, conversely, be enlarged upon in an aesthetic and aesthetic-historical analysis, in which its characteristics include phenomena so pregnant with modernity as infinity, myriads of particularities, non-corporeality and naturalism. Interestingly, these ingredients are not just to be found in the castigation to which the Italian Renaissance writers subjected the Northern Gothic, they also reappear as central parts of the aesthetic repertoire of romanticism in the 18th-19th centuries, including the Gothic revival. The romantics' rediscovery of the Gothic was thus not merely a case of more or less detached return to the Middle Ages, but of re-instituting the foundation of modernity and through that to overcome the regressive Renaissance.

Qua fulcrum of modernity's pictorial paradigm, landscape will be a recurring element in this argument. Despite the modern paradigm's trans-European impact in the 15th century, we will note, for example, that Netherlandish landscape images already at this time depart from their Italian counterparts by being more expansive, detailed and naturalistic. And in the 16th-17th centuries it is in the reformed North Europe too that landscape separates off from its ballast of figurative justification to become a motif in its own right.

It is my hope that this redistribution of roles in the play 'the birth of modern art' will reach beyond the narrow sphere of historians of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages and affect the discipline of image interpretation more generally. For the Renaissance annexation of early modernity has had a very unfortunate impact on standard art history in that the two specifically modern pictorial phenomena,

naturalism and perspective, are always interpreted through the Renaissance's distorting concave mirror, namely as inextricably allied to narration and to the plastic figure, and thereby also as adversaries of the amorphous, the expressive and the symbolically ambiguous. If, on the other hand, naturalism and perspective are liberated from the neo-antique hegemony, there should be hope that we can re-uncover their ontological potential as pictorial agents favouring description rather than narration, space rather than figure, subjectivity rather than ideality and brush-worked colours rather than unmediated transparency.

9.1 Modernity versus Renaissance: a historiographical perspective

The Renaissance – mask or face?

According to still prevailing Renaissance art history, the new naturalism of the 1400s emerged through the simultaneous pursuit of two sources: observation of nature and study of antiquity. By this means an art emerged that was ostensibly both more true to nature and aesthetically more satisfying. But as already suggested by Panofsky, there is a possible divide wrapped up in this dual objective: is the most beautiful and most antique-looking also necessarily the most true to nature? Panofsky states that until the end of the Renaissance, the divide was surmounted by the thesis "that classical art itself, in manifesting what *natura naturans* had intended but *natura naturata* had failed to perform, represented the highest and 'truest' form of naturalism."[2] With his characteristic, strategically-placed inverted commas Panofsky suggests that there is something fishy about this form of 'true' naturalism – a naturalism that should rather be understood as its opposite, *idealism* – and yet he elegantly sidesteps having to take an actual stand on the matter. Renaissance devotee that he had by now become, he could at the very most suggest that the Renaissance was a kind of masquerade – but a masquerade that completely changed the girl who wore her grandmother's clothes. Role and personality allegedly became one.

If, however, we isolate Panofsky's equilibristic attempt at conciliation in its subjugated component parts, we are left with the following basic question: does the late medieval pursuit of the pictorial heritage of antiquity really lead to anything that could with any justification be called a more naturalistic pictorial paradigm, or does the antiquisation chiefly involve an idealized pictorial culture masking or even subjugating an already advanced naturalism? The question leaves us with three options increasing in degree of scepticism: [1] when the Renaissance broke through, modernity was so little developed that even a resuscitation of antiquity

would look modern; [2] the Renaissance's self-perception is partly self-deception and its 'antique' ingredients a masquerade of a modernity that does not include resuscitation of antiquity as an essential keystone of its existence; [3] the Renaissance is utterly conservative, a backlash, the outer forms of which are not just masks, but signifiers for inner structures that curb the emerging modernity. In the following section I shall lean mainly in the direction of [3], albeit a dose of [2] and a grain of [1] are necessary for the sake of nuance.

As regards point [1], in chapters 1 and 3 we saw how the pictorial art of antiquity is characterised by a semi-developed perspective with foreshortenings and light/shade representation, and that this perspective was deconstructed in the Middle Ages in favour of a flatter, more diagrammatic pictorial space in which propensities to infinity are only expressed symbolically. Based on that observation, there must then be something or other in the pictorial culture of antiquity that is suppressed in the Middle Ages and 'reborn' in early modernity. Broadly speaking, it could be an acknowledgement of the sense of sight as crucial factor in pictorial representation – even though it has to be repeated that antiquity's concept of visibility is based in corporeality, whereas its modern counterpart looks towards space. It would thus not seem improbable that antique pictorial culture did actually act as a catalyst, optically becoming a guide for the late medieval image, albeit we have to be aware that this catalyst also had its limits, if it did not simply carry over into a neo-antique pictorial idiom.

Should the latter be the case, one interpretation is found in point [2], i.e. that we are dealing with an exterior cladding of an otherwise advanced modernity. Spengler, for example, sees the Renaissance as anti-Faustian in its attempts to repress the musical-Gothic and depth-seeking in favour of the plastic-corporeal, and yet it has no core substance that can justify these stylistic phenomena as anything other than semblance:

> But the Renaissance, when it had mastered some arts of word and picture, had shot its bolt. It altered the ways of thought and the life-feeling of West Europe not one whit. It could penetrate as far as costume and gesture, but the roots of life it could not touch – even in Italy the world-outlook of the Baroque is essentially a continuation of the Gothic.[3]

So, even though Spengler acknowledges the muted existence of the Gothic in Italy, there is still so much of it that it constitutes a core upon which the neo-antique is merely ornamentation. The Renaissance thereby limits itself to an enterprise in taste, an artificial counter-movement, which might indeed be anxious about Faustian supremacy, but at the same time lacks awareness of what it will put in its place.

But is accepting this idea of masquerade not to undervalue the effect of the Renaissance? For if sufficient power is staked behind the masquerade, this power appropriates what there might be of original personality, and we land in point [3], the understanding of the Renaissance as regressive, also in its fundamental structures. According to this model, the Renaissance can still effectively be an illusion at incorrigible distance from its antique prototype, and yet the empathy with antiquity represents a symptom of a cultural regression that radically changes the structures of the epistemic *field* in the 15th-16th centuries.

If not before, this model made itself felt in Italy after 1850 when the *Risorgimento* was unifying the peninsula under a republican form of government, and democratically-minded historians began searching for national antecedents to republicanism. In this quest writers such as Pasquale Villari and Alessandro Wesselofsky were seized by bitterness against Renaissance humanism and its promotion of antiquity, as classicism was seen as camouflage for a 14-16th-century political decline in which the republicanism of the communes was supplanted by the despotism of the *signorie* – antecedents, that is, to the very same mighty nobility which the *Risorgimento* was in the process of neutralising.[4] According to Villari's argument, for example, the communes were the cradle of European democracy since they afforded the third estate a stake in power – as is evident from 14th-century chronicles and diaries, the *volgare* of which is full of chaotic, everyday details. As the despotism spreads, however, the writers are seized by Neo-Latin airs and consequently their images of history become synthesised constructions scorning empirical trifles.[5] It was only with the Dominican monk Savonarola's attempt to re-establish the Florentine republic at the end of the 15th century that the *volgare* culture ostensibly had a final chance to break with the classically-draped absolute rule, in this instance of the Medici, and the 19th-century Italian school of historians itself was therefore given the name *I savonaroliani* or *I nuovi piagnoni* (after Savonarola's followers, 'the crying').[6]

Apart from the aforementioned nuances – the Renaissance's doses of actual modernity and masquerade – this model of regression corresponds quite precisely to what is going to be my concern here. The wealth of detail in 14th-century chronicles thus corresponds with pictorial art's contemporaneous movement towards an unbridled naturalistic paradigm, just like those constructions of history estranged from empirical corpus prevalent in later humanist literature correspond with the focus on the ideal body shunning particularities that is prevalent in pictorial art from and including the later 15th century, the epoch in which the High Renaissance came into being. While the sociological evidence of this will be discussed in chapters 10-11, I will here restrict myself to selected intellectual aspects: history of philosophy and science and, particularly, history of aesthetics and art.

In the history of philosophy, the ambiguous status of the Renaissance in the

creation of modernity can be sensed in, for example, the work of Bertrand Russell, who might indeed believe in the movement's breach with a rigid scholasticism and creation of an intellectual free space, but who nonetheless has to note that it "was not a period of great achievement in philosophy" and "produced no important theoretical philosopher".[7] And Ernst Cassirer, who must take the credit for having identified just such a theoretical philosopher in Nicholas of Cusa, a pioneer in the development of the modern, nominalistic philosophy, runs into problems, on the other hand, when he also wants to categorise Cusanus as Renaissance philosopher, even as the focal point for the thinking of the movement. In practice, he has to note that Nicholas of Cusa stood singularly alone among the antiquity-venerating philosophers of his day and immediately afterwards – the Aristotelians and Platonists – and that he first found company in the work of people such as Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Giordano Bruno; and where, then, is the stamp of the Renaissance?[8]

The historian of science, Lynn Thorndike, goes to the heart of the issue:

> The concept of the Italian Renaissance [...] has, in my opinion, done a great deal of harm in the past and may continue to do harm in the future. It has kept men in general from recognizing that our life and thought is based more nearly and actually on the Middle Ages than on a distant Greece and Rome, from whom our heritage is more indirect, bookish and sentimental, less institutional, social, religious, even less economic and experimental.[9]

According to Thorndike, then, the Middle Ages paves the way to modernity, whereas the concept of the Italian Renaissance confuses the understanding of both the character and the genesis of modernity. By expanding the scope of the Renaissance category from a concept just belonging to a posterior historiography into a late medieval practice seeking to transform that concept into reality, we could be even more specific and say: early modernity is curbed and modified by the Italian Renaissance, first regaining its full strength in the 18th century. As a very precise synonym for Spengler's Faustian culture, modernity could thus be understood as an epistemic *field* growing out of the Middle Ages around 1000, reaching its first maturation in the 15th century – the century that ushers in the new paradigm of pictorial art – culminating in the 18th-19th centuries and phasing out with the same paradigm after 1900.[10] Whereas this *field* in the Late Middle Ages, from 1000-1400, is equally distributed between North and South Europe, indeed, in certain respects is most sharply accentuated in Italy, it is, however, muted down here by the Renaissance from the middle of the 15th century, so that the waters are definitively divided from 1500 onwards.

In art history this understanding of the Renaissance as fundamentally different from early Northern modernity was already hinted at by Riegl, for although he

did not comment upon the Renaissance in his *Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie* with its macrohistorical reflections on the evolution of the culture of the gaze, the epoch emerged in *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (1902) in which the attention is directed to the evolution of pictorial content in early modern visual culture.[11] Here the Italian Renaissance and its ideal, classical antiquity, are considered to be founded in what Riegl designates *will*, a compositional principle which *subordinates* all pictorial ingredients to a narratively-conditioned *inner unity*. In the 17th-century Dutch group portrait, on the other hand, the point of gravity is displaced toward *feeling* and *attention*, qualities which allow the pictorial elements a looser *coordination* and simultaneously, in an *outer unity*, open them toward a completion through the subjectively-conditioned gaze of the beholder. As in Hegel and Spengler, classic images here, once more, appear as closed upon themselves in a plastic self-sufficiency, whereas Dutch images, in a conscious incompleteness (cf. Spengler's Faustian infinity), open toward the gaze of a subjective beholder. In this characterization of Dutch imagery we thus meet a reformulation of Riegl's own category, the optic distant sight, and remembering that this sight is under development throughout the Middle Ages, the possibility here too emerges that the Renaissance could be a conservative island formation in an already advanced flood of modernity.

Without reference to Riegl, Svetlana Alpers has also expertly revealed the many aspects in which 17th-century Dutch painting, and Northern art altogether, escape the Italian Renaissance aesthetics – an aesthetics which art historians have hitherto elevated to an almost universal instrument in the understanding of all pictorial art produced between the Middle Ages and the 20th century. What Alpers observes in Netherlanders, going back to Jan van Eyck, is, as indicated in chapter 8, their *descriptive* method – a method which abandons itself to the pure visual process, to the empirical registration of the surroundings in all their diversity. With its attention to texture and particularity of detail, this way of looking is in striking contrast to the Italian, which cultivates *narration* in accordance with the antique canon, as revived not least in Alberti's *De pictura*.[12]

Even though there are, as mentioned, a few problematic details in Alpers' theory (the coupling narration/linear perspective, the separation between window and eyesight), it is highly profitable in its basic concept. The tendency in Northern art, which Alpers pins down, can be expanded both forward to the 18th-19th centuries and backward to the Gothic, the beginning of modernity. The characteristics of Italian art also have far-reaching consequences, becoming guidelines for *academic* art. The art academies, the new places of education established by the absolute royal houses which from the 16th century onwards replace the medieval workshops, have *history painting* as the norm, i.e. depiction of the heroic human body in narrative or allegorical situations. The art academies could but look down on genres

which moved their gaze away from the symbolically dense ideal body and over to its insignificant surroundings. The further we move out into the chaos of the environment, the lower we are in the genre hierarchy. We are thus flung centrifugally from portrait to genre to marine and animal painting, in order to land at the outermost – and lowest – points, the humble landscape and still life.[13] The reason for the inferiority of these genres was therefore no different in modernity than it had been in antiquity. Rather than guiding the intellect towards grand perceptions, they pulled it down into the darkness of sensuality. That the academic view of art in the 18th-19th centuries was increasingly looked upon as conservative, was therefore due to more than a purely contemporaneous reason. From its very introduction in the 15th-16th centuries, the question could be asked as to how universally it expressed its contemporaries' conception of the world.

One philosopher who could supply the wherewithal for an integrated theory of the iconological properties of the modern art – also in contrast to the Renaissance – is Hegel. As mentioned in the Interlude and chapters 1 and 8, Hegel makes a sharp distinction between classical art and its Christian and modern successor, the art form to which Hegel applies the umbrella term *the romantic*. Where classical art culminates with sculpture based in the ideal and non-subjective, the congenial visual medium for romantic art is painting – a painting which, as expression of the free spirit, emphasises temporality, particularity, diversity, subjectivity, portraiture and the everyday. Even though its changeable environment must always appear as reflection of the inner frame of mind, of mood and emotion, it knows no restriction of subject matter:

> Precisely for the same reason romantic art suffers externality on its own part to go on its way freely; and in this respect permits *all and every material*, flowers, trees, and so on, down to the *most ordinary domestic utensils*, to appear in its productions just as they are, and as the *chance of natural circumstance* may arrange them. [my italics]

Hegel even remarks that romantic art "gives unfettered play to the emphatic features of ugliness itself."[14] In this art form the spiritual is not only drained from nature but also from the context which previously supplied classical art with its meaning: characters, stories, events – in brief: *the narrative*.

Hegel is in no doubt that romantic art is in conflict with its classical forerunner – an art which does not tolerate such an uninhibited presence of empirical observations, randomness and transience.[15] Nonetheless, he is unwilling to take the full consequence of his own theory and draw up the lines between Italian Renaissance and Northern romanticism. He might well note that Italian painters rarely depict their times, reality, national history or landscape, whereas these subjects are

welcome in the North with its focus on the inner mental life. And yet he confirms the widespread prejudice that Italian art expresses "a beauty of form and a freedom of soul"[16] to a greater extent than its Netherlandish counterpart. Even though Hegel does not quite manage to escape the Italophile pitfall, his conceptual structure is nevertheless so solid that it can be used as safeguard against the same.

In more recent scholarship pertaining to the history of literature, the idea of Renaissance conservatism also strikes Hans Robert Jauss, a representative of the Konstanz School of Reception Aesthetics.[17] In his identification of what he calls a "Christian poetics", Jauss demonstrates how the Middle Ages separate out the hideous from the cruel and evil – a disengagement which underlies modernity's interest in the arbitrary, non-ideal and individual. According to Jauss, a closer examination of this liberation ought to show how it became "mitigated and modified" by the Renaissance focus on ideal beauty and how this "excommunication" was then broken at the end of the 18th century with the re-discovery of the Christian poetics, not least as it came to expression in the work of Dante. The Renaissance thus appears, once more, as a regressive bulge between the Late Middle Ages and romanticism.

Having demonstrated that since the 19th century there have actually been many well-qualified attempts to break up the Renaissance monopoly on the definition of early modernity, then we have all the more cause to wonder why these attempts are repeatedly silenced and ousted from the general historical consciousness. Perhaps we are at long last approaching the state of affairs in which we can join Spengler in stating:

> That close inward relation in which we conceive ourselves to stand towards the Classical, and which leads us to think that we are its pupils and successors (whereas in reality we are simply its adorers), is a venerable prejudice which ought at last to be put aside. The whole religious-philosophical, art-historical and social-critical work of the 19th century has been necessary to enable us [...] to begin to realize, once and for all, how immeasurably alien and distant these things are [...].[18]

Gothic modernity, Renaissance conservatism

Until the requisite study is available, revealing how the myth of neo-antique modernity has been maintained right up to our own day, I will settle for identifying certain seeds to the other side of the story: its origins in the Late Middle Ages. This primarily involves an account of how the controversial concept 'modernity' emerged and of how this concept was then appropriated by the Renaissance movement. An obvious problem with the term *modern* and its opposite *antique* is that they can be used – and since the 5th century have been used – about everything that seems

to represent a dialectic between a present and a past state of affairs.[19] And what is worse: in a remarkable paradox, throughout the history of this pair of terms the modern has repeatedly been *equated* with the antique.

Nevertheless, there would seem to be a qualitative structure within the concept of modernity cutting across all differences. Simply the post-antique emergence and dissemination of the term *modern* tells us something of the word's meaning and makes it reasonable to use it in the sense of period: for modernity as era. Its secret is hidden, as so often, in the etymology. *Modernus* means, essentially, 'contemporary', derived as it is from the adverb *modo* which means, among other things, 'now', 'recently' and 'just'. The latter meaning, however, makes a bridge from the restrictive, recent time interval ('it has just happened') to a more general idea of pinning down in relation to a norm ('just' = 'exactly', 'precisely', 'only'). This wider meaning reflects the root word for *modo* – and thereby also *modernus* – i.e. *modus*, with meanings such as 'way', 'manner', 'measure' and 'limit'; for these terms are indeed different aspects of the norm to which the exact, precise and limited relate.[20]

In the last chapter we saw how modernity is characterised by a nominalistic distinction between the beholder and the infinite environment, between the notions which the individual has of the world and that world itself. These notions could be described on the basis of these very same various meanings of *modus*: 'way', 'manner', 'measure' and 'limit'. 'Measure' could, for example, indicate the objective scientist who measures the world, i.e. compares the independent units of measurement with the infinitely differentiated objects which make up the world. 'Manner' could suggest the subjective artist who interprets the world with the help of an equally independent style (=manner), the expression of his or her original personality. Also on the etymological level, then, modernity could be said to be concerned with the individual's creation of cultural norms that are autonomous in relation to the surrounding environment – alongside an assumption that these norms are different from the immediate past. A keyword could therefore be *liberation*: liberation from the dominance of nature as well as from tradition.

Indeed, the term *modernus* does not appear until post-antique periods, when consciousness of time changes. Its introduction and first blossoming occurs in late antiquity around 500 AD, at a time when, for example, Cassiodorus (*c.* 485-*c.* 585), secretary to the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, looks upon antiquity as a bygone Golden Age, which the modern era can only imitate. In a letter to the cultured Roman politician, Symmachus, written around 507, commissioning him with the reconstruction of the Theatre of Pompeius, Cassiodorus praises him for the private residences he has built outside Rome, by means of which he has become "the very careful imitator of the ancients, the very noble founder of the moderns".[21] The pairing of modernity and revival of antiquity can thus even be traced to this early date.

Apart from a prelude during the Carolingian *renovatio* – again, that is, in a neo-antique context – the word 'modern' does not, however, become common until after 1000 AD, the very period during which I have claimed modernity was born. The most well-known area of application is probably the Northern European proto-reformatory movement *Devotio Moderna*, which from the 14th century displaces Christianity's point of gravity from church and monastery to the laity, and thereby actually takes part in the creation of modernity. But, in fact, the use of the term modernus already starts escalating in the 1100s. Alain de Lille denounces "modern crudeness" while Walter Map, in *De nugis curialem* (*On Trifles of Courtiers*; 1180-92), celebrates the 12th century, "whose recent and strong memory collects everything which is remarkable [...]. The century which has passed is our modernity [*modernitas*]." Soon again the modern is linked with the revolutions taking place in the universities, first the Aristotelian in the 13th century, and later the *nominalistic* in particular which, as we have seen, breaks with Aristotle and could once more be associated with the birth of modern philosophy. Among the famous representatives of *logici moderni* or *theologi moderni*, apart from natural-philosophy-oriented scholastics such as William of Ockham and Jean Buridan, we also find a proto-reformer such as Wycliff.[22]

Within my own area of study, what we now call visual art, we should pay particular attention to the fact that the first style to be labelled 'modern' was the Gothic – a current whose veritable modern features I shall elaborate upon in the following section. North of the Alps the modern style is associated with Gothic right up until the middle of the 17th century, and even in 1639, when Giovanni Baglione was seemingly the first Italian to swap the usual term *maniera tedesca* with the new *gotico*, there is still so much modernity clinging to the style that he has to use the prefix *antico* in order to highlight its obsolescence (*antico-gotico* or *antico moderno gotico*).[23]

It was, however, an Italian construction to invent the Middle Ages, topple the Gothic in its darkness and then to transfer the Gothic label of 'modern' to the revived antique style. The Goths were the ones who, along with other Northern barbarians, had ravaged the antique culture, the grand Italian past. Therefore, their style, however long after the great migrations it might have been developed, must be primitive. The idea of Northerners who ravage the antique culture and institute their own barbaric building style is presented in Manetti's biography of Brunelleschi (*c.* 1480), and it is further developed in the letter from Raphael and Castiglione to Pope Leo X (*c.* 1519), in which pointed arches are compared with the topos of the wild man who builds bowers: Gothic architecture is "born from trees that are not yet pruned, from which they bend the branches together and bind them to form their pointed arches."[24]

Although the idea of the dark Middle Ages can be traced back at least to Petrarch, and from then on antiquity was the ideal for Italian intellectuals, it was nonetheless a long time before they spotted the Gothic blunders, and at first only in architecture where the clash with antiquity was more immediately visible than in painting and sculpture. Filarete was possibly the first Italian writer to bemoan the Gothic when, in his *Trattato di architettura* (*c.* 1460-64), he wrote: "I too was once pleased by modern [i.e. Gothic] buildings, but as soon as I began to enjoy the antique ones I grew to despise the modern."[25] It was not until the next century, however, with Vasari's confirmation of Italy as the home and most advanced bastion of the modern art, that the coup with which we still contend took place: the juxtaposition of *moderno* and *la buona maniera greca antica* in its re-awakened form.[26]

Even though Vasari had an instinctive eye for the classical-oriented painters who were part of the Italian current of modernity from the outset – most obviously, as we will see, Giotto and Masaccio, more problematically Leonardo – he saw no conflict between these painters and their typical, Gothic-dominated environment in the 14th-15th centuries. All were forerunners of the classical, 'modern' style culminating with Michelangelo in the 16th century, the classicists just to a more pronounced degree. That Vasari and his predecessors were thus blind to the Gothic features of painting, while at a relatively early stage they were offended by Gothic architecture, can partly be explained by the lack of antique paintings for comparison before the end of the 15th century, the beginning of the Renaissance. Moreover, painting was not scarred by the North-South conflict. While architecture had been ravaged by Gothic, painting had simply stagnated in *maniera greca*, the Byzantine manner.[27] The style which succeeded *maniera greca* in the 14th-15th centuries was accordingly not associated with Gothic, but only with the Renaissance. It is therefore not so strange, as we will see, that far into the 1400s the humanists preferred Gothic painters to Masaccio.

However, by the time the Gothic features of early modern painting were finally spotted during the romantic period and the Gothic revival of the 18th-19th centuries, the Renaissance myth was so well-developed that Gothicism's modern aspects had evaporated. The 15th-century Netherlanders and (to an extent) Italians became 'primitive'. Brueghel was a medieval painter. The argumentation is again the Platonic, which Panofsky went so far as to equip with inverted commas: the 'true' naturalism is that which realises what nature had 'actually' intended, but could not carry out. The beautiful is the true; the ugly is the primitive. In Johann George Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (1792), "Gothische Malerei" is defined, for example, as the painting that precedes the study of nature and antiquity in the late 15th century and which has elongated figures and unnatural movements. "The painters before that time drew according to an ideal that was not a heightened

nature, as was the ideal of the Greeks, but according to a nature that was corrupted in proportion and movement."[28]

Both Panofsky and his predecessor Sulzer thus acknowledge that the Renaissance aspires to a 'heightened' nature, an antiquised nature free of Gothic 'corruption'. And yet it is still the prevailing myth that naturalism is *by and large* a Renaissance invention. But can the same movement embrace nature in its expansive, temporal and particular aspects – all the modern ingredients which literally corrupt beauty – and at the same time aim at beauty with only limited access for these ingredients? It seems far simpler to attribute the new naturalism to the Gothic and instead to look at the Renaissance as a counter- or subsidiary movement to this – a movement which curbs the modern lack of restraint in favour of a more ideal beauty.

Still, however, we are left with the paradox that modernity so often – from Cassiodorus to the Renaissance and neo-classicism to Nazism – has been associated with a re-awakened antiquity. To explain the modern potential in this, we could perhaps focus on the masquerade aspect, the non-antique antique in all these revival movements. For is it not an ongoing phenomenon of modernity all told that it likes to rig itself out in alien robes (apart from all the classicisms, for example, neo-Gothic, Chinoiserie, Orientalism)? Inscribed as it is in an infinite space without proportions, modernity would at heart seem to lack identity. To rectify this, it fluctuates between adventurous longing for foreign shores and times (romanticism) and a prosaic everydayness that tethers it to 'reality' (realism). The modernness of the Renaissance, then, could be said to increase the more it assumes the quality of masquerade, the less its antique norms are actually realised.

Perhaps modernity also needs antiquity because in itself it lacks *body*. As we saw in the previous chapter, matter has become strangely weightless in the Copernican space where the world hierarchy has been eradicated and the beholding mind has isolated itself from the surrounding environment. The Renaissance, then, is able to supply the body with a dignity and substance which modernity otherwise dissolves. The problem, however, is that this dignity and substance becomes forced in step with the increasing development of the modernity *field*. Simultaneously wanting to highlight that the human being has become modern – a liberated individual in an infinite environment – and to heroise this condition via an idealised, muscular body, puts culture in danger of totalitarianism. The extreme consequences of this striving are seen in 20th-century totalitarian movements: Fascism, Nazism and Communism.

9.2 Modernity's pictorial space and its Gothic origins

Ergon-parergon

As shown in chapter 1, antique literature yielded a whole list of curses connected with the illusionist image: detachment from reality, mist, fragmentation, transience, collapse of proportion, deception, particularity, individual arbitrariness, confusion, overcomplicated variation. As the reader will by now have acknowledged, it is precisely these properties that constitute the basic substance in the modern image. To be sure, they are now often evaluated in a totally different and positive light, but this does not alter the fact that their *structures* are unchanged.

That such a preservation of structure is achievable will only become obvious if we bring in the cosmological considerations of the previous chapter: in antiquity, with the celestial soul confined in the earthly prison, beauty and wisdom consist of getting as close as possible to the celestial prototypes, which means slipping off the fetters of an earthly point of view and individual contingency. But as the celestial cavity implodes to the membrane around the individual mind in the Late Middle Ages, there is no longer a celestial universality to strive for. Where the image had before been a microcosmic depiction of the closed macrocosmos, a tight and corporeal *ergon* elevated above the individual point of view and discreetly surrounded by *parergon*, it is now transformed – analogously to the individual of which it is the expression – to an *autonomous work* surrounded by an *infinite environment*. As far as the internal pictorial world – the infinite environment projected onto the image plane – is concerned, on antiquity's terms we could say that *ergon* is overwhelmed by *parergon* since the pictorial field within the individual viewpoint is filled with surroundings, space, landscape and particularities. The climax of this is, of course, the autonomous landscape image, which indeed only consists of that which had previously comprised *parergon*.

But, as Christopher Wood remarks, the conceptual couple *ergon-parergon* has actually lost its meaning as a device by means of which to describe single elements in the modern work of art.[29] In the infinite space in front of the individual field of vision there is no closed form, no *ergon*, and therefore no *parergon* either. What we encounter is rather a web of perceivable objects, in the broadest sense: a landscape. Landscape is no longer of peripheral importance, everything has become landscape. In this all-encompassing landscape there are, of course, no proportions, which in themselves would presuppose closed form; these are instead transformed into an internal relationship on that plane through which the artist chooses to capture the surroundings.

If the relationship *ergon-parergon* is to have any meaning in modernity, therefore,

it has to be displaced from the depicted *single objects* and their connecting link to the world, to *the work in its entirety* and its connecting link to the world. And what is the connecting link between the modern work and the infinite environment other than its frame? Synchronously with infinity breaking down the claim of pictorial elements for the status of *ergon*, *parergon* is absorbed by the infinitesimal frame that makes this breaking-down possible. This razor-sharp frame is what endows the work with its autonomous aura and makes it an analogous expression of its autonomous creator. As Wood writes: "The frame isolated the work from ordinary objects and from the world in general, just as artists would eventually be distinguished from ordinary people by certain defining myths about them, and by expectations about their behaviour and appearance."[30]

In the pictorial world cut off by the frame, there emerges a completely new space for the particular which now as never before is the bearer of visual meaning. This shifting of meaning towards its earlier periphery is also bolstered temporally, as the frame additionally signifies an incision in a time which is detached from anchorage in particular events. It is by this means that a new aesthetic emerges, based not in narrative but in *description*.[31] Description covers everything that the light allows the eye to see in a space at a given moment and thereby points in the direction of the Aristotelian concept of history as discussed in chapter 1. The historian not only includes the circumstances pertinent to a narrative sequence, but also "all the events (in their contingent relationships) that happened to one person or more".[32] Bearing in mind that, between the 15th and 19th centuries, the advance of depth of field towards infinity brings with it more and more such non-narrative events, we can all in all corroborate a connection already pointed out by Franzsepp Würtenberger: that the symbolic incident, the literary-defined charge of meaning gleaming from the figures, shrinks proportionally with the expansion of the earthly horizon (FIG. 9.1).[33]

The transformation I am outlining here is, of course, an ideal model. In reality, the sequence took place over a period stretching from the 11th century to 1900, and the development was far from steady. Even Kant, a champion of the autonomous, aesthetic work of art, demonstrates a still significantly ambivalent attitude to the status and place of *parergon*:

> Even what one calls ornaments [*parerga*], i.e., that which is not internal to the entire representation of the object as a constituent, but only belongs to it externally as an addendum and augments the satisfaction of taste, still does this only through its form: like the borders of paintings, draperies on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings. But if the ornament itself does not consist in beautiful form, if it is, like a gilt frame, attached merely in order to recommend approval for the painting through its charm – then it is called decoration, and detracts from genuine beauty.[34]

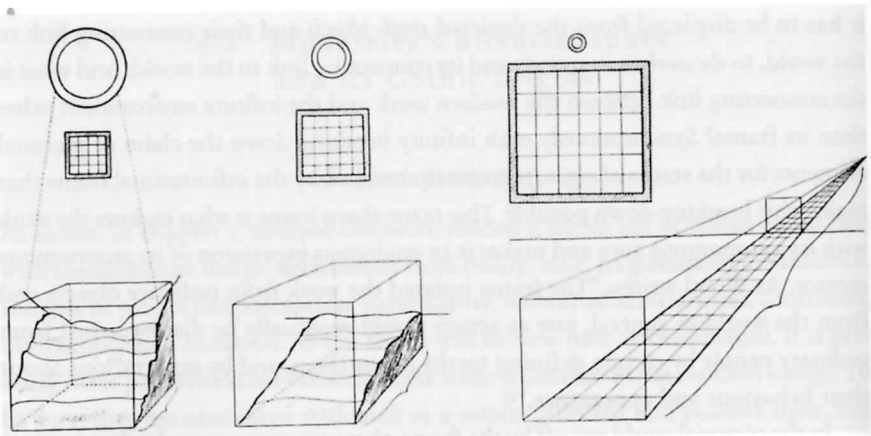

Fig. 9.1. Diagram showing the connection between 1) the shrinking of symbolic incident and 2) the simultaneous expansion of the earthly horizon. From Franzsepp Würtenberger, *Weltbild und Bilderwelt von der Spätantike bis zur Moderne* (1958).

Kant is here still irretrievably influenced by a classical way of looking in which ornamental frames can be placed around an image in the same way as draperies can be placed on statues and colonnades around magnificent buildings. But, as Wood points out, strictly speaking there is no room for this transitional position in the infinitesimal incision that separates the modern work from its surrounding world.[35] The ornamentation is swallowed up by the black hole of the incision. And, if the frame is of any size, there is no intermediate position: either it belongs to the work or, more usually, it is totally external.

Taking Kant's hesitation and Renaissance primacy into consideration, however, it is hardly surprising that the classical *ergon-parergon* coupling persists in early modernity. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Francesco Colonna's phantasmagorical romance of *c.* 1467 (published 1499), provides a description of a mosaic frieze on the inside of an arched gateway decorated with "exquisite details [*perergi*] of waters, springs, mountains, hills, woods and animals".[36] And in a Latin dialogue written around 1530 by the historian and art collector Bishop Paolo Giovio, we are told very informatively of the Ferrarese court painter Dosso Dossi (*c.* 1479-1542):

> The gentle manner of Dosso of Ferrara is esteemed in his proper works [*justis operibus*], but most of all in those which are called *parerga*. For devoting himself with relish to the pleasant diversions of painting he used to depict jagged rocks, green

> groves, the firm banks of traversing rivers, the flourishing work of the countryside, the gay and hard toil of the peasants, and also the far distant prospects of land and sea, fleets, fowling, hunting, and all that *genre* so pleasing to the eyes in a lavish and festive style.[37]

The "proper works" must be referring to the figurative motifs and *parerga* to their surrounding environment given that Dossi belonged to a culture in which autonomous landscape paintings were as yet unknown. This reading is more than corroborated in the lexicographer Thomas Blount's definition of landscape in his *Glossographia* of 1656:

> *Landskip* (Belg.) Parergon, Paisage or Bywork, which is an expressing of the Land, by Hills, Woods, Castles, Valleys, Rivers, Cities, etc., as far as may be shewed in our Horizon. All that which in a Picture is not of the body or argument thereof is *Landskip, Parergon*, or by-work. As in the Table of our Saviours passion, the picture of Christ upon the *Rood* [...] the two theeves, the blessed Virgin *Mary*, and St. *John*, are the Argument. But the City *Jerusalem*, the Country about, the clouds, and the like, are *Landskip.*[38] [Blount's italics]

We will note that in Blount's classification, a picture's *parergon* – that which lies beyond the body of the argument – is quite simply defined as landscape. And thus landscape is again seen as a marginal zone in a twofold sense: as the zone in which the figurative is disbanded as the body is assigned to space, and as the zone in which meaning is diluted with increasing distance from the argument.

Northern landscape sensibility in the 15th century

Before highlighting the differences between North and South in the pictorial articulation of landscape, it must be made clear that these differences appear exclusively as variations within the same paradigm. In the Late Middle Ages especially, culminating in the international Gothic of the decades around 1400, shared experiences seem conspicuous. Thus the modern landscape image breaks through fully – and suddenly – on both sides of the Alps in the 1420s. In Gentile da Fabriano's *Flight into Egypt* of 1423 (PLATE 6) as well as in Robert Campin's *Nativity* of *c.* 1425 (PLATE 7), we encounter distant horizons, projected sunlight, an atmospheric sky, roads, hedges and ploughed fields.

Nevertheless, from the very outset there are striking differences in kind between the landscape images from Italy and those from the Netherlands. The Netherlandish gaze takes in more radically remote horizons than the Italian, and the Netherlanders'

zeal to depict detail, texture and effects of light with realistic refinement would seem almost inexhaustible. In comparison, Italian vision seems more general and constructed, and far more dependent on considerations of a well-arranged composition. In Jacob Burckhardt's words: "As a gift from heaven [the Italians] [...] possessed the tact not to pursue the outer reality in all details, but only so far that the higher poetic truth did not suffer from it."[39] Gift from heaven, tact, curbing of realistic details, higher poetic truth – would it be possible to express Renaissance selective ideality more unequivocally?

When referring to Netherlandish painting, it was indeed usually the radical empiricism, including the teeming details, which caught the attention of contemporaneous Italian writers. In 1449, when describing Roger van der Weyden's *Deposition* owned by Leonello d'Este, prince of Ferrara, Ciriaco d'Ancona, the greatest antiquity expert of the time, is stunned by

> garments prodigiously enhanced by purple and gold, blooming meadows, flowers, trees, leafy and shady hills, ornate halls and porticoes, gold really resembling gold, pearls, precious stones, and everything else you would think to have been produced, not by the artifice of human hands but by all-bearing nature herself.[40]

And when Bartolomeo Fazio in his *De viris illustribus* (*On Brilliant Men*, 1456) refers to a Jan van Eyck painting owned by Ottaviano Ubaldini della Carda, nephew of Federigo da Montefeltro (d. 1499), he is particularly struck by, among other things, the incredible feeling of distance. Moving from a scene of women in a bathroom, the gaze takes in what must have been the view through a window:

> In the same picture there is a lantern in the bath chamber, just like one lit, and an old woman seemingly sweating, a puppy lapping up water, and also horses, minute figures of men, mountains, groves, hamlets, and castles, carried out with such skill you would believe one was fifty miles distant from another.[41]

Even though the painting has not survived, Fazio's fascination may be relived in a work such as Jan van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (*c.* 1433-34; FIG. 9.2 and PLATE 28). In the inner courtyard beyond the shadowy interior, the two observers by the embrasure become agents for our own gaze towards the extensive landscape: from the city with its teeming civic life and tiny ant-like people on the bridge, our gaze moves to the boats and island castle reflected fantastically in the river, only to continue towards the diminutive forests, rows of furrowed fields and church spires, the distances between which would indeed seem to be measurable in scores of miles – a visual expansion culminating in the vertiginously distant

Fig. 9.2. Jan van Eyck, *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (*c.* 1433-34), oil on wood. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

snow-clad mountains where the afternoon light fades from tawny to light-blue to a hardly visible grey.

This panoramic-realistic way of looking, with a depth of field stretching all the way to the most remote distance and with a lens that captures the least and most insignificant objects, must generally be ascribed to, indeed identified with, the Northern tradition. Evidence of this is provided both by the observation that the word 'landscape' develops at an earlier stage in Northern Europe than in Italy, and that it is in the North, too, that the landscape image breaks away from its attachment to figurative themes and becomes autonomous, a pictorial motif in its own right.

Etymology of landscape

That landscape belongs to a modern sensibility is evident from the very etymology of the word *landscape*, which does not exist in its current sense before the 15th century – the century that ushers in the new paradigm for pictorial art. As we saw in chapter 6, when referring to areas of the earth's surface or their pictorial representation, antiquity uses words such as *topia* (rural places), *regio* (stretch of land) or *terra* (earth). While these terms relate specifically to the terrain itself, the word 'landscape' signals an elevation of viewpoint: rather than comprising the land itself, landscape is the panoramic totality that emerges when the earth's surface is viewed spatially. As Kenneth Olwig has pointed out, however, this meaning of landscape seems to be derived from an older form denoting a tract of land, a district or a country – the English extinct *landsceap* or *landscipe*, the German *Landschaft* – a designation which more than its antique forerunners evokes a sense of the earth's belonging to and being formed by a community (cf. *-schaft* being etymologically related to *schaffen*=shape or create).[42] In fact, the oldest sense of the German *Landschaft* – first recorded 1121 – refers to the very inhabitants of a country district, and from at least the 15th century the word often denotes geographical units being regulated by particular customs, laws and estates, sometimes regions with a certain political autonomy such as the Schleswigian *landskab* Eiderstedt. In this older sense, then, a landscape was neither the land itself nor a picturesque panorama of it; as Olwig writes, "it was a nexus of law and cultural identity".[43] In other words, we here encounter yet another indication that the modern landscape is indeed founded in the *territory*, the post-paradisiacal earth marked by the utilitarian grid of civilisation.

In the case of painting, the concept of landscape in its more emancipated sense as a panoramic totality is documented from the beginning of the 16th century when, in Germany and Switzerland, there are several references to the *landschaften* to be inserted into commissioned pictures. A contract made in 1518 for an altarpiece in Überlingen on the shores of Lake Constance specifies, for example, that *landschaften* in the scenes on the panels should be painted in the "best oil colours".[44]

Renaissance-dominated Italy is more hesitant when articulating the new concept. Alberti, with an eye to antiquity, uses the term *province* and its Latin translation *regionis*,[45] Leonardo uses *paese* (country), which long remains the predominant term. In a note written around 1515, for example, he refers to "[t]he best method of practice in representing country scenes, or I should say landscapes [*paesi*] with their plants [...]." And in a contract of 1495, Pinturicchio consents to paint "in the empty parts of the pictures – or more precisely on the ground behind the figures – landscapes and skies [*paesi et aiere*] [...]."[46] We must seemingly wait until the 1530s before the word *paese* begins its metamorphosis on the way to *paesaggio*, a word that imitates

the French *paysage*. In 1531, Giorgione's famous *La Tempesta* from the collection of Gabriele Vendramin is thus referred to as "[t]he small landscape [*paesetto*], on canvas, with the thunderstorm, a gipsy and a soldier."[47] However, it is not until Vasari's day in the second half of the century that the future term *paesaggio* enters the canon.[48] This delay in usage could seem irrelevant, were it not for the fact that the Italians are also reluctant to cultivate landscape in their pictorial art practice. Landscape relates to the extensive and particular space, which threatens the dignity of the ideal body, and consequently it is left, by and large, to the Northerners to pursue its more extensive exploration in the image.[49]

Rise of the autonomous landscape image

The autonomous landscape image is an image whose sole motif is landscape, whose justification is the view across the landscape itself. In a way, every modern image can be said to tend towards the autonomous landscape image, for earlier I claimed that everything positioned in front of the picture window became landscape. If, however, we acknowledge the sluggishness of the dissolution of the classical *ergon* concept, and if we maintain the distinction between a zone dominated by culture and one dominated by nature, the autonomous definition is somewhat narrowed down. In that case, the autonomous landscape image is an image whose justification is in the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the natural domain alone, and the figures of which, if there are any, do not take part in narrative actions, but on the contrary are dominated by the wide expanses of this natural setting. To this must be added the requirement that the aesthetic pleasure of landscape takes place in what could be called a presentational medium – a medium not intended for studio purposes or the artist's own personal gratification, but aimed at an audience.

The autonomy could thus be said to be conditioned by the following parameters: [1] extent of the landscape in relation to any human figures present; [2] degree of extrovert presentation; [3] degree of aesthetic pleasure. When all three factors meet in full maturity, the autonomous landscape image takes form: the grand landscape painting produced for the open market. This type crystallises in 17th-century Netherlandish painting and reaches its full maturity in the 19th century. Its forerunners include such different media as: labours of the seasons; all sorts of maps and topographical illustrations, including depictions of private properties and militarily strategic areas; natural science illustrations; studies in preparation for paintings; more or less finished landscape drawings made for the artist's own use; landscape graphics; intarsia panels; outer panels of altarpieces; and, finally, paintings whose landscapes swell up in relation to the figures.

As this list would indicate, there are already many landscape depictions in the

14th-15th centuries without dominant human figures. Nevertheless, these images cannot be called autonomous, because they are either subject to a purpose beyond pure aesthetic pleasure or else this pleasure is constricted to a germinating status in the artist's studio. Advanced examples of the former are found in German and Netherlandish miniatures. A Regensburger manuscript from 1431 of Hugo von Trimberg's didactic poem *Der Renner* (*The Courier*, *c.* 1300-1313), for example, shows a landscape with crystalline rocks, fields and castles, but no people (FIG. 9.3). The justification for this lack of figures is provided by three larks in the foreground, as the miniature illustrates a moralistic passage on larks.[50] Another example, pointed out by Otto Pächt, is an illustration for a topographical text produced in Bruges around 1470 (PLATE 29). Here we are looking across the Flemish countryside with its fields, roads, hedges, fences, windmills and watermills, and tiny human figures.[51] I will not here discuss this type of illustration any further, for it tells us just as much about the new landscape paradigm *as such* as it does about the specialised genre framing a section of this paradigm.

Since this genre, the autonomous landscape image, is closely connected with the autonomous concept of art as such, it is most likely to be pin-pointed within the aesthetic art domain: painting and fine-art graphics and drawing. In painting, the forerunners to landscape autonomy are particularly of the type 'Landscape with...'. The epicentre is 16th-century Flanders, where painters such as Patinir, Herri met de Bles, Lucas Gassel and Brueghel created such sweeping views across meadows, fields, villages, rocks, forests, bays and high misty skies that it is often necessary to search for the diminutive narrative themes which, after all, still validate these panoramas (FIG. 9.4).[52] When Dürer travels to the Netherlands in 1521 and records a visit to Patinir in his diary, he thus ignores Patinir's figures completely and simply calls him "der gut landschafft maler".[53] This Flemish landscape panorama has very appropriately been given the name *World Landscape*, as each picture seems to synthesise the whole world within a single bird's-eye perspectival view. Realism is thus not manifest in the overall terrain, which still has much of the medieval rock mass to it; it can rather be traced in the details carrying on the development of van Eyckian precision.

A related centre of landscape, which is more concerned with human figures, but on the other hand is more open to the atmospheric value of landscape, is the Republic of Venice. The atmosphere makes itself felt in all pictorial genres, but reaches its peak exposure in the so-called *poesie*, a figurative genre of pastoral appearance, in which the artists consciously make the narrative content ambiguous. In a painting such as Giorgione's *La Tempesta* (*c.* 1505-10), the relationship between the soldier and the breast-feeding woman is unspecified to just the point (more about this in chapter 11) where it opens to the stormy sky's atmospheric rather than

Fig. 9.3. Regensburg Master, *Landscape with Skylarks* (*c.* 1430), miniature from manuscript of Hugo von Trimberg's *Der Renner*. Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek.

Fig. 9.4. Herri met de Bles, *Road to Calvary* (*c.* 1550?), oil on wood. Vienna, Akademie der Künste.

Fig. 9.5. Domenico Campagnola (?), *Landscape with Two Trees and a Group of Buildings* (*c.* 1517), engraving. Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen.

narrative expression (PLATE 30). No wonder, then, that in 1531 Marcantonio Michiel puts landscape and storm before figures: "The small landscape, on canvas, with the thunderstorm, a gipsy and a soldier." Even though the Italians came late to the use of the actual word 'landscape', Michiel's statement would seem to be the earliest surviving example of a whole work being categorised as a landscape.[54] In return for this categorisation and for the dominance of atmosphere, the human figure has to be given a bigger role than the diminutive one sanctioned in Flanders. As could be anticipated, however, landscape dominance increases as soon as the Venetians move towards the periphery of monumentality, to graphics and drawing respectively. An engraving attributed to Giulio Campagnola (*c.* 1517), for example, depicts no more than a collection of rustic buildings with two trees in the foreground (FIG. 9.5).[55]

Figureless landscape studies on paper or parchment must have existed at the time of the paradigm shift around 1420, if not before, albeit we first encounter extant examples from the 1470s onwards. Such studies, which have chiefly attracted interest on a level of studio practice, alternate between precise topographical representations and fictive compositions, and between preliminary studies for

Fig. 9.6. Leonardo da Vinci, *River Landscape* (1473), pen and ink on paper, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

paintings and graphics and independent works. In his pen-and-ink drawing of an imaginary Arno landscape, the 21-year-old Leonardo takes a pronounced step towards autonomy, in that he introduces the genre of the landscape image which is at one and the same time devoid of human figures and aesthetic (FIG. 9.6). From a tree-covered rocky plateau we look across a gorge with a waterfall of almost Chinese appearance, and from here the gaze moves on towards an extensive plain creating a staggering sense of remoteness. That Leonardo was conscious of the drawing's status as a work of art is apparent from his dating in mirror writing, even with specification of the day, August 5 1473. This is indeed the earliest dated drawing to have survived at all, and thus Leonardo has committed the very modernity-pregnant act of elevating both the medium of drawing (the sketchy) and the genre of landscape (the multivalent) to an autonomous sphere, which now begins to hold the properties of 'art'.

Even though this tradition of independent landscape compositions on paper seems initially to crystallise in Central Italy, it goes on to have a richer existence towards the North: in Venice and, in particular, southern Germany where landscape

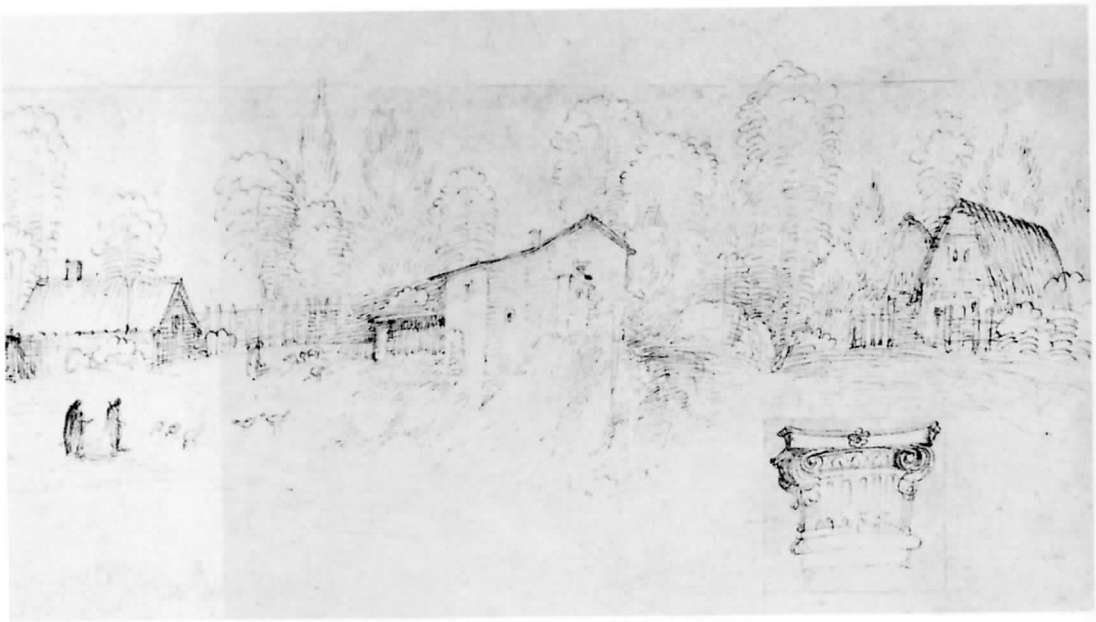

Fig. 9.7. Fra Bartolommeo, *Landscape with Farmhouses and Capital of a Column* (*c.* 1500), pen and ink on paper. Vienna, Albertina.

drawing is cultivated by artists such as Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer and Wolf Huber.[56] In this respect, the Florentine Dominican monk and follower of Savonarola, Fra Bartolommeo, is an interesting exception. In the decades around 1500 he creates a series of pen-drawn landscapes with monasteries, farms and rocks (FIG. 9.7), which apparently had no other recipient than himself.[57] If the choice of subject and his religious-populist approach points towards the North, the stylistics, however, keep him anchored in the South. Despite topographically precise elements (localities around Tuscan Dominican monasteries) these stylistics focus on the volume of the forms, just as the vegetation and rocks are generalised. The Venetians and, to an even greater extent, the Germans, on the contrary, emphasise irregularities such as foliage, bark and the ruined surfaces of buildings.

In a series of works from the beginning of the 1520s by Albrecht Altdorfer – watercolour-gouache, oil on parchment and etching – this now independent landscape takes a further step in the direction of a cultivated audience (FIG. 9.8).[58] The etchings multiply the line drawing, and the colour pictures bring the landscape closer to painting, the most finished and most official medium. A total merger

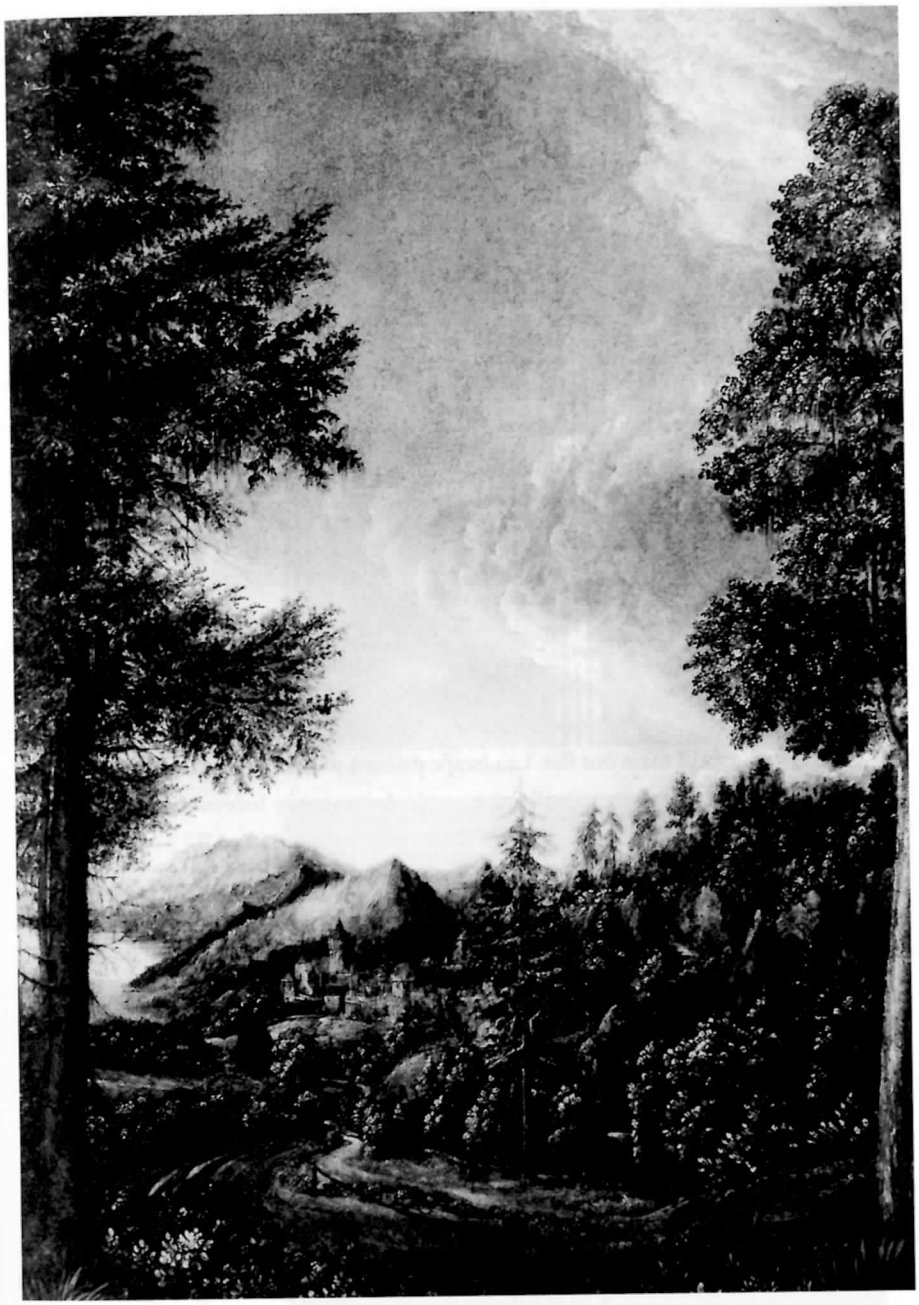

Fig. 9.8. Albrecht Altdorfer, *Landscape with Castle* (*c.* 1522-25), oil on parchment, mounted on wood. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

with painting has yet to take place, however, as although the oil compositions are mounted on wood, they are actually painted on parchment. Moreover, unlike the etchings, they are kept in a vertical layout.[59]

This vertical layout could be seen as a final hesitation en route to the pure landscape painting. For the new landscape paradigm could be described as the triumph of horizontality. In the antique-medieval Golden Age *field*, the pictorial space is extended in a vertical tension between the heavens and the earth – a tension which is incarnated in the upward-striving rocky ground. When the poles of the heavens and the earth are dispelled in the Copernican infinity, however, verticality is replaced by a horizontal panorama with the level plain as sounding board. Landscape literally gets *horizon*. What the image still retained of sculptural mass is hereby transformed into incorporeal vision: not vertical solidity, but panoramic restlessness. That Altdorfer, in this strategic transitional phase, upholds verticality in his colour images can therefore be seen as manifestation of a desire not to give space free rein. As Goethe notes in his *Italian Journey* (1787), we have to bear in mind that

> [...] when human fantasy wants to think of things as being significant, it always imagines them as larger than life, and thus provides the image with more character, gravity, and dignity. [...] [I]magination and reality correspond to each other as do poetry and prose; the former will conceive of things as mighty and steep, the latter will always spread them out flat. Landscape painters of the sixteenth century, compared to ours, offer the most striking example. A drawing by Jodocus Momper next to one of Kniep's outlines would make the whole contrast evident.[60]

This worldliness-impeding verticality also has an impact on the genre in which landscape devoid of human figures appears for the first time in the large painting format – the outer wings of altarpieces. On the outer wings of Gerard David's *Nativity Altarpiece* of the 1510s, we see a forest interior scene with two oxen, an ass and a building which must be the stable where Christ was born (**FIG. 9.9**).[61] Despite the probable function of the scene as a kind of 'appetizer' for the middle panel of the altarpiece, such a monumental landscape image with no human figures is highly radical for its day. Legitimacy is provided, then, by the vertical layout, which almost turns the forest into a Gothic cathedral. A similar justification could support the bird's-eye view over the newly-created earth which adorns the outer wings of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (*c.* 1503-04; **FIG. 9.10**). Despite the glass-like celestial dome, the flat earth and the eerie paradisiacal vegetation growing from the virgin ground – all reminiscences of a pre-modern, dualistic cosmos – the panorama is just as far-sighted and the cloudy sky just as high as in Patinir's world landscapes of a slightly later date. As the triptych even seems to have been made for a private

Fig. 9.9. Gerard David, *Forest Landscape with Stable* (1510s), outer panel of *Nativity Altarpiece*, oil on wood. Den Haag, Mauritshuis.

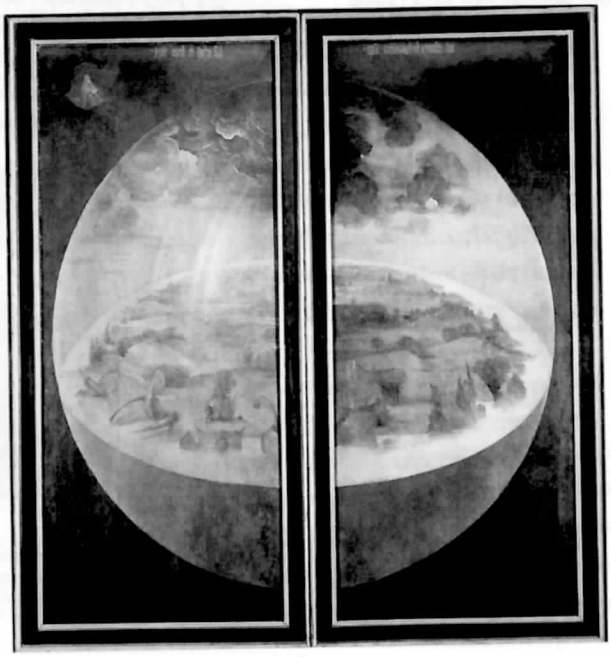

Fig. 9.10. Hieronymus Bosch, *Creation of the World* (*c.* 1503-04), outer panels of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, tempera on wood. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

Fig. 9.11. Anonymous German artist, *Langenargen Castle* (1486), woodcut from Thomas Lirer's *Chronik von allen Königen und Kaisern* published in Ulm. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book Library.

Fig. 9.13. Albrecht Dürer, *Madonna and Child over Rocky Landscape* (*c.* 1515), woodcut. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Fig. 9.12. Anonymous German artist, *Mounts Sinai and Horeb* (before 1508-09), miniature from Hartmann Schedel's manuscript copy of Felix Fabri's *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae*, vol. 2. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

individual's worldly meditation, it has been in great need of the semantic values still attached to the sacral altarpiece.

Another archaic element compensating for the lack of figures in the landscape image is, as in antique painting, *the rock*. As Christopher Wood has noted, the rock is one of the most important motifs in a special category of early deserted and semi-official landscape images. These landscapes are actually substantiated by a semantically well-defined purpose, but all approach an independent pictoriality beyond the purely illustrative. This applies to the woodcut depicting the castle of Langenargen in Thomas Lirer's *Chronik von allen Königen und Kaisern* (*Chronicle of All Kings and Emperors*; 1486; FIG. 9.11), and the miniature with *Mounts Sinai and Horeb*, pasted in and framed by Hartmann Schedel in his manuscript copy of Felix Fabri's *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae* (*The Wanderings in the Holy Land*; before 1508-09; FIG. 9.12). It is also true of Dürer's peculiar chunk of rock which, probably symbolic of the Madonna (cf. chapter 12), is inserted under an otherwise completely separate tondo of *Madonna and Child* from around 1515 (FIG. 9.13).[62] That these depictions of landscape in a non-private context approach the autonomous image, is thus – almost like in Roman wall painting – because the solid rock with its numinousity counterbalances the narrative loss inherent in landscape.

As in the early phases, the North is also the fulcrum when, in the decades around 1600, the pure landscape image is presented as actual *painting*, i.e. on wood and canvas. This initially occurs in the forest interiors by Flemish successors to Brueghel, such as Gillis van Coninxloo, Jan Brueghel and Roelant Savery. In their pictures, the dense trees, for a final time, render numinous compensation for the dwindling narration. But, with a new generation of Netherlandish artists – a generation shaped by the Protestant civil republic which, from the 1580s, is built up following the Spanish recapture of the Southern Netherlands – a real breakthrough becomes possible: rather than being surrounded by sheer rocks and dense forest, the gaze opens – and sinks – towards a previously unseen flatness of moorland, dunes, ploughed fields, canals and muddy tracks. In landscapes by Jan van Goyen (FIG. 5), Cornelis Vroom, Pieter de Molijn and Salomon van Ruysdael, modernity's surface has at last become presentable in itself.[63]

All that being said, however, it must be stressed that these early examples of autonomous landscape pictures in the North should only be seen as tips of the icebergs of a broader development. Because, on the whole, it can be claimed that Northern artists, regardless of the specific theme, allocate that which is depicted a greater degree of landscape, i.e. a coherent way of looking, than their Southern colleagues. In Wölfflin's incisive words:

> What is so characteristic for Romanesque feeling – articulated beauty, the transparent system with clear-cut parts – is certainly not unknown to Germanic art as an ideal, but immediately thought seeks the unity, the all-filling, where system is abolished and the independence of the parts is submerged in the whole. [...] And just in that fact lie the conditions of northern landscape painting. We do not see tree and hill and cloud for themselves, but everything is absorbed in the breath of the one great nature.[64]

So saying, the Northern, autonomous landscape pictures do not so much denote the development of an independent genre, but rather selected incisions in a paradigm that is born landscape-like.

Origins of landscape space: the Gothic-Romantic axis

It is not for nothing that the modern landscape image breaks through during the period of international Gothic. For it seems that infinity and the sensuous diversity of the painted pictorial space were already laid down in the Gothic style, a quintessentially Northern phenomenon.[65] Gothic architecture could thus be seen as the first building style based on panoramic impressions, on the beholder's subjectively generated illusion, and which at the same time, in the details, employs unseen naturalistic devices (precisely observed foliage ornamentation,[66] exact likeness of faces, and so forth). The myth of Gothic emerging from the depths of the forest has, therefore, more than just primitivistic potential; as Spengler points out, it is just as much comprehensive evidence of Gothic architecture's expansive, landscape-like qualities.[67]

In a structural homology to 13th-century university discussions of the closed cosmos' deficiencies, the anthropomorphic closedness that had hitherto made architecture compatible with the geocentric cosmos is thus also problematised. Not only can the slim Gothic columns reach any length whatsoever in the space between capital and base, they can also exceed this space so that such articulations achieve the status of mere markers on infinitely outstretched lines. Furthermore, Gothic doors, windows and statues have a tendency to harmonise with the small human figure rather than with the overall proportions of the cathedral, thus breaching the antique concept of a closed building structure. Panofsky notes, in particular, that the modern pictorial space is pre-empted in the areas around the Gothic statues and reliefs, where canopies ensure that the figures are surrounded by a space.[68]

The climax of this architectural expansion is seen in Gothic pointed arches (FIG. 9.14). When the columns, from the beholder's perspective on the floor, are seen rushing toward the celestial infinity, we forget that they actually meet in the point

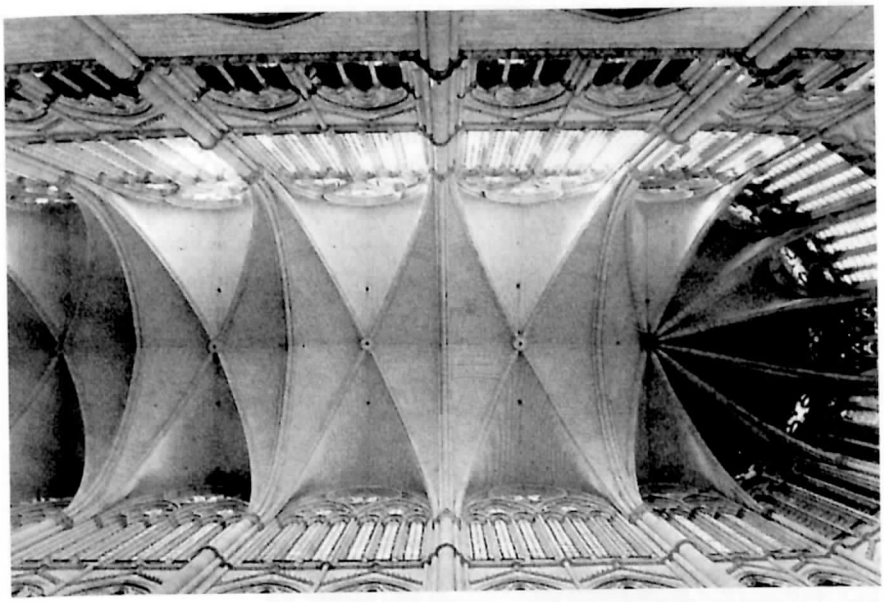

Fig. 9.14. Chancel vaulting in Amiens Cathedral (building begun 1220).

of the arch. In anticipation of mathematical perspective, they would rather seem to follow an uninterrupted course, only to converge in the celestial remoteness. As Georg Forster (1759-94) writes in 1790 of Cologne Cathedral's pointed arches:

> In enormous length the groups of slender columns are standing there, as the trees of a primordial forest; only in the highest pinnacle are they divided in a top of branches which, together with its neighbour, vaults into pointed arches and is almost unattainable for the eyes which want to follow them. If it is not possible to visualize the *immenseness* of the cosmos in the limited space, then in this upward-striving of the pillars and walls there is nevertheless that incessantness, which the imagination so easily extends into the *unlimited*.[69] [Forster's italics]

That Forster's juxtaposition between the upward-reaching perpetuity of the columns and the infinity of the universe is not just a matter for the 18th-century reception of the Gothic, will be evident, for example, by recalling Nicholas of Cusa's nominalistic *possest*. In the early medieval world picture, the heavens had had the monopoly on infinity, but in Cusanus the divine ability has moved into an infinity that includes everything outside the measuring, human consciousness.

It was quite natural that the Gothic's infinite features would be the subject of conscious discussion in the 18th century as here, in the second phase of modernity, the infinite, the unfinished and the becoming have become common ideals for the romantics: ideals that are condensed in the key concept of *the sublime*. As formulated by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), this entity is characterised by qualities that point away from the closed and well-defined body, qualities such as enormity, extreme insignificance, infinity, indefinability, coarseness, confusion and lack of substance.[70] The close connection between these qualities and romantic self-awareness in total is highlighted by Schiller, for example, when, in his *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), he compares the naïve, antique poet with the modern, sentimental heir: "The former therefore indeed fulfils his task, but the task itself is something limited; the latter indeed does not fulfil his, but his task is an infinite one."[71]

In relation to my concept of modernity as a *longue durée* developing from the 11th to the 19th century, the point, then, is that this un-antique striving for infinity was not limited to Schiller's own day, for the roots of modernity, which the romantics aspired to re-expose, were to be found precisely in what we still call the Middle Ages, especially the Gothic prior to the triumph of the Renaissance in the 16th-17th centuries. Around 1800 John Milner (1752-1826), for example, like Forster, saw an *artificial infinite* in the Gothic's "aspiring form of the pointed arches, lofty pediments, and the tapering pinnacles", besides the serial repetition of the bays. And when Uvedale Price was seduced by Gothic architecture in his *Essays on the Picturesque* of 1794, it was a consequence of its coarseness, sudden variation and detailed irregularity – all features which were contrary to the classical closed form, and which also made it well-suited to become a picturesque ruin.[72] The feeling of infinity is thus also roused on the microscopic level in the teeming Gothic detail, layer upon layer of tympanum figures, foliage ornamentation, small architectural members, and so forth. (FIG. 9.15). In reference to Milan Cathedral, Goethe even speaks of a "multiplied smallness" (*Multiplizierter Kleinheit*), so the thought could, in Speglerian fashion, lead to Leibniz's and Newton's later integral calculus.[73] Bringing together all these observations, it does not seem strange that by *romantic* Hegel understood post-antiquity in general.

However, the axis from Gothic to romantic – and bypassing the Renaissance – is made truly tangible by the fact that all the terminology with which the romantics rehabilitate Gothic actually goes back to Gothic's own time. For, although in a judgement reversed 180 degrees, the Italian and French Renaissance writers focus on the same characteristics of the Gothic as those highlighted by their romantic successors. As the Italians gradually became convinced of the blessing of the Renaissance and the curse of Gothic – the hitherto modern style – it was precisely the un-proportional

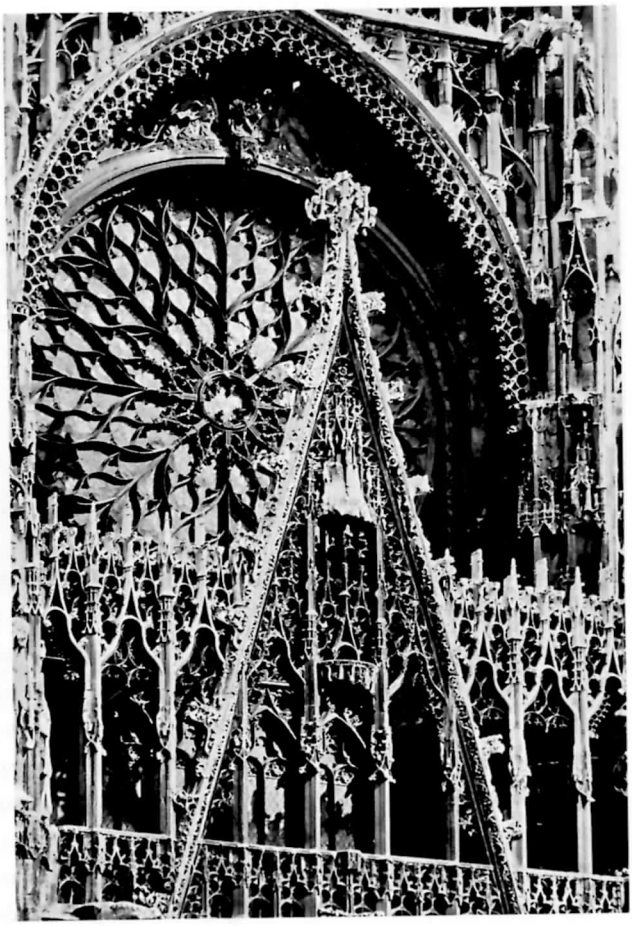

Fig. 9.15. Section of the west facade (1386-87, 1485 and 1509-14) of Rouen Cathedral.

throng of detail that caught the eye. Filarete, one of the first declared adversaries of the Gothic, states in his tract on architecture (*c.* 1460-64) that the Gothic style was not created by real architects, but rather by painters, stonemasons and especially goldsmiths, who designed their modern works "like tabernacles and thuribles".[74] And in Raphael's and Castiglione's letter to Leo X (*c.* 1519), offence is taken at the Gothic's badly executed and observed small figures and at the "strange animals and figures and foliage beyond all reason".[75]

Vasari, too, giving *maniera tedescha* the deathblow in the mid-16th century, thinks that these artists made "a curse of tiny tabernacles, one above the other, with so many pyramids and spires and leaves, that [...] it seemed impossible that they could sustain themselves; and they appeared more as if they were made of paper than of stone and marble."[76] Apart from the confusing hotchpotch, then,

Vasari is also offended by Gothic's *incorporeality*, its all too slight appearance. This discourse survives undiminished when, in 1642, Giovanni Baglione defines *Gotico* or *Tedesco* as "particular disorder in art and architecture" [*più tosto disordine dell'arte e dell'architettura*],[77] and also when, in 1681, the art historian Filippo Baldinucci refers to the Gothic "infinity of small tabernacles" and its "extremely subtle columns and long distortions [*smisuramente lunghe*], turned and in many ways unnatural".[78]

Thus, even though the Italian Renaissance and Baroque writers find the Gothic style repugnant, and not sublime, they still describe it via exactly the same concepts as those used by the romantics. Both parties are concerned – whatever the assessment – with Gothic infinity, immeasurability, irregularity, coarseness, myriads of detail and incorporeality. If we also add Gothic naturalism to these properties, we are practically left with a recipe for a landscape image. Only the projection onto a surface is missing. This we find in Michelangelo's comment on Flemish painting, reported in *Four Dialogues on Painting* by the Portuguese Francisco de Hollanda:

> Flemish painting [...] will, generally speaking, [...] please the devout more than any painting from Italy which will never bring him to shed one tear, whereas Flemish painting will cause him to shed many; and this is not because of the strength and goodness of the painting but because of the goodness of the devout person. It will appeal to women, particularly the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns, and to certain noblemen without sense of true harmony. For in Flanders they paint in order to bind you to the outer view [*pera enganar a vista exterior*], or such things that may cheer you up, and of which you cannot speak badly, such as for instance saints and prophets. They paint materials and masonry, turf of fields, shadows of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes [*paisagens*], and many figures on this side and many on that. And all this, although it appeals to some, is done without reason and art, without symmetry and proportion, without clever choice and boldness, and, finally, without any substance and nerve.[79]

In Michelangelo's view, then, Flemish painting is sentimental, over-pious, effeminate, harmless. Its tear-jerking effect should not be attributed to the work's inherent qualities, but rather to the beholder's own, which is to say it appeals to *subjectivity*, nominalistic shielding from the object being looked at. This subjectivity is made possible precisely because it can be reflected in an external vision: a vision that can almost be identified as landscape. For the radius of the landscape not only encompasses the turf of fields, the shadows of trees, rivers and bridges, but also "materials and masonry", plus a plethora of figures, all of which are mentioned in the same breath. This kind of sensory inclusion of pictorial elements obviously impedes the reasoned choice that creates symmetry and proportion, prerequisites of

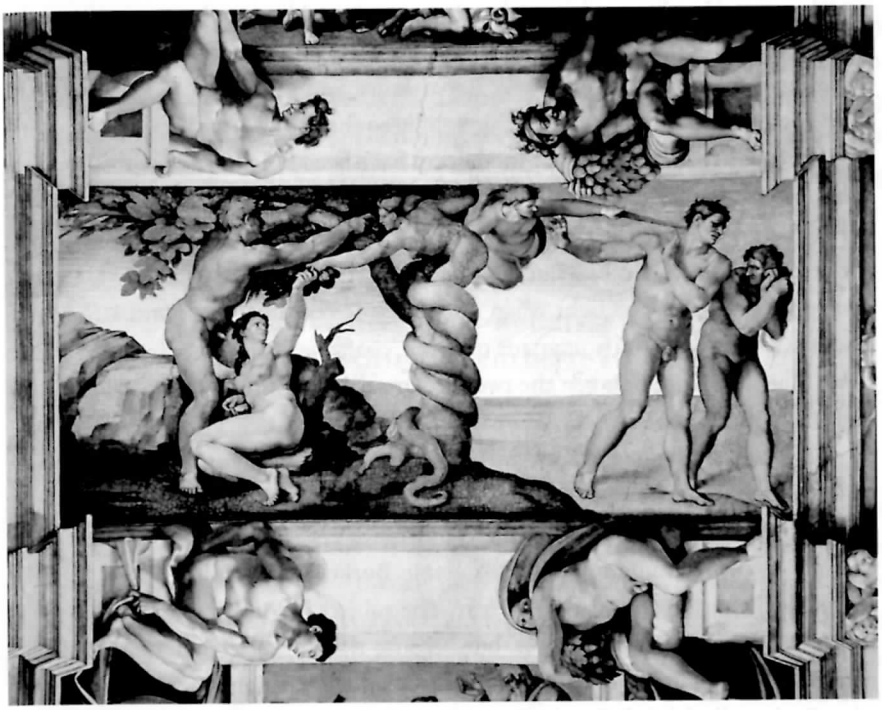

Fig. 9.16. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Fall and Expulsion from Paradise* (1510), ceiling fresco. Rome, Vatican, Sistine Chapel.

a closed *ergon* in accordance with antiquity's canon. Without closedness, substance cannot be created either, and then we are left with exactly the same objections that the Italian writers had against Gothic architecture: lack of proportions, confusing myriads of detail, incorporeality.

Michelangelo's comments are so much the more striking in that he is himself a sculptor and, moreover, when he paints, the Renaissance expert of the figure par excellence. While the volume of his nude bodies swells to titanic, sometimes grotesque dimensions, the landscape is restricted to an almost forced minimum. Adam and Eve on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1510) are expelled to a green plateau without so much as a blade of grass or a stone (FIG. 9.16). The thought occurs that the closed corporeality required in neo-antique art is a problem in the open space of modernity. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that Gothic human figures are slight, spindly and ethereal, as if the materiality has been dissolved in the expansive surrounding environment.

That post-Hegelian art history has, however, been blind to the continuity in the Northern tradition is because it has been sliced into at least three parts, each with an isolated discourse: Middle Ages, Renaissance and modernity. As the first two have both done their bit to tie Gothic solidly to the Middle Ages, the only Gothic-romantic axis that historians of modernity have been able to spot is the one that turns the romantics' interest in the Gothic into a question of reception history: the romantics' view of the Gothic as sublime revealed more about themselves than about the nature of Gothic. But, as I have shown here, to a surprising extent *the same* properties come to light when a Renaissance commentator and a romantic discuss Gothic: i.e. infinity, myriads of detail, coarseness, lack of substance, and so forth. The difference between the two discourses is not due to content, but to the *evaluation* of this content.

But how can the same content be regarded with contempt at one point in time and with admiration at another? For the early practitioner of the sublime, Edmund Burke, there is actually no great distance to the undercurrent of difficulty that makes the re-evaluation understandable. Burke sees the sublime experience as rooted in liberation from pain and fear. The subject is confronted with terrifying topics threatening to obliterate it, but because they are placed at an appropriate distance – that of art or of aesthetics – the beholder experiences a feeling of relief, what Burke calls *delight*.[80] For the Renaissance beholder, the Christian experience of painful and base topics were still too close to the body for the Gothic visualisation of them to be regarded with this kind of delight, but once the bourgeois culture in the romantic period had put them at a greater distance this enjoyment could be realised.

For Kant, however, the sublime not only incites delight but also aspiration. The sublime – *das Erhabene* – makes reason aspire to an absolute totality and imagination crave infinite progress. "That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small", says Kant, but at the same time he stresses it has to remain a subjective category, as nothing is so big that it cannot be microscopic in comparison with something else. The term also predicates, therefore, that nature ultimately remains unattainable as an object for the exposition of ideas.[81] *Das Erhabene*, then, could be perceived as the twofold feeling of omnipotence and impotence that arises when the subject is confronted with the modern, infinite environment. Today, with the romantic repertoire of marvellous topics getting rather worn-out, we are again beginning to sense the alarming aspect of rendering infinity visible. The discomfort has found expression in the French and English concept of *abject*, a sort of negation of the sublime.[82] In her 1980 essay on the abject, Julia Kristeva aptly notes that sublime and abject are bound together by a common denominator: neither of them has an object. Kristeva thus notes that:

"The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being."[83] If both the sublime and the abject are turned towards the amorphous world beyond the closed body, the sublime depicts what is spellbinding about this world, whereas the abject is more likely to deal with its spleen and identity-threatening vacuity of meaning. Here, then, we are back in the vicinity of the Italian disgust at the Gothic.

9.3 Gothic versus Renaissance in Italian 14th-15th-century painting

Giotto and the Sienese

Right from the modern painting's pioneers in the 14th century – the first stage of Vasari's three-point programme on the way to the ostensible climax, the High Renaissance in the 16th century – there is perceptible tension between the two power centres competing for the pictorial paradigm's supremacy: the classically closed-form body and the Gothic expanding surroundings. A comparison between Giotto – the traditional father figure of Renaissance painting – and the Gothic-oriented Siena should demonstrate this relationship.

Even though Siena is located to the south of Florence, its French trade connections made the city the Gothic centre of Central Italy. The Sienese School provides the 14th century's most extensive pictorial spaces and landscape panoramas, both in absolute fresco-dimensions and within the image in relation to the figures. In Ambrogio Lorenzetti's the *Effects of Good Government in the City and the Countryside* (1337-40), for example, the gaze wanders without interruption across an already broad cityscape and on to the Sienese *contado*, which by the standard of the day comprises a dizzying landscape panorama with fields, hills, forests and rivers (PLATE 13). In this type of Sienese pictorial space, the figures are neither dominating nor voluminous but, on the other hand, in possession of a relaxed, graceful freedom of movement (FIG. 9.17). Similarly, the Sienese images are rich in detail and small episodes, which is presumably what caused Berenson to note "a native tendency of Sienese art toward mere Illustration."[84] This illustration can fittingly be assessed in contrast to narration. Where the narrative action is in itself loaded with meaning, illustration is more of a *supplement* to the story, by means of which it can develop its own space of details.

Narration is, however, what we are offered by Giotto (FIG. 9.18). In spite of his Gothic-realistic elements, Giotto aspires to a monumental body volume which will make his figures heroic. But to accomplish this, he has to sacrifice the Gothic

Fig. 9.17. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Massacre of the Innocents* (1308-11), panel from the *Maestà*, tempera on wood. Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

freedom of movement and gain control of the incipient infinity. He does this by reducing the details so that his figures never get lost in the crowd. Furthermore, he tones down the dimensions of the pictorial space vis-à-vis the figures, so we have the impression that it is a function of these figures. As this is only partially successful, and as the space is almost clinically cleansed of irrelevant detail, Giotto's environment, particularly the architectural surfaces, is strangely, almost eerily, empty. This aspiration to subjugate both the corporeal and its spatial environment to geometrical control shows us the seeds of the tension which, via Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassicism, culminates in Fascism. To sum up the contrasts: where the Sienese figures are slender, emotional, ethereal and mobile, Giotto's are monumental, self-controlled, substantial and slightly static.

Panofsky, even though he persisted in regarding the Renaissance as modern and the Gothic as medieval, had a brilliant understanding of this mechanism. In a comparison between the Gothic pioneer Abbot Suger and Renaissance man, Panofsky finds that Suger manifests his personality *centrifugally*: "he projected his

Fig. 9.18. Giotto, *Massacre of the Innocents* (1305-06), fresco. Padua, Arena Chapel.

ego into the world that surrounded him until his whole self had been absorbed in the environment." Renaissance man, on the other hand, expresses it *centripetally*: "he swallowed up the world that surrounded him until his whole environment had been absorbed by his own self."[85] The Sienese ego is thus projected out into the expansive world, which thereby comes into focus, whereas the body is restricted to an airy shell full of graceful movement. The neo-classicist Giotto, on the other hand, attempts to recreate a substantial individual, which involves a loss of movement and a suppression of expansion.

This suppression can also be traced in his landscapes, which remain *parergon* to a greater extent than the spatial totality of the Sienese School. Evidence of this is found in the new cartoon-like phenomenon: the permanence of the surrounding environment in stories that develop over time, but not in space. It requires overt consciousness of the space's independence of the figure to imagine a specific place where the sequence of events is played out and to insist that this place remains unaltered when the image and chronology change. Giotto and Duccio, his slightly older Sienese colleague, are on a par for as long as they are dealing with the temporal stability of the interiors. But as soon as the setting is moved out of doors, Giotto is reluctant. In the Arena Chapel's images of Joachim (1305-06), when moving from *Joachim among the Shepherds* to *Joachim's Dream* the rock formations and the vegetation

Fig. 9.19. Giotto, *Joachim among the Shepherds* (1305-06), fresco. Padua, Arena Chapel.

Fig. 9.20. Giotto, *Joachim's Dream* (1305-06), fresco. Padua, Arena Chapel.

Fig. 9.21. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Entombment* (1308-11), panel from the *Maestà*, tempera on wood. Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

Fig. 9.22. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Three Marys at the Tomb* (1308-11), panel from the *Maestà*, tempera on wood. Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

are replaced even though the wooden hut and rock peak to the right indicate that we are in the same location (FIGS. 9.19-9.20). In Duccio's *Maestà* (1308-11), on the other hand, rocks and trees stay in place for three whole sequences: from the *Nativity* to the *Adoration of the Magi*; from the *Agony in the Garden* to the *Arrest of Christ*; and from the *Entombment* to *The Three Marys at the Tomb* (FIGS. 9.21-9.22).[86]

Masaccio and Gentile da Fabriano

This tension between statuesque figure and expansive space only seems to escalate when we let our gaze move on to the 15th century. We sense this in a strangely back-to-front way in Frederick Antal's *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (1947), in which the author's youthful experience from *Budapester Sonntagskreis* – Karl Mannheim's and Georg Lukács' sociological forum (1915f.) – is channelled into that revitalisation of the Renaissance myth, which took place simultaneously with the primacy of the totalitarianisms from the 1930s to 1950s. In a kind of political competition between the two leading players, the Renaissance man Masaccio and the international Gothicist Gentile da Fabriano, the former is thus elected hero, as with his ostensibly hypernaturalistic Renaissance style he is perceived as exponent of a progressive republicanism, whereas his Gothic and correspondingly less naturalistic rival is seen as champion of an aristocratic feudalism. As, *inter alios*, Peter Burke has shown, there is no evidence in support of the political aspect of such a thesis, for although we know that the two painters found their patrons among the same upper middle class, nothing is known about the specific political orientation of these patrons.[87]

I shall here further problematise Antal's argument by simply turning its stylistic observations on their head. Even though it might make sense to do the same with the politics (cf. Pasquale Villari above), I must settle for referring to the macrohistorical argument, which will be developed in the next two chapters, and here restrict myself to the aesthetics.

As Masaccio is the first painter to carry forward Giotto's heroic body cult and thereby the neo-antique project, he must, like his predecessor, forgo energy of movement, grace and landscape abundance. The price of his desired goal – strong and worthy figures – is a certain degree of stasis. And although he is among the first artists to try out mathematical perspective, he uses it in a centralising and simplifying manner, which precludes the richly-stocked landscapes of his ostensibly more conservative colleague Gentile da Fabriano in, for example, the *Strozzi Altarpiece* predella (PLATE 6).

In the *Tribute Money* in the Brancacci Chapel (*c.* 1425; FIG. 9.23), Masaccio has placed his statuesque male figures in a landscape that might at first sight look fully modern: a plain with more or less withered trees, a bay, and in the background a mountain range so high that its peaks half disappear in the drifting clouds. But more than opening up, the mountains serve as a limiting background, a backdrop for the relief-like figures. And the withered state and sketchiness of the trees would mostly seem to bear witness to lack of interest in this part of the created world. The impression is corroborated by the almost washed-on belts of vegetation on

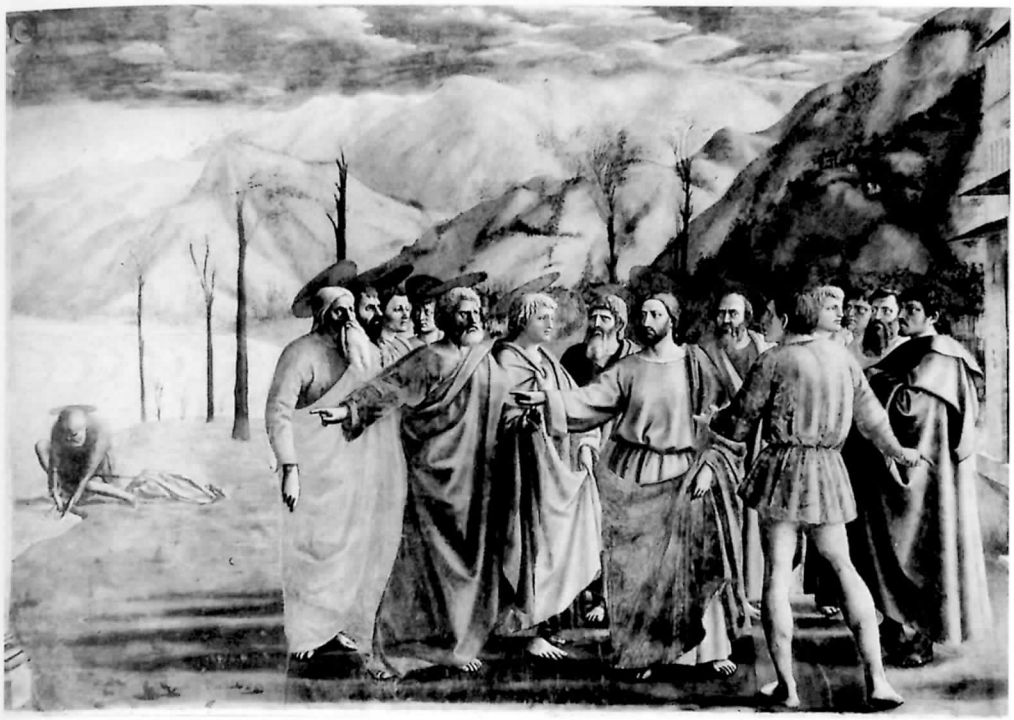

Fig. 9.23. Masaccio, *Tribute Money* (*c.* 1425) fresco (section). Florence, Santa Maria del Carmine, Brancacci Chapel.

the mountainsides, the only green element in the otherwise traditionally desolate and massive rocky landscape. In form they look like the new hedges surrounding Gentile's fields, but here they seem strangely ghostly. It is as if Masaccio intuitively feels that the modern cultivation of landscape is an enemy of his heroic, neo-antique art of the body and has therefore chosen to suppress it. "Puro, senza ornato," they said of him in his day. *Puro* could refer to the body, *ornato* could stand for *parergon*, including landscape trimmings.

Against the background of these observations, Gentile's pictorial idiom might seem more chaotic and less monumental, but, for this very reason, also more radically naturalistic than Masaccio's. That Gentile, being the international Gothicist he is, has a certain predilection for precious ornamentation – undulating sequences of lines, touches of gold leaf, stylised cloth patterns – should not entice the beholder into believing that he can only master the ornamental, because the ornaments thrive

Fig. 9.24. Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano* (*c.* 1445), tempera on wood. London, National Gallery.

Fig. 9.25. Piero della Francesca, *Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* (*c.* 1452-57), fresco from the cycle of the *Legend of the True Cross*. Arezzo, San Francesco.

in close liaison with searching optical observations which out-distance those of Masaccio. What does Masaccio show us, in degree of naturalism, for example, that corresponds to Gentile's variegated flora, gritted tracks, sacral gleams of light in the dark night and hillsides blazing in the sun's head-on rays? There would seem, all in all, to be evidence for the assertion that the unilateral crowning of Masaccio by Antal – and conventional art history – as the pioneer of modernity, and the corresponding consignment of Gentile to the darkness of the Middle Ages, is chiefly

Fig. 9.26. Raphael, *School of Athens* (1510-11), fresco.
Rome, Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura.

the result of a hibernated neo-antiquity, an impeded modernity, favouring the monumental and plastic at the expense of the particular and optical.[88]

After Masaccio and Gentile had divided the waters in 15th-century Italian painting, some painters tried to squeeze it all in anyway: not just neo-Giottoesque corporeality, but also movement plus perspectival and cultivated landscape space. The impossibility of the project is clearly seen in the work of ambitious artists like Uccello and Piero della Francesca. In scenes of violent action, such as Uccello's versions of the *Battle of San Romano* (FIG. 9.24) and Piero's *Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* (FIG. 9.25), the movement seems strangely postulated and puppet-like – quite the opposite to the work of contemporaneous Gothic artists like Filippo Lippi and Fra Angelico. Uccello's warriors, horses and lances even become prisoners of the centralising linear perspective, as if they were iron filings in a magnetic field, which could only be positioned either parallel with or at right angles to the image plane.

This conflict between the ideal, substantial body and its surrounding space is not resolved, characteristically, until the High Renaissance, when the Italians – temporarily – restrict the expansion of pictorial space and re-establish a closed world hierarchy. In a leading example such as Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510-11; FIG. 9.26),

the barrel vaults can soar high above the figures because these vaults are placed in a symmetrical relationship to the figures and also to their framework. A secure scene is thereby created, in which the figures keep their monumental substance, without this threatening their freedom of movement, which they can now express with relaxed grace.[89]

Pisanello and Guarino da Verona

Since Masaccio (and gradually also Uccello and Piero della Francesca) has been seen as representing the absolutely most advanced achievement of early Italian Quattrocento art, it has been a thorn in the flesh of scholarship that humanists far into the 15th century actually preferred the Gothic painters and generally trained their antennae on the North. Michael Baxandall, who has made a close study of the humanist art commentaries, has to acknowledge:

> It is one of the more disconcerting facts of Quattrocento art history that more praise was addressed by humanists to Pisanello than to any artist of the first half of the century; in this sense – and it seems a reasonably substantial one – Pisanello, not Masaccio, is the 'humanist' artist.[90]

What we would today describe as Gothic pictorial qualities found a strong centre of appreciation in the Guarino School – i.e. Guarino da Verona himself, plus pupils such as Tito Vespasiano Strozzi and Bartolomeo Fazio. In a poem probably from the 1430s, Guarino is impressed by, *inter alia*, the varied landscape in the work of his fellow townsman Pisanello: "[...] you equal Nature's works, whether you are depicting birds or beasts, perilous straits and calm seas; we would swear we saw the spray gleaming and heard the breakers roar." Whereupon Guarino is about "to wipe the sweat from the brow of the labouring peasant" and praises Pisanello for his realistic effects of night and seasons. In brief, just about all the new, modern phenomena of the landscape image are celebrated.[91] Later, in 1456, when Bartolomeo Fazio catalogues the greatest painters of his day in the book *De viris illustribus* (*On Brilliant Men*), he chooses, besides Pisanello, the Gothic painters Gentile da Fabriano, Jan van Eyck and Roger van der Weyden. Of "Jan of Gaul" it is even said that he "has been judged the leading painter of our time" and of Gentile, that he was Roger's favourite among the Italian painters.[92]

Nonetheless, by now we are so far into the Renaissance that landscape and Gothic realism ought to be justified in a neo-antique framework. Key concepts, characteristically borrowed from rhetoric, were *copia* (abundance, plenty, richness) and *varietas* (variety).[93] In antiquity both were used to ensure the appeal of the spoken

word and image to the audience and could therefore be seen as *parerga* adorning *ergon*. Abundance of expression might have been important to the rhetoricians of antiquity, yet it could not be allowed to get out of control, but should be held in check by *compositio*, the internal coherence of the period. Failing this, chaos and disintegration – *dissolutio* – would ensue. In Quintilian's words:

> But plenty [*copia*] should be controlled by moderation [...]. The result will be greatness, not excess; sublimity, not hazardous extravagance; boldness, not rashness; severity, not grimness; gravity, not heaviness; abundance, not luxuriance; pleasure, not abandon [*dissoluta* [*opera*]]; grandeur, not turgidity.[94]

This very threat is integral to landscape and Gothic variety. Tellingly, Guarino – the humanist who has praised Pisanello for his diverse landscape – is taken to task by his own pupil, the Byzantine George of Trebizond, for cultivating a disjointed style of speaking. As early as 1435, George attacks the many short sentences in Guarino's 1428 panegyrical speech to Count Francesco di Carmagnola, and rewrites it into one long construction.[95] In sentences such as these, which recall Villari's observation of Renaissance humanists' synthesizing constructions, we thus encounter the literary parallel to a pictorial idiom favouring the plastic body over the particular environment.

Alberti's De pictura

De pictura, Alberti's 1435 manifesto for the new painting (which he himself translated into *volgare* in 1436), also attempts the feat of uniting Gothic modernity with neo-antique beautification – putting particularity-filled illusionism in tandem with principles of ideal corporeality. Alberti wants space, realism and profusion *alla tedesca*, but also closedness and moderation *all'antica*. The other side of the coin is apparent from the Renaissance requirement that beauty is at least as important as faithfulness to nature: "The early painter Demetrius failed to obtain the highest praise because he was more devoted to representing the likeness of things than to beauty."[96]

The ideal image is achieved when there is balance between, on the one side, *istoria* and *composizione*, on the other, *copia* and *varietà*. Or, in other words: the *ergon* of the story has to be appropriately decorated with the *parergon* of profusion. The story – the narrative action – should be, as in Aristotle, a closed body, and so Alberti requires everything in the image to be contained within it, a construction put together, borrowing from rhetoric, with the help of composition. In the same way as words are parts of phrases, which are enclosed in sentences, which in turn are set in periods, Alberti concludes that: "Parts of the 'historia' are the bodies, part of the body is the member, and part of the member is the surface."[97] This last, slightly peculiar

term, *surface* (*superficie*), is one of the very few words in Alberti's vocabulary with no precursor in antiquity,[98] and should perhaps therefore be read as his response to a specific visual problem: to build a bridge between the two – increasingly more remote – entities, the sculptural totality of 'bodies', which make up the story, and then the plane – the painting's window – through which these bodies are seen.[99]

This focus on the outer surfaces rather than on the voluminous bodies themselves could be seen as a kind of externalisation of the antique corporeality. When Vitruvius discussed *eurythmia* and *symmetry* in the human body, he regarded them as the result of the interplay between the *individual parts of the body* (cf. chapter 1). As Alberti, however, lives in a period in which vision is transferred from the corporeal to the projection of the image window, he correspondingly shifts the gaze from the body parts to their *outer surfaces*: "From the composition of surfaces arises that elegant harmony and grace in bodies, which they call beauty." Immediately before this, he even claims: "The principal parts of the work are the surfaces [...]."[100]

Even though Alberti thus builds a bridge from the bodies via their surfaces to that surface which is the composition of the painting, he cannot, however, make up his mind as to how many doses of *copia* and *varietà* this bridge can bear. With a Gothic enthusiasm for detail, which levels out *ergon* and *parergon*, he may proclaim: "I would say a picture was richly varied if it contained a properly arranged mixture of old men, youths, boys, matrons, maidens, children, domestic animals, dogs, birds, horses, sheep, buildings and provinces."[101] In this extremely un-antique – and landscape-like – juxtaposition of objects, Alberti gets suspiciously close to Bartolomeo Fazio's aforementioned examination of Jan van Eyck's bathroom scene with its old woman, water-lapping puppy, horses, tiny human figures, mountains, groves, villages and castles.

But once Alberti has let go of this landscapesque view, Renaissance man also has to take a look and call for composure: "I disapprove of those painters who, in their desire to appear rich or to leave no space empty, follow no system of composition, but scatter everything about in random confusion [...]." In the Latin version of *Della pittura*, the maximum number of participants is even restricted to the nine or ten considered by Varro to be the limit for a banquet.[102] Here Alberti is obviously divided against himself, as ten players do not harmonise with a throng in which the human ingredients alone are made up of "old men, youths, boys, matrons, maidens, children". Hardly surprising that he left out the passage in the Italian version.

Just as the painter's gaze should not be overwhelmed by the *parergon* comprising the abundance of the surrounding environment, neither should the gaze, however, move to such a great distance from these surroundings that another type of *parergon*, vacuity, takes over. Alberti thus also warns against too many empty surfaces, what he calls "loneliness". Guarantee that the composition is bound together and

avoids overloading or vacuity alike is provided by the unity of action. Regardless of how many figures appear in the story, they must all react to the same action. As illustration of this, Alberti makes an exception and points to a modern rather than an antique work, Giotto's celebrated fresco *Navicella* in the Old St Peter's: "[...] Giotto represented the eleven disciples struck with fear and wonder at the sight of their colleague walking on the water [...]."[103]

Ghiberti and the Sienese

Whatever Alberti might have thought about the proper dosage of *copia* and *varietà*, there is no doubt that at least one contemporaneous artist, the Gothicist Lorenzo Ghiberti, was struck by the diversity potential of the concepts. Ghiberti was in the middle of modelling his *Gates of Paradise* when *De pictura* was published in 1435, and the last five bronze reliefs for the door show a pronounced change of style, which could be described as a systematised augmentation of *copia* and *varietà* (FIG. 9.27).[104] The first five reliefs for the portal – the sequence up to and including *Isaac* – usually have a manageable number of figures, placed additively so that their individuality is retained. The culmination is reached in the classically-looking *Isaac*, where the figures seem almost sculptural in their high relief and enter into harmony with the Albertian arcade, which could well bring Raphael's *School of Athens* to mind.

From and including *Joseph*, however, the number of figures is drastically increased, while the gaze becomes more summarising. Ghiberti's starting point would now seem to be the throng in its totality, whereas the figures lose their individual corporeal substance. There is also an attempt to control this more overarching gaze by means of a tighter *istoria* in that the number of narrative episodes within each panel is reduced, culminating in *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, which only has one episode.

That Ghiberti's change of style was due to influence from Alberti – very likely through reading the newly-published *De pictura* in 1435 – is confirmed by Ghiberti's own *Commentarii*, the compendium of art history written in 1447-48, which was meant to ensure his place among the *conoscenti* of the day. As noted by Henk van Veen, *Commentarii* is full of Albertian terminology,[105] and of his own *Gates of Paradise* Ghiberti writes:

> They were Old Testament stories, very abundant with figures [*molto copiose di figure*], in which I strove with every measurement to respect nature and to try to imitate nature as far as it was possible for me, both with all the line structures that I was able to produce from it [nature] and with excellent compositions rich with a great number of figures. In some stories I put about one hundred figures; in some stories more and in some less.[106]

So here Ghiberti compares *copia* with the number of figures and, moreover, sets the number so high that it can only correspond to the last five reliefs on the *Gates of Paradise*.

The impression that Ghilberti had read Alberti is also corroborated by reference in *Commentarii* to Ambrogio Lorenzetti, which is again coloured by Albertian terminology.[107] *Commentarii* is remarkable for presenting the first lengthy discussion of the Sienese tradition, which had otherwise only previously been mentioned a few times in the Florentino-centric literature.[108] By writing this item, Ghiberti shows both his debt to the modern Sienese tradition and, in a broader sense, its correlation with Alberti's concept of *copia*. In his examination of two now lost Ambrogio Lorenzetti fresco cycles in Siena – on the one hand the *Franciscan Mission's Martyrdom*, formerly in the chapterhouse of Sant'Agostino, on the other the *Crucifixion* and *Stories of Saint Catherine*, formerly in the first cloister garth of San Francesco – Ghiberti is struck by a number of telling features. The San Francesco cycle immediately impresses him with its Sienese speciality, size, as it fills an entire monastery wall. In addition, he is impressed by the effect of the throng and the variations within it. Of the San Francesco cycle he writes that the monks "are decapitated, with a very great multitude, mounted and on foot, looking on. There is the executor of Justice with very many armed people [and] there are men and women."[109] And in the Saint Catherine fresco "there are painted many people, [both] inside and out." Indeed, "this story is very rich [*molto copiosa*]".[110] Within this abundance, Ghiberti goes on to note the pronounced variation created by different positions and clothing.

But Lorenzetti is *nobilissimo componitore* as well, so Ghiberti also describes how all those involved in the various episodes, as in Alberti's description of Giotto's *Navicella*, react to the same action. For example, "all the people" have their eyes turned to the naked monks; just as "all the people who go to see" listen to the hung monk preach.[111]

Considering Lorenzetti's sense for descriptive details and subsidiary episodes, this last part of Ghiberti's description could seem to be somewhat influenced by wishful thinking. Lorenzetti has a lot of *copia* and *varietà*, but it seems doubtful that they can be so painlessly subjugated to the neo-classical idea of unity of

Fig. 9.27. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise* (commissioned 1425; modelled 1429/30-37; installed 1452), gilded bronze. Florence, executed for the Baptistery, east entrance; now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.

composition and action. The Gothic variety is something experienced purely from a subjective vantage point, which emphasises the window through which the world is beheld; classical corporeality, on the other hand, is elevated above the subjective. The composition and unity which Ghiberti so enthusiastically thinks he has found expressed both in his own work and that of the Sienese is, therefore, perhaps in reality not so much a corporeal unity as a unity dependent on the beholder's gaze – in short, a modern, subjective unity. Ghiberti – and his mentor Alberti – only lacked a vocabulary that could provide words for this alternative unification of the image.

9.4 Supremacy of the amorphous: naturalism without Renaissance

Landscape imagery between wall stains and hypernaturalism

If we acknowledge that the naturalistic image is not necessarily focussed on plastic bodies, but may include all forms of sense impressions determined by the moment (sharply defined, dull, amorphous or completely dark), our attention is split in two opposite directions and the midpoint between them: towards the infinite space in all its diversity; towards the subject appraising this space; and, finally, towards the image plane on which this space's subjectively-determined projection of infinity leaves its imprint. As Alberti states in *Della pittura*, this plane is not merely to be compared with a clean windowpane, but also with a veil or even a mirror for the beholder. In other words, there are extremely fluid transitions from a myriad chaos of objectively-observed individual elements (window) to a totality unified on the image plane, because it is seen from a subjective position (veil or mirror).

Considering the roots of nominalism and subjectivity in the Northern European culture, it is therefore not unexpected that in the post-Albertian period, from the end of the 15th century and further on to the 16th-17th centuries, it is the Northern culture – Venice and the Netherlands – that devises the coherent, hazy, so-called painterly vision that turns the brush-script into an index of original artist personality. Behind the framed plane, alias the artist's retina, lies the autonomised subject, a primarily Northern European mind able to make a free choice as to the degree of purity in which sense impressions will be invoked on the plane which receives them.

As far as this subject is concerned, the objective observation of nature devoid of the trace of an artist's hand (window) is but a sable-hair's-breadth from the subjective vision which allows the brush strokes to emphasise the process by means of which the surrounding world is comprehended by the beholder (veil or mirror).

Both ways of seeing – 'hypernaturalism' and 'impressionism' – are based in the plane separating the individual from the surrounding world. The introverted version, the mirror, is Narcissus' image: "What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?"[112] Or, in the words of a popular 15th-century aphorism: "Ogni dipintore dipinge se" ("Each painter depicts himself").[113] In modernity, therefore, the hazy traces of the painter's hand, which to Plato signalled illusion and deception, become a refractive zone between two mutually-dependent areas of reality: the inner personality and the outer world.

Landscape is the epitome of this binocular way of seeing as it represents, to a supreme degree, that which is alien. It is brimming with objects, each with its particular character – rocks, gravel, broken branches, leaves, clouds, etc. – so that there are no limits as to the extent to which it is possible to become absorbed into their illusionistic reconstruction on the image plane. But, at the same time, the grouping of the objects within the whole is raised above predetermined regularities to an extreme degree, and thus the artist can treat them with equally unlimited freedom. We recall how Pliny the Younger, when describing his view from the Apennines in the *5th Epistle*, turned to the words *varietas* and *descriptio* (see chapter 6). By so doing he indicated that the variety of the landscape settled into a pleasant arrangement in front of the beholding gaze. With a modernist turn it could be said that the outer world slots together with the beholder's mind. In this respect landscape, as no other pictorial motif, demonstrates the intimate connection between the objective and the subjective.

But once more there are extremely fluid transitions from the landscape of 'nature' to the landscape that simply appears in front of the beholder irrespective of the objects involved. For again, whatever the motif, the modern way of seeing is landscapesque. The connection is elegantly demonstrated in Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting*. Leonardo shall not fail

> to include among these precepts a new discovery, an aid to reflection, which, although it seems as a small thing and almost laughable, nevertheless is very useful in stimulating the mind to various discoveries. This is: look at walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles, and rapid actions of strange figures, expressions on faces, and costumes, and an infinite number of things, which you can reduce to good, integrated form. This happens thus on walls and varicolored stones, as in the sound of bells, in whose pealing you can find every name and word you can imagine.

And Leonardo continues:

> Do not despise my opinion, when I remind you that it should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or the ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud, or like things, in which, if you consider them well, you will find really marvelous ideas [...], because the mind is stimulated to new inventions by obscure things. But be sure that you first know how to make all the parts of the objects that you wish to represent, such as the limbs of animals, and the elements of landscape, that is, rocks, plants, and such things.[114]

Subject to a certain previous knowledge of the organisation of the world, and taking as the starting point the most confused and amorphous forms – stained walls, motley stones, ashes, clouds and mud – the artist might thus create the most admirable inventions. Just like their initiators, these inventions seem to transcend, if not dissolve, the neo-antique horizon, the closed *ergon*. The painted landscapes are particularly effective in this respect, as the amorphous forms which are their point of departure – stains, clouds, mud, and so forth – also belong to the variety of natural objects which the finished landscapes *depict in high definition*. In addition, the inventions can consist of facial expression (fleeting emotional states), battles (large throngs of figures), figures ("strange" and in "rapid actions", i.e. beyond neo-antique decorum) and clothing (by definition a *parergon*), besides "an infinite number of things". We recall variety, infinite number of things and confusion as points on the Albertian curve towards increasing dissolution. To the modernist Leonardo, the prime safeguard against chaos, however, is not composition but naturalistic studies of individual elements.

Once again, then, we see what a short step it is from lack of proportion to hypernaturalistic close studies. Hovering in the uncertain space between the large and the small infinity, the painter has free choice as to the frame and the sharpness within which he will view the surrounding environment. What at one moment appears as an amorphous blob in the microworld, proves – under a change of lens – to constitute a hypernaturalistic landscape in the macroworld. At the same time, this macroscopic landscape is made up of amorphous objects, each of which is the entrance to yet other new landscapes. The damp stains of the wall could, therefore, in themselves be regarded as a metaphor for the painterly style, the painting which stresses the misty vision and its own genesis.

This vision, which can zoom freely in on and out from the objects of the world, is in obvious conflict with its classic forerunners. The classical vision only finds beauty in objects that it can include in a single gaze – if the objects shrink to ant-size, or expand to giant-size, it is jolted. The feeling is clearly felt in Francesco Colonna's

Fig. 9.28. Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Procession to Calvary* (1564), oil on wood. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (*c.* 1467, published 1499). Having climbed a colossal building at the base of a rock ravine, Poliphilo cannot bring himself to look down, for "my eyes, adapted to the ground, could not see again, inasmuch as every object below me appeared imperfect".[115] The "imperfect" could here be interpreted as the unclosed amorphousness that transpires in the gaze of distance.

It is precisely this obscene relativism, with its emphasis on unclosed matter, that is cultivated in the Northern tradition, from Jan van Eyck to 17th-century Holland and on to 18th-19th-century modernity. Brueghel's *Procession to Calvary* (1564; FIG. 9.28) could be seen as an emblematic image in this respect. The gaze has here been raised so far above the underlying terrain that the more distant part of the throng of people looks like the miniscule organisms Aristotle finds so distasteful in his *Poetics* (see chapter 1). And the terrain itself could resemble the *Poetics*' thousand-mile-long object, the cohesion of which is lost to the observer.

Naturalism in recent art criticism: some adjustments

If I have by now succeeded in extrapolating naturalism's distance from plastic ideality and its corresponding close connection with the amorphous, this should not only set the scene for reformation of the traditional art history, but also for adjustment of some of the reactions that this art history has already triggered in the post-war period, especially in phenomenological- and semiotic-oriented art criticism. It is thus an ironic fact that post-16th-century prejudices caused by the Renaissance annexation of naturalism actually live on among opponents of the traditional art history. Rather than recognising naturalism's modernity potential by divesting it of neo-antique ingredients, the new art history takes over the whole Renaissance cliché of naturalism as inevitably narrative, olympically overviewing and linear perspectival, with the result that this distorted idea of naturalism is not dissolved but, on the contrary, turned into the antipole of, and thereby – through the logic of negation – into a continued sphere of control for, the new art history. Thereby, we end up in the far too universal 'denigration of vision', the antiocularcentric paradigm, which Martin Jay has identified in numerous areas of 20th-century French thought and which has spread to much of the cutting-edge art criticism since the 1970s.[116]

The unacknowledged neo-antique prejudices concerning naturalism, which thus hibernate as the 'enemy' of an ostensibly more advanced art appreciation, are, in particular: [1] naturalism's ideal is an unmediated, transparent reproduction of reality; [2] naturalism is focused on clearly-defined bodies; [3] naturalism without linear perspective is inconceivable; and [4] naturalism and narration are two sides of the same coin.

The first point has been corroborated by, in particular, Norman Bryson, whose post-structuralist attack on naturalism's iconic aspiration builds on an assumption that this iconicity demands a 1:1 equality between image and environment. Bryson thus assumes that Western painting since the 15th century is gripped by a fallacious longing for absolute transparency, an unmediated access to "the Essential Copy" and that it therefore opposes *deictic* traces, i.e. traces which accentuate the painting's own process of creation (from Greek *deiktikos*=able to show).[117] But if we bear in mind naturalism's nominalistic roots, it should be unambiguously apparent that even a very 'clean' pictorial window still comprises a subject-bound, fragmentary mediation, whereas the term "Essential Copy" leads our thoughts in an extra-subjective, universalistic direction, i.e. towards the Renaissance focus on ideal plasticity. And, unlike Bryson's assertion, the Western pictorial window is actually often transformed into a veil or mirror, with the brushwork miming the subject's impression and assimilation of the environment. The painterly style with

its indexicality of both craft and perception is not, therefore, essentially alien to, but rather symptomatic of, Western modernity.

The attack on naturalism's apparent ideology of transparency can also be turned around so that, instead of firing a broadside against the Western painting tradition, focus is placed on its overlooked pockets of seemingly conscious anti-transparency. This strategy is implemented with considerable effect by Hubert Damisch, who in his semiotic counter-reading of Western pictorial art, *Théorie du /nuage/*, identifies the cloud as an amorphous primary figure for the painterly, picturesque and Baroque. As demonstrated in a manifesto-like manner in Correggio's dome frescoes in Parma (San Giovanni Evangelista (1520-24) and the Cathedral (1526-30)), the cloud evades the domain of the measurable and linear and instead marks out a transcendent zone midway between visible and invisible, representable and non-representable. In Damisch's opinion, the cloud image can actually be driven so far into the supremacy of the amorphous that he finds it useful to distinguish between two types of cloud sign: on the one hand, an italicised *cloud*, the unambiguously denoting *signifiant* for the *signifié* cloud; on the other hand, a slash-flanked /cloud/ representing the *signifiant* itself, the amorphous traces of paint, and with a denotative relation to the representation of the physical environment so consciously unclear that it turns inwards and becomes the index for the artist's, for example Correggio's, style.[118] With the idea of /cloud/, Damisch is thus aiming at the very stuff of which painting is made, and which can only be contained to a limited extent in recognisable figures.

Conversely, the chief instrument of the figure formation is ostensibly linear perspective, which thus, as already indicated in the discussion of Brunelleschi's views of Florence, becomes the absolute anti-pole of the cloud. In Damisch's opinion, not only is perspectival representation inextricably allied with the drawing and the linear, but both parties permeate every form of imitation and *trompe l'oeil*, which accordingly sees colour outdone by line. At the same time, Damisch sees this linearly-controlled and colour-repressing imitation as inevitably concentrated on corporeal figures and their manifestation in Albertian stories, acted out on cubical vanishing-point-oriented scenes.[119] It is in order to disarm this rationally imitative pictorial regime that the hazy *cloud* and its condensation in amorphous blotches of paint – /cloud/ – has to be mobilised, by means of which we are catapulted into the self-representative genesis of style, a seemingly non-naturalistic space filled with paradoxical ruptures and ambiguous connotations.[120]

Despite Damisch's indubitably perspicacious and innovative ideas – the distinction linear/amorphous; the distinction cloud/amorphous traces of paint; and perhaps especially: the alliance between the cloud figure and the picturesque style – we have to note that he again perpetuates all the neo-antique clichés as regards naturalism's modes of operation: that it is necessarily transparent, linear-perspectival,

corpo-centric and narrative. But why should a sharply-focussed *trompe l'oeil* painting not be able to depict amorphous, colour-glinting clouds just as convincingly as it can denote ideal bodies on grey, mathematically square scenes? What is more, in order for the paint to be the index of the artist's stylish brush-writing, these optically imitative cloud images do not require a change of register to particularly paradoxical, anti-naturalistic and rupture-filled spaces, because, as suggested by possibly the most valuable point in Damisch's thesis, the characteristic of the cloud figure is exactly the fluidity of the transitions between *signifié* and *signifiant*, between transparency and opacity, between hypernaturalism and painterliness. To defend nevertheless the idea of a distinction imitation/cloud and simultaneously of a link between linear perspective and corporeality, Damisch finds himself compelled to adopt forced, indeed strangely infantile assertions – such as, for example, that the vanishing point or the optical image of the sky cannot induce a feeling of infinity, and that infinity is given a better representation in a vertical rather than a horizontal view.[121] In this endeavour to see infinity as monopolised by the cloud, the amorphous and the transcendent, Damisch fails to notice that infinity appears in two forms in the culture of modernity: not only in the domain of incalculability (for example, in the sublime of aesthetics), but also in that of the calculable (in addition to the vanishing points and horizon lines of perspective – entities approached infinitely but never reached – in mathematical differential and integral calculus).

A more specialised articulation of anti-transparent phenomena in Western art history is moreover put together by Georges Didi-Huberman who, in a reinterpretation of Fra Angelico, highlights the "dissemblant" quality in this artist's brush-writing, i.e. its equally indefinite relationship to bodies, narrative and spatio-temporal relationships (cf. all the four abovementioned points).[122] Didi-Huberman concentrates on a more material form of 'cloud' – i.e. certain recurring colour zones in the frescoes in the Florentine San Marco which, just like the Correggio frescoes, seem to play on their dual identity as figurative signs and completely amorphous blotches – for example, the small red colour-stains which, in the *Noli me tangere* fresco, alternate between denoting flowers and stigmata, or the strikingly large *marmo finto* panels found both inside the figure scenes and in separate spheres below them. In Didi-Huberman's reading, these colour sections are still *figures*, however in a different sense than the Renaissance 'volgar', which deal with plastic bodies in well-defined *istorie* seen in linear perspective. In accordance with the medieval exegesis tradition, pursued in the Dominican monastery, this is more a case of signs miming the mystery of incarnation and therefore seemingly displaced (*déplacées*) in relation to time, space and the domain of the visible altogether.[123]

Like Damisch, Didi-Huberman certainly provides a much-needed attack on the Renaissance annexation of the late medieval, Gothic-influenced image, identifying,

furthermore, highly potent pieces for a persuasive alternative interpretation. Nonetheless, his attack is again distorted by the Renaissance-governed notion that the narrative and plastic-corporeal are inextricably built-in to the perspectival and naturalistic, and so he too, to an exaggerated degree, has to distance himself from the domain of the visible *in toto*. What he unwittingly reawakens as the agency of this distancing, however, is not merely a certain anti-ocular medieval mysticism, but nothing less than the roots of nominalistic naturalism, i.e. the notion that the visual process and its fixing on the image plane *from the ground* is partly uncertain in its relationship to the surroundings, inasmuch as it is entrusted to mediations such as darkness, mist and amorphous forms – in brief, the entire chaotic repertoire which, according to Leonardo, is the starting point for even the most hypernaturalistic image creation. So why cut the painting's figures away from time and space when the late medieval physical cosmos has already absorbed God's infinity, and this infinity in any case – as Nicholas of Cusa, Fra Angelico's contemporary, recognised (cf. chapter 8) – can only be embraced via otherness, i.e. through signs which only leave traces of it to a limited extent and with ambiguous symbolic meaning?

In other words, Didi-Huberman's 'dissemblance' appears as an iconically rather one-sided nominalism, which displaces the pictorial signs' slightest structure-preserving response to the environment, as this nominalism's sole conceivable iconicity is the Renaissance-determined caricature: the total likeness, Bryson's "Essential Copy". This does not mean, however, that the surrounding environment as a whole is excluded from Didi-Huberman's thinking, because at the same time he is of the opinion that there should be an inverted proportionality of sorts between iconicity and indexicality, so that the less Fra Angelico's figures resemble the visible phenomena in the environment in terms of form, the more they are 'touched', not, as in Correggio's work, by the artist's style, but by the mystery of incarnation.[124] Apart from the problematic correlation of the fundamentally incomparable entities of iconicity and indexicality, it would seem precipitate to attribute Fra Angelico's pictorial signs with special indexical properties vis-à-vis environmental phenomena. Irrespective of how amorphous the colour stains might look, there is no getting away from the fact that they are constructed, just like the linear perspective, via Fra Angelico's hand and are thereby bound to a nominalistic genesis.

Both Damisch's and Didi-Huberman's assumed link between formlessness and indexicality are clearly influenced by the French phenomenological tradition, in that Merleau-Ponty and Lacan similarly consider non-linear visual phenomena such as colour stains and light refraction to constitute a perceptual field which evades the rational perspectival construction – here in favour of more direct, corporeal dealings with the world.[125] Even though I agree with the fundamental benefit of differentiating between, on the one hand, play of colour and light and, on the other

hand, rational linear perspective, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan would also seem to be ensnared by the Renaissance plastic interpretation of the latter, and so they must similarly exaggerate the alien relationship between form and non-form in modernity. However, if the North European pictorial tradition is again brought into the discussion, we will recall that its colour- and light-play often enter into so close an interaction with the linear-appearing but not necessarily mathematically-constructed perspective, that this looks as if born of and borne by the colours. Moreover, as with Didi-Huberman's stains, it is important to stress that the play of colour and light in this pre-photographic era is no less nominalistically based than is perspective, since it is similarly constructed on the image plane through a purely iconic – and not indexical – contact with the environmental phenomena it represents.

If, on the one hand, we elevate the light-colour-play to mediate an extra-rationalist, almost sacred proximity to reality, while, on the other hand, we demarcate the linear perspective to a quasi-fascist, subject-governed environmental control, we are not in my opinion settling accounts with modernity – on the contrary, we are perpetuating a demonised version of its later dogma of two incompatible cultures: the aesthetic rule-less and the rationalist rule-bound. A genuine postmodern horizon ought to set the scene for considering this differentiation with the insight of historical distance and recognise that its rational part has been distorted through its unrecognised annexation by Renaissance idealism. Exculpated from this idealism and its glorified subversion, the divide no longer concerns a 'progressive' versus a 'reactionary' modernity, but points out two complementary sides of the same epistemic *field*.

That it seems fundamentally unbeneficial to isolate the amorphous layers of paint from the naturalistic pictorial tradition in its entirety, is finally suggested by the fact that the *amorpheans* Damisch and Didi-Huberman even prove to be closely allied with a scholar who, from a conventional point of view, might be misunderstood as their antithesis: the *naturalist* Svetlana Alpers. Where the two parties meet is again in the case against their shared defendant: the Renaissance's clearly-defined history painting with its narration and linear perspective. Damisch and Didi-Huberman could simply be said to attack the accused *from the inner side of* the pictorial window (veiled or mirrored), through the chaotic mediation of the paint, which dissolves the clear plasticity and denotation, whereas Alpers goes into action *behind* the same window (the clean one), through the myriad empirically-recorded particularities, which likewise subvert the overview and predefined literary point. Both positions therefore show themselves to be enrolled in the same nominalistic pictorial paradigm, that of modernity which allows for a wide spectrum of paint definitions – sharpness and blurredness, glaze and opacity, brightness and darkness – to act as iconic signs for the optically-perceived

space and light conditions of the environment. While these paint formations – in the special case of Renaissance pictorial space – *can* be manipulated to centre on plastic figures denoting well-defined iconographic meanings, they will most often spread their references to the optically-perceived boundlessness, with a corresponding displacement of meaning – a gemmation of connotations – to follow. Thus, again, neither the materiality of the pictorial sign nor the ambiguity of its iconical meaning should be sought in a special pictorial space that is estranged from imitation and stylistically isolated; on the contrary, they both thrive at the heart of naturalism, the pictorial idiom of nominalism.

Wölfflin's principles: a reappraisal

These observations could be further clarified by bringing in Heinrich Wölfflin's celebrated *principles of art history* from 1915.[126] Even though these principles are tremendously useful in a pragmatic way, Wölfflin did not succeed in developing an explanation of *why* they were as they were and which context of cultural history supported them – a lack of context presumably resulting from the art history discipline seeing itself compelled to throw any such deliberations overboard after, in the second half of the 19th century, it had liberated itself from its origins in aesthetic philosophy.[127] Since, however, the art history discipline has recently approached a reconciliation with its former partner, these principles – like their kin: Riegl's haptic-optic spectrum (cf. chapter 1) – could be considered as being a perceptual fine-tuning of Hegel's aesthetics; albeit, that is, a Hegelian aesthetics now so concentrated on form and so limited in its temporal overview that any consciousness of its progenitor and his ideas pertaining to the philosophy of history has evaporated.[128]

Wölfflin sees, as is well known, a dichotomy between Renaissance and Baroque, particularly Italian Renaissance and Northern Baroque – a dichotomy described by the following pairs of terms: *linear/painterly; plane/recession; closed form/open form; multiplicity/unity; absolute clarity/relative clarity.* This entire dichotomy can be described as a specification of Hegel's contrast between *classic* and *romantic* – and thereby also of Riegl's last two levels of the pictorial history: the *haptic-optic normal sight* of antiquity and the *optical distant sight* of late antiquity and modernity. Linearity, plane, closed form, multiplicity and absolute clarity are thus all features caused by Renaissance eagerness to return to the classical *ergon*, in which the subjective vantage position is moderated. Placed in the perspectival field, we see objects that: appear in relief-like parallelism with the image surface (plane); accumulate into an articulated whole, the outline of which relates to and in a way becomes one with the pictorial frame (multiplicity and closed form); and, finally, are sharply-drawn, by means of which the visual process is displaced (linearity and absolute clarity).

In the Northern 'Baroque' (actually, more like naturalism and realism), however, modernity flares up again and attention shifts from the objects in front of the field of vision to the process of perception itself (painterliness, relative clarity and unity); by this means, the image becomes a frame randomly cutting off the gaze towards the infinite environment (open form and recession). To the question of where the 15th-century painters, *the primitives,* fit into his scheme, Wölfflin is interestingly rather undecided as, on the one hand, their "craftsmanlike" and therefore sharply-drawn images could be seen as an undeveloped Renaissance art; on the other hand, they are marked by 'Baroque' features such as space-creating and complicated compositions, which explode the Renaissance idiom of closedness. However, even though the point is underplayed, Wölfflin himself supplies the beginnings of an explanation:

> There is a Germanic imagination which certainly passes through the general development from plastic to painterly, but still, from the very beginning, reacts more strongly to painterly stimuli than the southern. Not the line but the web of lines. Not the established single form, but the movement of form. There is faith even in the things which cannot be grasped with hands.[129]

Had Wölfflin now gone on to clarify that the painterly stimuli, i.e. the web of lines and the movement of form, might just as well be fixed on the clean window as on its veiled counterpart – since both forms of appearance point to the perceiving medium more than to plastic objects independent of it – the primitives would seem to be sheer early 'Baroque', and the Renaissance would thereby shrink to my requisite image of it: an island formation in a more or less unbroken trans-European tradition flowing from the Gothic period up through the 17th-19th centuries.

Wölfflin's thoughts thus, once more, corroborate that modernity demonstrates no epistemologically interesting contrast between a pictorial idiom focussed on the empirical phenomena of the surrounding environment (cf. Alpers) and one oriented toward the materiality of the image plane (cf. Damisch and Didi-Huberman). Both converge towards Wölfflin's concept of the Baroque, the friction of the eyesight, and both are at a distance of his Renaissance, the smoothness of the ideal body.

The last bastion of neo-classicism: Panofsky's iconography

Finally, it must be stressed that the points concerning the optical primacy in the modern pictorial paradigm are not restricted to considerations of form, but also have far-reaching interpretative consequences. Inasmuch as the depth of field's flight towards infinity displaces focus from the body to its spatial surroundings,

and from supra-temporal presence to subjective observation, the centre of meaning is also displaced on several levels: from object-bound narrative to environmental translation; from the motif itself to the agencies through which this motif is captured; and from denotation to connotation.

To the story of the lengthy afterlife of the Renaissance, however, we must add that this interpretative strategy has also had problems finding favour in art scholarship dealing with the early modern image. For if the romantics came a long way in their formulation of an aesthetics of formlessness, this aesthetics continued to thrive alongside the antique notion of closed form. The idea lives on in the romantic notion of the *beautiful* – an entity which, unlike the chaos of the sublime, is characterised by limitation, well-defined outlines and clear surfaces, and which in its capacity as *ergon* can still be the bearer of conceptual meaning.[130] The extent to which this closed – and therefore continually antiquating – concept of beauty has actually held its own in relation to its amorphous companion, is not least apparent from its success in 20th-century art history, where it is elevated to a – albeit partly unacknowledged – cornerstone in Panofskian image interpretation (cf. also Interlude).[131]

In close agreement with art academy norms, Panofsky turns his iconographic searchlight on what he calls *images*, *stories* and *allegories* – visual forms charged with so-called *intelligible concepts*. If this has a Platonic ring it is by no means accidental, as the intelligibly-charged forms Panofsky calls for are precisely the closed *ergon* forms which are re-instituted with the Renaissance. Iconographic meaning is here welded together with the plastic body, whereas it evaporates in the infinite space beyond that body – the open space of genre, landscape and still life. Renaissance historian that he was, Panofsky had to make these genres, as mentioned, the exception in his master schema.

However, if the Renaissance and its academic offshoots are understood as a countercurrent in the epistemic *field* of modernity, then rule and exception change roles. Here the iconography-less genres are no longer to be understood as isolated meaning-deprived cracks in a space of otherwise iconography-dense bodies; rather they comprise specialised aspects of the modern pictorial vision – a vision which gradually reduces the domain of iconography to scattered condensations in the paradigm. Despite his sceptical attitude to the concept of realism and its connection with optical perception, Bryson supplies a precise semiotic analysis of this very circumstance.[132] What the "reality effect" supplies, according to Bryson, to the meaning determined by convention – the iconography or denotation – is a budding growth of particularities, which with their surplus information about physiognomy, atmosphere, light conditions, and so forth, trigger off a chain of connotations. Interested as he is in the Renaissance logocentric regime, Bryson

certainly considers the connotations to be agencies chiefly employed to make the denotation self-evident – "natural" – in that they seem to be revealed by perception rather than the socially-determined conception. But, nevertheless, he outlines the way in which they actually lead in the opposite direction: to the periphery of denotation, and thereby to Panofsky's displaced genres, in which meaning is multilateral and uncontrollable.[133]

Therefore, if Panofsky's method has reached a crisis point, this should not be attributed to a postmodern scepticism as regards a truly modern strategy; rather, it signifies the discovery of a classicist's problems with modernity.

10

Time, Territory and Wilderness in Early Modern Landscape Images, I

Before the Paradigm Shift 1420

Introduction

FROM THE PREVIOUS TWO CHAPTERS, the following observations, *inter alia*, should now appear quite clearly: within the perspectival pictorial space of modernity, a boundlessness is released which not only bursts the shallow spatial depth of medieval pictorial art but also impedes the return of antique pictorial culture, the reawakening of the plastic-bound forms. It has been shown, moreover, that this expansion of space is structurally equivalent to a two-sided cosmological breach of boundaries: the Copernican world picture's transgression of geocentricity; and the geographical and colonial conquest of land areas beyond the European continent.

If we again compare these expansive movements with our fundamental mythological framework – the Golden Age and Paradise myth – we will recall (cf. chapters 4 and 8) that they correspond structurally with the spatial disruption that occurs during, respectively, the Fall and the fall to the Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages. In the post-paradisiacal world, humankind is no longer encircled by a womb-like garden nature, but is scattered to the winds in cultures which are compelled to make use of agriculture, territorial divisions, tree felling, mine-work, shipping and trade in order to procure the necessary – or superfluous – natural goods. This opening-up of the world was both pre-empted and displaced by the pre-modern epistemic *field*, the Golden Age *field*, inasmuch as this *field* nominated the substitute Paradise as its ideal society: the bipartite and yet closed social body with an unbroken lifeline between place of production and consumer, whereas the post-paradisiacal circulation of goods was encompassed by the antique horror-concept: infinity.

While I have so far illuminated the spatial expansions of modernity from mainly natural-philosophical and aesthetic angles – corresponding to the pole of

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