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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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BURCHELL, PRINGLE, AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN PICTURESQUE

by John Coetzee

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Burchell, Pringle, and the South African Picturesque

1. William Burchell.

Between 1811 and 1813 William Burchell, botanist, ornithologist, anthropologist, natural historian, travelled some 4500 miles across the Cape Colony and beyond its borders. In his Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa (1822), Burchell left a comprehensive account of his researches in the vast and sparsely settled hinterland of Britain's new colony.

Besides being a man of science, Burchell was an accomplished amateur painter and a thoughtful observer of the South African landscape. Shortly after arriving at the Cape he was taken to see the view over what are now the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch. He comments:

> The view from this spot ... is the most picturesque of any I had seen in the vicinity of Cape Town. The beauties here displayed to the eye could scarcely be represented by the most skilful pencil; for this landscape possessed a character that would require the combined talents of a Claude and a Both; but at this hour, the harmonious effect of light and shade, with the enchanting appearance of foliage in the foreground, and the tone of the middle distances, were altogether far beyond the painter's art. The objects immediately surrounding us, were purely sylvan; a blue extent of distance terminated the landscape both in front and on the right. To the left, the noble Table Mountain rose in all its grandeur ... The last beams of the sun, gleaming over the rich, varied, and extensive prospect, laid on the warm finishing lights, in masterly and inimitable touches.

Burchell records the Kirstenbosch scene only in words. But they are the words of an enthusiast of landscape, that is to say, *of an observer who views terrain as a potential subject of* painting, and whose observation of terrain is in turn educated by his experience of painting. Burchell's comments on the difficulties of rendering the tone, light and chiaroscuro of Kirstenbosch are not empty exclamations but judicious aesthetic observations. Composing the scene in his paragraph as planes of foreground, middle ground and far distance, with the mountain forming a coulisse on the left, he follows pictorial principles. His mention of "warm finishing lights" reveals the medium in which he projects the scene: oils. He even specifies the landscape tradition within which he is thinking: the tradition of Claude, particularly of Claude as seen through English eyes -- that is, the tradition of the picturesque.

Once Burchell leaves Cape Town and passes the Hex River Mountains, however, he finds himself in terrain that does not readily lend itself to being picturesquely conceived. "A desolate, wild, and singular landscape," he writes on 9 September 1811. "The only colour we beheld was a sterile brown, softened into azure or purple in the distance: the eye sought in vain for some tint of verdure; nothing but rocks and stones lay scattered every where around." Arrival at the Gariep River, on the other hand, evokes the following effusion:

> The...view... realized those ideas of elegant and classic scenery, which are created in the minds of poets ... The waters of the majestic river, flowing in a broad expanse resembling a smooth translucent lake, seemed, with their gentle waves, to kiss the shore ..., bearing on their limpid bosom the image of their wood-clothed banks ... Rapt with pleasing sensations which the scenery inspired, I sat on the bank a long time contemplating the serenity and beauty of the view.

His relief at discovering in this hot alien land a scene that, if not breathing domestic associations, at least does not resist the imposition of a familiar aesthetic schema, is palpable.

In the second volume of the Travels Burchell returns several times to the problem hinted at in the above passage: Are the banks of the Gariep an oasis in the African aesthetic wilderness, or is there an African species of beauty to which the eye nurtured on the European countryside, trained on European pictorial art, is blind? If the latter, is it possible for a European to acquire an African eye? Contemplating a typical stretch of what later writers will call "the veld," Burchell answers himself as follows:

> In the character of [this] landscape and its peculiar tints, a painter would find much to admire, though it differed entirely from the species known by the term 'picturesque.' But it was not the less beautiful: nor less deserving of being studied by the artist: it was that kind of harmonious beauty which belongs to the extensive plains of Southern Africa. The pale yellow dry grass gave the prevailing colour, and long streaks of bushes as it seemed, parallel to the horizon and gradually fading into the distance, sufficiently varied the uniformity of the plain; while clumps of the soft and elegant acacia, presented a feature which relieved these long streaks by an agreeable change of tint, and by the most pleasing forms backed by low azure hills in the farthest distance.

It requires the addition only of horses and oxen grazing in the foreground, Burchell continues, to complete "a landscape, perhaps altogether inimitable...which, if put on canvas, would...prove to European painters that there exists...a species of beauty with which, possibly, they may not yet be sufficiently acquainted."

In these and other passages, Burchell pleads on two grounds for aesthetic appreciation of the South African landscape. The first ground is that European standards of beauty are linked too closely to the picturesque, which is only one of several varieties of the beautiful. The second is that the European eye will be disappointed in Africa only as long as it seeks in African landscapes European tones and shades. I would like to examine these grounds more closely; but first we must be clear about what Burchell means by "the picturesque."

The practice among Englishmen of travelling for the purpose of viewing natural scenery may be said to begin after 1713, when the Treaty of Utrecht opened up the Continent to the so-called Grand Tour. In Rome, travellers on the Grand Tour made the acquaintance of Italian landscape art, particularly the paintings of Claude Lorraine and Salvator Rosa, and carried home a taste for them. Till at least the end of the century in England, and for another half-century at least in the colonies and ex-colonies, enthusiasm for painting in the style of Claude and Salvator, and consequently for natural scenes of the kind depicted in their paintings, all under the name the picturesque, remained a mark of a cultivated taste.

Landscape is picturesque when it composes itself, or is composed by the viewer, in receding planes according to the Claudian scheme: a dark coulisse on one side shadowing the foreground; a middle plane with a large central feature such as a clump of trees; a plane of luminous distance; perhaps an intermediate plane too between middle and far distance. Enthusiasm for landscape of this type was a powerful factor in determining the course both of English nature poetry (James Thomson, for instance, is clearly familiar with Claude) and of English landscape gardening. As an aesthetic category, the picturesque for a while held in England a position of significance near to that of the beautiful and the sublime.

It cannot be too strongly stressed that, as the word landscape is both topographical and aesthetic in its reference, the word picturesque refers to nature and art at the same time, that is, to physical landscape conceived of pictorially. In this respect the picturesque differs from the beautiful and the sublime, which refer to either art or nature but not to a relation between the two (Kroeber 5).

In historical retrospect, we now recognize that the picturesque performed a transitional function, for the space of several decades bridging the gap between a waning neo-classicism -- to be seen most clearly in Claude's literary landscapes, with their nostalgia for the world of Theocritus and Virgil -- and the growing Romantic taste for variety of light and shade, abruptness, what the great propagandist of the picturesque Uvedale Price calls "intricacy" or surface variation. By 1800, the picturesque had ceased to be a living force in English aesthetic thought. Wordsworth speaks for this movement in taste when, looking back to his early enthusiasm for the picturesque, he criticizes himself for

giving way
To a comparison of scene with scene,
[Being] bent overmuch on superficial things,
Pampering myself with meagre novelties
Of colour and proportion
(Prelude [1805]).

Yet the picturesque is more than a makeshift bridging movement in the history of sensibility. The cult of the picturesque made the contemplation of landscape into a widespread cultural recreation. A generation learned not only to view terrain as a structure of natural elements with analyzable relations one to another, but to be aware of the associations, natural and acquired, borne by these elements. Picturesque landscape is, in effect, landscape reconstituted in the eye of the imagination according to acquired principles of composition.

Though the picturesque had ceased to be a force in aesthetic debate by the time Burchell published his Travels in 1822, it remained a term in wide currency among educated people. Arguing for aesthetic appreciation of the landscape of the South African plateau, Burchell, as we have seen, takes the position that, though it may not be picturesque, this landscape possesses a certain "harmonious beauty" deserving of study. Such study, he implies, may yield a uniquely African aesthetic schema parallel to the Claudian schema of the picturesque, and this in turn may provide the basis for aesthetic satisfactions paralleling the aesthetic satisfactions afforded by European picturesque landscape.

The idea is potentially revolutionary. Yet as Burchell adumbrates what an African beauty might consist in, we recognize that it is but a modified European picturesque, particularly in the prominence it awards to the infinite perspective ("long streaks of bushes...gradually fading into the distance...low azure hills in the farthest distance"). We should recall that if one feature of Claude's paintings above all captured the imagination of the eighteenth century, it was the inimitable luminous faroff glow into which the viewer's gaze was slowly but ineluctably absorbed. In recession into the infinite, Burchell asserts, Africa can match Europe; as regards the middle ground, Africa is varied enough, once the eye has accustomed itself to more subdued tonal values; while if the foreground tends to be empty, matter enough can be found with which to fill it. Plate I of the second volume of the Travels provides an example: Burchell fills the near ground with a bed of waving reeds, and introduces his travelling companions receding from him in file; he even incorporates a coulisse in the shape of a shadowed rocky hillside.

Less disappointing than his observations on composition are Burchell's remarks on colour and tone. He is continually on the lookout for green. Of the landscape of the Kareeberg he writes: "The only colour we beheld was a sterile brown, softening into

azure or purple in the distance: the eye sought in vain for some tint of verdure." On the banks of the Gariep "[The] lively yellow-green [of the willows]...had a cheerful effect on the spirits and relieved the eye by a hue most soothing and grateful." The paucity of greens, the subdued tone of what green does occur ("that broad and green foliage, that fresh and lively complexion [of England], do not belong to the general character of the woods and thickets of the interior"), combine with an overall thinness of hue: "In Africa we look in vain for those mellow beautiful tints with which the sun of autumn dyes the forests of England." Even the African dawn is "[deficient in] those rosy and golden tints...which decorate the morning sky of European countries," the cause of this deficiency being the absence of cloud and vapour in the atmosphere.

As an Englishman writing for English readers, it is not surprising that Burchell should continually point to differences between the landscapes of Africa and England. But his painterly terminology reminds us that he writes, as well, as an artist, and an artist brought up in the English landscape school. For such an artist, what problems does the African landscape present? The list might include the following. First, the artist's entire palette must be modified and subdued: deep greens being rare, the discrimination of shades of green at which North European landscape art excels must be replaced by discrimination of a variety of fawns, browns and greys (which Afrikaans collects as the non-colour vaal). Second, since foliage adapted to a dry climate transpires very little, it lacks lustre. Third, light tends to be bright and even, transitions from light to shade abrupt. Fourth, the reflective medium of surface water is rare, the diffusive medium of atmospheric moisture only slightly less so.

I have already discussed the debt of English picturesque art to the Italianate tradition, that is, to Italian Renaissance models as filtered through the work of Claude. This tradition was grafted, principally by Gainsborough, on to an English tradition that continued to find its subjects in local topography but learned much of its technique from the Dutch landscape school of Hobbema and Ruysdael. If we seek reasons why English landscape art of Burchell's day should have found itself ill prepared for the African landscape, should even have found the African landscape intractable, we should look not only to the resistance of that landscape to being composed according to the picturesque schema, but to the predispositions of north European oil-painting technique. The bias of the north European palette (and eye) towards rich greens, and the general depth of tone of north European landscape art, have already been referred to. Let me go on to discuss the importance of shade and water.

The great technical achievement of John Constable was to create means of rendering transitory effects of sunlight on surfaces -- what he called "the evanescent effects of nature's chiaroscuro." There are two sides to the phrase "nature's chiaroscuro" as Constable uses it: first, the sparkle of light,

particularly as reflected from objects touched with moisture (e.g., dew) or bursting with moist life, a sparkle that Constable rendered with touches of white from a palette knife; and second, the opposition and interplay of light and shade in landscape. "Light and shadow never stand still," he writes.

Light and shadow never stand still for Ruysdael or Constable because, in Holland or England, there is always cloud movement in the sky. Over the Southern African plateau, however, skies are blue, light and shadow are static (which is why writers repeatedly characterize the landscape as sleeping, torpid, heatstruck). Peculiarities of atmospheric conditions in northern Europe thus make for developments in European art that have no obvious relevance to southern Africa. When we broaden the discussion to take in the general dryness of South African conditions, as opposed to the moistness of English conditions, we come to touch on questions that are not merely technical but condition radical differences of material culture between two societies, even, one might speculate, radical differences of cultural outlook. It is no accident that the Lake District became the destination par excellence for the picturesque tourist. By the aid of lakes, wrote Wordsworth in his Guide through the District of the Lakes,

> the imagination ... is carried into recesses of feeling otherwise impenetrable. The reason of this is, that the heavens are not only brought down into the bosom of the earth, but the earth is mainly looked at, and thought of, through the medium of a purer element.

Tranquil water is the only reflective medium in nature, by its nature a medium to tranquility and reflection. But, as Wordsworth points out, lake water is also transparent, its transparency rendering it penetrable into its depths by the eye, the mind. Bodies of still water lend themselves to metaphors of thinking; in European Romantic landscape art they are associated with reflection, contemplation, and the values attached to the contemplative posture. In lakes and pools, like Narcissus, we see ourselves, come to self-consciousness, for the first time. Surface water -- lakes, rivers, streams, pools -- more than any other natural feature except perhaps trees and mountain peaks, becomes a locus of meanings as well as an element of construction in landsape art. What concerns us here is, by contrast, the near absence of surface water on the South African plateau, and the consequent lacuna in the repertoire of the artist (painter but also writer) wishing to give meaningful (meaning-filled) representation to that landscape within the schema he has carried over from European art. In the rarity of bodies of still water in South Africa, European-descended landscape writing finds confirmation, and perhaps even occasion, for several of its commonest themes: that in South Africa the earth and the heavens are separate and even sundered realms; that the earth is dead or sleeping or insentient -- in Henry Thoreau's figure, lacks an eye; that no dialogue can be carried on with it.

2. Thomas Pringle.

Thomas Pringle (1789-1834), who spent six years in South Africa during the 1820s, is the only Romantic writer of any attainment to have visited the Colony. Pringle left behind a fair body of impressions of the South African landscape in verse and prose. Before turning to these, however, I would like to quote from "The Autumnal Excursion" of 1816, a poem that shows Pringle still closely wedded to eighteenth-century models of landscape verse, and in particular to the conventions of the picturesque. Of the Tweedside where he grew up, he writes:

> Oft from yon height [Mt. Blaiklaw] I loved to mark
> Soon as the morning roused the lark,
> And woodlands raised their raptured hymn,
> That land of glory spreading dim;
> While slowly up the awakening dale
> The mists withdrew their fleecy veil,
> And tower, and wood, and winding stream,
> Were brightening to the orient beam.
> -- Yet where the westward shadows fell,
> My eye with fonder gaze would dwell; ...
> There stood a simple home ...
> A rustic dwelling, thatched and warm ...
> And there the wall-spread apple-tree
> Gave its white blossoms to the bee,
> Beside the hop-bower's twisted shade
> Where age reclined and childhood played.
> Below, the silvery willows shook
> Their tresses o'er the rambling brook,
> That gambolled 'mong its banks of broom,
> Till lost in Lerdan's haunted gloom,
> Methinks I hear that streamlet's din
> Where straggling alders screen the linn,
> Gurgling into its fairy pool,
> With pebbled bottom clear and cool.

In this poem we see both the enthusiasm for shade, solitude and mouldering ruins, and the careful scenic composition, characteristic of picturesque art. Certainly it is the eye of childhood memory that beholds the Tweedside landscape; but this eye is first removed to a hilltop, from whose vantage the landscape is composed, item by item, as a prospect in the tradition of poems like Dyer's "Grongar Hill," before the picturesque composition is rendered in words. This rendering into words clearly takes into account procedures whereby painting is read, particularly the order in which the eye decodes the elements of a well-composed painting. Of course the picture in Pringle's eye is not composed with quite the care of the painter's art; nor, working in a linear medium, does he have the painter's planar resources; so what he follows in the writing is not quite the progress of the eye decoding the mental picture along lines of compositional structure, so much as a few of the movements of the eye standard to the reading of picturesque

painting: for instance, the progress of the gaze up a mist-shrouded valley toward the horizon (rather than down the valley); or along the path of a stream from near ground till it loses itself.

The hilltop situation of the observing eye does more than create a prospect. It also puts the kind of phenomenological distance between viewer and landscape that exists between viewer and painting, creating a predisposition to see landscape as art (the use of the Claude glass is the logical and ultimate extension of hilltop practice, putting a frame around the prospect and toning down its colour). Furthermore, the hilltop explicitly defines the poet's position in space, and therefore seems to renounce the freedom of the mind's (or memory's) eye, which can roam where it will, in favour of the painter's single viewpoint.

The most notable topographic poem Pringle wrote in South Africa is his "Evening Rambles." In the construction of this poem we again see the procedures of picturesque painting (and viewing) at work. It begins with a panorama that announces the contrast between settled valley (Pringle's Glen Lynden) and surrounding mountains:

> Soothing recollections fail
> [When] we raise the eye to range
> O'er prospects wild, grotesque, and strange;
> Sterile mountains, rough and steep,
> That bound abrupt the valley deep.

The disturbing panorama of the mountains is countered by a more reassuring progress of the eye up the valley into the "stream of light descending" in the distance, and then by several more traverses whose effect is to cover the whole space of the landscape. I will not discuss these traverses in detail, except to observe that they are accomplished with a fair amount of art. One traverse is dramatized as a walk by the poet through a "maze" of acacias during which a variety of bird and animal life presents itself to him; in another traverse his eye follows the course of darkness down [sic] the mountainside into the valley, bringing the creatures of the night (owls, bats, fireflies, but also porcupines) in its wake. These traverses are disguised, one assumes, to make the itemization of features of the landscape a less contrived-seeming procedure. The centre of the poem, however, consists of an undisguised prospect sequence. The poet ascends the hillside to his "wonted seat." From there,

> Spread out below in sun and shade,
> The shaggy Glen lies full displayed ...
> And through it like a dragon spread,
> I trace the river's tortuous bed.

The eye then follows the river, noting flora and fauna on the way, into the setting sun.

In adhering to the conventions of the picturesque in topographic poems like "Evening Rambles," Pringle seems to be entirely untroubled by the question Burchell raises: whether the great aesthetic schemas of European landscape art have universal applicability. Pringle's own use of the word "picturesque" is loose:

> The general aspect of the country [around Albany in the Eastern Cape] was ... fresh, pleasing, and picturesque. The verdant pastures and smooth grassy knolls formed an agreeable contrast with the dark masses of forest which clothed the broken ground near the river courses. The undulating surface of the champaign country was moreover often agreeably diversified with scattered clumps or thickets of evergreens interspersed with groves of large trees, like a nobleman's park. ... In the lower bottoms, wherever a brook or fountain had been discovered, ... we found the emigrant at work in his field or garden; his reed hut or wattled cabin generally placed on the side of some narrow ravine, under the shade of a grove or thicket... These cabins often looked extremely handsome and picturesque, as we came suddenly in sight of them peeping out from the skirts of the ancient forest, or embowered in some romantic wood or evergreen shrubbery.

Pringle uses the word as a cultivated layman rather than an artist would, to cover typical (even clichéd) elements of picturesque landscape, and indeed, in this passage, as a kind of shorthand for scenes that put the spectator in mind of Europe. (We should not forget to what extent landscape gardening had remade the English country park in the image of picturesque art.)

Pringle's residence in South Africa was limited to Cape Town and the Eastern Cape. He did not therefore face as directly as Burchell the problem of representation raised by the interior plateau, and particularly by the flat, arid Karoo -- the problem, to put it in its crudest form, of finding enough in the landscape to fill the painting or the poem; or, to put it in a different way, of finding an art-form responsive to "empty" country. The word that Pringle uses in what appears to be a complementary sense to "picturesque" is "wild"; there is also a passage in which he contrasts the "sublimely stern" scenery of the Eastern Cape coast with the "tameness" of English scenery. In his extremely loose usage, we therefore have the wild/sublime set against the tame/picturesque; in "Evening Rambles" this opposition is actualized as one between mountain and valley.

What strikes us, in both Burchell and Pringle, is how little the possibility is explored of deploying the rhetoric of the sublime upon the interior plateau. Why, at a time when the notion of the sublime had not exhausted its potency, was it not applied to the vast "empty" spaces of the hinterland?

3. The wilderness and the sublime.

"The wilds," "the wilderness" are resonant words in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In one sense, the wilderness is a world where the law of nature reigns, a world over which the first act of culture, Adam's act of naming, has not been performed. The origins of this conception of the wilderness lie in pre-Israelite demonology, where the wilderness (including the ocean) was a realm over which God's sway did not extend. But a second sense of the wilderness grew up in Judaeo-Christian theology: the wilderness as a place of safe retreat into contemplation and purification, a place where the true ground of one's being could be rediscovered, even as a place as yet incorrupt in a fallen world. Both of these potentially conflicting conceptions of the wilderness have played a part in the history of South Africa. The first can be loosely associated with British colonialism and the effort to maintain a border separating a region of order and culture -- the Colony -- from the barbarian wilderness. The second can, as loosely, be associated with Afrikaner isolationism; though we should note how strictly the Calvinist theology of the Afrikaner, while blessing the analogy of colonial hinterland with Biblical Promised Land, blocks the further analogy of hinterland with Eden.

Thomas Pringle, gazing at the Knysna coast from the deck of the ship bringing him to Africa, saw "lonesomeness and dreary wildness." In later South African topographic writing we continue to find the interior of the country assimilated into the figure of the waste land, a land of

> scorching sun, ... withering wind, ... serpent's tooth ...
> *vulture swoop , ... locust cloud ...*
> [and] faithless mocking phantom [i.e., mirage]
> (Dugmore, "A South African Wilderness").

The topos of the interior as a wilderness is common enough in South African literature. The development we might have expected, however, had the European pattern been followed -- namely, the reclamation of this nameless wilderness, or what aspects of it are amenable to reclamation, in the name of the sublime -- never occurred. Why should this have been so?

To begin with, we may note that in European art the sublime is far more often associated with the vertical than the horizontal, with mountains than with plains. The fenlands of East Anglia were shunned by eighteenth-century tourists, who *flocked instead to the Scottish Highlands or the Lake District.* No doubt part of the attraction of the vertical to the painter is that the vertical is the plane of the painting itself as it is hung; but sublime art goes on to make verticality -- heights and depths -- the locus of important -- "profoundly" important -- feelings such as fear and ecstasy, and values such as transcendence and unattainability -- values occasionally attached to skies but never to land expanses. Wordsworth called sublimity

"the result of Nature's first great dealings with the superficies of the earth," not considering that plains, as well as mountains and oceans, resulted from these dealings. In Book 7 of The Prelude (1805) he writes of mountainous regions as the regions where "simplicity and power [appear] most obviously," where by "influence habitual" they may "[shape]...the soul / To majesty." In 1850 he adds the desert as another soul-shaping environment, but limits it to shaping the soul of the Arab. As he remarks in the Guide, even sublime impressions "cannot be received from an object however eminently qualified to impart them, without a preparatory intercourse with that object or with others of the same kind" -- that is to say, whatever its sublime possibilities, the South African plateau cannot be expected to strike travellers fresh from England as sublime.

Numerous celebrations of the limitlessness of the veld are in fact to be found in such collections as E.H. Crouch's Treasury of South African Poetry and Verse (1909) and Francis Carey Slater's Centenary Book of South African Verse (1925). These poems react to what we may call the first moment of the sublime, a moment at which an attempt to encompass the landscape in the imagination breaks down. Roy Campbell, to whom the veld seemed not a positive limitlessness but "a gap in nature, time, and space" to be apprehended only in terms of its "vacuity" ("An Anatomy of the Veld"), satirizes this moment in his "Veld Eclogue":

> There is something grander, yes,
> About the veld, than I can well express,
> Something more vast -- perhaps I don't mean that --
> Something more round, and square, and steep, and flat ...
> Something more "nameless" -- That's the very word!

But the cult of expansion, whether as an aesthetic-spiritual programme or as a geopolitical ethos, was to be eclipsed by 1945. South African poetry reads a diversity of meanings out of the spaciousness of the landscape, but does not invoke the aesthetic of the sublime powerfully enough or early enough in history to create a standard to be either adhered to or reacted against. That is to say, a certain way of feeling about the landscape in which awe weighs heavily did not become the norm. As to why the sublime did not flourish in nineteenth-century South Africa, we can only conclude that this was a matter of historical circumstance. There was no tradition of landscape painting or writing -- indeed no artistic tradition at all -- among the Dutch at the Cape, among whom, anyhow, religious certainties seem to have been unquestioned enough to make substitute transcendencies like the sublime unnecessary (Thomas Weiskel correctly calls the sublime "a massive transposition of transcendence into a naturalistic key"). And among Englishmen travelling in the interior, the amount of topographical writing of any talent or ambition was exceedingly slim.

The position one should be wary of taking up, however, is that the sublime could never have taken root in British South Africa, either because by the turn of the nineteenth century it

was a concept in desuetude, or because it could not have endured the transplantation. The landscape art of the nineteenth-century United States, of Thomas Cole and the Luminists of the later Hudson River School--Fitz Hugh Lane, John Kensett, Martin Johnson Heade-- of Fredrich Church, of the painters of the West, Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, is proof enough of the informing potential of the sublime outside Europe.

Two broad reasons emerge why a sublime landscape art emerges so vigorously in the United States and in so late, tentative and stunted a way in South Africa. First, topography, vegetation and atmospheric conditions make the transposition of the sublime from Europe to whole regions of North America a more obvious step than from Europe to the South African interior. Second, the full ideological apparatus that accompanies expansive nationalism, including national arts, was in place by mid-century in the United States; while even if we allow for the difference of scale, such an apparatus cannot be said to exist in South Africa before the 1930s, and then only as an adjunct of Afrikaner nationalism. And, while it by no means follows that the sublime must be sympathetic to the politics of expansion, conquest and grandeur, it is certainly true that the politics of expansion has uses for the rhetoric of the sublime.

Neither the assertion nor (consequently) the questioning and denial of the sublimity of the South African environment therefore becomes an important issue in South African landscape art. Filling the vacuum we find, instead, a concern with the hermeneutics of landscape. The dominating questions, particularly in poetry, and most of all in English-language poetry, become: How are we to read the African landscape? Is it readable at all? Is it readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language? Is the very enterprise of reading the African landscape doomed, in that it prescribes the quintessentially European posture of reader vis-à-vis environment? Behind these questions, in turn, we detect an historical insecurity regarding the place of the artist of European heritage in the African landscape such as we do not encounter in America -- an insecurity not without cause.