

## THE SUBLIME AESTHETIC AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VICTORIA FALLS

JOHN MCALEER

TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN

Recent academic fashions have posited visual images of colonial landscape space as forming part of a network of intellectual influences that promoted both a culture of imperialism *and* an imperial culture in the nineteenth century. Frequently these analyses concentrate on constructing an overarching socio-political interpretation into which to place this art, thereby ignoring the influence of artistic and aesthetic theory in the creation, assessment and reception of these images.

This paper seeks to reconsider the role of art theory and the philosophy of aesthetics in the context of imperial image production. Thus, it explains the response of British artists and writers to the *terra incognita* presented by a landscape vista in sub-Saharan Africa, the landscape of an unknown territory, at the moment of its initial exploration and artistic delineation by Europeans. Drawing on the rich cultural intertext of published travelogue, exploration narrative and visual representation (in both oil and print), it suggests that one of the most pervasive aesthetic categories in post-Enlightenment discourse—the Sublime—was applied to a particular landscape phenomenon encountered by Europeans in Africa—the Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River. By analysing the role of the Sublime, as formulated by Edmund Burke, in the describing and imaging of this scene for European audiences, I seek to introduce this aesthetic notion into the contemporary critical debate. Furthermore, I want to conclude by suggesting that the various forms of eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse to which I will make reference were important components in the European epistemological appropriation of this potential colonial landscape.

I would tentatively suggest that similar strategies of visualisation and cultural colonialism were

deployed throughout the burgeoning British Empire in the nineteenth century. However, this paper, as will become increasingly apparent, focuses on the landscape rendition of Southern Africa by British artists and travellers. As early as 1774, Horace Walpole remarked, 'Africa is indeed coming into fashion.'<sup>1</sup> The insatiable European hunger for information about these newly explored corners of the world, expressed by Walpole, buoyed the nascent British publishing industry. By the end of the eighteenth century, travel literature was second only to novels in numbers sold.<sup>2</sup> However, the Western audience towards which these texts (and their accompanying images) were aimed could not accommodate the strangeness, foreignness and otherness of the African continent using their traditional and culturally inherited methods of knowing. Africa was a territorial and metaphysical space removed from conventional Western European registers of meaning. It did not fit the basic European linguistic and philosophical template that was employed to describe landscape and travel. Captain Henry Butler, an Irish officer serving on the frontiers of the Cape Colony, found that 'all nature spoke a *language* so different from anything European.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in what terms could this foreign, strange and other<sup>4</sup> land be envisaged and presented to a European domestic audience? I will suggest that it was the philosophical vocabulary of Western European aesthetic discourse that enabled Europeans travellers and artists to envisage the landscape of Southern Africa.

The Cape of Good Hope was acquired by the United Kingdom in 1806 and left the authorities with the task of coming to intellectual terms with this new and unexplored landscape. Before dealing with the particular example provided by the Victoria Falls, it is instructive to consider the prevalence in the Southern African colonial context of that other form of eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse—the Picturesque. I would argue that the initial visual engagement with this essentially unknown and threateningly 'other' region is couched in this aesthetic vocabulary—an easeful contentment with the prospects of the landscape. This ideology was the continuation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hibbert (1982), 21.

<sup>2</sup> See Porter (1991), 26, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Butler (1846), 312-20, 457-74; 474 [my emphasis].

<sup>4</sup> I use this word advisedly, conscious of its overdetermined critical status and aware of the numerous caveats attached to its usage. See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998), 169-71 for a fuller discussion of this issue.

picturesque traveller theme. Ernst Gombrich's ideas of the Picturesque help to explain its predominance in visualising the colonial landscape of Southern Africa. Gombrich employs the Picturesque to explain his thesis in *Art and Illusion* (1960). His fundamentally psychological reading of art means that he equates the Picturesque with a mode of looking at and visualising the world in terms of our own preconceived notions of it.<sup>5</sup> His central hypothesis is that painted landscape constitutes 'not the nature of the physical world but the nature of our reactions to it.'<sup>6</sup> In other words, the visualisation of a landscape prospect according to aesthetic criteria, in this instance the Picturesque, allowed the European traveller and artist to see the strange and alien forms of landscape in comfortingly familiar terms. The fact that these terms were invariably those of a Western aesthetic discourse alerts us to a trend that is encountered in much of the British visual, artistic and aesthetic engagement with the landscape presented by Southern Africa.

The example of William Burchell illustrates the operation of the Picturesque in Southern Africa. He was an early nineteenth-century traveller in the Cape, a prolific naturalist as well as an accomplished artist—having been taught by the artist Merigot.<sup>7</sup> Burchell finds the Cape of Good Hope so charming that 'it smothers every uneasy sensation of the mind.'<sup>8</sup> This pleasing restfulness and relaxation is conveyed to the viewer in his illustration of *A Scene on the Gariiep River* where the traveller displays the kinds of landscape that Europeans wanted to imagine existed in South Africa. The response elicited from Burchell is one that is absolutely consonant with the early-nineteenth-century cult of the picturesque traveller—the cultured individual who pursued idyllic havens of bucolic bliss for their aesthetic merits. Thus, Burchell abjures giving any indication of the strategic importance of the river, the logistical complications of its bridging or its even geographical location. Instead, he focuses on the emotional effect that this scene has on him—the European observer: 'Rapt with the pleasing sensations which the scenery inspired, I sat on the bank a long time contemplating the serenity and beauty of the view.'<sup>9</sup> Thus, his search for, and codification of, landscape in terms of a British aesthetic category assuages any discomforting feelings in the face of

---

<sup>5</sup> Gombrich (1960), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Klonk (1996), 4.

<sup>7</sup> See Burchell (1822-4), xiii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

an unknown land.

The images that record the earliest English reactions to this foreign, unknown and other environment are replete with symbols betokening surroundings which are tranquil and calm. We have here an abnegation of the 'otherness' of this foreign landscape—it is neutralised by the European envisioning and representation of it in terms of its sentimental effect on the viewer. This strategy of visualisation is, I would suggest, directly related to the employment of a picturesque aesthetic in the intellectual codification of this landscape.

However, I would argue that the Picturesque was not the only aesthetic criterion that could be employed in presenting a specific view of Africa. The impact of the landscape was not always submerged beneath a welter of pleasing associations. For George Thompson, another traveller in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, his journey through Bechuanaland produced views that were not uplifting or at all pleasant. Rather they were 'almost oppressive to the heart.'<sup>10</sup> In fact, the immensity, grandeur and the daunting otherness of certain parts of the African landscape was only properly conveyed by artists and travellers when it was couched in the visual and textual vocabulary of the Sublime. This was an aesthetic category which had a basis in classical philosophy but had been rejuvenated in the eighteenth century by aesthetic theorists such as Joseph Addison at the beginning of the century and Immanuel Kant at the end. More specifically, the cult of the Sublime was given major impetus by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, described as 'perhaps the most influential discussion of sublimity produced in the eighteenth century.'<sup>11</sup>

The legacy of the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the Sublime can be best appreciated in the artistic response to one of the most visually affecting natural phenomenon in the region —the Victoria Falls. The discovery and subsequent literary and visual codification of the Falls provides a wonderful case-study of how eighteenth-century aesthetic discourses, like the Sublime, percolated into the delineation of a landscape phenomenon in the nineteenth century. The Victoria

---

<sup>10</sup> Thompson (1827), Vol. 1, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Monk (1935), iv.

Falls were only seen by a white man for the first time in 1857, when David Livingstone visited them for two days in November of that year. On observing this wonderful vista, Livingstone produced the classic European response by maintaining that 'no one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England' before proceeding to try to describe them for an audience familiar only with the scenery, vegetation and topography of the English landscape.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Livingstone enunciates the philosophical and epistemological conundrum facing the European explorer encountering such scenes on his travels—how to make the unknown knowable; in what terms to represent that which cannot, by their own admission, be represented.

This paper will suggest that it was through the judicious deployment and manipulation of a specific Western European discourse, the Sublime, that this particular example of the colonial African landscape was ultimately envisaged, imaged and represented for a European audience at home. The aesthetic merits of a waterfall, filtered through its specific effect on the sensations, feelings and emotions of the observer was a long-standing tradition, even amongst the disciples of the Picturesque.<sup>13</sup> For mid-nineteenth century travellers who visited the Falls, the overwhelming physical and natural power of the scene was expressed in terms of how it materially affected their bodies and impacted upon their sensibilities. Responses to the Falls are littered with language, images and metaphors that connect the visual effect of the scene with a specific and quantifiable bodily effect.

The *Philosophical Enquiry* is pervaded by, and constructs its arguments around, bodily representations of aesthetic experience. The whole thrust of the argument, as well as many of the images and examples used in its elucidation, depend upon the recognition of a definite and quantifiable link between the natural phenomenon and its effect on the perceiving observer.<sup>14</sup> Burke's theories demand a physiological and psychological response from the viewer to the object of attention. For the traveller in Africa, the very physical force of the landscape is recorded as a

---

<sup>12</sup> See Livingstone (1857), 518-9.

<sup>13</sup> That the waterfall could be a suitable vehicle for the articulation of these notions was alluded to by Gilpin. Describing the falls on the River Bran near Dunkeld, he maintains that they are 'high finished pieces of nature's more complicated workmanship...in which every touch is expressive; especially the spirit, activity, clearness and variety of agitated water'. These are 'among the most difficult efforts of the pencil.' See Barbier (1963), 124.

<sup>14</sup> Burke (1759), xi.

means of giving corroborative emphasis to their account and adding interest and appeal to their writing and visual representations.

The concentration and insistence upon the direct physiological and psychological communion achieved by the spectator in the face of this wonder of nature is a recurrent mantra that situates their initial recording of the Victoria Falls within the discourse of the Sublime. Thomas Baines, who was an official artist on one of David Livingstone's expeditions to the Zambezi River, attributes a physical force to the scene when he visited the Falls in 1862.<sup>15</sup> For him the panorama presents 'the most lovely *coup d'oeuil* [sic] the soul of the artist could imagine.'<sup>16</sup> The double rainbow, a unique meteorological peculiarity and visual characteristic of the scene, is undoubtedly 'gorgeous' and 'lovely' but also has a physical power that Baines attributed to the highest forms of scenery. The rainbows are 'so brilliant that the eye *shrinks* from looking on them.'<sup>17</sup> The physically coercive force of the Victoria Falls is a time worn technique used to impress the viewer with the overwhelming power in his midst—an essential criterion to be fulfilled by any scene of potential sublimity. In Baines' assessment, the spectator becomes a passive observer upon whom the rich grandeur and effulgent profusion of natural growth imprints a lasting impression of intimidating power. This is emphasised by the prominent position of the artist in the picture as he gazes on the wonders of the Falls. Other travellers record the natural sublime is made manifest in, and directly related to, their own bodily response as they look on the type of scene painted by Baines. Thus, Baines' companion on the journey to the Victoria Falls, James Chapman, writes about this waterfall which 'make[s] one's hair stand on end.'<sup>18</sup> For him the scenic ensemble, looked at from the 'giddy height' represented in Baines' image —inducing such horripilation—is exactly the sort of bodily response envisaged by Burke. The composite view of the waterfall at the Zambezi River corresponds to the feelings of the Swedish botanist, Peter Kalm, when he visited that other great waterfall—the Falls of Niagara, in 1750: 'You cannot see it without being

---

<sup>15</sup> See Godby (1999), 30-39; 30.

<sup>16</sup> Baines (1862), 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 [my emphasis].

<sup>18</sup> Chapman (1868), Vol. 2, 120.

quite terrified; to behold so vast a quantity of water falling headlong from a surprising height'.<sup>19</sup> Chapman's viewing position aids this response, because as Burke comments 'height is less grand than depth...we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than at looking up at an object of equal height'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the images that Baines painted to accompany these responses is exactly consonant with the depiction of such scenes of Sublime nature.

The representations of the Victoria Falls, in both text and image, present us with a good example of how the discourse of the Sublime was adapted and employed extensively in the representation of a foreign, strange and 'other' scene. The strategies delineated and characteristics outlined above were used for the textual codification of 'the first waterfalls in the world and as much finer than Niagara as Niagara is finer than Schaufhausen'.<sup>21</sup> However, these textual representations of the scene, suffused and saturated as they are by the many and various facets of the Sublime as it had penetrated the cultural consciousness of European explorers in Africa in the nineteenth century, carry an ideological import in the process of European engagement with the African landscape. We need to examine the consequences of having a foreign and alien landform described and so heavily encumbered with European philosophical and aesthetic baggage. How does the large accumulation of the terms, the intricate network of associations and cultural presumptions impinge on the European engagement with this potential colonial environment?

The Sublime was a crucial philosophical strategy in the imperial envisaging of the landscape. Its use is connected to the anxiety of the European about his inability to represent and to intellectually grasp the regions through which explorers and traders were passing. Livingstone is so bedazzled by the 'most wonderful sight that I had witnessed in Africa' that his language and description of it are totally inadequate and unsuitable for such a scene. His futile and rather pedestrian attempts to intellectually colonise, to represent and record the scene, lead to his asking his readers to think of 'the Thames filled with low tree-covered hills immediately beyond the tunnel, extending as far as

---

<sup>19</sup> McKinsey (1985), 24.

<sup>20</sup> Burke (1759), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Trewen (1960), 144.

Gravesend.<sup>22</sup> The comic incongruity of the image should not distract from the real and definite strategy being pursued in this description—that of trying to describe and visualise the scene for a domestic British audience by recounting and associating it with familiar scenes and terms from home. However, the discourse of the Sublime allowed the explorer to do something more intellectually valid and more politically useful. Burke's theory permitted, and even extolled the virtues of a lack of knowledge with regard to the object being perceived or described: 'Knowledge and acquaintance make the striking causes affect but little'.<sup>23</sup> The freshness, novelty and consequent emotional impact of the scene is preserved in descriptions of the Victoria Falls that acknowledge their indescribability. Narratives of travellers who visit the Falls are replete with authorial disclaimers as to the impossibility of a correct rendition of the scene. Livingstone bemoans the fact that 'it is a rather helpless task to endeavour to convey an idea of it in words'.<sup>24</sup> Chapman laments the lack of comparative sources at his disposal: 'I have never seen anything with which I can compare it'.<sup>25</sup> Frederick Barber is quite overcome by the singularity of his visit: 'The Victoria Falls can never be over-described or overpraised; the descriptions and pictures which I have seen don't give one the slightest idea of the reality'.<sup>26</sup> And the German traveller Edward Mohr finds all attempts to encode the Victoria Falls in written and textual terms futile: 'But I threw down my pen. No human being can describe the infinite and what I saw was a part of infinity made visible and framed in beauty'.<sup>27</sup> Imbedded in these descriptions is the classic colonial use of the Sublime in order to further its descriptive and appropriative ends.

The avowed speechlessness and self-professed descriptive ineptitude of the writers does not tally with the facts of the texts or the visual representations. For just as the infinite has been embodied in the natural guise of the waterfall, so the unutterable has been eloquently committed to prose and paint. Simon Ryan has noted how this oxymoronic process of claiming speechlessness and indescribability before proceeding to describe the scene constructs the explorer as a

---

<sup>22</sup> Livingstone (1857), 519-25.

<sup>23</sup> Burke (1759), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Livingstone (1865), 179.

<sup>25</sup> Chapman (1868), 127.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Tabler (1960), 149.

<sup>27</sup> Mohr (1876), 327.



surmounter of geographical and linguistic difficulties.<sup>28</sup> This linguistic process closely parallels Homi Bhabha's explanation of colonial power as one that 'produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible.'<sup>29</sup> The travellers who have recorded the Victoria Falls advertise their ability to travel to, to record and ultimately to return from these unknown regions and areas of great natural beauty and imperial promise. By transposing awkward, alien and indecipherable forms of knowledge into a code of Western epistemology, Europeans could manipulate and command that which had previously evaded their grasp. It draws alien and foreign climes and cultures within a European methodological system. Thus, anything perceived as being threateningly 'other' can be neutralised by, and contained within, a European epistemological framework centred on descriptions that have been formulated using a Western philosophical framework. Therefore, the European project of civilization and progressive development was inextricably linked to and dependent upon a reduction of foreign knowledge systems to a European-orientated code. Images and descriptions of the Victoria Falls partake in what Thomas Richards calls 'the process of semiotization.'<sup>30</sup> In effect, the discourse of the Sublime gave Europeans a way to envisage and to record the unusual wonders and vistas presented by a *terra incognita*. It allowed the traveller to present his adventures in the form of signs that would be both intelligible and attractive to the reading audience while simultaneously asserting European mastery over the landscape.

The Sublime becomes one of the European explorer's tools with which he appropriates and familiarises the scene for the reader. Philosophical discourse allowed authors to remove the scene from its geographical and local existence and to present it as an aesthetic object. The Victoria Falls become available for critical scrutiny and appreciation according to Western criteria and through European media. Thus, the Sublime is here exposed as part of an imperial epistemological process. The physical act of recording a view of a distant landscape feature in a published narrative or painted image and its subsequent dissemination to a domestic audience gave Europeans an implicitly superior position of power and intellectual control.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ryan (1996), 86.

<sup>29</sup> Bhabha (1986), 156.

<sup>30</sup> Richards (1993), 14.

Martin Shee maintained that the discourse of the Sublime occupied 'the insane point of the critical compass.'<sup>31</sup> But what Shee ridiculed was actually a useful strategy, deployed cogently and consistently by European explorers encountering the Victoria Falls and other exotic landscape vistas. It provided an epistemological framework for viewing an environment and locale that was completely outside the European experience until the mid-nineteenth century. If, as Jan Pieterse argues, 'non-European worlds were represented as part of European scenarios' then the Victoria Falls were envisaged in terms of the Sublime as I have outlined above.<sup>32</sup> The detonators of sublime experience that were codified and analysed by Burke and others in the eighteenth century come to fore again in the diverse descriptions of the Falls. However, these characteristics do not occur merely as pedantic and stereotypical responses in the face of the Victoria Falls. Rather they form part of the process whereby colonial landscape and 'one of, if not *the*, most transcendently beautiful natural phenomena on this side of Paradise,' was intellectually appropriated, and became known and represented to European audiences.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Monk (1935), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Pieterse (1992), 224.

<sup>33</sup> Selous (1881), 110.

## REFERENCES

- ASHCROFT, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1998), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Theory*, London.
- BAINES, Thomas (1862), *The Victoria Falls, Zambezi River, sketched on the spot by Thomas Baines, FRGS, 1862* (reprint Bulawayo, Rhodesia: Books of Rhodesia, 1969).
- BARBIER, Carl (1963), *William Gilpin*, Oxford.
- BHABHA, Homi K. (1986), 'The Other Question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism' in Francis Barker (ed.), *Literature, Politics and Theory*, London: Methuen.
- BURCHELL, William John (1822-4), *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, edited and introduced by Isaac Schapera, London (reprint The Batchwood Press, 1953).
- BURKE, Edmund (1759), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited by Adam Phillips, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- BUTLER, Captain Henry (1846), 'A Glimpse of the Frontier, and a Gallop through the Cape Colony' in *New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 77 (May – Aug.).
- CHAPMAN, James (1868), *Travels in the Interior of South Africa*, 2 vols., London.
- GODBY, Michael (1999), 'Thomas Baines on the Victoria Falls: A Contest Between Science and Art in the Career of a British Explorer in Africa' in Michael Stevenson (ed.), *Thomas Baines: An Artist in the Service of Science in Southern Africa*, London.
- GOMBRICH, Ernst (1960), *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London.
- HIBBERT, Christopher (1982), *Africa Explored: Europeans in the Dark Continent, 1769-1889*, London: Harmondsworth.
- KLONK, Charlotte (1996), *Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, New Haven.
- LIVINGSTONE, David (1857), *Missionary Travels and Researches in Southern Africa*, London.
- (1865), *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi and its Tributaries*, London.

- MCKINSEY, Elizabeth (1985), *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*, Cambridge.
- MOHR, Edward (1876), *To the Victoria Falls of the Zambesi*, translated by N. D'Anvers, London.
- MONK, Samuel (1935), *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (reprint Ann Arbor, 1960).
- PIETERSE, Jan Nederveen (1992), *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, New Haven.
- PORTER, Dennis (1991), *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, Princeton.
- RICHARDS, Thomas (1993), *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, London.
- RYAN, Simon (1996), *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*, Cambridge.
- SELOUS, Frederick Couteney (1881), *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*, London.
- THOMPSON, George (1827), *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, 2 vols., London.
- TREWEN, Richard (1852-96); Quoted in E.C. Tabler (ed.), *Zambezia and Matabeleland in the Seventies* (London, 1960).