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book review of

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Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self by Nina Amstutz

Reviewed by Daniel Fulco

Nina Amstutz,
Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.
269 pp.; 82 color and 36 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
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In her new book, *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature & the Self*, Nina Amstutz reexamines the compelling and enigmatic work of this renowned German Romantic painter from a variety of innovative viewpoints. Her book challenges the traditional tendency to privilege allegorical readings of Friedrich's work that center on themes of transience, nascent German nationalism, and Christian spirituality in nature, and instead explores how developments in nineteenth-century German philosophy and scientific theory informed the artist's creative expression, working process, and conceptualization of his subjects.^[1] Rather than focusing on the canon of Friedrich's most famous early works such as *Cross in the Mountains* (1808), *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10), or *Abbey in the Oak Wood* (1808–10), to name a few, Amstutz concentrates on his less-studied late landscapes of the 1820s and 30s. Referring to many of these paintings and drawings as “portraits of nature,” the author argues that natural motifs and their details evolved into individual subjects for Friedrich. As she maintains, the painter's focus on particular specimens from nature was in part rooted in contemporary life-science theory, specifically the illustrations of Alexander von Humboldt's and Aimé Bonpland's botanical publications. His awareness of and response to these texts combined with his spiritual practice of observing and depicting nature closely in order to reveal something vital that lay beneath the readily apparent world and which was part of a universal, interconnected whole.

To expound upon her main thesis, Amstutz probes how morphology, metamorphosis, and anthropomorphism were central to his artistic approaches, technique, and practice in each chapter. In the author's view, Friedrich's advancements in landscape painting derived from a

wide-ranging cultural understanding of art and science as “complementary investigative practices” (5) and his interaction with an intellectual circle of like-minded artists, scientists, and theorists, chief among them Carl Gustav Carus, Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, and Lorenz Oken. In the early nineteenth century, Friedrich Schlegel and Johann Wilhelm Ritter argued there should be greater integration between the humanistic and scientific disciplines. Citing their contention, Amstutz notes that such a milieu fueled a lively, fluid exchange among the visual arts, biological sciences, and philosophy, all of which flourished in the early to mid-nineteenth-century German states. As Amstutz contends, it is necessary to go beyond mere binary arguments of the influence of science on art and elucidate how Friedrich’s art intersects with the common tenets and goals of these branches of knowledge. She advocates for the images recounting particular stories and revealing meaning rather than one-to-one comparisons between scientific concepts and individual works. Grounding her central argument in poet and philosopher Henrik Steffens’ dictum “Investigate Nature and your actions are those of the spirit there,” Friedrich’s Romantic creative expression can be viewed as a self-exploratory quest into the Romantic self in which artists, like scientists, inserted and immersed themselves in nature’s entirety in an effort to convey their experiences within that context. For Friedrich, art could serve as “an intermediary between nature and human beings” (14) and it embodied one of the main tenets of *Naturphilosophie*: there was no separation between the self and the natural world.

Dividing each of the book’s chapters into case studies that examine the relationship between Friedrich’s works of art and late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical discourses, the author commences chapter 1 with an inquiry into the “physiognomy of nature.” By this, Amstutz means the physical features of nature that were thought to disclose its inner essence and character. Essentially, she draws an analogy between the human body and the earth and argues that Friedrich, like his Romantic contemporaries, believed that our existence was founded on a sense of “primordial oneness between self and nature” (23). Employing Friedrich’s early *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1810) as an example, she explores how the artist’s physiognomic features (e.g., unkempt hair or wrinkles and bumps on his forehead and cheeks) in this drawing share parallels with irregular natural forms found in his landscape paintings, viz., waves, shading of rocks, and geological formations. By focusing on the iconography of his face, he created a likeness particular to a landscape painter: it revealed his cognitive abilities and the idiosyncrasies of his character and expression. The author maintains that Friedrich responded to contemporaneous writings by Johann Kaspar Lavater and Franz Joseph Gall that describe the distinct physical characteristics that landscape artists were supposed to exhibit. Like a depiction of nature, Amstutz contends that Friedrich’s face can be compared to a geographical terrain of its own that invites close inspection and contemplation and also offers the opportunity to chart the topography of his mind.

In the second part of this chapter, Amstutz expands her discussion by centering on a key painting in his oeuvre, *The Watzmann* (1824–25), which, in her view, engages closely with both *Erdlebensbildkunst* (earth-life-painting) and geology. Drawing upon Timothy Mitchell’s argument that the compositional planes of this painting relate to successive stages of mountain formation described by Abraham Gottlob Werner in his science of geognosy, Amstutz maintains that the granite formation in the foreground (found in the Harz Mountains) was formed by sedimentation and is an example of the earth’s later development.^[2] Thus, the artist encourages us to ponder the history of the textures and

forms in the rocks, trees, vegetation, and snow-capped peak of the mountain in order to divulge the earth's secrets and represent its evolution from the core outward. In concluding this section, Amstutz employs her reading of *The Watzmann* to announce several of her main themes in the rest of the book. These include the Romantics' mystical attitude toward nature as it materialized in the physiognomy of Friedrich's compositions and his quest to go beyond the surface of nature in search of both a tension and unity between himself and nature which was grounded in *Naturphilosophie*. Through careful observation, the author asserts that exterior forms of nature could even reveal themselves to reflect the body inside out, a notion that she investigates further in chapter 3.

In chapter 2, Amstutz begins by exploring the major role played by the notion of the self as a theme in Friedrich's *Early Snow* (1828) and *Chalk Cliffs at Rügen* (ca. 1818), two later paintings that rework earlier, similar subjects. Rather than focusing on the *Rückenfigur* motif (figure with its back turned to the viewer) most commonly studied by scholars and traditionally interpreted as an indirect self-portrait of the artist, she chooses to focus on the absence of figures in these paintings, which are replaced by natural forms. Amstutz proposes that Friedrich did not merely insert himself into his compositions; he actually "naturalized" and metamorphosed the body into the landscape itself through anthropomorphized trees, plants, and rocks that stand in for humans. In short, Amstutz examines the unfolding metamorphosis of human into nonhuman forms and vice versa. In this regard, she places Friedrich among the Carus-Oken camp of theorists who advocated notions of fluid or porous metamorphosis rather than the Johann Friedrich Blumenbach-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe mindset that espoused ideas of linear transformation. For example, in *Chalk Cliffs at Rügen*, she contends that three people found in Friedrich's earlier oil painting of this subject metamorphose into the three trees in the foreground of the watercolor, which become mirror images of their human counterparts.

Although this interpretation of the two related Rügen paintings has its merits, it over-focuses on the figural-botanical transformations, overlooks the artist's expansion of the water, sky, and horizon in the watercolor, and neglects to mention the conspicuous presence of the sailboats on the Baltic Sea in the distance. With regard to the latter compositional element, the author misses the opportunity to address the significance of the increase from two vessels in the oil painting to six in the watercolor. Might the augmented number of boats also relate to the omission of the figures, and do these vessels suggest a metaphorical journey to or from the island?

In the second half of this chapter, the author examines a key related example of natural anthropomorphism in *Harz Cave* (ca. 1837), in which she notes the ambiguous presence of several distinct rock faces. These forms emerge from the composition as Romantic hieroglyphs, the meanings of which remain unclear and raise a degree of skepticism among viewers. By studying isolated geological forms, he "re-presented" them to make nature's elements "legible" and subtly reveal the hidden life behind the environment's morphology (86). In brief, we are encouraged to search for and discover vestiges of ourselves in nature.

In chapter 3, Amstutz delves into the anatomy of nature and challenges the traditional *vanitas*-based readings of Friedrich's paintings of trees. For the author, Friedrich focused on "single specimens," such as individual trees, bushes, or rocks. She maintains that aspects of his

tree portraits (*Oak Tree in the Snow*, 1827/29, Cologne and Berlin versions) closely resembled anatomical illustrations, thereby suggesting that the artist aimed to bridge the inner and outer world within nature's universal forms. According to Amstutz, Friedrich was fascinated with trees as Ur-forms without their foliage because he was able to study their skeletal structures and represent the visual parallels between bodily forms (e.g., spines, vertebrae, and blood vessels) and arboreal features such as roots, knobs, bark, branches, and twigs. His approach was grounded in comparative natural history and physiology as advocated in treatises by Carus, Johann Gottfried Herder, Novalis, and Oken. As we discover, Friedrich's works visualize the interior of the human body, reflected in its comparable forms in nature, and embody his belief that all paintings were in one way or another some sort of self-portrait of the creator.

When viewed in relation to the reddish, almost blood-like pools of water in the foreground of each composition at the base of the trees, the author compares their lacerated bark and the liquid below as indicative of wounds, i.e., trees can suffer pain just like humans. She links these anthropomorphic resemblances to German mythological notions of trees as life-giving forces, emergent sentiments of German nationalism, and the Crucifixion's symbolic associations with the tree of salvation and Christ as the eventual giver of redemption and new life. On the whole, Amstutz's discussion of the Cologne and Berlin versions of *Oak Tree in the Snow* are both successful and compelling. However, she misidentifies the sky in the Berlin landscape as being primarily clear and blue (97) when in fact it is primarily overcast. Both renditions of the subject feature brooding stratus clouds that extend across the horizon line of trees and gradually break into cumulus clouds from the middle to the top of the sky in each composition.

In chapter 4 the discussion of anthropomorphism carries on with a concentration on the role of the eye and hand in Friedrich's *Willow Bushes with Low Sun* (ca. 1830–35) and *Rocky Ravine with Elbe Sandstone Mountains* (1822–23). In *Willow Bushes with Low Sun*, the author draws a parallel between the structure of the sun in the composition's sky and its respective chromatic zones and the three visible areas of the human eye: pupil, iris, and sclera. The tree branches and the dead twigs recall retinal nerves and veins and comprise an organic melding of forms that are pulled together to create an opening around the sun's corona. *Willow Bushes* reinterprets traditional Christian symbolism through landscape, whereby the eye of God evolves into a spiritual and figurative organ that is represented through the divine light of the sun. At the same time, this painting evokes the physiological conditions of seeing (actual observation) and the artist's radiating inner eye (imagination).

In the second part of the chapter, we learn how the hand was Friedrich's "vehicle" for the eye when he painted *Rocky Ravine with Elbe Sandstone Mountains*. The five rocky outcroppings that extend upward into the sky anthropomorphize the fingers of a hand and suggest that it might allude to God's "active hand" in nature. Alternatively, these geological formations represent an abstract self-portrait of the artist in which he metaphorically ties his "petrified" hand to the landscape, thereby forging a union between him and nature both during his life and after his death.

Continuing in this vein, Amstutz's final chapter examines the theme of death in works such as *Cemetery Entrance* (1825) and *Cemetery in the Snow* (1827). It is well known that this subject

preoccupied the artist for much of his career in part because so many of his family members and friends died during his lifetime. Amstutz observes, however, that death and life in the artist's works are mutually occurring in a reciprocal relationship (*Weschselverhältnis*). This rapport can be linked more broadly with metamorphosis and the change in seasons. In many of Friedrich's works focusing on death and life cycles, vitality and decay are juxtaposed. His pictures straddle both states of being and challenge purely binary allegorical interpretations of transience most often associated with his landscapes of this type. Amstutz somewhat unconvincingly argues that the recently buried corpse in *Cemetery Entrance* is decomposing and releasing gases into the air (in a process of chemical metamorphosis described by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling and Schubert), which according to her are suggested through the inclusion of the nebulous white outlines hovering slightly above the scene's middle ground. I would contend that this faint impression of a white figure resembles a specter or spirit ascending through the air more than a visibly decaying body of the deceased.

While notions of degeneration and morbidity are indeed suggested by the freshly dug grave in *Cemetery in the Snow*, the possibility of renewal, regeneration, and hope in the next life is also conveyed by our return to the earth, the melting snow on the ground, the fungus and plants that grow throughout the landscape, and the open graveyard entrance. In Friedrich's mind, upon death and burial, an individual is not obliterated but instead is destined to be reduced to his or her most essential elements. Thus, death is a recurring stage in the perpetuity of life in which the human body will inevitably become one with nature again.

Amstutz builds upon the work and approaches of Mitchell and Joseph Leo Koerner, exploring in innovative ways the diverse relationships that existed among nineteenth-century German landscape painting, contemporary scientific discourse, and *Naturphilosophie*, all of which uniquely intertwined during the period in question.^[3] Her methodology and concentration on Friedrich's late works set her apart from scholars such as Helmut Börsch-Supan, William Vaughan, Werner Hoffmann, and Christian Scholl, whose writings center on the earlier portion of his oeuvre and mainly focus on religion, allegory, and political history in relation to it. If Amstutz's readings of Friedrich's works of art are not always convincing, her carefully crafted analyses and interpretations nevertheless draw readers into the core of the artist's creative expression and technique and reveal his complex engagement with and response to the natural world. Significantly, the author encourages us to delve beyond the surface of his portraits of nature in order to consider the possibility of new, alternative meanings conveyed by them.

Overall, this monograph effectively achieves its key goals and tackles an ambitious subject that is both fascinating and multifaceted. With that said, this study could have benefitted from the omission or rephrasing of sweeping statements that are surprisingly contradicted in different parts of the text. For example, she writes: "His [Friedrich's] scant writings rarely reveal any meaningful engagement with the intellectual currents of the day, scientific, philosophical, or otherwise" (7). This assertion unfairly diminishes the importance of the artist's extant writings in relation to his creative process and expression and guiding philosophical principles, many of which are invaluable sources that allow us to gain an understanding of his work. As the book progresses, Amstutz refutes her initial remark by drawing upon many of Friedrich's aphorisms in analyzing and interpreting his imagery at

various points in the text. At the beginning of chapter 4, she similarly counters the notion that Friedrich's paintings are not rooted in early modern allegory and then later goes on to demonstrate how the artist adapted and reinterpreted such imagery found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German emblem books.

While it is important to discuss the Romantic scientific and philosophical discourses pertinent to Friedrich's art and cultural milieu, some of these could have been handled more economically. With a reduction in those discussions, more space could have been reserved for examining additional works by Friedrich that would have helped expand her investigation of anthropomorphism and metamorphosis, viz., *Dolmen in the Snow* (ca. 1807), *The Tree of Crows* (ca. 1822) and *Coastal Landscape* (ca. 1830). Apart from addressing the choice of subjects and approaches shared by Friedrich, Carus, and Philipp Otto Runge, Amstutz also might have compared their work to specific examples by other contemporary European and American artists, most notably Johann Christian Clausen Dahl, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Thomas Cole, and Asher B. Durand. While she begins to touch upon some common aims held by the German Romantics and Hudson River School artists, she does not fully develop how those painters' engagement with anthropomorphism paralleled or diverged from one another. Allocating more of the text to this topic could have provided fascinating insights onto the intersection of art and science on both sides of the Atlantic during the period in question.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, *Caspar David Friedrich, Nature and the Self* provides a host of fresh perspectives on the complex interrelationships among art, nature, science, and philosophy that converge in Friedrich's late paintings and drawings. As such, Amstutz's study opens the door for future research on a subject ripe with possibilities for further inquiry. This book does a great deal to broaden our understanding of Friedrich's artistic mind and oeuvre and enhance our appreciation of his introspective approach to landscape painting through an exploration of the self in nature. Furthermore, the author effectively validates the relevance and importance of anthropomorphism in understanding landscape painting, the world that exists around us, and the diverse roles that humans play in relation to nature as a whole.

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Notes

[1] For example, see Christian Scholl, *Romantische Malerei als neue Sinnbildkunst: Studien zu Bedeutungsgebung bei Philipp Otto Runge, Caspar David Friedrich und den Nazarenern* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2007); William Vaughan, *Friedrich* (London: Phaedon, 2004); Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich: Ästhetik und Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Werner Hoffmann, *Caspar David Friedrich*, trans. Mary Whittall, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Prestel, 1973).

[2] See Timothy F. Mitchell, *Art and Science in German Landscape Painting, 1770–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd edition (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 2009/1990).