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Landscape and Literature

“What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?”, wrote Henry Thoreau in the second Chapter of “Walden”, his account of finding a place within the world, a practical, metaphorical, and therefore metaphysical question. Even the unhoused wanderers among us will find the question appealing. Isn’t the word “home” the most touching word – not only in English – but when uttered in films and conversations everyday with an almost inevitable comforting feeling. Home – a house, a seat.

Sit down and think about it. Or, as Thoreau continues: “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly.” It would be easy for me, in this essay, to analyze the word home, house, home-run, the works of Homer, known to me from early childhood, to the daily televised dose of Homer (Simpson) – this time late childhood, twenty something – and explore and explain themes of my own writing – homelessness, drifting odysseic feelings and the search for a place to rest.

But then I would be trying to fool you – and likewise, probably, to make a fool of myself. Instead I’d like to ask you the same question, Thoreau raised, without the rhetorical answer.

“What is a landscape?”

But a *sedes*, a seat?

No feelings of homecoming at all, as there is no house there, perhaps.

Landscape seems to be one of those words that contains, or that includes, many things: such as trees, grass, cows, and the light of an evening sky. They seem to be “set up” places, as the word “place” itself, just a little more furnished, a little more shaped. But still it is open, because our imagination could fill the landscape with houses, gardens, streets, plants – the nice ones and the atomic ones.

There is no escape from the landscape. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not talking about Nature and our nurtured-by dependencies. That is all true though; let others tell you in a better way. There is no escape from the landscape because the word signifies our human necessity to give the chaotic outside of ourselves sense, body-womb or daddy-cool, may it, metaphorically, be as you will, a shape, an order – a world in words. The stabilization of “what is” into something, as the concept of reality is an illusion caused by words, syntax, and metaphor – and a necessary one.

That necessity of naming – Adam and Eve’s first big apple to chew – seems as human as its core. Our “Adamitic” desire to see “what is” as it is, or again for the first time, is indeed poetic. The “as if” imagination of our fancy-faculty gives the worn out world, words, concepts, a new twist. Seeing comes before naming, sure. But the first action of a child, after leaving the food and shit, hungry, thirsty, sleepy world is deictical. A child, like a poet on a page, tries to relate to the outside world, making a connection to what is not

immediately tangible, “feelable,” edible, by pointing toward it. I always like the idea that words are like imaginary hands, touching things in the distance.

Landscape is a big word. It opens before our inner eyes like a wide screen, multiple-sensual world in cinemascope. It is an Image that could contain almost anything. Trees. Sky. Birds. I like to think of words as vessels, huge container ships, ready to explore, storing hidden meanings, parts of other words, roots, gestures and still the whole word is moving to some unknown shore. In the poem. I always described the ideal poem for me as a “betretbare Landschaft”, a landscape which you might be able to enter. A living space.

“My dear Degas, “ the French Poet Mallarme once wrote to his artist friend Paul Degas, who wanted to know what he had in mind when he wrote ‘un coup des des’, “one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words.” That is true, indeed.

The opening poem of my first book of poetry, *Loops, First Crow*, a series of poems taking place in Paris, where I lived for a year, begins like this:

*The sky
blue over the Landscape.
Blue and then the Landscape,
the Cityscape.*

*Crows hanging
Like Questionmarks in the Light.*

The German word for sky – Himmel it is also a big word, if you think of it, and a big, undefined thing, like landscape, it is a space, transporting also the English word heaven and the related saints, angels and the ice creamy homey feelings of popular songs etc. It’s like a stage setting for a heavenly-earthly drama, that comes out of the blue, as one of the middle poems, and all of my poems in that book are somehow related by their limited and repeated use of word material, I try to explore words as a spatial and corporal experience, as well as an experience of sound. Where should something take place, if not in landscape? Where should the “I” be and the “eyes”, if not in the movement through words, with the buses of syntax and the birds of metaphor?

I like to think of writing as a materialized form of thinking, in Heidegger’s vocabulary, as Ereignis, Bewegung, Unterwegssein. Thinking, like writing, is not a conceptual movement or a movement of systematic construction, but it is an event of language that is irreducible to the prepositional style of philosophical or scientific discourse. Like poetry, thinking needs to be situated outside. It is responsive and not assertive, paratactic and therefore fragmentary, and not unifying, syntactic. Digressive rather than progressive.

Poetry, with its word-material, and remember the little transformative jump toward world-material, is like thinking in words, sinking with them, singing, drowning, drowsing, always on the way, restless even in the moment of pausing. I’m aware that this sounds like a manifesto, and does not read like an argument.

And – just to open the field once more (not for unified field theories, not for plowing or digging), just to open the eyes and ears for something Paul Celan, who lived and died in Paris, wrote in his poem Thread Suns, Fadensonnen:

Thread Suns

Above the grey-black wilderness.

A tree-

High thought

Tunes in to light's pitch: there are

Still songs to be sung on the other side

Of mankind.

Vast spaces are opened up by the great gesture of this short poem. We are reminded of a meteorological phenomenon we might have observed at some point, or seen in paintings of Dutch, English, American or German landscape-painters like Ruusdaal, Frederick Church or Caspar David Friedrich: The way that threads of light open up light-spaces and light-distances above a grey-black horizontal wasteland covered over and over with thick clouds. I also like the idea of suns thin as threads, no longer round, fragile, abstract. It is a spiritual horizon – not merely the weather conditions – in which these thread-suns are found to draw open the grey-black wasteland. It is striking that thread-suns is a plural form, which suggests an anonymous expanse of infinite worlds.

Profiled against this is the singularity, the uniqueness of the tree-like thought that rises up, touching the sky. Monumental spaces opened up in this heavenly drama that allows forgetting the disconsolate human horizon. The tree-thought strikes the light-sound. *Das Lichttonverfahren*, the light-sound process is used in film to record and replay the sound that belongs to the pictures. Acoustic waves are transformed, therefore, into the amplitudes of the light-intensities. It is a process of translation, of balancing and of connecting sound waves and light waves, as I would suggest for a reading of the poem, a way of grasping the containing images of the word and their sound character.

A landscape has a sound. Reached by the tree high thought, I always see a gigantic harp that arises here, the light sound is a song-sound, a song to be sung beyond all human standards and necessities, a drama grown to a scale beyond humankind.

By setting up this sublime experience of “beyondness” within a poem, he opens the wound in the middle of all of our words, the wound of language itself: the poem evokes pure exteriority that, elsewhere, is a freedom for which we have no words. And even the poem cannot touch it, not point to it without experiencing that it is solitary and on the way. Nomadic, deterritorialized, always elsewhere.

The house Thoreau spoke of is a metaphysical home. The poem has no home. It is right *in* the landscape.