

Natural Vision in Picturesque Travel Itineraries

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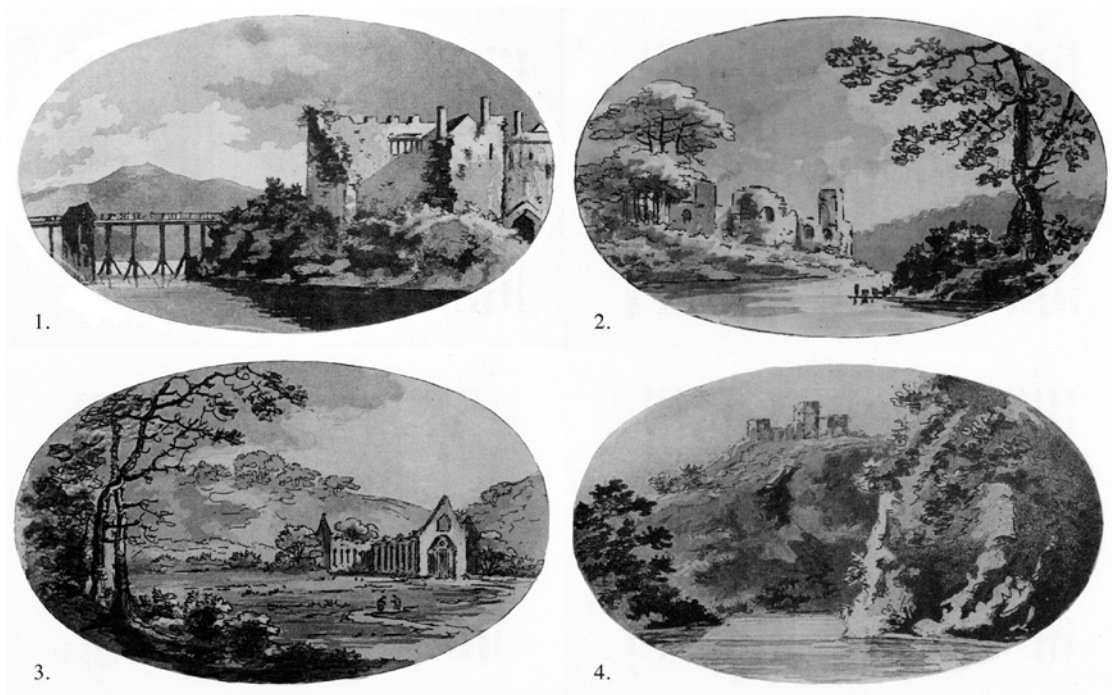
The skeptical mind, aware of the need for reasonable common truths but aware as well of the imaginative power of arbitrary structures and accidental associations, finds itself torn between external nature and the mind's art, between knowledge and power.

—Martin Price, “The Picturesque Moment”¹

In 1925, Alfred Watkins, a self-proclaimed photo-geographer, channeled the suggestive power of photography to capture traces of ancient Celtic and Druid civilizations hidden in plain sight—concealed by the purportedly natural and picturesque arrangement of the English countryside. The images that Watkins produced to support his findings, first published in *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones* (1925), helped popularize photographic tourism for British travelers who likewise sought to engage their native landscape and aesthetic traditions through the medium of photography. In the process of researching for the development of his patented *Bee Exposure Meter*, Watkins encountered a secondary hidden landscape within the picturesque English countryside.² As his compact light meter was refined and made more affordable, early devotees joined him in the hunt for images in the first decade of the twentieth century, thus deploying his photographic method to reveal connections between curious features along the Wye River valley. Rather than encountering a pristine landscape of past monuments, these amateur photographers found themselves retracing a setting that had served as proving ground for the late eighteenth-century arbiter of picturesque theory, William Gilpin.

¹ Martin Price, “The Picturesque Moment,” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Hilles, Frederick W. and Harold Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 271.

² The Bee Meter allowed photographers to determine the proper exposure time for a photograph in the field by exposing a piece of “printing-out paper” that did not require chemical developer to yield darkened silver. Information on Watkins Bee Exposure Meter can be found at the following website, last accessed on September 19, 2011: http://www.jollinger.com/photo/meters/meters/watkins_bee.html.



Figs. 1.1-1.4 Selected views from WILLIAM GILPIN, *OBSERVATIONS ON THE RIVER WYE*, 1782. Aquatint.

1.1 Wilton Castle; **1.2** Chepstow; **1.3** Tintern Abbey; **1.4** Vale of Usk.

Watkins believed that he had uncovered an entire hidden network embedded in the countryside—a glimpse into a lost archeological history that defied nineteenth-century laws restricting public access to the natural landscape. However, his photographic project also demonstrated that what modern society had assumed to be a naturally occurring landscape was in fact significantly shaped by the imaginative projections and physical interventions of prior civilizations. As Joel Snyder has argued in reference to the reception of photography in the nineteenth century, it is likely that Watkins's audience would have been swayed by their belief in the material truth of the objects figured in his photographic images. Snyder writes:

Pictorial features were understood...to have been derived not from conventions of illustration or from the photographer's unfettered imagination but from physical facts about the world as it appeared before the camera at the time of exposure.³

With his photographs, Watkins sought to dissolve the external laws and rules of composition that previously shaped his audience's perception of the landscape, in

³ Snyder writes that, "by the mid-1850s...changes in the technical practice of photography resulted in photographic prints that looked machine made because of their high finish and endless detail, and that consequently were thought to be precise, accurate and faithful to the objects or scenes they represented." See Joel Snyder, "Territorial Photography," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 181.

order to suggest a truth that lay beyond the ostensible veracity of his surface views. However, instead of finding external nature in a wild and pristine state, he happened upon a subtle layer of the historical past—one that promised to grant his viewers a glimpse into the imaginations of their native predecessors.

Watkins's photographs blend nineteenth-century technological advancements and eighteenth-century picturesque theories, like those of Gilpin's, which sought to visually reproduce the effects of external nature. Watkins helped to advance the growth of amateur picturesque travel photography independent of the established systematic itineraries of picturesque tourism that had been codified over a century before his excursions. A rising leisure class of tourists adapted the Claude Glass, a convex reflective drawing aid, and the steam-powered train in their efforts to approximate Gilpin's vision of an objectively procured landscape view. As trains expanded into a network of rail travel by the mid-nineteenth century, an entirely new visual framework emerged that formally systematized the traveler's experience of the picturesque. This intermediate perceptual mode synthesized Gilpin's desire to visually order the landscape through a set of technological restraints that externally framed the viewer's subjectivity.

By insisting that the traveler suspend agency to properly observe natural phenomena, Gilpin's theory draws on an eighteenth-century empirical pursuit of the unknown in order to find the limits of human perceptual faculties. This self-fulfilling drive to complicate the habitual, a motivating force behind Watkins's work, involved a process of change and adaptation that encouraged the individual to make sense of features that appeared to be hidden or initially imperceptible within the landscape. While it would be reductive to draw a simple connection between Gilpin and Watkins or compound their individual motivations, their work shares a common longing to be liberated from previous visual and aesthetic agendas. This desire drove Gilpin, and later Watkins, to map transparent pathways between disparate sites within the English countryside. Both strictly adhered to unique methodologies of their own derivation that they believed would free their followers from the contrivances of traditional landscape viewing and composition.

Prior to Watkins, Gilpin's theory of the picturesque and the subsequent technologies of rail travel and photography progressively transformed the way in which images and travelers alike pictured the landscape surrounding the Wye River. Each successive intervening system retained aspects of prior orderings of the natural world, while also allowing remnants of prior networks to dissolve or become indistinguishable. This periodic reconfiguring gave the impression that a view of nature could transcend the traveler's naturalized or accustomed visuality. As succeeding generations of theorists postulated new modes of looking that complicated the existing landscape, travelers' imaginations assimilated their novel contexts. Theories of the

picturesque provided both with a momentary respite from the habitual at moments when the traveler encountered the unsettling disorder of an ostensibly “true” nature. The experience of defamiliarized nature, often initiated by a technologically mediated view, further compelled viewers to project their conceptions of beauty onto the disorderly scene and thereby recreate their view within the visionary space of the imagination.

In *Observations on The River Wye* (1782), William Gilpin establishes the English valley as a setting for observing surprising intersections between natural and civilized worlds. For Gilpin, the Wye provided a constant source of conveyance and a restrictive topographical context that he believed could productively inhibit the tendency to search for preconceived landscape views. To demonstrate his theory, Gilpin outfitted a rowboat with a drawing board and drifted through the Wye Valley from the small town of Ross in Herefordshire to the river’s confluence at the Bristol Channel. By allowing the river’s current to orient his vessel and even direct his gaze, Gilpin believed his images chronicled his travels more disinterestedly than if he had set out under his own direction on land.

The ink washes resulting from Gilpin’s experimentation, later made into aquatints to accompany his literary account, visualize the overwhelming force of nature on the ruins of manmade structures that punctuated his journey. While most picturesque inventories prior to Gilpin’s treat each ruin as a singular point of interest, the large gulfs in the foreground and the off-centered placement of the structures call into question the focus of Gilpin’s work (fig. 1). This characteristic is most evident in his rendering of Tintern Abbey, where Gilpin employs a screen of silhouetted foliage as a frame in the left foreground and offsets the ruin further downstream to the right side of the composition (fig. 1.3).⁴ This formal device emphasizes his interest in and *beyond* the Abbey, rather than focusing on an individual edifice as an object for sustained contemplation. Through this recurrent trope, Gilpin situates the experience of traveling via the river as the proper subject of his work, rather than the ruins as such.

This shifted focus is further revealed in Gilpin’s use of undefined lines between manmade ruins and their surrounding natural environs. For example, in his view of Wilton Castle, Gilpin depicts the ruin as continuous with the adjacent rock formations and foliage below (fig. 1.1). The eroded edges of the castle allow the form to become an indecipherable mass of building material and vegetation. Both the repeating oval format, which mimics the popular Claude Glass used in scenic travel, and the common palette of ruins, vegetation, water, sky and ground, aesthetically unify disparate points along the river.⁵ By systematizing the views within a consistent picturesque vocabulary, Gilpin allows for momentary differences to emerge within a set of continuous compositional parameters. This disjunctive strategy enables the

of spontaneity—one that Gilpin had called roughness.” See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 167.

⁴ One particularly conspicuous technique is Gilpin’s use of a wedge-like side screen element, or “repoussoir figure,” that Ann Bermingham describes as a mechanism that “frames the distance, sets the scale, and establishes a diagonal direction for the composition.” See Bermingham, “System, Order, and Abstraction: The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795,” in Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 79.

⁵ Rosalind Krauss describes this repetitive base image, saying, “the copy served as the ground for the development of an increasingly organized and codified sign or seme

⁶ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (London: W. Strahan, 1772), 25.
⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 62.

conflicting natural elements that lay outside of the established aesthetic program to be effaced by way of Gilpin's methodology—an effect that stands in conflict with the rhetorical forfeiture of his agency to the river's currents.

Gilpin's practice of acquiring views by giving himself over to the course and movement of the river recalls an earlier theory for encountering beauty in nature. In *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), William Hogarth describes visual acuity as a source of beauty in itself, independent of encountered objects. Hogarth states:

The eye hath this sort of enjoyment in winding walks, and serpentine rivers...that [lead] the eye a wanton kind of chase, and from the pleasure that gives the mind, intitles [sic] it to the name of beautiful.⁶

Aesthetic pleasure is described here as the result of an intellectual process that is sustained by visual movement through a serpentine course. Hogarth finds beauty in the suspense of not knowing what lies ahead. Although his model predates Gilpin's river travels, the winding path of the Wye acts according to Hogarth's serpentine line, effectively obscuring Gilpin's sightlines, and thereby complicating his conception of the landscape.

Edmund Burke expands Hogarth's description of aesthetic pleasure by introducing another category, the sublime, which emphasizes the apprehension that accompanies not knowing, but anticipating that a resolution lies just around the corner. In his 1757 treatise, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke states:

A judicious obscurity in some things contributes to the effect of the picture; because the images in painting are exactly similar to those in nature; and in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those which are more clear and determinate.⁷

Burke argues that the visual obscurity facilitated by nature and present in paintings can impact the "grander passions." Throughout Gilpin's guidebook, this ambiguity in form and texture not only unifies the compositions, but also invites his followers to imaginatively enter the countryside and make their own observations. Many of the scenes produced by Gilpin's acolytes may have superficially resembled his ink washes; however, it was ultimately the process of recording the effects of nature in situ as a rough layer on the surface of a conventional composition that represented the traveler's unique experience of the picturesque.

Gilpin introduced *roughness* as a central tenet in his conception of the picturesque, which comprised a mixture of both Hogarth and Burke's philosophies of the sublime and the beautiful. In his *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* (1792), Gilpin first published his theory, writing, "picturesque composition consists in uniting in one whole a variety of parts; and these parts can only be obtained from rough objects,"

to which he later adds, “roughness either real or apparent, forms an essential difference between the beautiful, and the picturesque.”⁸ Gilpin goes on to show how painters use roughness to unify their compositions and create picturesque beauty by subordinating the unique character of particular objects in the landscape to an overall effect. This visual dissolution of clear and determinate forms, he surmises, hinders the viewer’s tendency to rest upon a particular object within the painting itself. Like Hogarth’s serpentine line of beauty, Gilpin leads the viewer on a continual search for respite within a visual field of constantly changing and unpredictable tones and textures.

In Gilpin’s rendering of Chepstow, the worn edges of the building’s form, the irregular pattern of openings on its surface, and the splotchy play of light across the scene collectively visualize a consistent expression of roughness (fig. 1.2). Beyond his central definition, Gilpin holds that this effect remains the distinguishing factor between a natural object and its “artificial representation,” concluding that “the picturesque eye abhors art; and delights in nature.”⁹ Crucially then, for Gilpin, the picturesque is not inherent within depicted objects, but rather, it originates in the viewer’s imaginative faculties and is activated through the perception of certain visual fields. Picturesque principles guide the artist in incorporating natural and artificial elements into a systematically composed scene beneath a rough layer of variable natural effects. Gilpin’s views constitute a string of ephemeral vignettes that collectively describe an uninterrupted search for clarity, along with a seemingly conflicting desire for obscurity that heightens the experience of the beautiful. The looming threat of the unknown preserves the vitality of those who seek out beauty and drives individuals to envision a safe haven from further confusion.

While Gilpin relied heavily on his experiential encounter with the river to create a narrative that emphasizes the scale and supremacy of the natural world, he also gave visual shape to Claude’s eighteenth-century aesthetics. The ocular format of Gilpin’s washes likely references the shape of the Claude Glass, a mirrored pocket-tool that travelers often carried to aid in producing views akin to the work of the French master. In contrast to Gilpin’s method, drawing with the aid of a Claude Glass entails turning away from the scene one wishes to observe. However, in the late-eighteenth century, picturesque tourists relied on this device’s convex surface and dark glass to translate the English countryside into a hazy, atmospheric chiaroscuro like that found in Claude’s wash drawings (figs. 2.1-2.4).

The clouded effect of the Claude Glass provided a seemingly external and impartial quality of filtration that approximated Gilpin’s conception of an agentless experience along his river journey. By using the device, viewers chose to reassemble their desired landscape views from the dissolved forms projected onto the opaque, reflective surface. While it is unknown whether or not Gilpin made use of the viewing

⁸ William Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 19, 26.

⁹ Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque*, 26.



Fig. 2.1 (top left) CLAUDE LORRAINE, *UNTITLED*, 1640. Norton Simon Museum.



Fig. 2.2 (top right): Study for *AENEAS AND THE CUMEAN SIBYL*, 1669.

Black chalk, pen and brown wash.

England, U.K. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

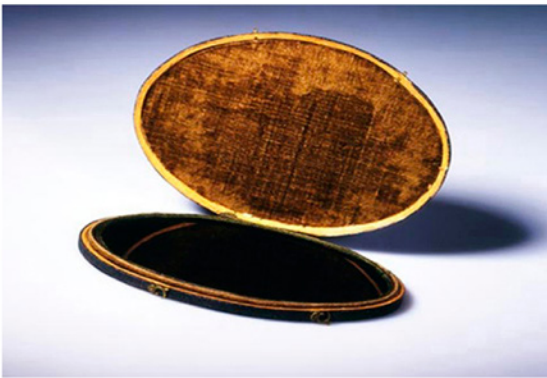


Fig. 2.3 (bottom left): CLAUDE GLASS INSIDE A LEATHER CASE, 18th century.



Fig. 2.4 (bottom right): SIAN BOWEN, A CONTEMPORARY REPRODUCTION OF THE 'CLAUDE GLASS,' 2007.

device during his travels on the Wye, the skepticism he registers towards the drawing aid in an earlier treatise on picturesque beauty drafted in 1776 suggests he did not. He writes that Claude Glasses

are combined of two or three different colours; and if the hues are well sorted, they give objects of nature a soft, mellow tinge, like the colouring of that master.... In general I am apt to believe, that the merit of this kind of modified vision consists chiefly in its novelty; and that nature has given us a better apparatus, for viewing objects in a picturesque light; than any, the optician can furnish.¹⁰

¹⁰ William Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of Great Britain, Particularly the Highlands of Scotland, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1776*, Vol. 1, 3rd ed. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1808), 124.

While the Claude Glass consistently introduced novel effects and distortions, for Gilpin the intermediary device was too regularized. Viewers could make use of the natural effects of distance, naturally variegated lighting, and above all the mind's eye to render a scene with continuous tone of variable intensity. However, the Claude Glass—a product of industrial origin—commoditizes this viewing experience, producing a fabricated consistency that ultimately overwhelms nature's effects, distorting them in its manufactured lens. As a result, the tool further distances the viewer from a landscape that is already at his or her back. Rather than deciphering nature's effects through a first hand and unframed encounter, the viewer relegates this intellectual process to the operation of the device.

As industrialization spread throughout England, an emerging class of leisure travelers flocked to the countryside with both Gilpin's guidebooks and a variety of viewing devices in hand.¹¹ Along the Wye, travelers could selectively crop or turn their backs on any number of undesirable elements in the landscape. Gilpin, by contrast, was more intent on discovering unexpected visual delights by incorporating potentially unsightly elements, such as the industrial smoke from charcoal factories.¹² As he drew near a densely settled Bristol Channel, he writes, "the smoke, which is frequently seen issuing from the sides of the hills; and spreading its thin veil over a part of them, beautifully breaks their lines, and unites them with the sky."¹³ Gilpin remarks on the aesthetic appeal of visual byproducts of industry and the co-dependency of leisure and industrial circulation. His interest in smoke that mimics the effects of nature's clouds precedes a system that, by the mid-nineteenth century, came to parallel the physical flow and perceptual conditions of the Wye River. The introduction of the English railway system in 1825, and more specifically the Wye Valley Railway in 1876, shifted the prevailing perceptual conditions of the river landscape, and in the process dramatically augmented travelers' experience of space and time therein. The train's technological power and seeming ease in traversing the countryside combined nature and the overlying industrial landscape into one continuous panorama for rail travelers.

Like Gilpin's raft, trains constrained an aspect of the traveler's agency while moving through the landscape. Railway lines gave rise to a vast geographical network that transcended traditional restraints imposed by the landscape and recalibrated the relative time and habitual experience associated with moving through the countryside. The original diagram for the interconnected British train system depicts an abstract linear network of metropolitan and rural destination points along a branching path, with no respect for topographical variation in the land (figs. 3.1-3.2). Railway lines soon came to supersede rivers

"the most offensive separation of property" and which prohibited the free range of one's gaze through the landscape. This subtle political jab at the burgeoning industrial and agricultural revolution in England was a common sentiment shared by British nationals at the time. Most citizens wanted the land to remain free and seemingly natural rather than constrained and productive—a complicated position for the middle class traveler who was both delighted and offended by the presence of industry and its subsequent generation of more complicated landscape scenes. See: William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye* (New York: Woodstock Books, 1991), 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ Malcolm Andrews describes such travelers as subjects who were "engaged in an experiment in controlled aesthetic response to a range of new and often intimidating visual experiences." Andrews goes on to describe the act of "fixing" wild scenes within the landscape and finding "stations affording composed prospects" as "subtle psychological protection to the tourist freshly exposed to daunting and often disorienting landscapes." See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 67.

¹² In *Observations*, Gilpin registers his disdain for growing industry by observing newly-laid stone walls that divide the countryside into enclosed parcels of land, which he calls

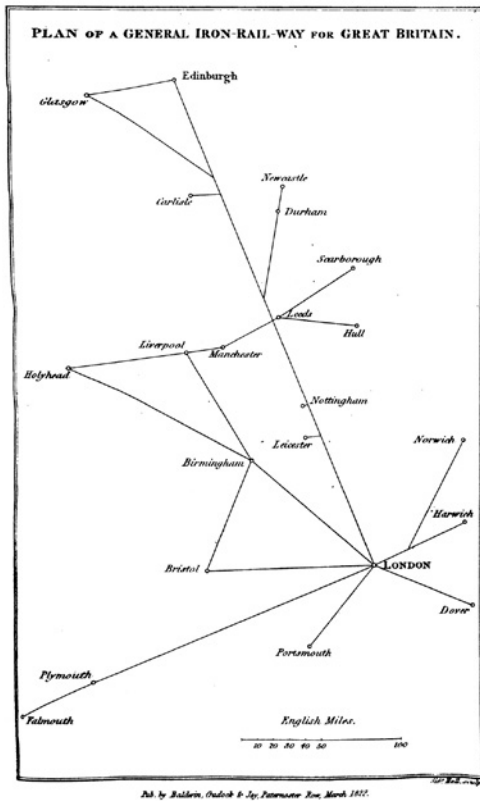


Fig. 3.1 (left) THOMAS GRAY, *PLAN OF GENERAL IRON RAIL-WAY FOR GREAT BRITAIN*. *Observations On A General Iron Rail-Way, or Land Steam-Conveyance*, London, 182.



Fig. 3.2 (right) THOMAS TALBOT BURY, *EXCAVATION OF THE OLIVE MOUNT*, 1831-1832. Aquatint.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes the experience of riding the train through a familiar environment that suddenly appeared to be utterly transformed as transcendental, saying, "the alienation from immediate, living nature that was initiated by the mechanization of motive power was increased as the railroad was constructed straight across the terrain, as if drawn with a ruler.... Mechanical regularity triumphed over natural irregularity." See Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986), 23.

as the preferred routes for picturesque travel, giving rise to new perceptual parameters for observing. The train's fast, steady motion stirred up the natural scenery beyond the framed glass windows into a continuous blur and its fixed interior compartments further constrained the traveler's ability to search freely. Like the Claude Glass, the train framed and restricted vision, but within a fully enclosed environment that absorbed the viewer.¹⁴ In contrast to the handheld device, the immersive experience of riding and looking from a train car significantly augmented Gilpin's practice of floating along the valley under the control of the river's natural course. Seemingly indifferent to nature, this revolutionary mode of travel allowed one to traverse the landscape within a system that fundamentally altered the traveler's visual itinerary.

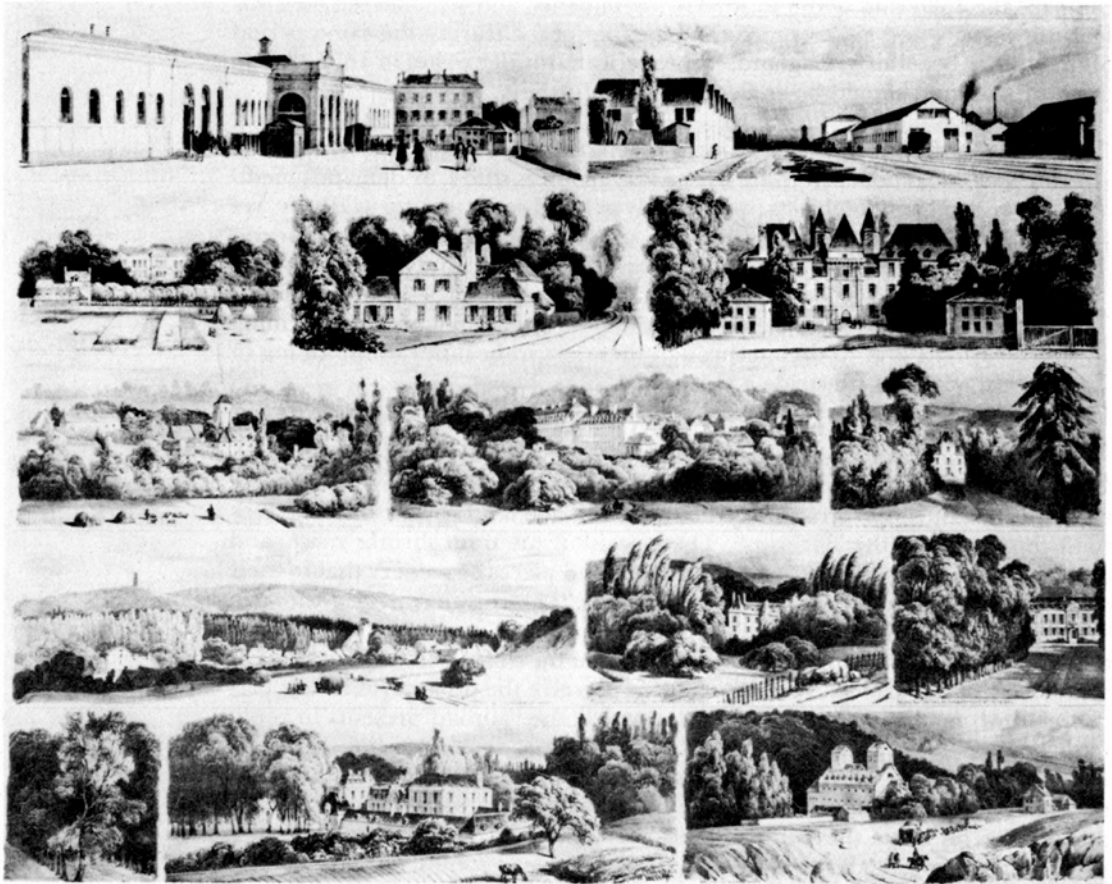


Fig. 4 Paris-Orlean line panorama, 1843.

As Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, in the mid-nineteenth century, the constant rate and predictable forward movement of trains were dramatically different from horse and carriage travel. This consistency allowed the passenger to devote more of their attention to deciphering the shifting scene. In one early visualization of rail travel, it is possible to observe the artist's continued effort to find or fabricate stable picturesque views that are sequentially contained within a streaming panoramic context (fig. 4). The reliance on existing pictorial conventions is apparent in the clarity and stillness of the foregrounds, which slowly recede into a blurred background that evokes the speed of the train moving through the countryside. The artist renders the tension between these two pictorial modes as he struggles with the idea of a continuous view built through periodic breaks that are used to frame each scene. The quality of stasis thereby stands at odds with the continuous and at times disorienting experience of riding a train.

Despite the initial excitement over rail travel, rising familiarity with its perceptual novelty led to a gradual loss of interest in observing exterior views. In response, travel writers strove to reconnect curious voyagers in novel ways with the landscape outside of the train's cabin.¹⁵ Following the opening of the Wye Valley Railway, picturesque rail guides like *Black's Picturesque Tourist* (1851) describe changing modes of travel, from Gilpin's drifting tour to one coinciding with a railway course that primarily serviced industry. Trains came to predictably and reliably deliver materials, passengers and views. Through minimal visual and textual data, *Black's Picturesque* guide cleverly recreates the landscape by laying out a schematic checklist for the traveler. In the middle column of the diagrammatic text, the guide describes the various towns that the railway synthetically connects along its route (fig. 5). The text interweaves the description of picturesque points of interest, such as ruins, industry and trade, with the movement of the train. For instance, even though Chepstow—a town that "carries on a considerable trade in timber, coals, grindstones, iron and cider"—lies four miles from Tintern Abbey, the guide presents it as being directly adjacent to the ruins. The contracted space of the maps underscores the train's ability to seamlessly merge nature and industry, as well as revolutionize one's experience of time.¹⁶ As industry and picturesque travel became imbricated through the rail system's logic of distribution and efficiency, a continuous, integrated view of the natural landscape and the encroaching civilization developed.¹⁷

The guide provides precise instructions that alert the traveler to points of interest. For instance, at the eighteenth mile from Bristol, travelers are informed that they can catch a glimpse of Tintern Abbey with the following description (fig. 5):

The ruins of Tintern Abbey, 4 miles from Chepstow, belonging to the Duke of Beaufort, form a remarkably beautiful and picturesque object.... The ruins are seen to great advantage from a spot about half a mile down the river.¹⁸

In place of Gilpin's suggestive and atmospheric views that emphasize a lack of perceptual clarity when confronting nature, *Black's Picturesque* guide presents highly articulated scenes that attempt to make sense of the disorienting space beyond the train car's windows. To further this point, the precisely rendered details of the book's engravings contrast with and challenge Gilpin's notion of roughness. The illustrations contain careful delineations of each view with a variety of line weights, greater attention to detail, and a longer focal length through the more tightly framed space of the river.¹⁹ These penetrating, precisely rendered engravings were most likely finished in a studio from sketches that were made on location, adding yet another layer of mediation between the observed scene and the resulting landscape.

Alongside pictorial codes and conventions for landscape artists and travelers in earlier representational media, photography likewise expanded and transformed

¹⁵ Martin Price's paraphrasing of Richard Payne Knight, a prominent eighteenth-century landscape theorist, in his article "The Picturesque Moment," perhaps makes sense of the boredom that was soon experienced by rail travelers. He writes, "uniform perfection is tiresome." Man's true happiness, he continues, is in the process of acquiring rather than possessing the object: "His real happiness consists in the means and not in the end: in acquisition, and not in possession." See Price, "The Picturesque Moment," 275.

¹⁶ Adam Black and Charles Black, *Black's Picturesque Tourist and Road and Railway*

Guide Book Through England and Wales (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1851), 143–145.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 143–145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143–145.

¹⁹ Bermingham, "System, Order, and Abstraction," 89.

²⁰ See Snyder, "Territorial Photography," 177.

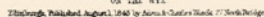
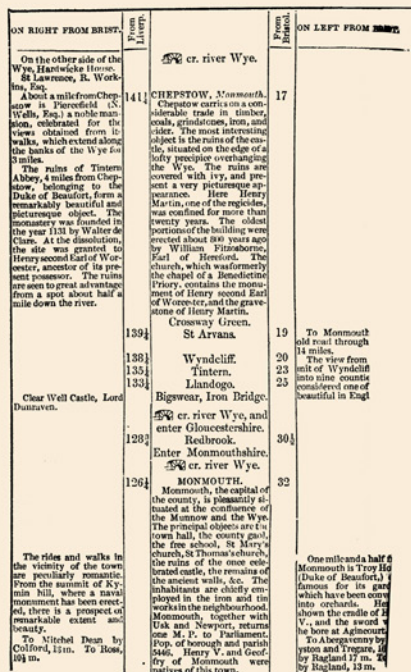


Fig. 5 An excerpt from ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK, *BLACK'S PICTURESQUE TOURIST*, 1851. It shows a map of the Wye Railway Line, where the space of the train is represented by the central column. The features to the right and left of the tracks correspond to those listed in the respective columns.

picturesque principles in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ By remaining within the boundaries of the preexisting landscape genre, photographers worked within a structured system of rules that initially helped to guide the medium toward producing effects and images that paralleled those of other visual media. Just as *Black's Picturesque* and its followers lingered on sites established by Gilpin, early landscape photographers habitually produced stereotypical landscape scenes.²¹ The perception that the photographic medium reproduces the exact scene before the camera also imbued photography with associations of truthfulness and simultaneously distanced the potential art form from a scientific practice. This widespread interpretation eventually came to bolster later departures from the relative security of established compositional conventions, giving the artist opportunities to experiment by way of photographic documentation and empirical practices.

Erwin Strauss has suggested that the discursive split between scientific truth and artistic license in the nineteenth century relegated observers to a world "between landscape and physics." For Strauss, nineteenth-century conceptions of visual perception continually vacillated between these poles. He continues,

the more modern life is dominated by technology, the greater grows the yearning for the landscape, the more forced is the effort to regain it, to regain it—oddly enough—by means of this very technology.²²

In searching for landscape views, the picturesque observer remained perpetually bound to pictorial conventions that inadequately rendered an idealized visual order that only exists in the mind. As the rise of photography and technology in the nineteenth-century increasingly separated these visual codes from traditional pictorial conventions, they rekindled the traveler's hopeful search for an idea of pure nature. With this renewed sense of freedom, however, came a visual disengagement caused by oversaturation, parallel to the rail traveler's perception of a seemingly endless and indecipherable landscape.

As a response to this renewed excitement, photographic record societies began to crop up towards the end of the nineteenth century. In 1897, Sir Benjamin Stone founded the National Photographic Record Association in England, an organization devoted to photographers who sought a more rigorous system of photography. Stone envisioned that the association would allow amateur photographers to use photographs to preserve a visual history of the English landscape for future generations against the threat of wars or natural disasters. Soon after, photographic societies began to gather in different regions with the shared purpose of recording the British landscape. In *The Camera as Historian* (1916), H.D. Gower describes that the general mission of these societies was to record architecture, landscape, and culture through "representations of the highest fidelity."²³ Gower formalized a method of "systematic photography," which involved choreographing the camera's movement

²¹ Joel Snyder characterizes the hesitancy of early practitioners as originating in their fascination with the camera's ability to convey what he refers to as the "absolute precision of delineation through all represented planes." He continues: "Photographs were in some respect transparent and true (at least to the material, superficial aspects of the visible), and their pictorial features were understood, accordingly, to have been derived not from conventions of illustration or from the photographer's unfettered imagination but from physical facts about the world as it appeared before the camera at the time of

exposure." *Ibid.*, 177, 180–181.

²² Erwin Strauss, *The Primary World of Senses* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963), 321.

through the landscape according to a predetermined geometrical arrangement that was wholly unrelated to a viewer's visual preferences or inclinations. Any sense of truth value accorded to a photograph was thereby augmented by the external logic of an all-encompassing geometric grid populated with a network of points determined separately from the contours of the landscape.

This intellectually conceived network of abstract parameters obscured relations between preexisting orders and familiar objects. Maps marked hundreds of survey vantage points that radiated from strategic nodes within the countryside and guided record societies as they systematically documented the counties of England. In the map of Croyden from Gower's ordinance map survey in *Camera as Historian*, for example, the added shading emphasizes how these collections of points were deployed in the process of photographing the landscape (fig. 6.1-6.2). Rather than following an organizational logic based around particular objects in the landscape, this system sought to maximize the camera's unique potential to quickly generate numerous images of a given site. As a result, these photographs show formerly unseen perspectives that reconfigured civilization in the landscape. This external network appears to have its own inherent rules as the views emerging from each vantage point juxtapose the existing train tracks, streets, and architectural fabric, often obscuring their actual scale and arrangement in the process.

Despite the development of seemingly comprehensive abstract systems for recording the English countryside, however, photographic record societies maintained a connection to previous modes of picturing the landscape. Before the publication of *The Old Straight Track* (1925), Alfred Watkins joined his local society to survey the upper reaches of the Wye River Valley. As he and his group set about documenting the county of Herefordshire, Watkins's native region, he claimed to have a psychic or instinctual connection to curious paths, mounds, standing stones, trees, ponds and architectural sites that he captured within the landscape. At first, this heightened awareness led him astray through the countryside on a seemingly irrational course. Watkins eventually transcribed these points onto Ordnance Maps and, in the process, discovered that what he had initially taken to be the natural arrangement of the landscape was in fact ordered by what he understood to be ancient manufactured pathways (figs. 7.1-7.2).

Aerial views taken at a later date seem to corroborate Watkins's findings and reveal the two distinct conditions he encountered in the landscape when juxtaposed to a map of sightlines. For example, on the left, a straight track corresponds with property edges that disguise the pathway's artificial relation to the natural landscape (figs. 7.1-7.2). However, to the right, a different track divides the more articulated grain of the countryside, cutting across properties as an alternate network. Indeed, certain points along the straight tracks were simultaneously associated with property

²³ H.D. Gower, *The Camera as Historian* (New York: F.A. Stokes Co., 1916), 5-6.



Fig. 6.1 (left): A diagram representing the controlled rotation of the camera at each selected point within a grid.

Fig 6.2 (right): A Map of Croydon from Ordnance Map Survey showing radiating points to achieve a general survey of the landscape. As Gower describes, “a general survey could be obtained by 34 photographs taken from 8 strategic points. The numbered circles show the positions for camera and the radiating triangles the direction of views, each comprising an angle of 60°.” H.D. Gower, *The Camera as Historian*, 1916. (Color added by Culbert, B.)

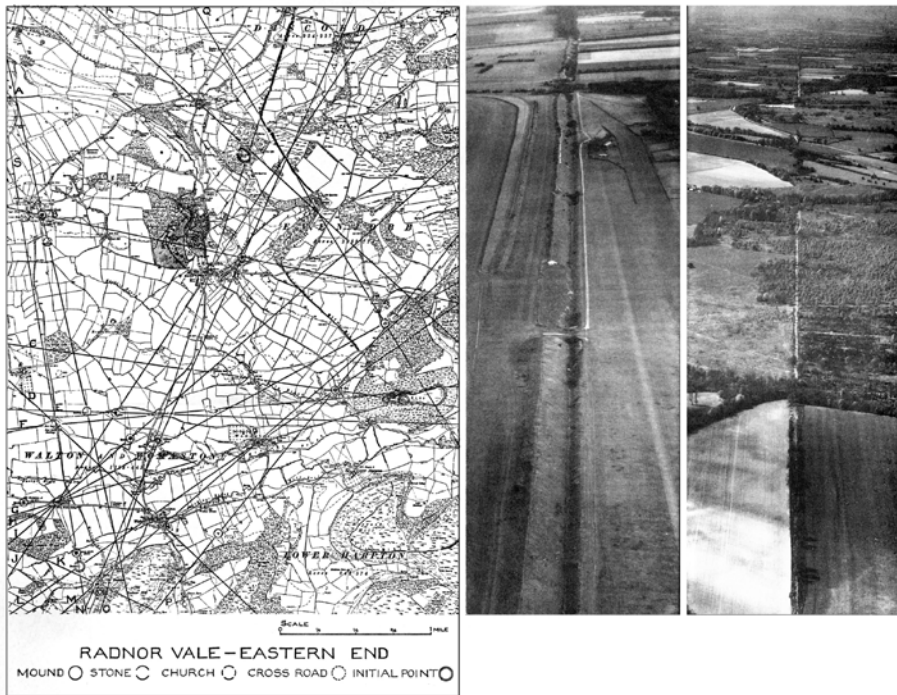


Fig. 7.1 (left): Alfred Watkins's surveys overlaid an Ordnance Map of Eastern Radnor-Vale showing the straight tracks running through the landscape. From Watkins, *The Old Straight Track*, 1925.

Fig 7.2 (right): aerial photographs from aircraft survey of Watkins's paths. From John Michell, *The New View Over Atlantis*, 1983.

lines, roadways, and the contours of the landscape. However, rather than following the shape of the existing topography, the transparent alignments of natural and manmade features of the landscape appear to obey their own rules.

According to Watkins, the shape of the landscape offered vantage points for ancient navigation rather than solely providing a natural path along a ridgeline or through a river valley; such elevated prospects enabled travelers to sight the next marker along their course.²⁴ Points of interest therefore gain a double meaning as both part of the topography of the countryside and as cues to the ways civilizations may have arranged and settled the landscape throughout history. Watkins's thorough rhetorical analysis, coupled with carefully structured photographs of generic waypoints imbued objects in the landscape with novel historical significance. Michell muses,

Watkins saw straight through the surface of the landscape to a layer deposited in some remote prehistoric age. The barrier of time melted and...in one moment of transcendental perception Watkins entered a magic world of prehistoric Britain, a world whose very existence had been forgotten.²⁵

Watkins persistently located and documented rogue natural artifacts camouflaged in the picturesque English countryside to decipher a transparent topology of meaning beneath what many had come to accept as natural. As he began to establish his network of points and pathways, he exploited photography to mine natural monuments that previously appeared to have little or no significance. Formations that were partially concealed and altogether unremarkable in person came to be integrated into his framework as connective waypoints. Watkins supported his theory by carefully repackaging photographic evidence to emphasize the inexplicably organic and geometric arrangement of these supposed waypoints throughout the countryside (figs. 8.1-8.3).

Watkins entices the viewer to connect points of interest by tightly cropping each image around an individual object, giving landmarks a monumental quality by decontextualizing them from the greater landscape, and arranging the images in gridded groups. His text and maps likewise describe a process of isolating objects from their corresponding former or "hidden" pathways. The composition and orientation of these framing devices are rhetorically suggestive in themselves. In the paired image of pathways through a farmyard (fig 8.2), for example, Watkins crops each image so that the path becomes a central vertical axis through the narrow frame. Moreover, he utilizes a long focal length to suggest the continuation of the path into the background of the scene. He presents the path as a continuous line cutting through the landscape with a scale that abstracts its linear form from the traditional farm and domestic setting in the foreground. The heightened contrast of the images further imparts a suggestive, ghostly past onto Watkins's paths.

²⁴ Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1925), 3.

²⁵ John Michell, *The New View Over Atlantis* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 23



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FIG. 30. THE LEYS, WEOLLEY
FIG. 33. MICHAELCHURCH-ON-AVON

FIG. 31. ENGLISH BRIDGE, SHREWSBURY
FIG. 34. WERGIN'S STONE, SUTTON

FIG. 32. LEOMINSTER
FIG. 35. VOWCHURCH



CASTLE FARM, MADLEY

FIG. 125. CAUSEWAY TO HOUSE ON
MOATED MOUND

FIG. 126. CAUSEWAY ALIGNING TO ACONBURY CAMP,
NORTH ENTRENCHMENT



MOUNDS

FIG. 10. CAPLER CAMP, AT EASTERN ENTRANCE

Watkins's photographs showing the variety of paths and objects within the landscape that initially drew his attention. Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track*, 1925. (Clockwise from top left): Mark Stones; Castle Farm, Madley; Mounds.

The Old Straight Track met a warm public response from an audience receptive to Watkins's revelations. Backed by his extensive empirical data, his hypothesis facilitated an imaginative foray into an ancient social order that was tied to the composition of the natural world. The material that Watkins explored and repackaged in the landscape was so familiar that, John Michell relates, many felt the experience was "not so much like hearing something new but more like a reminder of something they had once known."²⁶ As travelers encountered stones and pathways in the context of the vast countryside, their former purpose and manmade construction often remained hidden from view. It was not until Watkins used the camera to draw these landmarks away from their local context that they gained their own independent significance. The ruins that Gilpin observed were dated from a more recent and better understood historical period. However, the objects, mounds and clearings that drew Watkins's attention were thought to have been from a variety of historical moments. While less enticing as self-contained objects, Watkins incorporated each element of the landscape into his hypothetical ordering system.

For the generations of picturesque travelers before Watkins, the stones, paths, and clearings that dotted the landscape were integral to their experience, though their significance was eclipsed by the more visually captivating architectural ruins, natural effects, and grand topographical formations recorded by the likes of Gilpin. For Christopher Hussey, writing on the picturesque tradition in 1927, Gilpin's scenes offer, "glimpses of the ideal—showing what nature would have liked to produce, according to man's idea of picturesque beauty...not an actual scene but an idea, everything unessential to which is eliminated."²⁷ Upon entering the landscape, the model nineteenth-century traveler attempted to construct an ideal view or reconstruct a preexisting composition. However, as the images produced by Gilpin, Claude, Black and Watkins show, any scene that accords with an individual's existing expectations is based at least in part on prior pictorial conventions. Hussey's definition can be expanded to describe the practices of Watkins, as both he and Gilpin set out to materialize their conceptions of nature by transposing their imagined compositions of what they believed ought to exist in the actual material of the landscape. Their visions of new orders for the English countryside relied on a belief in the existence of transparent systems that each traveler could draw into a personalized pictorial narrative in the pursuit and transmission of his or her ideas.

The arrival of the Wye Valley Railway in 1876 and Watkins's later discovery of apparent prehistoric linear pathways coursing through the landscape offer two filters that forged new relationships between nature, industry and society that were formerly invisible to travelers. Following a century of technological advancements, Watkins's excursions into the unknown are also indicative of the growing desire among members of urban society in the early-twentieth century to reconnect with

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1967), 114.

²⁸ In his essay on Watkins's findings, Stephen Daniels writes that a "landscape without landlorism" was visionary at the time and in need of a scheme like Watkins's whose, "Ley" lines articulate a free trade utopia, enabled by an enlightened planning regime." See Stephen Daniels, "Lines of Sight: Alfred Watkins, Photography and Topography in Early Twentieth-Century Britain," *Tate Papers*, Autumn (2006): 10.

the natural landscape. Often, this connection was made by way of the very technologies that engendered their alienation from it. Watkins's followers took hold of his work in hopes of reestablishing a perpetual and primal search for nature beyond the systematic reproduction of views circulated through prints and literature.²⁸

Watkins examined the formation of ruins that were transparent in the landscape and were widely taken for granted as authentically natural. He argued that the natural landscape had been shaped by former inhabitants, just as it was reshaped in the minds of travelers by the succession of subsequent pictorial depictions. Momentary observations of the disorder that came to stand for nature became more pronounced as antiquated and emerging overlying structures affected the visibility, and shape, of the landscape for the viewer. Over time, as new technological systems became embedded and seemingly congruous with nature, their role as perceptual armatures improved and came to inform the observer's habitual understanding of the landscape. As systematic orders within were uncovered, often by the very technology that produced them, artists played a key role in shaping the way that travelers perceived natural settings. With each layer of information between the observer and subject, the raw material of nature is further obscured from view as images, technology, and itineraries mediate the natural world and mold the way in which viewers confront, traverse, and comprehend their surroundings. *coj*

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