

Norman Turner

Addicted to Defeat: Reflections on Painting Outdoors

*Non multum, sed quispiam*

Arriving at the cliff top, I confirmed what I'd suspected on leaving my truck. The blasts of wind sweeping across this lofty elevation in the Shawangunk Mountains were too strong. From past encounters with bright, gusty days, when high-pressure weather systems move in and the wind freshens from the northwest, I knew that my four-by-five-foot canvas, mounted to a sheet of thin plywood, would make a usable sail for a small boat. I did hesitate, I did know better, but I was impatient to work on the painting I'd started. The place where I stood, looking down at the lake and step-stone cliffs rising from the other side, was somewhat sheltered by trees. Perhaps I could get by. I lashed my easel to two largish stones weighing thirty to forty pounds each, mounted painting to easel and began. The anchoring tactic did fine—until a fierce blast dove in, seized the painting and easel and hurled them to my feet. The palette, loaded with paint, flipped onto the picture, wet side down. Here it was, just as the wind had forewarned, had I been willing to listen, another “blowdown,” as I call them, one of many I've had in forty years of painting outdoors. Sometimes blowdowns result in a broken easel, a damaged picture. All that mitigated the present case was its lack of novelty. I stood there, calm enough, unsurprised, eyeing the disaster, mindful that my aim was to work. Presently I returned easel, painting and palette to their rightful places, scraped the mess of paint off the picture and adjusted the anchoring rocks to reflect, I hoped, a better wind-defying angle. Taking up my scattered brushes, I continued. Until there came another blast, another blowdown, the same as before. Twice the wind had spoken, authoritatively, in a commanding voice. Today, and not for the first time, weather conditions would decide the outcome of my effort.

Many are the halts that attend my vocation, some caused by me, some by phenomena, some by the actions of others. I absent-mindedly leave my paint box in the studio and must return for it, a loss of time fatal to my purpose if the place I've gone to is distant. Bound to accept the testimony of meteorologists, whose forecasts I obsessively consult, I travel with a painting meant for sunny days only to see the clouds roll in, travel with one meant for cloudy days only to see the solid overcast derisively break up. After laboring on a project for a month I discover that the view for it has been compromised or outright ruined. Someone has felled a tree, erected a wood fence between me and the view, plowed a hay field, or torn down an old barn, and the constellation of objects that prompted me to give the project a try in the first place exists no more.

My resources, material, temporal, physical and mental, are too often expended reaching in the direction of but failing to touch a brush. I kill good painting time transporting myself and my equipment to and fro, setting up my easel, paint box and palette, taking them down, retracing my path. Searching out places to stand where elements of my surroundings gather in a display that tickles my interest, I reconnoiter for hours in a vehicle and on foot, stopping to scrutinize or with a pencil throw down on paper that which might become the object of a painting. An absolute requirement, not to be assumed, ruling out this or that spot, is that I be able to position

my canvas relative to the display so the sun doesn't shine on it; the sun's over-brightness would paradoxically dim my perception of the colors I'd employ. Perching on a rock with a two-foot or ten-foot drop a few steps back is awkward, as is standing in a brook wearing chore boots, the front legs of the easel in the brook with me, the rear leg up on the bank. The dwindling days of late fall, not long before snow will swirl down and cling to the cold, receptive ground, finds me in front of a needy picture, icy, stiffened hands thrust in my pockets, reflecting on how unprofitable this arrangement is, in respect to accomplishing much. Twice in recent years, I've fallen. Striding with painting and gear across a field of steeply canted bedrock, I stepped on a patch of water-saturated lichen slippery as ice and went down, my body slamming into quartz-studded aggregate. No lasting injuries but most certainly a lasting increase of caution.

To time-consuming, frustrating and bruising complications can be added the interference of wildlife that flies. Honey or bumble bees swing by to hover over my palette or painting, investigating whether they've found a new and exotic flower. Mosquitoes, black flies and deer flies circle my head, access my skin by crawling up my sleeves or into my hair, and recklessly dive into new paint on the canvas, committing themselves to an entombment similar to that of their ancient ancestors caught in amber. There are spring days when in front of my face dances a gathering of black flies so densely populated with zooming specks that my view is beclouded. One late fall day, a flock of migrating robins settled on nearby trees festooned with blue-black berries, on which they boisterously fed. Crossing excitedly back and forth from tree to tree above me, they released blue-black waste. One bird-bomb splattered across my picture like a gout of purple blood. Another joined the colors I'd mixed on my palette. The stuff was surprisingly hard to remove. Receptive though I was to virtual gifts from the scene around me, I had instead been given, by express delivery, a real, unwrapped, surprise.

But what I've mentioned so far are incidentals, illustrating from only a practical standpoint the dubiety of painting outdoors unless called to. As painting misadventures, bad weather and bird dung are minor. Major misadventures rise when the pictorial imagination is given to empiricism. Deriving pictures from direct observation of the actual world in its present manifestation is the empiricist approach, and it yields insoluble problems. It was Monet who wrote, "This time of year the sun goes down so quickly that I cannot follow it," and, "I am more and more maddened by the need to convey what I experience." He was witnessing, and wanted to convey, a rapid progression. His experience of this progression was led by a truth as consequential and fundamental as the sun's position relative to the earth's rotation. The painter who wants to lay hold of nature in all its swift immediacy is greeted by a cosmic spectacle, a great wheel of days, forever revolving, endlessly varying. Because the spectacle is endlessly varying it is infinitely suggestive. It fires the painter's brain with myriad possibilities, stimulating a wonderful vision of what his art might be, an art of perfect realism that would also be an art of perfect beauty. But it also makes him anxious. To chose from the flow of appearances, to grasp that which is forever in transition, evaporating even as it is born to his eye—this proves to be a challenge. As appearances steadily evolve, as the painter's opportunities and choices proliferate, he finds himself grappling with a huge, ever-expanding, thousand-piece, mind-boggling puzzle.

The extent to which appearances steadily alter cannot be exaggerated. A sunlit view seen in the morning on a cloudless June day is altogether different seen in the afternoon or under an overcast sky. Divide that day into smaller segments and notice that the view at nine in the morning is different a mere two hours later, at eleven, though it remains the "same" view in respect to its material features. Divide it further, into fifteen-minute intervals, and subtle distinctions still eventuate as the sun and its created shadows advance and colors minutely shift. And concurrently with these quarter-hour changes, on a lengthier time-scale, the seasons alter, too, a slow-sliding backdrop to the fast-paced, upstage drama. Everyone knows that the

harmonies of June cross to those of July, which cross to those of August, and then to those of September, when universal green is supplanted by ochre, crimson, and rust. No one knows this with the intimacy, the fanatic attention, of the painter who works outdoors, and who must calibrate his efforts to these relentless transformations. The succession of days swings round from spring to autumn as the planet tilts, the sun drops from the zenith to near the horizon as winter approaches, the shadows daily stretch further, and the quality of the light is no longer what it was earlier in the year. The light of June, the light of December, could be arriving from other suns shining on other planets, they are that unlike. "Change" is the word that best describes the appearance of things outdoors.

The added twist is that change runs onward while marks made on a surface are fixed. The train of appearances is forever leaving the station while the artist, lugging his suitcase of pictorial notions, is forever scampering down the platform to try to catch it. Unavoidably at odds are the feckless state of the countryside and its frozen symbol, the painted surface.

Truly, a painting done outdoors, in an Empirical spirit, is the limited response to an unlimited situation, in respect to flux. Nowhere is this more evident than with "local color," reputed to be the fundamental hue of things, apart from the influence of hues neighboring or nearby. At bottom, the concept pretends to excavate a color-reality that is absolute rather than provisional; that is the goal. Of which goal one must ask: What, then, is the local color of the trunk of a chestnut oak in winter sunlight? What is that of asphalt; of a river reflecting uniform cloud cover; of a quartz-laden local rock called Shawangunk Conglomerate; of shadows on New England hills seen in late afternoon in early fall; of a white house seen against the sun, its façade in shade? What is the final color of the sky? The answer, I assert, is that such colors are readily discerned, distinctively themselves, as powerful to the eye as are garlic or vanilla to the nose, but unnamable, neither with words, nor with any conceivable pigment. Nor is it even possible for them to simply occupy our vision in an unqualified condition, self-same though they are, never mind assigning verbal or pictorial designations.

To demonstrate the visual point indirectly and inadequately, with words, much as the word "flower" indicates the daisy, it might be said that the color of the trunk of a chestnut oak in winter sunlight would be gray for the corrugated bark were it not pale, washed-out yellow, orange or pink for the light. Slowly modulating with the sun's movement, the color is as translucent as water in a brook, and no less unstable. The color of asphalt, new or old, in sun or in shade, is always reliably asphalt-like, our eyes tell us. In respect to nomenclature, though, it is purple; no, pale gray; no, it has a yellowish or pinkish or pale-blue sheen, layered, as it were, over a sullied, nondescript hue, a weathered, tar-dark, industrial base-tone of little character and with no single quality as such. The color of a river reflecting uniform cloud cover is that of spilled mercury or crumpled aluminum foil; one perceives that the rippled and metallic aspect is incorporated in the water's hue, which is to say the water has no hue as such. The color of shadows on New England hills seen in late afternoon in early fall is a blue rich and saturated but shot through with warm nuances opposing the blue. The color of Shawangunk Conglomerate depends on whether its outcrops are bare of growth, with a raw, whitish, exposed look, or supporting lichen, or raked by light, or lying in shade, but often on what is nearby, to elicit a comparison. Even at a distance this rock is plainly no other material than what it is, yet its color is both stable and mutable and never seems quite the same, though always emphatically Conglomerate-like. The façade of a white house seen against the sun is darker than the sunlit lawn it overlooks, confoundingly so, since the reverse must be true: green is darker than white. Such is the compensatory power of our visual apparatus that we involuntarily attribute whiteness to the façade and do see it so, though on closer examination we find it to be a middling-dark, neither-here-nor-there color in a range of gray-blue, a color light and dark at the same time and

remarkably intense. The color of a sky free of smog and excessive humidity is, to the casual observer, bright Kodak blue, the color in a vacation snapshot. Those who look closely, who differentiate the zenith and horizon, who watch for shifts that occur when the sky sits next to foliage, to clouds or to hills, find in it the finest transparencies of red, green, violet and orange, faint scrimms of color behind which the controlling lapis prevails.

I'm saying that the colors of nature are prodigious in their variety, that they are limitless in their mutation, that they saunter at the edge of perception, that they mock the empirically unsupported concept of local color, that in truth they are beyond the bounds of human invention, and that they stimulate and frustrate those who care to approach them with an inquisitive mind and sharpened powers of discrimination, a painter's materials at hand. They resist being sorted into band-widths of the spectrum and cannot be located in a tube of paint.

Another issue is that of simplicity rising from complexity, of parts relative to a whole. If one considers a giant oak tree in its particulars, item-by-item, one finds that it has bark irregularly incised, branches subdividing out to the finest twig, countless leaves of the same cut yet with no two leaves identical, and groups of leaves draped in clusters along the branches. Like the leaves, the clusters conform to a pattern, a drape-and-cluster pattern, that also never identically repeats. The oak is comprised of a nearly incomprehensible number and variety of angles, parts and sub-assemblies, staggeringly complex, impossible to encompass by mentally adding part to part. If one considers the oak casually, on the fly, especially from a distance, one notes a total organism, a single entity, unified in the gesture of its limbs, encompassed with one stroke of the mind. But a painter working outdoors, from observation, one mark at a time, cannot render the oak with one stroke of his mind. He must confront the oak's particulars, even as the sun moves and their appearance mutates. Is he to achieve the totality by articulating its parts, down to the level of individual leaves, or at least a convention for individual leaves, as in Poussin, or is he to attempt a broad, sweeping impression, a generalization that evokes the singularities from which it has been extracted? There is no one answer to this question, no logically necessary way of proceeding. And the same divergent excess of choice applies to all of nature, to each species of tree, to different kinds of clouds, to rocky streams, to forested or grassy hillsides, to all the ragged borders between different kinds of thing.

Yes, the painter who works outdoors from observation has much to occupy him. He rushes to catch a time of day and year that approximates his initial sense of what he saw from the position he so scrupulously staked out; scrambles to set up his easel at the best angle available, lashing it to rocks or a tree so it will stay put; tenses apprehensively when a gust of wind arrives, his concentration darting from exalted concerns to pragmatic ones; fans away the cloud of black flies that instantly gathers in front of his face when the gust subsides; cannot decide whether to extract wholes from particulars, particulars from wholes, or both at once; irritably stops work when passersby want directions or to engage him in conversation; and, amidst all the distractions that swarm (like black flies) in his mind, asks himself what in the name of art are the individual colors he is looking at? He tries to understand how these colors are mutually under the influence of each other, not as on Color-aid paper in an Albers color course in a college classroom, but as vested in real things under the restive canopy of the universe; and he studies the contents of his paint box, trying to work out how to best employ wholly inadequate means to render that which cannot be reproduced.

I think he has about him something of a Buster Keaton air, he with the lurch to his stride, the so-serious expression, the bright-blue cap. Clambering up rugged trails, suffering the elements, he perhaps envisions himself a heroic figure, a veritable frontiersman, a stalker not of bison but of motifs, his educated brush the Sharps with which he will bring down a splendid moment before it trots into the future, rapidly disappearing over a rise in the temporal plain. But

his easel blows over, he slips on water-slicked bedrock and falls down, birds crap on his beginning, he is flummoxed by the test of attempting to mix, with humble pigments, stand-ins for enthralling colors that are nothing like pigments. Clinging to his ideal of a pictorial construction adequate to what he sees, he struggles haplessly against crisscrossed perversities of circumstance, like Keaton in "One Week," assembling a crazily mixed-up house. Really, the artist is trying to paint a halfway decent picture under conditions, and with aims, that teeter, like Keaton's house, at the edge of collapse.

Yet we have hardly begun to excavate the root of his problem, the source of the other problems, sited as it is in deepest folly. He is committing a philosophical blunder. Despite experience having taught him that the concept of local color is just that, a concept, despite "reality" being coterminous with "flow," he persists in wanting to get at the true condition of things. Willfully, as if by deliberate misdirection, he conflates painting and the phenomenal world, mixing that which aims to give concrete, visible shape to states of being, thereby expressing them, and that which precedes, and is entirely extraneous to, such representations. To speak as plainly as possible, he wishes painting and the appearance of actual things as he experiences them to be as one, undivided, equivalent each to the other. But the impact on his vision of the physical present, the momentary face of the actual world, is not a picture. The physical present does not convey, inherently, a resemblance to anything, for in no way is it constructed, a-priori, for language or language-like activities, of which painting is one. The present condition of the actual world, deployed beyond the painter's bodily and mental boundaries, is materially, primordially, implacably and indivisibly whatever it happens to be just then, with no given link to his concerns, his pictorial modalities of grasping it, of casting it onto a surface. Putting the matter naively, one might say that the ever-marching panoply of one's surroundings, viewed dispassionately, look like nothing other than what they are. Little wonder that the phenomenal world of nature and the virtual world of painting, the appearance and the image, can never be adequately reconciled, that the gap between reality and art is impossible to bridge.

And it is in the midst of this error, this self-induced conundrum, this trance of undying conflict, this clash of indifferent actuality and furious human contrivance, that painting outdoors from observation finds its meaning and its justification. The fraught zone between the passing spectacle and its imaginative reconstruction, strewn with attempts coherent and incoherent but having in common that they always strive to gain ground on the real, is where some occasionally worthwhile activity occurs. Here, in this zone of the impossible, the painter who works outdoors while looking at what he is painting finds a continual defeat that is also a fervent pursuit, the unending chase of an unendingly seductive lure. Here he finds a singular type of existential engagement, a way of occupying the turbulent intersection of world and art, of breathing in tune with the full abundance of his surroundings, the immeasurable present, the great right now

But that is not all. If he returns from the zone of conflict having again discovered that he is unequal to the combat, that nature shrugs off his assaults, he also brings back a trophy he has captured. Though routed, he returns with a tattered emblem, a representation of part of the actual world, an abstraction from reality, undeniably feeble compared to the model, but, still, an emblem. The proximate cause of this limited achievement is that he does not, after all, advance to the fray all naked and unarmed. Viewing his surroundings neither incuriously, nor with a lack of specific intent, he picks a segment and deliberately starts to view it, not for its own sake, apart from his interests, but as if it were the basis of such an image as he himself wishes to create. That is, he projects upon the actual situation his pictorial outlook. Through years of intensive training, he has learned to direct and shape his visual experience in a pictorial direction. Thus his chosen segment of his surroundings doesn't look at all like a picture until it does: until he arrests it with

his formative gaze, choosing to see it according to the idea he applies to it—an Impressionist idea, an Expressionist idea, a perspective idea, an idea likely more tailored and less schematic and obvious than these three options imply. Possessing as his defense against chaos this conceptual frame, this loose or rigid set of picture-making rules, this intention to see what things would look like if they were indeed initially given to his eyes for picturing, he proceeds to read into the scene before him something of what he wants and is able to find there. The impressive corollary is that the scene is made by this mental action to reciprocate, to fit itself to the image he is fashioning. Under the painter's purposeful scrutiny, the scene more and more stands forth in resemblance to his project. So he fails to catch phenomena as they parade before him, yet succeeds in extracting from them a contribution.

The significance of painting outdoors from observation, its particular if allusive content, lies in the intersection of the trained observer, the capacious and effervescent scene he observes, and the formal resources of pictorial art. In that every touch the painter makes to the surface notates a summative glance at the transitive scene, the complex, tri-part mix of observer, observed and pictorial invention yields a distinctive visual savor. In such works as I have in mind, sometimes slapped together because of the artist's eager temperament or the outdoor hazards that attend their making, sometimes slowly and painstakingly developed over weeks, sometimes even continued in the studio, but always exploratory, inventive and intuitive rather than formulaic, there is a palpable connection between the painter and the actual places he has confronted in all their quotidian yet extraordinary and ultimately unfathomable presence.

Painting outdoors becomes addictive. One accomplishes little, and does not much care. One knows the activity to be in some ways idiotic, but keeps returning to it. Without the excursions, the blowdowns, the black flies, the insidious weather, the ravishing but crushingly difficult subjects, one becomes restless and bored. Without the rotating spectacle of the seasons, the fascination exerted by slantwise autumn light, the enthralling glimpse of a new-leafed branch trailing in water or a shadow athwart a boulder, one is deprived. Without the devotional gathering together of one's full attention in the act of bearing witness to the contemporary moment of all the world around, one dwindles in spirit, is reduced. Yes, compared to the incomparable, one's efforts preemptively fall short. One accepts beforehand that one will be humbled. But it is the very intractability of the wide-spread earth, its gnarliness, its reluctance to yield itself to art, that gives to one's efforts qualities no other creative activity can aim for or own. One ends up having missed what one wished for but nonetheless with a trace of the place we inhabit, this small, blue, vital globe. And so, again, my motto: *Non multum, sed quispiam*. Not much, but something.