

A Short Glance at Harpur's "Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest"

Sugi Iswalono

Prodi Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta
sugi_iswalono@uny.ac.id

The English Romanticism much influenced the beginning of Australian writings in English, which mostly centered on the lives in the bush bringing about the individuals' loneliness and feelings of alienated in the harsh landscape and the oppressed nature of convictism. Charles Harpur's master piece "Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest", poem of five stanzas, deals with the quietness and beauty among the hardship and the alienated aspect of the colonial Australian land.

Although Harpur describes the world which is naturally different from the world where English originates, he does not attempt at inventing apt vocabulary. Thus, the language employment he uses to portray the scene bears similarity to that used by the English poets of the 19th century. The 'beauty' and the quietness of the landscape that he portrays is presented in stanzas one to four, the last stanza he is found to insert himself in the enjoyment of the beauty and quietness of the nature. In order to represent such milieu in more vivid way, he makes use of some kinds of literary devices such as figurative language (synecdoche, personification, and metaphor), imagery (visual, tactile, and auditory), and the only musical device, i.e. onomatopoeia is found in stanza three. As the title suggests, this paper is aimed at only exploring the devices used in the poem dealing with how the English experience of living in the Australian bush (forest). It is hoped that despite its limited scope, the project brings some sorts of benefits to the reader, especially those who are beginning to enjoy literature.

Keywords: the English Romanticism, Australian writings, literary devices, figurative language, imagery, musical devices

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I. Introduction

In the late 1770s, there were too many convicts to be managed by the British government. Prisons were overcrowded with them, and the old ships moored in harbours and rivers that were temporarily used to house them were not able to accommodate them any more. They became a problem. As Britain had just lost its American colonies, it could not simply ship them to these colonies, and decided to instruct Captain Arthur Phillip to establish a penal settlement in Australia. The arrival of Capt. Phillip to Australia with roughly about 750 convicts was popularly known as the First Fleet.

The years of the transportation coincided with the English Romantic Period, and, therefore, it was no wonder that these people also brought with them the ideas of Romanticism. Thus, the beginning of Australian literature in English was greatly affected by the English Romanticism. However, since they were faced to different natural conditions, themes characterized by individuals' loneliness and feelings of alienated in the harsh landscape and the oppressed nature of convictism had become the concern of the works of art they invented, and Charles Harpur is one of the outstanding writers belonging to this early period of Australian writings.

"A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest", a poem of five stanzas, is one of Harpur's poems in which he names a successful attempt to give a vivid picture of the Australian scene. He presents a picture of the beauty of a quiet day in the summer time with the "plain", the "woods", the "ants", the "grasshoppers", the "locust", the "lagoon", and the "rill". The quietness is broken by the presence of the "dragon-hornet", and the pleasant time turns into heat when "the noontide hour" comes to take place. Despite the noon sun which is a "scorching eye", the poet manages to find a pleasant place where he lays himself down musing upon the quietness of the beautiful nature, brushing aside the marvelous, "bright beetle" which is seizing his attention. The local scene being depicted is a small part of huge Australia. When synecdoche is applied, this part may refer to the continent itself. Australia is perceived as being romantic in spite of the extreme heat and the fact

that during Harpur's period, according to Walker (in Hergenhan 1988: 157), "Australian nature was so alien and inhospitable". However, the poet still sees the beauty of the animals and of nature.

II. Language Employment

The language that Harpur employs in this poem is observed as that normally used in the works of nineteenth century English verse (Perkins in Hergenhan 1988:149). The diction he chooses does not bear any specification although he describes a different 'world' far from the 'world' where English originates. In view of this, there must be things that English lacks to cover for precise description. However, there seems no possibility to invent an appropriate vocabulary, as Australian literature in Harpur's time was still a 'new born-baby'. The wise thing to do was to pick up whatever the 'mother', Britain, gave.

III. Stanza-by-Stanza Treatment

"A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest" consists of five stanzas. From stanza one up to stanza four, the poet portrays the beauty of an Australian scene. In stanza five he is, then, found to insert himself in the enjoyment of the beauty and the quietness of the nature.

A. Stanza One

Stanza one gives the picture of the quiet, vast landscape as presented by the words which arouse the reader's sense of sight like "plains" and "woods". It is so quiet that no "sound disturbs the air" and it is "quiet everywhere". To strengthen the picture, the poet personifies the abstract concept of "stillness" as somebody who is in a deep thought: "What a mighty stillness broods."

B. Stanza Two

The introduction of the insects' activity in stanza two is meant to support the quietness in the scene being described. The insects may also serve as pictorial completion of what the woods normally have: the "grasshoppers", the "ants", and the "locust". That they are not doing any activity constitutes the silence that the poet

intends to convey. Even the "ants", which are usually "busy ... are found/ Resting in their pebbled mound". They are enjoying themselves in their nice environment. This pleasing condition is explicitly pointed out by personifying "the coolest shadows" that is said to "sleep". Again, to highlight this pleasing condition, an overlapped imagery is employed: the personified "shadows" which appeal the reader's sense of sight is overlapped with tactile imagery of "coolest".

As in stanza one, personification in this stanza happens to be a significant figure to use. It also falls into the choice to strengthen the idea of the silence, the quietness: "And over hills and over plains / Quiet, vast and slumberous, reigns." Quietness holds power.

C. Stanza Three

The sudden breaking of the silence as observed in this stanza is carried out through the use of auditory imagery which is showed in the onomatopoeia of the "humming" sound. In fact, this imagery functions to direct the reader's attention to enjoy the beauty of "the dragon-hornet" hovering from the "warm lagoon". This is strengthened by the intrusive poet, as Goodwin (1986: 16) affirms, in line 15: "'Tis the dragon-hornet—see!" .The insect is said to be brown-yellowish with brilliant scarlet red spots. Harpur seems to have made himself master of poetic diction. The use of "tawny" and "vermeil" are very peculiar. Hodge and Misra (1991:21-2) doubt that Harpur "had a specific insect in view" when describing the "dragon-hornet"; instead, they are convinced that the insect allegorically refers to an Aborigine who is believed to endanger the "tranquil landscape", "paradisiacal environment".

'Tawny' ... derives from 'tanned', as applied to skin, and this is part of its field of connotations ... [and] [On Australian context, it is the skin of Aborigines which is 'tawny', skin which they daubed with yellow and white ochres. In this poem, this hornet represents the one discordant, threatening note in the otherwise tranquil landscape. If Harpur's elaborate description had an allegorical target in mind, the most likely candidate is the Aboriginal people: Aborigines as a latent threat in this otherwise paradisiacal environment. In this text, the threat is unspeakable, though in other poems, Harpur was able to write at length about the dangers posed by Aboriginal hostility.

The rarely used word "vermeil" is very compact diction to describe the brilliant scarlet red colour of the insect's spots. John Keats, an outstanding English poet of the Romantic period, also employs the same word in his "Book I" stanza three, line 50: "Before the daisies, vermeil vimmid and white". Goodwin (1986: 16), clarifies this case by asserting that the Romantic period poets like Keats influence his works.

D. Stanza Four

The natural hardness, which characteristically belongs to Australia, is introduced in this stanza: the extreme heat of Australia's summer when it is reaching its peak. This condition is brought in by personifying "summer" which is said to be lazily tired" and, thus, the heat in this season is felt much longer, which is implicitly almost unbearable. Henry Lawson has at least pictured the same condition. For example, in his short story entitled "The Bush Undertaker" (1990:12), he describes how the sun's heat scorches a dead body into a mummy.

At the foot of the sapling he espied an object which he at first thought was the blackened carcass of a sheep, but on closer examination discovered to be the body of a man; it lay with its forehead resting on its hands, dried to a mummy by the intense heat of the western summer.

While in "The Union Buries Its Dead" (1990:27), he witnesses how the heat quickly dries up water drops:

I noticed that one or two heathens winced slightly when the holy water was sprinkled on the coffin. The drops quickly evaporated, and the little round black spots they left were soon dusted over; but the spots showed, by contrast, the cheapness and shabbiness of the cloth with which the coffin was covered.

This stanza, in fact, presents two contradictory natural conditions: the flowing "rill" which gives "cool" air and the summer sun during "the noontide hour," which produces extreme heat. These conditions are seen through the poet's use of personification. He says that the rill is "ever wakeful" and "throws/A Cooler comfort round". The comfort that the reader may share in this stanza is also presented through visual and auditory imageries: "... the ever wakeful rill,/Whose cool murmur only throws/A cooler comfort round Repose". The word 'murmur'

meaning low, continuous, indistinct sound, rising and falling very little in pitch" (Hornby, 1974:557) also gives the sense of the tranquillity that the poet is experiencing at the moment.

The figure of personification plays a double role here. Not only is it employed to portray the comfort of the nature, but it is also used to recount the heat that the summer produces when the "summer" is personified as a "tired" girl who is

.... in her forest bower
Turning with the noontide hour,
Heaves a slumberous breath, ere she
Once more slumbers peacefully.

Practically this stanza still presents the picture of quietness. Gentle sounds are observed, though. These are the sounds of "the ever wakeful rill" and "Of leafy bough". The gentleness of the sounds is well depicted in the poet's use of metaphor. The moving of the tree boughs is compared to that of "some ripple in the sea". To capture the wonder, the reader is given to have the mental picture of the vast sea in a quiet moment.

The use of "rill" to mean a stream in line 4 is worth glancing at. It is an archaic word found in English verse. It seems to be strikingly peculiar that Keats happens to employ it at least in his *Imitation of Spencer*, stanza one, line 4: "Silv'ring the untainted gushes of its rill" and in his "To Charles Gawden Clarke", stanza six, line 91: "And sips its freshness from the little rill."

Thus, the employment of "vermeil" (stanza three) and "rill", for example, cannot merely hold a valid conclusion to legitimize that Harpur's work is colored by the Romantic influence without seeking any other valid sources. Goodwin (1986: 13-4), for example, admits that English in Harpur's time was insufficient to describe what Australia has but he did not seem to see any way out and, therefore; "Art readers had begun to feel that a new language needed to be wrought". What becomes the most valid evidence is Harpur's admission (in Wilde et al, 1985: 318) that "Australian poetry should be modeled upon traditional English verse before seeking its own individuality". As a matter of fact he has a good knowledge of the English poetic roots from which his poetic language flowers / blooms (Ross in Hergenhan, 1988: 13).

E. Stanza Five

Stanza five appears to be special. The poet inserts himself in this stanza and participates himself in the poem by, again, giving his personal opinion of the quietness and beauty of the nature as mentioned in the previous stanzas. Under the sun heat, he finds so comfortable a place to have a rest that he can find time to muse over the natural wonder. He shows his real affection to the environment.

By a closer inspection, it is obvious that the poet does not simply set out to describe the summer time as he experiences in the Australian forest. From the way he depicts his telling, it may be inferred that apart from the hardship that one is facing there is still something to enjoy.

IV. Conclusion

In "A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest", Harpur has proven his poetic genius of presenting the vivid picture of the colonial Australian scene. He is of a great ability to depict the natural beauty not only from a distant observation but also from a closer observation to provide the reader with a detail. He employs such figurative language as synecdoche, personification, and metaphor, and three types of imagery like visual, tactile, and auditory to portray the beauty and calmness of the scene.

The local landscape of Australia, as he sees it, is paradisiacal beauty. He perceives the hard natural condition still bears beauty and enjoyment if one knows how to love this nature. However, he is also aware of the potential danger that may spoil his peacefulness, i.e. the 'beautiful hornet'. This is seen through the use of auditory imagery as showed in the utilization of onomatopoeia.

The influence of the language used by those belonging to the English Romantic period is found to colour Harpur's work. Among others is the use of "vermeil" and "rill". This is due to the fact that English was still insufficient to describe Australian nature.

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A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest
(Charles Harpur, 1813-68)

*Not a bird disturbs the air,
There is quiet everywhere;
Over plains and over woods
What a mighty stillness broods.*

*Even the grasshoppers keep
Where the coolest shadows sleep;
Even the bug ants are found
Resting in their pebbled mound;
Even the locust clingeth now
In silence to the barky bough;
And over hills and over plains
Quite, vast and slumbrous, reigns.*

*Only there's a drowsy humming
From yon warm lagoon slow coming:
'Tis the dragon-hornet—see!
All bedaubed resplendently
With yellow on a tawny ground—
Each rich spot nor square nor round.
But rudely heart-shaped, as it were
The blurred and has impress there,
Of a vermeil-rusted seal
Dusted o'er with golden meal;
Only there's a droning where
Yon bright beetle gleams the air—
Gleams it in its droning flight
With a slanting track of light,
Till rising in the sunshine higher,
Its shards flame out like gems on fire.*

*Every other thing is still,
Save the ever wakeful rill,
Whose cool murmur only throws
A cooler comfort round Repose;
Or some tippie in the sea
Of leafy boughs, where, lazily,
Tired Summer in her forest bower
Turning with the noontide hour,
Heaves a slumbrous breath, ere she
Once more slumbers peacefully.*

*O 'tis easeful here to lie
Hidden from Noon's scorching eye,
In this grassy cool recess
Musing thus of quietness.*