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978-0-521-13110-0 - The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770

Edited by Stephen Copley and Peter Garside

Excerpt

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Introduction

Stephen Copley and Peter Garside

‘The Picturesque’ is a notoriously difficult category to define. The term is clearly of considerable importance in British aesthetic debate of the 1790s and early 1800s. Offered by its original proponents as a third aesthetic category to set against Burke’s ‘Sublime’ and ‘Beautiful’, it also plays an important part, directly or by default, in the definition of the ‘Gothic’ and the ‘Romantic’ in the period. By the time it enters theoretical debate in the 1780s, however, the word already has a prehistory which renders its deployment problematic. Subsequent debates between the proponents of the Picturesque aesthetic in the 1790s and early 1800s are marked by sharp disagreements over what it might entail, and over its possible applications in different areas; and these disagreements are compounded by disjunctures between Picturesque theory and the practices that are justified under its name – or, in other words, by conflicts between the status of the Picturesque as a theoretical category and its manifestations as a popular fashion. The widespread adoption of Picturesque terminology in conversational use in the late eighteenth century, in relation to a broad range of cultural practices, confirms the problematic nature of the aesthetic: even in this period, it can seem so ill-defined as to be virtually meaningless. This lack of precise definition is not an indication of its cultural or ideological insignificance, however. On the contrary, it can be argued that the cultural importance of the Picturesque stands in direct proportion to the theoretical imprecision of its vocabulary.

Unsurprisingly in this context, the Picturesque has never established itself as a rigorous category in aesthetic debate in the way that the Sublime or the Beautiful have done. Instead, work on the aesthetic has tended to concentrate on its historical manifestations. In the earlier twentieth century, commentators tended to examine the Picturesque largely through consideration of its links with the

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Romantic movement. This is the approach adopted in Christopher Hussey's *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (1927), which has remained an important reference point in more recent accounts, even if Hussey's view of the historical progress of aesthetics from 'classic' to 'Romantic' achievement, through an 'interregnum' of pre- or proto-Romantic Picturesque experimentation, now seems inadequate.¹ Research on the topic in the 1950s and 1960s – notably by Walter J. Hipple – essentially followed the lineage and preserved the terms of debate set out by Hussey, even if the critical arguments that informed the later work were more sophisticated than his had been.²

Recently, the Picturesque has been exposed to revisionist re-reading and reassessment of a kind that has also been apparent in work on the Gothic, the Sentimental, and other styles and modes of late eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, which had earlier been securely placed and contained as more or less coherent facets of a notional 'pre-Romanticism'. This new work has not resulted in a confident new synthesis of the meanings of the Picturesque. Indeed, it may appear that the methodological problems of working across several disciplines and dealing with the variety of 'high cultural' and 'popular' contexts in which Picturesque terminology is used, and the questions raised in recent theoretical discussions of representation and cultural history, have confounded the attempts of commentators after Hussey to provide a comprehensive theorisation of the Picturesque aesthetic. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that an awareness of the inadequacy of the grand narrative of aesthetic development that underpins Hussey's account, as a vehicle for writing larger cultural history, has led many commentators to the conclusion that totalising aesthetic theorisation is inappropriate in the face of the complex historical phenomenon represented by the Picturesque movement. In this context, studies have tended to approach the aesthetic by documenting and characterising its manifestations in particular sites or periods, in gardening, painting or literature, or in the tourist's search for aesthetically pleasing landscapes. The question that has underlain much recent work, whether voiced or not, has been whether it makes sense in any circumstances to speak of 'the Picturesque' as a single coherent category, or whether the multifarious versions of the Picturesque aesthetic produced by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, by the tourist, the landscape gardener, the painter, the aesthetic theorist, the literary writer, in the late eighteenth and

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early nineteenth centuries, let alone by others in wider usages and later periods, are not so disparate and in some respects so incompatible as to resist homogenisation on any terms.

Certain broad characteristics of Picturesque theory and representation have been remarked by most modern commentators, however, although their readings of them have varied widely. The historical genealogy of the term offered initially by Hussey has been broadly accepted by later critics, even if it has been extended and qualified by several of them. Alan Liu, for instance, has suggested three overlapping phases in which the Picturesque aesthetic developed in the eighteenth century: a period from the 1710s to the 1760s in which broadly picturesque conceptions increasingly informed landscape painting and design; a period of the 'high Picturesque' in design and tourism from the 1770s; and an overlapping period of theorisation of the aesthetic in the 1790s, lasting perhaps until 1810.³ As various critics have pointed out in this context, when the term 'picturesque' came into use early in the century as an anglicisation of the French 'pittoresque' or the Italian 'pittresco' it was applied to all the subjects suitable for painting, rather than being restricted to landscape, and it only gradually acquired its later dominant focus and its characteristic emphases. The most striking of these for modern commentators is the apparent rejection by Picturesque theorists of self-conscious design and system and their recommendation instead of irregularity, variation, decay and wildness in 'natural' appearance as sources of aesthetic pleasure. This emphasis, and its manifestations in practice in a variety of fields, have come under the scrutiny of scholars in several different disciplines.

Recent work has taken two broad directions, which are by no means mutually exclusive, but which are worth distinguishing, at least provisionally. On the one hand, increasing interest in eighteenth-century cultural and social history since the late 1960s, combining with recent theoretical work devoted to reading aesthetics as ideology, has produced a number of substantial critiques of the ideological implications of the Picturesque movement, some of which have been written by contributors to this volume.⁴ On the other hand, particularly in the last couple of years, attempts have been made to rehabilitate the Picturesque as a coherent category in aesthetic debate. Interestingly, these latter attempts have inverted earlier critical assumptions about the similarities between the

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Picturesque and the Romantic: instead, the critics involved have celebrated the Picturesque as an aesthetic that is in many ways antithetical to Romanticism.

Two discussions in particular exemplify the attempts of recent commentators to revive the Picturesque as an aesthetic category. In *Inquiry into the Picturesque*⁵ Sidney K. Robinson presents the aesthetic as an expression of contemporary liberalism whose sophistication has been undervalued. He concentrates mainly on the theoretical writings of Uvedale Price, arguing that in his case the Picturesque aesthetic arises from ‘dissatisfaction with a compositional mode that seeks seamless control over all constituent elements’ (p. xi). Price’s identification of roughness and irregularity as the qualities of Picturesque appearance is only a partial statement made in response to the previously prevailing aesthetic. Underlying his claims, and unrecognised at the time by his opponents, is the ‘much more challenging principle of mixture’ (p. 5), which is ensured by ‘abrupt variation’ (p. 6). Picturesque design also deploys ‘less power than is available to compose the parts in an arrangement that does not press for a conclusion’ (p. xi). This, Robinson argues, implies ‘a preexisting condition of plenitude’ (p. xii). The relinquishment of fully visible compositional control does not imply the absence of such control: Price is ultimately concerned with the relation between parts of a composition, not with the parts for their own sake, and the devices of the Picturesque are strategies for maintaining the vividness of the whole design. In this context viewers’ uncertainties about whether they are being ‘misled, entertained, or challenged’ (p. xii) by the Picturesque object are integral to their experience of it.

Robinson writes as an architectural historian: indeed his presentation and celebration of the Picturesque movement’s eclecticism, refusal of fixity and authority, and exploitation of marginality, sometimes makes it sound disconcertingly like a programme for architectural Postmodernism. His overwhelming concentration on Price as a Picturesque theorist inevitably leads him to develop a monolithic version of the phenomenon, in which the claims of Gilpin’s Picturesque, for instance, are scarcely mentioned; and his approach to the enormously varied sources and manifestations of Picturesque taste is notably more successful in some areas than in others. In his survey of the political implications of the Picturesque movement, for instance, the amorphousness of the category is not really clarified by discussion of Charles James Fox’s ‘picturesque’

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political behaviour – especially when Robinson admits that there is very little to connect Fox himself directly to use of the term, and when the vagaries of the politician's career and pronouncements look very much like those of many another pre- or post-Picturesque politician.

Robinson's selective endorsement of the Picturesque aesthetic is both complemented and countered in Kim Ian Michasiw's 'Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque'.⁶ Michasiw challenges the viability of the Picturesque itself as a unitary category. In particular, he attacks the assumption, most recently voiced by Frances Ferguson, that 'a writer like William Gilpin composes his guides to picturesque travel as a way of reconciling nature with art, making the walking tour itself the near relation and opposite number to the eighteenth-century landscape garden'.⁷ Instead, Michasiw emphasises the distinctions between the projects of Picturesque tourism and landscape management, and condemns the preference of earlier commentators for the landscape theorists Price and Knight over the supposedly naive tourist Gilpin. He identifies Gilpin's Picturesque writings as the repository of an aesthetic that is in some ways radically opposed to the claims of the later theorists, and that has been largely disregarded by commentators who have only been prepared to see Gilpin as a precursor of those theorists. He thus celebrates Gilpin's Picturesque for precisely the reasons that had earlier caused critics to denigrate his accounts of decorative scenery as trivial and frivolous in comparison with the Romantic engagement with nature. For Michasiw, Gilpin's 'Enlightenment game' (p. 94) with the artifices of perception and representation, his self-aware ironic playfulness, are the antithesis of Romantic mystificatory absolutism, even if the later Picturesque theorists themselves fall prey to that absolutism. The attraction of Gilpin's Picturesque in the context of current aesthetic debates is then clear: 'the implications of Gilpin's theories have some relevance to the necessary demystification of art and its idolatry in the postmodern condition', and 'the fact that they were unsuited to their era should not license our continuing to condemn and dismiss them' (p. 96).

Despite his self-declared 'aesthetic' focus and dismissive references to earlier work on the politics of the Picturesque, Michasiw acknowledges that many of the most valuable recent discussions of the movement have developed from critiques of its political implications. In the hands of some of its original expositors in the 1780s and 1790s, the Picturesque is an intensely and explicitly politicised

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aesthetic – Richard Payne Knight’s famous footnote to *The Landscape*, setting his landscaping projects in the context of contemporary events in France, provides the clearest example of this level of engagement.⁸ At the same time, and sometimes in the same texts, the Picturesque celebration of the spontaneously ‘natural’ appears to be based on the effacement of the political and the social. This latter aspect of the aesthetic has come in for particular scrutiny. Picturesque habits of viewing, representing or constructing aesthetically pleasing objects – whether they be landscapes, artefacts or human figures – have been seen to rest on the suppression of the interpretative and narrative signs which marked earlier representation. This characteristic has been identified by commentators as the basis on which the Picturesque translates the political and the social into the decorative, and so, as the route to the naturalisation of the Picturesque image.⁹ The clearest instance of this translation is the Picturesque deployment of motifs for aesthetic effect which in other circumstances are the indicators of poverty or social deprivation, but critics have also identified the feature more generally, for instance in the oddly double-edged relation of the aesthetic to time and history. On the one hand, time and mutability are essential to, and indices of, Picturesque decorative effects; on the other, the Picturesque has been presented as resolutely ahistorical in its deflection of socially consequential interpretations of favoured aesthetic objects such as ruins.¹⁰

The Picturesque aesthetic emerges as strongly in literary narratives (in written tours and in fiction) as it does in visual art or practical landscaping. In turn this poses problems. If pictorial Picturesque representation suppresses narrative for decorative effect, this possibility is altogether more difficult to contrive in written narrative. Discussion of this aspect of the aesthetic has benefited considerably from comparative analysis of Picturesque and other scientific or exploratory writings of the period, and from more general historical and feminist work on the novel and on travel literature.¹¹ Recent criticism has also questioned the extent to which the Picturesque – initially and specifically a domestic landscape aesthetic – can be seen to shape British (or wider European) accounts of colonial landscapes and cultures. Even within the British Isles the discourse of the Picturesque intersects with and is shaped by the discourses of colonialism at various points. In the case of the Scottish Highlands, for instance, the combination of political repression, economic exploitation, and aesthetic sentimentalisation of the Scottish land-

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scape in the early nineteenth century clearly renders the Picturesque 'invention' of the region a hegemonic cultural manifestation of the English colonising presence.¹² In a broader field, the shaping and constraining legacy of Picturesque assumptions can be discerned in European accounts of North America, India, Africa and Australia.

A number of commentators have pointed out that the development of the Picturesque aesthetic is closely dependent on contemporary economic and technological changes, although the latter may seem inimical to the values it appears to celebrate. This link involves both the enabling circumstances of the Picturesque and the representational constraints and conventions that mark it. In relation to the first, it is clear that the fashion for Picturesque domestic tourism stems in part from the development of a good road system, making previously inaccessible areas of Britain relatively accessible, although this development is driven by commercial (and in the case of some areas, such as the Scottish Highlands, military) imperatives apparently inimical to the claims of the aesthetic. Equally, interest in the Picturesque appearance of the countryside is intimately connected with changes in the agricultural and commercial economies, whether their effects are registered directly (in the booms and slumps in agricultural production during and after the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, or in the Highland clearances), or indirectly, in the emergence of sections of society with the leisure and resources to cultivate an aesthetic of redundancy in those parts of the country least implicated in the economic changes from which their own prosperity derived.¹³

The popularisation of the aesthetic, which superficially seems to threaten its very nature, depends on technological advances in printing (such as the development of aquatint, which allowed Gilpin to reproduce his sketches commercially). More generally, it is intimately connected with the growth of consumerism in early industrial society.¹⁴ In this light it is hardly surprising that the representational codes permitting, excluding or otherwise governing the treatment of commercial activity and industrial subjects in Picturesque visual art and description have been opened to considerable scrutiny. On the one hand, the suggestion that, at least in its early stages, the Picturesque is not as single-minded as it may appear in its exclusion of the industrial has led to interesting analysis of the precise bounds and grounds of its aesthetic exclusions. On the other, its boundaries have been marked in relation to other genres of

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painting such as the industrial Sublime.¹⁵ More generally, the discourse of the Picturesque itself has been located ideologically in relation to contemporary political economy in a recently revised article by John Barrell, which draws on a number of the disparate strands in current debate.¹⁶ Barrell points out that Picturesque ‘taste’ is often naturalised by contemporaries to the extent that ‘Picturesque’ appearance is often treated as ‘natural’ appearance, and ‘the picturesque eye’ is represented simply as ‘the eye’. Taking as his example the Picturesque illustrations of social activities that make up William Pyne’s *Microcosm* (1806), he suggests that the perspective offered by the Picturesque appears as the ‘transcendent viewing-position which had through the eighteenth century been regarded as the perquisite of the gentleman’ (p. 97): ‘the picturesque eye’, detached from all cramping restrictions or specialisation, surveys ‘the natural’ with ‘pure unmediated vision’, when ‘the natural is located in picturesque forms devoid of ethical, political, or sentimental meanings’ (p. 98). The Picturesque thus offers a rival version of transcendent vision to that offered in the political economist’s survey of the multiple activities that constitute the economy and, by including the economically marginal (in the form of gypsies) as well as the productive, and leisure as well as labour, it turns out to offer ‘an account of the variety of social activities no less expansive, though certainly less methodised, than that revealed to the economic philosopher’ (p. 116).

The essays in this volume continue the exploratory projects of recent work and extend the arguments that have informed this work into new areas. They are written from various disciplinary standpoints and do not attempt to work from (or towards) a single definition of the Picturesque. Instead, they emphasise the variousness of the manifestations of the aesthetic in a wide range of areas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and examine its continuance as a focus of aesthetic debate and political polemic beyond the point at which it is usually thought to have dissipated as a coherent (or potentially coherent) aesthetic category. The essays are weighted towards consideration of (but not exclusively concerned with) ‘the politics of the Picturesque’, defining ‘politics’ both in its narrow, and in its broader, ideological and textual senses.

The first four essays cover familiar – and less familiar – areas of cultural practice in which Picturesque taste manifested itself in the

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late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins dispel the vacuum in which the theoretical arguments about landscape of Price and Knight have often been discussed by modern commentators, and in doing so challenge the view that Picturesque landscaping in the period was a purely and impractically decorative concern. They dwell on the practical demands of estate management, which provided a countervailing or complementary set of imperatives to those of aesthetic landscaping, even for a Picturesque theorist such as Price, and suggest that the landscapes that he developed consequently cannot be read exclusively in terms of his aesthetic theories. Stephen Copley takes William Gilpin's account of a particular site in the Lake District as the focal point of a more general discussion of the projects of Picturesque tourism, and of eighteenth-century tourists' perceptions of the economic activities they encounter in the parts of the country they visit. Michael Charlesworth considers the implications of the aesthetic appropriation of that most popular of Picturesque sites – the ruined monastery – in the early nineteenth century. His arguments about the historical changes in perception that underlie representations of Rievaulx Abbey reinforce the suggestion that the Picturesque is an unstable and mutating aesthetic, even in the Romantic period. Ann Bermingham surveys an area in which the importance of the Picturesque aesthetic has not previously been much documented – the development of female fashion systems. In demonstrating the extent to which the vocabulary of the Picturesque informs female fashion, she also suggests how far the notion of fashion is central to the Picturesque aesthetic as it emerges in the area of mass taste.

The next group of essays have literary texts at their centre, although they 'place' these texts in distinctive ways in relation to the dual concerns of the volume as a whole. As Vivien Jones demonstrates in her essay, the gender politics of the Picturesque emerges particularly clearly when the Picturesque motifs that are deployed in fiction written by women in the period are examined in the context of gendered readings of the texts of Picturesque theory. Peter Garside's discussion of the relation between Scott's descriptions of the gypsy Meg Merrilies and contemporary illustrations of her sets both firmly in the tradition of Picturesque representation, drawing on eighteenth-century debates about the origin and social place of gypsies, as well as aesthetic assessments of their potential as

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Picturesque figures. Further aspects of the relation between the Picturesque and the Romantic are negotiated in the next two essays. John Whale investigates the relevance of the Picturesque as an organising trope and as a point of departure in the exploratory writings about Africa of James Bruce and Mungo Park, and in the exploratory projects of Romantic poetry. Raimonda Modiano's treatment of the status of the destitute in the Picturesque draws on Freud and Melanie Klein in its consideration of the 'found object' and she extends her discussion into the area of German Romanticism and into later nineteenth-century British aesthetic debate. Finally in this group, David Punter's wide-ranging discussion also deploys a psychoanalytical vocabulary to suggest ways in which the terminology of the Picturesque can be deployed as an aesthetic category well beyond the historical period with which it is associated.

Three final essays extend historical discussion of the aesthetic forward to the later nineteenth century. Two tackle the specifically political controversies that surround discussion of the Picturesque from the 1790s on, marking both radical opposition to the aesthetic and the appropriation of its vocabulary for radical causes. David Worrall surveys the attacks on the Picturesque that are mounted by proponents of the Spencean programme for land in the early nineteenth century, and traces the ramifications of those attacks in radical political polemics and in middle-class literary texts of the time. Anne Janowitz analyses a later moment of nineteenth-century radical politics: the counter-hegemonistic deployment by Welsh artisan radicals in the Chartist movement of a vocabulary with its roots in the Picturesque, which links their native South Wales and the Australia to which their leaders were transported after the Newport Uprising. Finally, Malcolm Andrews marks the continuance of debate about many of the issues at stake in earlier discussions of the Picturesque, in his survey of a later nineteenth-century controversy over the social and political acceptability or unacceptability of the aesthetic, as it is manifested in photographic images of decay and decrepitude in the poorer areas of London.

NOTES

- 1 Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927).
- 2 See Walter J. Hipple, *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque in*