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Essay #1

Pattern, Metaphor, and Meaning in Classic Landscape Painting

A young man stands hatless in a black coat on a high rocky point. His back is turned toward us, and he is bracing himself with a walking stick against the wind that blows his hair in tangles. Before him lies a fog-shrouded landscape in which the fantastic shapes of more distant promontories are only partly visible. The far horizon reveals mountains off to the left, plains to the right, and perhaps very far away—one cannot be sure—an ocean. But maybe it is just more fog, merging imperceptibly into clouds. The painting, which dates from 1818, is a familiar one: Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*. The impression it leaves is contradictory, suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of an individual within it. We see no face, so it is impossible to know whether the prospect confronting the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both.

Paul Johnson used Friedrich's painting some years ago as the cover for his book *The Birth of the Modern*, to evoke the rise of romanticism and the advent of the industrial revolution. One should like to use it here to summon up something, more personal, which is one's own sense—admittedly idiosyncratic—of what historical consciousness is all about. The logic of beginning with a landscape may not be immediately obvious. But consider the power of metaphor, on the one hand, and the particular combination of economy and intensity with which visual images can express metaphor, on the other.

from John Lewis Gaddis, "The Landscape of History"

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