

The Ut Pictura Poesis Tradition
and English Neo-Classical Landscape Poetry

Flemming Olsen

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Landscape Poetry

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 7

CHAPTER ONE
THE PARALLEL 9

CHAPTER TWO
THE PARALLEL IN THE NEO-CLASSICAL AGE 11

CHAPTER THREE
NEO-CLASSICAL AESTHETICS 27

CHAPTER FOUR
LOCUS AMOENUS AND THE PASTORAL
LANDSCAPE. EARLIER LANDSCAPES 45

CHAPTER FIVE
NEO-CLASSICISM AND LANDSCAPES 55

CHAPTER SIX
SOME OBSTACLES TO THE EMERGENCE OF THE
LANDSCAPE POEM AS A LITERARY GENRE 65

CHAPTER SEVEN
FACTORS FAVOURING THE EMERGENCE AND
ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORTHODOX NEO-
CLASSICAL TYPE OF LANDSCAPE POEM 73

CHAPTER EIGHT
FROM TOPOS TO GENRE 87

CHAPTER NINE
THE INGREDIENTS OF THE
NEO-CLASSICAL LANDSCAPE POEM 97

CHAPTER TEN
SOME EXAMPLES ILLUSTRATING THE NEO-CLASSICAL
LANDSCAPE CONVENTION IN POETRY 121

CHAPTER ELEVEN
THE CRUMBLING OF THE CANON 165

CHAPTER TWELVE
THE LANDSCAPES OF JAMES THOMSON'S SEASONS 201

CONCLUSION 217

BIBLIOGRAPHY 235

NOTES 261

INDEX 271

INTRODUCTION

This book investigates some assumptions within Neo-Classical aesthetics that were derived from the recognized parallel between painting and poetry as epitomized in the Horatian dictum *ut pictura poesis*. It analyses the application of the principle to one genre, viz. the poetic description of landscape, with particular reference to the period approximately 1680-1730.

Those years witness a twofold change of convention or “taste”, as the Neo-Classicists themselves would have put it: artistically as far as the theme of landscape description was concerned, and psychologically in regard to the acceptance and understanding of it.

The year 1680 has been chosen as one of the two lines of demarcation – allowance being made for some background information and one or two earlier specimens of landscape poetry, among them, of course, the two versions of Denham’s *Cooper’s Hill* – because it is around that year that theoretical preoccupation with criticism and with what literature “ought to be” gains in solidity. Leibnitz said that “*finis seculi novam rerum faciem aperuit*”,¹ the last quarter of the century witnesses the beginning of a new order of things, heralded by the influence of French critics like Rapin and Boileau. Between 1680 and 1684, there were no less than four English translations of Horace’s *Ars poetica*. Some of the translators accompanied their versions in the vernacular with comments on, and elucidation of, the thoughts of the original, which means that they had to make up their minds about the implications of the Horatian precepts, among them *ut pictura poesis*.

The year 1730 has been chosen as the other limit because by then James Thomson's *Seasons* had been completed. The tendencies and developments to be analysed in the following pages did not come to a stop in 1730, but *The Seasons* – to which full justice will not be done in this book – is, besides being several other things, a brilliant perfection of the Neo-Classical landscape genre.

The term Neo-Classicism is used as the common denominator of a number of attitudes and tendencies, which will be discussed later in the book, rather than as a designation of a clearly delimited period of time.

The book's thesis is that some characteristics of the Neo-Classical landscape poem can be accounted for in terms of the aesthetics of the age, an important aspect of which was the *ut pictura poesis* axiom. Neo-Classical landscapes are not only far more inclusive than those of other traditions, which tend to be selective because they are frequently little more than stylized stereotypes. They are also far more attentive to colour than earlier landscapes. The fact that they are often more photographic does not prevent them from being social and political analogues.

The subject of the book is one corner of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, not an exhaustive history of its treatment and development. Nor is the book a description of landscape description as such.

It is an almost exclusive literary undertaking; the art of painting will only sporadically be referred to, also because Neo-Classical poets, critics and theorists make very scant reference to concrete paintings or names of painters.