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Paper 1

Ruysdael's Landscape with Cattle and an Inn and Monet's Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil:

The subjugation of the wilderness.

Salomon van Ruysdael's work Landscape with Cattle and an Inn, finished in 1661, serves as a skillful example of Dutch seventeenth-century landscape painting. Executed in oil on wood and measuring about 120 centimeters in width and about 60 centimeters in height, the picture presents a meticulously detailed dynamic view of a Low Countries scenery. Monet's Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil, dated 1874, shows us a landscape with an iron bridge crossing a river in the Parisian periphery. His painting is a little smaller than Ruysdael's at about 70 centimeters in width and 50 centimeters in height and is carried out in oil on canvas. At first glance, besides a principal difference in pictorial style --Monet's Impressionist painting being less concerned with realistic representation of objects than Ruysdael's dramatic, yet very acute rendition -- the two pictures appear to share not only subject matter, but also compositional elements. Consequently, a shared or at least related intention in both artists might be inferred. However, upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the succession of these two images reflects not only the move away from photorealistic representation in painting, but also a fundamental change in Western society's view of nature brought upon by the process of industrialization. While Ruysdael's nature is an impressive *force*, a power greater than man, Monet's nature has been marginalized into a mere *environment*, a space passively accepting mankind's manipulations.

The pre-industrial Landscape with Cattle and an Inn gives us an impression of seventeenth-century rural life in the Netherlands. Ruysdael leads the viewer's eye through the picture on a circular path, starting in the lower foreground, where a small herd of cattle trots towards a watering hole. The viewer's attention is captured by a white cow whose gaze is directed at her. To the right, an ox is trying to mount another animal. Behind the cattle on a mound of earth, a group of three majestic trees extends into the

sky. The trees stretch over two thirds of the vertical and horizontal height of the wood panel and are thus the biggest and most prominent physical objects in the painting. To the right of the trees in the middle ground, tucked behind the earth mound, a grouping of at least four buildings is visible – presumably the inn mentioned in the work's title. The inn is much smaller than the trees, occupying at most one fifth of the picture's width and height. Yet smaller, a group of people, some on horses, some on carriages, are seen next to it on the right. On the far right, a farm worker on a horse leads the hindmost cows into the pictorial foreground, directing the viewer's eye back into the foreground where the traversal had started.

Unexpectedly, it is hard for the viewer to concentrate on the people in the picture. Their small size, marginal position, and low-value rendering lead the viewer to visually leap over them and focus on the extremely dynamic and three-dimensional depiction of the overcast sky. In fact, through a low horizon line – the sky would take up two thirds of the vertical space were it not obscured by the grand trees – the cloudy atmosphere becomes the second dominant entity, and although insubstantial by nature, its volumetric modeling rivals that of the trees. The impression, then, is one of grand nature. Through convergence and atmospheric perspective, the skies appear to stretch to infinity. The majestic trees arch over people and buildings, dwarfing them both. Even the herd of cows, domesticated animals and as such supposedly disciplined by man, are refusing to be controlled, as symbolized by the oxen attempting to copulate directly in front of his keeper. The Inn itself appears as a shelter to protect travelers from nature – it is hidden behind trees and the rectangular arrangement of buildings conjure the image of a fortress, although a battered, not a proud one. Part of this impression might be attributable to the geographical location of the scene – because of their very makeup, the Low Countries

feature imposing vistas of the heavens, but even when accounting for this, the painting certainly reflects a view of nature as a force man has not yet conquered.

Ruysdael's choice of form complements the subject matter. While the human beings are placed on the right side of the graphical space, most compositional weight lodges with the trees on the left side. A kind of balance is created through the large cloud-form in the upper right, but because of its use of strictly high value colors and low saturation, it does not suffice to make the composition symmetrical. Whereas the tree-complex ranges across the entire value spectrum – from dark green leaves to little bright white highlights – the people are painted in conspicuously low value colors, thus reducing their ability to be recognized and inspected. There is no discernible singular light source. Rather, the scene is lit irregularly, a realistic result given the overcast skies, and maybe a symbol for nature's power over light and darkness. Ruysdael's brushstroke is fairly even and mostly undetectable unless inspected closely, but varying brushstroke as a means of expressing intent had not come into fashion in Ruysdael's time as it would do in the 1870s of Monet's Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil.

While using similar subject matter, Monet produces a significantly different message with his painting. He offers us a glimpse of an iron railroad bridge spanning over a peaceful river on a clear, bright day. Elevated on concrete pillars, the bridge occupies a large portion of the painting's top half, starting in the right foreground of the picture and leading into the left background, where it is met by a manmade hill. A locomotive is passing over the bridge moving into the background as a small sailboat with two sailors, coming from the left, is about to navigate around the pillars. The viewer is located on a grassy mound on the bank of the river below and in front of the bridge, and thus she can only catch a glimpse of the tops of the passing train cars. In fact,

the locomotive itself is entirely obscured by the iron structure of the bridge, so that only puffs of smoke can be seen billowing into the sky. In the right foreground, large shrubbery and trees hide the beginning of the bridge.

Notably, the people shown in the painting are as small and inconspicuous as in Ruysdael's work. However, the relative scale of the iron construction is much larger with respect to the total image size than was the scale of the buildings in the earlier painting. The bridge occupies about two thirds of the horizontal as well as vertical space and is clearly the most prominent object in the picture. Also, it is the only item displaying linear perspective and thus becomes the main conveyor of depth, an important function fulfilled by the sky in the Ruysdael's landscape. It appears then that Monet is granting the man-made bridge structure much of the attention that Ruysdael focused on the elements of nature.

Further corroboration for this interpretation can be found in Monet's use of color. Except for the underside of the bridge and the shrubs in the foreground, the painter applies mostly mid- to high value colors. Among these lighter colors, those of the pillars of the bridge strike the eye as almost glowing. The supports appear to be illuminated by a strong directional light source located on the viewer's side of the river behind the bridge. This light might originate from a sinking sun, but the brightness of the pillar's whites suggest an intentionally created symbolic highlight to distinguish the engineered structure from its natural surroundings.

Monet's varied brushwork further substantiates the carefully constructed contrast between nature and the products of industrialization. Here, each object is assigned a unique brush-treatment to illuminate its character. Natural objects are generally represented by curved lines, where each individual brushstroke functions as an indicator

of an area's reflectance of light rather than a trace of the actual underlying geometry. The river's strokes are mainly horizontal and slightly curved upwards, suggesting a calm, gentle movement. The grass' and bushes' strokes are thinner, more isolated, and varying in direction, representing an organic growth process. In contrast, the bridge's strokes are very straight, following the geometry of the object more closely and thus providing a contrast of order and regularity to the undulating, ever-changing natural entities. The brushwork above the horizon line inverts this distinction between strokes. While the sky is lightly striped in long, soft lines from the top right to the bottom left, the locomotive's smoke is depicted in circular turning strokes that mock the underlying plainness of the sky. Thus Monet positions the symbols of nineteenth-century industrialization – the bridge and the locomotive's steam – as a conscious counterpoint to nature. The products of progress are integrated into the environment, but they are not blending in. Rather, they stand out, opposing the natural, and if necessary, controlling it.

After analyzing subject matter and formal attributes of the two paintings, it becomes apparent that some significant shift in the painters', and accordingly, in people's perception of nature must have occurred in the roughly 220 years that lie between the works. Arguably, the most significant change in this period was the movement of Europe from a mainly agricultural to an industrialized group of societies. Thus it should not be surprising to find *the* symbol of industrialized progress in the nineteenth century – the rail road – juxtaposed with and triumphant over nature in Monet's work. In Ruysdael's landscape, elements of man's attempt to control nature are also present in the collection of buildings and the herd of domesticated cattle. However, the goal in the seventeenth century appeared to have been not the subjugation of nature under mankind's will, but rather the creation of an arrangement with nature under which people would not be

harmed by nature's magnificent forces. In this light, the later industrialization can be interpreted as a process of imposing a set of rational, structured rules on the irrational, unpredictable natural powers. By the time Monet completed his work, this procedure had apparently succeeded to such a degree that the painter and his contemporaries did not understand nature as a violent authority in need of restraining any more – the scene depicted in Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil is quite idyllic and peaceful.