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NATURE'S FAIREST FORMS
LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS
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With exultation, at my feet I saw
Lake, islands, promontories, gleaming bays,
A universe of Nature's fairest forms.
William Wordsworth

Why are swamps dismal? Marshes melancholic? Sloughs despondent? Moors dreary? Tarns sullen? Why are parklands picturesque and some prospects pleasing? Why are small, well-formed, smooth and enclosed scenes and surfaces beautiful? Why is the experience of big, massive and ruggedly formed objects sublime and terrifying? Why are the abject, smelly and formless depths of slime uncanny and horrifying? These questions pose a problematic of the aesthetics of nature for the modern European cultural tradition and its settler diasporas. The European landscape aesthetic was part of the explorer's and settler's cultural baggage that they took with them and either found or recreated in the colonies with devastating consequences. Yet the indigenous inhabitants and owners of colonial land had lived sustainably with it for tens of millennia before.

Landscape is one of the central devices and means by which Europeans and their settler diasporas understand and relate to land. In this article I critique the European landscape aesthetic of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful for its hierarchical taxonomy of landscapes in which, for instance, mountains are privileged over marshes, fields over fens. In particular, I argue that the aesthetics of nature valorises some landscapes, landforms and objects in or associated with them (sublime mountains, pleasingly picturesque prospects, beautiful small things) to the detriment of others (dismal swamps, melancholic marshes, despondent sloughs).

The discourses of nature and of the public and private spheres contributed to the development of landscape aesthetics in eighteenth-century Europe. Conservationists inherited this landscape aesthetic and in some instances have struggled against it to produce a conservationist aesthetic that values all land whether or not it is aesthetically pleasing. Aesthetics has traditionally been concerned with only the senses of sight and hearing and that it is the means whereby the bourgeoisie secured and maintains its hegemony through the distinction of the subject from the object whereas a conservation counter-aesthetics would value all the

senses and deconstruct the masterly distinction between subject and object.

These questions are not of merely historical or theoretical interest as they have wider cultural pertinence and practical consequences for the conservation of ecosystems and for the way humans live in the ecosphere.

The aesthetics of nature in landscape painting and gardening as well as in nature writing, tourism, nature documentaries, televisual life-style shows and the photographs of the coffee table book and the geographical magazines are all big business.

Yet despite the interest in, and industry of, landscape aesthetics, nature has not really been regarded as a proper object for aesthetics. The idea of the aesthetics of nature is a historical misnomer in European philosophical terms, though it has been a commercial success in the modern culture industries. This official disregard for the aesthetics of nature can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century. Theodor Adorno argues that beginning with Friedrich Schelling, the principal philosopher of Romanticism, aesthetics has shown an almost exclusive concern with works of art, not with nature. There is an historical irony here in that the Romantics are usually considered to have been more concerned with nature than with art, but they valued art over nature.

Adorno goes on to contrast what he calls this post-Kantian neglect of 'the beautiful in nature' with Kant's 'perspicacious analyses' of it in *The Critique of Judgment*.¹ Although Kant theorised some aspects of the aesthetics of nature, he was primarily concerned in the third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, with that in nature that would evoke or produce the experience or the state of the sublime. Thus the aesthetics of nature does not merely involve the beautiful as Adorno suggests, but also the sublime, not to forget the picturesque, all three of which could occur in relation to landscape considered as painting or as writing or as architecture (rather than gardening) or as viewing an actual piece of land.

In answering the question 'why was natural beauty dropped from the agenda of aesthetics?' Adorno responds that 'the reason is not that it was truly sublated in a higher realm, as Hegel would have us believe. Rather, the concept of natural beauty was simply repressed.'² Why? Because, as he goes on to argue, 'art and aesthetics after Kant have tacitly incorporated what in traditional aesthetics used to belong to nature.'³ Post-Kantian aesthetics represses the concept of natural beauty because the former was founded on the incorporation of the latter. Nature was made into art; cultural transformation of nature into art occurred in early nineteenth-century Europe.⁴ Just as sex was transformed into discourse, so was nature transformed into art. This process of incorporation sublimated nature (and natural beauty) into the realm of aesthetics but this process was founded on repression of nature.

A countervailing transformation of what Tim Bonyhady calls 'art into nature' began in the 1960s only to be obstructed more recently. He goes on to argue that 'if the gap between art and nature narrowed dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, it reopened wide through the 1990s.'⁵ The 'environmental aesthetic' retrieved from the nineteenth century and espoused by Bonyhady seeks to reclose the gap in the 2000s but it uncritically reproduces the official aesthetic modes of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful. By contrast, a conservation counter-aesthetic critiques not only the class and gender politics of all three, and the category of the aesthetic itself, but also the privileging of the aesthetic senses of sight and hearing over the others. It promotes a full bodily interaction with land, even an erotic ecology.

Arguably all sublimation involves a corresponding and concomitant process of repression. The two processes of subl(im)ation and repression, as I have argued elsewhere following Zoë Sofoulis, go together.⁶ One is not possible without the other. They are two sides of the same coin as it were, or more precisely are two complementary processes, which mirror each other, which go in opposite directions as it were. Whereas sublimation raises up what might otherwise descend into the merely beautiful into the ethereal realms of the aesthetic, repression pushes back what is further below, what wants to come to consciousness.

As a result of this dual process of sublimation and repression, nature was effectively split. The sublated was aestheticised and the repressed demonised. Some aspects of nature were sublimated, or more precisely seen as the site for the experience of the sublime such as the mountainous, whilst others were repressed, such as the slimy and swampy. As a consequence, the mountainous has been seen as the height of the sublime, whereas the swampy has been the depths of the slimy.⁷ This hierarchical privileging can be mapped spatially, as well as corporeally and metaphysically, as I have attempted to do elsewhere.⁸

The three official, or philosophically legitimated, aesthetic modes of the beautiful, picturesque and sublime are those in which the senses of sight and hearing can achieve expression and satisfaction. Yet Freud formulated a fourth modality that is not necessarily aesthetic, but even counter-aesthetic. This is the uncanny, which is related closely to the sense of smell and is the obverse and repressed of the sublime as I have also argued elsewhere following Sofoulis.⁹ Nature was thus not totally sublimated, nor was it simply repressed, but split. Nature *per se* was not a proper object for aesthetics because nature was split into the aesthetically pleasing (the beautiful, the picturesque), the aesthetically discomfiting (the

sublime) and the aesthetically displeasing, or simply the unaesthetic or even counter-aesthetic (the slimy, the swampy and the uncanny). The aesthetically pleasing and discomfiting in nature can be discussed and contrasted as instances of landscape aesthetics whereas the aesthetically displeasing and the counter-aesthetic are not instances of anything, or are instances of nothing (and nothingness).

This split can be illustrated by reference to seventeenth-century English 'country house' or 'estate' poetry. 'Nature's glories' for Andrew Marvell can be found in:

fragrant gardens, shady woods,
Deep meadows, and transparent floods.¹⁰

Nature's glories can be contrasted with what Charles Cotton calls:

nature's shames and ills –
Black heaths, wild rocks, bleak crags, and naked
hills,
And the whole prospects so inform, and rude.¹¹

Nature's 'shames and ills' differ from nature's glories in both prospect and form. Nature's 'shames and ills' are displeasing prospects whereas nature's glories are 'pleasing prospects.'¹² Nature's glories, or the beautiful and picturesque, are what Wordsworth called 'nature's fairest forms' whereas nature's 'shames and ills,' the slimy and uncanny, are 'inform' (both informal and inside form) rather than formless (lacking form or too big for form to contain), a feature of the sublime.¹³

It is easy to highlight the normativity of this hierarchial, value-laden distinction simply by inverting it in carnivalesque and parodic play as Raymond Briggs does in *Fungus the Bogeyman*, ostensibly a 'children's book.' In the upside-down, topsy-turvy world of Bogeydom 'landscapes [displayed in the National Bogey Gallery] show ditches, dead trees, sewer outflows and black stagnant lakes.'¹⁴ I hazard a guess that no national art gallery in the right-side-up world houses such 'landscapes.' They may house paintings depicting dismal swamps but only as the setting or backdrop for the story of Evangeline or of the runaway slave. Not only do the Bogey 'landscapes' not constitute landscapes in subject-matter and tone, but also they do not constitute a nation's view of itself and of its national territory suitable for displaying in one of its monuments to itself.

Nature may not have been a proper object for aesthetics in the sense of the formal, theoretical study of aesthetic experience, but nature has been an object for aesthetic practice and experience in landscape painting, gardening and writing since the sixteenth century. The aesthetics of landscape and the ideology of country split nature into an aestheticised and passive object of contemplation on the one hand (or landscape) and an agricultural and compliant slave for manipulation by the active agency of the landlords in accordance with their design on the other.

Although he had second thoughts later in his life and preferred the concept of livelibood, the crucial distinction for Williams is not between culture and nature but between the country and the city, and within the country between 'unmediated nature' ('a physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land' (though this already smacks of the natural historian's abstraction of species from their habitats and ecosystems and the explorer's doctrine of *terra nullius* that denies the work of indigenes in shaping the country and nature)) and 'working agriculture' ('in which much of the nature is in fact being produced'). Or perhaps more precisely, re-produced.¹⁵ The country was constructed in the service of a bourgeois, and burgeoning, agrarian and industrial capitalism. Indeed, Williams shows how the strongest feeling for the aesthetic and other pleasures of nature in the country were evinced precisely when that capitalism was making its strongest and most irreversible inroads into re-shaping the countryside.¹⁶ At the same moment and, indeed, in the same breath and stroke of the brush and pen, as nature was being aestheticised, nature was also being exploited economically by hand, tool and machine. The former was a compensatory and disavowing device for the latter.

Although agrarian capitalism was not responsible for the invention of nature, it was complicit with the scientificisation of nature and it did heighten and extend a process instituted by agri-culture. 'The real invention of the landlords,' as Williams puts it, was 'to make Nature move to an arranged design'.¹⁷ The category of country was constructed by an emergent landed gentry and entrepreneurial capitalist class as a means of securing and maintaining its hegemony through the control of land as its resource base. Country was a cultural construction of nature which, as Ann Bermingham argues, 'becomes a key concept linking the cultural representation of social institutions and apparatuses with the economics of the enclosed landscape.'¹⁸ Williams' history attests to the rise of this ideology of nature, this capitalist construction of the categories of landscape and nature, which was simultaneous and concomitant with the capitalist exploitation of the natural environment. For Williams 'a working country is hardly ever a landscape.

The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.¹⁹ Landscape is an aesthetic category, a visual experience for the roaming eye/I which/who occasionally stops to take in 'the prospect' from a static viewpoint as we will see in the next chapter.

The word 'landscape,' Barbara Bender argues, 'was originally coined in the emergent capitalist world of western Europe by aesthetes, antiquarians and landed gentry – all men.'²⁰ Landscape itself is a capitalist masculine category that explorers, colonists, anthropologists and tourists have imposed on non-capitalist cultures and lands. Recent studies of the anthropology of landscape have thus universalised a capitalist masculine category to all cultures.²¹ The complicity of anthropology with imperialism stands revealed. Colonisation and imperialism takes place culturally through the imposition of categories; they are categorical. Neither imperialism nor its avatar in tourism is possible without landscape. Landscape art, J. M. Coetzee argues, is 'by and large a traveller's [and tourist's?] art intended for the consumption of vicarious travellers: it is closely connected with the imperial eye – the eye that by seeing names and dominates – and the imperial calling.'²² Landscape is the visible surface of the land that allows the eye the power to wander and to name, or more precisely to rename as the places had indigenous names.

Landscape is the visible and renamable surface of the land. It is not the invisible and mute depths of the land that working country is dependent upon. Landscape for Denis Cosgrove is 'the surface of the physical earth, the surface upon which humans live, which they transform and which they frequently seek to transcend.' It is a surface of inscription for aesthetics, grid-plan towns, drains and railways, and not what he calls 'the elemental depths of the inorganic world below.'²³ Yet the depths below are more organically productive than the surface above; the depths of the wetland are more organically productive than the surface of the dryland. Landscape reduces land to surface, to virtually two dimensions of length and breadth either in the prospect of the land or in the painting of the landscape before one. Landscape is the surface of inscription and production that denies and represses the depths of the land.

With landscape the surface of the land is set up against the self. The notion of landscape, as Veronica Brady puts it glossing Judith Wright, 'implies a division between the self and the land.'²⁴ The land becomes a surface against which the self poses itself, and a screen (psychological, cinematic and televisual) against which it projects its fears and desires. Landscape separates subject and object. Landscape is a phenomenological and psychological

category of the distinction between subject and object. For Eric Hirsch 'one concomitant of the process of ever-increasing intervention in nature was the simultaneous generation of new ideas of separation, such as that between subject and object,' especially between 'the experience of a viewing 'subject' and the countryside as a desirable 'object' to behold,' and own.²⁵ Landscape and landscape aesthetics entail separation between subject and object in the very act of seeming to join them.

Landscape is not a category of the object itself; landscape is not a category of the land, but a category of human visual land perception. 'The landscape' is, as Wolfgang Sachs puts it, 'the construct of a society that no longer has an unmediated relationship with the soil.'²⁶

The concept of landscape encodes, measures and reproduces our alienation from nature. Landscape measures our distance from land. Landscape is capitalist – and by no means universal.

This distinction between subject and object is embedded in the English word 'landscape' whose genealogy has been traced by John Barrell who relates how the term was:

introduced from the Dutch in the sixteenth century to describe a pictorial representation of the countryside . . . Later the word came to include within its meaning both this sense . . . and another, more loose [sense] of a piece of countryside *considered as a visual phenomenon* . . . [Nevertheless b]oth these senses . . . had this in common, that they referred to a tract of land, or its representation in painting, which lay in prospect - that is to say, which could be seen all at one glance, from a fixed point of view. . . But later still [in the mid-eighteenth century], a more general meaning attached to the word, so that one could now talk of 'the landscape of a place. . . And so we can trace these stages of the word 'landscape': from first denoting only a picture of rural scenery, it comes to denote also a piece of scenery apprehended in a picture, in prospect, and finally it denotes as well land 'considered with regard to its natural configuration.' This extension of the second meaning into the third is, clearly, a most important one. It implies a change in attitude to land something like this: in the first place, a particular piece of land, under the eye is considered pictorially; in the second place, *the whole of natural scenery is considered as having, somehow, a pictorial character* . . . The words 'landscape', 'scene', and, to a lesser extent 'prospect', . . . demanded, in short, that the land be thought of *as itself composed into the formal patterns which previously a landscape-painter would have been thought of as himself [sic] imposing on it.*²⁷

Land not composed into formal patterns was not, by definition, landscape. Such land by and large was some sort of wetland, and wetlandscape was an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. Hence, dismal swamps, melancholic marshes, sloughs of despondent, dreary moors, and sullen tarns as they are unaesthetic and even counter-aesthetic.²⁸

NOTES

- 1 T. W. Adorno, 'The Beauty of Nature' in his *Aesthetic Theory*, C.

- Lenhardt (trans.), Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds), (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p.91.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 See Carl Woodring, *Nature into Art: Cultural Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 5 Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press, 2000), pp.358 and 366.
- 6 Rod Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), especially chapter 2.
- 7 *ibid.*, especially chapter 1.
- 8 See 'A Psychogeocorpography of Modernity' (Figure 1, chapter 2), *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*, especially chapter 2.
- 10 Andrew Marvell, 'Upon Appleton House: To my Lord Farifax' in Alastair Fowler (ed.), *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth Century Estate Poems and Related Items*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p.283.
- 11 Charles Cotton, 'Chatsworth,' *ibid.*, p.375.
- 12 See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), title of chapter 12. I extensively discuss pleasing prospects in chapter 3 of *Living with the Earth: Mastery to mutuality* (forthcoming, Salt).
- 13 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, James Creed Meredith (trans.), (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p.90.
- 14 Raymond Briggs, *Fungus the Bogeyman*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), unpaginated. I am grateful to Sylvie Shaw for drawing my attention to this 'children's' book.
- 15 Williams, pp.3, 118 and 119.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.118.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.124.
- 18 Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740-1860*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.1.
- See also her articles 'Reading Constable' in Simon Pugh (ed.), *Reading Landscape: Country – City – Capital*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); 'Redesigning Nature: John Constable and the Landscape of Enclosure,' in Roger Friedland and Deidre Boden (eds), *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and 'System, Order and Abstraction: The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795' in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 19 Williams, p.120.
- 20 Barbara Bender, 'Landscape – Meaning and Action,' *Landscape:*

Politics and Perspectives, Barbara Bender (ed.), Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp.1,2.

21 See *ibid.* and Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (eds), *The Anthropology of Landscape*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).

22 J. M. Coetzee, 'Reading the South African Landscape' in his *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.174.

23 Denis Cosgrove, 'Landscapes and Myths, Gods and Humans,' *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Barbara Bender (ed.), Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 282.

24 Veronica Brady, *South of my Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1998), p.433.

25 Eric Hirsch, 'Landscape: Between Place and Space,' *The Anthropology of Landscape*, Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (eds), (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.6-7.

26 Wolfgang Sachs, *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back in the History of Our Desires*, Don Reneau (trans.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.154.

27 John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp.1-3. My emphases. See also Barrell's *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

28 See Giblett, especially chapter 1.

NOTES

¹ T. W. Adorno, 'The Beauty of Nature' in his *Aesthetic Theory*, C. Lenhardt (trans.), Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds), (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p.91.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ See Carl Woodring, *Nature into Art: Cultural Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press, 2000), pp.358 and 366.

⁶ Rod Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*, (Edinburgh:

Edinburgh University Press, 1996), especially chapter 2.

⁷ *ibid.*, especially chapter 1.

⁸ See 'A Psychogeocorpography of Modernity' (Figure 1, chapter 2), *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, especially chapter 2.

¹⁰ Andrew Marvell, 'Upon Appleton House: To my Lord Farifax' in Alastair Fowler (ed.), *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth Century Estate Poems and Related Items*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p.283.

¹¹ Charles Cotton, 'Chatsworth,' *ibid.*, p.375.

¹² See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), title of chapter 12. I extensively discuss pleasing prospects in chapter 3 of *Living with the Earth: Mastery to mutuality* (forthcoming, Salt).

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, James Creed Meredith (trans.), (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p.90.

¹⁴ Raymond Briggs, *Fungus the Bogeyman*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), unp.

I am grateful to Sylvie Shaw for drawing my attention to this 'children's' book.

¹⁵ Williams, pp.3, 118 and 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.118.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.124.

¹⁸ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740-1860*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.1. See also her articles 'Reading Constable' in Simon Pugh (ed.), *Reading Landscape: Country – City – Capital*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); 'Redesigning Nature: John Constable and the Landscape of Enclosure,' in Roger Friedland and Deidre Boden (eds), *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1994); and ‘System, Order and Abstraction: The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795’ in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Williams, p.120.

²⁰ Barbara Bender, ‘Landscape – Meaning and Action,’ *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Barbara Bender (ed.), Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp.1,2.

²¹ See *ibid.* and Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (eds), *The Anthropology of Landscape*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).

²² J. M. Coetzee, ‘Reading the South African Landscape’ in his *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.174.

²³ Denis Cosgrove, ‘Landscapes and Myths, Gods and Humans,’ *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Barbara Bender (ed.), Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 282.

²⁴ Veronica Brady, *South of my Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1998), p.433.

²⁵ Eric Hirsch, ‘Landscape: Between Place and Space,’ *The Anthropology of Landscape*, Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (eds), (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.6-7.

²⁶ Wolfgang Sachs, *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back in the History of Our Desires*, Don Reneau (trans.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.154.

²⁷ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1972), pp.1-3. My emphases. See also Barrell’s *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

²⁸ See Giblett, especially chapter 1.

