

Paddy Woodworth

LANDSCAPE AND LITERATURE

In the Iowan Indian summer, landscape seems infinitely preferable to literature. Ezra Pound famously declared that he would rather play tennis than write poetry. I would rather seize these precious, unrepeatable moments by cycling through the River Corridor than attempt to define the riverscape's relationship to writing. And I am sure you would rather do something similar than listen to me. But here we all are, and here goes:

Landscape is as fundamental to literature as setting is to theatre. Narratives always take place in landscapes, whether they be urban or rural. It is no accident that the one of the great masterpieces of world literature, the Judaic-Christian bible, opens with a magnificent landscape scene; opens in fact with a mythic vision of the creation of landscape itself. There had to be a setting before humanity – or man, in the quintessentially sexist universe of the aptly-named patriarchs -- could appear on the scene:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep,” says the writer of Genesis, according to the Iowa House Hotel's Gideon Bible. “And the Spirit of God was hovering” – like a great raptor, I like to imagine, though the birds had yet to be created – “over the face of the waters”.

After switching on the lighting system, which instantly created its own opposite, darkness, God creates the firmament and dry land. Contemplating this process, the writer seems in constant danger of being seduced by the detail of landscape, of digressing from the great drama which is about to be played out in Eden:

‘And God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself, on the earth”. In fact the writer likes this bit so much that he repeats it immediately.

Having set up the big planetary picture, the writer zooms in on Eden. Since people of murderous and benign intentions have ransacked the bible for significance from its earliest history, let me on behalf of the International Writing Program analyze the order in which Genesis sets the scene: “The lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden...and out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food”. Pleasant to the sight first, and good for food second: it's not just that landscape comes before narrative, the aesthetics of landscape come before landscape's utility – and those, we are told, were the priorities for the author of the whole scheme of things.

When we come to the Christian part of the bible, however, we appear to find matters reversed. According to the Gospel of St John, things did *not* start with heaven and earth. “In the beginning was the Word,” declares the Evangelist, “and the Word was with God” – and then he takes things further – “the Word *was* God.” I'm no biblical scholar, as you've

already gathered, but it does seem striking that the St John goes on to say that “He [presumably meaning the Word] was in the beginning with God. *All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.*”

Perhaps we could say that a prerequisite of that odd beast, creative writing, is the marriage of Genesis and St John, the Landscape and the Word. This points up a familiar dilemma: does the landscape call forth our words, as Genesis seems to suggest, or do our words call forth the landscape, following St John?

The answer, as usual, is probably a bit of both. Wordsworth, father of a whole school of landscape poetry, hedged his bets. He spoke of familiar scenery as “both what we see, and what we half create”. Yeats had another formulation for a similar idea, when he said that said that the shape of a mountainous horizon known to us from childhood was “a line drawn between memory and imagination”.

Or, as Simon Schama puts it in his monumental *Landscape and Memory*, “it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape”. And also: “it is culture, convention and cognition...that invests a retinal impression with the quality we experience as beauty”.

A perverse kind of cultural blindness, however, also enabled 19th century romantics and early ecologists to see landscape as wilderness when it was in fact (though only partially of course) the work of other human beings. Yosemite is the classic example of this visionary myopia. Schama again: “Even those landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product...The brilliant meadow-floor which suggested to its first eulogists a pristine Eden was in fact the result of regular fire-clearances by its Ahwahneechee Indian occupants.”

John Muir, the father of the White Man’s Yosemite, not only tended to ignore the Native American contribution, he saw the landscape itself as primeval literature, a kind of sacred text in tree and stone. This view was shaped, according to a new study by Dennis C. Williams, by his Presbyterianism, which held that we know God first by “the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book”.

But while Muir liked to ignore the human history which was written on the landscape long after God had finished with it, words themselves are never innocent. Some are chosen rather than others, so that our naming of the landscape is always a political act. We know this well in Ireland – think of Derry and Londonderry. Brian Friel, himself a partial resident of that divided city, has written a superb and appropriately ambiguous play, *Translations*, about the stripping of Gaelic names from the Irish landscape by the British Ordnance Survey in the 19th century, an exercise in linguistic eviction by military map-makers.

Military men in Yosemite performed a physical eviction when the US Army’s Mariposa brigade attacked the Ahwahneechees and deported those they did not kill. Rebecca Solnit, in “Savage Dreams: a Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West”, recounts a remarkable moment in this process. As they were rounding up survivors, the soldiers carried out an act of naming that betrayed both bad conscience and a deep ignorance of

where they were. They told the Ahwahneechee leader, Tenaya, that they were naming one of the region's most beautiful lakes after him. Tenaya was underwhelmed by the White Man's compliment. There was no need to name the lake after him, he replied, because it already had a name: Py-we-ack. But landscape as well as history is written by the victors, and you will only find Lake Tenaya on the map when you visit the park today, and stay in sumptuous luxury at the Ahwanee hotel. Beyond its huge plate glass windows, over a crisp glass of sauvignon blanc, you can see a spectacular 'wilderness'. But this wilderness landscape has been constructed in our minds, to a very considerable degree, by the enormous volume of literature – and Anselm Adam's poetic photographic images must surely be included in that category -- which the park has generated.

Peter Mathiessen makes a similar point in his novel, *Lost Man's River*, when he writes about the creation of a national park in Florida. The policy was that "the region be returned to its natural condition as a wilderness" with all signs of man eradicated. "What do those idiots mean by 'natural condition?'" one of his characters asks. "Chatham... Bend is nothing but shell mound, don't they realize that? One huge Indian midden, built by human hands!"

Authors like Solnit, Mathiessen and many others have in recent years helped us to see more clearly that landscape is a palimpsest in which human handiwork is almost always visible, once you scrape away a layer or two. Contemporary literature, then, may be approaching a little closer to the daunting task which I suggested earlier may be the obligation of the writer: the marriage of the human word with the physical world.

And now we should go for a long walk up the river...

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