Landscape: between Loss and History

Jean-Marc Besse

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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- 1 The discovery of landscape, according to Georg Simmel, was above all the experience of a twofold separation: separation of subject and world, on the one hand, and separation of landscape and nature, on the other. Double separation or double extraction, typically modern, which reflects a movement towards the individualization of forms of interior and exterior life. It is in the withdrawal of the human being from his/her worldly involvements, and in his/her capacity to regard the world, so to speak, from without, without taking part in it, that the "landscape sentiment" apparently came into being. But this sentiment was also the outcome of an historical moment, during which bits and pieces of the expanse of countryside were cut out and isolated by art within the global ebb and flow called nature, to be thus described as landscapes. The problem raised by landscape--a problem that stems from the history of culture as well as from metaphysics--is thus the problem that has to do with the possibility bequeathed to the human being of maintaining a relationship with "greater nature", in the very distance that separates and defines it. Michael Jakob's book comes across like a somewhat critical historical itinerary in relation to this possibility. We are living nowadays in an age which he describes typically as being an age of the omni landscape, which is essentially just the culmination of a very age-old process, during which western societies (the only ones he considers in this book) have regularly hidden the live

experience of nature by replacing it with manufactured images. It is these images which, it just so happens, have made landscapes. The on-going efforts made by sensibilities to achieve, by way of landscape as go-between, something like an “authenticity” of nature have, up until our day and age, been framed and, in the end of the day, thwarted by powerful cultural phenomena, be they scientific, political or economic. The lesson drawn from all this by Michael Jakob is, when all is said and done, somewhat disenchanted: we are living today in a world of generalized media coverage, to which landscape imagery is making effective contributions.

- 2 Augustin Berque’s latest book is permeated by the same melancholic observation, with at times the odd polemical emphasis. In this book we find the central issue of the authenticity of landscape and the relation of subject and nature, but here seen in an explicitly philosophical perspective. Berque bases his analysis on a fundamental distinction between “thinking of landscape” and “landscape thinking”, which he develops by founding his argument mainly in a reference to Chinese culture. “Thinking of landscape” tallies with the modern paradigm which, on the one hand, establishes a dualism between subject and object and, on the other, reduces nature to a huge mechanism with no end purpose. Within this paradigm, landscape becomes an object, and what really informs it, its spirit, disappears in front of the measures of a language that basically knows little about it. Conversely, “landscape thinking” is thinking without language and the sum of silent efforts made generations of peoples, neither seen nor represented as separate from the world surrounding them, but who have on the contrary stayed in what Berque calls “mediance”, i.e. they have not split their individual and collective life into two halves (subject/object).
- 3 But is it possible—and if so, how?—to get beyond the modern paradigm, or more precisely the kind of alternative (being within nature/being outside) which seems to form the thread of the two books afore-mentioned? Can landscape not be presented and analysed solely in relation to the loss mode, an inextinguishable loss that is, at the same time, the deepest mainspring? It is probably possible to adopt a serene viewpoint with regard to landscape.
- 4 And first of all, perhaps, by accepting to allow landscapes to instruct us, without any all too systematic consideration, but by bringing them in as close as possible, to the nub of the emotions and demands aroused by being in them. We can find a sort of trust in landscapes, when we associate them with journeys and narratives, with attentive eyes cast on things germinating within us and around us, and with time running through them. In their sequencing, the essays brought together by Gilles A. Tiberghien form a kind of exploration of the diverse possibilities of experiencing the world, as given rise to by the experience of landscapes and gardens (a fine essay on Albert Santos Dumont, the man who wanted to feel what it is really like to live in the air). Without nostalgia, but with the honed critic’s eye, Tiberghien finds in the gardens he describes not a world “to be rediscovered in its primal nature”, as he himself puts it, but “a reality in transformation, transitory and historically marked”. Because, just like gardens, landscapes are this, too: practical, active encounters between people and nature, from which deep meanings are to be extricated, the way the photographer Alex MacLean does.
- 5 These encounters—i.e. these varied ways of living in and transforming the world represented by landscapes—form the actual object of the rich book by the geographer David Lowenthal, with its fifteen essays. In the legacy of George Perkins March (whose

biography he has written) and Carl Sauer, Lowenthal shows how landscapes manufactured and fabricated by societies also convey moral values, cultural meanings, or quite simply ways of perceiving and imagining things that are typical of these societies (whence the link with nature which differs in Europe and the United States). This excludes any purely quantitative relationship with landscape, but, on the other hand, calls for a recognition of its value as memory and heritage, for example, and, essentially, of a responsibility towards its future. New landscapes still remain to be made today.