Prolegomenon

Poetical Painting should come naturally to the English, actually it is rare. Many English painters have attempted poetical subjects, few have painted poetically.
[Kenneth Clark,] Anonymous Introduction to Exhibition, Rosenberg and Helft, 1938
(Tate Gallery Archives, TGA 836/1)

One is never quite finished with Graham Sutherland.
A friend

The structure of the natural world was vital to Graham Sutherland's art. In 1977, he wrote to the author,

> Really Pembrokeshire or any other place for me is a 'point de depart', that is to say, it is a vocabulary of forms. These by their rhythmic relationship to each other and by their internal rhythms and character, appeal to me at the point where they are free more or less from their environment and then ready to lead a new life in pictorial form. (Letter to author, GA/RT archive)

Although certain places may have provided the source of his inspiration, he never intended that any painting should specifically represent an exact place at a particular time, though he later talks of the setting sun.

Sutherland was stimulated quintessentially by the natural origins of living matter, but he was similarly and also intellectually concerned with how his individual discoveries and means of interpreting certain organic constructions could be adapted and made acceptable to a European art-buying public. When Sutherland began to paint seriously in the mid-1930s, he carefully prepared an artistic career by considering the type of contemporary painting then selling in Europe. Certain patterns which excited him were, he felt, parallel to ideas being formed by the modern Romantics there. Robert Melville suggested, 'Sutherland is influenced and fascinated by the forms which he isolates from a countryside for intimate portraiture and which he imbues with energies beyond their nature' (from *Graham Sutherland with an Introduction by Robert Melville*, The Ambassador Editions. H.P. Juda, London, 1950: unpaginated).

When the Graham and Kathleen Foundation at Picton Castle in Pembrokeshire opened in 1976, he said, 'I think paintings are best seen in the places where they were inspired'. Yet, as previously stated, he didn't like the exact location specified. The landscape images, especially those of the sea and wind and erosion around the Welsh shores, were never factual representations, but came from an amalgam of natural objects derived from a variety of sources, allowed to filter through his mind and recreated in the new context of a composition. At the same time, however, these remained closely related to their actual origins. 'The painting', he wrote to the author in 1978, 'has to reveal itself gradually or immediately by itself and on its own merit – but of course it is interesting to see the source [of inspiration] as in Van Gogh or Cézanne' (GS notes of RT original text, 1978, GA/RT archive).

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So strong was the influence of Pembrokeshire that its memory permeated much of his work after his first visit there in 1934. Even in the giant hieratic tapestry of Coventry Cathedral, one senses the communication with west Wales. With the eye of a scientist, Sutherland unravelled the complex structure of nature, then recreated it using varying perspectives, scales and colours. He shaped his images, not in a flash but through quiet, lengthy and sustained study.

> The objects which I paint do in fact exist in nature. But I do not think people are willing to look at objects in nature divorced from their context. I think that people looking at a landscape, for instance, expect a landscape painter to paint a scenic view, and my particular preoccupation in landscape's [*sic*] bound up in a desire to divorce some of the objects which one sees from their [context] and to treat them as things having intrinsic value of their own . . . giving it a heightened form of realism. (Walker, Myerscough, 'Modern Art explained by Modern Artists', *The Artist*, March 1944)

> I feel that an artist's business is to find an equivalent to the things which give him his idea, an equivalent which derives its life from being a 'work of art', rather than a 'work of nature'. The prototype in nature has got to be seen through terms of art. A metamorphosis has to take place. That is to say it is necessary to project and paraphrase the object or objects in nature in terms of art. . . . The aim of a painter . . . seems to me to be bound up with his ability to be able to select certain aspects of what he has seen and felt, and, as it were, to caricature the 'essence' or the 'gesture' of reality. In so doing he must necessarily be less concerned with the scene as a view. . . . (Ibid)

> What I believe one has to realise is that most of the raw material which I use as a subject out of doors, in the woods and so on, is on the whole unfamiliar to people because they do not naturally look at it. I try to separate things from their environment; if they 'are' in an environment, they are camouflaged, as it were, and hidden. (Interview with Forge, Andrew, 'Landscape and Figures', *The Listener*, 26 July 1962)

> The quality which I felt when I was about ten of being in a wood, or at the side of a river, the warmth of the summer sun, was a thing which still stays with me, and I get enormously moved by this curious quality of enclosure . . . of being inside a jewel. . . . (Ibid)

Again, Graham Sutherland writes:

> The nature of poetic response is something outside ourselves – sudden recognition. The need to paraphrase as this recognition unadulterated would bore us? Recognition of the truth, the shiver down the spine, the ordering by the brain, civilisation, nothing to do with the process neither culture but these are helped by this outsidedness. (TGA 812/49m, 'A sketchbook – Affinities and the Nature of Poetic Response')

When Paul Nash writes of the contrast between Bawden and Sutherland, he says:

> Sutherland presents an entire contrast [in] *Road with Rocks*, (undated). The whole conception is nebulous and abstract, the method fluid, almost precipitate. A feeling of nervous, scarcely controlled energy pervades the drawing, yet it achieves a subtle harmonious unity. Its whole atmosphere is evocative, its message lyrical. (Nash, Paul, 'New Draughtsmen', *Signature*, 1 November 1935)

The comparison is evident much later with Sutherland's *Rocky Plain*, 1951 (pencil and gouache) and Edward Bawden's watercolour *The Bloody Foreland VI* (date unknown). Both works have a rhythmic and sensuous quality which begin to hint at Cézanne's *Mont Ste Victoire* series. Robert Melville further explains:

> Sutherland's solution, exemplified in the watercolours . . . is two-fold: on the one hand, he drops all the devices for the direct representation of space, and concentrates upon a moderate rendering of the volumes of the objects which inhabit space: on the other, he brings earth and sky into the same arc of the colour circle, treating them as if they were the 'sol y ombra' the yellow and orange of a cubist guitar, and identifies them in their already drastically mitigated difference with an equal density of hue. (Sutherland, Graham, *Graham Sutherland with an Introduction by Robert Melville*, The Ambassador Editions. H.P. Juda, London, 1950: unpaginated)

> The line ponders the strains and stresses of growth; [he] is, I think, the greatest colourist this country has

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> ever had. His colour, which is organic and functional, is nevertheless not always to be found in the object that provides the material for the picture. It settles upon the object as if by natural attraction. One aspect of his approach to colour may be found in his own words. (Evans, Myfanwy, *The Painter's Object*, Amo Press, London, 1937)

The minutiae of an area rather than the grand landscape excited Sutherland's imagination, although often he would observe in Pembrokeshire natural forms, such as sea-eroded rocks, 'precisely reproducing in miniature the forms of the inland hills'. Sometimes it was only when he returned to a place, 'when the light had thrown up some unexpected form', that a subject would reveal itself and he felt impelled to notate it: as many as twenty drawings might result from a single encounter. These drawings were then paraphrased and translated into their pictorial reincarnation without losing the structure and feeling of the original object. Many of them are untidy and unclearly titled and leave the researcher guessing at Sutherland's intention. The use of unusual and unexpected colour to convey tone, gave the final image a romantic and fluent language. It remained important to him that in the ultimate analysis of a painting, the 'first frisson of an encounter' be felt. He was guided and inspired largely by a philosophy of his own, rooted in nature, although contemporary influences are also quite evident. A painting for him was 'a separate entity, related to its source, yet self existing'.

From the beginning of his career, Sutherland was totally committed – many would say ambitious – to the professional and commercial aspects of his work, while never losing the integrity of the individual artistic process. His life was a series of paradoxical thoughts and inspirations, which in turn created the energy to work. He was admired principally for his vision, talent and inventiveness. Having once established a theme, he pursued it with many variations which, when he gained acceptance, won him recognition throughout the world.

Sutherland maintained a strict daily routine. After the late 1960s, he spent some three months a year in Pembrokeshire. The other months were divided between his homes in France and Kent, with an annual summer visit to Venice; however, wherever he lived, he followed the same regime. He did not like the wind, rain and damp, but he found such weather conditions more compatible to his working schedule in Pembrokeshire than similar conditions would have done in France. This he attributed to the extraordinary quality of light found in Pembrokeshire.

It was difficult to imagine that the figure who stumped through estuaries and over scrub near St. Brides Bay was a painter. Immaculately dressed in his decorative trousers, Jermyn Street shirts, covert coat, fur-lined mackintosh, mariner's cap and large wellington boots, he looked far more like the archetypal city businessman on holiday than an artist with a secret mission, scrutinising the anatomy of rock formations. When asked why he wore the mariner's cap, he replied 'Well I'm really a frustrated mariner . . . Have you ever seen Leonardo's 'Waves?' I began to understand his feeling (Conversation with RT, 1976, GA/RT archive).

The author appreciated this sentiment, recognising the many hours spent walking through estuaries and over scrub, observing the pattern of bird flight and rest. Graham Sutherland became an international figure and his principal collectors, and latterly his friends, were Italians. He was European by virtue of his lifestyle, but he believed that 'no one can get out of their genealogical tree. Something comes out of the country where you were born, you cannot avoid it'. In a letter to the author, he added the words of Cocteau, 'the more a painter sings in his genealogical tree, the more his singing is in tune'.

> There is a steady consistency in his [Sutherland's] evolution. 'Steadiness and consistency were not incompatible with moments of exhilarating discovery'. (Rothenstein, Sir John, *Modern English Painters, Wood to Hockney*, Macdonald and Janes, London, 1976)

> And it has also been said on rare occasions that there was no clearly defined sense of evolution in his development. (Ibid)

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