THE POETICS OF LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT
Landscape is not a location or an area waiting to be discovered and identified. It is rather discerned and formed by selecting and favoring an area of the earth's surface, by recognizing it and considering it notable. A landscape is an area of the natural world in relation to an observer.

KEYWORDS
Environment, Landscape, Relationship, Wallace Stevens

Landscape is commonly thought of as a feature of the natural world designating a region of the earth's surface that is attractive and favored. The title of this discussion is intended to avoid this presumption. It rather suggests that landscape is not "out there," waiting to be discovered and identified, but it is rather something that is made. It is made by selecting and favoring an area of the earth's surface, by recognizing it and considering it notable. That is to say, landscape is not identified but formed, not discovered but discerned. Landscape, in a word, is not a location but an area of the natural world in relation to an observer: It is a relationship, not a place.

I

Let me begin by saying that the basic ideas that commonly underlie inquiries in environmental philosophy are presumptive and misleading. Foremost among them is the notion of environment itself. Usually regarded as the objects and conditions that surround us, environment is taken as external to humans. It is hypostatized as "*the* environment." It is considered to be separate and distinct from humans, while closely related to human activity. While this understanding may seem intuitively obvious, it harbors some puzzling questions. Among them are conceptual difficulties created by the inveterate propensity to treat nominatives as substantives; that is, to ascribe independent ontological status to favored fundamental concepts.

Close and related to the concept of environment is the idea of landscape. Usually associated with a scenic area of environment,[1] the term 'landscape' originated in the seventeenth century, during what is sometimes called the Golden Age of Dutch painting, as a technical term to denote "a picture representing natural inland scenery."[2] The common understanding of landscape is an instance of the pervasive and powerful tendency to hypostatize abstractions, to give a concept ontological status, which, of course, is an unjustifiable inference. It occurs most commonly in discussions of environmental influences and forces such as weather and climate.

Landscape has often been understood as denoting a favored natural environment. The recent literature is both varied and imaginative. As Heinrich puts it most inclusively, landscape should be considered "a life-form with a specific physiognomy and memory and as an existential part of human sensibility and world-experience"[3] In her comprehensive account of the recent literature on the aesthetics of landscape, Isis Brook characterizes 'landscape' as place considered

as a whole, "a vaguely bounded whole that includes the landform and the inhabitants' particular way of organizing and interacting with the landform."[4] Landscape may be rural, i.e. countryside, or wilderness. Some have even found landscape surviving in an urban context in the form of gardens and orchards.[5] All these identify landscape as a location or area. Certainly, it is commendable to value natural settings, and exploring the different forms they take can expand the range of our appreciation. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the original perceptual impulse behind this appreciation may be lost in the conventional way of regarding our environment. Exploring the meaning and significance of landscape does not contribute so much to a comprehensive theory of place, of human habitation on the earth; it rather provides a fairer account of environment in relation to human presence. Nowhere is this exemplified more explicitly than in landscape painting, to which I shall turn in a moment.

II

Since its introduction, the usage of the term 'landscape' has proliferated. It has come to mean anything from a generalized form of earth awareness to a sense of an aesthetically attractive environment.[6] Considered most generally, landscape may be regarded as a form of the humanization of nature. What, however, is landscape? Behind any discussion of landscape lies an understanding of its meaning, not always articulated but always present. Let me begin in a way uncustomary in philosophical discourse with a poem that graphically describes the emergence of landscape. And in what follows I shall try to make a case for that poetic insight.

The mid-twentieth century American philosophical poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) expressed a sense of landscape that is suggestive in a poem called "Anecdote of the Jar." This short poem of only three stanzas contains a metaphorical account of the creation, identification, and meaning of landscape.

ANECDOTE OFTHE JAR[7]
Wallace Stevens

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

"Anecdote of the Jar" embodies the argument of my remarks. First, the jar. What does it mean for the poet to have chosen an ordinary object, a round, tall, plain gray jar, as a metaphor for explicating landscape? As an ordinary object, it represents a common event. Further, the metaphor of the jar suggests that landscape radiates from a central point in all directions: it is not one view or a single perspective. And it implies, further, that the jar, as an ordinary object, represents an ordinary occurrence of a view from an elevated location.

Moreover, a landscape depends on a perceiver. Placing the jar requires a perceiver, who is represented by the jar, and who creates the landscape, metaphorically speaking, by placing the jar in an elevated place. There is, then, so to speak, a jar (i.e. a perceiver) in every landscape. It is this perceptual presence that turns the formless, chaotic, "slovenly wilderness" surrounding the hill into a landscape. To say that "the jar was gray and bare" suggests that this was not a remarkable object but an ordinary one. From this one may infer that landscape is an ordinary occurrence that depends on the presence of a perceiver. It need not be a dramatic view but one that can assume a wide range of force, from mild to striking.

How did the jar find itself on the hill? The fact that a person placed it there means that the landscape exists in relation to an observer. It is not just a physical location but a location tied to a perceptual event. The fact that I have placed the jar signifies that landscape is a human experience accessible in an environmental context. It is not a physical location; it is not a unique occurrence; it is not an entity or a place. It is a human experience of environmental coherence that can range in varying degrees from ordinary to dramatic. To conclude this metaphorical interpretation, then, we may say that there is, so to speak, a jar in every landscape. What does this signify? It suggests that landscape exists in relation to a human presence. It is not a

location but a human relation. The question to ask of every landscape, then, is, who placed the jar upon the hill? To whom is the landscape in relation?

III

To say that landscape is not a place but a relation is to say that it is not a unique occurrence or place but a common relation. It might indeed be said to characterize all human existence. However, rather than pursue this general claim, let me turn for exemplification to the art from which landscape first received its identity: painting. Every representational landscape painting implies a viewer from whose vantage a spatial representation spreads out. Linear perspective is a graphic technique for rendering space on a flat surface as it would actually appear to the eye.

Yet whose eye? Where is the viewer? In perspectival representation the eye can enter and follow the pictorial space. Just as a landscape painting implies a viewer, so a landscape seen in nature implies a viewer. Thus landscape is not a place but a relation, an experience of environment. Aesthetic experience in other arts similarly rests upon relationships, not objects. Novels imply readers, music listeners, theater and dance spectators.

What, then, do the viewers of landscapes supply? The viewers' contribution is multiple. Foremost, it identifies what is viewed: a scenic area, a notable physiognomic feature, a painting of a scene. The viewer gives its object coherence, boundaries, objecthood. In singling out its object, the viewer confers significance on it, recognizes and assigns value to it, value that, in this context, may be aesthetic value.

Now the question to be asked is, What is the spatial context of this landscape event? Where is the landscape located? Most critically, I want to suggest that it begins with the eye of the beholder. Where, then, does the viewer stand who is implied by the perspectival array? Where is that eye located? Conventionally it is claimed that the space in a landscape painting begins at the picture plane. We are expected to regard the painting as an object, an object that contains the representation of space. There the convention rests. Yet the viewer's eye is never at the picture plane; it is always and necessarily outside and in front of it. However, when the eye is brought close to the picture plane, the viewer begins to perceptually enter the space of the painting and traverse its contours and depth. This is a fascinating phenomenon that is rarely made explicit but yet can be recognized

by an astute observer who, by that act, becomes a participant in the space of the painting.[8] Landscapes can be rural, a countryside, or wild, a wilderness. They can be agricultural, urban, or industrial. Recognizing the stimulating insight in these alternatives, I suggest that they are best pursued by following the suggestive possibilities in each rather than assimilating them to a generic "landscape," for doing so would obscure the special significance of its basic meaning: relationship. Let us propose, then, returning 'landscape' closer to its original usage. This usage possesses a distinctive and important insight: the relationship of an observer who selects and associates with a region of the earth's surface.

As such, 'landscape' offers rich possibilities of meaning and association, for it allows and encourages many readings. Let us mention yet another, very different poetic use, this by the great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, also for whom landscape depends on us. Thus in the middle of "Summer Evening in the Jerusalem Mountains," Amichai wrote:

> Here in these mountains, hope belongs to the landscape
> like the water holes. Even the ones with no water
> still belong to the landscape like hope.[9]

Let us conclude by recalling the legendary account of the aged Chinese painter who, at the end of his life, gathered his students about him, brought out a large sheet of rice paper, and with a few deft strokes created a mountain landscape with an ascending path. Laying down his brush, the painter stood up, stepped into the painting, and walked up the path. Turning to wave his students farewell, he continued on until he eventually disappeared into the landscape.[10]

1 Reviewing the recent literature on landscape, it seems that most commentators assume the conventional meaning of landscape as a scenic area of the environment. Few make this assumption explicit, although it is sometimes elaborated into a complex theoretical concept. Most generally, landscape is understood as an area of "inland natural scenery," *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1933) vol. VI, 53-54. The OED devotes two columns to its varied uses.

2 "Landscape," *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume VI (1933), 53-54.

3 Dirk Michael Heinrich, "Landscape as a Forthcoming Paradigm," in *Philosophy of Landscape: Think, Walk, Act,* eds. Adriana Verissimo Serrão and Moirika Reker (Ediçoes Húmus, 2022), 64.

4 Isis Brook, "Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscape," in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies,* 2nd edition, eds. Peter Howard et al. (Routledge, 2019), 39-50.

5 Mateusz Salwa, "Landscapes as Gardens. Aesthetics and Ethics of the Environment" and Moirika Reker, "Bridging City and Landscape" in *Philosophy of Landscape: Think, Walk, Act,* eds. Adriana Verissimo Serrão and Moirika Reker (Ediçoes Húmus 2022), 289-304.

6 Heinrich, "Landscape as a Forthcoming Paradigm," 60-65 and Augustin Berque, "Landscape and the Unsustainable Urban Realm," in *Philosophy of Landscape: Think, Walk, Act,* eds. Adriana Verissimo Serrão and Moirika Reker (Ediçoes Húmus 2022), 102 ff.

7 Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 76. Originally published in Stevens' first book of poem, *Harmonium* (1923). I acknowledge and thank Riva Berleant for suggesting this poem.

8 Despite recognizing that this contradicts the principal thesis of his study of French painting in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the art historian Michael Fried recognizes the importance of Denis Diderot's serious use of the fiction of physically entering a painting. That this fictional entrance is peculiar to an enthusiastic and enraptured appreciator can be contradicted by the intense participation of an experienced and open-minded appreciator of landscape paintings of, for example, the Dutch Golden Age and other work. Cf. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of California Press, 1980), 92-105, 108-109 118-132, 147-150, 216, 224-225, 226-227.

9 I thank Michael Alpert for this reference.

10 "What I know is stories of the Tang dynasty painter WU Daozi (吴道子; also Wu Tao-tsz', Wu Tao-Tsu, or Go Doshi), who had the divine power of merging painting and reality by entering his own painted landscape. There are also tales of Daoist entering the caves in miniature landscapes like penjing. I unfortunately don't know the exact story you are looking for. The closest seems to be from the writing of Walter Benjamin."
Here, Benjamin writes in German:
"Sie stammt aus China und erzählt von einem alten Maler, der den Freunden sein neuestes Bild zu sehen gab. Ein Park war darauf dargestellt, ein schmaler Weg am Wasser und durch einen Baumschlag hin, der lief vor einer kleinen Türe aus, die hinten in ein Häuschen Einlaß bot. Wie sich die Freunde aber nach dem Maler umsahen, war der fort und in dem Bild. Da wandelte er auf dem schmalen Weg zur Tür, stand vor ihr still, kehrte sich um, lächelte und verschwand in ihrem Spalt. Walter Benjamin's". *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (1938) in *Gesammelte Schriften* volume 4, 262–263. [Trans. It comes from China and tells the story of an old painter who gave his latest painting to his friends to see. It depicted a park, a narrow path by the water, through the trees, extending in front of a small door, leading to a small house in the back. But by the time the friends looked around for the painter, he was already gone, and in the picture. Then he walked down the narrow path to the door, stood motionless before it, turned around, smiled, and disappeared into its opening.] Personal communication from the art historian Prof. Xin Conan-Wu, 5/15/24.