The question
(Adapted from 2010 Standard question for Module B on Judith Wright’s poetry)
How does the relationship between the observer and the landscape move us to a deeper understanding of remembered landscapes?

In your response make detailed reference to your prescribed text and a related text of your own choosing.

Prescribed text: *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton, 2002 (non-fiction)
Related text: ‘My Country’, Dorothea Mackellar, 1908 (poetry)

Introduction captures the scope of the prescribed text and its connection with the module

Landscapes are a source of real and imagined memories for individuals, through which we return to the past and re-experience the emotions of observing the scene, possibly with greater depth while also searching for something to respond to our individual needs. The reflective and healing experience of the natural landscape and the meditative power offered were attributes extolled by Wordsworth and Ruskin. In his book, *The Art of Travel*, De Botton explores this relationship between the immediate impact of the landscape and the representations of landscape through memories. He examines the strong human desire to capture landscape through journeys or close reflection, through writing or drawing. The same longing for the remembered landscape that de Botton reveals in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, can be found in Australian Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’. In the art world, de Botton offers the example of Van Gogh whose pursuit of the complex relationship between the landscape and the observer motivated him to spend numerous hours trying to capture the details of the ‘Cypress’. Each representation of the landscape, whether written or drawn has had an influence on the way we see and remember what we have observed.

Related text is introduced

Clear thesis responding to the question

Reflection on remembered landscapes creates the opportunity to recapture a scene while evaluating the observer’s relationship to the landscape and the wider world. De Botton’s identifies that Wordsworth moved beyond ‘natural phenomena’ of the landscape to develop a deeply personal relationship with a focus on the details: placid lakes, a sparrow’s nest, and the sound of nightingales. Critics at the time, particularly Byron, saw this relationship as unsophisticated, ‘namby-pamby’, and yet de Botton reminds us that Wordsworth’s philosophy of nature has had a ‘hugely influential claim about our requirements for happiness’ and the origins of our unhappiness. With his intimate and conversational tone, de Botton locates this unhappiness in the binary opposition of country and city describing Wordsworth’s understanding that the landscape was an ‘indispensible
corrective to the psychological damage inflicted by life in the city.’ And yet de Botton also reminds us that the urban landscape has its own allure as he travels to Amsterdam and ruminates about the seductive qualities of ‘something as small as a front door in another country’. Flaubert’s travels through Cairo serve as a contrast to Wordsworth as Flaubert searches in the exotic for connections with his own values which he felt were ‘part of his identity but for which his own society had had little sympathy’.

The addition of images throughout the text further demonstrates the simple and yet very complex relationship between people and landscapes. Lithographs of Cairo in the Flaubert chapter, sit alongside photos of places, transport, and paintings from different artistic periods. Hopper’s representations of bleak urban settings where people are isolated and alienated from each other stand in sharp contrast to more idyllic pastoral and sublime scenes of the Romantic period or from impressionist painters such as Van Gogh. The double page image (presented in the monochrome) of de Loutherbourg’s evocative ‘The River Wye at Tintern Abbey’ reflects the calmness and majesty of nature in harmony between man and beast. The salient image of the cows with the shepherd in the left-hand foreground restfully contained and the peacefulness of the relationship with the landscapes provide an example of the ‘redemptive power of nature’. This linking of the past and the present embeds the unique of the landscape as an antidote to the city, when remembered. Paintings that frame the sublime, similarly foreground individuals in the landscape including such paintings as Caspar David Freidrich’s ‘Chalk Cliffs in Rugen’, but perhaps the clearest representation of man’s relationship with the sublime comes through the painting of de Loutherbourg with the diminutive figures of the left-hand foreground, holding arms outstretched as they confront the overwhelming power of the landscape.

Dorothea Mackellar’s poem ‘My Country’ offers further proof of Wordsworth’s belief that being removed from a landscape provides opportunities for reflection and reevaluation of its worth, power and beauty of the landscape. Dorothea Mackellar wrote the poem in London while homesick and it was eventually published in the London Spectator in 1908 as ‘Core of my Heart’. The poem begins by establishing the regard the English have for their landscape of ‘field and coppice’. At the end of the first stanza, after listing the attributes of the English countryside (‘green and shaded lanes’, ‘ordered woods and gardens’), this love is described as a metaphorical life force ‘running in your veins’ and a sharp contrast and dismissal of the British landscape is offered when Mackellar acknowledges that ‘I know and cannot share it / my love is otherwise’). The very intense and personal nature of her relationship with the Australian landscape emerges through the constant declarations of love and the personal pronoun: ‘my love’, ‘I love’. ‘I know’. Colour conjures up the visions of the landscape from simple descriptions (‘the wide brown land’) to strongly evocative and Romantic visions such as ‘sapphire misted mountains’ or through the pathetic fallacy favoured by the Romantics: ‘the hot gold hush of noon’. The sublime, which according to de
Botton was there to move us to ‘acknowledge our limitations’, emerges in Mackellar’s descriptions of the enormity of the land captured through the adjectives conjuring the movement of ‘sweeping plains’ and the disharmony of ‘ragged mountain ranges’. As if to reinforce what is already clear from her laudatory lines, Mackellar makes a clear declaration of the power of memories of the land on her emotions and her physical self when she exclaims ‘Core of my heart my country!’

Mackellar’s poem links landscape with representations of nationalism but it also pinpoints an aspect that de Botton’s discussion of Van Gogh brings to the fore: that our understanding of landscape may be culturally determined and can be challenged as we look with new eyes to find the details of different landscapes. Van Gogh believed that in order to perceive reality he needed to use ‘distortion, omission, and substitution of colours’. De Botton opens this chapter with a personal anecdote from which he develops his thesis about the representation of landscape and the way we see different landscapes. An Australian tourist’s denial of Van Gogh ‘Well it doesn’t much look like that’ is used to show the limitations and restrictions of individual expectations of the ‘reality’ before them. Just as in the chapter on Flaubert, this chapter shows how much we rely on expectations created through the written and visual representations we encounter when distant from a given landscape.

Ultimately de Botton is challenging us to reconsider the importance of the landscape and to realise that the mere act of travelling is not sufficient to appreciate it if it is not captured in out memories. He writes, we may have ‘met people who have crossed deserts, floated on icecaps and cut their way through jungles – and yet in whose souls we search in vain for evidence of what they have witnessed.’ In contrast Mackellar clearly has immersed her soul in the landscape of Australia, capturing powerful poetic images in her nationalistic poem ‘My country’. It is in the acts of representation of writers and artists that a true engagement with the landscape is created as they capture vivid memories evoked by the landscape they observed. The remembered landscape has the ability to take us beyond the reality and transcends time shaping a future relationship for the observer.