

Landscapes of Memory – Narratives of Past Places

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During my fieldwork on ‘the ethnography of memory’, intended to reveal different perceptions of the socialist past of the rural populations in two different regions of Poland, a population which after the Second World War stayed in its original place and a population which was transferred to lands previously inhabited by Germans, I was surprised not so much by the existing similarities between the memories of the two populations but by the common lack of landscape and nature in descriptions of the recalled places, although we asked people to elaborate on the subject. How is it possible that nature and landscape, which constitute such an important ingredient in the lives of the two populations, were not present in the oral descriptions concerning the past? Please note – and I will come back to this later – that landscape was not present in oral accounts, but it is present in peasant written documents. Sometimes, under direct anthropological interrogation, elements of landscape started to appear, but in a particular form as engendered or imposed by the we/they relation.

The reason for this mysterious lack of landscape may only be explained if we take into account the specific mentality, and ways of categorising reality, which dominate the rural culture. Despite uniformity of cultural models, village communities preserve a number of distinctive features. But first of all I want to make it clear that I will discuss the ‘landscape’ and not the ‘space’, as there is a difference between the two. Although the landscape is dependent upon the culturally categorised space, its meaning cannot be reduced to it. On a very general level, one can compare the relationship of landscape and space to that of the language and code described by Yuri Lotman (Lotman 1999: 31–32). In his opinion, language is a code with a history, and landscape can be described, analogically, as a space with a history that tells us more about the people to whom it belongs than of the landscape itself.

Numerous authors note that peasant narrations do not contain landscape or nature as ‘objects of contemplation’. Even when they appear, they function ex-

clusively as conventional signs, where nature is symbolically marked but is not analysed. 'In most cases it is an incrustation of the background rather than an autonomous subject in the foreground, ... there is no image of nature, i.e. something that comes in its place and acts as its emotional equivalent, a verbal or iconic representation.' (Sulima in: Mysmy... 1994: 133.) Consequently, we have a meadow, greenery, a river, the sky, a hillock, an oak – categories so universal that they lack individual marks of emotional bonding with the place; they do not identify anything. What is more, even in peasant literature, when nature appears, it is so schematic and conventional that in written folk poetry, among other forms of expression, it is semantically empty and transparent.

One of the suggested explanations for this strange non-existence of nature, presented in the ethnographic literature, is that 'a peasant did not assume a place outside nature, did not differentiate himself from it by some deliberate act of will' (Sulima in: Mysmy... 1994: 133). He did not experience the landscape in aesthetic and ethical terms, but only on a purely sensory level. As he knew everything about nature, it was transparent to his vision.

However, this answer will not do. Why not? This brings to mind an example from a different culture and context than the one discussed here, but which is nevertheless relevant. It is a story by Nigel Barley about the Dowayo tribe in western Cameroon, included in his excellent book *The Innocent Anthropologist* (Barley 1997). Barley compiles European ideas about the knowledge of Africans regarding their natural habitats, where they are perceived as superb experts, with thorough understanding and great attention paid to the surrounding nature. However, Barley demonstrated in his research that his knowledge of the local nature significantly exceeded the knowledge demonstrated by the Dowayo. Barley jokingly stated that the Dowayo would not be able to tell a lion's paw-prints from motorbike tracks and if they had adequate technical resources, they would get rid of wild animals, which they regarded as useless (Barley 1997: 106–107).

In our case, if we want to avoid the superimposition of town-dweller ideas on peasant ideas, we should search more deeply for better explanations of the lack of significant landscape. Some light is shed on this question by the use of nouns without adjectival 'bells and whistles' when describing landscape. Descriptions contain only such attributions as 'beautiful', 'nice', 'ugly' or 'a lot' (e.g. of meadows), 'more' or 'less' (of forests, fish in the river etc.). This narrative form dominates in peasant descriptions. In order to explain this phenomenon, we

need to refer to the rudiments of thinking that characterise village communities in Poland.

Bruno Schulz once wrote that ‘the essence of reality is meaning’ and this perfectly sums up the previously mentioned way of thinking (Schulz 1973: 335). We could also quote the words of Polish anthropologist Ludwik Stomma who wrote that ‘myth does not seek harmony with sensual reality, but with meaning’ (Stomma 2002: 161). Consequently, in peasant narrations discourse is typically purged of all elements – even if empirically real – of secondary importance with regard to the meaning. Also, peasant narration uses such narrative devices, symbols, and representations which would prove ‘the vital essence’, bringing the heart of the matter to the present and future generations.

It follows that the non-existence or conventional portrayal of landscape in peasant narrations is an element of language and culture, which typically uses adjectival-less language. In fact, peasant culture is generally the culture of silence (Mysliwski in: Mysmy... 1994: 134). A word in this culture has the status of a symbol, a profound metaphor, where sometimes a single noun signifies a whole microcosm of relations and demonstrates a complex network of meanings. A peasant does not need adjectives because he can draw on the richness of the name itself. It would be naïve to assume that lack of landscape in peasant narration means it is unimportant to village culture. Such an opinion may be disproved by the fact that, although peasant memories lack ‘contemplated landscape’, they abound in topographical vocabulary (even if it is rather schematic). Ethnographic materials are full of records uncovering a vast amount of semantic stereotypes that accompany particular places of peasant surroundings. After all, a peasant perceives the relationship between himself and nature as almost symmetrical – without him ‘the land is helpless, it will not be domesticated, it will not open and it will not close’ (Mysliwski in: Mysmy... 1994: 134) and he cannot find his purpose in life without land. In his culture, landscape is a phenomenon located inside and not outside.

As an internal reality, it is subject to the same kind of valuation as other elements of his world. The region of familiar, domesticated topography is perceived as beautiful – as in the case of the groups living in the plains:

I like it where the plain is; when I was in America I saw a mountain, and this was an awful view. And when it’s flat wherever you look, so that you could roll an apple, that is beautiful. Where a level field is perfectly flat, a lake, that’s most beautiful. And when

there are mountains, sands, forests, you don't even want to come back. But a man must live where there are mountains, even if it is not so nice. (Olędzki 1971: 185.)

'Domestication' or 'familiarisation' of the landscape is the main factor of its transformation into a value (i.e. 'the beauty') that can be proven by, for example, narratives of those who settle in places totally different from those who left: the new environment, as quickly as it is adapted, becomes 'natural' and 'beautiful'. The 'beauty' is also attributed to useful elements of the surroundings: fields, fertile soil, gardens 'full of tomatoes, cucumbers, currants, and gooseberries', where the only 'useless' or purely aesthetic elements are flowers. The link between usefulness, which encompass not only its most explicit dimension but also such extensions as 'access to workplace' or 'material status', and aesthetics is apparent in such expressions as 'that is a place like many others; everywhere is the same – poverty is everywhere'.

On the other hand, an attribute attributed to a foreign landscape is ugliness. The admiration for that kind of landscape is an experience of people from the outside, who are unfamiliar with the object of their admiration. Such a landscape also has the potential for being misleading (after all, this region is unknown), for uselessness, and for wildness:

I especially like fields with different grains, then meadows, and finally forests. [---] In my opinion, if a forest is nicely planted in rows, then it's a sight to see, as in the case of rye or potatoes. [---] It's beautiful where rye and potatoes grow. That's what I think is most beautiful; it's God's gift for man to use; and haystacks look nice too. Forest is not the same. [---] Apple trees and plum trees are nicest, 'cause they have nice fruit, tasty if it is ripe. An apple tree decorated with fruit is very beautiful. Other trees are not the same, and I don't even like to look at acacias. (Olędzki 1971: 185–186.)

And, as in testimonies of the Poles transferred to lands previously inhabited by Germans, we can read that '...the German ghost didn't leave the region completely. Its ugliness concentrates in the architecture of some houses, and especially in those "touching details", mementos and writings. New owners quickly rebuild houses after their own fashion.' (Strzeszewska-Bienkowska 1946: 29.) We found also such expressions as: 'How can I like other places as I don't know anyone from there?'

As we can see, Polish rural culture shows a clear pattern of juxtapositions, which to a large extent model the presence of landscape in peasant narrations:

inner world (*orbis interior*) – beautiful – domesticated – known – useful

outer world (*orbis exterior*) – ugly – wild – unknown – useless

‘The very fact that a given phenomenon belongs to orbis exterior, outside the scope of things domesticated, useful and known, determines that such a phenomenon will remain unknown and thus unworthy of consideration.’ (Stomma 2002: 166.)

The above contradicts the statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote about the priority of classification logic over pragmatics (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 19). It also violates the previously mentioned principle expressed by Ludwik Stomma that myth is superior to the logic of practice. We must also reject the resurfacing opinion that ‘the birth of a landscape’ occurred when the perception of it was detached from the concepts of usefulness and moved towards aesthetic categories (see, for example, Pietraszko 1992: 109). As we saw, in peasant culture beauty (an ‘aesthetic category’) is associated with usefulness.

As I have mentioned before, there is a clear-cut distinction between the functioning of landscape in the spoken and written word. Writings (e.g. in peasant diaries) only recreate the landscape which we typically know, which is portrayed in literary descriptions, paintings, and films. The author feels a different form of detachment from such a landscape because of its strangeness. This is no longer an inner landscape but a product of the outside perception; it is a part of ‘publicised’ narration, permanently objectivised, easily separated from the initial context and having qualities of other similar products. The written word imposes its own conventions of presentation, in which ‘the adjective’, missing in peasant, spoken narrations, becomes one of the principal constructional elements.

Another element modelling landscape in narrations discussed here is human memory. As we know, memory is a mechanism of the semiosis of the past, where the subject of the story of the past is shaped by what is currently taking place in the social environment of the narrator. Consequently, by becoming a part of the narration of the past, landscape becomes an element of the currently negotiated present. This is exemplified by stories of people who visited their homelands when they were under the control of other nations (Poles talking about places in the Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, and Germans talking about places in Poland). It turns out that all these stories are alike. A reoccurring theme in these stories is the physical degradation of such places and that is especially visible in the narratives of former places of residence (the case of the second group mentioned at the beginning of the paper). They were often described as not worth visiting, as there was nothing interesting to see or to do because, as was stated, ‘no one survived’, ‘everything died’ or ‘everything was destroyed’ and ‘nothing remains’.

In fact such opinions can often be substantiated by the actual degradation of buildings, streets etc. However, in the above stories such degradation is associated with the whole landscape and the current inhabitants. This is the effect of detachment, strangeness, and perception of the same 'through different eyes'. In the case of such stories 'the past' becomes the sign of truth as often happens in folk narrations, where the effect of 'authenticity' is achieved by an appeal to the past, or to beginnings (see Sulima in Mysmy... 1994: 15–16), and truth, beauty and order belong to the places of memory, rather than the current places which have become unfamiliar. From the present vantage point, the landscape of a given place preserved in memory is less important: what matters is what currently holds value, and this can be landscape which is now perceived as a 'product' that can be sold (if there are tourist-attracting features of the landscape) or utilised in some other way.

To sum up I would like to stress that landscape is semiotic in its 'nature' because it stands for something else than itself. Its subject is not the same as the perceived object of nature because it is a representation based on interpretation. Observation of nature is based on selective perception of its elements and features, i.e. differentiation and accentuation of some elements at the expense of others. Selection takes place on the level of an inter-subjective system of values (classification) specific to a given culture. Attribution of values to landscape is connected with a certain type of detachment (as we have already seen, this can be detachment due to differences, as in the discussed rural environment, or detachment due to strangeness). A given value allows landscape to be transformed into a cultural asset, which will lead to its commodification. Consequently, in rural culture there are currently two parallel types of landscape: the internal and the external (associated with models of general culture, with 'a product' for tourists).¹ At first sight we could conclude that they have a common set of references, that they only differ in what is 'significant'. But that is just an illusion, because cultural calibration also affects our perception. In the words of Kirsten Hastrup: '...the space in which we move has already been structured by our experience and our history: the physical environment assumed a social context from the first steps people took in nature.' (Hastrup 1994: 11.)

¹ This difference is especially evident if we look at the community of Polish highlanders, who, while being attached to the type of thinking I have presented, also provide for themselves by 'selling' the mountainous landscape to tourists.

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