

## Monotony and the Picturesque: Landscape in Three Australian Travel Narratives of the 1830s

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It has been argued that the picturesque is more than a way of describing the land. Both Paul Carter and Simon Ryan claim that the picturesque aesthetic is used to appropriate the land. Carter, for example, writes that: 'The picturesque ... is thoroughly entwined with notions of nature's use-value and the need to appropriate this wealth. Indeed the language of scientific and picturesque study is a language of appropriation' (*Road to Botany Bay* 287).

The objective of appropriation is not only for outward possession but, as Livio Dobrez argues: 'A politics of appropriation requires for its completion, inward possession, guaranteed only by (apparent) dispossession and loss. Identity comes to birth in its own dying, that is in uncertainty, as a question' (39).

What is the relationship between identity and conceptions the land as picturesque or monotonous? As seen through the eyes of three early nineteenth-century travellers in Australia, the picturesque landscape appears as a culturally constructed aesthetic. It is a landscape to which a cultural identity is applied. A monotonous landscape conversely is one that acts upon and can generate personal identity precisely because it is free from the inveteracy of received cultural tradition.

### The picturesque

In the 1830s Australia entered the pastoral era and travel writers reflected both the aesthetic and the utilitarian functions that this era demanded of the picturesque.

*Wanderings in New South Wales*, published in 1834, is an account of a brief sojourn in Australia in 1832 by the English doctor and naturalist, George Bennett. From the deck of a ship, his first impression of Australia is of a coast that appeared barren and sombre. It is the scenery of the interior of the Colony that he praises highly, not least of all for its resemblance to England. To this end, Bennett never tires of employing the picturesque aesthetic to describe his impressions of the Australian landscape:

The plains were animated by herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, and troops of horses, grazing, reposing, or exercising: the whole combination of this beautiful scenery excited the most pleasing sensations, which were heightened by its English character ...

... green sloping hills, thinly timbered, only wanting the addition of mansions to the natural lawns and parks to perfect the landscape ... (184, 186)

The economic imperatives of settlement clearly underwrite this description. There is, however, also an important cultural and social perspective to the scene, for it represents an idealised landscape, one that Bennett imagines as completely domesticated. In so far as he is able to project his own cultural bias onto the scene in front of him he creates a state of accord between himself, his cultural heritage and the land.

Bennett's cultural partiality again comes to the fore while travelling the 'deep romantic glens' of the Blue Mountains, but here he adds to the picturesque economic, practical and psychological elements:

the prospect before us had assumed a romantic and in a high degree picturesque appearance: there was a distant view of the Appin, Windsor, and other districts, like a sea of country in the distance; near us were wild deep-wooded glens, to the bottom of which the eye could not reach. On another side were mountains heaped on mountains of various forms, and for the most part densely wooded, all combining to form a landscape of a grand and impressive character. There was, however, a deficiency of water in the view, an element which adds so much to the natural beauties of all landscape scenery; by its presence the picturesque as well as fertile appearance of the country would have been much increased. (100)

The names he mentions—Appin and Windsor—are as distinctly English as the characteristics of the land that he elaborates under the picturesque paradigm. His comments regarding the deficiency of water reveal additional facets to the picturesque. Bennett associates water with the economic, that is, the fertile aspect of the countryside. In practical terms water represents survival, water allows the land to be travelled. Further, water balances the landscape and contributes to a state of harmony between the land and the observer.

For Bennett, the picturesque provides a point of focus, where he can let his gaze rest and absorb; where he can seize upon a set of objects in a scene and describe the extent to which they accord with the many aspects of the picturesque. His image of the landscape from atop Mount Brace is a dense passage describing the panorama in all these terms:

the view from it was extensive, and of much picturesque beauty. Plains, (varied by wooded patches,) upon which herds of cattle grazed or reposed; – spots of cultivated land, green with the rising grain; – the distance terminating to the horizon in mountains of a greater or less degree of elevation and of varying forms ... and the Cudgong river winding its course amidst the tranquil scene, produced, in combination, a very pleasing landscape. (122)

The cattle and fields of grain symbolise European civilisation and wealth, and are set within the larger framework of the beautiful appeal of the picturesque landscape—it is benign, soothing and tranquil. This type of landscape leads Bennett to rhapsodise:

Day had just dawned when I commenced my journey; the sky was clear and serene; the rising sun gilded the summits of the picturesque mountains; the sparkling dew was not yet dispelled, and all nature looked refreshed; the atmosphere was cool and agreeable, the birds chanted, as if to salute the rising orb with their early melody ... (304)

The poetic quality of this and like passages is intended to impart something of the psychological effect that the landscape has upon the traveller. It can, however, be regarded just as readily as an operation of the traveller upon the landscape. The writer is, in this view, producing a purely imaginary landscape from the storehouse of a culturally received picturesque tradition.

By the time Bennett was writing, the tradition was enshrined in the culture through painting, the visual representation of the picturesque to which these written descriptions correspond. Bennett's prose is the poetic equivalent to the visual (338), and represents the cultural ideal of the image of 'nature' perfected. It is an image of

nature seen through the lens of English cultural identity and, as Ruth Benedict points out in *The Growth of Culture* (246), our actions are determined to a large degree by our cultural images of nature. However, it is equally clear that our activities can determine how nature is imagined.

In 1838, Joseph Hawdon, a young, wealthy, recently-arrived capitalist, made a five-month cattle-droving journey from New South Wales to Adelaide. His journey is practical and rapid; his writing pragmatic, the journal being written from an overlander's viewpoint. For Hawdon, the picturesque is present only in the midst of civilisation and only insofar as it resembles England. He reserves the description, 'picturesque' for the cities of Melbourne and Adelaide. The countryside in between is only ever either pretty or beautiful. Describing Melbourne he writes almost mechanistically:

... the waters of Port Phillip flow nearly into the centre of the township, where they are met by a picturesque cascade of the river ... The scenery around Melbourne is not surpassed by any in New South Wales. From an eminence at the outer-west end of the town, called Bateman's (Batman's) Hill, a natural lawn, beautiful in verdure, slopes to the extent of three or four miles, encircling a small salt water lake, that is generally covered with swans and wildfowl, and on its brink are scattered clumps of the Shea-oak, which give the whole the appearance of an English Park. (4)

Here the term 'picturesque' functions as a kind of shorthand. A simple comparison of the scene to an English park gives this scant description a completeness that the prose fails to achieve.

Hawdon does not express his feelings towards the landscape nor does he disclose the effect the landscape has on him. The most he says about Adelaide's scenery, for example, is that it:

is very pleasing. Towards the sea it consists of plains studded and intersected with belts of trees. The Mount Lofty Range distant about two miles to the eastward, presents a beautiful picturesque appearance. (61)

Perhaps Hawdon's descriptive powers are not great, but it may be that he considers it inappropriate to record his impressions from any other position than that of the detached observer. Taking his journal as a whole, it seems certain that he wishes to present a strong and heroic image of himself, an image that would be compromised if he became even remotely subjective.

In his journal Hawdon is at his most subjective when he is travelling through monotonous rather than picturesque land:

The course of the river obliged us to travel two miles southwards; we then proceeded due west, across extensive plains, which though of poor soil, afforded a great relief to the eye after travelling five days through a monotonous box-tree forest. (16-17)

During the next two-and-a-half months he travelled through an unchanging landscape for much of the time but acknowledges it only in such impersonal remarks as 'the country did not vary' (51).

By describing the land as monotonous a traveller is responding on a personal and emotional level. For Hawdon it seems that any emotion is a sign of weakness. Consequently his journal entries are brief and factual. He refuses to allow the land to dictate his experience of it.

### The monotony of distance

Monotony and the picturesque are not antonyms for the appearance of the landscape. Rather they denote different ways in which the landscape is experienced. In the picturesque encounter the observer is static, while in the monotonous experience the observer is moving through the land.

Australia as 'monotonous land' is part of our cultural inheritance, especially as regards the experience of travel in the outback. In the 'out there' the landscape is without focus; it seems purposeless. 'Out there' there is nothing for the uninitiated eye to seize upon, name and identify; there is no way of establishing a sense of personal familiarity and identity of location. When applied to a journey, monotony conjures up images of landscapes that have the same scenery occupying the entire field of vision, with limited potential for change beyond the horizon. Under these conditions, personal identity is threatened, and, as such, the experience of monotony is best analysed psychologically. Monotony is more a state of mind, more a state of 'dis-ease', than a state of place. Describing an empty, arid desert freckled with bush and stretching away to the horizon, as 'monotonous' is an emotional and even poetic response to a landscape that is not monotonous in itself but which thought has made so.

*A Month in the Bush of Australia*, by Thomas Walker, published in 1838, combines the monotonous and the picturesque in a way that illustrates the dramatic psychological effect that the monotonous landscape can have upon identity. Early in the book that recounts his journey from Sydney to Melbourne is a passage that hints at the effect the landscape can have on the traveller:

The view and country around are very picturesque and pretty ... They consist of the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, here a running stream, with a good deal of water in it, even at present, flowing circuitously through a very broken country. There are a few flats, but the country is chiefly very hilly on each side, and bounded by rather high ranges ... very beautiful indeed; notwithstanding all that, it was not such a place as I should like to live at, there is a wildness about it or something else, which prevented me from feeling that it was a place I should choose for my residence. (11)

Further into his journey he writes:

We have had a monotonous ride today through these interminable forests of small white gum trees, with very little variety of scenery ... there is nothing striking about it. (20)

Although the ever-present and unchanging forests may cause his ride to be monotonous, they are not inherently so. It is the day's journey that is quite properly described as monotonous. The important horizon in this landscape is not so much the physical one as the temporal one. In this sense monotony is a measure of time, or time-less-ness, and the changeless landscape through which Walker travels is one yardstick by which he can measure monotony. The same forests that Walker felt were interminably monotonous, later lead him to an appreciation of the sublime. While watching that his cattle do not stray:

There was a degree of sublimity in being alone in the silence of midnight in the interminable forest; and an excellent opportunity for reflections is on such occasions presented.

Though the country we travel through is monotonous, and does not present much, if any, fine scenery, yet it is new; its extent and absence of population as well as novelty have their charm. (Walker 27-8)

Approaching his destination, his self-reflection is intensified:

What a changed life I have led these two months back! how different from what I have spent these fifteen years! I appear to myself unlike myself; I can scarcely believe I am the same person. I feel as if I am dreaming and not really leading the life I do, so totally different is it from what I have been so long accustomed. (38)

It is the journey's monotony, rather than any picturesque landscape, that is the catalyst for his momentous psychological change. It is in an environment devoid of external distractions that the experience of travelling is brought home most forcefully (41) and it is in a monotonous forest that cultural identity is most stressed and the subjectivity of this traveller is most intimately revealed.

The concept of an 'intercultural identity' provides a framework for understanding the landscape's effect on the identities of these travellers. First postulated by Young Yun Kim in 1992, intercultural identity represents the ability of the individual to 'grow beyond their original culture and encompass a new culture, gaining additional insights into both cultures in the process' (3). There are several key factors involved in this acculturation process, the process whereby a new culture is accepted in place of or in addition to a former one: *motivation* to acknowledge the other culture, *opportunity* to interact with the other culture and *competence* in taking advantage of these opportunities. Most importantly Kim argues that *conflict and stress* may be necessary and desirable in the long view since stress is likely to result in more complete intercultural identity formation. This is the point at which monotony, the picturesque, cultural tradition and identity coincide.

There is a stress factor inherent in monotony, with its timelessness, and lack of focus, that is lacking from the façade of the picturesque. The essential picturesque is a sedative. It is concerned with appearance and the maintenance of identity through a culturally appropriated concept of 'nature perfected'. Monotonous nature, in contrast, is an experience of the landscape shunned by the creators of European culture and as such is devoid of cultural content. The extent to which a landscape is deficient of history and cultural interest will determine the measure of its monotony. An utterly monotonous landscape bears no relation to the travellers' world, to their history or their culture, and that is to say that for a particular landscape to be or not to be a part of culture depends on whether the land is a priori part of the mind that experiences it. Like the myths which Lévi-Strauss analysed, landscapes could be said to 'signify the mind that evolves them by making use of the world of which it is itself a part' (341).

Livio Dobrez, in writing about *Voss*, claims that it shows Australia re-explored from the inside. 'He who loses the land,' writes Dobrez, 'will find it'. And I would add that to find oneself one must lose oneself. In the picturesque landscape one is in no danger of losing one's identity, in fact it is reinforced. The picturesque aesthetic attempts to adapt the land to the mind and in the process cultural identity reproduces itself perpetually. In the monotonous experience the mind is compelled to adapt to the land; identity must forsake its cultural attachment, its self-referential obsession, and generate something new.

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