Caspar David Friedrich
Nature and the Self

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2 Natural Bodies, Embodied Nature

Nature is a temple where living pillars
At times allow confused words to come forth;
There man passes through forests of symbols,
Which observe him with familiar eyes.

—Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondences,” The Flowers of Evil

Over the course of his career, Friedrich painted a number of landscapes with human figures that have been interpreted as self-portraits. From the capuchin in the early masterpiece Monk by the Sea (1808–10), whose features recollect the monk-like characteristics of his Berlin Self-Portrait, to the man at rest at the edge of a mountain stream in the watercolor The Source of the River Elbe (c. 1810), the artist’s protagonists are often read as meditations on his own place in relation to the world (figs. 28, 8, 29). With paintings such as these in mind, Werner Hofmann credited Friedrich with transforming the representation of man in nature. In place of the traditional mythological or religious staffage that populated the landscapes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Friedrich inserted his own image and that of his contemporaries, “in still surrender to the experience of nature.” The figures in question cannot be conclusively identified as self-portraits, as they all more or less conform to Friedrich’s most famous trope, the Rückenfigur (figure seen from behind), a faceless doppelgänger through which the viewer can empathize and imaginatively assume the artist’s perspective. Moreover, the identity of these figures is necessarily ambiguous, perpetually vacillating between the artist and viewer, for whom they function as surrogates. Nevertheless, I argue that they point to an important development in Friedrich’s practice and the visual arts more broadly around 1800: the emergence of the self as a legitimate subject of landscape.

As Friedrich’s work evolved, his project of self-exploration went beyond inserting his own image into his native surroundings. In the 1820s, he experimented with omitting the human figure altogether. Joseph Koerner has argued that the very structure of Friedrich’s landscapes thereby began to exhibit the presence of a self-aware subject, where “the whole of represented nature” appears “as the picture of the artist’s inner experience of self and world.” This genealogy can be traced in a series of unpeopled landscapes from the 1820s that Friedrich developed out of earlier peopled compositions. These new iterations of familiar subjects maintain the overall concept and structure of their prototypes, but the overtly human element has been erased. Consider the relationship between Friedrich’s Chasseur in the Forest (1813–14) and Early Snow (c. 1828) (figs. 30, 31). Although there is a fourteen-year gap between the two landscapes and the locations are not exactly the same, they are formally and conceptually related. In the earlier painting, a lone soldier takes a moment of pause along a winter path leading into a dark forest. In Early Snow, Friedrich stages a similar scene without the Rückenfigur. The snow is now fresh, giving no trace of
FIGURE 28
Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10. Oil on canvas, $43\frac{3}{5} \times 67\frac{1}{5}$ in. ($110 \times 171.5$ cm). Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

FIGURE 29
Caspar David Friedrich, *The Source of the River Elbe*, c. 1810. Watercolor on paper, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$ in. ($25 \times 34$ cm). Private collection, Germany.
FIGURE 36
its past travel, yet the path is more defined than in the earlier work and clearly intended for passage. The major conceptual change between the two paintings is the introduction of the profound visual question, "For whom is this path intended?" In \textit{Chasseur in the Forest}, the viewer's experience of the landscape is realized through empathy with its protagonist; we do not walk upon the path ourselves. In \textit{Early Snow}, this experience is no longer mediated through a surrogate and is rather conveyed to the viewer directly. Koerner has analyzed this effect in Friedrich's oeuvre at length, arguing that the viewer is left to absorb the artist's vision as his or her own and, in this case, follow the trail deep into the wood.\textsuperscript{4} Although the chasseur is absent in \textit{Early Snow}, the work continues to document a human presence by situating the artist, and by extension the viewer, before the canvas as the landscape's protagonist, and designating the scene the product of his or her gaze. What I would like to emphasize in this sequence is that the implied presence of the artist or viewer in \textit{Early Snow} is not only suggested by the structure of the composition, but also through memory, by the work's relationship to its peopled predecessor, \textit{Chasseur in the Forest.}

The sense of interiority evoked by \textit{Early Snow} does not amount to a physical incarnation of the self; it rather expresses the subjective "cognition of appearances," to use Koerner's words once again.\textsuperscript{5} In a couple of Friedrich's revisited landscapes, though, I propose that the artist pursued a more radical strategy of subject engagement: he went beyond \textit{placing} the viewer in or before the scene and actually \textit{naturalized} the body into the landscape itself. In other words, the human figures do not simply disappear but are metamorphosed into landscape. Anthropomorphic trees, shrubs, rocks, and other natural motifs stand in for the human body, echoing its previous posture and form. Friedrich did not explain what motivated him to rethink certain compositions and left their formal relationships up to the viewer to discover, but such body/earth switchings point to a shift in his conception of the dynamic between self and world. In this chapter, I seek to understand this transformation and what it might mean for Friedrich's larger move in the 1820s away from traditional narrative subjects toward "independent landscape," a term that Christopher Wood has used to describe the emergence of landscape in the early-modern period as a subject in its own right, namely one that does not merely provide the setting for a textual narrative or allegory, or serve a decorative, topographic, or other auxiliary function within a larger pictorial scheme.\textsuperscript{6} Counterintuitively, I ask how Friedrich's mature portraits of nature might continue to engage with the human subject. I approach this question by analyzing a number of precedents for Friedrich's reworked landscapes from the early-modern era to his own day, and by situating his anthropomorphism in its historical context, as part of a broader effort in Naturphilosophie, art, and literature to understand the entangled relationship between human beings and their environment. I argue that Friedrich's late landscapes invite the viewer to empathize with nature and read her physiognomy, with the aim of recovering meaningful correspondences between the self and nature at large. In so doing, they are representative of a new form of self-exploration: the rigorous study of one's own existence as a natural being within, and a microcosm of, the order of nature.
NATURE, EMPATHY, AND THE SELF
Among Friedrich’s most famous landscapes understood to be a self-portrait is his iconic oil painting *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (c. 1818; fig. 32). Set on the northern German island of Rügen, the work shows two men and a woman gazing out over the Baltic Sea. From a precarious position at the cliff’s edge, they admire the wondrous, craggy chalk formations found on the island’s shores. Relegated to the grassy foreground, these Rückenfiguren each offer the viewer a unique perspective into the landscape: on the right, a man dressed in old German costume leans with his arms crossed against a tree trunk and gazes out over an endless expanse of water, the stillness of which is only interrupted by subtle crests, two sailboats, and the hint of a horizon line deep in pictorial space; in the center, a man dressed in bourgeois clothing crouches down on his hands and knees to inspect the ground at close range, his observations as much haptic as they are visual, suggested by his engaged right hand; lastly, on the left, a seated woman in a red dress points down into the abyss, her visible eye conspicuously closed. The composition is harmoniously framed on both sides and from above by arching trees, of which the branch of one dips down into the center of the canvas. This painting has been interpreted as many things, including a wedding portrait in conjunction with an allegory of hope, a reflection on the sublime, a sympathetic statement of patriotism based on the figure wearing old German costume, and a commentary on competing forms of vision, from firsthand observation to subjective reflection.⁷ What most interpretations have in common, though, is that they identify one or more of the figures as self-portraits. The figure on the right is frequently read as Friedrich himself, the identity of the middle figure varies from a portrait of Friedrich’s brother Christian to a second self-portrait of the artist, and the woman is usually understood to be Caroline Bommer, Friedrich’s new wife. My own interest in this painting is not to contest, defend, or contribute to any of the existing interpretations, which I feel exhaustively account for the range of its possible meanings. I am rather concerned with its formal and conceptual relationship to a small watercolor reworking of the composition from a few years later, and what this second iteration might mean for Friedrich’s evolving project of self-exploration.

Friedrich’s watercolor *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1825 or later) offers the most compelling example of the transformation from peopled to unpeopled landscape in the artist’s oeuvre (fig. 33). The scene is staged from an almost identical lookout point as the oil painting.⁸ Following the same compositional structure and perspective, the work similarly directs the viewer’s gaze through a gap in the cliffs at the open water, dotted with a constellation of sailboats. In the foreground, though, the watercolor diverges. The landscape in the watercolor is much wilder than in the oil painting. Although it appears to be the same location, the path seems far less trodden. The ground is overgrown with a dense carpet of grass and the trees have been removed, leaving only a few shrubs on the cliffs to frame the composition. The most striking difference in the watercolor, however, is the absence of the figures. In place of their three distinct postures are three corresponding

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**FIGURE 32**
arboreal formations. Independent of the oil painting, these shrubs and trees do not seem to have any immediate significance. But when viewed together, they appear to be metamorphosed mirror images of their human counterparts. Removing the woman on the left’s red dress in the oil painting, the two aerial roots in the watercolor stand in for her legs, extending over the edge of the cliff. Her outstretched arm also finds its analogue in the horizontal broken-off branch. On the far right of the oil painting, the slight forward bend of the standing man’s torso subtly echoes the angled orientation of the corresponding tree stump in the watercolor. The parallels between the central figure on his hands and knees and the winding shrub are the most striking. A sharp bend in the branch forming an oval knob stands in precisely for the figure’s head, and the organic lines of the boughs seem to follow no logical sequence, rather mimicking the proportions of the kneeling man up to the details of his raised rump and extended leg.

The compositional similarities between the oil painting and watercolor might lead one to assume that the watercolor is a preparatory study, but it is not. The oil painting dates to circa 1818, whereas the watercolor was created in 1825 or later: there is a watermark on the latter stamped “Whatman-Papier” with the date 1825. The watercolor is generally understood to be an independent work belonging to a series of Rügen landscapes created between 1818/19 and 1826 that Friedrich intended to publish under the title *Malerische Ansichten von Rügen* (Scenic Views of Rügen).9 Beyond formal affinity, moreover, there is no direct relationship between the two paintings, which has led scholars not to dwell on the correspondences between them.10 However, I believe that the watercolor is important precisely because it is a reworking of the c. 1818 painting. The earlier *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, despite its fame today, remained unsold for some time, and Friedrich stored and displayed it in his studio until at least 1822.11 Despite the watercolor’s independent origin, it was most certainly conceived with the oil painting in mind. The metamorphosis of human into nonhuman form is with reference to the people’s composition and threatens to reverse itself the moment the viewer discovers it.

Such a direct translation of human into arboreal form is unique in Friedrich’s oeuvre, but it is anticipated by his earlier work. Friedrich experimented with similar formal analogies between trees and people as a young artist, but within a single composition. In the sepia drawing *Mourning Scene on the Beach* (1799), for instance, a grieving mother embraces her adolescent son, her chin resting in her hand in the traditional gesture of melancholy (fig. 34). The posture of this figure group echoes the lifeless bifurcated tree behind them, which ever so slightly leans sympathetically toward them. Its two main branches rise up like arms, mimicking a display of dismay and sorrow. As Koerner has noted, “Within this narrative, landscape functions simply as the domain of analogy, in which the inner sentiments of the human subject are pictured through appropriately evocative elements in nature.”12 The tree, in other words, communicates the emotion on behalf of the figures, which, restrained and withdrawn, do not fully express their grief externally. The attribution of trees with human characteristics, both physical and emotional, has a
long and rich history that will be explored in the next chapter, but I will digress briefly to explain the empathetic exchange with nature around which this work, and arguably the Rügen watercolor, is organized.

The notion that nature could express and even reciprocate the deepest human emotions was commonplace in the Romantic period, and understanding nature involved self-consciously empathizing with all her animate and inanimate variations. In the words of the mineralogist and poet Novalis, "No one will fathom nature who possesses no sense of nature, . . . who does not with an inborn creative joy, a rich and fervent kinship with all things, mingle with all of nature's creatures through the medium of feeling, who does not feel his way into them."11 The act of "feeling oneself into" nature was not conceived as an empty projection; it was a genuine form of communion with nature, a means of tapping into those essential currents that pulse through all life and matter.14 This notion deeply influenced landscape aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Theorists such as Johann Georg Sulzer, Karl Ludwig Fernow, and Carl Gustav Carus encouraged artists to make strategic use of nature's affective properties, maintaining that different aspects of nature rouse specific emotions and sensations in the viewer.15 In his landscapes, Friedrich exploited the emotive effects of different atmospheric conditions on the psyche, from tempestuous waters and skies to the stillness of dusk and dawn, as well as the associative possibilities of particular natural forms. His Mourning Scene on the Beach is still laden with traditional elegiac symbols, namely the woman's gesture of melancholy, the gravestone, and the crucifix, which distract the viewer from a genuine experience of kinship with nature. In Friedrich's Rügen watercolor, though, apart from a few distant sailboats, recognizable allegories have been consciously removed and it is the landscape alone
that communes with the viewer. As our eye meanders across the foreground bed of overgrown grass, following the turf's phototropic growth toward the cliff's edge, we stumble upon three familiar arboreal forms. By tracing the outline of each aerial root and bough, we recognize in these trees and shrubs echoes of their human antecedents from the earlier oil painting. These anthropomorphic details, embedded in the physiognomy of nature, go a step further than mirroring human emotions in the elements of nature. Standing in for the artist's former self and those of his closest relations, they suggest an effort to feel his whole body into the landscape. These forms continue to invite us to empathize with nature and, in the process, I argue, to discover ourselves, both spiritually and physically, entangled with the organic world.

Friedrich's transformation of people into trees points to a major conceptual change in the place of the human subject in landscape painting, which is especially clear in relation to the c. 1818 *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*. In the oil painting, the position of the figures on the periphery of the scene has led some scholars to read the work as an expression of the modern bourgeois subject's estrangement from nature. As Gregor Wedekind has argued, "The observation of nature, the experience of nature, unfolds not with the higher goal of an entry into her eternal cycle, the self-contained ebb and flow of growth and decay. What dominates is the experience of separation." This construction is one that characterizes many of Friedrich's peopled landscapes: one or more figures stand at the edge of a landscape and gaze longingly into an inaccessible distance, deliberately cut off from the background, often with little to no suggestion of a middle ground. In this case, the arching trees create the illusion of a window frame, echoed by the formation of the chalk cliffs, through which the figures look out onto the vast expanse of sea, without ever themselves crossing the threshold. Wedekind suggests that these peripheral figures are representative of the middle-class audience to which the painting was addressed, who would have traveled in droves to Rügen as tourists to view the cliffs as detached spectators. For them, nature is something that exists outside of history and society, in which those elemental forces and universal processes whence they came could be observed, but which they had long ago sublimated into culture.

What happens to the dynamic between nature and the human subject, then, when anthropomorphic trees and shrubs are directly substituted for the figures? I propose that Friedrich's watercolor reworking of *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* approaches the communion with nature that is structurally withheld in the oil painting. The watercolor suggests an effort to overcome the sense of distance from nature that its prototype reinforces by inviting viewers, through careful and sustained looking, to recognize echoes of themselves in the landscape before them. The transformation of the figures into trees also undermines the division of space in the oil painting, which I argue is not simply organized into three pictorial fields but is also partitioned according to a strict taxonomic scheme. In the foreground of the oil painting, Friedrich rendered grass, stalks, bushes, red flowers, and trees in a primarily green-brown palette; the middle ground is rigidly distinguished from this
sphere through the stark chromatic contrast of the white chalk cliffs, the brightness of which is dramatized by direct sunlight; lastly, the background is composed of the transparent blue and rose hues of the sea and sky. This constellation reads as a micro cosmology in which the integrity of distinct classes of life and matter are maintained through the separate spatial registers of vegetation, minerals, and water. The human figures are positioned within the realm of organic life but, by assuming the different possible perspectives of the observer on the threshold of the landscape, they seem to remain entirely distinct from the elements of nature. In the watercolor, conversely, the taxonomy of life and matter is much more porous. Shrubs grow atop the chalk cliffs, bridging the mineral and vegetable kingdoms, and, of course, the human subject dissipates into its natural surroundings. Self-portraiture here becomes something quite different than a literal representation of a person in a specific time and place, an approach that is still more or less upheld by the earlier oil painting. Significantly, it points to a new insistence on the self as part of an interconnected whole, a perspective that is closely aligned with Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's Naturphilosophie and concomitant developments in the life sciences.

FORMAL AND CONCEPTUAL PRECEDENTS
The watercolor Chalk Cliffs on Rügen is, to the best of my observation, the only work that exhibits such a direct translation of human into nonhuman form in Friedrich's oeuvre. As an isolated case and seemingly minor work, the significance with which I attribute it in the artist's development as a landscape painter might seem out of proportion. Friedrich did, however, approach this kind of transformation in at least one other work derived from an earlier peopled composition, and he was not the only artist to do so. Over a period of almost twenty years, he completed four iterations of a scene based on a marble quarry near Rübeland in the Harz Mountains, which he first sketched in 1811. What is plausibly the last of these works, a sepia drawing entitled Harz Cave (created after 1811 and likely c. 1837), is unpeopled, but through careful looking, a human element emerges from the alpine topography (fig. 35). The composition leads the viewer through a rocky, sparsely vegetated landscape toward a chasm at the base of a cliff. The perspective is unusual, in that the viewer's line of sight is angled down to omit the horizon. The eye is directed along a stony descent toward the foreboding darkness of the cave's mouth, encountering heterogeneous lines, surfaces, and textures as it travels into pictorial space. The accidental arrangements of stone debris, the meticulous rendering of the sod patches, the erratic growth of regional vegetation, and the irregular pattern of cracks and fissures on the rock face all suggest an acute attention to the physiognomy of nature. For the Romantics, the empirical observation of nature was to lead beyond the world of appearances, in this case deep into the uncharted core of the earth, an imaginative leap that is bolstered by the cave's intuitive association with interiority. What the viewer ultimately discovers along this descent, however, is far more than a passage through deep time. In the geological
FIGURE 35
Caspar David Friedrich, Harz Cave,
after 1811 and likely c. 1837.
Graphite and sepia on paper,
13 7/8 x 17 1/4 in. (34.5 x 43.8 cm). Her
Majesty the Queen’s Reference
Library, Copenhagen.
strata, metamorphic faces begin to coalesce, as if looking at nature were like holding up a mirror to the self. In her unpublished dissertation, Catherine Clinger first identified a human face in profile just past the upper-right edge of the opening, from which a tuft of grass grows that recalls a helmet plume, along with a second head in profile on the left edge of the cave entrance, which stands out as a silhouette against the blackness of the telluric cavity (figs. 36, 37).26 There is another larger, grotesque face in profile following the fissure at the right of the cave upward to the top-right corner, which exhibits an arched brow, squinting eye, hooked nose, grinning mouth, and angular chin (fig. 38). None of these faces appear in the studies Friedrich completed on-site or in the three oil paintings he developed out of the drawings. I have discovered one additional face in profile in an unrelated drawing dated June 3, 1813, that is embedded in the uppermost rock of a formation he sketched in Saxon Switzerland (Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden), an outcrop that Friedrich later integrated into his Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c. 1818; Hamburger Kunsthalle), but without the face.20

Artistic interest in the metamorphic properties of stone has an extensive history in Western art that reaches well into the nineteenth century, from the two faces in profile embedded in the mountain at the upper left of Albrecht Dürer’s View of the Arco Valley (1495; Louvre, Paris), to those at the mouth of the cave in Gustave Courbet’s Fantastic Landscape with Anthropomorphic Rocks (1864 or later; private collection).21 What makes the anthropomorphic heads in Harz Cave unique is that they are loosely anchored to an earlier peopled composition. Clinger has astutely observed that some of the faces in the rocks echo figurative motifs from the first version of the composition, Graves of Ancient Heroes (1812; fig. 39). There is an illuminated obelisk to the left of the grotto in Graves of Ancient Heroes that has a figure in profile carved on its right edge, the head of which recalls the larger head in profile on the left of the cave opening in Harz Cave, and the headdress of the soldiers mourning before a large sarcophagus at the cave’s mouth is echoed in the grass “helmet plume” (see fig. 36).22 On their own, these allusions to the peopled composition might seem tenuous, but, in conjunction with the stronger analogy in the watercolor Chalk Cliffs on Rügen, they amount to a pattern in Friedrich’s later work of embedding
anthropomorphic forms in the physiognomy of nature to rethink the place of the human subject in landscape.

To understand the magnitude of Friedrich’s gesture, it is useful to consider its contemporary and historical precedents, which include at least one from the German Romantic context. In 1805 Philipp Otto Runge began an oil painting, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1805–6; fig. 40), which was likely conceived in anticipation of a commission for an altarpiece for the Marienkirche in Greifswald. Runge created a number of preparatory studies for this work, one of which deserves particular attention. In *Nile Valley Landscape*, natural motifs assume roughly the same position and form as the figures in the final painting: the tree on the left morphs into a grazing donkey and the seated Joseph tending the fire, where the line of the lower-right part of the trunk echoes Joseph’s shoulder and left arm extending the stick; Mary assumes the position of the stump on the far right, the trail of her blue veil following its curvature; and the Christ Child’s raised arm and spread fingers mimic a small, broken-off stump (fig. 41). As with Friedrich’s Rügen watercolor, the issue of chronology is relevant. Intuitively, one would assume that Runge used this nature study to develop the larger composition, but its place relative to the final painting is ambiguous. As Jörg Traeger has proposed, the study does not necessarily signal a
FIGURE 40
Philipp Otto Runge, Rest on the Flight into Egypt, 1805–6. Oil on canvas, 38 × 51 in. (96.5 × 129.5 cm). Hamburger Kunsthalle.

FIGURE 41
morphing of landscape motifs into figures, but could equally point to a reversion of traditional iconography to pure landscape. Koerner too concedes that the sketch is not a preparatory study in the conventional sense, for when it was created Runge had already worked out the final composition, evidenced by another preparatory drawing.

Runge and Friedrich were not the only Romantic artists to reinterpret peopled compositions as independent landscapes. This same impulse is traceable in American landscape painting. David Huntington has argued that a drawing of a tree from the 1820s by Thomas Cole reflects "the translation from human to non-human," a process that is visible when it is compared to one of the artist's earlier drawings of a sculpted nude: "The contours and the movements of the two objects are essentially of the same order." He goes even further and proposes, "Cole's sense of his own body might literally, in the drawing of a tree, define his perceptions of nature." Jennifer L. Roberts recently pointed to a similar transformation in Asher B. Durand's work. In the 1840s to 1850s, Durand painted a series of nature studies at close range, which, although they were completed en plein air, are framed and represented in highly anthropomorphic ways that draw on Durand's earlier peopled compositions. Rocks, for instance, recline in postures that are suggestively figurative, acting as substitutes for the body, petrified and "in a condition of obdurate, silent materiality."

What led diverse artists in the early to mid-nineteenth century, completely independently, to rethink landscape in these terms? First, the gesture is not unprecedented; the very concept of landscape in European art has its origins in this type of experimentation. Christopher Wood has shown that some of the first independent landscapes in northern Renaissance art were conceived by reworking narrative compositions. In the early 1500s nature studies drawn from life by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer increasingly came to resemble self-sufficient pictures, while paintings by Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Altdorfer that maintain a traditional narrative subject began to exhibit a sense of ambiguity and overlap between figure and ground. Trees and other vegetal motifs start to encroach on otherwise formally autonomous figure groups, and, in some cases, figures cease to support narrative at all and are rather woven into their organic surroundings or "bleed into setting and dissipate" (see fig. 47). In other cases, trees seem to carry the painting's narrative themselves, assuming the dramatic postures and character of human figures, to the extent that one barely notices they are absent. But the end of landscape's function as supplementary to human narrative is expressed in an even bolder gesture, according to Wood. German artists began to isolate and copy landscape backgrounds, extract these passages from their larger narrative compositions, and re-present them as independent works. Wood also identifies compelling instances in which copyists created independent landscapes by simply removing the figures from entire landscape settings, whereby they seem to have "looked through the figures and still [seen] a composition." In these cases, the artists did not replace the figures with anthropomorphic forms, as Runge or Friedrich did, but rather drew in organic motifs in the empty spaces previously occupied by figures. It is possible that the artists simply thought the vegetation worthy of study
and intended such landscapes as exercises, but it is equally plausible that Altdorfer and his contemporaries began to find human narrative subjects to be expendable and understood such paintings as independent landscapes.\textsuperscript{31} Wood distinguishes these landscapes, in which the narrative element has been replaced by the absence of subject matter, from the tradition of the framed landscape within a picture (\textit{Veduta inquadrata}). The act of extracting the latter from a complete picture is simply making "the invisible frame visible" and is "the logical consummation of a latent idea."\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, "The complete landscape setting minus its figures . . . is always marked by those figures."\textsuperscript{33}

This last condition similarly defines many of Friedrich’s reworked compositions. The chasseur in \textit{Chasseur in the Forest} determines the landscape, and his presence continues to be marked in the eviscerated \textit{Early Snow} (see figs. 30, 31). In most of Friedrich’s figureless adaptations of earlier compositions, this presence is expressed as an absence, one filled by the beholder through the structure of the landscape. But in the Rügen watercolor, human presence is expressed through anthropomorphic surrogates. Although Friedrich’s approach to imagining independent landscape is formally similar to some early-modern experiments with the genre, he is unlikely to have seen the works in question, let alone observed these transformations or understood the context of their creation. What is relevant about early examples of this pictorial strategy is precisely that it \textit{reappears} after several centuries, which suggests that it is an intuitive stage in the visual thought process of an artist seeking to rethink the conceptual foundations of landscape painting, and, particularly, to liberate the genre from its status as mere background to religious and mythological staffage.

The only precedent that Friedrich is likely to have responded to directly is Runge’s \textit{Rest on the Flight into Egypt} and \textit{Nile Valley Landscape}, so it is worth exploring the meaning of this sequence further (see figs. 40, 41). Runge began \textit{Rest on the Flight} in Hamburg and left the painting there unfinished. It is, thus, unlikely that Friedrich knew the painting firsthand, but it is plausible that he saw the sketches, some of which illustrate the final narrative composition. Friedrich had met Runge by 1801, and the two remained in contact. In July 1806 Friedrich spent time on the island of Rügen and on his way back to Dresden probably visited Runge in Wolgast.\textsuperscript{34} As \textit{Rest on the Flight} was one of the major projects Runge had been developing in 1805–6, he would have likely discussed it with Friedrich and shown him his drawings. Runge did show his sketches to colleagues, sending \textit{Nile Valley}, along with several other studies for \textit{Rest on the Flight}, to Goethe in April 1808.\textsuperscript{35} Should Friedrich have not seen them personally, he may have become aware of them through their circulation.

Runge’s \textit{Rest on the Flight} and \textit{Nile Valley} offer an important preamble to Friedrich’s Rügen scenes, not only in terms of form but also as a theoretical exercise. Several of Runge’s epistolary reflections on landscape and history painting offer an explanation for \textit{Nile Valley} that likewise provides historical context for Friedrich’s radically new approach to landscape. In a letter from February 1802, Runge declared:
We stand on the brink of all religions that sprang from Catholicism. The abstractions are fading away; everything is airier and lighter than it was before. Everything tends towards Landscape, searching for something concrete in this uncertainty, not knowing where to begin? They grasp erroneously again toward History [painting] and lose themselves. Is there, then, in this new art—landscape painting, if you will—not also a zenith to be reached, which will perhaps be more beautiful than what has come before?36

Runge anticipated a shift away from history painting and its monopoly on spiritual subject matter, making way for a new art of landscape. What Runge meant by “landscape,” though, does not match the traditional sense of the term in the visual arts, and its precise meaning remains contested in the scholarship. Indeed, Runge’s religious paintings remained highly allegorical figurative compositions, even if nature plays an important role. According to Traeger, Runge was not attempting to ground new conventions for landscape painting by renouncing human narrative, nor did he seek to rearrange the traditional hierarchy of genres to put landscape at the top; rather, he strove to abolish the very boundaries between the genres, forging a universal art of spiritual feeling.37 Runge envisioned this art as taking the form of an allegorical landscape that expresses the human through nature rather than allegorizing nature through the human, as was the convention in history painting. Peter Betthausen similarly claims that Runge imagined landscape as a “subjective art of feeling, one that is to express the unity of humans with the universe,” rather than a topographical excerpt from nature.38 Most scholars view Runge’s Times of Day—of which only Morning (1808; Hamburger Kunsthalle) was ever completed—as the consummation of his idea of landscape. Runge’s epistolary documentation of the cycle supports this hypothesis, but Nile Valley, as a naturalized conception of Rest on the Flight, represents an important intermediary step.

The significance of Nile Valley for Runge’s concept of landscape becomes clear in another letter, addressed to his brother Daniel from November 7, 1802. Runge isolated what he saw as the obsolete condition of history painting: “In the beginning men embodied the various elements and forces of nature within the human form, it was only ever in man himself that they beheld nature stirring; the authentic historical perspective lay precisely in perceiving these mighty forces moving within history itself: this was history as such; the greatest image that emerged from this perspective was that of the Last Judgement; the very rocks themselves had come to resemble the human figure, and the trees, the flowers and the waters were all confounded with one another.”39 Runge posited that, traditionally, everything that is meaningful in nature was expressed through the human form, the basis of history painting. The multitude of contorted postures in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment represents the pinnacle of this approach. Runge then observed that the art of his own day evinces the opposite impulse, where “man impresses his own feelings upon the objects that surround him.”40 He explained that recent philosophers—who remain
unnamed, but he was likely thinking of Kant—proposed that the world outside of us is unknowable, and how we perceive it is ultimately a projection from within, "so that now we see or at least should perceive in every flower the living spirit which man himself has put there." Runge viewed this position as a fallacy and, in the spirit of Naturphilosophie, he offered a correction, insisting that "these forms and shapes [animals and flowers] are nothing apart from ourselves." The Bible served as his defense: "And the lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. . . . And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air." For Runge, human beings are part of nature, and the empathy they feel for her is anything but a projection. The tendency to recognize oneself in the elements goes back to the original creation: "The delight we take in flowers is properly something that comes to us from Paradise. Thus it is that we always associate some inner meaning with the flower, that is to say some kind of human shape, and it is only then that we perceive such a thing with delight. When we see how it is only our own life that is thus reflected in the whole of nature, it is clear that it is only in this way that landscape proper can arise, as something quite distinct from the kind of composition that takes human action or historical events as its subject." For Runge, natural forms are always charged with human significance and morphology, because an original unity ties human beings to nature. To look at nature is, thus, always at once to look deep into the self. In other words, for a painting to take the human condition as its subject, or for it to amount to an act of self-portraiture, it need not necessarily represent the human form directly. This conviction opened up a whole range of ideas and themes traditionally reserved for history painting to the genre of landscape. Runge's own solution was ultimately not independent landscape, but he flirted with this possibility in Nile Valley. By reducing a pivotal narrative in human history to landscape, Runge's study reveals that everything meaningful in human life lies latent in nature; every tree, flower, and blade of grass harbors the deepest connection to the mind, body, and spirit.

Runge's premature death in 1810 limited him from fully exploring the practical implications of his theories on canvas. Friedrich, however, would develop what Runge initiated in Nile Valley without reservation. His revolutionary altarpiece Cross in the Mountains (1808), in which, apart from the cross, Christian iconography has been reduced to nature, is often described as the ultimate realization of Runge's concept of landscape (see fig. 82). But Runge's example would become especially relevant for Friedrich in the 1820s, at which time he reconceived several of his compositions by either removing the human figure altogether or metamorphosing it into landscape, his watercolor Chalk Cliffs on Rügen being the most provocative example (see fig. 33). What to the twenty-first-century viewer might seem to suggest a break from the conventions of landscape painting through the renunciation of the human figure was, in practice, far more nuanced. In the Rügen watercolor, human presence is still implied, embodied in, and negotiated by meaningful
natural forms. The Russian poet Wassili Shukowski observed of Friedrich’s paintings in 1821, “Every one awakes in the soul a memory of something familiar; when one finds in them more than meets the eye, the reason is that the painter does not observe nature as an artist, who only searches for a motif for his brush, but rather as a person with feeling and fantasy, who finds everywhere in her a symbol of human life.”46 For the Rügen watercolor, the sense of familiarity that Shukowski suggested Friedrich’s landscapes awaken amounts to something quite specific: the figures in the oil painting upon which the arbooreal forms are based. Moreover, the human dimension of Friedrich’s work goes beyond an abstract set of emotive relations between nature and the human spirit. His work penetrates to the core of the human subject, discovering in nature a shared psychology and physiology. As with Runge’s Nile Valley, it is not enough to say that nature is anthropomorphized, for in select cases, the human form ceases to be distinguished from the landscape itself.

METAMORPHOSIS
In this chapter, I have described the relationship between Friedrich’s oil painting and watercolor Chalk Cliffs on Rügen as an unfolding metamorphosis of human into nonhuman form and back again. In the most literal sense, this characterization describes the formal transformation that takes place in a selection of his landscapes, but it also points to historically specific understandings of change in nature. To elucidate this context, I again turn to Runge’s Nile Valley Landscape and Rest on the Flight into Egypt and, specifically, their equivocal chronological relationship (see figs. 41, 40). Koerner offers two possible explanations for the sequence. If Nile Valley is viewed as a preparatory study for the final painting, then Rest on the Flight would seem to read Christian figures “directly out of nature,” as opposed to simply introducing them into the landscape.47 But if it is understood as an afterthought, Nile Valley offers an “alternative vision,” one that transforms “the figures of sacred legend into objects of nature.”48 Moreover, the study simultaneously suggests “the genesis of history painting from nature drawing” and the naturalization of Christian figures.49 To these interpretations I add a third: that there is an element of transformation in both compositions. Anthropomorphism is never a unilateral attribution of human features to inanimate beings or things. As J. M. Bernstein points out, the “projection of the human onto the nonhuman is simultaneously a projection, in return, of the nonhuman onto the human.”30 Dario Gamboni further recasts anthropomorphism as anthropomorphosis, aligning the concept with metamorphosis. The implied transformation is not necessarily only from the nonhuman to the human, but could equally be described as a metamorphosis of the human into the nonhuman, with the outcome of an endless back and forth between the anthropomorphic and the geo-, phyto-, or zoomorphic.51 In Runge’s work, metamorphic forms are just one dimension of a larger theme of transformation. Rest on the Flight was conceived as a pendant to Source and Poets (1805; Hamburger Kunsthalle), which together stage a diurnal sequence of morning and evening.52 With the rising and
setting sun, the revolution of the globe is implied, accompanied by transformations of light and color with the changing hour.\textsuperscript{53} As such, the pair does not simply chronic a linear progression in time but rather suggests a cycle that unfolds indefinitely, where which composition follows which is subject to change. Within this constellation, the transformation of the Holy Family into nature in _Nile Valley_ too reflects an endless back and forth in time, akin to the never-ending organic cycle of growth and decay. In the case of Friedrich's Rügen watercolor, its undisputed chronology relative to the oil painting does not discount the possibility of reciprocal transformation. As much as the figures in the oil painting have metamorphosed into trees in the watercolor, they maintain traces of their human shape, as if they were already evolving back into their previous form.

The suggestion that Friedrich's or Runge's organic forms might move in both directions, particularly from the human to the nonhuman, poses a challenge to the contemporary discourse surrounding metamorphosis in the life sciences. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the concept of metamorphosis was usually associated with two developments: Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's theory of the _Bildungstrieb_ (formative drive) and, above all, Goethe's morphological studies, both of which are based on a teleological notion of development in which organisms evolve more or less unilaterally from the simple to the complex. In his consequential essay "On the Formative Drive and Its Influence on Generation and Reproduction" (1780), Blumenbach proposed that a life force animates organisms from within that stimulates generation, growth, and reproduction, an idea that anticipates evolutionary theory and implies that the outward form of living things is not entirely predetermined.\textsuperscript{54} In Blumenbach's day, the Bildungstrieb served as a defense of the theory of epigenesis (that organisms develop in successive stages independent of the blueprint contained in the egg), as opposed to preformation (the theory that the fully formed adult already exists in the embryo as a homunculus). Although Blumenbach did not see the goal of the formative drive as fixed, he did view it as ordered—as a function of the interaction of an organized body and its environment. In turn, Blumenbach's theory did accommodate the possibility of regression, but only as the formative drive's response to accident, and certainly not in the sense of an organism's return to an earlier stage of its development, let alone to a more primitive life-form.\textsuperscript{55} Blumenbach's Bildungstrieb was formative for Goethe's theory of metamorphosis, which sought to explain how the various parts of an organism develop out of and as variations on a single Ur-form, or basic structure, his most famous example being the leaf, out of which the different parts of plants allegedly metamorphose.\textsuperscript{56} In Goethe's model, the transmutation of a plant's parts generally follows a consistent series of stages, but he did allow for the reversion of certain parts to earlier forms. However, he viewed the development of an animal's organs as simultaneous rather than successive and without the potential to be retracted, such that the caterpillar can become a butterfly, but not the reverse.\textsuperscript{57} In both classes of life, though, formation is progressive and strives toward a particular ideal of perfection, with, in Goethe's words, "the plant finally reaching glory in the tree, perduring and rigid, and the animal in human
beings, the epitome of mobility and freedom. Goethe evidently held the archetypes of plants and animals to be distinct, and metamorphosis to be a more or less linear process that unfolds within the limits of a given taxonomic category of life.

Scholars have convincingly argued for the significance of Goethe’s theory of the metamorphosis of plants for Runge’s paintings and drawings of botanical life. Friedrich’s arboreal transformations in the Rügen watercolor, however, resonate more with a model of change promoted by Romantic naturalists such as Carl Gustav Carus, Lorenz Oken, and Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, who understood the boundaries between different classes of life and matter to be porous. Schubert offers a particularly important counterperspective in this regard, in that he complicated the then-commonplace idea of a linear progression from the autonomous stone world to the equally individuated vegetable kingdom through to the unique domain of sentient life. In his system, not only do the most evolved plants and the most primitive animals approach each other’s form, but there are also intermediary creatures, such as polyps that bridge insentient and sentient life, and lichens that simultaneously exhibit qualities of the inorganic and organic worlds. He concluded that the developmental force in nature appears to take the form of a circle or an arc rather than a straight line, where all life and matter at once strive toward greater complexity and retreat to a more primitive state, in harmony with the never-ending cycle of expansion and contraction in the universe. This circularity too characterizes Friedrich’s Rügen watercolor, which I see as moving not only from tree to human but also from human to tree. The volatility of his arboreal forms mirrors an unstable isotope that might revert to another state at any moment, reminding the viewer of the fluid boundaries or even alchemical relationship between nature’s forms and, ultimately, of the interconnection of all things.

**ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN CONTEXT**

The oscillation between human and nonhuman form in Friedrich’s watercolor _Chalk Cliffs on Rügen_ is more remote than Runge’s _Nile Valley_, as the landscape’s anthropomorphic dimension easily goes unnoticed without reference to the earlier oil painting, which is itself part of a separate project. Indeed, considerable time elapsed between the two compositions. Within the current methodological climate, this distance raises the question of whether Friedrich’s anthropomorphism is really his, or whether I, as the interpreter, have fallen prey to what Bernstein describes as the “endless effort to ascribe human form to the forever nonhuman,” as if the only way of making “sense of our humanity” was to see it “projected onto what is patently other than human.” In recent years, a number of scholars have questioned whether nonhuman objects in paintings that have been said to resemble the human form or countenance are to be attributed to the artist’s tendency to give human traits to nonhuman entities, or to the interpreter’s misguided projections. James Elkins argues that identifying hidden images in paintings is one of the “defining strategies”
of late twentieth-century art historians. The historian’s solution to making sense of bewildering paintings often has been to “solve” them by insisting they contain “hidden images.” In certain cases, allegedly “hidden” forms have been clearly placed there by the artist. Friedrich himself experimented with picture puzzles, visible in the lancet window frames of The Tomb of Ulrich von Hutten (c. 1823–24), which form three distinct silhouettes of helmets or soldiers, alluding to the buried hero’s struggles in the name of freedom (fig. 42). Or in his drawing Study of a Rocky Slope and Trees, with Two Recumbent Figures (1799), a crucifix conspicuously emerges from the fissures in the rock face, which I discuss more closely in Chapter 4 (fig. 43). In other cases, however, hidden images in paintings are not so obvious and their existence is often disputed. Historically, their presence has been defended with the claim that artists can produce images unconsciously, even while maintaining full control of their compositions. Elkins dismisses the psychological rationalization of chance images, attributing them to the imagination’s natural tendency to interfere with perception and insisting that they are only “created by being seen.”
Elkins was not the first to recognize the anxious historian’s inclination to project meaning where it is not there. In 1947 Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris explored the various linguistic forms of aesthetic ambiguity, the most extreme being “projective”: “We shall speak of an ambiguity as projective when clustering is minimal, so that responses vary altogether with the interpreter. The term is in such cases said to be ‘hopelessly’ vague, the meanings found being in fact imposed—projected—by the interpreter.” When language is composed of unstable symbols, it inevitably encompasses multiple interacting levels of meaning, so that the act of interpretation itself becomes one of constant creation and re-creation. Images too tend to resist any single interpretation—Friedrich’s work in particular, as he, along with many other Romantic artists, often dispensed with narrative or legible iconographic systems, and developed free and private systems of signification. Yet anthropomorphism differs in a fundamental way from other forms of literary or visual ambiguity. As Paul de Man reminds us, anthropomorphism, unlike the associative structure of relations implied by other literary tropes, maintains “an identification at the level of substance,” meaning that it is premised on an essential semantico-ontological relation to the human. De Man insists, “Anthropomorphism… takes one entity for another and thus implies the constitution of specific entities prior to their confusion, the taking of something for something else that can then be assumed to be given.” In de Man’s constellation, this rhetorical figure accepts the identity of the human as fixed; therefore, transposing it onto something nonhuman (usually nature) brings the free association of language to a halt: “Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others.” Cynthia Chase aptly summarizes the implications of de Man’s account of anthropomorphism: “Taking the natural as human, it takes the human as given. This is to take the human as natural, to create a naturalness of man from which man and nature in effect disappear as the distinction between them is effaced.” De Man offers a critique of anthropomorphism as a linguistic trope (or anti-trope) in lyric poetry based on its presumption of some common substance or shared sense of being between the human and the natural, and the spurious attempt to use language as a conduit between the two. For Friedrich, though, who believed that art is “an intermediary between nature and human beings,” that sameness is not misplaced or self-defeating; it is an underlying premise of his project. In the Rügen watercolor, the taking of “one entity for another” quite literally and deliberately takes place “prior to their confusion.” Although observing the anthropomorphism of Friedrich’s trees and shrubs is not immediate and involves a degree of chance, these motifs are formally derived from the figures in the earlier oil painting and, thus, maintain a relation to the human “at the level of substance.” Once the memory of these forms is recovered, the almost infinite associative possibilities of trees are narrowed and focused on the human, which is itself construed as a universal, blurring the boundaries between self and nature.

That the anthropomorphic trees and shrubs in Friedrich’s Rügen watercolor are intentional is supported by the earlier peopled iteration of the subject, but why then did
the artist choose to leave those forms inchoate, to the extent that they have gone unnoticed in almost two hundred years of scholarship? First of all, the element of uncertainty that accompanies the process of discovery cannot be explained away by the subject's unconscious tendency to project itself onto the outside world. The notion of an imaginative projection itself has a long history, and it would be anachronism to dismiss the artist's anthropomorphism based on post-1960 constructions of vision and its discontents. The power of the eye and mind to conjure up forms in nature, human or otherwise, has been a serious topic of discussion in discourses surrounding the visual arts since the Renaissance and, at different points, was either celebrated as an essential part of the creative process or apprehended with great suspicion.⁷⁴

During the Romantic period, scientists and artists alike investigated and encouraged the active role of the imagination in perception. Early psychologists such as Karl Friedrich Burdach, Jan Evangelista Purkinje, and Johannes Müller explored the internal origins of optical hallucinations with great enthusiasm. Müller's essay On the Fantastic Phenomena of Vision (1826) is an important point of reference, which takes a physiological approach to psychology to demonstrate how the sense of sight works in tandem with mental activity to produce phantasms.⁷⁵ Müller maintained that our visual faculties are not simply passive receivers of information; rather, the eye is an active producer of visual phenomena and responds to the internal organic stimuli of other organs as much as it does to the outside world. Illusory images observed in nature are the subject of one of his key case studies. A man by the name of Nicolai would see imagined trees and boulders in the landscape that disappeared every time he blinked, only to be replaced by new imagined forms when he reopened his eyes.⁷⁶ Nicolai's visionary landscapes were understood to be pathological, but parallel discussions surrounding the productive powers of the eye and mind appear in the context of the visual arts, where they were largely viewed as a positive force.

Many German writers and philosophers in the early nineteenth century, notably Goethe, Schelling, and August Wilhelm Schlegel, encouraged artists not to imitate nature's outward appearance but rather to harness her creative energy, in the manner of natura naturans, meaning the active, productive dimension of the universe. Landscape was particularly valued for its imaginative possibilities, expressed in Ludwig Tieck's novel Franz Sternbald's Travels (1798), which reads as a quasi-manifesto for Romantic landscape painting. The eponymous Franz, a fictional student of Dürer, is persuaded by his friend Rudolph to abandon the narrative figures and obsolete iconographies of history painting, and instead to turn his attention to the "wondrous colorful images in the clouds."⁷⁷ Rudolph declares that he would happily forgo "narrative, passion, and composition," even "meaning in the traditional sense," for the sake of a painting that captures the sky's "dazzling colors" just as they manifest in nature, without regard for formal coherence.⁷⁸ Such "aerial images" (Luftbilder) would "delight and satisfy" his heart and soul completely, Rudolph insists. In practice, the most extreme example of this attitude to composing a picture did not emerge out of the German context; it is rather embodied by the late
eighteenth-century British painter Alexander Cozens, who suggested that making random inkblots on paper could, with the aid of the imagination, stimulate original landscape compositions. Friedrich may have himself given “blotting” a try, which is indicated in an anecdote recorded by the sculptor David d’Angers. Upon visiting Friedrich’s studio, David d’Angers discouraged the artist from discarding a drawing on which he had spilled ink, suggesting that “one could take this blot for a bird,” in response to which Friedrich “smiled with a childlike expression.” Gamboni attributes the growing popularity of such contingent practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to an increasing awareness of the “active, subjective nature of seeing.” That Friedrich was interested in the tension between perception and imagination is supported by his oft-cited maxim, “The painter should not only paint what he sees before him but also what he sees within him.” Yet his treatment of nature is far removed from Romantic practices based strictly on accident and subjectivity. Most, if not all, of his landscapes derive from the firsthand study of nature and accord meticulous attention to her morphology. The visual ambiguity of his anthropomorphism cannot be attributed to mobilizing the productive dimension of the mind alone, for it was inconceivable for him to compose a landscape from strictly imagined forms.

Methods and developments in the natural sciences offer a more convincing conceptual context for the subtlety of Friedrich’s anthropomorphism. Empirical accounts of correspondences among the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, the birth of Naturphilosophie, and a revival of interest in the early-modern doctrine of signatures led to serious consideration of the substance of resemblances found in nature. Many of the Romantic naturalists, writers, and artists who observed ichnologic images in nature approached them as if they had some meaningful existence independent of the beholder’s mind. In the opening words of The Novices of Sais (1802), Novalis recognized a hieroglyphic language in nature that speaks to us but is never entirely intelligible:

Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures which seem to belong to that great cipher which we discern written everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds and snow, in crystals and in stone formations, on ice-covered waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, of plants, beasts and men, in the lights of heaven, on scored disks of pitch or glass or iron filings round a magnet, and in strange conjunctions of chance. In them we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar, but our surmise takes on no definite form and seems unwilling to become a higher key. It is as though an alkahest had been poured over the senses of man. Only at moments do their desires and thoughts seem to solidify. Thus arise their presentiments, but after a short time everything swims again before their eyes.

For Novalis, nature’s forms have some significance beyond what readily meets the eye, and this higher meaning reveals itself to the attentive beholder in fleeting moments. He described nature’s morphological variety, her surfaces, and her textures as
part of a universal code, but this language is hieroglyphic, for every time these random configurations begin to coalesce into a concrete image or script, they dissolve again into pure abstraction.

This way of thinking about nature bridges new and old epistemologies. Novalis drew on various early-modern sources, notably Paracelsus, the most important early proponent of the doctrine of signatures, as well as the seventeenth-century mystic Jacob Boehme, who maintained many of Paracelsus's principles on the language of nature. Paracelsus held that nature's deeper significance could be discerned from her visibility, because God communicates with the earthly realm by impressing the surface of things with a mysterious but ultimately legible script. Implicit in this doctrine is the concept of nature as a revelation of the divine, where signatures reflect the visual dimension of the process of revelation. In turn, incipient images found in nature were believed by many to have some tangible existence and meaning outside of the imagination, which had important implications for the representation of nature in the visual arts and beyond. In his treatise De statua (On Sculpture) (1464), Leon Battista Alberti even described the origin of sculpture as the process of completing inchoate images observed in tree trunks, earth, and other natural objects. For Alberti, artists are especially attuned to discovering meaningful resemblances in nature and feel naturally compelled to complete them. The proliferation of anthropomorphic forms in the work of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artists, notably Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Hieronymus Bosch, Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, Dürer, Athanasius Kircher, Andrea Mantegna, Matthäus Merian, Joos de Momper, Bartolomeo Montagna, Piero di Cosimo, and Raphael, was at least in part a means of conveying the analogies, resemblances, and signatures that were believed to structure the relations between things. Artists and naturalists alike were entrusted with decoding nature, serving as humankind's means of deciphering God's language and, in the process, translating mystical into empirical knowledge.

In Novices of Sais, Novalis's protagonist assumes the role of interpreter, but the author updated the doctrine of signatures by replacing the notion of the Book of Nature with Romantic hieroglyphs, which still read as a graphic language but spell out a far more arcane and infinitely variable script of potential meanings. The trope of the hieroglyph adds a dimension of uncertainty to the process of translation where moments of clarity are at best fugitive. He also aligned the discourse with at least two principles of Naturphilosophie: the idea that nature behaves as an organism, and that nature manifests as the interplay between inner and outer worlds. For Novalis, nature is legible in so far as all her forms are part of and representative of an interconnected whole. Studying nature in her visibility, however indeterminate her forms may appear, was thus the path to grasping nature's more abstract forces.

For the German Romantics, discovering traces of the human body in nature was evidently not understood as an empty projection of the self onto inanimate objects, nor could such images be dismissed as mere distortions of perception. Those artists
and scientists versed in the discourse of Naturphilosophie were accustomed to looking for some kind of hidden life behind nature, something not readily perceivable to the untrained eye, but that would reveal itself through careful looking. By reading the physiognomy of nature, one could begin to decipher her hieroglyphic language. For the Romantic naturalist Schubert, a champion of Friedrich's work, the attentive study of nature could expose the essential connection between the self and nature. In his pendant texts General Natural History or Suggestions for a History of the Physiognomy of Nature (1826) and Views from the Night-Side of Natural Science (1808; rev. ed. 1827), discussed at length in Chapter 1, the study of outward appearances led him to an understanding of "the oldest relation of man to nature, the living harmony of the individual with the whole."60 Although foremost a scientist, Carus extended this objective to the practice of landscape in his Nine Letters on Landscape Painting (1815–24), which were inspired by exchanges with Friedrich. Carus insisted that we must "train the eye to perceive nature in its divine, essential life and in its forms."61 This task was twofold: it involved apprehending "the shapes of natural objects not as arbitrary, undefined, lawless, and consequently meaningless but as defined by primordial divine life, eternally law-abiding, and meaningful," and the artist was to "discern the diversity of substance in natural objects, observe the difference in the appearance of one and the same form embodied in different substances, and detect the connection, the affinity, between specific differences of substance and particular forms."62

The ambiguity between trees and the human figure in Friedrich's Rügen watercolor expresses comparable principles through visual representation. This work may be the only example of the direct translation of human into nonhuman form in Friedrich's oeuvre, for even the faces in Harz Cave are at best loosely tied to the figures in his earlier iteration of the landscape, but that does not lessen its significance. The Rügen watercolor serves as a bridge into the Romantic period eye, opening up modern viewers to this generation's historically specific way of looking at nature. And, significantly, it allows us to detect an even subtler anthropomorphism at work in many of Friedrich's other portraits of nature, one to which we would otherwise remain blind, buried beneath the sediment of a remote time and place. His unpeopled landscapes are not puzzles to be solved, nor do his anthropomorphic motifs emerge from the landscape unconsciously, for as the artist himself noted, "art may be a game, but it is a serious game."63 These works are highly personal testaments to Friedrich's own study of nature's physiognomy and the accompanying search for the life behind her morphology. Studying isolated natural forms, he re-presented them to render legible nature's encrypted code, the greater connection between her apparently discrete elements. For Friedrich, revealing elemental sympathies between human life and nature was a project of the utmost seriousness, one that sought to dispel artificial and alienating dichotomies such as internal and external, or subject and object. True to the Romantic imperative that to understand nature is to understand the self, he staged meaningful encounters with the natural world, in which viewers are invited to search for and discover vestiges of themselves.
As in Novalis’s writing, though, there is an element of doubt in Friedrich’s project, expressed through its subtle execution, which I argue is itself a central tenet of his anthropomorphism. The artist’s visual ambiguity, and the viewer’s concomitant hesitation over whether the human form is really there, foregrounds the desire to merge with nature, while simultaneously serving as a reminder of the impossibility of that union, a tension that is typical of Romantic constructions of nature. I once again cite Novalis, who most forcefully articulated the plight of the naturalist in one of his philosophical fragments. While “Everything that we experience is a communication . . . a revelation of the spirit,” the transmission is imparted to us as an incomplete text: “The time is over, in which the spirit of God is comprehensible. The meaning of the world has been lost. We are left standing with only the letters.” Regretting the bygone legibility of the Book of Nature, Novalis’s project was one of re-mystifying the world. This involved recovering the forgotten signatures of objects, but his writing expresses the inevitable failure or impossibility of this undertaking, which is also what is conveyed by Friedrich’s Rügen watercolor. In the absence of the oil painting, the landscape’s anthropomorphism is in question, just as nature’s signatures are no longer self-evident. As suggestive as his trees and shrubs are, and as much as they threaten to become human and vice versa, like Novalis’s ciphers, “everything swims again before their eyes” before the transformation is complete. It is left up to the viewer to scrutinize nature’s physiognomy in search of lingering signs of the hidden life beneath her morphology.

The ambiguity and sense of doubt that characterizes Friedrich’s mature landscapes ultimately eclipsed the earnest investigation of nature that underlies his metamorphic forms. As the Romantic movement began to wane in the 1840s, anthropomorphic attitudes toward nature were misconstrued and became the subject of critique and satire. In his Modern Painters (1843–60), John Ruskin pejoratively dubbed “the state of mind” that attributes to inanimate objects the “characters of a living creature,” the “pathetic fallacy.” Ruskin distinguished between “the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us” and “the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy.” The latter state, in which “reason is unhinged by grief,” is what leads the artist to fallaciously “express something which he, as a living creature, imagines in the lifeless object.” Ruskin associated this tendency with the “troublesomeness” of German metaphysics and identified it as particularly strong in modern (Romantic) poetry and painting. Within the German context, the late Romantic artist Moritz von Schwind parodied the projection of human forms and sentiments onto nature in a woodcut printed in the satirical journal Fliegende Blätter. Titled Organic Life in Nature (1847–48), the illustration stages an orgy of anthropomorphic trees, erotically reclining and draped over each other (fig. 44). The caricature was not accompanied by an explanatory text, but Schwind seems to mock the hylozoic inclinations of artists such as Friedrich and dismiss anthropomorphism as a fallacy of the mind at a time when Naturphilosophie had lost much of its hold on intellectual circles. Yet the Romantic cosmology of a dynamic and mutually
The supporting connection between human life and nature was not entirely lost with the end of the movement; it simply evolved from a mystical worldview to an empirical one.

The anthropomorphic dimension of Friedrich’s practice and its link with natural science and philosophy situates the artist within a larger current of modern art concerned with the genesis of life and matter, and the laws of organic and inorganic form. As Barbara Larson has shown, for certain artists and writers in the mid- to late nineteenth century, debates “over life’s origins rekindled the old idea of micro- and macro-cosmos, which . . . led them to reexamine the relationship of the body to the landscape.” Larson’s primary case study is Odilon Redon, in whose works from the 1860s she suggests that the human figure occasionally “echoes mountains or boulders in form” and is even “fused within rock.” She contextualizes Redon’s investigation of the “relationship of man to matter” relative to debates in the natural sciences concerning spontaneous generation, namely whether or not life could emerge from nonliving matter. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary
theory was formative for such discussions, and many other artists from the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century followed a related trajectory, from biomorphic abstraction to bio art, a point to which I return in the conclusion of this book. The idea of nature as interconnected and subject to ongoing transformation was, however, already proposed by eighteenth-century vitalists and, subsequently, by Schelling’s Naturphilosophie. Friedrich’s watercolor Chalk Cliffs on Rügen points to a fluid understanding of the boundaries between human life and matter, and the continuity between this work and the earlier peopled composition suggests an acute attention to the metamorphic properties of nature that aligns with the proto-evolutionary investigations of naturalists in his circle. In the next chapter, I look more closely at the precise meaning of Friedrich’s natural morphology, focusing on trees and the larger significance of dendrites within the emerging life sciences.
CHAPTER 2. NATURAL BODIES, EMBODIED NATURE


1. This is not a complete list of works that have been interpreted as self-portraits. See Helmut Börsch-Supan, "Caspar David Friedrich’s Landscapes with Self-Portraits," Burlington Magazine 114, no. 834 (September 1972): 620–30; Werner Hoffmann, Caspar David Friedrich, trans. Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 57–60, 127–28.

2. Hofmann, Caspar David Friedrich, 135.

4. Another example is Fir Trees in the Snow (1828; Neue Pinakothek, Munich), in which a semi-circular copse of coniferous trees has been extracted from the earlier Winter Landscape with Church (1811; National Gallery, London) and the peripatetic figure has been removed. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 27–28, 189–92.

5. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 90.


For a reconstruction of both views, which actually derive from different lookout points, see Herrmann Zschoche, *Caspar David Friedrich auf Rügen* (Amsterdam: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), 110–14, 117–20.

9. On Friedrich’s series of Rügen scenes, see Zschoche, *Caspar David Friedrich auf Rügen*, 127–31; Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 474. Based on Friedrich’s loose brushwork, Börsch-Supan dates the watercolor to the late 1820s; however, given the work’s relationship to the series, this dating is unlikely. On the dating of the oil painting, see Schieb and Wedekind, *Rügen*, 139–41.

10. Jensen noted that the trees to the far left and right in the watercolor assume roughly the same position as the figures in the oil painting, but he made no mention of the central shrub and kneeling figure and he did not point to formal affinity. Jensen, *Life and Work*, 172.


18. The first three are oil paintings: *Graves of Ancient Heroes* (1811; Hamburger Kunsthalle); *Racey Valley* (The Tomb of Arminius) (1813; Kunsthalle Bremen); and *Racey Gorge in the Harz* (1821; Pommersches Landesmuseum, Greifswald). On Friedrich’s work in the Harz Mountains, see Herrmann Zschoche, *Caspar David Friedrich im Harz* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 2000), esp. 87–88. For reproductions of the drawings on which these works are based, see Christina Grummt, *Caspar David Friedrich: Die Zeichnungen, das gesamte Werk* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011), 2:628–29, cat. nos. 690–91.


22. Clinger interprets Friedrich’s recapitulation of earlier figurative motifs as a progression from real to imagined forms that suggests a tension between conscious and unconscious memory. Her psychological reading leads her into a discussion of similar forms in eighteenth-century speckled illustrations and the imaginative exercise among spelunkers of sighting grotesque faces or other images on the interior walls of caves. Clinger, "Caspar David Friedrich," 208–9.


24. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 163–64.


27. Robert’s key comparison is Landscape: Creek and Rocks (1850; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia) and a print Durand created after John Vanderlyn’s Ariadne from 1835 in which the horizontal position and dimensions of the sandstone boulder, situated at the water’s edge, mimic Ariadne’s recumbent pose on the banks of a creek. Jennifer L. Roberts, Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 137–40, quote on 139.


29. Wood’s key example is Alt dorfer’s Landscape with Footbridge (c. 1588–90; National Gallery, London). Wood, Alt dorfer, 161.

30. Wood, Alt dorfer, 119–27. A paradigmatic example is Lucas Cranach’s woodcut St. Jerome (1509) and the drawing Landscape with Clearing after the work (artist unknown, 16th century; Graphische Sammlung, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, inv. no. 651).

31. Wood, Alt dorfer, 121.

32. Wood, Alt dorfer, 121.

33. Wood, Alt dorfer, 121.


35. In a letter from Philipp Otto Runge to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 19 April 1808, Runge lists a number of sketches that are enclosed for Goethe to consult, including several for Rest on the Flight. He described one as a "study for the background," which likely refers to Nile Valley. He clearly left it up to Goethe to recognize the metamorphosis of human forms into landscape, or vice versa. Runge, Briefwechsel, 255.


40. "Jetzt fällt der Sinn mehr auf das Gegenheil. . . . So dringt der Mensch seine eigenen Gefühle den Gegenständen um sich her auf, und dadurch erlangt Alles Bedeutung und Sprache." Runge, Briefwechsel, 103–6; Art in Theory, 986.

41. "Wie selbst die Philosophen dahin kommen, daß man alles nur aus sich heraus imaginiert, so sehen wir oder sollen wir sehen in jeder Blume den
lebendigen Geist, den der Mensch hineinlegt." Runge, Briefwechsel, 105; Art in Theory, 986.

42. "Daß die Gestalten außer uns nichts sind, will ich dir erklären." Runge, Briefwechsel, 106; Art in Theory, 986.


44. "Die Freude, die wir an den Blumen haben, das ist noch ordentlich vom Paradies her. So verbinden wir innerlich immer einen Sinn mit der Blume, also eine menschliche Gestalt. Und das ist erst die rechte Blume, die wir mit unsre Freude meynen. Wenn wir so in der ganzen Natur nur unser Leben sehen, so ist es klar, daß dann erst die rechte Landschaft entstehen muß, als völlig entgegengesetzt der menschlichen oder historischen Composition." Runge, Briefwechsel, 106; Art in Theory, 986. Emphasis mine.

45. See, for instance, Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 169, see also 63. Scholars have argued for and against the importance of Runge's work and theories for Friedrich's practice. For an overview of positions, see Traeger, Philipp Otto Runge, 180-83.


47. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 163.

48. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 164.

49. Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 164.


52. Runge never completed Source and Sets and it only exists as a preparatory drawing. For a reproduction, see Traeger, Philipp Otto Runge, 386-87. cat. no. 323.

53. On the theme of transformation in the diurnal pair, see Thomas Lange, Die bildnerische Denken Philipp Otto Runge (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 206-20, esp. 214.


56. See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären (Gotha: Eitinger, 1790).


75. Johannes Müller, *Ueber die phantastischen Gesichterscheinungen: Eine physiologische Untersuchung* (Koblenz: Jacob Hölscher, 1826).
80. "Quand je l'ai prié de mettre son nom en bas d'un dessin qu'il m'avait donné . . . il laissa tomber un peu d'encre dessus. Je vis que son premier mouvement était de le déchirer; mais il n'en fit rien, parce que je l'assurai que l'on pourrait prendre cette tache pour un osseau. Il sourit, avec cette expression enfantine que l'on ne retrouve que chez les hommes remarquables d'Allemagne." *Les carnets de David d'Angevin*, November 1834. As cited in Jean-Claude Lebentsztein, *L'art de la tache: introduction à la Nouvelle méthode d'Alexander Cozens* (Montélimar, France: Éditions du limon, 1990), 394.
82. "Der Maler soll nicht bloß malen, was er vor sich sieht, sondern auch, was er in sich sieht." Friedrich, *Briefen und Bekenntnissen*, 129.
86. Janson, "Image Made by Chance," 55.
87. Janson, "Image Made by Chance," 60.
88. See, for instance, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Archimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 162-63; Michel Weemans, "Herri met de Bles’s Sleeping Peddler: An Exegetical and Anthropomorphic Landscape," Art Bulletin 88, no. 3 (September 2006): 471; Gamboni, Potential Images, 34. Well-known early-modern examples include: Bartolomeo Montagna, Virgin and Child with St. Monica and Mary Magdalen (c. 1485; Civic Art Gallery of Palazzo Chiericati, Vicenza); Raphael, Sistine Madonna (1508; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest); Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, Rocky Island (c. 1515; Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin); Piero di Cosimo, The Discovery of Honey (c. 1499; Worcester Art Museum, Mass.); The Misfortunes of Silenus (c. 1500; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass.); and Andrea Mantegna, Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (c. 1457; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).
93. "Die Kunst mag ein Spiel seyn, aber sie ist ein ernstes Spiel." Friedrich, Die Briefe, 43.
96. Ruskin, Modern Painters, 3:159.
100. Larson, Dark Side of Nature, 15.

CHAPTER 3. THE ANATOMY OF NATURE

1. This chapter expands on my article "Caspar David Friedrich and the Anatomy of Nature," Art History 37, no. 3 (June 2014): 454–81.