

Earth Music:
a forthcoming book not written for tenure or a raise
John Conron

I expect to finish the writing of *Earth Music* by late summer 2007. The book considers the impact of the evolving master narratives of energy physics on early modernist American landscape painting, particularly on Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexican landscapes (c.1930-1946); John Marin’s Deer Isle sea- and landscapes (c. 1919-1930); and Charles Burchfield’s landscapes of western New York State (c. 1943-1967).

Darwinian biology is germinal to these (and other) twentieth-century landscapes, of course, but the advent of energy physics into the American imagination, even before the BOMB, made the relation of modernist landscapes to science more inclusive. The spaces around material forms were no longer empty, as Newton believed, but filled with moving and expanding fields of thermal, electromagnetic, gravitational and other forms of energy. The edges of material forms grow indeterminate. Surfaces took on auras, like nebulae, of the energies they both attracted and emitted. “We cannot imagine a definite surface,” wrote Einstein, “separating distinctly field and matter.” Matter was merely a more condensed form of energy.

Between 1900 and 1930, energy physics had a massive impact on earth sciences. Meteorology became a study of the thermodynamics of climate, seasons and weather; oceanography, a study of the effects of thermodynamic and gravitational energies on tides, currents and waves; “dynamic geology”, a study of the physics of thermal upthrust and weathering (erosion) in rock. Even ecology gravitated towards a study of the role of the physical energies of sunlight on biological and chemical energies: photosynthesis—the transformation of sunlight into wood—and dormancy and the pathways of the energy cycle in biotic communities. With this reinvigoration of the earth sciences, every part of a landscape— air, water, earth and the green plants— could be read as an interplay of energies and forces.

1. Setting. In the arts, the impact of energy physics was equally profound. For one thing, the notion of “setting,” drawn from drama, was joined if not displaced by that of “environment”— literally, “surrounding.” No more backdrops! Physical environments and their social equivalents not only immerse but influence: “flow into” the bodies and psyches of human beings as they do into the bodies of other living things. In narrative art, the actions of physical energies become powerful enough to initiate plots.

2. Synesthetic images. In painting, environments enlist all the senses in their representation, making synesthesia a necessary crucial element of representation. (One of my own initiations into modernist space took the form of learning how to move in wild spaces at night by “seeing” with my ears, nose, skin and kinesthetically, with the muscles of my legs and stomach. It was not simply an academic experience, and neither is reading the landscapes of modernist painter.) Recurrently Burchfield paints insect and bird sounds (like William Carlos Williams, he loved the raucous calls the best); he paints insect and bird flight, the smells of budding wildflowers from clover to nicotiana. O’Keeffe finds ways of making readers feel in their thighs her “soft and stubborn” red hills, as Marin does the waves and currents of Penobscot Bay. That requires the invention of visual equivalents for these kinesthetic experiences.

3. Recurrent images. The title of the book came early in the process. In *Composition*, a book crucial to the art education of all three (and other) painters, an art teacher named Arthur Dow showed how important is the artful composition of images into a significant design in twentieth-century painting. Since all three of my subjects practiced his lessons, the landscapes of all three make the leitmotif— the *repetition* of lines and colors: of images— the most reverberant strategy for composing landscapes. Arranged into a “rhythmical order,” leitmotifs in their partly expressive, partly representational painting can articulate both the music of earthly motion, like “ripples and rolling waves” and the movements of body and mind, including “the rhythms of breathing and walking” and those intense “emotion.”

Repetition, we hear and see, is most powerful when it incorporates the principle of variation: lines and colors situated at “unequal” intervals. Incremental repetition avoids repetitiousness: the “bad,” because predictable, patterns of railroad tracks, fences, doggerel rhyme. It relates spaces and forms within spaces by “delicate adjustments and balance of proportions tone and color.” That is where the title of my book comes from: *Earth Music*.

4. Image into symbol, image into narrative. For O’Keeffe, Marin and Burchfield (not to speak of Faulkner and Eliot, Gary Snyder and A. R. Ammons, incremental repetition expresses meaning as well as structural beauty in landscape. Images repeated, as Coleridge had said, become by definition symbolic. Images linked by leitmotif become, in Marin’s terms, “brothers and sisters” to each other.

Images sequenced along a visual path become by definition narrative: linked by time and contiguity as well as leitmotif: “next to” can be read as “before” or “after” or even “because of.” It was the symbolic and narrative character of European and Asian landscape painting through the seventeenth century, not their verisimilitude, Dow argues, that lifted them to the level of fine art.

5. Abstraction. How do you make visible states of energy that are invisible? Burchfield's quite definitive answer allows a good enough entrance into O'Keeffe (especially the radiations from her Texas suns) and Marin (especially the push/pull of gravity and buoyancy in his sailing vessels) as well. Burchfield's inventions of "semi-abstract" images, whose signifiers can be understood contextually, intuitively and conceptually, made him able to visualize wind fields, photosynthesis, the push/pull of atmospheric energies and a dozen other phenomena science had described as real. These were abstractions "from the life: their authority derives more from science than from experience.

Abstractions "from the mind," however, were visual expressions of mental states: of moods; of intensely contemplative and even visionary responses to the natural world; of liminal promptings from "the sub-conscious," which expressed itself, among other ways, in a lyric and symbolic imagery. The landscapes of the three painters include both kinds of abstractions.

6. Lyricized images. Like Ezra Pound, the three painters evolved an art of images superimposed on other images as a way of combining subjectivity with the empirical narration required to recover images from the world's flow of energies and forces. Images could be transformed into metaphors or symbols not only by the syntax of the leitmotif, but also by the syntax of superimposition: the setting of one image or "one idea . . . on . . . top of another," just as in Ezra Pound's poem: "In a Station of the Metro// The apparition of these faces in the glass:/ Petals on a wet black bough."

Pound's superimposition of the image of flowering petals on a wet petalled bough, separated by a colon from an abstract image (an "apparition"!) in a subway, he declared "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."

It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

The superimposition joins signifieds and signifiers into a symbolic syntax. On Pound's image of ghostly heads in the windows of the subway cars, his image of petals on a wet, black tree bough elaborates both images: shiny steel glinting ("wet") in the darkness (black") of the round tunnel ("bough"); apparitional faces, "petal"-like as if blooming from an underground darkness. But then see what the petals imply about the "apparition of these faces."

Among the three landscape painters, such images such images as O'Keeffe's ladders, flowers and skulls afloat in space or Burchfield's recurrent superimpositions of wings or flames on trees, shrubs, wildflowers and clouds express the emotional and conceptual impact of natural events on a consciousness stirred by the senses. Like Pound's superimposed "petals," they present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.

7. The modernism of it. In these landscapes, modernity takes place not so much in François Lyotard's "withdrawal of the real" as in the both the presentation and the destabilization of the real, but modernity is defined in them, too, "according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable, it is possible, within this relation, to distinguish two modes (to use the musician's language).

The emphasis can be placed on the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything. The emphasis can be placed, rather, on the power of the faculty to conceive, on its 'inhumanity' so to speak (it was the quality Apollinaire demanded of modern artists), since it is not the business of our understanding whether or not human sensibility or imagination can match what it conceives. The emphasis can also be placed on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other The nuance that distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece, are almost indistinguishable; and yet they testify to a difference on which the fate of thought depends and will depend for a long time, between regret and assay.

François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?"

What does this say to readers? It can ask those of you who contemplate an academic life or a writer's life to imagine where and who you are when the assignments stop, as they will, and when you come make your own assignments, as you will if you continue to write. Make them out of what gives you joy (it may be fear, at first), instead of what you think you're supposed to do. Joy is a more durable as well as a more moving (and a more difficult) motive to write from. You are freer than you may think. When you can envision writing something with joy, you can begin doing it even before the assignments end.