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Aesthetics of the Italian Landscape

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The study of the Italian landscape and its exemplars calls for a gaze that can pursue two different but closely related approaches, namely, the cultural and the aesthetic. The fact that a considerable portion of our country has been degraded or spoiled by industrial development requires that we discuss the history of Italy, from the standpoint of both preservation and innovation. In this way, we come to see the Italian landscape as the product of images that literature as well as the visual and plastic arts have ascribed to it in the course of history. From the models of ancient Greece in southern Italy up to those of 18th-century Europe, proceeding from the Middle Ages and their Romanesque and Gothic forms, the Humanist ideal of classicism, and the Baroque age, when the Italian landscape became an “aesthetic ideal” for intellectuals in other European countries traveling to our beloved places, contemplation and work, the figurative arts, and agriculture all contribute to the creation of a unitary image. World view and the experience of things fused together in transformations and memories. What we may refer to as the art of the Italian landscape emerges from these considerations. For centuries, the Italian landscape, in all its variety, was an authentic objective in the quest for beauty. The Grand Tour, the famous educational trip undertaken especially by young English, German, and French nobles, with their tutors or aspiring artists, between the 17th and 19th centuries crowned this quest by illustrating and celebrating the excellence of the Italian landscape: a fusion of myth, nature, culture, and history. Numerous notes and travel diaries, drawings, paintings, and literary descriptions illustrate this fact. (Fig. 1-12)

A Brief History

The birth of the landscape, as awareness of the landscape approximating the recent or modern sense of the term, occurs essentially in Italy with Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* (1336) and Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco *The Effects of Good Government in the Countryside*, 1338-1340, Siena Palazzo Pubblico). We might also mention earlier references, including some extraordinary images of nature in Dante: “The rivulets that down to the Arno flow / From the green hills of Cosentino, and make / Their channels cool and spongy as they go,” and “Where a wall of mountains rises / To form fair Italy's border above Tirolo / Lies Lake Benaco, fed by a thousand sources” (*Divine Comedy*, *Inferno* XXX, vv. 64-66; XX, vv. 61-62). Petrarch and Lorenzetti, however,

initiate a great revolution in seeing, annotating, and recording – Petrarch, by capturing the aesthetic pleasure of a vista and a stroll and Lorenzetti, by offering us a very important visual document of the territory. The real landscape, then, presents itself to the mind where it unfolds through a process of descriptions, emotions, feelings, and representations. In the mid-1300s, there arose the need, which was latent for centuries, to formulate a principle of the relationship between mankind and its surroundings through a series of useful and aesthetically very profound images. In the light of this new awareness of the landscape as an exchange between the subject and the natural object, a modern form of assessment takes shape. That is to say, nature becomes beautiful when it approaches art. Prior to the Middle Ages, instead, art was beautiful when it conformed to nature, which was considered to be a manifestation of the divine. Therefore, in Petrarch's letter cited above and in other works (consider the poem "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque" "Clear, fresh sweet waters", Canzoniere [Songbook], no. CXXVI, written around 1340, as well as the image evoked of Fontaine-deVaucluse, a lovely commune in Provence), we have a first important expression of sensibility to the landscape understood as vision, contemplation, and an end in itself. We read in the poet's letter to his father: "At first, owing to the unaccustomed quality of the air and the effect of the great sweep of view spread out before me, I stood like one dazed," and "I turned about and gazed toward the west. I was unable to discern the summits of the Pyrenees, which form the barrier between France and Spain; not because of any intervening obstacle that I know of but owing simply to the insufficiency of our mortal vision. But I could see with the utmost clearness, off to the right, the mountains of the region about Lyons, and to the left the bay of Marseilles and the waters that lash the shores of Aigues Mortes, although all these places were so distant that it would require a journey of several days to reach them. Under our very eyes flowed the Rhone."

(Fig. 13-25)

There is something familiar in this stupor, in this admiration tinged with antiquity: Petrarch cites the example of Philip of Macedon ascending Mount Haemus in Thessaly and then recalls St. Augustine ("And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not."). All this "modernity," consisting of the attention paid to what today we would call the real landscape and the represented landscape, however, was a minority viewpoint during that age, one that was dominated, and would remain dominated until the late 1500s, more than by the "paesaggio" or landscape, by the "paese" or land, a material object linked to the use of territory, as we also evince from Leonardo's works. As regards the love of the countryside and the natural environment, how can we overlook the pleasures associated with life in the villa, the architecture of the Italian gardens of the 1400s and 1500s, 16th-century Venetian painting, the masterpieces of Palladio, the literary centrality of Tasso's writings and his theory of the natural and the artificial, and the role played by Vincenzo Scamozzi's *The Idea of a Universal Architecture* (1615)? All this constitutes a network of profound correspondences and connections

among the arts, culture, and the thought of “excellent minds.” From this arises appreciation of the Italian landscape as an aesthetic ideal, whether it be Tuscan, Venetian, Lombard, or Roman, including the perspective of Romantics, which followed from the experience of the Arcadia movement.

(Fig. 26-33)

The trajectory is an Italian one, but it is also a European one with the above mentioned Grand Tour. Additionally, in the observations of great writers like Pindemonte, Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni, up to Verga and D’Annunzio, we find a love for the landscape that we can relate to personally. In the 1900s, especially the second half of the century, with the dramatic transformation of the economy and society, such an admirable passion for nature, for the beauty of the countryside and the woodlands of various parts of Italy, was damaged.

During the last century, our national landscape was degraded by the devastation brought about by the building frenzy. The main works in defense of the monumental and environmental legacy of Italy include the following: R. Assunto, *Il paesaggio e l’estetica* (The Landscape and Aesthetics) [Naples: Giannini, 1973], A. Cederna, *La distruzione della natura in Italia* (The Destruction of Nature in Italy) [Turin: Einaudi, 1975]; *Brandelli d’Italia* (Broken Pieces of Italy) [Rome: Newton Compton, 1991], the various contributions of Cesare Brandi, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, now collected in the anthology *Il patrimonio insidiato, scritti sulla tutela del paesaggio e dell’arte* (The Undermined Legacy, Writings on the Preservation of the Landscape and Art) [edited by M. Capati, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 2001], the observations of F. Zeri in *La percezione visiva dell’Italia e degli italiani* (The Visual Perception of Italy and of Italians) [Turin: Einaudi, 1976], and the critical views of F. Ermani in *L’Italia maltrattata* (Mistreated Italy) [Bari: Laterza, 2003]. We have a cultural and historical-artistic study of the landscape especially in *Storia d’Italia* (History of Italy), edited by Cesare De Seta (Vol. V, Turin: Einaudi, 1982), a historical agrarian overview in E. Sereni’s *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano* (A History of the Italian Agrarian Landscape) [Bari: Laterza, 1961], an important historical-literary account in P. Camporesi’s *Le belle contrade. Nascita del paesaggio italiano* (Beautiful Districts. The Birth of the Italian Landscape) [Milan: Garzanti, 1992], and a reflection on the transformation of the landscape of Italy in Fulco Pratesi’s *Storia della natura in Italia* (A History of Nature in Italy) [Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2001]. Important writings by geographers include L. Gambi’s *Critica ai concetti geografici di paesaggio umano, Una geografia per la storia* (A Critique of Geographic Concepts of the Human Landscape, A Geography for History) [Turin, Einaudi 1973], Eugenio Turri’s *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano* (Semiology of the Italian Landscape) [Milan: Longanesi, 1979], and, among the works of architects, we have L. Benevolo’s *L’architettura nell’Italia contemporanea* (Architecture in Contemporary Italy) [Bari: Laterza, 1998]. Studies on the forest landscape include Mauro Agnoletti’s *Storia del bosco. Il paesaggio forestale italiano* (A History of the Forests. The Italian Forest Landscape) [Bari-Rome:

Laterza, 2018]. As well, there are the many impassioned statements of P.P. Pasolini in defense of the image of Italy, not only the artistic, monumental country, but also and especially the world of the peasants. In the last ten years, a group of researchers, in the context of literary and philosophical studies, in the fields of ethics and aesthetics, has examined the landscape, its theorization, protection, conservation, and design.

The first initiatives, in terms of legislation, for the protection of the landscape date from 1905; there is another law emanated in 1923, and then an institutional law in 1939. Certain principles are expanded upon and confirmed in December 1947 in Article 9 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic. Within the broad panorama of legislation, we need to mention the “Galasso Law” of 1985, which inspired a great wave of concern for the natural and the urban environment: defense, protection, valorization. The safeguarding of historic centers, through the creation of new parks and protected areas, during the last 20 years stems from a new sensibility and a new politics in favor of the environment. This entire process can also be found in the “codice Urbani” (“Urbani Code”) of 2004. The first national parks were created in 1922 (Gran Paradiso) and 1923 (National Park of Abruzzo). In 1956 the “Italia Nostra” association was established. Various other important associations followed, including Fondo Ambiente Italiano (the National Trust of Italy). On the history of the valorization of our country, from the standpoint of tourism, we have the birth of the Club Alpino (Alpine Club) in 1863, and the Touring Club in 1864. In 1914, the Alinari brothers of Florence published a book by N.A. Falcone titled *Il paesaggio italico e le sue difese* (The Italian Landscape and its Preservation). Prior to the Second World War, the aesthetics of the landscape was linked to a romantic and sentimental vision in the vein of Friedrich or Turner. In the work of Rosario Assunto, the most important philosopher of nature in Italy, the landscape presents itself, instead, to perception and the imagination, as an aesthetic object. It appears as an immense sculpture or architectural form of the cosmos, a limitless visual expression of lines and contours, an endless dance or rhythm of forms, an unbounded poetic language of signs, or a marvelous spectacle with neither a prologue nor an epilogue. The full aesthetic valorization of the landscape springs, within our consciousness and feeling, from the appearance of a natural object that is contemplated as an ideal place for doing and imagining. According to Assunto, the critique of the landscape as a pure and simple natural object finds justification in human production: production aimed at giving, in the course of history, a precise configuration to the organization of places, reflecting the ideals of culture and society, or production for the expression of human sensibility and fantasy.

These remarks permit us to deal with the topic of the landscape in terms of a broad range of issues, all the while respecting the two approaches noted above, namely, the cultural and the aesthetic. The variety in our perception of and feeling for the landscape at the core of these observations stems from the topic of doubling and enigma, which opens our minds to images of what appears as real, represented, or symbolic. It is a topic described by Leopardi: “To a sensitive and imaginative man, who lives, as I have done for so long, continually feeling and imagining, the

world and its objects are in a certain respect double. With his eyes he will see a tower, a landscape; with his ears he will hear the sound of a bell; and at the same time with his imagination he will see another tower, another landscape; he will hear another sound. The whole beauty and pleasure of things lies in this second kind of objects. Sad is the life (and yet life is generally so) which sees, hears, feels only simple objects, only these objects perceived by the eyes, the ears, and the other senses" (Zibaldone, 30 November, 1828). Thus a second image arises, one capable of opening up vaster and more profound horizons, where poetry teaches us how to see things. To read the landscape is to understand the nature, history, and culture of a place. This is an important reading that recovers the signs of the past, making them visible, and juxtaposing them with the more recent signs that emanate from the new requirements of possible transformations. The recognizable signs of a landscape reveal pages of a long history, from tradition to modernity. This is because the landscape is at once modern and ancient. Landscape and culture constitute an indissoluble relationship. Techniques and forms of knowledge, pertaining to collective activity transmitted from generation to generation, form a system of traditional knowledge that must be stored in our collective memory.

Works Cited:

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