Hacer pie en la tierra

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UNA MONTAÑA, UNA NUBE

Before 1500 - I read Gombrich - nature was used to trivialize little characters. As far as painting was concerned, meadows were a mere pretext for cows and shepherds; the sea for sailing ships. In his *History of Art*, E. H. G. proclaims Albrecht Altdorfer the emancipator of scrubland and small rivers. 'Many of his watercolours and etchings, and at least one of his oil paintings, contain no anecdote and no human being. This is a noticeable change.

A big semantic leap can be caused by a small methodological step: what Altdorfer did was to paint the same plush forests that had served him to portray, for example, St George with the dragon, but ignoring the protagonists. The Chinese began experimenting with unpopulated landscapes two or three centuries earlier. As part of certain meditative practices, artists were instructed in the execution of each of the elements that make up *drawable nature*, following the work of the old masters. Once the apprentice had acquired the necessary skills, he would leave the classroom to contemplate the overwhelming concert of the elements. Then, back in his studio, the draughtsman had to recall the sensation that the fir trees and the rocks had caused in his mind, since that emotion (and not the specific accidents that produced it) was the model he had to take for his work.

The procedure, in substance, resembles that employed by the Romantics, famous admirers of mountain ranges. In a painting by Friedrich, an oak tree is more than a tree, but a modern subject facing the anguish of existence (what a thankless role!), which is rarely found in the middle of the countryside. Like the hard-working meditators of the East, Caspar David also painted by looking at his innermost part.

Basically, the landscape genre has never been about nature, but about that part of nature which can be (adequately) represented in painting. With less sincerity than the Chinese of 1300, the Europeans of the 17th century fiddled with the glorious views of their homeland to suit their own convenience in order to make them fit the composition. A taste for metaphor, German idealism and the rise of physiocracy did the rest.

'The great vice of our age is to do something beyond the truth', John Constable wrote plaintively, as if his conglomerations of cob horses and big boats had a drop of reality in them. If he had been interested in 'the truth', the good Sir John could have followed the example of William Bradford (painter, Quaker and American), who financed six expeditions to see the northern ice.
The Encyclopaedia Britannica mentions one of his succinctly titled landscapes ('Steamer Panther in Melville bay, under the light of the Midnight Sun') which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1875. Bradford did not paint from life either, presumably to prevent frostbite amputations, but he hired two Bostonian photographers to supply him with 'faithful and instantaneous images' from which to assemble the painting.

His most famous works reproduce icy plains on which the vertical of the masts stand. The same as always, but snowy. His minor works, however, are another matter altogether: an implausible fillet of ice, crossed by greenish lines, floating on the horizon; striated icebergs (two of them are crossed by a celestial line, like a commemorative band) grouped against an impenetrable sky.

William Bradford, Icebergs. 1865. New Bedford Whaling Museum

We know that Bradford did not invent these fragments, because the photographs that guided him have survived. Even so, it's hard to believe. The concreteness (a single element, just a bit of sky and a little water) is suspicious, almost implausible. We know that such things exist in the world, but perhaps not in painting. So many centuries of bucolic and fraudulent pictures have spoiled our eyes.

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