



Landscape:

An Aesthetic Ecology

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The theme of this book is landscape and interdisciplinarity. Let me begin with some reflections on interdisciplinarity as an idea, because I want later to relate it to the particular issues on landscape aesthetics that are the subject of my chapter.

Interdisciplinarity is premised, obviously, on the prior existence of disciplinarity, the separation and territorialising of forms of knowledge into ‘disciplines’, and the generation by each of those disciplines of its own particular discourse. Individual disciplines themselves evolved over a period of time, with a marked acceleration and proliferation in the nineteenth century. However, there must have been a pre-disciplinary era, when forms of knowledge were not so discretely packaged; we could therefore see *interdisciplinarity* not as a new, or newish intellectual project, but as the attempt to retrieve a lost, more holistic mindset. Centuries back, perhaps, pre-Enlightenment certainly, our intellectual behaviour might have been interdisciplinary *avant la lettre*.

It puts me in mind of T. S. Eliot’s well-known theory of the dissociation of sensibility. According to this, the omnivorous imaginative sensibility of the English Renaissance poets – John Donne is his principal example – devoured all kinds of human experience, implicitly recognising that ‘the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary... [he] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes’ (Eliot, 1953 [1921]). In the seventeenth century, so Eliot argues, this unified sensibility was fractured, by forces which he doesn’t specify: the result is that while a greater degree of refinement evolved (for example in poetic language), there was a corresponding crudeness

(Eliot's term) of sensibility. Refinement, specialisation, proliferation of different disciplines, hierarchising of genres – these developments resulted in a loss of the energetic, indiscriminating, albeit crude comprehensiveness of human experience as celebrated and explored in the imaginative writings of the earlier age. Perhaps this lost unified sensibility is analogous to the idea of a pre-disciplinary intellectual world.

How then does this bear on landscape? This book – including architects, geographers, philosophers, art historians, literary critics – implicitly recognises that the experience of landscape involves a weave of different discourses. My aim in this paper is to explore some of the structures of landscape aesthetics, and I shall be considering and questioning some familiar models of the complex response to landscape – including the view that it is a 'palimpsest' of experiences or readings. We have heard now and again of the idea of an 'authentic' landscape response (one which has been debased, for example, by the tourist industry and other commercial exploiters of landscape beauty): but is there such a thing as the 'authentic response' to landscape? The paper is partly deconstructive. It also becomes very personal. Out of this, I shall be proposing an aesthetic model that seems to me more discursively inclusive and dynamic than a number of those more familiar ones (such as 'palimpsest'), and one that is perhaps more akin to T.S.Eliot's idea of the unifying sensibility.



Image 1. According to William Wordsworth, the first stage of the evolutionary model of landscape responsiveness is the child's unreflecting delight in nature as a big playground with trees to climb and fields to race around in.

To set some of the coordinates for this exploration, I begin with two important figures in the history of landscape literature and art: the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth and the twentieth-century American photographer Ansel Adams.

In Wordsworth's poem 'Tintern Abbey' (1798), he described a 3-stage evolutionary model of landscape responsiveness, derived from his own life experience. The first was the child's unreflecting delight in nature as a big playground with trees to climb and fields to race around in. The second stage, for him in his early 20s, was the experience of nature's colours, forms and sounds as a source of intense sensuous and aesthetic pleasure, with a sharpened sense of nature as a refuge from cities. The third stage, premised on the loss of that unreflecting sensuous delight in the natural world, comes as a recognition of nature's power to stimulate more complex moral and spiritual comfort and insight. The modulation is from the crude animal reflexes to the more highly evolved and refined perception of nature's metaphysical solaces. What is perhaps disturbing in this is the apparent incompatibility between the passionately sensuous and the moral/spiritual experiences of nature; this divorce is something I shall be returning to.

In the spring of 1948, the American photographer Ansel Adams was working in Yosemite National Park. He was looking for dogwood blossom along Tenaya Creek and came across an opening in the trees which gave the perfect subject.

"The visualisation was immediate and complete. I hope that the print conveys not only the moment but some evidence of my perception to which the viewer may respond. Just what this expressive perception contains must be sought for only in the print. I repeat my conviction that photographs alone can express the experiences of photography. We can describe and explain the physical elements of the scene, the forest, rain, white blossoms, the flowing stream and the lichened rock; but to try to express the photographer's emotional-aesthetic response might cause confusion for viewers and limit their responses." (Adams, 1983: p. 79-80).

Adams seems to be suggesting here that the sensuous response to the physical elements of this landscape are fused with what he calls the 'emotional-aesthetic', by which, I guess, he means something rather more than sensuous delight, even though it may not aspire to Wordsworthian transcendentalism. That compound epithet synchronises several complex responses that Wordsworth had tried to plot diachronically. This disparity raises fundamental questions about how we might classify the response to landscape. Are we, when we gaze at a fine landscape, compressing a sequence of separate responses into some compound? Is it an

experience of simultaneity rather than sequence? Are there incompatibilities between different kinds of landscape response so that they can't ever harmonise into one?

These problems were sharply focussed during the period of Wordsworth's early career, in the Picturesque movement in England in the late eighteenth century. The Picturesque drastically narrowed the channels for representing the response to landscape. And it did so by, in effect, introducing a new discipline. The English poet Robert Southey, writing in 1807, remarked on the 'new taste for the picturesque [which] has sprung up' in the last thirty years: 'a new science for which a new language has been formed' (Southey, 1994: p. 82). The Picturesque insisted very much on the purely visual and formal evaluations of landscape, articulated in a connoisseur vocabulary; and in order to maximise the value of educating those responses, it edited out other potentially distracting considerations. Notoriously it edited out the social and moral implications of scenes of human poverty and decay that it otherwise relished for their textural roughness and tonal motley.



Image 2. The Picturesque broke the link between beauty and utility, and beauty and morality. In the image, William Gilpin's view of Penrith Castle, Cumbria, England.

The Picturesque, pioneered by William Gilpin, broke the link between beauty and utility, and beauty and morality. 'The moral sense', he wrote, 'can never make a convert of the picturesque eye' (Gilpin, 1790: p.

12)¹; ‘It is not it’s [the picturesque eye’s] business to consider matters of utility [...]. Utility is always counteracting beauty.’ (Gilpin, 1791: vol. 1, p. 298; vol. 2, p. 143). This distinction underpinned most of Gilpin’s subsequent work over the last two decades of the eighteenth century in promoting the special pleasures of the Picturesque.

Wordsworth was one of the earliest in that period to explicitly break away from Picturesque practices and values. In *The Prelude* he wrote of the tyranny of the eye – ‘most despotic of our senses’, recalling remorsefully how in his Picturesque phase he ‘roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock, / Still craving combinations of new forms, / New pleasure, wider empire for the sight’ (Wordsworth, 1961 [1850]: p. 576) at the expense of imaginative and spiritual engagement with the natural world.

Two centuries later, the narrowly aesthetic Picturesque attitude to landscape is still tenacious and still under fire, as in these comments from the travel writer and novelist Jonathan Raban:

“Trying to understand the habitat in which we live requires an ability to read it – and not just in a loose metaphorical sense. Every inhabited landscape is a palimpsest, its original parchment nearly blackened with the cross-hatching of successive generations of authors, claiming the place as their own, and imposing their designs on it, as if their temporary interpretations would stand for ever....

Landscape historians can read the palimpsest more skilfully than me, but to begin to see it like this is to go some way towards rescuing oneself from the brain-curdling effects of degraded late Romanticism, which still shapes the way most of us instinctively think about landscape and place. In Britain, it’s led to the cult of the antique-picturesque, in the United States to the parallel cult of ‘pristine’ wilderness. Devotees of both practise a highly selective, self-induced blindness, cancelling from their view, and all claims to their sympathy, everything that intrudes on their preconceived pictures of how landscape ought to be. This sort of mental bulldozing tends to bring real bulldozing in its wake, in fits of Cromwellian zeal, to erase from the land whatever offends the eye and taste of the temporary beholder. Better by far to learn to value the landscape, as a reader, for its long accumulation of contradictions and ambiguities – an accumulation to which we’re constantly adding by our presence here” (Raban, 2009: p. 39).

1 Raymond Williams saw this as the crucial moment in the history of English landscape, when the observation of landscape became divided into ‘practical’ and ‘aesthetic’, and he associated that eighteenth-century move with the separation of production and consumption. (Williams, 1973: p. 120-121).

Raban polarises the two views of landscape, historical understanding and aesthetic delight – and sets them in conflict. But perhaps there's room for both? We do have 'preconceived pictures of how landscape ought to be'. When we fight to defend 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' from development, are we not constituting beauty very much according to familiar models of natural beauty, or 'preconceived pictures'?



Image 3. When we fight to defend 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' from development, we are probably constituting beauty very much according to familiar models of natural beauty, or 'preconceived pictures'.

So, these writers and artists illustrate the tensions within the range of landscape perceptions, arguing for the primacy of spiritual, or pictorial, or historical responses. Faced with the perplexing mystery of landscape, Wordsworth and Adams, Gilpin and Raban drew deeply on their own experiences, and articulated their responses in a strenuously thoughtful way. It is an enterprise that every person who has thought at all intensively about landscape and culture is driven back to from time to time.

I would like to use this occasion now to work from my own experience and try to identify in some detail what comes into play at such moments. I don't think that what I'm describing is unfamiliar: much of it may indeed seem too obvious. I also realise this is a particular kind of experience of a particular kind of landscape, but maybe some of the more

general implications of what I'm describing will resonate with other people's experiences.

Having taken retirement from my job last summer, I've had the leisure to indulge what has been a long-term passion for landscape reflection. Not far from where I live there's a very small village called Bishopsbourne. It's about a half-hour cycle ride into the country. The village sits in a shallow valley and is hardly more than a crossroad, with a couple of straggling streets of cottages, a village hall, a pub, a church and churchyard. The valley runs more or less north-south. Bounding the village at its north and south ends are two stately homes and their parks.

On the days when I cycle over I go to sit on a bench at the edge of the churchyard which looks out over the open parkland of one of these stately homes. This is my view of the landscape. I describe it in two stages.

First Impressions: Green serenity and silence. Several acres of grassland cradled in a gently sloping valley. Soft, tussocky ground; near to me tufts of taller grasses catching the sunlight. A dry stream-bed, grassed-over, shallow and velvety, wandering away, stooping under a small concrete bridge and fading out of sight. Big plumey trees isolated or in clumps of three or four, scattered across the land. Creamy blobs of sheep, nibbling away.

Structuring the View: Panning left to right – on the left margin are four towering turkey oaks huddling together; right of them open grassland, then a solitary ash, quite ancient, with one or two long bare limbs leaning down and pawing the ground. Open land again to its right, dipping in and out of the stream-bed and then running 500 metres to a gathering of six to eight trees, all different, one dead. Beyond them the ground starts to slope up the valley side, the sun warm on its flank, for a kilometre or so until it reaches the horizon of a belt of trees. That was a slow pan left to right. Now the eye moves from foreground to background. From where I sit I have a straight view through the open ground between the clump of turkey oaks on the left and the ash to the right, with the eye easily guided by a screen of trees to the left receding in a gentle curve towards the vanishing point, and a broken line of trees on the right, also following the old stream bed. At the distant convergence point is a glimpse of a large mansion, actually little more than a white portico pushing out above a cushion of trees.

What system of coordination am I using to bring these scattered material components into any significant relationship? In what sense is this a landscape? And what if anything is aesthetically pleasing about this arrangement of natural components, as opposed to some other kind of ar-

rangement, or angle of vision? In my description I offered not so much different angles as different points of approach from the same angle of vision. I first gave a general impressionistic response to colours, textures, spaces, light. I then tried to give orientation, topographical organisation, following the path of the eye as it steers across the terrain. I also included some botanical particulars, such as differentiating the kinds of trees that give different characteristics to the look of the land. I tried also to communicate some feeling of the vitality and sensuous quality of the scene: adjectives, verbs of movement. In other words I was trying to make sense of it as a single scene, and not just an inventory of material forms: I was coordinating the forms into a structure partly so as to enable readers to begin to construct the scene in their minds. In effect, perhaps, it didn't become a 'landscape' until I had done that?

I could simply have shown a photograph (see image 4).



Image 4. View of Bourne Park, Bishopsbourne, Kent.

What relation do this photograph have to my verbal description? For one thing, this is already picture, ready-made, rectangular 'landscape'. A landscape isn't naturally rectangular. So as the photographer I have had to make editing choices. The frame edges determine the eye movement *within* the picture, and *beyond* the picture they have closed off the conti-

nities of movement that I could convey in my description. There were no edges to my verbal picturing. The relation of picture to roving verbal description is rather like pulling a single frame from a movie. I wonder, incidentally, do we think of the landscape experience as a fluid narrative or a speeded-up sequence of stills?



Image 5. A landscape isn't naturally rectangular, so as photographers we have to make editing choices when taking pictures.

My second-stage description was an invitation to fuller detailing: for example, the specification of turkey oaks and ash tree cues in the possibility of fuller botanical information, the mention of parkland and a porticoed mansion invite a fuller social-historical background and horticultural history. As soon as I introduce botanical, horticultural and architectural terminology, the holistic 'landscape' representation fragments, and off we go down different disciplinary paths. Where is the 'landscape' moment in all this? Has it passed? Is it yet to be constituted? Was it the first 'emotional-aesthetic' encounter as I sat down on the bench for the first time and began to take in the immediate scene, before reading it a little more closely?

The process of apprehending landscape is centripetal and centrifugal. It is centripetal up to a point, to the point where one realises there is no centre, and no such thing as 'a landscape', something to be grasped as an entity with its own integrity, to be sharply focussed. If you peer too closely at it, if you amplify it, it pixelates. On the threshold of seeming

within one's grasp, landscape drifts away into its constituent parts – centrifugal.

Oddly, landscape exists as a more focusable entity for me, once I'm no longer there. On my bike ride over to my churchyard bench I carry this landscape in my memory from previous visits: but it's a 'flatpack' landscape, more two-dimensional than anything else, easy to carry, almost frameable. Once I've arrived here, at my viewing bench, that flattened landscape image dissolves before the three- or four-dimensionality of the real place. Then later, on my journey home, the remembered landscape reconstitutes itself back to a picture in the mind – a 'take-away' landscape. Not quite the same picture as I brought over on the way here. In fact the picture-souvenirs from each successive visit multiply into a collection of snapshots, and the landscape place proliferates into an album. That reminds me of the term 'palimpsest'. Jonathan Raban, you might recall, remarked that 'Every inhabited landscape is a palimpsest', referring to the layers of history underlying any such place.

The pioneer ecocritic Lawrence Buell has written 'place sense is a kind of palimpsest of serial place-experiences.' (Buell, 2005: p. 73). I'm not sure how helpful that is. Palimpsest is a vertical stratification. You have to dig down or scrape off to recover past experiences. But where familiar place is concerned, the past is not buried. The past is not even past; it is active in the flux of associations triggered by a landscape view, it is contemporary in the mind with the here and now of what the eye is seeing, the ear hearing, and part of a single system. That's why I prefer to test this other analogy, and think of the mind-landscape relationship as an eco-system in which everything is vitally interactive to produce the landscape experience.

The art historian Kenneth Clark once remarked: 'I fancy that one cannot enjoy a pure aesthetic sensation (so-called) for longer than one can enjoy the smell of an orange, which in my case is less than two minutes.' (Clark, 1960: p. 16-17). What is that 'pure aesthetic sensation' compounded of? Raban spoke of 'the way most of us instinctively think about landscape and place'; but how instinctive can that ever be, especially when he has told us that that 'instinctive' thinking is shaped by the 'effects of degraded late Romanticism.' It is less instinct than habituated cultural conditioning. Thus, here at my viewing bench, looking out onto Bourne Park, my first impressions are probably not instinctual at all, but associative? Am I not struck by the beauty of what I see because it is a model of beauty already familiar? This is a managed English landscaped park nearly 300 years old – that's why it looks the way it does, natural but discreetly groomed. That's how these majestic trees have been able

to grow undisturbed in these clumps; that's why these sheep are grazing here. It is that subtle coupling of apparently unchanging pastoral and discreet farming. Can or should the landscape response fuse these two?

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues that landscape is precisely the amalgamation of two distinct points of view, and suggests an analogy with an old optical device, the stereoscope:

Landscape is an ordering of reality from different angles. It is both a vertical view and a side view. The vertical view sees landscape as domain, a work unit, or a natural system necessary to human livelihood in particular and to organic life in general; the side view sees landscape as space in which people act, or as scenery for people to contemplate.... The geographer studies the rural landscape...from "above"; likewise the ecologist when he looks at landscape as a natural system. The side view, in contrast, is personal, moral, and aesthetic... [by analogy with the stereoscope] the data from the two sources fuse and what he then sees is three-dimensional relief – a stereo image. In like manner, when a person faces the environment he may see alternatively an operational farm, a pleasant scene, and a type of social order. Should these different sets of clues amalgamate into a vividly coherent whole in his mind's eye, what he sees is landscape. (Tuan, 1979: p. 97).

According to this, the fused stereoscopic view integrates the aesthetic and the moral/historical in three-dimensional relief. However, Tuan misses out a fourth dimension, one I haven't yet touched on.

As the American geographer D.W.Meinig has said: 'Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads' (Meinig, 1979: p. 34). My eye may be wandering over the parkland, partly reading the history, partly immersed in the aesthetic moment, trying to focus the stereoscopic visions; but the rest of me is outside it, sitting on a bench at the edge of the churchyard, between two yew trees. All the time I am here, invisible waves of contiguous associations are lapping at my consciousness, and all the territory that I see in front becomes increasingly difficult to focus as a 'landscape' now. It is morphing into something more like an environment, only part of which is within my viewing range. I say the associations are 'lapping at my consciousness', but it might be truer to say that my consciousness IS the manifold of ebbing and flowing associations, joining the visual impressions, and has never been anything but that. I am reminded of the Buddhist view: there is no thinker behind the thought (Rahula, 2006: p. 26). Here are some of the constituents of this environment, both before my eyes and within my head (see image 6).



Image 6. View of the churchyard of Bishopsbourne Church, Kent.

Lapping at my observation bench is the old churchyard, with its grey tombstones tilting this way and that on a gently undulating sea of grass. These rhythms always bring to my mind Thomas Gray's lines in the 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard': 'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap', where the turning of the vowel-sounds almost echoes the roll of the grassy mounds. My mind also experiences floating superimpositions of familiar paintings of English country churchyards.

Shadows reach out across some of these graves from the little church, which calls itself 'The Cradle of Anglicanism'. Casting more elusive shadows over my sense of this place, but very much helping to constitute it *as* place, with a local identity, are two village inhabitants who lived and worked nearby. One is Richard Hooker, the Elizabethan theologian, one of the finest of English prose writers. He was Rector of this parish in the last years of the sixteenth century, and presided in this church behind me. He spent the last five years of his life here, writing, in failing health, in order to finish his great work, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. 'It is thought he hastened his own death, by hastening to give life to his Books' (Walton, 1865: p. 84) wrote his seventeenth-century biographer -- a haunting remark. (The book is a grand justification of Anglican worship and religious theory, 60 years after England's break with Rome,

which is why his little church now boasts itself as ‘the Cradle of Anglicanism’.) The other villager lived in that large white house set in its walled garden on the far side of the churchyard, another master of English prose, the novelist Joseph Conrad, who died there on 3rd August 1924.

‘It is thought he hastened his own death by hastening to give life to his Books...’: these books were conceived and born to be living members of posterity, active in our cultural environment, playing their part in the forming of human experience into ‘new wholes’, to recall T.S.Eliot’s account of the integrated sensibility.

Richard Hooker, Conrad – those dead writers of powerful living books deepen the chiaroscuro of the landscape internalised in my mind, like the dead and buried people who physically shape the rise and fall of this churchyard ground. It is the dead and the living whose authorial mark is left on the shaping of this parkland, the positioning of the trees singly or in clumps. The American poet Gary Snyder asked us to consider ‘Mind as wild habitat’ (Snyder, 1995: p. 172): like most wilderness the mind is also subject to cultivation. The parkland, the writers, the churchyard, the mind – these are all one partially cultivated landscape, in which it is impossible to distinguish the physical external place from the one unfolding its contours and colours in my mind. They belong within the same single field of signification, but interactive. ‘Everything is connected to everything else’ (Egan, 2007: p. 126), according to one of the primary laws of ecology. Hence, it seems to me worth entertaining the analogy of the landscape response as a mutually nourishing aesthetic ecosystem, with its interactive stimuli and mental associations, where the external landscape is mediated by the internal, and the internal supplemented by the external, where everything is in play, the dead remain living presences, the present is alive with the past.

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