

# BREATH AND REVELATION

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The inspirational is, literally, that which we take in – as we breathe in the air that sustains us. That which is inspirational in this way is not something that we take in because we choose to do so, but because we cannot do otherwise. The inspirational thus exerts a power that derives both from the nature of that which is taken in and from the nature of the lives – our very own – into which it flows.

Talk of inspirational landscapes might be taken to imply reference to a special kind of landscape – to just those landscapes that we ‘take in’, that have the power to influence and affect us, and that presumably stand out from those ‘other’ landscapes that are simply *there*, apart from us, in the face of which we remain untouched, unmoved, uninspired. But is the idea of landscape really the idea of something that can ever be understood as separated from us in this way? Or does landscape already bring with it the idea of a necessary involvement and influence?

There is certainly one very common view of landscape that does seem to involve treating it as something that, while it may have an influence on us and is undoubtedly influenced by us, is nevertheless something that stands removed from us. This view takes landscape to be the product of an essentially visual and representational construal of our relation to the world. Just as the English term has its origins in painting (1), so this view takes landscape to involve the presenting of the world as an object, seen from a certain view, structured, framed and made available to our gaze. Such ‘views’ may well affect us, but precisely because they are already seen as ‘views’, so they are separated from us, and our involvement with them is based purely in the spectatorial. As Raymond Williams puts the point “... a working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation” (2).

This visual or representational view of landscape is crucial to the treatment of landscape as an ideological construction tied, for instance, to industrial capitalism and to male-oriented forms of social organisation. But while it is almost certainly true that the idea of landscape arises out of a certain sense of actual or potential separation from the physical surroundings in which one lives (by means of which those surroundings are brought to salience), and the structure of particular landscapes cannot be divorced from social and economic forms, the idea of landscape as essentially tied to a representational way of relating to the world seems to neglect crucial elements in the very experience of landscape out of which any such representation arises. For the *experience* of landscape is as much of the sound, smell and feel of the place as of anything purely visual. Moreover, such experience should not be construed as a merely subjective phenomenon — it does not take place ‘in’ the subject, but rather is rather part of the way the subject is herself ‘in’ the world.

Even considered in relation to artistic production, landscape does not first appear only representationally. The landscape artist is typically concerned with a certain view, a view that is already given, prior to the act of artistic production, in her own visual appreciation of a stretch of country or a particular scene, and with the articulation or re-working of that view in art. Strictly speaking, then, the work of landscape (whether it be in the form of painting, photograph, or whatever) is not merely a view, but rather a view *of a view* – hence its re-presentational character. But the very possibility of such a view already

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depends, from the start, on a location that is within the landscape so viewed and an engagement with that landscape. Every such 'view' is of this character: it always already depends on an involvement and orientation with respect to some particular place or locale. Landscape as art derives from such involvement and orientation, and is a representation of it – although as a re-presentation, so it also presents only a certain view of that original and originary involvement.

Raymond Williams aside, then, landscape need not imply separation or observation. Indeed, landscape only arises as landscape out of our original involvement with the place in which we find ourselves as that place affects and influences us through its sounds, smells, feelings and sights. To experience a landscape is to be active within it, since it is by means of such activity that landscape affects and influences us – the nature of the place determines what is possible within that place. In this respect, then, all landscape is 'inspirational' in that all our actions, and every part of our life, draw on that landscape in which we act and live in an exactly analogous way to that in which we draw our life from the air around us. In fact, what we see in the artistic representation of landscape is not a representation of landscape as such, but rather a representation of the particular 'in-flow' – different in each case – of the landscape (and of the place) into the life and modes of life that arise within and in relation to it.

If all landscape is inspiration in this way, then landscape itself only becomes landscape through the way in which it is implicated in human lives as both affected and affecting. Even the wilderness landscape is made what it is, as wilderness, through the way in which it establishes a certain set of human interactions in relation to it and the way in which those interactions themselves establish the particular form of landscape that is 'wilderness'. This is not to say that landscape is somehow a 'construction' of the human – as if it were some form of cultural or social 'artifact'. While it is true that even the landscapes we most often think of as 'natural', are typically products of the interaction between human, environmental and other factors (3), this does not mean that the human somehow plays the determining role here. Landscape may be shaped by human involvement, but the human is itself shaped by landscape, and neither has the upper hand in this relationship – each is appropriated by and to the other. For this reason, too, we cannot think of landscape as merely that within which human activity is located and in which human lives are played out – landscape is, as Seamus Heaney says, both 'humanized and humanising' (4).

The landscapes that most inspire us – the landscapes that flow most directly into our lives – are often the landscapes that we take most for granted. Indeed, while landscape always implies involvement rather than separation in the sense associated with the spectatorial or observational, the recognition of landscape and its importance to us, almost invariably arises out of certain forms of dislocation and physical separation. One comes to understand and to know a landscape through movement within it, and one comes to understand and know a landscape as a landscape only through the journey 'there and back again' that takes one from one landscape to another – from the familiar to the strange and the strange to the familiar – or that shifts elements of the landscape itself. It is no accident that the rise of landscape painting as an art form is itself tied to the dislocation and disruption of the traditional landscape, especially in England, that occurred from the seventeenth century onwards. In contemporary Australia, the recognition of landscape, and the questioning of what it may be and what it may signify, has always been directly tied to the changes in the way in which the landscape is itself brought into salience through journey and return, whether it be the journey and return that occurs within the landscape through processes of disruption and change, or the journey and return that occurs as individuals, and sometimes whole communities, move within landscapes, across country, between places. When landscape is brought into question in this way, so too is our own *relation* to landscape – our own 'belonging', our own 'identity', our own 'place' – brought into question along with it. We cannot ask after landscape without also asking after the things that make up our lives — that are part of us, that matter to us.

The relation between landscape and life is not, of course, a simple and invariant one. The particular ways in which landscape affects us, the ways in which it 'flows in' to our lives,

depends on the ways in which our own lives are articulated in relation to that landscape, on the ways in which we engage with ourselves, with others and with the world, and on the narratives within such engagement is itself embedded and understood. For those of us who come from an Aboriginal way of life, for instance, the landscape, the ‘country’, will configure itself quite differently from the way it is configured for those of us from non-Aboriginal backgrounds — and so the way in which we see the in-flow of landscape will be quite different also. Thus, while landscape is always inspirational in the sense of flowing into and determining the human lives lived in relation to it, not every landscape or feature of landscape will be evident to each of us as being inspirational in the *same* way, nor will we always recognise landscape as being inspirational, in the sense at issue here, in *every* case.

Often, in fact, we recognise the inspirational character of landscape only in those landscapes that stand out for us in some special fashion – perhaps because of the role they play in particular narratives that are especially important to us, because those landscapes are brought to salience through their loss or destruction, or because the very majesty or beauty of those landscapes (their almost ‘physical’ effect on us) bring them immediately to our attention. This should not lead us, however, to overlook the inspiration that is associated with the ordinary, the constant and the mundane. Indeed, the landscapes that we celebrate as having some special inspirational character – whether it be the ‘red heart’ of Uluru, the rainforests of Northern Queensland, or the wild mountain country of Tasmania’s South West – are often much less important to us, in terms of their real influence, than the landscapes that support our everyday lives. Thus, in Hobart, the South-West is a real and significant part of the wider landscape in which we live, but for those of us who live in or near the city, it is the contrasting landscape of hills and water, of the Mountain and the Derwent that flows more immediately and constantly into our lives. A certain set of rhythms, views, habits and modes of action are engendered by the enviroing landscape that are characteristic of the city and the place – within that landscape things are brought to light in a way that resists any clear elucidation, but which is distinctive nevertheless. For someone, like myself, who grew up in the similarly intimate and enfolded landscape of the North Island of New Zealand, that distinctiveness is matched, however, by a feeling of recognition and familiarity that the landscape also brings – for a New Zealander, Tasmania is, in more than one sense, very close to home.

As landscapes are inspirational – as they flow in to our lives – so the encounter with landscape is an encounter with that which makes us what we are. Moreover, the encounter with landscape is itself inspirational, albeit in a slightly different sense, inasmuch as it opens us to the very character of landscape and of life; it opens us to the revelation of the near and far, of the ordinary and the everyday, as well as of that which transcends the ordinary; it opens us to the world as that wherein our lives take on shape and meaning. Thus Geoffrey Hill writes: “Landscape is like revelation/it is both singular crystal and the remotest things”(5).

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- (1) Although the original Dutch and German terms from which the English ‘landscape’ is derived have connotations of a unit of human habitation – see J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale 1984), -- 3-8.
  - (2) Raymond Williams, *The country and the city* (London, 1973), p.120. By ‘working country’, Williams means country as its is a site of action and process. He goes on: “It is possible and useful to trace the internal histories of landscape painting, and landscape writing, landscape gardening and landscape architecture, but in the final analysis we must relate these histories to the common history of a land and its society”.
  - (3) See, for instance, Simon Schama’s discussion of the essential interconnection of nature and culture exemplified in that archetypal ‘wilderness’ that is Yosemite National Park (*Landscape and Memory* [London: HarperCollins, 1995], pp. 7 – 10.)
  - (4) Seamus Heaney, ‘The Sense of Place’ *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 1978* (London: Faber & Faber 1984), p. 145.
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- (5) 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy', in Geoffrey Hill *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.185.