The Theme of "Alien Other" and "Imagined" Landscape in Australian Literary Tradition

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Abstract

In Australian culture, framed by both Western conceptions of nature and Australian colonial experience, traditional aesthetics and ideologies had negative attitudes towards the "wilderness". Therefore in the major 19th century Australian literary tradition, the antagonistic relationship between man and nature was prevalent, which is demonstrated through the theme of "wild" nature, in which the Australian "wild"landscape was constructed as "alien other" and "imagined".

Keywords: Australia, literature; aesthetics, wilderness, other; imagined

1. Introduction& Methodology

In Western thought, a prevalent attitude regarded nature as the inferior "other" of culture. As John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) declared, "all praise of civilization, or art, or contrivance, is so much dispraise of nature" (Mill, 2009, p. 21). Consequently, in the Australian literature of the colonial period, Australian "wild"nature was constructed as the "other" of human civilization.Australian nature, besides being considered as the "other" of culture, was also seen as the "other" of the European landscape. This attitude was influenced both by the original European ideas of nature and by those ideas as they developed in colonial contexts and were transplanted into new countries. Therefore in this paper I will first discuss the framework of dominant traditional European aesthetic ideas of the wilderness (section 2). As descendants of European forebears, in the colonial period Australians had concepts of nature which were inevitably influenced by both European conventions and Australian local conditions. Imported values were mixed with those already rooted in the Australian landscape. Early colonial Australians were eager to preserve their European cultural heritage, especially the colonial elite who regarded it with nostalgia. In this section, I will first elaborate on the dominant attitudes towards nature which had evolved in Europe, leaving the colonial evolution of these ideas for later discussion.

In section 3, I will discuss the theme of constructing an "alien other" and an "imagined" landscape, which is a result of regarding European landscape as the norm.The discussion of this theme will go hand in hand with the discussion of the colonial evolution of European ideas of nature. Those ideas of nature (e.g. the idea of "otherness") were developed in the age of imperialism and were closely related to colonial contexts like Australia. They are embodied directly in this theme.

In this paper, "Australian culture" needs to be clarified. There is no such thing as a monolithic Australian culture. In this paper by "Australian culture" I mean the prevalent white Australian culture—that of the early European immigrants and later native-born white Australians. Australian Aboriginal culture has existed for a much longer time, and Aboriginal painters had interesting perceptions of nature. But in order to limit the scope of my paper, I will mainly discuss White Australian culture.

In Australian literature, the genres I have chosen are diversified, including poetry, short stories and novels.The criterion of choosing literary works is that "nature" should be the main theme, or at least that it should play an important role in the work.

2. The Aesthetic Framework of the "Wilderness"

Frederick W. Turner in his highly regarded study *Beyond Geography: the Western Spirit against the Wilderness* (1983) points out that the cultural and spiritual dynamic behind Western attitudes to the wilderness can be traced back to the early history of the Middle East. An antipathy developed between civilization and the desert, an

opposition between cities and the hostile wilderness of nature. It was there, Turner argues, that human beings began to enact the dream of mastering the natural world, a dream that later became incorporated into the Old Testament and hence into Christian tradition. The desert wilderness was regarded as a terrible place, and it was believed to be the task of man to conquer it. With the European expansion, such ideas, codified and embedded in Scripture, extended to many parts of the world, such as Africa, America, Australia and New Zealand. This scriptural justification of conquest helped shape the destructive impulses of the early colonists and informed their deep antipathy to the forest or bush wilderness they encountered.

Roderick Nash also points out that negative attitudes towards nature and the wilderness were deeply rooted in the West from the time of the Greeks, mainly as a result of the experience of living in the dark and endless forests of northern Europe. The fear and repulsion caused by these forests, and their associations with evil, lawlessness, strange events and menacing inhabitants, created an enduring reaction against the wilderness. Nash argues that the very term "wilderness" was an invocation of bewilderment: it symbolized "the unknown, the disordered, the uncontrolled" in nature, and "a large portion of the energies of early civilizations was directed at defeating the wilderness in nature and controlling it in human nature" (Nash, 1982, p. xi).

Nash's thesis is only partially valid. In European cultures the forest has complex implications, and is not always threatening. However, his argument can be considered useful in that the early European colonists' attitude to Australian wild bush did favor a pastoral idyll, a cultivated and orderly landscape rather than the wilderness. In Europe, what was known as "nature" had already been largely modified by man and transformed into a tamed landscape. W. G. Hoskins in *TheMaking of the English Landscape* (1985) studies the historical evolution of the British landscape as a "man-made" rather than purely natural "creation". He argues that the tendency of European civilization is to give human beings more and more complete control of the natural environment. Similarly, in the 17th century John Locke (1632-1704) argued that uncultivated nature is not only alien to humans, who have both the right and responsibility to cultivate it, but also not valuable and not worthy of protection until it is cultivated. According to him, "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste" (Locke, 1956, pp. 22-23). Locke believed, as did so many other Europeans, that as man civilizes nature, he at the same time liberates it and frees it from its "negativity", its hostility to spirit. Undoubtedly, this view reduced the potentialities of nature to nothing more than raw materials and reduced the status of nature to that of a prisoner waiting to be liberated by culture.

For the Europeans, civilization has achieved that liberation and transformation of nature most noticeably in parks, gardens and reservations. This appreciation of tamed nature has a long history, which can be traced back to the Graeco-Roman tradition in which the joys of natural scenery referred to those of "the olive grove, the cultivated field, the orchard, [and] the carefully disposed villa or temple" (Passmore, 1980, p. 107). The wild forests or mountains were seen as crude, inhuman, unperfected, or dangerous, frightening, and threatening, "not worth the attention of a cultivated man" (Passmore, 1980, p. 107). Christianity reinforced this idea by encouraging man to perfect and transform the wilderness into farm and pasture (Passmore, 1980, p. 17). "Perfecting nature" is understood as imposing form on it, as designing to control and suppress the waywardness of nature.This emphasis on man's responsibility to make nature more beautiful, useful and fruitful by his efforts was clearly expressed by the English essayist Joseph Addison (1672-1719) in 1712: "Our British gardeners…instead of humoringNature, love to deviate from it as much as possible. Our trees rise in Cones, Globes and Pyramids. We see the Marks of the scissors upon every Plant and Bush". Through this process of transforming nature into something more agreeable and more intelligible, Europeans felt they could enter this domesticated world and understand what they had helped to create. They always felt in some measure alienated from or external to untamed wilderness.

In Western aesthetics, natural beauty did not enjoy a high position. This was an inevitable consequence of the general view that nature was of value only when perfected by man. Western intellectuals, from Hegel (1770-1831) to Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), considered natural beauty inferior to the beauty of art and civilization. Wilde claimed (perhaps humorously) that "the more we study art, the less we care for nature. What art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolute unfinished conditions. Nature had good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out" (Wilde, 2008, p. 4).

In summary, the conception of "nature" in the European traditions is much more anthropocentric. From the time of the Greeks onwards, Europeans favored a pastoral idyll, a cultivated and orderly landscape, rather than the "wilderness". In the following section I will discuss a major theme in representation of Australian landscape in Australian literary works of the colonial period, which is influenced by traditional European aesthetic ideas of the "wilderness".

3. The Theme of "Alien Other" and "Imagined" Landscape

Australia is a country born out of European expansion and colonization, and the representation of Australian landscape cannot be understood without due weight being accorded to this influence.During the process of European expansion, many new theories and ideas supporting European colonial activity appeared. These ideas were interwoven with and reinforced by each other. Although sometimes they were contradictory, the basic assumption never changed. Europe was always regarded as the heart of the world. This "Eurocentric" perspective fostered Western responses to nature when Europeans contacted the rest of the world. The domination of European economic, political and environmental attitudes was matched by the growth of Western ideas about different environments and the people who inhabited them.

One of such ideas about different environments and their peoples is the concept of the "other". The principle of "otherness" was used to explain the relationship between Europe (or the West) and other parts of the world. Just as "European merchants and financiers were struggling to bring all the world's lucrative trades within their grasp", so European intellectuals were "struggling to bring their fragmentary knowledge of the outside world into a coherent system of order and control" (Arnold, 1996, pp. 23-24). Many early colonists characterized the Australian landscape in terms of certain stereotypical features, defining it in ways which expressed both differences from the West and inferiority to it. Interpretations of otherness tended to focus on representations of non-Western people rather than the otherness of non-European environments. However, alien landscapes were often imbued with as much importance as the peoples which inhabited them. For example, Rolf Boldrewood (1826-1915) wrote in "A Kangaroo Drive":

> "Many a time in years past have I spared the poor furry brutes…for surely I trusted that all forest things would disappear before civilization.All history is our warrant for wild beasties, ay, and all aboriginal craters, fading away before the great Anglo-Saxon" (Boldrewood, 1975, pp. 29-38).

Here, the importance of the environment is perceived, as a site of difference (or "otherness")—represented by the "poor furry brutes", the "forest things", the "wild beasties", and the "aboriginal craters".

In this schema of thought, nature was used to establish a contrast between different societies as well as to explain the cultural idiosyncrasy of any one society such as Australia. The European idea of the wilderness was particular relevant here because to most Europeans, Australia was untamed and almost all "wilderness".A prevalent attitude among early Australian writersregarded the Australian "wilderness" negatively and found little beauty in it. Although "alien" nature with similar characteristics of "tropicality" and a luxuriance of flora and fauna excited interest and a taste for the exotic, as a whole the landscape to these authors was monotonous and melancholy. It was a flat and wild country which depressed writers used to regarding the European landscape as normative.

This is reflected in the works of early writers such as Barron Field (1786-1846), who in his poem "On Reading the Controversy between Lord Byron and Mr. Bowles"described the Australian landscape as one in which "nature is prosaic, unpicturesque, unmusical" (1996, p. 11). Robert Lowe (1811-1892) in "The Songs of the Squatters" described Australian natural features in these terms: "The gum has no shade, the wattle no fruit / … The plains are all dusty, the creeks are all dried". Richard Rowe (1828-79) also viewed the Australian landscape from a perspective of alienation. To him the bush was "a dreary Hades" and the gum-trees were monotonous—though once, in "A trip up the Hunter" he admitted that "there is some good even in gum-trees" (2000, pp. 85-100). The colonial experience was often one of a sense of loss. In "Australian Scenery", Marcus Clarke (1846-1881) defined the quality of the Australian landscape as one of "weird melancholy", and he described the gum trees as "odd", "grotesque" and "distorted" (Clarke, 1896, pp. 1-2). Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) was the first Australian local poet to gain a wide readership. In his most "Australian" poem, "A Dedication", he expressed his disappointment with Australian nature in the famous lines:

> In lands where bright blossoms are scentless,
>
> And songless bright birds.

In echo of Marcus Clarke's opinion of the gum tree, he describes it as:

> gnarl'd knotted trunks Eucalyptian
>
> …
>
> And hieroglyph strange.

As a whole his Australian landscape is impressively alien:

> Where, with fire and fierce drought on her tresses,

Insatiable Summer oppresses

Sere woodlands and sad wildernesses,

And faint flocks and herds (Gordon, 1973, pp. 105-106).

Some writers, influenced by the fact that sometimes only Britain provided the publishers and reading public for Australian writers, added a sense of novelty in their descriptions of the landscape that would appeal to English readers who were interested in "the colonies" and curious about the differences between this new land and the mother country. However, more often we can see the writers' negative perceptions of the natural features of Australia in their struggle between the old and the new worlds, sometimes summed up in a rejection of native plants and animals. Anything unexpected or outside the traditional European "imagined" landscape was considered ugly. As a result, Australian gum-tree foliage presented to the eye of the European the appearance of being actually "dead" for half the year.

In these descriptions, Australian "wild" bush acquired the quality of an alienating "otherness", against which white man struggled to forge his self-identity. Undoubtedly Australian nature has its own rhythm, its own aesthetics and laws. The dominant plant and tree species are different from those of settled, temperate northern hemisphere countries. For the past two centuries Australian writers have always struggled to understand and describe their landscape. In their struggles, many writers have been unable to escape their Eurocentric perspective and frame of reference. Nicolas Rothwell argues that Western art and writing have a "DNA", with deep-rooted attitudes to color (for example, the association of the beautiful landscape with green, not Australian grey), to nature and landscape. Their descriptions reflected European ideals of country; and that code, that embedded aesthetic, shaped much in the work of Australian authors (Rothwell, 2007, p. 15).

This is expressed in Mrs. Campbell Praed's (1851-1935) works in which although she and her principle characters possess strong local ties, England still remains the center of attachment. Mrs. Campbell Praed concentrates upon those elements in Australian life and those types of scenery that she regards as most characteristic. But she depicts them as contrasting with an English life and English scenery. For example, in *Fugitive Anne: A Romance of the Unexplored Bush*, when describing a journey through the Queensland bush, she writes:

> They went silently through a stretch of gum tree, **wild** and utterly **dreary**. The great **uncouth** trees rose above them, stretching overhead a latticework of stems, vertical rather than horizontal, and giving little shade. The limbs of the ironbarks were rough and knotted, with perhaps a stalactite of gum, red as blood, dropping here and there from some wound or abrasion on their surface, and were hung with long withes of green-grey moss that gave them a **strange** look of hoary antiquity…all was **dull** green-grey, arid and **shadeless,** from the thin leaves of the gum-trees to the tussocks of coarse grass and prickly spinifex…The bush sounds only seemed to intensify the **loneliness**. It was getting towards mid-day, and most of the birds were silent. Those that were awake had **discordant** notes, and were mostly of the parrot kind, they chattered shrilly, their **harsh cries** rising above the tiny whiz of myriads of new-fledged locusts…" (Praed, 2002, p. 18)

I have put certain words in bold letters for emphasis. The Australian landscape was certainly not "wild", "uncouth", "strange", "shadeless" or a site of "loneliness" to its indigenous inhabitants, the Aborigines. The American Indian Luther Standing Bear articulated it in this way: "Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery" (Simmons, 1993, p. 14). But to those observers who accepted English landscape as the norm, and who saw it as too far removed from modern Western consciousness, the Australian landscape was clearly not attractive. Arnold's argument is applicable to the Australian situation. Old fears and ancient insecurities especially the Christian attitude toward wilderness were revived in the face of such a vast, forbidding wilderness, which resulted in a fear of losing hold of civilization entirely, of becoming wild, unruly, and ungodly (Arnold, 1996, p. 134). This symbolic association of the wilderness with "otherness" is endemic to Western capitalist culture, but it takes on an Australian specificity. On entering Australia, the European settlers needed to construct a myth of the land as wilderness in order to convince themselves that the Aborigines were either not there or of no great account. In the Australian tradition, quite apart from nature, this "other" status was also given to those objects and people which were in a despised position in relation to the white man, such as the Aborigines, immigrants and women (Schaffer, 1988).

Compared with Mrs. Campbell Praed, Mary Theresa Vidal's (1815-1873) works suggest that her "English eye" was gradually becoming accustomed to the Australian scenery. But she still saw the English countryside as the way things were supposed to be, and thus superior:

> Had it been more **cleared**, and the **unvarying** outline of gum-trees a little broken, it might have been pronounced a pretty spot. Here and there was a single graceful shrub, many a delicate blossom, and that peculiar depth of blue sky which inspires the eye with a sense of space. It would have been a pleasant scene, but for the brown and sun-dried grass, and that **dull** bluish hue, a peculiar feature in Australian foliage, which **lessens the beauty to English eyes.** (Vidal, 2000, p. 35)

Here, again, the Australian landscape is represented as the "other" of England. In the traditional construction, Australian nature was often reduced to a rather singular vision as uniformly bush or desert, which was different from British nature and which strengthened the implication of its "otherness". Mary Theresa Vidal wants the Australian scenery to be "more cleared", if she is to pronounce it "pretty". This is a colonial way of understanding nature. Although she admits to certain attractive features, she still finds the peculiar color of Australian grass and foliage "dull" and that it "lessens the beauty to English eyes". To these Europeans, nature in Australia could not match the subtle beauty of England. They missed the changing hues of autumn and the tender green of spring—crab-apples in bloom, horse chestnuts and lilacs. They found the Australian bush and the central desert dull and uniform, without any of the characteristics of the pastoral and the picturesque (in the European sense) which molded European standards of natural beauty. To them it was only possible to "adore" nature in a country where it had been "nearly or quite enslaved by man" (Arnold, 1996, p. 157).

The above examples show the negative attitude towards the Australian landscape of many early Australians, and their strongly Eurocentric perspective. Davis J. Tacey makes a strong case in his argument that certainly the Australian landscape could never have given birth to an English Romanticism. It did not foster "green thoughts in a green shade". Instead, it inspired an otherworldly, desert-mysticism of rocks and bones. Deserts were symbols of destruction to the over-civilized, British consciousness that first arrived here. The creation of a consciousness that connects a people and the spirit of the land takes time and effort; it is a work of culture (Tacey, 1988, pp. xvi-xvii.). During the colonial period, many writers could simply not accept this "alien" landscape. They either viewed it as an ugly "other", or "imagined" it into more acceptable European forms.

Through imagining the landscape of the "new" world into "old" European terms, certain writers converted the wilderness into a tamed landscape on paper. This is implied in Adam Lindsay Gordon's poem "Doubtful Dreams":

> Aye, snows are rife in December
>
> And sheaves are in August yet,
>
> And would you have me remember,
>
> And I would rather Forget;
>
> In the bloom of the May-day weather,
>
> In the blight of October chill,
>
> We were dreamers of old together,
>
> As of old are you dreaming still?

All the references to the seasons and nature in this poem are to those of a European landscape.

> I have changed the soil and the season,
>
> But whether skies freeze or flame,
>
> The soil they flame on or freeze on
>
> Is changed in little save name;
>
> The loadstone points to the nor'ward,
>
> The river runs to the sea;
>
> And you would have me look forward,
>
> And backward I fain would flee. (Gordon, 1912, pp.156-161)

In this poem the author combines a description of a realistic Australian landscape (the local landscape of the poet's home) with an imaginary landscape (the English landscape of his heritage), and the focus of his thought and feelings is England. In this poem there is a nostalgic longing for and preoccupation with the "old world" of the European landscape. In this sense what the author describes is also an "imagined" land, and he failed to capture the genuine and characteristic features of Australian nature. Gordon's use of vocabulary is

Anglo-Australian. He speaks of glens, forests and springs as often as he speaks of bush, gullies or creeks (Hoorn, 2007, p. 190).

Similar representations can be found in the poems of Henry Kendall (1839-1882). In "Sydney Exhibition Cantata" he wrote: "Shining nations! Let them see / How like England we can be" (Kendall, 1903, p. 376). Kendall is often considered to be the first poet to whom the beauty of Australian landscape was unveiled.However,from this poem we can see that he still found it necessary to invoke England as a frame of reference. The Australian landscape is no longer "ugly" or "wild", but its beauty lies in "how like England" it can be. Influenced by the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Shelley, he found in natural scenery moods of the human spirit, using woods and mountains, streams and birds and trees as symbols of the emotions that he wished to express. But from his descriptions it is often difficult to know which country the natural images are from:

> And while sweet Autumn with her gypsy face
>
> Stands in the gardens splashed from heels to thigh
>
> With spinning vine-bloods… (Kendall, 1903, p. 371)

These lines are steeped in European seasonal imagery. The natural beauty that sparkled through his verse was not that of the wide hot spaces which were generally considered to be the most characteristic of Australian nature; it was rather that of the narrow strip along the eastern coast of New South Wales which he felt most resembled England.Kendall's landscapes are, in fact, "covered in a vague veil of generalization under which nothing is really recognizable, nothing different from anything else" (Wright, 1965, p. 30).

This "imagined" landscape sometimes finds its expression in embedding cultural associations in Australian nature, as in the best-known poem of Charles Harpur (1813-1868), "The Creek of the Four Graves":

> I verse a Settler's tale of olden times
>
> One told me by our sage friend, Egremont;
>
> Who then went forth, meetlyequipt, with four
>
> Of his most trusty and adventurous men
>
> Into the wilderness…
>
> …
>
> So went they forth at dawn: and now the sun
>
> That rose behind them as they journeyed out,
>
> Was firing with his nether rim a range
>
> Of unknown mountains that, like ramparts, towered
>
> Full in their front, and his last glances fell
>
> Into the gloomy forest's eastern glades
>
> In golden masses, transiently, or flashed
>
> Down on the windings of a nameless Creek,
>
> That noiseless ran betwixt the pioneers
>
> And those new Apennines … (Harpur, 1973, p. 3)

Here the adventure is based on a premise of strangeness, and everything is alien to the European consciousness. Harpur could not interpret the Australian countryside in its own terms. Instead, he tried to impose European associations—using similes such as "new Apennines"—on the "wild" and "unknown" mountains. The term indicates his desire to "recognize something familiar in the unfamiliar, to identify the unknown in terms of the known" (Mitchell, 1973, p. xxiii). In another poem "A Coast View", in order to evoke the wild, eroded coastline, when describing the cliff formations he used such similes as "Assyrian" arches and "Babylonian" buttresses (Harpur, 1973, p. 35). This shows the author's lack of identification with the local landscape which presented itself in colours and forms that were entirely without literary associations or traditional significance (Green, 1984-1985, pp. 111-112). Through the use of the Gothic tradition, "the weird and rugged Australian coast is thus tamed and assimilated by an acceptable aesthetic convention" (Perkins, 1984, p. xxxii). As inhabitants of a newly established country with a short "white" history, Australians have always possessed a cultural insecurity and a sense of "cultural cringe", a feeling that Australian culture is inferior to others. To the peoples of other countries, "barrenness" had long seemed to be a metaphor for Australian culture. Australia lacked "style and taste"; it was a

"far-off land…rather vague and empty". (Walker, 1976, pp. 11-30) However, as civilized people "superior" to the Aborigines, colonial Australians expected others to regard them as cultured people, just as other Europeans were. Therefore, it was necessary to elevate culture above nature. As a white world distanced from its origins, Australia was "in need of salvation from without—from Europe" (Schaffer, 1988, p. 191).

This nature-culture relationship is reminiscent of the tradition of associationist aesthetics which was popular in 19th-century Europe, and may have influenced some of the early Australian writers' attitude towards this land. This theory located the aesthetic value of an object in the series of associated ideas it evoked. As Australia was a new country which from the perspective of the white settlers lacked the romance of an historic past, and which, unlike Europe, was considered to be devoid of literary associations, consequently the Australian landscape was frequently described as "unknown", "barren", "vacant', and "destitute of taste", in comparison with the European landscape in which every place and object possesses a real or romantic legend. As Louis Esson declares: "It [Australia] had no culture—there were no castles or abbeys, no folk-songs—there was no Bloomsbury or Montmartre or Latin Quarter of Paris, with exciting bohemian life" (Nile, 1994, p. 14). Even when beauty was admitted, it was considered to be purely visual, "without any intellectual associations" (Eagle, 1994, p. 159). This sense of vacancy in the perception of Australian landscape preoccupied those Australian writers whose underlying assumption was that nature was not appreciable until it had been "humanized" or "consecrated" by human civilization. Even then, tamed nature was often appreciated exclusively as a means to celebrate human historical, cultural, or literary events and accomplishments (Saito, 2004, p. 144).

4. Conclusion

In Western aesthetics, there is a deep-rooted negative attitude towards untamed nature especially the wilderness. This conception is reinforced by those theories of nature proposed during the European expansion and colonization. In the Australian cultural tradition, framed by both Western European ideology and Australia's own colonial context, the Australian landscape, especially the "untamed" wilderness, was frequently constructed in terms of an alienating "otherness" and was transformed into an "imagined" landscape with the European, especially the British, landscape as the norm.

Acknowledgements

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