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# LANDSCAPE AS A PRESENCE

For a phenomenological description of landscape, I derive my initial inspiration from the entrancing travel notes of Antal Szerb published first in 1936. Szerb, a brilliant Hungarian writer and scholar, experienced the vibrant and exhilarating presence of the serene Italian countryside when, during a warm and sunny summer afternoon, he reached the Montale Tower, located on the third peak of the Monte Titiano, in San Marino.

> I sit at the foot of the tower and gaze out at the view. My view. So far I have been obliged to share it with the day-trippers, to join enthusiastically in their constant chattering. Now I have come into possession of my soul. The whole of this part of the country is mine: on one side, rich, twilit Romagna, with its scattering towns, sloping gently down to the distant sea; on the other, the bandit-haunted Apennines of ancient Etruria. Behind them again, I sense the presence of my Easter Kingdom: Urbino, Arezzo, Gubbio, and the whole of Umbria. These are real mountains, as vast as a man could wish. Mountain any larger than these I do not like. I dislike the Alps. They are unrestrained, titanic. In a word, inhuman. No mountain should be greater than these before me. The Apennines are human-like, just as the entire Italian landscape is human-like. And this is why it is more beautiful than any other landscape of the world[1].
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> I sit looking out over the Italian countryside. In the advancing twilight, the blues and the reds on the skyline will be sharper, more sonorous, more distant; I absorb the inexpressible sweet serenity of the Italian landscape, and for the first time on my present journey, I am happy. Happy in the archaic sense of the world, according to which no child can be said to be happy: a replete happiness, containing everything. (Szerb 1936, 68)

[1] I have translated the Hungarian *emberszabású* with the English 'human-like' and not with 'human-scale', which is proposed by the translator of the book. The expression 'human-scale' refers to the abstract geographical environment. It is measured by distances and positions.

## 1. The changing appearances of the landscape

A landscape is present through a number of material realities: mountains, hills, trees, rocks, meadows enamelled with flowers. Our senses perceive them with all their tangible characteristics. First, we perceive their outlines and then, upon careful observation, we discover the details. The material presence of a landscape is unpredictable; a tree, a stone, a creek may suddenly appear here and there following the slowly moving perusal of the overall scene. A landscape is prone to continuous metamorphosis; it gives itself in different ways; it lends itself to the variation of the light, of the season, of the whims of the weather, as well as to the change of the standpoint of the beholder and of the chosen perspective.

Unlike a work of art, which presents a winter landscape in a certain frame, a snowy field apprehended in a lived-experience, gives itself with no well-defined edges. Its outline is not stable. It extends and shrinks as we move from one place to another and as the panorama modifies itself with the change of our location. A landscape 'keeps improvising', presenting new aspects and new appearances of the very same material reality. The modification is produced by the change of our standpoints and bodily movements as well as by the inevitable metamorphosis of the external conditions and circumstances.

## 2. Landscape and the human body

The landscape and our body's movements and aptitudes mutually enhance each other. We touch the landscape, taste it, and fully embrace it with our senses and, by paying close attention to it, we press the landscape to reveal its hitherto hidden aspects.

Whether we sit calmly in order to contemplate a lake or walk on a path between the trees of a forest or climb on a steep slope, we are bodily present to a landscape. The landscape always affects our body in a certain way and our bodily attitudes and movements reveal a particular aspect of the landscape. The features of the landscape may then encourage leisurely walks, challenging hikes, or invigorating swims. Indeed, the landscape solicits our body and we respond to this solicitation by adopting a particular bodily attitude (standing, sitting, or lying down), by accomplishing bodily movements (walking, running, climbing, or swimming), and making an ingenious use of our bodily aptitudes (sensibility, spontaneity, memory, or imagination).

### 3. Landscape and geographical space

In his reflections on the immediate sensory communication with appearances and on the detached understanding of things and people, Erwin W. Straus (1963, 318-323) makes the clear distinction between the landscape and geographical space. In the landscape, as we move from one place to another, we respond to the sensory impressions coming to us from various locations. We are always in the middle of the landscape and, in this particular place, we are aware of the extent of our own visibility. It is our place and space only, defined by our own interests, desires, and goals, as well as by our momentary feelings. The horizon encircles this place; no matter where we go and where we place ourselves in face of a landscape, the horizon constantly asserts its presence.

In a landscape, our location is determined by what we see, touch, and feel, and not by the totality that we are able to represent and to record as a system of positions, distances, and directions. We live in the present and enjoy or lament whatever the present offers us. Detached from the abstractly represented locations, we may be lost – for good or ill – in a landscape. We know only what is near to us, what we is offered to our senses, what elicits joy or fear. We orientate ourselves with the helpful support of trails, roads, bridges, rocks, streams, and ponds. In a landscape, we have to find our own way.

Szerb's account of his experience of the Italian scenery does not convey such a sharp separation between the concrete experience of a landscape and the abstract representation of a geographical environment. Unwilling to ignore the spatial and objective knowledge of surrounding regions, Szerb nevertheless understands himself as someone enclosed and embraced by the lovely mountains around him. His whole being is happily absorbed in a beautiful Italian landscape without completely losing sight of the inhuman and distant world and without forgetting that he is cheerful and complete only by leaving behind a hectic collectivity and their mundane interests.

### 4. Animated presence

The author of *The third tower* relates his joy of savouring «the inexpressible sweet serenity of the Italian landscape». A natural environment arouses in him a higher degree of sensory alertness than the ambient visual and auditory noise of the city he has just left behind. As he sits calmly at the foot of the tower, away from all

the chattering tourists, he notices the animated presence of a landscape. To be sure, under different circumstances, the beholder might detect, in the surrounding mountains, entirely different qualities. He would perhaps speak of the 'cold immensity' or 'remote unfriendliness', or simply 'melancholy' of the surrounding mountain range. A person who happens to see the Apennines covered with snow and to feel the icy wind gushing through its valleys may not echo Szerb's glowing view of the landscape. For instance, for Aldous Huxley (1948, 190-204), who attempted to travel from Florence to Bologna in an inclement season, the Italian scenery was a rather disconsolate and unfriendly sight.

Just like the material aspects of the landscape, this particular and dynamic quality of a landscape is subject to ongoing transformation. The same scenery may appear, in different seasons either warm, joyous, inviting or ominous, oppressing, and hostile. Whatever the detected emotional quality may be, it provides the natural surrounding with a certain intensity and an irradiating force. In every presence, we sense a certain power, which intervenes between the surroundings and ourselves and creates a singular reciprocity: we approach the landscape with a heightened awareness and the landscape, on its turn, solicit an attentive sensory perception from our part.

**5. Atmospheric presence**

Each of these presences offers a different atmospheric impression. A snowy mountain on which skiers descend is entirely different from the hill enveloped by a dense forest. The atmosphere of feverish mobility is replaced an ambiance of peaceful immobility. As we move through a meadow and remain alert for subtle and complex perceptual cues, we detect the underlying affective quality of our specific surroundings. We might follow the example of Szerb and describe the atmosphere of the mountains as 'human-like' or, while we walk through a pine forest, will rather apply the concepts of mystery or starkness. The atmosphere of a landscape consists of a specific 'emotional essence' diffused throughout the material elements. We instantly apprehend this essence, and each subsequent and explicit visit merely confirms the validity of our primary mode of perception.

A particular atmospheric quality is not identical with some objectively given traits. Yet we sense it as we come into a contact with a path, a tree, or a creek. It is everywhere and nowhere.

Therefore, we are not always able to give a clear account of our ways of replying to situations. We may walk through a forest without being able to pin down why we feel ill at ease. We may refer here to a pertinent observation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1963, 173), who related his experience of entering a living space (a city, a building, or an apartment) and immediately perceiving the character (*l'esprit*) of those who live there, without being capable of justifying this impression by an enumeration of notable details. In a similar fashion, we detect the affective quality of a landscape: while, and even before+, apprehending its physical features, we sense its incomparable and peculiar character.

**6. Restrained presence**

But what is a human-like landscape? A landscape is endowed with a human character when we experience a correspondence, a suitability between the material characteristics of the landscape and our whole being. The fitness is made possible by the restraint which is exercised by our approach to the landscape as well in the manner with which the landscape presents itself. Conversely, we may speak of the absence of connectedness when we notice the landscape's colossal size, overpowering forcefulness, and crushing presence, and, indeed, its lack of restraint.

A landscape displays its restrained presence when it gradually opens up, lifts its veil, without revealing all its facets. While sensing this restraint, we repeatedly return to a park or to a heath and happily discover what we have missed before. In another sense, the landscape's restraint is apparent when an awe-inspiring and vast natural reality – a forest or a mountain or a large lake – does not generate distress and terror. We have the impression of being in the presence of a potentially frightening but tamed power. It may happen that we stand on the top of the mountain and feel the presence of a considerable amount of energy below us. Yet we know or at least hope that this energy does not constitute any menace or threat to our existence.

The human-like landscape solicits the restraint of the beholder. We impose a restraint on ourselves when we perceive a sensual harmony or ecological balance of the meadow and we want to preserve it and respect its peace and stillness. Obviously, an alteration of the landscape may occur in due course. However, such a change may be introduced with a sense of discretion, without destroying or altering the harmony of the whole. Then we

are careful about what we add to the landscape as well as about what we would like to take away. In a word, we hold back a power we have; we do not use it. This human capacity is captured by the French term *litote*. *Litote* is the ability to hold a power in check and exercise restraint; it is the guarantor of refinement and balance in whatever we decide to touch and transform.

**7. Silent presence**

We may consider the silent presence of a landscape as a form of restraint. But this kind of silence does not entail the absence of sounds. The steeply descending brook and the gently ruffling leaves on the trees produce sounds. Beyond these sounds, we still perceive the silent atmosphere embracing everything in the forest. Even if Huxley hears 'fearful noises' as he approached the town of Pietramala, the slopes near him exude calm and stillness. Silence is contrary to whatever is obtrusive, rowdy, petty, raucous, and wicked. The unruly and boisterous people, leaving behind them a mess, clash with the silence of a landscape. The gestures and movements of an agitated person setting up a camp in the open air can be noisy and unruly even if he does not emit a single sound.

In his essay on the world of silence, Max Picard (1988, 137) contends that the silence of nature is a 'primary reality'. The segments of a landscape make the original silence 'clearly visible'. We tend to associate silence with darkness and the daylight with the sounds of conversation or of music or of transport vehicles. Yet, in the heat of the summer noon, silence absorbs everything in a landscape and dissolves itself into light. Then, «the light seems so much the essence of silence that the word seems quite unnecessary. The light is all at once the fulfillment of the silence». As time advances, the silence of the night lends breadth, mystery, splendour to the trees and the starry sky above them.

In his novel *Butcher's Crossing*, John Williams (2007) contrasts the silence of a pristine valley with the noisy and wicked slaughter of buffalos. In fact, he juxtaposes goodness and bestiality, humanity and inhumanity. The density of the landscape's silence portends the intensity of a cruel destruction that the gun of hunters will soon achieve. The image of these men standing quietly above a beautiful valley makes, for the reader, the eventual senseless and unrestrained killings and the correlate profanation of the landscape more brutal and more devastating.

> Lush grass grew on the bed of the valley, and waved gently in the breeze as far as the eye could see. A quietness seemed to rise from the valley; it was the quietness, the stillness, the absolute calm of a land where no human foot had touched. Andrews found that despite the exhaustion he was holding his breath; he expelled the air from his lungs as gently as he could, so as not to disturb the silence. (Williams 2007, 117)

Although people find themselves now very rarely in presence of a virginal landscape, this type of experience is far from being uncommon. Genuine hikers and passionate excursionists are sensitive to the silent presence of a distant mountain or the encompassing calmness of a green meadow. They are eager to preserve this primary silent presence of the landscape while they reach the summit of a mountain and admire the valley and the surrounding peaks.

**8. Landscape seen as perfect**

Szerb relates his sense of well-being and wholeness when he detects perfection in the contemplated scene. He declares that all is well, nothing is missing; his existence is complete, which brings him the feeling of gladness to be alive. All tensions and worries of his everyday life have been for a while forgotten as he enjoys a euphoric moment of harmony and fulfilment. The feeling of well-being is lived as a grace; it occurs without calculation or control; it eludes the power of the individual to produce it at will; it induces cheerfulness and gratefulness; it creates the impression of grace stirred by what the beholder sees as a perfect landscape; all its elements appear vivacious and lively.

A landscape is seen as a perfect presence when its elements and proportions are congruous with our feeling of peace and elation. This feeling tends to be absent when we are confronted with the immensity, austerity, excessive dimensions of a mountain or of a forest. To judge a landscape perfect, we have to view it as an animated reality, to which we somehow belong and in which, occasionally, we are ensconced with ease.

There are lovers of undulating hills, lovers of peaceful meadows, and lovers of the sea's 'deep and calm solemnity' (Søren Kierkegaard). As John Cowper Powys (1974, 150) remarked, «there is undoubtedly a deep affinity, probably both psychic and chemical, between every individual human being and some particular type of landscape». As we have seen, Szerb experienced joyfully this affinity with the Apennines and qualified it as human-

like while attributing to it the alteration of his whole being. He extends this quality to the entire Italian landscape and considers it 'more beautiful' than any other landscape of the world[2].

**9. Beauty of the landscape**

How should we understand the often-repeated and spontaneously voiced claim about the beauty of a landscape? Should we speak of beauty only when the beholder is able to view a scenery with a sense of aesthetic objectivity? In other words, should we make the presence of beauty dependent on the adoption of a distancing, objectifying attitude towards a landscape?

We find illuminating first-hand accounts of the experience of beauty in presence of landscapes in Timothy Beardsworth's book (1977, 48-64) entitled *The sense of presence*. One of the contributors, who sat opposite to «a beautiful tree covered with pink blossom, thrown into a relief by the high hill behind it», speaks of being «caught up into the reality» and being «part of it». Another individual was «in presence of a great natural beauty» and felt that he «was extending into (his) surroundings and was becoming one with it». He had a «strange feeling of expansion», an experience «difficult to describe». Again, another individual spoke of being «caught up into a tree», becoming «part of it». He «was extending into his surrounding».

The contributors identify and praise beauty less by following an aesthetic canon and considering the formal facets of trees, meadows, or hills. They speak of an altered relation to the grass, the tree, an orchard. The beauty of the landscape is found in the experience of synchrony with the surroundings and in the significance that a person spontaneously attributes to a scenery.

Beautiful is a grove, which prompts a sense of unity, induces a wonderful feeling of freedom, makes one just stand, dwell upon a scene and fully enjoy the moment. Beautiful are the leaves, the field, or the surface of the river because they are alive, mysterious, «infinitely significant»; they bring the person to «the verge of a great revelation». One contributor stated: «I felt if I held my breath I would hear breathing». Whereas the perception of formal qualities of order, balance, complexity, proportion, clarity, rhythm

[2] I have translated the Hungarian *szebb* with the English 'more beautiful' and not with 'lovelier', which is proposed by the translator of the book.

merely lifts one's sprit, the «memorable experiences of one's life» create an intensification of the person's sense of being absorbed by a tree, a meadow or a creek.

All these accounts mention an unusual sense of peace and well-being, a previously unknown surge of unspeakable joy, an acceptance of everything with a «sort of glorious indifference», an «inspiration for creative activity», «sheer exhilaration», an «attentive, breathless synthesis» between two realities as if the «I and what the I was watching were one».

**10. Experience of the landscape in solitude**

If there is a condition to live such an experience of presence in face of a landscape, it does not reside in the adoption of an attitude of aesthetic objectivity. A prerequisite of the perception of a beautiful and perfect presence is rather the distance taken from other human beings. One has to absorb the impressions alone, in a state of full composure. Szerb declares that by leaving behind his tourist companions, he is able to come into possession of his soul, to be in touch with his own centre, and recognize the Italian landscape in its human-like beauty. Contributors to Beardsworth's book also remark that a close personal contact with fellow human beings 'destroys' the ability to relate to oneself and the surroundings with the sense of unity and fully enjoy the encounter with the intensity of beauty.

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