

STEPPING WESTWARD. By Nigel Leask. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xiii+339 pp.

In his 'Introduction' to the Book, Leask, through William Wordsworth's poem 'Stepping Westward' (p. 1805), argues the consequences arising from the interaction between the touristic community of Southerners and the economically backward North, giving birth to the earliest examples of what could be called 'pedestrian aesthetics' and 'the tourist sublime', which Leask defines as "'a human sweetness' that permits Wordsworth to humanize the cosmic uncertainty" (5). Theoretically speaking, the 'tourist sublime' seems to be a triumvirate between 'human sweetness' fading as nature dis-suits itself from further clear-cut definitions *in time*, "cosmic uncertainty" which prevails as the apocalyptic, or the 'true' imaginative timelessness sets in, and their dialectical balance whose slow but steady attrition marks the domain of the Sublime.<sup>1</sup> 'Old Ways and New Roads' provides an insight into Edmund Burt's *Letters* on the topography of Scottish Highlands, illustrating the quirky instincts of the Highlanders who participated in "sullen non-cooperation rather than linguistic incompetence" (40) with the tourists. 'Conquering Caledonia' introduces, among other things, Michael Hughes's *A Plain Narrative* (1746) and *A Journey* (1747) by an anonymous author who charts his dislike for the mountains in a manner similar to Burt's. The author, in the midst of broad historicizations, highlights the diabolic side of MacPherson's *Ossian* which "sutured Highland and Lowland identity in creating an integrated national *mythelhistoire* for Scotland within the Union" (81), hinting at cultural homogeneity not emerging from cultural monopolizations, but from acknowledging cultural individualities and politicizing homogeneity through individualized heterogeneity across cultures. 'Thomas Pennant's Highlands' charts the itineraries of the eponymous character and surveys his publications, while the succeeding chapter studies Dr Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), interestingly pointing out how "he [Johnson] seems to be energized into inner creativity by the sensory 'blockage' of the surrounding mountains" (148), or how Johnson's true aim was not to absorb the Scottish Highlands, but to create a 'noble distance' from the material urbanity of the lowlands, using the Highlands as a perceptive gestalt.<sup>2</sup> Johnson's wish to "formalize Gaelic" (163) by drawing it away from its orality and improving it through print has been well presented and equally well-argued. In 'Inhabited Solitudes', the author foregrounds the picturesque in the works of William Gilpin, John Stoddart and Sarah Murray, finally assessing Dorothy Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour made in Scotland* (1803) where she "employs memory and imagination to recover lived experience" (198). The aesthetic subject in Dorothy is "self-effacing", which marks a decisive move in the female approach to pedestrianism. Leask demonstrates the *Ossianic* in Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper', claiming how he "creates a kind of parity across huge barriers of language, gender, class and culture, at least in aesthetic if not in socio-political terms, but without any suppression of the latter" (216).<sup>3</sup> In 'Walter Scott and the Highland Tour', the author projects the sources of Scott's 'The Lady of the Lake' (1810) in the appropriation of "Pennantian travel account" (233) to his own purposes. In the concluding chapter, Leask addresses the implications of William Daniell's *Voyage Round Great Britain* (1814-25) that introduces the phrase 'moral electricity' in the domain of tourist aesthetics. He

correctly points out how “steam transport was a democratizing force” (264), meaning its absolute lack of discrimination between humankind by substituting them with mechanical enterprises. John Eldowes Bowman’s *The Highlands and Islands* (1825) notes “not just an emerging distinction between ‘traveller’ and ‘tourist’, but also the significance of reading as a preparation (rather than a substitute) for experience” (267). Drawing readers into Keats’s influential letters written from or about the Scottish highlands, the author notes how “sublime landscape of the kind which tourists drooled over assumes a sexual life of its own” (274) – the term ‘tourist sublime’ re-emerging in the phraseology of the author. MacCulloch’s books on travel writing become a staple for “scientific masculinity” (288). Nigel Leask’s book is a crucial factual repository for researchers studying the motifs of pedestrian aesthetics and its minimal spiritual surplus, suggested through the ‘tourist sublime’.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Citing a passage from Hegel’s conception of God in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe affirms that it is a “‘dialectical’ understanding of the sublime”, but “It is in no way, however, the “dialectical version” or the “dialecticization” of the sublime” (22). Lacoue-Labarthe, in the manner of Hegel, accepts the dialectical roots of the Sublime without calling the dialectical Sublime, or by gainsaying the indebtedness of the Sublime to dialectical (dis) balance. See “Sublime Truth” (part I), published in *Cultural Critique* No. 18 (1991), pp. 5-31. *JSTOR*, 10.2307/1354093. Trans. David Kuchta.
- <sup>2</sup> Usual questions aside, one is still inclined to ask if material urbanity amounts to an established femininity aided by channelization of masculine energy that fertilizes it in ways not necessarily physical. The evocation of anything opposite to civilizational discipline must be masculine discipline and not anti-feminine indiscipline. Thus, if Johnson the tourist experiences blockage, it is the blockage of civilizational fluidity and the ingress of stunted, masculine, glaciated movement which, although emaciating if pursued for long, becomes a milestone for future preservation of higher values in fluid civilizational corruptions. As William Cronon puts it, for the sublime myth to sustain, “the mountain [is revealed] as cathedral” (12) despite posing “spiritual danger and moral temptation” (10) – danger since annihilation of the self becomes an obsession both moral and spiritual. See “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, published in *Environmental History*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 1996, pp. 7-28. *JSTOR*, 10.2307/3985059.
- <sup>3</sup> The question of suppression often brings a more important question to the fore – is there, in reality, no suppression at work when the aesthetic conflicts with the socio-political, and then un-conflicts with it? I speculate there must be. If the aesthetics of the Sublime must be involved, its political ideas are surely determined by the nature of its action, or by withdrawal from essential non-action. As Donald E. Pease puts it, a formulation must be “able to show what the Sublime “does” much more capably than he can define what the sublime “is”” (260), and since the Sublime “unsettles every locus of power” (263), there is every possibility that subservience is observed at some point of its re-formulation. See “Sublime Politics”, published in *boundary 2*, Vol. 12 no. 3 – Vol. 13 no. 1, On Humanism and the University 1: The Discourse of Humanism, 1984, pp. 259-279. *JSTOR*, 10.2307/302817

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