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**Literary Landscape as Real Landscape.
Ideas from Gabriele D'Annunzio (A Case
Study: *Il Vittoriale* by Gabriele
D'Annunzio)**

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Aesthetic research aims here to understand the meaning and value of the landscape from the standpoint of an analysis of forms. The experience of perception and human activity, the illusion of sentimental reading and the dematerialization of our object may be considered from both the vantage point of history and culture, as well as from the particular angle of literary image. In the latter case, landscape becomes a diffuse art, a *poiesis* and poetry, scattered everywhere; we can observe a field of symbolic interactions between man and this immense living sculpture, namely nature modified by man. At the outset my approach is interdisciplinary, but it lies open to metaphor. It is the contention of this paper that an exchange of standpoints takes place between subject and object in the overall design of the real that surrounds us, represented and imagined, expressing the problems of memory, identity, and composition according to an index of characteristics and on this occasion presenting a poetic, rather than sociological or anthropological category in the hermeneutics of the landscape. In what follows, then, I shall comment on the so-called creative or imaginative genius that in many ways agrees with the ideas of enigma and splitting into two.

The aesthetic sphere deals with the relationship between what literature imagines, describing it, and describing also that which is directly visible to the observer: situations and characteristics may come together in a case to be analysed, or in a series of cases capable of providing a frame of typologies of vision, if necessary in relationship with a rhetorical discourse which will be connected in particular—at least as far as my research is concerned—to metaphor. In the case I have chosen to examine, cultural layering makes spontaneous, or even natural, a mental and inventive attitude that can be called wonder, a frame of mind based on a strategy of artifice allowing us to look at landscapes not as they are, but as how one might wish to see them.

Everything is natural precisely because everything is profoundly cultural. This fact also concerns psychology in the modes of behaviour of our mind. Under certain conditions observation and contemplation restore a state of wonder towards nature capable of substituting the characteristics and expressive properties in a landscape with others belonging to our imagination and emotional temperament. We sometimes substitute one waterscape for another, or a mountainscape for another, or we wish to see a Greek landscape in an Apulian one, or to feel as though we were in Mongolia when we are in fact in Castelluccio Valley. We transform the colours and shapes of a Tyrolese castle into

a Tibetan village and so forth. Far from being recent, this is an inherent part of how we have gazed and contemplated over the centuries. A case in point is Villa Adriana and the cult of the mythological memories that the emperor "concretely" wished to have around him for the pleasure of identification in an exceptional place. In descriptions, literature only promotes its landscape as if it were objective and real. We witness an exchange: the real landscape becomes literary landscape, literary landscape becomes real landscape because both one and the other have descended into myth, in a principle of narration whose enigma always returns. The vehicle is metaphor, that is a rhetorical figure belonging to the mental representation and language of the world, the things of the world organised by our gaze.

It is, nevertheless, as though we were haunted by the idea of a universal language borne by metaphor; as though we were induced to believe that an eloquence of nature existed, as proposed by TW Adorno in *Estetica*, 1970, it. ed. 1975, pp.89-112.¹ We could characterise and define a visit or walk through panoramic points and movements so as to interpret things around us as an articulation of images which accompany us and affect us—a set of signs that recall a language. This experience with its wealth of images, figures and thoughts is a fluctuation similar to music and substantially irreproducible. A nature mediated by the techniques of mechanical and virtual reproduction risks the annihilation of its meaning and value; for example Turner and the Impressionists not only reproduced the spirit of the landscape, but *translated* it. Mere subjectivity would be insufficient for defining that pleasure which overpowers us, as if by enchantment, in a perceptible passive registration of the world and that may be called enigma. It is, then, the dissolving of the ego in the imagination which produces such pleasure.

Nature appears to be a real *spettacolo* (Spectacle) demanding that we participate keenly and fully: clouds, flashes of lightning, patches of sky, sea-storms, deserts, etc. are scenes worthy of Shakespeare and ones which he did, in part, represent. An elusive suspended language transpires from his figurative expressions—a language made up of traces and cues that refer us to a secret syntony. And the ways of handling such harmonious responses differ greatly. This is known to us through countless literary and pictorial examples, from Friedrich to Corot, and Leopardi to Proust. In contemporary literature the aesthetic gaze has infinite evocative implications which give rise to other landscapes. At this point I quote one of the most compelling passages of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche*,

La haie formait comme une suite de chapelles qui disparaissaient sous la jonché de leurs fleurs amoncelées en reposoir; au-dessous d'elles, le soleil posait à terre un quadrillage de clarté, comme s'il venait de traverser une verrière; leur parfum s'étendait aussi onctueux, aussi délimité en sa forme que si j'eusse été devant l'autel de la Vierge, et les fleurs, aussi parées, tenaient chacune d'un air distrait son étincelant bouquet d'étamines, fines et rayonnantes nervures de style flamboyant comme celles qui à l'église ajuraient la rampe du jubé ou les meneaux de vitrail et qui épanouissaient en blanche chair de fleur de fraisier.²

The hedge resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars; while beneath them the sun cast a chequered light upon the ground, as though it had just passed through a stained-glass window; and their scent swept over me, as unctuous, as circumscribed in its range, as though I had been standing before the Lady-altar, and the flowers, themselves adorned also, held out each its little bunch of glittering stamens with an absent-minded air, delicate radiating veins in the flamboyant style like those which, in the church, framed the stairway to the rood-loft or the mullions of the windows and blossomed out into the fleshy whiteness of strawberry-flowers.³

A plethora of associated things are brought to mind, in a principle of continual analogies, in a ceaseless flow, in the tempo of the mood, and in the pure sacredness that affirms the mind's ability to see. And we are there, already before the work of art in an ecstasy of "as ifs". As contemplators, unknown protagonists, we live those images prior to their inventive elaboration. As Ernst Cassirer states in *An Essay on Man*,

I may walk through a landscape and feel its charms, I may enjoy the mildness of the air, the freshness of the meadows, the variety and cheerfulness of the coloring, and the fragrant odor of the flowers. But I may then experience a sudden change in my frame of mind. Thereupon I see the landscape with an artist's eye - I begin to form a picture of it. I have now entered a new realm - the realm not of living things, but of 'living forms'. No longer in the immediate reality of things, I live now in the rhythm of spatial forms, in the harmony and contrast of colors, in the balance of light and shadow. In such absorption in the dynamic aspect of form consists the aesthetic experience.⁴

The metaphoric discourse belongs to us mentally even before its elaboration in terms of literature and painting.

There is something ancient in this dimension. I mentioned earlier Villa Adriana. But over the past three centuries our gaze has been directed backwards in time as if to regain possession of the void left by the separation between man and nature that took place even earlier—a void that provides a meditation on time. A nostalgic "reflection" on the end of the original enchantment transpires when, as Klages puts it,⁵ earth, sky, clouds, water, flora and fauna enshrouded our individual life as in a sarcophagus, interweaving it into the grandiose universal occurrence. It is an enchantment that also—more broadly speaking—reminds us of an interest in the knowledge of classical antiquity, as if some therapeutic practices were connected to the sense of the unity of nature; this can be seen in the reputation of *Air, water, and places*, a book attributed to Hippocrates, or, at least, in his possession. A whole world, incited in part by scientific inquiry, is disclosed before our eyes, crossing the threshold of immediate reality and allowing us to glimpse the depths of those elements that underlie every aesthetic discovery. But the catalogue of places and landscapes in this metaphoric discourse of the language of nature is infinite.

The city, too, is landscape. From this we can *go out* into nature (as Socrates and Phaedrus did), in an exchange between the city and countryside, but we can also *enter* the city to "inhabit" the contemplation of the architectural structures. Every architectural work is landscape painting that, in turn, fosters a didactic relationship between environment and spirit. This changes according to our transition, the mobility of our gaze, just as it does to the light and seasons. The view and our body undergo a contemplation between the interior and exterior, between that which is outside and distant and what is inside and smaller and that is articulated before our eyes. There is a close correlation between the aesthetic experience of the natural and urban landscape. Given this, just as man inhabits the earth, so too he inhabits the city. Small or large urban conglomerations can be the realisations of Renaissance or modern utopias, but the city or metropolis, with its *piazze* (squares), districts, buildings and monuments may be disorientating thereby creating a starkly different impression. H. de Balzac (*Ferragus*), for example, describes Paris as the most delightful of monsters. However, whether the London of Fielding, Rome of D'Annunzio, Paris of Baudelaire, Turin of Nietzsche, Prague of Kafka or the Venice of Ruskin, what counts is the meeting with the place dreamt of and imagined, the one that is replaced with the real one. There are two different literary descriptions of the same place differently conjured up that correspond to two different places in the representation.

In this context of mental processing, Gabriele D'Annunzio springs to mind, inasmuch as he was sensitive to both classical antiquity and to the modern — if we wish to find a case of realised literary landscape ("guardian of tradition, promoter of modernity"). We could also cite the "lookout" that Victor Hugo had built atop his Hauteville House, in Guernsey, a sort of glass cage lending itself to contemplation of the sea. But D'Annunzio is a prime example in this respect. It suffices to read *Le Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra, degli eroi* (*In praise of the sky, sea, earth and heroes*), the various notebooks, journalistic writings, and numerous fragments from his works to obtain an idea of his veneration for nature and landscape to the point of reaching a true **composition** of the countryside and landscape under the guidance of poetic knowledge. This is what happens at Il Vittoriale. I could have compared landscapes in the portrayal furnished by Petrarca or Manzoni, Dante or Pirandello and in the representation of what they truly are. However, D'Annunzio's choice stems from the fact that in the place recreated at Gardone, the poet invents an architectural work of the vision that fuses reality and artificiality, memory and illusion. Garden and landscape coalesce in a love affair of the gaze. The meaning of a love affair does not normally depend on a "before" or "after"; it is inconsistent, erratic, and does not privilege a system of observation. But here, at Il Vittoriale, on the other hand, a curious novel fact exists: a love affair, well thought-out and well-structured as in a literary text, according to a process of similitudes, advanced by symbolist and futurist cults. It has a component that can be considered oneiric, because it is inextricable from fantasy. And yet it is also an historical document in a sort of spatial madness. It is enough to allow oneself to follow the flowing of the time of vision, in a fixed position, almost from any viewpoint, in the garden and park, to realise that one is entering into a different phase of seeing — the principle of contemplation; but as the Poet and intended and saw it, not as we might decide. Everything stands in the place of another. We are ushered into a literary garden-landscape where it is the metaphor that holds sway. In general we always see fragments, relics of reality, experiences, signs and memories that come to us reassembled, in a seemingly vacillating wholeness. Our wandering gaze wins. Scattered pieces of history and deeds are strewn like ruins of a possessed soul.

A sequence of similitudes is here perceptible because it is in this very place that metaphor is the genius of the *Imaginifico* (Imaginary). The metaphor is generally understood as one word used instead of another to render a referent with a different meaning. It is a question of a semantic transfer that is based on a relationship of resemblance. Substantially one image here substitutes another, one landscape another. Just as D'Annunzio imagined architecture,⁶ so he imagined the places on architecture.

Vistas from Il Vittoriale:

- 1) The ship Puglia, extraordinary scenery inside the park, worthy of a great director, invites one to see not of a lake in front of one but the Adriatic Sea. It actually guides this sort of vision.
- 2) At a point of the park we could be at San Giusto, in Trieste, looking towards the great gulf. That particular point favours the memory and conjures up the distant place in one's mind's eye.
- 3) In the private gardens, due to their composite structure on terraces, we would seem to be in Ravello, a spot that still commands one of the most beautiful views of the Mediterranean: an exceptional belvedere.

- 4) The stones of the Carso, signs disseminated in a limited green space allowing him to shuffle between those memories like a giant in a miniature geographic landscape. Theatre of distance and proximity that exalts the protagonist.
- 5) The waterfall with the division between two streams, could have been devised according to Japanese, Shintoist and Buddhist models (perhaps influenced by Japanese portrayals in the Priory). Of importance seem to be the approach-routes to the waterfall, as if in a framework that becomes increasingly explicit.
- 6) The theatre evokes the atmosphere of Graecia Magna or Ancient Greece and its theatres, fire of gazes on the surrounding panorama; perhaps that of Taormina is cited in particular.

All this echoes a penchant for quotation and a taste for the antiquarian, which is everywhere copious and permeated with memories of war as of mythic evocations. In this realm of the metaphor, the real landscape—what is in front of us, moves aside, ceding its place to another landscape, the one evoked or imagined. The forms of the real landscape become actors in a different *spettacolo* (Spectacle), in compliance with an apparatus of similitude. The literary landscape imagined by the poet becomes an absolutely real landscape. The real landscape is transformed into an imaginary landscape.

The appearance of Il Vittoriale is subject to change; from *ascetario* (hermitage) it turns into a silent and fragrant island inhabited by the ghosts of the myth; a Mediterranean island, an ideal and mysterious Ithaca, yet alive, concealed by the Greek spirit, by that spirit which is, however, the result of a principle of contrast, as stated by the poet in his travels. On a cruise in 1895 he notes that the Greek spirit consists of man's continuous reaction against the *personality* of things, that things having such a precise and marked personality commanded man's respect like an abuse of power and that man reacted, thereby giving rise to the magnificent personality of the Greeks—a reaction against things by instinct of supremacy. Landscape is *stimulating*. Are the trees in the plain between Patros and Pirgo, standing so far apart, not *personae*? In front of the Museum of Corinth stands a tall pine. It has its *own* form and voice.⁷ Even in Il Vittoriale we are invited to contemplate a clash of personalities: man, the Poet, things and we feel the "Greek spirit" hovering and are accordingly permeated by that Greek spirit. In another passage of the *Taccuini*, D'Annunzio states that there everything is a form of his mind, an aspect of his soul, trial of his fervour. A consonance of themes that return to the landscape as a mental category, offering the imagination space. As visitors, it is as though we were motivated by a strange *trasognamento* (reverie) to sail the Mediterranean⁸ yearning for sea, the sylvan idyll, stone and to repose, like the poet, in the voluptuousness of being different and unfathomable, at sea in a solitude brimming with apparitions and marvels. The Greek spirit, harmonic tension, comes back in a state of measured rapture. Il Vittoriale represents the fortress of essences of *trasognamento* (reverie). Looking towards the lake as if it were a secluded spot in Greece, we might even be able to see that stretch of sea which separates Ithaca from Cefalonia. We enter into a mythical place that superimposes the objective one of the lake. In the passage of the above-mentioned *Taccuini* D'Annunzio describes this place as being on the classical sea with imposing Homeric ghosts that spring up on all sides. On entering the canal they see that Ithaca is rocky whereas in Cefalonia olive groves and cypresses abound. A multitude of tall slender cypresses are dotted on the slope thereby lending a meditative appearance to the

island. Furthermore he claims he would like to explore the peaceful island on which the cypresses seem to be long spindly shadows as in a cemetery.⁹

Trasognamento (reverie). The poet never tires of asserting that his life does not exist without *trasognamento* (reverie). To him dreaming is one thing and *trasognamento* (reverie) another. Reality suddenly bares itself to him and draws near with a sort of impelling violence. All of a sudden it (reality) vanishes, loses form and is transformed, taking on the appearance of his most secret phantasm.¹⁰ Il Vittoriale, in a theoretical embrace between vision of interiors and exteriors, is the result of is this ineffable ecstasy that re-creates landscapes. D'Annunzio situates himself beyond the borderline, beyond a boundary between two worlds, where a feeling of distance and solitude arises, surrounding him and makes him like an island without roots.¹¹

¹ T.W. Adorno, *Estetica*, 1970, it. ed. 1975, 89-112 in *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London, 1984).

² Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps tempu*, Paris, 138.

³ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps tempu*, trans. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, 1996, 165.

⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (Toronto, New York, London, 1944), 168.

⁵ Klages, *Man and Earth, Mensch und Erde*, 1913.

⁶ See the important book by Carlo Cresti, *Gabriele D'Annunzio, "architetto immaginifico"* (Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli, 2005).

⁷ G. D'Annunzio, *Altri taccuini; Other Notebooks*, edited by Enrica Bianchetti (Milan: Mondadori, ed. 1976), 6.

⁸ *Dell'attenzione*, Zurich, 5th September 1899, in *Il venturiero senza ventura (The Adventurer without an Adventure)* (1924), 1107.

⁹ G. D'Annunzio, *Taccuini*, 39-40.

¹⁰ G. D'Annunzio, *Dell'attenzione*, 1104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1105.