

HARSH CLARITIES: meteorological and geographical determinism in New Zealand art commentary refuted

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I *Meteorological determinism*

“The harsh clarity of New Zealand light”: this alleged clarity, it is a critical commonplace to say, has caused a hard edged clarity in New Zealand painting.

The most recent proponents of the harsh clarity theory are G. Brown and H. Keith, whose *Introduction to New Zealand Painting* continues to proclaim “a positive response on the part of a number of more important New Zealand painters to the distinctive qualities of New Zealand light”. The important ones in their book are those who do so respond: the unimportant are those who do not. Brown and Keith happily cite such earlier claims as P.A. Tomory’s: “The Pacific light burns and bleaches so that in high summer black and white predominates”. Hence, says Tomory, the predominance in our art of “hard edged black and white images”.

This hard light theory first got big and loud here in the 1930’s. Listen to A.R.D. Fairburn declaiming, in 1934:

“There is no golden mist in our air, no Merlin in our woods, no soft, warm colours to breed a school of painters from the stock of Turner, Crome, Cotman, and Wilson Steer. Hard, clear light reveals the bones, the sheer form of hills, trees, stones and scrub. We must draw rather than paint, even if we are using a brush, or we shall not be perfectly truthful.”¹

The year before, Prof. James Shelley had written that in Northern countries a mountain of 30 miles “finds itself behind veil upon veil of hazy atmosphere”, whereas in New Zealand, “the mountain fairly bounds across the sky”. So to be true to New Zealand, Shelley argued, the New Zealand painter should adopt a style of particular clarity.²

Even in the 19th century, painters occasionally talked of the clarity of New Zealand light compared to England’s. Alfred Sharpe, for instance, wrote in his *Hints* of: “the difference of the atmosphere which is so great that 20 miles is the average limit [of visibility] in England, while 60 - 70 miles is the limit here”.³

Sharpe’s observation may be heard as a faint pre-echo of 20th century proclamations. But it was not until our times that the ‘hard light’ claim was so widely and loudly spread here than an English visitor of my acquaintance, pointing perhaps to some misted hill, had only to say, “the harsh clarity of New Zealand ignorance”, to raise a laugh.

The hard-edge clarity argument, then, is a kind of meteorological determinism: New Zealand light *causes*, or should cause, New Zealand style. Yet this argument may easily be countered, for in every case where painter or critic calls for clarity or contrast of light, it

can be shown that the call reflects current *stylistic* concerns: any argument for clarity of style is part of a general stylistic move towards clarity, which offers the physical “facts” of New Zealand light merely as its alibi.

Let’s start with Sharpe, and work up to the present ...

Sharpe’s statement reflects not only his own stylistic concerns but the move of much English painting after Turner – most notoriously with the Pre-Raphaelites – towards an over-all closeness of focus. Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice*, and elsewhere, had attacked atmospheric perspective (the blurring of backgrounds) as merely conventional, noting that on clear days objects in nature were clearly visible for miles. In defending Pre-Raphaelite painting against the accusation of flatness resulting from its lack of aerial perspective, he calls aerial perspective “entirely conventional and ridiculous, a mere struggle on the part of the pretendedly well informed, but really ignorant artist, to express distances by mist which cannot be expressed by drawing”.

It seems to me significant that Ruskin, like Sharpe, and like later New Zealand critics, should claim scientific truth for an overall clarity of focus, even to the far distance, and that he should do this in England, the natural home, meteorological determinists would say, of misty distance. Sharpe’s call for clarity is not, then, I would argue a matter of his being affected by New Zealand conditions of light: it reflects recent English stylistic concerns; it might better be explained in the words of Sharpe’s response to an attack on Pre-Raphaelite servility to nature: “I would rather keep to pre-Raphaelism”.⁴

Similarly, the chorus of calls in the 1930’s for a hard-edge style based on the “facts” of New Zealand light, was part of the general move in the 30’s in New Zealand, as in England, towards a kind of clarified, formalised naturalism, based on the aesthetic theories of such English writers as Roger Fry. The cult of clarity was a current English cult, which our nationalists logically ought to have rejected as foreign.

Again, Tomory’s and Brown’s and Keith’s adoption of the hard light theory in the 1960’s represents merely the latest proclamation of what the latter two themselves titled “the search for a national identity”, the call for a national style in art, its last cry before internationalism won out, in the art of the 70’s and 80’s. Just as the call for hard-edged clarity in the 30’s in New Zealand was provoked and answered by the work of painters like Rita Angus and the Englishman Christopher Perkins, so it was the black/white style of McCahon that provided the frame through which, in the 1960’s, Brown and Keith saw the history of New Zealand painting. As Rob Brownson puts it: “McCahon’s vision of New Zealand is behind almost everything that Brown and Keith wrote”.⁵ So much so that the contradictions were ignored between their hard light frame and the painters they favoured within it: the muddy mid-tones of T. Woollaston, for instance, hardly fit their black/white clarity thesis.

These examples are sufficient, perhaps, to suggest that the alleged “facts” of New Zealand light are invariably cited merely as the “proofs” of an argument that painters should adopt some currently favoured style. There is another argument possible against the hard New Zealand light theory, an argument not so much, as was that last, on the basis of historical fact, but rather, one which aspires to a more purely logical, or theoretical, refutation ...

An obvious and dangerous flaw of meteorological determinism is that it denies artists any freedom of choice. Turner could not here have painted his ravishing mists, the determinist must say; or, if he had, he would have been wrong, he would not “be perfectly truthful”.

But inevitably, in fact, whatever a country’s prevalent weather, the painter seeks in nature for that which answers the demands of his or her own style – seeks for and finds nothing else.

“... When thunder rolled, and wind howled, and rain poured, Van der Velden would go out into the gorge to work. But when the sun shone from a cloudless sky, he would lie on his back in the grass near the hotel and sleep.”⁶

Van der Velden sought and got from the Otira gorge the storms of the Sublime, and the darkness which both his style and that genre demanded.

Conversely, Don Binney works not at all in the rain or mist, but only, he says, on fine afternoons between 12 noon and 3.30 p.m. – as the sharp, hard-edged clarity of his style demands.

“The sort of painting I’m involved with has always had a lot to do with light and still does today. For instance, if I’m drawing at Piha I must first have a fine afternoon. I cannot do the drawing before approximately mid-day and cannot continue much after 3.30.”⁷

Here, as everywhere, the *style* of painting entirely usurps the data before it.

It is not that New Zealand has become sunnier in Binney’s time than it was in Van der Velden’s. Nor, presumably, did shadows suddenly turn blue in France in the 1860’s, or later in New Zealand, in the 1890’s, or French and New Zealand light decompose suddenly into discontinuous dabs. It was the Impressionists, not nature, who *invented* coloured shadows, or – to use the archaic sense of the word “invention” – who *discovered* them, saw them in nature for the first time. We have had them in art and nature ever since.

Canaletto shows both Venice and London as sharp and bright, Turner shows both Venice and London as soft and misty; yet, as Frances Haskell has written: “None of us would be shaken – or even surprised – to discover from the meteorological records that Canaletto’s impressions of the London climate in the 1750’s were unduly favourable.”⁸

The painter’s light and weather, it should be repeated, is entirely *invented*, the painter’s light and weather is, and can be, nothing but style.

II *Geographical determinism*

Why have we painted landscapes in New Zealand? The common answer in New Zealand commentary is, to put it bluntly, that the landscape is painted because the landscape is there, and lots of it.

Dr. T.L. Rodney Wilson, asking why Van der Velden should have responded better to landscape in New Zealand than to people, answered like this:

“The landscape is, in the first place, and unavoidable presence in this country. New Zealand’s population was, and still is, sparsely spread over a land of constant variety and presence. It is there, and dominates our lives; even our city dwellers whose life blood is in the city are nurtured by the land and its products. As long as New Zealand remains pastoral, until it becomes predominantly urban in character and our principal livelihood becomes non-rural, then landscape painting will remain an intrinsic element in the country’s art.”⁹

Similarly, H. Keith and G. Brown, after noting “a general orientation towards landscape” as “a readily available subject”, write that “the reason is obvious”:

“New Zealand is not a densely populated country and in general the New Zealander does not think instinctively in terms of cities or community groupings. Only in the last ten years has any kind of urban life or distinctly urban attitude made their appearance.”¹⁰

What we have here is a kind of geographical determinism. The land is here, the theory says, so it gets painted. The theory can easily be refuted, however, by one simple, factual observation: the Maori, before the European came, did not paint landscape.

The Maori did not paint landscape, though the land was for them too “an unavoidable presence”, and though they were, even more than we, “sparsely spread over” it. It dominated their lives even more than it does ours. They, even more than we, “were nurtured by the land and its products”, and they certainly did not “think instinctively in terms of cities”. Yet they did not, as I say, paint in landscapes.

Similarly, in Europe before the Renaissance, though the economy was predominantly rural, and the land only sparsely settled, no landscape was painted. And that it *did* begin occasionally to be painted in the Renaissance, was, it has been argued,¹¹ the result of Renaissance readings of descriptions of landscape painting in classical authors, so that its painting became a theoretical possibility, a possible category of painting.

Had we been settled by Medieval Europeans, there would have been no landscape painting here. Had we been settled by Europeans any time between the Renaissance and the 18th century, there would have been very little landscape painting here, for though landscape painting had been invented by the Renaissance, it was low in the hierarchy of genres. Since the Europeans did come here in the 18th and 19th centuries, we had a lot of landscape painting, for these were the centuries when landscape painting became the most popular European genre of all.

So, the geographical determinist argument should properly be reversed: we do not paint landscape because the landscape is there: the landscape is there because we paint landscape. There will be no landscape until a genre exists called “landscape” to allow us to see “landscape”, a painter’s word, meaning the land pictorially perceived.

Furthermore, landscape, as the aesthetic attitude to the land, requires a detached observation, a suspension of the faculties of will and desire as they are normally applied to the land. It requires a standing still simply to *look* at it. It is the attitude, then, not of the worker of the land, of peasant, hunter, farmer or gatherer: to see the land as

landscape requires, it might well be argued, an *urban* habit of vision, it is the invention of city dwellers, who venture into the countryside carrying their cumbersome pictorial frames.

If there *is* a determinism in the painting of landscape, it is cultural, or ideological, not geographical.

As well as a purely factual and historical refutation of the geographical determinist theory, we may now offer a theoretical refutation: regardless of how much land is actually present, one will not see the land as a landscape, or paint it as a landscape, until the genre of landscape exists to allow one to so see it and paint it. Without the genre of landscape, landscape is, quite simply, not only invisible: it does not exist.

NOTES

¹ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Some aspects of New Zealand art and letters', *Art in New Zealand*, no. 24, June 1934, cited p. 205, Brown & Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, Collins, 1969.

² Prof. James Shelley, Review of Annual Canterbury Society of Arts, *Art in New Zealand* Vol. 16, No. 2, Dec. 1933.

³ Alfred Shape, *Hints for Landscape Students in Watercolour*, cited R. Blackley, *Writing Alfred Sharpe*, MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1978.

⁴ Alfred Sharpe, Letter to editor, N.Z. Herald 29.11.79, p. 5, cited R. Blackley, in *Writing Alfred Sharpe*.

⁵ Ron Brownson, p. 52, *Rita Angus*, MA Thesis, University of Auckland.

⁶ *The Sun*, Christchurch, 19 May, 1934.

⁷ Don Binney, cited p. 30, *Contemporary N.Z. Painters*, text by Jim Barr, Alister Taylor pub., 1980.

⁸ Frances Haskell, p. 295, *Art Bulletin*, 56, 1974.

⁹ T.L. Rodney Wilson, *Van der Velden*, p. 19, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1976.

¹⁰ G. Brown & H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, p. 10, Collins, 1969.

¹¹ E.H. Gombrich, 'Renaissance Artistic Theory and the Rise of Landscape Painting', reproduced in *Norm and Form*, London, 2nd ed. 1971.