

'TO BE A LANDSCAPE': Some Aspects of Landscape Representation in Paul-Eerik Rummo's Poetry

Ene-Reet Soovik

Lyric poetry is less concerned than, for instance, narrative fiction with particular settings; however, while this is not a strict requirement, many a poem still relates to one place or another. While places have multiple characteristics that contribute to their *placeness*, landscape is one of the most significant among them. Edward Relph defines landscape as the physical, visual form of place that is capable of being described (1976: 30); it is also possible to understand a place in the sense of its landscape, with an emphasis on its tangible and visual features (Relph 1976: 31). This idea is supported by Pauli Tapani Karjalainen who observes close ties between place and its landscape, suggesting that in many cases it is the landscape that comes to one's mind in connection with a particular place. "Landscape is a means of placing oneself somewhere, an image of one's environment, even a mark of identification" (Karjalainen 1993: 68). Chris Fitter defines landscape as "the concern for an organized visual field, for localized and circumstantial description, replete with exact optical effects" (Fitter 1995: 9).

Nowadays, the optical character of landscape perception will make it a welcome subject in visual arts; however, the matter has not been so simple historically. Landscape is not a timeless universal in Western art, and the same applies to poetry. In his monograph *Poetry, Space, Landscape. Toward a New Theory*, Fitter outlines the development of landscape representation in Western poetry (including the Judaic tradition) from classical antiquity until the arising of "the narrower, technical concern, in painting or poetry, for naturalistic, pictorial effects and the composed 'view'" (Fitter 1995: 10) – the phenomenon of "landscape" that has been dominant since the 17th century and, according to Fitter, derives from the particular complex of values by which highly advanced commercial civilization, of secular and materialist tendencies, engages and construes the

natural world (*ibid.*). Fitter concedes that the landscape-consciousness of every culture is historically distinct and subjective (1995: 2), yet it appears that the values cultivated by modern society allow this particular mode of landscape-consciousness to be cherished still.

Also, Fitter claims that there are in poetry four different transhistorical matrices of perception, through which the constantly changing objects of history are viewed (1995: 11–12). It can be assumed, though, that it is not only the local natural and socio-historical conditions, but also the relative importance of the perceptual matrices in relation to one another that govern, in bold outlines, the type of landscape the reader meets in imaginative literature. Fitter stresses the multiplicity of the matrices and, accordingly, criticises the habitat theory launched by Jay Appleton for reducing aesthetic satisfaction experienced in the contemplation of landscape to a single atavistic urge to survive. According to Appleton, a landscape that is experienced as aesthetically pleasing should provide you with a prospect of view and a place to hide – "Open glades and close woodland... will be found to be a common feature of much poetry" (Appleton, quoted in Fitter 1995: 4). Fitter counters it with the argument that human landscape values are not predatory but occupational and ideological (1995: 5); also, Appleton's ahistoricity that does not allow dating the establishing of the habitat matrix in the human mind even in broad outlines.

Nevertheless, there are certain similarities between Appleton's theory and the **ecological** matrix of perception in Fitter's classification. The latter considers nature as the field of potential satisfaction of requirements for subsistence and security (Fitter 1995: 11). However, Fitter's examples of ecological perception demonstrate an interest in such features of nature as are conducive of agriculture or travelling that Fitter calls *competent space*. From classical literature, Fitter mentions Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Virgil's *Georgics*. In Estonian verse this feature is most conspicuously evident in patriotic songs praising the native land, such as, "Here the fisherman may freely trawl at sea, and from the black soil corn may grow"; or "No cedars or palms grow in this country, but there is enough fertile soil everywhere." What is preferred is obviously the useful, rather than the attractive. Crucial to this type of perception is the dimension of territorial feeling (Fitter 1995: 15). According to Fitter, ecological perception originally concurred with a sense of oneness of the world; yet in the course of time historical development has brought along the contrasting domains of cultural space, wilderness

or chaos, and mythic space (underworld, heaven, hell, etc.); a classification since then long prominent in landscape-consciousness (Fitter 1995: 17). *Competent spaces* are confined to the cultural realm.

Cosmographic perception is alert in landscape to features that illustrate religious beliefs and ideas of current cosmology. This is evident in Old Testament descriptions of nature admiring the power and glory of the Lord (Fitter 1995: 19–20). In Estonian literature a religious system-consciousness and awareness of an order operating in all things can be found in the poetry of Uku Masing, but also in case of Jaan Kaplinski whose zen-influenced poems present natural elements as belonging to one interrelated system of growth, death and re-birth.

Analogical perception receives and apprehends the natural world in terms of analogy, polarity, symbol and type (Fitter 1995: 11, 21). It covers instances of analogy of a nonreligious and philosophic kind, but there is also a certain overlapping with the previous category, if analogies are seen between the visible world and the operation of higher powers or a cosmological system. In discussing analogical perception, Fitter recalls the erotic symbolism of the nature images in the Song of Songs. In Estonian literature, a similar analogy between lush spring nature and feminine sexuality bursting into blossom can be detected in the poems of Marie Under. The place/landscape metaphor as a poetic device makes analogical perception widespread. "Literary landscape overtly beds the optical in the ideological; working by metaphor or wit, fancy or piety, it is permanently closer than art to ideation, to the world of relations, to explicit networks of thought," Fitter comments (1995: 22).

The final mode in Fitter's classification, **technoptic** perception implies recognition among the innumerable forms and configurations of nature those the perceivers have learned from their experience of art (Fitter 1995: 23). Fitter has presented his typology in the same order in which it is introduced here, and although this is not stated explicitly, it becomes apparent that historically the dominant type of perception seems to have shifted along the same scale. Accordingly, as landscape in poetry already has a long tradition behind it, there are tropes and modes that have been handed down to contemporary authors, and the use of these could be expected to prevail in significance in comparison with the three other types of perception.

Also, Fitter claims that literary representations of landscape are necessarily metonymic (1995: 2). Here, I would rather suggest the term synecdoche, as what is

of specific significance here is apparently not the phenomenon of contiguity, but rather the selection of details that are to represent verbally the plenitude of visual detail a natural landscape can offer. In what follows, some poems by Paul-Erik Rummo are discussed with Chris Fitter's ideas in mind. Rummo's fame as a contemporary classic does not primarily rest on landscape poetry, yet it seems that the texts in his *œuvre* that explicitly focus on landscape experiences provide a fertile ground for detecting the matrices of perception involved, and finding out which details carry the weight of representing the whole.

Some poems by Rummo explicitly draw attention to parallels in art by their very titles, such as the four small poems forming a mental (although not typographic) sequence, as all of them are titled "A Study at Sunset" (*Etüüd päikeseloojangul*). The term *study* – a small drawing or painting – intimates a collaboration of poetry with visual arts. Also, the trope of sunset is borrowed from painting and first appeared in poetry only after the Italian artists of the Quattrocento had discovered it (Fitter 1995: 9). Such features strongly highlight the presence of technoptic perception that relies on the achievements of artistic forebears.

The first "study," subtitled "The Sea. Summer" (*Meri. Suvi*), begins with an image reminiscent of one of the most famous beginnings of 20th century world poetry. The sun is presented as a wounded person carried on a stretcher, with blood streaming into the sea. The reader cannot help thinking of the first lines of Eliot's "Prufrock," "Let us go then, you and I, / when the evening is spread out against the sky, / like a patient etherised upon a table." Although the use of the particular image may be coincidental (however, it was Rummo who later translated "Prufrock" into Estonian), the kind of harsh metaphor was not likely to appear in pre-modernist poetry, thus bearing evidence of the artistic conventions that have evolved during the modern period. With its seaside and a stone on which people can sit to contemplate the sun, the poem introduces a typical organisation of Rummo's spare representations of natural environment: quite often these rely upon the existence of a triad of stock elements that organise the main imaginary field of visual objects – in this case the sun, the sea, the stone.

The second study, "The River. Spring" (*Jõgi. Kevad*), differs from the rest, as it is written in the form of a dialogue between the persona and the willow-trees alongside a river bank. The visual images can be gleaned indirectly from the text: the trees are presented as wrinkled and stout, worldly-wise old women with sprat-

coloured hair, so that the analogical element becomes predominant.

The third study, "The Plain. Winter" (*Lagendik. Talv*), includes the triad of the plain on which there are feverish houses with burning eyes, and the sun described as a large disc of frozen fire that gradually disappears behind the horizon. The poem contains an interesting shift in the visual field that occurs in time: in the end the plain remains alone, so that we may conclude that the houses are no longer to be seen after the sun has set.

In the last study, "The Park. Autumn" (*Park. Sügis*), the observable realia are the sun, limetrees and shadows underneath them. This time, the study is fairly introspective, and instead of a verbal representation of a visual scene the poem concentrates on the inner self of its second person central figure who becomes one with the environment, gives up his face and his name among the witches'-brooms and birds' nests, not daring to step on the shadows of the trees lest he should hurt them.

"The flight of gossamer threads" (*Härmaniitide lend*) proceeds a step further and makes the I-figure merge in the landscape – he is described as a son of cowberries, brother of dwarf birches, surrounded by reindeer lichen. The visual element is explicitly brought into focus: the speaker has found his eyes in the water of autumn lakes, across which the gossamer threads are flying. At the same time, the lakes reflect, or, to use the words of the poem, repeat the sky and the clouds, supported by the narrow shoulders of the birches. The triadic composition has doubled: the major elements of the landscape are the lake, the sky, the birches; the modifying details include the gossamer, the small plants, the clouds. This poem presents the landscape from an interesting double perspective, as the reader is likely to reconstruct the scene from the point of view of someone observing an autumn landscape in the living world or looking at a work of art on the subject, whereas the speaker's view is directed along the vertical axis: he is either looking up with eyes that are the lakes, or down, into the lake, observing the mirrored representation of nature and his own eyes.

The image of the lake as an eye has been commented upon already by Gaston Bachelard who mentions the lake or the pond that in literature often appears as "the very eye of the landscape, the reflection in water the first view that the universe has of itself, and the heightened beauty of a reflected landscape presented as the very root of cosmic narcissism" (1994: 209–10). The reflection on the lake surface can in its turn be compared with a framed artistic representation that presents a

fragment instead of a whole. One may recall here the so-called Claude glass, a tinted mirror used as a view finder in the 18th century, that enabled the spectator to enjoy a framed picture of a part of the landscape while his back was turned towards the actual whole.

A similar treatment of a lake as a mirror of the surroundings occurs in the poem "Ever thinking of Liiv" (*Ikka Liivist mõeldes*), which refers to the turn-of-the-century poet Juhan Liiv, author of both patriotic verse and fine, spare nature poetry. Central to Rummo's poem, however, is not the image of a man, but that of a little shivering lake in the middle of a snow-covered wood. The lake is in the wood, and the wood is in the lake; the lake is desperately trying to keep itself from freezing, to keep itself and the wood around itself, to keep the world in its one and only mirror. The poem that presents a landscape of the lake, the wood and the snow naturally invites an analogical reading, recalling the desperate effort in the life of the psychologically disturbed poet who represents his whole nation. The plural pronoun *we* that expresses the focal consciousness of the poem, intimates the existence of a community that shares the same space/artistic tradition.

If the poem discussed previously does not so much emphasise the immediate presence of an observer in front of or surrounded by the landscape, but rather builds up an analogy between the reading community and the landscape, there are also poems such as "On the backs of grey mists" (*Hallide udude turjal*) in which the speaker finds himself within a slowly transforming space with the dimensions of perceptible depth and height, where a path can be trodden through the wet meadow up to a wood of dark blue tree trunks. The three elements of the landscape – the mists, the wood, and the meadow – make up a scene just after the setting of the sun that has left its echo in the eyes, hands and heart of the persona. This suggests that the evening landscape (which, by the way, does indeed include the open glade and the close woodland of the habitat theory) is intensively experienced by the persona; the sun lingering within him weakens the observer/observed dichotomy. Another poem in which the point of view is that of one surrounded by nature is "I am listening to the movement of clouds" (*Pilvede liikumist kuuln*); however, in this case the question arises if a poem presented from the vantage point of one lying in the damp dark grass with his eyes closed can, in principle, be discussed under the topic of landscape that by definition requires the presence of the visual.

All in all, the poems discussed so far do not employ the position Jonathan Smith attributes to an observer of aestheticised landscape, "a landscape situates its spectator in an Olympian position, and it rewards its spectator with the pleasures of distance and detachment and the personal inconsequence of all that they survey" (Smith 1993: 78–79). Rummo's settings that we have been observing hardly function as scenes of intellectual contemplation which the observer is confronted with and detached from. Rather, the spectators emerge as participants, communicating with the surroundings or even dissolving in them.

A particular type of interaction between landscape and humans is referred to by Edward Relph who, when discussing place as landscape, recalls Lawrence Durrell's ironic environmental determinism and suggests that the idea that human beings are expressions of their landscape is to be taken partly seriously, "...the spirit of a place lies in its landscape" (Relph 1976: 30). Rummo provides a telling example of this kind of argument, making landscape determine personal – or even national – characteristics in the poem, "Here you were born" (*Siin oled sündinud*), in which the Estonian peace and balance stem from the flatness of the land where Munamägi – the land's highest hill that rises 318 metres above sea level – is the cloud frontier. The countryside moulds the mode of existence of those inhabiting it. Implicitly, the poem is also a contrastive presentation, as emphasising the country's flatness and greyness indicates the existence of different, more exiting landscapes in other places. It is a negation of the Romantic sublimity that betrays a knowledge of the tradition negated. The ensuing comparative evaluation of the native countryside is not spelled out, yet it is bound to be anything but adulatory. Thus, the subdued treatment of the countryside seems to be another conscious deviation from the mainstream of landscape poetry dedicated to apotheosis; as Fitter has observed, it is "a competitive pride of place [that] generates the most important landscaping" (Fitter 1995: 42).

Hitherto, we have seen that Rummo's verse tends to evolve in *competent space*. "Here you were born" explicitly domesticates even the woods that become a Mecca for mushroom gatherers, a continuation of the realm of human activities rather than the demonic Other to culture. However, his poetry is not entirely devoid of the untame, "wild" manifestations of natural scenery, suggestive of the models mediated by technoptic perception, that the flat land appeared to negate. The prime example would be "One who listens to a waterfall" (*Kosekuulaja*). The three elements of the scenery of this poem suggest a rugged landscape of the sublime that

consists of the woods, this time likened to a castle wall under siege; a boulder; and the rapidly falling water. No visual details are added to these stock concepts, and there are other senses employed beside seeing – the burning sensation left by the drops and the sound of water falling. The two final stanzas of the poem clearly shift into the analogical mode, turning the powerful waters into the flux of time.

At this point it might be interesting to introduce another statement by Jonathan Smith which Rummo's poem seems to contradict. Smith suggests that an aestheticised landscape (understood as scenery) that seems pregnant with meaning does it perhaps precisely because it omits any reference to what will follow and makes us believe that we have stepped out of history (Smith 1993: 79, 80). Actually, the poem does contain an intimation of the kind that could serve to support Smith's related reasoning that the durability of landscape, its ability to outlive its past, also shields history from the observer's view. The boulder has apparently been travelling around and now has remained sedentary, providing a secure foothold. History has reached its end. However, both this poem and Rummo's nature/landscape verse in general rather feature ongoing processes and changes (such as the setting sun, falling snow, etc.) than frozen moments. Even such stable elements as lakes become capable of suddenly appearing among thickets of angelica the way they do in Estonian folk tales ("The Travelling Lake" – *Rändav järv*). Therefore the poems hardly create the impression of the arrow of time having reached its teleological destination in an epiphanic moment that obstructs anything that may come.

The nearest equivalent in Rummo's poetry to the aesthetical experience Smith has in mind appears under the title "The bush and the traveller have met" (*Põõsas ning rändaja said kokku*). The poem describes a still point in the turning world: the aftermath of a downpour when the sun, again, is setting. In the atmosphere and space three qualities prevail – blossoming, scent of honey, swaying. The list is followed by the sentence "Grace of mind." (in Estonian, one-word *meeleheldus*), a feature that can be attributed both to the scene and to the persona. Thus, in a truly Romantic way nature in this poem emerges as an emblem for a state of mind, at the same time being described as offering genuine pleasure to the senses. The rosebush is in the world, in the sunset, in bloom: a triad introducing the spaces/states in a diminishing order, making them increasingly more concrete and more visual, and simultaneously indicating their presence within one another. The timelessness inspired by this particular sight sums up the poem: the wanderer, for a moment, has

become one who has been wandering. The movement and change has been left behind, the ending suggests an illusion of completion and stability that landscape treated as scenery will unfailingly evoke, as suggested by Smith (1993: 79).

And, to bring the sequence of poems observed to a close, some attention ought to be paid to the poem that served as an incentive for the present paper. "To be a landscape" (*Olla maastik*) lays the stress wholly on the landscape, as it remains obscure who the human is whom the title concerns. Throughout the poem either the impersonal infinitive (in its first part) or the ambiguous generic *you* (in the second stanza) is used.

The poem is divided in two. In the first stanza the landscape that one is/wants to/has to be is attributed lofty human characteristics such as *magnificent*, *noble*, *magnanimous*. It contains a wintry hillside, crossed by a river, with children making merry on the ice (one is likely to be reminded of Brueghel here). There is green water falling from the dam that is compared with skirts and scarves, an old woollen mill – all in all, cosy details, suggestive of inhabited spaces. Then, after the phrase "for ever and for ever," the poem steps out of human history and moves into the realm of generalised dramatic notions. The landscape acquires cliché features of a dangerous wilderness: there are cries of hungry crows, nights of wolves, darkness hangs over the land as there is no sun as yet. And the first part of the poem is brought to a close with seemingly unexpected images of a roundabout, an observatory, a vault of glass that seem to belong to an entirely separate order of things. The three realms brought together clearly correspond to the division of the world in people's consciousness into cultural space, wilderness and mythic space, the latter being represented metaphorically by images symbolising the universe in an era of research and rational world outlook that, at the same time, still conceives of space as something humans are not able to grasp fully. In this final division the analogical and cosmographic modes combine.

The second part of the poem turns the all-encompassing world-picture into a beaming painting on canvas, stored at a museum in a tiny town. The landscape (the painting?) is not named and is, indeed, unnameable, which places it outside the competent space managed by human speech. The landscape is still wintry, it radiates snow-light – a frequent notion in Rummo – and keeps the peace after a snowstorm, thus appearing similar to the lake that fulfilled the role of the keeper in the poem on Liiv. The serenity lasts until someone disturbed attacks the landscape with a knife – a fate that seems more likely to befall portraits. Thus the analogical

mode involving parallels between painting and poetry, the living world and the world of artistic creation, the poet/artist and the landscape as self-creating phenomena is magnified. As the poem exudes an awareness of creating an artistic world that becomes one with the creator, and of traditions of creating, the technoptic element embedded in artistic self-reflexivity becomes prominent again.

If we are to make some concluding remarks on Rummo's landscapes, it is worth stressing that his landscape poems tend to be generic, not presenting individuated or actual landscapes. The locations of the landscapes on the map are not specified and they seem to carry little mimetic weight. Generic elements like the sea, seaside, a lake or a river, a wood or a meadow constitute the main natural setting that is reduced to a set of prominent, clearly articulated divisions of the visual field and is but rarely attributed any particular details. The composition of the poetic landscape is often triadic, with two elements forming the stable background, while the third member may well be something traditionally viewed as impermanent in comparison with the remaining "eternals," depending on the season or the time of the day: e.g., snow or the sun. The focus is rather on processes, which could be accounted for by the necessarily temporal dimension of a verbal representation.

The favourite image of the poet is the time-honoured poetic trope of sunset. The poems also display an awareness of landscape, an accepted artistic subject, and of traditional modes of treatment of nature in art that they may either confirm or contradict. This testifies to the significant role the technoptic matrix plays in writing on nature nowadays. On the other hand, the cosmographic perception seems to remain in the background in Rummo's case.

Yet in the end it is to be admitted that, as, firstly, "localised and circumstantial description" does not seem to be primary among Rummo's concerns, and quite often we get a sketch of the scene in its broadest outlines only; secondly, the settings are presented from the position of a persona actively involved in the surroundings, rather than as seen by someone admiring an open vista from a fixed vantage point; and, thirdly, other senses may also be employed besides the visual, the use of the term *landscape* in its strictest sense may be debated in Rummo's case. Thus, it may have been more correct to speak of his "environments" after all.

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