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A Questionable "Pleasure": Ruins in John Piper's and Paul Nash's Wartime Landscape Paintings

Hélène Ibata♦

The flourishing of landscape in the British school of painting is generally considered to coincide with the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of modern urban life in Britain, a connection which has led some art historians to understand it as a response to the divorce between man and nature that became apparent from the second half of the eighteenth century.

According to Anne Bermingham, notably, landscape painting in British art from 1740 to 1860 was used as a means to confer an ideal form onto the countryside, as if to capture in imagination what was in the process of being lost forever. In these representations, the countryside was made to function as an unchanging repository of values to sustain and cope with the new urban industrial culture: "Objectified as spectacle or science, the countryside took on an ideal form and performed the ideological function of providing urban industrial culture with the myths to sustain it." (Bermingham, 1987: 193)

Bermingham's examples are the landscapes of Gainsborough, Constable and Ford Madox Brown, whose tranquil depictions of rural life may have contributed to the sense that landscape painting functioned as a denial of modernity, and of the transformations wrought by industry and urbanisation upon the natural world.

But there were other responses and approaches to landscape, which engaged with the discontinuities and disjunctions induced by modern life, or visualised the tensions between the subject's aspiration to permanence or oneness with nature and the new awareness of irremediable change. The "catastrophic imagination and imaginary of ruins," which Andreas Huyssen claims has "accompanied the trajectory of modernity since the eighteenth century" (Huyssen, 2010: 19), was especially pronounced among artists of the 1790s and early decades of the 19th century, when the ravages of war combined with the sights of urbanisation and industrialisation.

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Romantic landscape painting was especially committed to formal experimentations that forced a confrontation between the natural world and the temporalities of modern life. The aesthetics of the picturesque revealed a heightened fascination for the decay and transience of all things, embodied by the ubiquitous motif of the ruin, while the quest for the sublime could be understood as expressing a sense of disconnection from environments—natural or industrialised—that were perceived as ungraspable or menacing. The anticipated ruins of Hubert Robert's *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796) or Joseph Gandy's 1830 perspective drawing of the Bank of England displayed the catastrophic imagination and intense awareness of the ravages of time that characterised the period; and the landscapes of J.M.W. Turner, like those of his contemporary Caspar David Friedrich, conveyed a form of estrangement from an overwhelming natural world, while inferring the representational powerlessness that Burke and Kant had associated with the experience of the sublime.

They still offered, however, an aesthetic solution to this sense of powerlessness. There was something soothing about the idea of eternal natural forces that would ultimately prevail, once their aesthetic potential was acknowledged. The transience of human inscription was transcended by the beauty of ruin, compounded with the idea that nature was the ultimate artist, using the fragments of culture for its own purposes. And the power and grandeur of the natural sublime was elevating rather than crushing. Even in its most awe-inspiring manifestations, even when it pointed to the insignificance of man, the book of nature provided some form of solace to the artist.

Such responses, which conveyed the anxieties of the modern subject experiencing separation from the natural world, remained relevant and influential in the twentieth century, as the environmental changes introduced by the first industrial revolution were succeeded by even more radical ones, and as the impact of humanity on the natural world intensified. Recent studies of the Anthropocene, both from a philosophical and art historical point of view, have notably underlined the usefulness of the aesthetics of the sublime in articulating the combination of terror and self-criticism experienced by humanity during the period referred to as the "Great Acceleration" (McNeill 2014), a dramatic increase in the human imprint that is generally said to have occurred from about 1945 onwards (see for example Williston 2016; Guénin et al. 2016).

At the dawn of this period, the Second World War, significantly, saw a resurgence of the Romantic imaginary, with its conflicted yearning for a lost pastoral idyll and terrified fascination for ruin. This was especially the case in Britain, where artists like John Piper, Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash or John Minton, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, seem to have found in the Romantic tradition some responses to the anxieties of their time and the wartime isolation of Britain (Yorke, 1988: 14),

leading art critics to label their art "Neo-Romantic," and prompting some of their contemporaries and successors to accuse them of escapism.

In the following pages, I would like to argue that even though this Neo-Romantic practice relied heavily on Romantic associations and influences, it also implied that such aestheticising approaches were becoming increasingly untenable, as the destructiveness of modern warfare seemed to supersede the forces of nature and undermine the very possibility of natural permanence itself. I will suggest that the tradition of ruin painting and the aesthetics of the sublime, while allowing these wartime artists to make sense of the devastation of their time, were also shown to be inadequate and used with a certain amount of critical distance. This ambivalence, it will finally be argued, marked a turning point in approaches to landscape, as the war led to a heightened awareness of irremediable human destructiveness that artists could not turn away from.

In a review of the 1942 London exhibition "New Movements in Art—Contemporary Work in England," the art critic Raymond Mortimer tentatively identified a category of contemporary British painters as "Neo-Romantic," because of their affinities with the tradition of art, their acceptance of "the claims alike of the intellect and the senses," of "the impulse to individual expression," and because he saw in them "the expression of an identification with nature". He believed their art appealed "to mystics and particularly to pantheists who feel a fraternity, or even a unity, with all living things, to those with the 'sense sublime/ Of something more deeply interfused.'" (Mortimer, 1942: 208)

The label was soon embraced by critics who argued that Neo-Romanticism was a reaction against the formalism of Roger Fry (Ironside, 1945), but also that the war had been a catalyst for the movement, throwing British artists "on their own resources," and making them "conscious of a national heritage" (Crook, 1961: 138-39). While such observations were often positive, the reference to Romanticism led many, especially among the experimental artistic circles of the 1950s and 1960s, to view these painters as conservative, unadventurous and elitist, if not escapist.

The label, however, had been given in retrospect to artists whose responses to the Romantic tradition were varied and complex. Some, like Graham Sutherland and John Piper, willingly argued for the compatibility of modern art and the "Romantic soul," suggesting that it could be found in Abstract Painting or Constructivism (Piper, 1942: 46). Others had a more ambivalent approach, in particular to the "identification with nature" and pastoralism associated with British Romanticism. Paul Nash, in particular, attempted to reconcile formal experimentation with his own affinities with the British landscape tradition for much of his career. In June 1933, he outlined a programme for the short-lived Unit One society of artists which he had joined, in which he explained that in order to go forward, British artists had to beware of their recurrent temptation, "the Nature cult in some form or other" (Nash,

1933: 10). A few months later, however, he described his contribution to the group by emphasising his sympathy for the British tradition, for what it owed to "the power of time and place" (Causey, 2000: 107), and he went on to write:

> If I were asked to describe this spirit I would say it is of the land; *genius loci* is indeed almost its conception. If its expression could be designated I would say it is almost entirely lyrical. Further, I dare not go; except to recount history and to state my faith. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, William Blake, then and often now, called a madman, perceived among many things the hidden significance of the land he always called Albion. For him, Albion possessed great spiritual personality and he constantly inveighed against 'Nature', the appearance of which he distrusted as a false reality. At the same time, his work was immensely influenced by the country he lived in. His poetry literally came out of England. Blake's life was spent in seeking to discover symbols for what his 'inward' eye perceived, but which alas, his hand could seldom express. Turner, again, sought to break through the deceptive mirage which he could depict with such ease, to a reality more real, in his imagination. In the same way, we, today, must find new symbols to express our reaction to environment. In some cases this will take the form of an abstract art, in others we may look for some different nature of imaginative research. But in whatever form it will be a subjective art. (Causey, 2000: 109)

As Nash's conception of the *genius loci* suggests, what a number of the artists associated with Neo-Romanticism found in the Romantic tradition was not so much a soothing pastoralism as an intensity of emotion associated to specific places.

In the context of the Second World War, this quest for the spirit of place was, at times, necessarily coupled with an acute sense of loss and disjunction, rather than communion with the environment. A sense that, ultimately, the scale of the conflict and the apparently irreversible damage inflicted by mankind made it impossible to find comforting answers in the book of nature. Piper's and Sutherland's gloomy paintings of the Blitz, whose almost monochromatic representations of a world plunged in darkness encompassed bombed cities and monuments as well as derelict rural cottages and country houses, projected the violence of the times onto places that seemed to be irremediably emptied of human presence.

In the immediacy of the conflict, these artists' conscious use of certain Romantic formulae, in particular of the aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime that had served the Romantics well in previous times of crisis, was more than just nostalgic or escapist. Rather, I would like to argue, it went together with an awareness that these aestheticising approaches were in themselves problematic, and that the times called for a reappraisal of the way of seeing they entailed.

This awareness is especially apparent in the case of Piper, an artist who explicitly considered himself and many of his fellow British artists as the heirs of the Romantic tradition (Piper, 1942: 46-47). Although Piper's wartime paintings may be seen as a form of emotionless aestheticisation (Jenkins and Fowler-Wright, 2016: 165), or a conservative twentieth-century variant of the picturesque (Aymes, 2008), it would be wrong to argue that he was living in an ivory tower, or that his representations of heritage sites, in the midst of conflict, were a denial of the realities of the war. From what his wife Myfanwy was to write later, it is clear that even before the outbreak of war, he and his circle were keenly aware of the responsibility of the artist in the face of the dramatic events of the times:

> We tried to detach ourselves but it was not possible. There was a perpetual mixture of exhilaration and uneasiness. The fear and the horror of war constantly took the attention of the only people who had an understanding of or interest in modern art and literature. The rest were indifferent to both culture and the threat of extermination. (Piper, 1965: 149)

Because of this impossibility of looking away from the horror of the times, Piper's return to representative art in the late 1930s (see for example Spalding, 2003), which went together with a personal interest in the tradition of the picturesque (Piper, 1947; Jenkins and Fowler-Wright, 2016: 148), may be seen as a conscious choice to reflect about the tragedy of history and the destructiveness of mankind, rather than a form of nostalgic escapism.

On the eve of the war and during the first years of the conflict, Piper revisited a number of pre-Romantic or Romantic landscape practices, with a new sense of urgency. Thus, his *Brighton Aquatints* (1939), which revived the eighteenth-century tradition of the picturesque tour book, contrast with their predecessors in their use of oppressive, flattened spaces and dark, ominous skies, their stillness and emptiness barely relieved by the occasional dash of colour. The Brighton Pier and the Royal Pavilion, left white except for a few etched lines and deserted by their visitors, appear ghostly and insubstantial against their menacing surroundings, as if they were intimating their own impending disappearance. But unlike the elegant ruins of eighteenth-century aquatint travel books, they are not offset by comforting natural surroundings and vegetation. The sea itself, in "Regency Square from the West Pier," or "The Metropole Hotel from the West Pier," is bleak and its motion is suspended by the sharp contours of the waves, whose colours and shapes echo the static architectural shapes above them.

Piper was to continue this dialogue with the picturesque tradition during the war, as the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) established by the Ministry of Information commissioned him to record bomb damage, first in a number of London churches, then in Coventry in November 1940, and as a number of public

and private patrons requested his services to record heritage sites (see for example Aymes, 2008). Having to deal with such subject matter, he became interested in the productions of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century watercolour artists like Paul and Thomas Sandby, John Sell Cotman and John 'Warwick' Smith (Jenkins and Fowler-Wright, 2016: 150, 177-179). Like them, he painted churches, country houses and cottages, often in watercolour, frequently using the characteristic succession of foreground, middle ground and background, and mixture of buildings and vegetation that structured their compositions, and finding a particular affinity with Cotman's simple colour schemes. His depictions of the House and gardens at Renishaw Hall (1942-43), for example, owe much to the picturesque estate portraits of the late 18th century, in their moody use of moonlight or diffuse sunlight, their combination of exuberant foliage, gothic follies or classical statues, and their composite use of expressive line and dappled colour.

This picturesque idiom, however, is in most cases radically transformed by a much darker vision of history, in which the pleasing reflection about the passing of time that old ruins had elicited at the end of the eighteenth century (most famously expressed by Diderot's "sentiment des ruines") gives way to the frightening awareness of present destruction. Piper's use of a prevailingly dark and opaque palette, in both oil and watercolour, and his recurrent choice to plunge his scenes in an obscurity broken only by gleams of unnaturally vivid colour, contrast with the lightness and luminosity of the Sandbys' and Cotman's landscapes and architectural drawings. And while the picturesque scenes of earlier centuries would generally have included human occupants (referred to as staffage) to better connect man and environment as well as past and present, Piper's places are devoid of human presence and unwelcoming, even hostile. The ruined cottages he started working on in the winter of 1940-41, while reminiscent of Samuel Palmer's farmhouses and of Cotman's *Clippersby Church* (a work he included in his *British Romantic Artists*), were depicted in much bleaker hues, and in a state of advanced decay. Far from providing visual warmth and comfort, much less a sense of belonging, the abandoned buildings of a former age only confirmed the prevailing sense of death and decay that pervaded Britain in the early 1940s.

Piper's ruin paintings, especially, convey the violence that the contemporaneity of the Blitz would have imparted. His depiction of the interior of Coventry cathedral, on the morning after its destruction by a major air raid on the 15th of November 1940, as a juxtaposition of eerily orange, red, yellow and black façades, flatly pressing against a background of patched grey, white and deep blue rectangles, captured the shock of the moment through the clash of primary colours, the angular shapes and the nervous scratches that cut across some of the colour areas. *All Saints Chapel, Bath* (fig. 1), painted in late April 1942 as the "ruins were still smouldering and the bodies being dug out" (Piper, 1958), transposed the suffering Piper had witnessed into the representation of a "disembowelled" building (Jenkins and Fowler-Wright, 2016: 181), filled with glowing debris. The violence of contemporary destruction is

conveyed by the implied motion of rubble pouring forth from inside the chapel, and of the spurting fire, sparks and smoke that surround the remains of the edifice. The palette, with its combination of dull reds and yellows, surrounded by a heavy grey, here and there heightened by touches of deep blue, is reminiscent of night and fire scenes by Romantic artists like Loutherbourg and Wright of Derby, but also of Paul Sandby's *Windsor Castle from Datchet Lane on a rejoicing night* (1768), which Piper had recently examined while working on a royal commission of watercolour drawings of Windsor Castle. However, the temptation to aestheticise the scene is undermined by the dull oppressive grey in which it is steeped as well as the emphasis on the formless heap of rubble in its center, which point to the impossibility of the picturesque and the sublime even as the artist consciously refers to these traditions.

Writing in the wake of the Blitz, Rose Macaulay included Piper among a long list of artists whose work made it possible to face the destruction, by taking aesthetic distance from it. "Ruin pleasure," she wrote, "must be at one remove, softened by art, by Piranesi, Salvator Rosa, Poussin, Claude, Monsù Desiderio, Pannini, Guardi, Robert, James Pryde, John Piper, the ruin-poets, or centuries of time." (Macaulay, 1953: 454) Viewed with hindsight, Piper's depictions of the ruins of the Blitz may have lost the raw immediacy that they had at the time of their production and justified such a comment. And yet, they also reveal the artist's difficulty to position



Fig. 1: John Piper, *All Saints Chapel*, Bath, 1942. Tate Gallery. Photo © Tate.

himself within the tradition of ruin painting, more specifically to engage in a dialogue with the tradition of the picturesque without underlining its impossibility in his own time. The gentle inscriptions of human history which adorned British landscape paintings and gardens in the late 18th century have given way to deep, fresh scars which compel the viewer to face the destructive power of humanity.

If Piper liked to view British places through the eyes of his Romantic predecessors (Jenkins and Fowler-Wright, 2016: 168), the war made it clear that the process often took place through a double lens. The Romantic perception was embedded within and undermined by the more skeptical gaze of Piper himself, whose sinister and empty landscapes and cityscapes, far from offering an artistic resolution to the darkness of the times, reflected his awareness not only of a separation from the natural world but also of mankind's responsibility in the process. This dual perception is perhaps best exemplified by *Shelter Experiments, near Woburn, Bedforshire* (1943) (fig. 2), a watercolour produced as part of Piper's work for the WAAC, which depicts a circle of experimental air raid shelters in flat and barren countryside, whose monotony is only broken by a shell crater in the foreground, and a low and dull sun in a dark, heavy sky. The conventions of the picturesque are alluded to in the artist's attempt to provide variety in spite of the drabness of the place and the absence of framing elements. There is also a reference to the Romantic yearning to connect with the spirit of place: the moody atmosphere, the heavy sky and its reflection on the land,



Fig. 2: John Piper, *Shelter Experiments, near Woburn, Bedfordshire*, 1943. Imperial War Museum. © IWM.

remind one of some of Constable's oil sketches of Hampstead Heath, while the historical associations suggested by the circular arrangement of the shelters, which bear an eerie similarity to Neolithic henges, recall the fascination for the historical layeredness of places that could be found in Turner's work among others. At the same time, the irony of resorting to this tradition is underscored by the implicit barbarity of the unnatural crater that immediately confronts the viewer, and of the shelters themselves, some of which are covered in dark red. To underline this irony, Piper has included a barely visible picturesque church in the far distance, as if to highlight the irrelevance of former landscape aesthetics, now displaced by the dreary scenes of modern warfare.

The wartime landscapes of Paul Nash contain a similar tension between the temptation of Romantic associations and a disillusioned awareness of their unsuitability. Nash has repeatedly been associated with the Neo-Romanticism of the 1940s, due to his early admiration for Blake and Palmer, and his own attempts to recover what he saw in their art as the spirit of place, or *genius loci*. However, his relationship with nature was far from being escapist or even rewarding. The battlefields of continental Europe at the end of the first world war, "the mud crater landscapes of Passchendaele and the nightmare No Man's Land of Gheluveldt" (Nash, "Aerial Flowers," 1945; qtd. in Causey, 2000: 157), had irremediably transformed his vision of landscape. He had translated their horrors into bleak, anti-picturesque images of natural desolation, anticipating later representations of ecological devastation. The emptiness and ruination of the natural world in *We Are Making A New World* (1918) and *Menin Road* (1918) both stood as a metaphor for the sufferings of the combatants, and implied the inhospitableness of a natural world from which humanity had excluded itself through its own brutality. *Wire* (1919) (fig. 3), which depicted a dark, colourless landscape of shell-holes and barbed wire, suggested that the unprecedented scale of the conflict had led to an apocalyptic environmental disaster.

Since these bleak depictions, Nash had been ambivalent about the temptation of finding comfort in the outward forms of Nature and skeptical of the popular pastoralism of the interwar period, which attempted to recover the communion of man and nature that industrialisation was said to have destroyed (Trentmann, 1994). For him, mankind had forsaken its privileged relationship with nature. He claimed that "the forms of natural objects and the features of landscape were sufficient without the intrusion of human beings," and he chose to "interpre[t] the phenomena of Nature without ever missing men or women from the scene." (Nash, 1937, qtd. in Causey, 2000: 142). When he explored surrealism in the second half of the 1930s, it was to depict haunting landscapes, devoid of explicit human presence and yet filled with disturbing emotions, in which he sought the combination of "beauty, ugliness and the power to disquiet" (Nash, 1936: 151-4). Far from providing solace, nature reverberated the fears of a world about to be engulfed in another major conflict, as in

Monster Field, painted in 1938, in which two fallen trees are depicted as "two monster objects outside the plan of natural phenomena" (qtd. in Causey, 2000: 151). And even though the artist continued to seek meaning and beauty in the natural world, he took his distances from his Romantic influences by emphasising his awareness of a disjunction between mind and nature. Looking back on his early career in 1945, he thus insisted that the Romantic fusion with nature had been replaced in his art by a more disquieting relationship: "I shared with Samuel Palmer an appetite for monstrous moons, exuberance of stars… But my love of the monstrous and the magical led me beyond the confines of natural appearances into unreal worlds or states of the known world that were unknown." (Nash, 1945; in Causey, 2001: 157). While such statements outlined Nash's own conception of surrealism and traced its connection to British Romanticism, they also suggested that the transition from one to the other went along with a departure from the prevailingly immersive experience of his predecessors, who had found fulfillment in the tangible world.

The resurgence of armed conflict in Europe in 1939 would have enhanced this sense of estrangement, reviving in particular images of the battlefields that Nash had represented in 1918 and 1919. In this new war, he realised, "machines were the real protagonists" (Nash, 1949: 248). Working, like Piper, for the WAAC, he dedicated himself to the depiction of aircraft, sometimes in energetic compositions celebrating



Fig. 3: Paul Nash, *Wire*, 1918. Imperial War Museum. © IWM.

the feats of these mechanical heroes, as in the *Battle of Britain* (1941), other times with a darker outlook. *Totes Meer* (1941) (fig. 4), an oil on canvas inspired by the Cowley Dump near Oxford, in which Nash depicted broken German aircraft as a dead sea of metallic waves, revisits the formula of conveying the brutality of mankind through damaged landscapes. At the same time, by replacing natural forms with industrial debris, it shifts the reflection into a more markedly environmentalist direction than before, while engaging in a fascinating dialogue with the Romantic tradition and the aesthetics of the sublime.

Few of Nash's paintings point so clearly to the artist's Romantic influences: besides being reminiscent of earlier analogies of the natural world and the human world, the painting can also be seen as a homage to Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice*, a sombre depiction of a shipwreck in arctic seas, in which a sinking ship collapses next to menacing masses of broken ice (see for example Rosenblum, 1975: 165). Nash's painting conveys some of the sublime terror of Friedrich's painting, in the vastness of the dumping site, the carnage that it implies, and the ghostly palette of greys and whites that he seems to have borrowed from his predecessor.

Nash's process of visionary transformation is made particularly striking when the painting is compared with photographs of the wreckage by the artist (Tate Gallery), which seem to have provided the starting point for the analogy with Friedrich's *Sea of Ice*. The photographs themselves give no idea of the extent of the dump, but the broken shapes of the planes, which evoke the jutting masses of ice in the foreground



Fig. 4: Paul Nash, *Totes Meer*, 1941. Tate Gallery. Photo © Tate.

of *Sea of Ice*, seem to have triggered the association, and the creation of an imaginary landscape composed of plane debris. The transfiguration, from purely material heap of metallic waste to uncanny landscape, suggests that Nash has adapted the Romantic idiom to the contemporary situation, for similar aestheticising purposes.

Yet Nash's conscious appropriation of the emblematic sublime painting by the German artist (meaningfully at the height of the combats against Nazi Germany), could be seen as partly subversive. His combined allusions to the pictorial tradition of the sublime and the conventions of the picturesque (with endless piles of rusting metal replacing the more noble architectural ruins of his predecessors) seem to be meant to debunk his own temptation to view the scene through the filter of the Romantic tradition. As Iain Bamforth points out, the painting is both a homage to and a pastiche of Friedrich's powerful depiction. (Bamforth, 2017: 65-67)

In a recent analysis of the painting, Robert Hemmings calls the painting an "ironic inversion of an iconic image of the German Romantic sublime" (Hemmings, 2016: 370), because Nash has allowed the wreckage itself, the metallic husks of German airplanes, to mimic and apparently replace the forms of nature, when in Friedrich's painting the shipwreck is reduced to insignificance, a small black shape about to be engulfed by the ice.

The process could of course be connected to Nash's interest in abstraction in the 1930s, which had led him to join the Unit One society and adopt its interest in "design" and lack of "reverence for Nature as such." (Nash, 1933: 10) Robert Hemmings suggests that the shapes of broken planes are a means to focus on form and plastic values: "the material debris of modern warfare becomes raw material for the beauty of Nash's painting, the aesthetic appeal of its color, form, geometric patterns, shape and texture." (Hemmings, 2016: 369)

The inversion, however, could have more than a formal significance and signal a renewal and transformation of the environmental reflection which had underpinned Nash's depictions of continental battlefields at the end of the previous war. The substitution of man-made waste for vast natural expanses, one could say, suggests a new awareness of the destructive forces of humanity, not just as an agent of war, but as a mass producer of industrial goods which threaten to submerge nature itself.

Nash was not the first artist to depict industrial waste, and the choice itself owed something to the Romantic tradition that he was turning to. An early example of the interest for industrial wastelands and the material debris of modernity can be found in Loutherbourg's famous *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801), in which the foreground is taken over by large fragments of cast iron detritus. But the artist's painful awareness of the destructive action of industry is compensated by his fascination for the elemental sublimity of the fire emanating from the foundry works, which suggests that the forces of nature are ultimately greater than those of humanity which has unleashed them. Nash, on the other hand, depicts a wasteland in which natural elements have been relegated to the margins, a barely discernible presence whose

very survival seems compromised. A pale owl flies in the distance, a thin strip of dark land is perceptible on the horizon, and the waning moon hovers over the scene, diffusing a surreal light over the ghostly shapes of the broken planes. Nature is no longer a major protagonist or a refuge from the convulsions of human history, but a potential victim of them.

Although Nash's focus on the debris of airplanes can still be seen as "participat[ing] in a tradition that embraces the ruin" and a form of aestheticisation (Hemmings, 2016: 370), his dialogue with Romantic predecessors and practitioners of the picturesque seems to put to the fore his own awareness of the insurmountable disjunction between mankind and the natural world. Robert Rosenblum argues that "Nash's painting […] perpetuates the Romantic image of a waste land, where the work of man has been absorbed into a desolate, chilly vista, a natural graveyard." (Rosenblum, 1975: 165) I would suggest, instead, that by making metallic debris take over the landscape, Nash stages a shift from the Romantic pleasure of ruin, as a transient human inscription partaking of the beauty of nature, to the disagreeable confrontation with environmental disfiguration. The human world is no longer harmoniously interacting with the natural world, but substituting its own structures for those of nature. The aestheticising process is still present, but in a self-conscious manner that questions its validity at the time as it is used.

When a few years later, in his *Battle of Germany* (1944), Nash revisited the confrontation between the forces of modern, mechanical warfare and the natural world, the Romantic ideal of communion was further undermined as natural analogies were replaced by a near abstract conflagration of colours and shapes, evocative of the violence of a raid on a city through pictorial values rather than representational devices. In this painting, the large moon, still present as a cosmic anchor to the scene and a reminder of Palmer's enduring influence, is to be seen as a symptom of the hostility between man and nature rather than their reconciliation. As Nash himself implied, it only makes apparent the irreversible estrangement of man and nature, by throwing into relief the devastation caused by human warfare:

> The moment of the picture is when the city, lying under the uncertain light of the moon, awaits the blow at its heart. In the background, a gigantic column of smoke arises from the recent destruction of an outlying factory which is still fiercely burning. These two objects pillar and moon seem to threaten the city no less than the flights of bombers even now towering in the red sky. The moon's illumination reveals the form of the city but with the smoke pillar's increasing height and width, throws also its largening shadow nearer and nearer. (qtd in Causey, 1975 : 100)

On the eve of the first world war, Georg Simmel argued that the fascination for ruins derived from what they revealed about the endless struggle between the spirit of mankind, expressed in architectural forms, and the power of matter and natural forces which ultimately reclaimed man-made constructions. In this cycle, the victory of architectural form over nature was only ever transient:

> This unique balance—between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward—breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image. (Simmel, [1911] 1958: 379)

Simmel also found comfort in the idea that the struggle was part of a continuous cycle of creation:

> The ruin of a building … means that where the work of art is dying, other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown; and that out of what art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity. (Simmel, [1911] 1958: 380)

It was such a belief in a harmonious struggle between the forces of nature and culture, and in its regenerating potential, which had accounted for the lasting popularity of the aesthetics of the picturesque in the eighteenth century, and more generally of ruin painting since the late fifteenth century (see for example Makarius, 2004 and Stewart, 2020). The "cosmic tragedy" outlined by Simmel contained in itself the soothing idea of the permanence of nature and the possibility of future creation. As Hell and Schönle write, "Simmel thought that ruins embody the justice of destruction, the reintegration of human design into nature that counteracts human interventions and makes them right." (Hell and Schönle, 2009: 6)

What Piper's and Nash's wartime works suggest—and this also goes for Sutherland's depictions of the Blitz—is that the cycle was broken by the lasting destructiveness of mankind. The balance between nature and culture was no longer "shift[ing] in favour of nature" and the aestheticisation of devastation was becoming problematic, largely because of humanity's responsibility in the process. One may consequently see in their conscious dialogue with Romantic aesthetics a

reflection about the lost connection with the tangible world, and a new awareness of humanity's irreversible transformations, which art cannot deny. Their wartime places are still endowed with emotive power. But this is not just the lyrical spirit of place or elegiac mode that has often been seen in their art or that they themselves sought. If it is present, it is always mingled with, and one could say heightened by, a sense of loss, emptiness, and even at times a form of skepticism.

Romantic aesthetic strategies are revisited indeed, but with an awareness that they are meant for another age, and that the fulfillment they could formerly provide is no longer possible, as humanity, through modern, industrial warfare, has alienated itself from the natural world. The ruin can no longer be the pleasurable inscription of times past, connecting past and present within places that convey a sense of permanence, as the scars inflicted by human history on the face of the earth become all-pervasive. The potential sublimity of contemporary scenes is no longer the dramatic exaltation instilled in the viewing subject by the indomitable power of nature, but a dull terror which contains the possibility of no revelation.

In the context of the war, therefore, the Neo-Romantics' allusions to the Romantic tradition often become nostalgic references, undermined by irony and a recurrent sense of responsibility. They anticipate the combination of environmental awareness and ambivalence toward picturesque aesthetics that can be found in much post-war landscape art, from Robert Smithson to Tacita Dean, Keith Arnatt or Jane and Louise Wilson. Like their successors, they are aware that the role of the artist is not simply to provide aesthetic healing, or escapist idealisations, but also to compel viewers to take stock of humanity's responsibility for the lost "balance between nature and spirit". The awareness that the balance had irremediably shifted became more pronounced in the second half of the century, as humanity's imprint on the natural world accelerated, but the two world wars appear to have been a turning point, compelling artists to become self-critical and wary of morally dubious aestheticisations. Even the Neo-Romantics, however tempted they may have been by fantasies of a lost harmony, could not look away.

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