

TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE

- *a sketch of the history of "scenery"* by Norman Skillen

*This article is an attempt to delineate some of the thinking behind a new branch of the **School of Nature**, which has recently been founded in Cape Town. The School of Nature, Africa Group, consists of Michael Grimley, Karen Goldberg, Ronnie Muhl and Norman Skillen, and their first three-week venture is scheduled for August-September 2010.*

In the early nineteen sixties, when I was boy, there was a programme that featured once a year on British television. It was an enthralling military event called "the Edinburgh Tatroo". It was only much later that I discovered why this took place in Edinburgh, and not some military centre further south.

The answer has to do with the British fondness for preserving grand public rituals. The Edinburgh Tatroo had been running since the mid-eighteenth century, and was the brainchild of none other than the great novelist, Sir Walter Scott. He had set it up as part of a Highland Tour package. Indeed, Sir Walter can justifiably be credited with inventing tourism. In this he caught a key moment in the development of modern consciousness, and under his tutelage the Highlands of Scotland became an epitome of what was to come, in Africa and elsewhere. It was at this period in the 18th century that the violent process of transforming the Highlands from a place where people lived and farmed to a playground for the English aristocracy was completed. What had been home to an ancient pastoral community was converted into – well, scenery (and it would soon become *romantic* scenery).

The final station in this process was the battle of Culloden in 1745. This was the last stand of the Scottish Celts against the might of the British army. Their defeat was inevitable, not because they lacked strength, courage or numbers, but because they stood with medieval weapons facing the mathematics of modern artillery. Truly it was a confrontation between the last Scottish remnants of ancient mythic consciousness and the new mechanical philosophy. This is a confrontation that has repeated itself in many parts of the world. No sooner was "ancient superstition" thus swept aside than the emptied landscape became something to be admired for its beauty.

This is not to say that it had not been admired by the Celts, but their admiration was of a different order. In keeping with all ancient peoples who have had a long association with a certain place, such as the Bushmen of the Kalahari or the original inhabitants of Australia, the landscape existed within the context of certain stories. For such a style of awareness the landscape is saturated with mythic incident and cannot be experienced apart from this. It is experienced as a field of established meanings. The cries of birds, the groans and bellows of cattle and game, the changing light all have their place in a narrative tapestry¹. When

¹ An example of this is in the following verse from "The Táin", one of the major mythic epics of the Celts. Here we have a war goddess, the Morrígan, in the shape of a crow, talking to the Brown Bull of Chaulnge:

the “readers” of such a narrative are displaced, their successors will bring with them a new narrative – the Celts themselves had probably done this many times in their long history of settling new territories. The fact, however, that this particular displacement happened in 18th century Europe meant that the incoming narrative was of a totally different kind. One that saw the surrounding world simply as *nature*, “the external world”, with only a generalised relationship to anything divine, if at all. This abstract concept of external nature had, of course, been taking shape for some time, but with the Age of Reason and the associated advance of the scientific mentality, western Europeans found themselves to be detached observers of a disenchanting nature. The Scots (and others) had taken the enchantments with them to the New World. The corollary of this detachment is that human beings become interested in “the view” for its own sake, and landscapes that were previously steeped in story thus have a tendency to become “scenery”. Obviously for a landscape to attain the status of scenery it would also need to be felt by its admirers to possess *beauty*, and as society, under the influence of mechanical science, became more urbanised, so beauty came more and more to be associated with wilderness. A romantic yearning towards the special beauty of wild places thus arose as the inevitable polar counterpart of a culture based upon mechanical thinking.

Sir Walter Scott rightly perceived that in Britain the Highlands of Scotland would become the focus of this new sensibility. Among the stream of seekers who came to worship at this temple of natural beauty was the poet, William Wordsworth. He was probably in search of what in one of his most famous poems he called “the visionary gleam”. The poem in question was written in 1805 and carries the title “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”. In it Wordsworth maps out, among other things², the dilemma of modern consciousness in relation to landscape and natural phenomena. It is a story of loss of vision and of the development of the “philosophic mind” required to come to terms with it. He begins with a tremendous evocation of the young child’s experience of nature, a time when “meadow, grove and stream, the earth and ev’ry common sight” are “apparell’d in celestial light”, and he takes this visionary experience of oneness with nature through the stages of childhood and youth until at last it “fade[s] into the light of common day”. What this represents is a poetic recapitulation, in relation to the human *individual*, of the process that played itself out in the large-scale history of consciousness and led (among much else besides) to the genesis of scenery. What Wordsworth describes can justifiably be characterised as a process in which the mythic light of childhood

...on the plains war
grinding heroic
hosts to dust
cattle groans the Badb
the raven ravenous
among corpses of men....

The Badb is another of the war goddesses, and it would appear that the groaning of cattle is not just evidence of her presence, but is the substance of her being.

² To name but two, he opens up the possibility of reincarnation, and singlehandedly provides the image of childhood that still forms the basis of all our assumptions about it, certainly in the English-speaking world.

becomes *Newtonian light*. In spite of this inevitable disappearance of “the visionary gleam”, we do, of course, continue, as Wordsworth notes in the poem, to experience the beauties of the natural world, even though we know that they do not have their earlier lustrous immediacy³. His answer to the problem thus presented is that we can cultivate imaginative recollection of the visionary experience and thus enhance our sensibilities in relation to the beauties of nature. For him this also involves being resigned to the fact that this is the best that can be done under the circumstances. This he called “the philosophic mind”.

A further aspect of this is that our modern appreciation of the beauty of nature thus becomes a mystery. Instead of the visionary immediacy of individual childhood or the rich tapestry of ancestral meanings given in the “childhood” of humanity, we have to content ourselves with cryptic glimpses of what Wordsworth elsewhere⁴ called “something far more deeply interfused”.

The appeal of this “something” has since led generations of hikers into the forests, mountains and wild valleys of the earth. It also led to the creation of national parks and the associated concept of nature conservation. This development is an extreme instance of the polarity mentioned earlier. The world's first national parks were founded at a time when the utilitarian exploitation of nature, fuelled by the mechanics of industry, was advancing at a ferocious pace. While it is often thought that Yellowstone was the first national park, there is strong historical evidence that Roosevelt, in founding it, had been inspired by the setting up of the Kruger National Park in South Africa.

It is significant that this occurred long before there was any concern about the ecological value of such places (indeed, “ecology” had still to be discovered). But poets and artists seem to have been ecologists before their time, even though the object of their attentions was becoming increasingly more elusive. By the middle of the 19th century geologists, such as Lyell, had distanced the natural world even further from the ambit of human sensibility. Now the rocks upon which Wordsworth and others had lavished their admiration were apparently not thousands, but many millions of years old. Then, nine years after Wordsworth's death, came Darwin's great work, which, at a stroke, rendered all the phenomena of nature, including the human being, entirely arbitrary and contingent. Where was the place for the act of aesthetic appreciation in such a worldview? Why should brute matter, the universally avowed starting point of evolution, generate organs (brains) capable of reflecting its own beauty? Why should we be so affected by the evening light striking an outcrop of granite that had been there for three hundred million years before there was a human eye to behold it? Artists did not wait for the answers to such questions, but in what may have been an instinctive counter-movement to such alienation, sought to embrace and penetrate the natural world with corresponding intensity. In England, William Turner is an intense example of this. His work is an attempt to take hold of nature, as it were, from the inside.

³ The large-scale historical equivalent of this lustre is, of course, the state of being bound into “nature” as a tapestry of story (hearing the groans of cattle as the voice of a goddess). This state has been given many names. The best one, in my opinion, stems from Owen Barfield – he called it “original participation”.

⁴ In “Lines - composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey”.

In this new mental climate it is perhaps no wonder that towards the end of the 19th century we find Thomas Hardy, in his novel "The Return of the Native" speaking in the following terms. He is speaking of the austere landscape, Egdon Heath, in which the novel is set:

"Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter..... Human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a sombreness distasteful to our race when it was young. The time seems near.....when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind. And ultimately, to the commonest tourist, spots like Iceland may become what the vineyards and myrtle-gardens of South Europe are to him now.....The most thoroughgoing ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon: he was keeping within the line of legitimate indulgence when he laid himself open to influences such as these."

Hardy seems acutely aware of the fact that scenery has a history, nor has it escaped him that there are in it qualities that correspond to human moods and emotions. Indeed, in his impassioned and intimate evocation of the moods of Egdon Heath that runs as a structural thread through the whole of this novel he gives utterance to the inside of nature as intensely as Turner gave it colour. In this we see that what Hardy is saying here is paradoxical. He thought he was giving expression to a necessary narrowing of human perspective, but in actual fact what he was pointing to was an expansion or intensification of awareness.

Since Hardy wrote those words the modern human soul has learnt to love wetlands, swamps, extinct volcanic craters, deserts, savanna, indeed the kind of wildness you are more likely to find in Africa than in Europe. To visit such places is to break through the veneer of "scenery", as Hardy indeed anticipated. And, of course, in many of these places exactly the same gesture of clearing out unwanted elements to make way for the pleasures of colonists has taken place as did in the Highlands of Scotland. For instance, it is a very chastening experience - in spite of the sweeping grandeur of the landscape - to journey through the Klein Karoo in South Africa while reminding oneself that it was once teeming with springbok, wildebeest, giraffe, zebra, quagga etc., plus all the predators that went with them. All victims of colonial pleasures, followed by the necessities of modern agriculture. Fortunately, the national park idea, as already noted, was already strongly present, so that even today there are vast tracts of Africa where the wilderness is preserved. When it is in the form of savanna, journeying through it can be like a homecoming. There is something soothing about the gently rolling expanse that is neither forest nor grassland, but both at the same time. I am not the only one who has noticed this homely feeling. According to Andreas Suchantke, for instance, the source of it lies in the fact that the savanna is the archetypal human landscape. We have reproduced it everywhere we have gone⁵. Almost any healthy, mixed agricultural landscape will have savanna-like features. In Provence, in the North of the Peleponnes ("Arcadia") in Greece, in the

⁵ Suchantke designates this the "cultural savanna" (Kultursavanne)

pistachio groves east of Jerusalem, in the mixed free-standing orchards of the Swiss valleys. In view of all this, it is not surprising that some of the first Europeans to behold the African savanna, perplexed by this ecological conundrum, called it "orchard steppe".

Travelling northwards in South Africa the homeliness of the savanna gradually diminishes and you begin to enter realms that are much more desert-like. Here the question of beauty poses itself in ever more stark terms. Why should the contours of dunes in particular atmospheres of light strike such strong chords in us? What is the charm of a salt pan, or the aesthetic delight of bare cliffs buckled into folds (such as are found in the area of Namibia called the Richtersveld)? Why should there be places in our souls that correspond to such phenomena? All we initially know of such questions is that we have an urge to grasp the cryptic eloquence of such places, and we will not be able to do this by treating them as scenery. Approached in a spirit of openness, they are sure to have something extraordinary to say to us.

Egdon Heath, for Thomas Hardy, was a place so scant in its dispensing of charm, that only a select few could take delight in it. I wonder what he would have thought of the landscape of the Cape Peninsula, south of Cape Town. This is the absolute quintessence or even apotheosis of heathland. Here we have a landscape that looks superficially like a moor. The rivers that emerge from it are even as brown as any flowing from an Irish bog. But when you actually walk this landscape and get in among the vegetation, you can see that it has an abundance undreamt of in Europe. To treat this landscape as "scenery" is nothing short of an insult. This is what is known locally as the "fynbos". It is a floral kingdom in its own right, there being nothing else like it anywhere, and it is the most diverse on the planet. This combination of heath-like austerity and unprecedented ecological abundance is something that only the vitality of Africa could produce. To feel one's way into the qualities of such a landscape is a privilege and a source of endless fascination. Here there will always be something more.

We are back with this "something" again. We begin to get a hint of what this something, this soul of hitherto unregarded places might mean, in the following passage from an essay by Owen Barfield:

"Sooner or later a certain truth is brought home to you.....I mean the fact that the mind or consciousness is not the function of an organ, though it makes use of organs, the brain among others; that it is not a mysterious something spatially encapsulated within a human or animal skin, but it is the inner side of the world as a whole, just as the individual mind is the inside of one human being.

This insight opens up the possibility of getting beyond "scenery" and viewing landscape as a *language*. This should perhaps be the next stage in the history of scenery: learning to read this language of nature. That such a thing is possible at all is guaranteed by the experience of beauty. The fact that we find nature beautiful is what gives the lie to any rigidly materialist interpretation of evolution. Our experience of beauty is the expression of the deep connection formulated here by Barfield. The wonder produced by this experience enjoins us to explore the language the phenomena are speaking.

A branch of the School of Nature has been set up in Cape Town with the express purpose of enabling anyone who wishes to do just that. The aim of its first course in August-September 2010, called "A Venture into Inner and Outer Landscapes of Southern Africa" , is to offer the opportunity to have in-depth

experience of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms in an African context. This will involve expeditions into three different landscapes, each one dominated by one of these three kingdoms of nature. For more details see the accompanying advertisement, or visit our page on the School of Nature web-site.