Buildings, Landscapes, and Regimes of Materiality¹

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Landscapes, we are assured by the organisers of the Royal Historical Society symposium, *Putting History in its Place*, ‘are not merely canvasses on which human action is played out, but constitute active social and cultural agents in producing change.’ During the course of our discussions we witnessed just how that might work out across a range of landscapes and a broad swathe of periods and places. Of course, as a modernist, there is always a fear that my subject is simply not as exotic or as exciting as those that went before – and the fact that my paper came last of all only enhanced that fear. But let me start with a modern – a twentieth-century – example of the power of place, nonetheless: one every bit as odd as anything from the early-modern or medieval eras, and one that raises – I believe – an important range of issues for historians of all periods.

I want to begin with a story taken from an autobiography published in 1994: the memoirs of Sir Kenneth Dover, a classicist, a rationalist, and a man, as one biographer notes, almost painfully determined to expose his own experiences ‘to critical scrutiny’.² Recalling his time in the Royal Artillery regiment as it swept through Italy in the latter part of the Second World War, Dover remarks on a somewhat surprising event which occurred in the

¹ My sincere thanks to Jennifer Hillman, Tom Pickles and Katherine Wilson for the invitation to speak, and to the Royal Historical Society for its support. I have explored some of the ideas in this paper at conferences in Belfast, London, and Oxford and am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to develop them over a number of years. I must also thank Dan Hicks and Sim Koole for bibliographical suggestions, and – as always – acknowledge my debts to Zoë Waxman for her invaluable help and advice.

² Stephen Halliwell, ‘Dover, Sir Kenneth James (1920–2010), Greek scholar and college head.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 13 Apr. 2018. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-102682>; see also D. A. Russell & F S Halliwell, ‘Dover, Kenneth James, 1920–2010’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* XI (2012), pp. 153–175.

mountains of Campagna, just a few miles south of the commune of Mignano Monte Luca. ‘It was’, writes Dover

an absolutely still day, with a blue sky from one horizon to the other, and the Matese massif was covered from end to end with snow. The scene struck directly at my penis, so I sat down on a log and masturbated; it seemed the appropriate response.

What, though, is the appropriate response of the historian to this rather unlikely reminiscence? For journalists in the mid-1990s, who headed a report of Dover’s disclosure ‘Oxford Don Takes Memoirs in Hand’, this was simply a laughing matter. For the author himself, anxious – in his own words – to avoid the suggestion that his recollections amounted to nothing more than *Confessions of a Wanker*, and keen, presumably, to distinguish his writings from the shame-faced masturbatory memoirs of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this physical, sexual response to a landscape could be simply and easily rationalized. ‘The explanation of such events’, Dover concludes, ‘is scientific rather than philosophical.’³ In other words, he saw this somehow as a natural response: natural in the sense that this was a simple, physiological reaction; and natural, too, in that it reflected some primal, essential, subconscious connection between a man and the natural world.

Clinicians are inclined to agree. Certainly, a recent encyclopaedia of human sexuality notes that it is not untypical for ‘a person so inclined’ to respond erotically to ‘a pleasing landscape or art work’.⁴ But philosophers might well beg to differ. Indeed, for the political philosopher Jane Bennett, considering what she calls ‘the sex appeal of the inorganic’ opens up all sorts of questions about human relationships with – and responsibility for – the

³ Kenneth Dover, *Marginal Comment: a memoir* (London, 1994), p. 114.

⁴ Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, eds., *Human Sexuality: an encyclopaedia* (New York and London, 2013), p. 54.

environment.⁵ And for historians, of course, Dover offers a self-evidently inadequate account. Far from exposing this experience to critical scrutiny, his recourse to the rhetoric of nature and science ducks the important question of what was actually happening on that mountainside in Italy in 1944.

In the first place, as Dover, the author of a pioneering work on *Greek Homosexuality*, was well aware, sexuality and sexual practice are never just about science.⁶ They have a history. And masturbation has a history every bit as rich and interesting as any other aspect of the history of sex (given its apparently perennial popularity, it can hardly not).⁷ Secondly, and every bit as importantly, ‘nature’ is a category that cannot – or, at any rate – should not be reduced to the simply or supposedly ‘scientific’. As the huge and ever-expanding field of environmental history continues to demonstrate, nature has a history too.⁸ Even Dover’s sense that he was witnessing a ‘scene’ – a landscape maybe – reveals his place within history: for both the notion of the scenic and the scene he describes have a history; they offer a glimpse of that most modern category, one defined by Edmund Burke in 1757 – the category of the sublime.⁹ Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* (1818) may have been doing nothing more alarming than gazing out into the mountains, but the sensibility depicted here is exactly that with which Dover identifies.¹⁰ And in Friedrich’s other paintings

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC, 2010), p. 61. In this, she follows the terminology coined by Mario Perniola.

⁶ Though it must be said his references to masturbation are somewhat reductive, see, eg., Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 148.

⁷ Thomas Lacqueur, *Solitary sex: a cultural history of masturbation* (New York, 2003). On the silences surrounding the subject in history, see David Stevenson, ‘Recording the Unspeakable: masturbation in the diary of William Drummond, 1657-1659’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000), pp. 223-239.

⁸ For a useful introduction, see Andrew C. Isenberg, ‘Introduction; a new environmental history’, in Andrew C. Isenberg, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 1-22.

⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford, 2015), esp. pp. 34, 47, 109-11. The sublimated sexuality of Burke’s sublime is discussed in Richard C. Sha, *Perverse Romanticism: aesthetics and sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832* (Baltimore, 2009), pp. 166-71. The extent to which a ‘sexual element’ is always found in the sublime is briskly summarized in Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven and London, 2011), p. 269.

¹⁰ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London, 2009), p. 212-13.

of the German alps, we see not just the same sensibility but the same aesthetic.¹¹ Dover's response in that way, too, was particular: shaped not just by science (whatever that means), but by history.

Yet even this conclusion does not go far enough. It is clearly important that we don't simply replace abstract 'science' with an equally abstract 'history' when trying to explain Dover's experience. Even when contextualized within the history of sexuality and the history of landscape, there remains a question at the heart of his account: the question with which this symposium sought to grapple; the question of agency. Dover's description is intriguing. He sketches in the scene – the 'blue sky', the snow-covered mountains – and then observes that this 'struck directly at my penis'; masturbation, he concludes, 'seemed the appropriate response.' But who is doing what in this recollection? Should we see Dover as the only active agent here? Or should we take seriously his implication – an implication he does not explore, and perhaps was not even conscious of evoking – that he was somehow responding to something the landscape was in some way doing to him?

These are crucial questions – critically important for anyone trying to put history back into its place, and vital for understanding landscapes and buildings in the past. For one of the most remarkable developments in scholarly life over the last two decades or so has been not just the renewed emphasis on objects and things which might be summed up in the 'material turn', but also – associated with, but distinct from this fashion – what appears to be a more profound re-enchantment of the world.¹² Anthropologists like Tim Ingold have re-animated animist notions of objects and landscapes.¹³ Art historians like W. J. T. Mitchell have likewise returned to questions of totemism and fetishism and even asked the question 'what

¹¹ Werner Hofmann, *Caspar David Friedrich* (London, 2005), trans. Mary Whitall, pp. 22, 25.

¹² See especially Graham Harvey, *Animism: respecting the living world* (London, 2017), pp. 213-30.

¹³ Tim Ingold, 'Rethinking the animate, reanimating thought', *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* (2006) 71:1, pp. 9-20.

do pictures want?’¹⁴ Archaeologists like Chris Gosden have widened this quest, not only enquiring ‘What do objects want?’, but also ‘emphasizing the manner in which things create people’.¹⁵ Philosophers like Jane Bennett have self-consciously sought to articulate what she describes as an ‘enchanted materialism’;¹⁶ a ‘childlike sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not.’¹⁷

And this re-enchantment of the world has – perhaps perforce – a special purchase on the study of the landscape: one that can be seen in the work of Ingold on perceptions of the environment,¹⁸ or Mitchell on landscape and power.¹⁹ Indeed, the landscape has become the site of a particular sort of enchantment: an unlikely mysticism which affects even those who seem to fight shy of the mystical. How else, for instance, to explain the ways in which avowedly post-humanist writers like social and political theorist Diana Coole are now nonetheless willing to approve such gnomic, quasi-mystical comments as those of Cezanne, as quoted by that other great mystic Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness’?²⁰

This twenty-first century re-enchantment of the world is almost – though perhaps not quite – as surprising as Kenneth Dover’s decision to drop his trousers atop that Italian hill. After all, the disenchantment of the world was meant to be a characteristic of modernity. Indeed, for Weber, it is the definitive aspect of modernity; ‘the key concept within Weber’s account of the distinctiveness and significance of Western culture’, as Ralph Schroder once

¹⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The lives and loves of images* (Chicago and London, 2005).

¹⁵ Chris Gosden, ‘What Do Objects Want?’, *Journal of Archaeological method and Theory* 12 (2005), pp. 193–211, p. 194.

¹⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: attachments, crossings, and ethics* (Princeton, 2011), p. 92

¹⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham NC and London, 2010), p. 20.

¹⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling, and skill* (new ed.; London and New York, 2011).

¹⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (2nd ed.; Chicago and London, 2002).

²⁰ Quoted in Diana Colle, ‘The Inertia of Matter and the Generality of Flesh’, in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New materialisms: ontology, agency, and politics* (Durham NC and London, 2010), pp. 92–115, p. 104. Compare this to the assertion on p. 20 of the introduction that this is a ‘posthumanist’ study.

observed.²¹ Sociologists and historians, at least until recently, embraced disenchantment as an unquestioned fact: tracing the *Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* with the saintly Owen Chadwick,²² or uncovering the vestigial, atrophying remains of *Religion in Secular Society* with the equally proper but infinitely more sceptical Bryan Wilson.²³

The disenchantment of the world also meant the disenchantment of the landscape, of course, and in the distinguished form of Keith Thomas – Dover’s successor as President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, by the way – disenchantment found its prophet. *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and *Man and the Natural World* (1983) were both, in a sense, Weberian, and both traced disenchantment – even alienation – from the world. ‘The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, Thomas concludes, ‘had seen a fundamental departure from the assumptions of the past.’²⁴ That departure – that disenchantment – was, it is clear, both product and progenitor of modernity. It is thus especially telling that in her brilliant book of 2011, *The Reformation of the Landscape*, Alexandra Walsham reaches quite the contrary conclusion. Covering a still greater period than Keith Thomas, she finds no disenchantment; rather, Walsham observes that ‘the overall effect of the religious, intellectual, and cultural movements’ she outlines ‘was to redefine rather than remove the presence of the sacred in the material world.’²⁵

What accounts for this re-enchantment? How, in the forty years between *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and *The Reformation of the Landscape* could scholars have come to

²¹ Ralph Shroeder, ‘Disenchantment and its discontents: Weberian perspectives on science and technology’, *The Sociological Review* 43:2 (1995), pp. 227–250, p. 228. See also Richard Jenkins, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium’, *Max Weber Studies* 1 (2000) pp. 11-32.

²² Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975).

²³ Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

²⁴ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London, 1983), p. 90.

²⁵ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: religion, identity, and memory in early modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011), p. 567.

differ so much? There are doubtless many explanations – generational, political, methodological. In the short space available to me, I can only gesture towards some of the key themes and most important works. An undeniably important development was what has become known as the material turn: a move or movement which, as we all know, emerged out of a deepening dissatisfaction with the linguistic turn;²⁶ a dissatisfaction voiced most forcefully by the Italian theorist Roberto Esposito in his ringing declaration that ‘By transforming the thing into a word, language empties of it of reality’;²⁷ and a process rather wonderfully illustrated in A. S. Byatt’s novel of 2001, *The Biographer’s Tale*, which opens with a postgraduate, poststructuralist student, sitting bored in an English literature class, pondering the ‘fatal family likeness’ of all his seminars. ‘We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lies and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying’, he observes. As his lecturer expatiates on Lacan and Freud once again, he concludes that he has had enough. ‘I thought,’ he writes, ‘I must have things.’²⁸ That a whole generation of scholars has agreed explains much about scholarship since then.

This search for things has been accompanied – and energized – by a renewed interest in the history of the body and in the history of emotions. Both have redirected our attention towards traditions of thought – especially phenomenology in its various different forms – that seek self-consciously to re-enchant. Heidegger is a continual reference point here; as is Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Without their example, the work of philosophers like Edward Casey or archaeologists like Christopher Tilley would be unimaginable.²⁹ Without Tilley or

²⁶ Dan Hicks, ‘The Material Cultural Turn: event and effect’, in Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry, eds., *The Oxford handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 25-99.

²⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things* (trans Zakiya Hanafi; Cambridge, 2015), p. 9.

²⁸ A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer’s Tale* (London, 2001), pp. 1-2.

²⁹ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: towards a renewed understanding of the place-world* (2nd ed.; Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009); Christopher Y. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: places, paths and monuments* (London, 1994).

Casey, the history of landscape, in particular, would be very different indeed.³⁰ Other theorists, like the French philosopher and historian Michel Serres, have also offered a phenomenologically-informed approach which seeks to re-enchant. ‘We consider a landscape, as a whole and in detail,’ he writes in his influential tract on *The Five Senses*, ‘it considers us as a landscape.’³¹

There is, of course, an ethical dimension to all this. The contemporary re-enchantment of the world owes much to anxieties about the environment – especially human-made climate change. In Jane Bennett’s words, the project of imputing agency to the world is driven by the ‘hunch ... that the image of dead and thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.’³² There is also a hope that a re-enchanting world will find space for a more progressive politics. Breaking down the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human, it is argued, will also break down divisions between people. Recognizing the entanglement of matter and meaning, humans and the world in which they live, suggests Karen Barad, in a book which draws on quantum physics to make its point, will enable the creation of an ecological, egalitarian, feminist political philosophy. ‘We are of the universe’, she concludes, ‘there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming.’³³

All these forces – intellectual, ethical, and, doubtless, simply professional – have been given further impetus by wider historical changes. I can only sketch them in for now; but they do need to be acknowledged. The fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of fundamentalist

³⁰ Tilley is, for example, cited in Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, p. 6. Casey has proved influential in the work of historians like Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, architecture, and sacred places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2015), p. 277.

³¹ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: a philosophy of mingled bodies* (trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley; London, 2016), p. 51.

³² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. ix.

³³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham NC and London, 2007), p. 396.

religion has had a shattering effect on modernization theory, with its assumption of a secular future for all.³⁴ The relative decline of the west has also led to questions about what was believed to be its normative path to modernity. For whilst modernization theory – with all its disenchantments – has retained a surprising purchase in precisely those parts of the world that seem to challenge it most, the rise of the rest and slide of the west have had their effects.³⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* is a good example of this – and the fact it concludes with a discussion of magic is emblematic of the ways in which enchantment and re-enchantment have become important parts of a broader challenge to a monolithic notion of modernity.³⁶ Similar themes can be found in the work of that great founding father of actor-network-theory, Bruno Latour.³⁷ Indeed, with his bold claim that *We Have Never Been Modern* and in his most recent book *Facing Gaia* we encounter the intriguing entanglement of material agency, political idealism, doubts about modernization theory, and a certain amount of mysticism or even enchantment.³⁸

So much for the present day. My reason for spending such a long time outlining this context is not just that much writing on the material turn seems to ignore or downplay the process of re-enchantment which has become such an important part of it. It is also – indeed, it is pre-eminently – because our early twenty-first century experience is so remarkably reminiscent of an earlier, an early-nineteenth-century moment. The eighteenth century was, as numerous scholars have noted, a period of disenchantment. Inheritors of the Cartesian

³⁴ The changing atmosphere is wonderfully summed up in the work of the sociologist Steve Bruce – from *God is Dead: secularization in the West* (London, 2002) to *Secularization: in defence of an unfashionable theory* (Oxford, 2011).

³⁵ See, for instance, James Fergusson, *Expectations of Modernity: myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999). I explore some of these themes in William Whyte, 'Modernism, Modernisation, and Europeanisation in West African Architecture, 1944-1994', in Martin Conway and Kiran Klaus Patel, eds., *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century: historical approaches* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 210-28.

³⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton and Oxford, 2000), pp. 240-43.

³⁷ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of Factish God* (Durham NC, 2010), p. 61.

³⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter; Cambridge, Mass, 1993); *Facing Gaia: eight lectures on the new climatic regime* (trans. Catherine Porter; Cambridge, 2017).

dualism against which so many of our contemporary writers now rail; disciples of the Newtonian worldview with its fixed laws and predictable causality; imbibers of the Kantian notion of matter as essentially inert and passive: the thinkers of the age of the Enlightenment are in all sorts of ways precisely those sorts of people who helped shape the modernization thesis and who saw the disenchantment of the world as a necessary, desirable end.³⁹

To be sure, we now know much more the ways in which this disenchantment proved partial, fragmentary, episodic. We understand that the eighteenth century found room for miracles and Enlightenment; for the alchemy as well as the physics of Newton; for much magical thinking.⁴⁰ It is now pretty uncontroversial to argue, as Paul Kléber Monod does in a recent book, that the period ‘witnessed a remarkable revival of occult thinking.’⁴¹

Yet even if one acknowledges that the eighteenth-century experience and understanding of the world was more complex and multifaceted than a simple caricature of Enlightenment ideals might suggest, the truth remains that ‘the modern scopic regime’, as Martin Jay puts it, did apparently ‘triumph’ in this period.⁴² With this triumph came a celebration of the enlightened individual’s subjectivity: a focus on the distance between the viewer and that which was viewed; a disenchantment of a sort precisely because it emphasized the dynamic role of the observer and the passive role of the world around him (and it was almost always him). This was a development which united those who, following Locke, were fundamentally empiricist and those who, following Descartes, preferred to focus

³⁹ See especially Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: a philosophical history* (Berkeley, 1997). For Kant, for instance, the sublime and sexual experience detailed by Kenneth Dover would be simply the consequence of - somewhat disordered - mental process. ‘Sublimity’, he observes, ‘does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind’: Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford, 1952), trans. James Creed Meredith, p. 114.

⁴⁰ Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven and London, 2006); Rob Iliffe, *Priest of Nature: the religious worlds of Isaac Newton* (Oxford, 2017).

⁴¹ Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: the occult in the age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London, 2013), p. 227.

⁴² Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (Berkeley, 1994), p. 105.

on how the mind interpreted sensation. For both occultist and rationalist, too – and for those who were both – the material world was subject to man; not a force in its own right. It was an odd consensus oddly summed up in the aesthetic theorist William Gilpin's disagreements with his neighbour William Lock in 1769. 'I have had a dispute lately', he wrote, 'on an absurd vulgar opinion, which he holds – *that we see with our eyes*; whereas I assert, that our eyes are only mere glass windows; and we see with our imagination.'⁴³ Either way, of course, the active agent was the viewer and the recipient of that action was the world beyond.⁴⁴

Just as is the case today, debates about landscape give a good index of what was thought and felt. Landscape, after all, was a relatively new coinage and a relatively new concept. It was also hugely fashionable. Landscape design and landscape painting were of intense interest for a remarkable range of people, 'those', as Conal Shields once put it, 'for whom 'nature' was nearly, if not quite, something to be ignored: those for whom it was to be subdued or transformed: those for whom it was to be gazed at and enjoyed.'⁴⁵ In all these cases, of course, the landscape was treated as an object of interest rather than a subject – much less an agent – in its own right. By the end of the eighteenth century, it had become controversial to maintain that landscapes had any inherent quality of their own. Instead, many cleaved to the claims of writers like Richard Payne Knight, who argued that the picturesque landscape, for instance, was nothing more than 'a way of seeing, a subjective aesthetic in the eye of the beholder'.⁴⁶ Armed with Burke's dictum that 'No work of art can be great, but it deceives',⁴⁷ committed to Chambers' argument that 'Nature is incapable of pleasing without

⁴³ Quoted in J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Dilemma of Style: architectural ideas from the picturesque to the post-modern* (London, 1987), p. 21.

⁴⁴ See also Jonathan Crary, 'Modernizing Vision', in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988), pp. 29-50, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Conal Shields, 'Introduction' to Leslie Parris, ed., *Landscape in Britain, c. 1750-1850* (exh. Cat.; London, 1973), pp. 9-13, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: landscape gardening and the geography of Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1999), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Quoted in David Watkin, *The English Vision: the picturesque in architecture, landscape, and garden design* (London, 1982), p. viii.

the assistance of art',⁴⁸ designers like Humphry Repton, in the words of one expert, turned landscape design 'into a species of furnishing.'⁴⁹ Here was disenchantment indeed.

Attitudes towards architecture echoed this sense of the material world as passive, animated only by human action. This was increasingly true even of sacred architecture, which is conventionally understood as somehow intrinsically different: an embodiment, in the title of one influential text, of *Theology in Stone*;⁵⁰ a space capable of evoking emotion and – in the words of Mary Carruthers – a place which 'has, as it were, moving parts ... an engine of prayer, not simply its edifice.'⁵¹ Yet, as historians of eighteenth-century America have shown in particular, the construction of churches which simply followed secular fashions,⁵² and which down-played any sacred function was in many respects a distinctive feature of the period.⁵³ Far from being an engine of prayer, much less an active agent of any sort, the late-eighteenth-century church was simply a gathering place: a box for preaching in; a vessel which only came alive when it was filled by its congregation.⁵⁴ Little wonder churches remained locked and closed for most of the week: these practical, fashionable spaces were essentially inert. Like the wider landscape of which they were a part, it was human activity and human agency which counted; the material world was always subject to that.

As I have argued elsewhere, the nineteenth century would overturn this conception of sacred space.⁵⁵ Churches were reimagined as active agents: capable of shaping belief; able to

⁴⁸ Quoted in Crook, *Dilemma of Style*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Crook, *Dilemma of Style*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: church architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (New York, 2004).

⁵¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 263.

⁵² Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican parish churches in colonial Virginia* (New haven and London, 1997), pp. 228–9.

⁵³ Louis P. Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and architecture in colonial South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008).

⁵⁴ John Harvey, *Image of the Invisible: the visualization of religion in the Welsh Nonconformist tradition* (Cardiff, 1999).

⁵⁵ See *Unlocking the Church: the lost secrets of Victorian sacred space* (Oxford, 2017). For a shorter essay with a broader perspective, see William Whyte, 'Architecture', in Joel Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 471–484.

affect their congregations and even passers-by. For the influential German architect and theorist Karl Friedrich Schinkel, for instance, ‘the “genuine” religious building’ was, as John Toews puts it, ‘a place where individuals were guided towards recognition of their inner essence through aesthetic experiences of the divine principle which animated both the universe and themselves’.⁵⁶ This new – this re-enchanted – view of architecture would shape buildings throughout the world, as the old notion of the church as an inert vessel gave way and a forest of steeples, a sea of stained-glass, a tide of encaustic tiles and marble fittings swept across cities, towns, and villages. These were not merely aesthetic effects; they reflected a belief that buildings – especially religious buildings – did things to people.⁵⁷

This transformation was not confined to churches. The belief that buildings shaped behaviour; the sense that – as one Victorian headmaster put it – ‘*the almighty wall is, after all, the supreme and final arbiter*’, was very influential.⁵⁸ Prisons, workhouses, schools, public buildings, and private homes were all designed with this in mind.⁵⁹ The ‘agency of things’ that Patrick Joyce has uncovered in this period – most recently in his *State of Freedom* – was a product of this new, and newly re-enchanted view.⁶⁰ And, of course, it was not just architecture that was reimagined in light of this thinking. The townscape, the landscape, the natural world – what we might call the environment – were all, in this environmentalist view, seen as consequential, capable of shaping their human inhabitants. Think of the housing reformer and landscape preserver Octavia Hill, for instance.⁶¹ A woman

⁵⁶ John Toews, Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory on Early-Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 129.

⁵⁷ See also G. L. Hersey, *High Victorian Gothic: a study in Associationism* (Baltimore, 1972).

⁵⁸ Edward Thring, quoted in William Whyte, ‘Building a Public School Community, 1860 – 1910’, *History of Education* 32 (2003), pp. 601-26.

⁵⁹ I explore this further in William Whyte, ‘Architecture’, in Carolyn White, *A Cultural History of Objects in the Age of Industry* (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ Patrick Joyce, *the State of Freedom: a social history of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), esp. ch. 7.

⁶¹ The following sentences draw heavily on William Whyte, Octavia Hill: the practice of sympathy and the art of housing’, in Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell, eds., ‘*Nobler imaginings and mightier struggles*’: Octavia Hill and the remaking of British society (London, 2016).

shaped by widely-shared assumptions about the impact of the environment, her life was devoted to redeeming the poor by improving their homes and granting them access to nature. So committed was she to the idea of material agency that she often neglected the capacity of humans to act, treating the recipients of her idealism as objects – ‘never’, in Ruth Livesey’s words, ‘full actors’ – whilst emphasizing the way in which new houses or gardens or plants could ameliorate both the lives and the souls of the indigent.⁶² Hill’s emotional entanglement with things even extended to the terrible ‘sense of injustice’ she felt when planting a Virginia creeper in one of her tenements. She could not rid herself of the guilt that it was exposed ‘to so different a fate from its companions’.⁶³ In Octavia Hill we find something approaching animism in the late-Victorian slums of London.

This brief sketch of an epistemological revolution two hundred years ago is not only intended to signal that we have been here before; though we have. It is also meant to pose a problem: a conceptual and methodological issue for those of us interested in the effect of the material world on individuals and societies in the past; the problem with which I began this paper. Even in this now re-enchanted world, scholars remain unsure about material agency. There are those who would wish to deny any distinction between human and non-human actors: those, like the archaeologist Dan Hicks, who would reject what he terms, ‘the false impression that the dirt on my hands is somehow ontologically different from my hands themselves.’⁶⁴ There are those, too, like the historian Chris Otter, who would deny the term agency altogether, seeing it as an unhappy and unhelpful anthropomorphism, which – as he puts it – ‘ironically, disrespects a resolutely non-human, inorganic process.’⁶⁵ For most, the

⁶² R. Livesey, ‘Women rent collectors and the rewriting of space, class, and gender in East London, 1870–1900’, in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth, eds., *Women and the Making of Built Space* (Aldershot, 2007) pp. 87–106, p. 94.

⁶³ C. Edmund Maurice, *The Life of Octavia Hill as Told in her Letters* (London, 1913), p. 193. Quoted in Whyte, ‘Octavia Hill’.

⁶⁴ Hicks, ‘The Material Cultural Turn’, p. 96.

⁶⁵ Chris Otter, ‘The Technosphere: a new concept for urban studies’, *Urban History* 44 (2017), pp. 145–54, p. 147.

solution is a still greater emphasis on materiality. Indeed, it is a routine complaint by writers of wildly divergent views that previous scholars – even, perhaps especially, those writing on the material – have not taken materiality seriously enough. For Tim Ingold, for instance, only through making – through scholars weaving, flint napping, dancing, focussing intently on things in themselves and for themselves – will we come to understand how things work and how people are things.⁶⁶ For Ian Hodder, only a willingness to abandon a human-centred analysis for one focussed more firmly on things will unravel the entanglements of people and the material world.⁶⁷

There is a virtue in this. Hodder is surely right to criticize phenomenologists like Christopher Tilley for blithely assuming that ‘our own embodied experiences of landscapes and monuments today must reveal to us something of the experiences of the people who once inhabited those same places in the past.’⁶⁸ But his solution – to focus yet further on the material itself – is no real solution at all, at least for my purposes, because it tells us no more about how that material was understood and experienced than the phenomenologists can. It replaces conjecture with something seemingly – literally – more solid. But it remains problematic, because it assumes, with a wonderful circularity, that if we only understood the thing we will come to understand how the thing was understood. Put more simply: just as we can have no confidence that our present-day experiences are the same of those of people in the past, so we can have no confidence that our understanding of materiality itself is the same as that of our subjects.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Tim Ingold, *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art, and architecture* (New York and London, 2013).

⁶⁷ Ian Hodder, *Entangled: an archaeology of the relationships between humans and things* (Chichester, 2012).

⁶⁸ Hodder, *Entangled*, p. 29.

⁶⁹ For a rather more enthusiastic account of phenomenology – when combined with documentary research – see Nicola Whyte, ‘Senses of Place, Senses of Time: landscape history from a British perspective’, *Landscape Research* 40 (2015), pp. 925-38.

What I have sought to show is that within the space of a generation the material world can be enchanted or disenchanted; it can be seen to possess agency, or any sort of agency can be strongly denied. In other words, different periods possess what we might call different regimes of materiality. They don't just understand the world differently; they experience it differently; they interact with it differently. As Chris Gosden acknowledges towards the end of an essay which appears to say quite the reverse, 'The world changes not just in its forms but in its feelings'.⁷⁰ Any approach which assumes the existence of material agency; which imports our assumptions into a period which did not share them, will necessarily fail to capture that. Before we look at the material world, therefore we need to examine how the material was looked at, how it was conceptualized.

These regimes of materiality were, of course, never secure. They were fluid and changeable. They encompassed a striking variety of different approaches. After all, when the anthropologist Daniel Miller went to explore how a people in single street used things, he found thirty different experiences in thirty virtually identical houses.⁷¹ Regimes of materiality might also be small-scale and quite specific. They might be highly individuated even. After all, Kenneth Dover's notably enthusiastic response to the landscape reflected a regime which perhaps few other people have ever shared. But, just like the different emotional regimes explored by William Reddy in his work on *The Navigation of Feeling*, these differing regimes of materiality defined what was reasonable to believe about the world and what was possible to experience in the world.⁷² It is by uncovering and re-articulating these regimes of materiality that historians can come to understand both their subjects and how their subjects experienced the world.

⁷⁰ Gosden, 'What Do Objects Want?', p. 209.

⁷¹ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, 2008).

⁷² William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

This claim has an obvious implication for the study of buildings and landscapes. In a typically lapidary phrase, W. J. T. Mitchell once observed that he hoped ‘to change “landscape” from a noun to a verb’, from ‘an object to be seen or a text to be read’ into a ‘process by which social and subjective identities are formed.’⁷³ In this paper I have tried to suggest that both these accounts – both the idea of the landscape as fixed and the idea of the landscape as active – had different purchases at different times in history, in different regimes of materiality. If landscape is a verb, it is one that has been translated and comprehended very differently in different regimes of materiality.

⁷³ Mitchell, ‘Introduction’, to *Landscape and Power*, pp. 1-4, p. 1.