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*On seeing in nature*

Indes mich wandernd durch die Weiten  
Des Seins Unendlichkeit ergreift,  
Indes mein Geist Vergangenheiten  
Und Zukunft augenblicks durchschweift

Eint sich das unermessne Viele  
Der Schmelzen ungebärd'ger Schwall  
Gebändigt zu dem einen Ziele  
Aus allen Dingen wird das All.

Da spür ich Leben rings empfahen  
Von neuem Atem Feld und Wald  
Und alles Ferne will sich nahen  
Und alles Nahe nimmt Gestalt.

Das aber ist des Wunders Fülle  
Wie Eines sich in Alles zweigt  
Aus Rätsels Haft gelöster Hülle  
Ein neues Rätsel fruchtbar steigt<sup>1</sup>

[As I wander through wide spaces, overcome by the infinity of being, as my  
mind roams in an instant through past and future,

Translation of 'Vom sehen in der Natur', *Blau-Weiss-Blätter: Führerzeitung: Breslauer Heft 2*, 8–10  
(1921): 133–44 [*Translator's note*. 'Führer' here refers to youth group leaders.]

1 These stanzas appear to have been written by Elias himself. It was a common practice amongst scholars of Elias's generation to compose verse or prose in the style of Greek, Roman and other authors. Elias wrote many poems of various types throughout his life, some of which were collected in his *Los der Menschen: Gedichte/Nachdichtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988).

## 6 EARLY WRITINGS

The multitudinous vastness, the restless flood of melting things are all made one, subdued by the single goal; all things become the universe. Now all around I feel new life, new breath enters field and wood, and all that's far seeks to draw near and all that's near takes on clear shape. But most miraculous of all is how one thing merges into all, and how, set free from the shell of mystery, a new and fruitful mystery arises.]

## I

Seeing in nature seems at first the simplest thing in the world. As we walk in the country we take pleasure in the changing landscape, climb a mountain and enjoy the beautiful view. And while art may demand the most diligent, detailed labour if one is to learn to see, nature appears to reveal its beauty to the eye directly and effortlessly. Despite these differences, a work of painting has much in common with a natural scene. Both are referred to not improperly as a 'picture', since in both cases a viewing subject stands opposed to something to be judged beautiful. But whereas, in the case of a painting, it can be readily understood why one thing represented – a tree, a human figure or a building – combines with another to form a painterly whole, since the artist's imagination has so ordained, it is by no means the same with landscape. How does it come about that tree and river, meadow and mountain, road and village likewise complement each other, form a pictorial unity and – what is still more remarkable – why are there no absolutely unsightly landscapes, while we must condemn as worthless countless paintings which lack this unity?

Whereas it is necessary to evaluate carefully the fluctuating artistic value of paintings, there is no such necessity in the case of landscape, which seems always unchanging. It is precisely this difference which provides at least a strong incentive to examine the individual element in a painting, to determine the authenticity of its particular representation and the way it is incorporated in the whole. An understanding of the value of a work of art emerges only gradually from a consideration of the details. In face of a landscape, by contrast, it is even uncertain where the noteworthy details actually are. What is it about their particular placement and integration in the whole that would merit investigation, in the sense that they might teach us how to see their unity anew and on a deeper level? More and more bushes, lakes and flowers meet the eye, no doubt of manifold kinds and

nuances, but the bush remains a bush, the flowers are flowers and the lake is a lake. What more could one learn to see in this? And yet all that in its totality, the landscape as such, seems more immediately overwhelming than the work of art.

## II

It is taken for granted today that nature is apprehended by those walking in the countryside in terms of its beauty, that is, from an aesthetic viewpoint, as landscape. Yet one is seldom aware that this way of looking emerged only gradually, in the Renaissance age.

It is customary to speak of that period as the age of awakening individuality. By this it is meant that here, for the first time, individual personalities not only played the most important roles but also became aware of themselves in their self-contained uniqueness. This form of consciousness is now accepted without hesitation as the self-evident attitude of human beings as such, while in reality it is only the attitude of the modern age. It was actually this consciousness of the self as sharply cut off within its own fate, standing opposed to every other self and to the whole world, as if separated from them by an abyss, which first converted nature into landscape.<sup>2</sup> A tacit assumption underlying the entire perception of nature as landscape is that the onlooker gazes at something opposite to and beyond himself, which always remains at a measured remoteness from his ego. Only when nature was viewed as a picture facing the human being was it possible to think of reproducing it in a painting, of transferring the three-dimensional natural space to the painted surface and expanding the picture space by means of perspective. From that time, through an inverse interpretation of natural space as picture space, nature was seen as landscape. However, in order to reveal what appears self-evident as merely a peculiarity of the modern age, and to make clear the nature of that peculiarity, it is necessary to give an account of another stage of consciousness, and therefore another stage in the way of seeing nature.

<sup>2</sup> This is Elias's first published formulation of what he would later call the *homo clausus* mode of self-experience.

## 8 EARLY WRITINGS

## III

Anyone who has gained access to the admirable world of the ancient Greeks must have wondered about the striking fact that these people, who lived in the most intimate association with nature, never actually depicted a landscape, and still less did they possess a word for the unknown concept. But it is equally strange that in this culture, which was rich in strong and distinctive personalities, the concept of personality was unknown.

The many constructions and interpretations of the Greek heritage generally obscure the deeper meaning of the Greek attitude to life, because they leave one thing out of account – that the Hellene could never have become conscious of himself as an absolutely separate entity, sharply distinct from the other. In their consciousness, individuals felt themselves strongly to be, beyond all the differences and contrasts, one with the other and with the world, encompassed by the single and eternal order of the universe. Living within this conception of the cosmos, the Greek was untroubled by the question which afflicts the modern age: here the solitary self, there the alien universe. And *noein*, *phronein*<sup>3</sup> – thinking itself – was not for them, as it often appears today, a subjective faculty of the individual, but a regularity, an order. This explains why Plato, at the high point of the Greek tradition, did not pose the question of the knowledge of goodness and truth as we are accustomed to do, with the knowing subject on one side and the dimly knowable world on the other. His question was directed at the being of goodness and truth, which is a being in the same way as a person, a number or an idea ‘is’.

The Greeks animated tree, mountain and sky with the same living gaze with which they looked upon the Olympic Games. Nature for them was no more a landscape confronting them than the racing youths, the public meetings, the daily bustle of Piraeus or the tragic dramas were merely an overwhelming spectacle. Only if we realise this will the secrets of the Greek attitude to life be revealed to our consciousness. We should never forget that their statues were not carved in order to present a

<sup>3</sup> The Greek words *noein* (νοεῖν) and *phronein* (φρονεῖν) refer to two types of thinking, respectively ‘intelligising’ and practical thinking. Elias’s argument in the text at this point is that the Greeks of antiquity did not experience their individuality so intensely as people today, which was reflected in the character of their philosophy. For the Greeks, the two words did not express two modes of the *subjective* capacity of an individual facing an alien and unknowable reality as they do today (there is a clear Kantian allusion here). Rather, they expressed the being, or regularity, of the world itself, as a single order.