



Exposé - "Poetics of Silence"

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By: Heinrich Geiger

Without a certain mindset – I call it frame - there is no perception of landscape.

A landscape opens up a peculiar view of the world. It has an almost rhetorical competence when it is placed in its historical and socio-cultural context (frame). One example of this is an anthology by Rudolf Borchardt from the year 1927, which includes texts by more or less well-known scientists and writers in the German language with travel experiences from European and non-European countries (Indonesia and India also feature). These, in turn, come together to form intellectual landscapes. The title of the anthology *Der Deutsche in der Landschaft* (*The German in landscape*) raises the question of whether the perception of landscape is fundamentally culturalist in nature?

Against this background, I will talk first about three different ways “How landscape speaks”. At the end of my paper, I will talk about the moment when landscape becomes silent.

How landscape speaks 1

In his highly acclaimed essay *Landscape* from 1974, Joachim Ritter tried to get to the heart of the modern experience of landscape. The essay is based on two assumptions: 1) Landscape is a manifestation of nature as opposed to culture. 2. Nature as landscape is not simply given, it is a product of “the theoretical mind”. The point of reference for Ritter's reflections is Francesco Petrararch's letter to the Parisian theologian Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro. In the letter, which he wrote on the evening of April 26, 1336, he reports on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, which he had always looked

up to since his childhood days. Having read the day before in the Roman history of Titus Livius that Philip the Macedonian king had climbed Mount Haemus in Thessaly, from which two seas could be seen at once: the Adriatic and the Black Sea, he decided to climb it together with his brother.

A book or a reading experience triggered an Italian poet's desire to climb a mountain. As he later wrote in his letter, he enjoyed a “completely unobstructed panoramic view” from its highest point. For Ritter, Petrarch stands in the tradition of Greek theoria as a “contemplative contemplation”: having reached the high plateau of the mountain, he perceived the fascinating spectacle (*spectaculum*) of the landscape stretching to the distant horizons. An undertaking of epochal significance, according to Ritter, as Petrarch had experienced nature as landscape for the first time on the heights of the Ventoux, whereas antiquity had only known nature. Petrarch, as Ritter sees him, “climbs the mountain, leaving all practical purposes behind, in order to participate in the whole of nature and in God on the summit, driven solely by the desire to look, in free contemplation and theory.”

With his ascent of Mont Ventoux, Petrarch opened up a new perspective on nature. Ever since Jakob Burckhardt euphorically discussed him in his *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* in 1860, his letter to the Parisian theologian Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro has been read time and again as a document that marks a historical caesura between the medieval negation of the world and the modern

view of nature. However, the panoramic landscape that Petrarch's gaze falls upon from the heights of Mont Ventoux is not, as Ritter believes, simply nature, but an infinite interplay of nature and human culture. For Ritter, Petrarch seeks participation "in all of nature and in God" in his contemplation of the world.

This cannot be inferred from Petrarch's text. On the contrary, instead of the great whole encompassing above and below, the sensual and divine world, and a cosmos revealing itself to theoretical contemplation, he sees above all the infinite abundance of the individual. Petrarch's world is not a well-ordered cosmos, but a sea of contingency. In contrast, the ONE to which Augustine would like to lead him in the imaginary dialog of the *Secretum* disintegrates into an incalculable diversity. The real is the individual: "Omnis res extra animam est realiter singularis et una numero" (Every thing outside the soul is in reality individual and one in number). The sentence from Ockham's *Liber sententiarum* is symptomatic of Petrarch's world view, albeit with one important difference: while nominalism postulates the experience of the individual in general, the signature of Petrarch's multifaceted work is the experience of the individual in its incalculable diversity.

To have raised the status of the contemplation of nature - that is Petrarch's achievement. The contemplation of nature as an overwhelming spectacle flashes through his work. The temptation and the pleasure of looking, the admonition to cross a threshold, the special nature of the undertaking, the happiness of contemplation and a kind of conversion. The world of books is accompanied by the experience of nature during the ascent of Mont Ven-

toux. Petrarch's appreciation of a life in close proximity to nature is nothing less than a correction to the powerful tradition of inwardness.

It was not only Augustine, but also Socrates who justified this turn inwards: Nature told him nothing, therefore he remained with man. This was formulated against the philosophy of nature in order to be able to detach man's self-image from the requirements of nature. The interior space of reflection was to prove more significant than the surrounding landscape. Augustine had justified his objection to the pleasure of the eye by pointing to the overwhelming greatness of man's inner self. Accordingly, Petrarch shies away from the overwhelming sight of the landscape in order to commit himself to the Augustinian ideal of inwardness.

The moment of devotion to the sensory impressions is brief. Petrarch immediately reaches for his copy of the *Confessiones*, the work of the Church Father Augustine, which Francesco Dionigi, to whom he will write his letter about the ascent of Mont Ventoux, once gave him. He opens the volume and comes across the passage in the 10th book where Augustine, while gazing at the beauty of the landscape, urges self-knowledge: "Even if the mountains and the oceans cause astonishment - the ability of man to remember all this with his eyes closed and to revive it within himself is even more overwhelming." And: "the spectacle of the outer world is no match for the greatness of the soul." Moreover, it is a wasted effort to climb a mountain with so much zeal and sweat when the real problem is man's desires fueled by earthly urges.

The contemplation of everything earthly instead of the contemplation

How a landscape comes into being. Three steps 1

of the eternal becomes an equally important option for Petrarch, even if he may still shy away from it. He perceives landscape in the “modern sense”, i.e. he releases the landscape elements from their functional context and thus makes it possible to discover the landscape as a manifestation of the diversity of the world. What is new is the contextualizing, space-constituting power of the gaze from an elevated position. Only in this way, in the individual gaze, can the landscape become an aesthetic experience. In the suction effect of the view from the height of a mountain, a radically new experience, no longer held in bounds by *theoria*, becomes possible.

We may conclude: Landscape is never itself, it is only created in its perception and within a certain frame which we may call a “cultural frame”. The gaze defines proximity and distance, but also the section of perception. It unites the data of the manifold individual into a second-order totality: the world, which unfolds a life of its own due to the unifying effect of the gaze in landscape painting. In this second-order totality, a tension arises between worldly orientation, the sensual, and inner orientation. In any case, the enormity of the sensual-aesthetic experience of landscape makes Petrarch resort to a strong formulation in his letter: “*obstupui*” (I marveled). He was astonished, as I would like to explain further, because he realized the priority of the particular over the general, the presence of the manifold. From the top of the mountain, he first looked down and observed the clouds. Then he looked at the snow-covered Alps. He saw the mountains of the province of Lyon to his right, and even the Gulf of Marseille to his left. The Rhone was almost before his eyes. It is no coincidence that polyphonic

music developed precisely at the time when the polyphony of nature was perceived in the landscape.

How landscape speaks 2

“While Petrarch sees mountains, rivers and the sea and not the artificial order of human settlements, the view of the mountaineer in China is directed at people and their settlements, at past times and the future in the sense of being cut off from both, but above all at himself.” This statement by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer again shows that landscape speaks to us in many different ways. The question posed at the beginning: How is a poetics of silence possible? comes closer to a solution at this point, however, because it is raised in an intercultural context. A poetics of silence is closely linked to the intellectual conditions in the respective culture in which it arises. It is closely linked to the question of what the intellectual prerequisites are for the world to become a landscape at all.

Landscapes may contain cities, other traces of settlement, traffic routes, rivers, streams, lakes, high-voltage pylons or landfill sites. But that is not the essential thing. What is decisive is the whole of the landscape, which lives from the tension between activity (*natura naturans*) and a goal of activity, the things or even a work (*natura naturata*).

Significantly, we only ever speak of “world” and “nature” in the singular when we look at a landscape, as is the case in the *Book of Zhuangzi*, for example. In it, the Dao and nature are only ever referred to as the ONE, as Richard Wilhelm translates it. Although not only the image of nature has changed over the course of history, but also man's awareness of his

position in it, the tendency to see the one nature in the landscape - despite the high-voltage pylons and the garbage dump, despite ants, chicken grass, rubble or piles of excrement - prevails. What is seen is "the constant presence of nature, which always remains the same, which supports and encompasses the changes of human history", as Wolfgang Kluxen has stated for Western culture. But is that also true for Chinese culture? Zhuangzi would add that a path must be traveled to experience nature as the ONE. Man must wander. He must transcend the multiplicity of being in order to penetrate the "castle of non-being, where everything is one". Hiking in the mountains, however, has a meaning all of its own. Schmidt-Glintzer has already given us a first important indication of this in the above quote.

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Because people are aware of the permanence of nature and the transience of human life, there is often something painful about climbing mountains in China. Pan Yue (247-300 AD), a scholar of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-317 AD) from what is now Henan Province, said: "When you climb a mountain, you think of the distant past and mourn the present."

Pan Yue's quote shows that people often have to mourn a multiple experience of loss in the panoramic view that they get from the top of a mountain: Past and present have been lost to him. While thinking about the past can be comforting, despair dominates when looking at the present. As Achim Mittag has observed, the lament that was still associated with the act of mountain climbing and summit views in the Chinese Middle Ages disappeared in the 16th century, when the desire to travel began to develop. The journeys, which had a spiritual-religious dimension and took

on the character of secularized pilgrimages, now followed a deep longing for purification and purity.

Two traditions: Virtue (*de* 德) and magic. Both were significant for the mountain metaphor and thus also for a certain understanding of nature in traditional China. The first tradition is based on a saying by Confucius, which is recorded in the Discourses (*lunyu*) 6:21. According to this, the mountain is assigned to the person who possesses the Confucian cardinal virtue of "sense of responsible action" (*ren* 仁). This is the Noble One, who in Confucianism represents humanity not only in the spiritual realm. He is also the wise ruler of a kingdom in which virtue (*de*) shines. The second tradition speaks of the dream of being able to climb the mountains like a saint. However, because this dream cannot be realized without the aid of magic, chapter 17 of *Baopuzi*, which dates back to the 4th century AD, states: "If you go to the mountains without magical precautions, you will eventually come to harm."

How landscape speaks 3

Mountain massifs rise out of a misty gray void, the likes of which can only be found in China. Some of the bizarre formations appear to be overgrown with bushes, while here and there what appear to be scrub and branches protrude adventurously from a crevice over the abyss. On closer inspection, however, the mountain peaks of this typically Chinese-looking landscape gradually mutate into the upstretched buttocks of men and women - this can be seen quite clearly. This monumental work - *It Looks Like a Landscape*¹ measuring 306x612 cm - does not lack a certain irony. Nevertheless, the artist Liu Wei

¹ see p.52, Editor's Note



How a landscape comes into being. Three steps 2, 3



does not really seem to be mocking the time-honored tradition of Chinese landscape painting - his carnal topography is too sublime.

Assembled into a texture from pre-defined components, a painted Chinese landscape can be “read”. The eye wanders in the picture over paths and bridges, past rock formations and waterfalls, bamboo groves and wooded hills and in this reading immerses itself in a whole that is more than the sum of its parts: a living cosmos that breathes a hazy breath of life. The components of this macrocosmic “living being”, which represents a Chinese landscape, are not very different from the building blocks of the human microcosm: rocks are like bones, water is the blood, the vegetation sprouting from the humus is the hair growth on the skin. So, the art work of Liu Wei is not mocking the tradition of Chinese landscape painting.

In China, the art of landscape painting is called “painting of mountains and water” (*shanshui hua*). The pair of terms mountain (*shan*) and water (*shui*) refers to the main elements of a Chinese ideal landscape, which, crucially, is constructed like the human body. Never an image of real existing areas and regions, it represents the cosmos in which the human being is embedded as a tiny but indispensable component. As Chinese *Shanshui* painting is composed of recurring elements, set pieces such as pine trees, waterfalls, lonely pilgrims, bridges and rock formations can easily be used as modules for digital, interactive images. The extent to which the tradition of fine ink paintings by old masters is continued by contemporary artists, criticized, broken with irony or deliberately negated is to some extent left to the interpretation of the viewer. It should be noted, however, that the

custom of referring to old masters is as old in the history of Chinese painting as painting itself - which brings us to the point at which we can begin the conversation about the poetics of place.

How landscape becomes silent

Beauty owes itself to a momentary point - the 'manic' moment of the happiness of aesthetic experience. The feeling of touching a sun-warmed rock holds a similar truth to the contemplation of ink paintings or works of written art. The aesthetic phenomenon opens the eye, the sense, in one point and the heightened sensitivity towards the obvious becomes the source of meaning in unexpected moments and in places previously overlooked.

Accordingly, Chinese ink paintings are more than maps: they not only enable people to find their way and determine their position, but also to open them up to their dreams and fantasies as they wander through landscapes. The “marvelous” (*miao*) plays an important role, which is why seeing is not just a mere perceptual technique, but the epitome of a successful life. It could be described as follows: seeing enables a permeability that no longer forces nature into the position of an opposing object. It is all about the goal of increasing attention, with which an unclouded presence becomes possible. In order to prevent eloquence and promote silence, the viewer must become a pure medium. The unobstructed view and the presence that comes to rest are two moments that intertwine and reinforce each other. Instead of asking whether we can decipher the elements of a landscape painting, both Petrarch's letter to a Parisian theologian and the Chinese landscape depiction are

about enabling an experience that is not held in check by any theory. Where the immediate gaze is not sufficient, however, literature can (not must) be consulted.

Landscape in the modern sense, as it appears for the first time in Petrarch's *Ventoux Letter*, presupposes the removal of landscape elements from their functional context and thus the discovery of landscape as the appearance of the diversity of the world. It is the cohesive, space-constituting power of the gaze from a lofty position that grants what is seen a new kind of self-reference and frees it from a possible center of meaning, for example a religious one. The landscape later became eloquent when it was made the experience of the thinking eye in 15th century painting. The subject of this new painting was the world and not, as in Chinese landscape painting, nature as a force or movement which is beyond fixed in terms.

In Chinese aesthetics, landscape paintings presuppose a viewer who becomes aware of himself and his position in the world by looking at it. The laws of nature behind the natural phenomena leave him in awe and amazement, as he believes he recognizes their eternal validity. Beauty and natural law are inseparable. The mountains and water in the Chinese landscape therefore demand nothing more than an open approach. A phenomenology derived from walking is helpful here. It means that the body thinks best when the mind stops thinking, when it is decoupled from the body.

The very best way to achieve this is to walk steadily for hours in a landscape or, as we may also say, in "nature", in a long rhythm of uninterrupted movement, until the brain not only knows the movement, but feels it as the resting center of being. Poetics of Silence.