

CURATED DECAY: PART TWO

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. . . it occurred to me that an answer to the question asked could, perhaps *would*, involve radicalization of the concepts associated with landscape—in particular, the concept of the *picturesque*. Admittedly, that concept has been mostly out of vogue since its heyday in the late eighteenth century, but that is largely because the picturesque has taken on the connotation of “prettiness.” Such a connotation or association, arguably, sits uncomfortably with the conceptual origins of the picturesque. At the heart of the picturesque was famously the presence of the ruin: in the crumbled structures of the old abbey or castle, in nature with quiet wildness violating human architectural ingenuity, time enforced its appearance indelibly as ruination, disclosing itself as the anti-architect *par excellence*.

Gilpin did, to be sure, adjudge the picturesque ruin—Tintern Abbey, especially, was considered emblematic, the very definition of the picturesque—as “enchanted,” which might suggest “prettiness” as the hallmark of the picturesque. But to obey that suggestion would miss the crucial melancholy subtending the picturesque. That melancholy is easy to laugh at in parody versions of Romanticism, but in the late-eighteenth century period when the picturesque and Romanticism developed there was a widespread perception concerning wholesale transformations of society through modernization. Those perceptions were not inevitably worries per se; often they were more a taking stock responsive to altered the cultural landscape and viewpoints, and traces of that process can be discovered in the emergence of landscape as a genre, a practice, a concept in art. The picturesque with all the superadded connotations was a constituent part of that landscape remapping. Utterly crucially, landscape and place were reviewed in terms of temporality, which made the persistence of the ruin symptomatic. The ruins of Tintern Abbey *as* ruins, then, became a place geographic, historic, and conceptual that would serve as a locus or model for a wide swarth of artists in those years when the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries intermixed. It became a mecca, the most complete conception of the ruin, and the basis for many pictorial and poetic practices exploring the conjunction of time and space, history and place.

To that degree, then, we must regard the dilapidated buildings of Orford Ness, merging with their environs, as the Tintern Abbey of our age.

The picturesque, thus, is the opposite of the eternal. Positing the temporal, the picturesque exposes ephemerality as essence, as an ontological being-unto-decay. Look around the Power House, peer out the window to the Black Beacon, step outside and traverse the landscape; know that everything around you is entropically receding into the past. Within the Power House there is an absence—one that is intensified by the presence of artworks—where once there was machinery. Of course, entropy can be rebelled against; rage against the dying of the light and absolutely everything else. That rebellion can take on the modes of restoration and renovation. But don't these modes confess the existence of that very destructive force they rebel against. Are they not demonstrations of the entropy's potency?

The picturesque is not the bucolic landscape, then, but a terrain of melancholy. Somebody asked: “How, in that case, does this feed into our comprehension of Orford Ness as a *place*?” I thought about the question, and finally, in response, it occurred to me that . . .

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