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Aesthetic performativity and natural beauty. Theoretical observations on Adorno's landscapes

Abstract

After the so-called Hegelian verdict, Adorno is the first philosopher who devotes such an intense attention to natural beauty within his aesthetic speculations. This central – although unfairly bypassed – moment could be fruitfully analysed through the figure of landscapes, thematized throughout Adorno's constellation of texts. In this framework, the landscape represents more than a mere backdrop, but rather a significant theoretical spot to concretize the connection between the aesthetic performativity and the beauty of nature. Therefore, by means of a careful reading of Adorno's various formulations on the topic, this paper aims to show how the philosopher overcomes the traditional and immediate antithesis between nature and culture or even technique. More importantly, it will be investigated how a genuine aesthetic experience of nature – also in the image of a landscape – should be configured, in order to hopefully feel its now mutilated silence again.

Keywords

Landscape, Natural beauty, Adorno

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1. Adorno's landscape: between biography and theory

The interest in nature as an object of philosophical investigation was a constant in Adorno's entire thought, as testified by a consistent production on the topic, which runs throughout his philosophical activity: from the conference *Die Idee der Naturgeschichte* (1932) to the posthumous *Ästhetische Theorie*, passing through the famous *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947). Among the various considerations that such a broad thematic perspective entails, we will privilege the centrality for Adorno's aesthetic theory assumed by nature, not in and for itself, but in its being aesthetically experienced. As a matter of fact, he was the first to grant again aesthetic citizenship to natural beauty, which the so-called Hegelian verdict had categorically excluded from aesthetic reflections, coinciding – from that moment on – with philosophy of art (history). In this respect, Adorno's thought marks an innovative and original change of speculative direction, whose objective weight has long been unfairly minimized by critics. Actually, Adornian explicit formulations on natural beauty rarely appear in textual occasions destined for publication¹, although with a greater insistence in his later works. Nevertheless, its effect on Adorno's philosophical structure is by no means muffled, on the contrary it is made even more striking. As one can easily guess, an intensive engagement with this theme is perfectly in line with Adorno's effort to elaborate an aesthetics that operates not only within but also beyond the traditional boundaries of art (Adorno 1996b: 395), recognising de facto the potential of the aesthetic in performative terms rather than merely thematic ones.

The point of access, chosen by this essay to move through the theoretical complexity of natural beauty, is an analysis of the landscape, as the most suitable moment to unfold some of the crucial features of natural beauty itself. This hermeneutic operation finds its legitimacy in the inclusion by Adorno himself of the paragraph on cultural landscape in the section of *Ästhetische Theorie* dedicated precisely to natural beauty (Adorno 1996a: 101-3). Furthermore, as attested by one of these pages, aesthetic theory would turn towards natural beauty to redeem what has been – and still is – oppressed, namely as an apology “*des Tiers, der Landschaft,*

¹ On the contrary, natural beauty proves to be a substantial thematic core of some of Adorno's university lectures on aesthetics, including the winter semesters of 1958/59 (see Adorno 2017) and 1961/62 (whose unpublished transcripts are – for now – only available at Adorno Archiv in Berlin).

der Frau"² (Adorno 1996a: 99), charging the beauty of nature and the aesthetic in general with a powerful ethical value. Moreover, providing an exhaustive characterisation of the landscape element means to immerse oneself in the constellative dynamism woven among Adorno's texts. As it will be seen, the landscape is indeed subject to a more widespread thematization than one might prima facie think. In its various manifestations, the landscape transcends the appearances of a simple backdrop or anecdotal context, landing as an actual theoretical place, where fundamental conceptual plots for Adorno's aesthetic theory are condensed.

Through a textually transversal overview of his most interesting landscape portraits, we attempt to show how Adorno detects a strong performative instance of the aesthetic, which is also active in the manifestation of natural beauty. As a matter of fact, such an instance assumes particular prominence in the experience with (see Matteucci 2019) the landscape, which turns out to be the most appropriate site for the Adornian theorisation of a necessary critical revision of the vulgar opposition between technique and nature. To this purpose, Adorno enumerates concrete examples where human intervention has been grafted onto the latter without mutilating it, which can be identified both in artistic transposition and in his direct and personal experience. Indeed, retracing the leitmotiv of landscape in Adorno's philosophy involves not the least an exciting journey through the geographical places that played a specific role in his biography. By means of a constellative reading of Adorno's writings, and in light of a series of evident correspondences, the brachiological impersonality of *Ästhetische Theorie* will dialogue directly with the strong autobiographical angle of some of the essays collected in *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*. As intriguing as it may seem to linger on the insights of such a thrilling life like Adorno's one, yet we will tend to maintain a more theoretical approach. Lastly, in conducting this investigation, we will not omit to point out how Adorno poses the issue of the reception of landscapes by the subject: not only the impersonal one of theory, but also Adorno himself as immediate subject and author of the experiences with "his" landscapes.

² Since some of Adorno's works have not yet been translated in English, we prefer to standardise our way of quoting throughout the essay, always referring to the original German version, even when an English translation is indeed provided.

2. Tuscan views

As self-contradictory as it may sound, the following considerations are based on texts, whose meaning seems to be reduced to anecdotes in an almost diaristic form and personal reminiscences. Nonetheless, their nature of occasional writings should not deceive us about the value of the thoughts they convey, since they present conceptual warps of rare clarity, but of no minor complexity than those of works usually cited as theoretical masterpieces. This logic applies especially to some of the essays belonging to *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*, which one would even be tempted to deny as pertaining to the aesthetic territory. To avoid such a gross error, it would be sufficient to recall that all the materials in this collection were organised and classified under the name of aesthetics by the direct will and action of Adorno himself, who published them in 1967 with a subtitle as evocative as unequivocal: *Parva Aesthetica*. Therefore, instead of sacrificing them to the secondary role which they are often condemned to, we should rather try to gain what is theoretically significant in these texts.

The considerations that the Frankfurt philosopher addresses on the theme of landscape are mainly concentrated around the cultural landscape [*Kulturlandschaft*]. This conceptual core allows Adorno to reassert a thesis very dear to him since the aforementioned conference *Die Idee der Naturgeschichte*, and to provide real proof of it. His assumption concerns the rejection of a harshly dualistic conception of nature and history, to understand them instead in a concrete and dialectical unity that, nevertheless, does not annul their distinction (Adorno 1990b: 345-65). In his view, nature is not to be relegated to a timeless dimension, but to be grasped in the intimate historical mediation that runs right through it. The most immediate evidence of this dialectical relationship is certainly to be found in the change of our way to perceive nature itself. As Adorno explains, when nature was looming over men as an untamed power, they hardly sensed it as an object of aesthetic experience. The same applies also to the factors that worked tirelessly on the land, without developing any aesthetic feeling at all (Adorno 1996a: 102). If history penetrates so deeply into the natural structure, then it comes to maximum expression precisely in cultural landscapes. From Romanticism onwards, they impose their aesthetic stratum on human sensorium, so much so that they are considered naturally beautiful, even though essentially opposed to the non-artificiality of the natural (Adorno 1996a: 101-2).

A strong affirmation of the presence and action of a historical core of natural beauty relates what is man-made to what is not, i.e., technique as

know-how and nature itself. The fact that this link is not at all costs an immediate antithesis, as one might naively assume, is clearly stated by Adorno in the definition of the cultural landscape: "*Geschichtliche Gebilde, oftmals in Relation zu ihrer geographischen Umgebung, etwa auch ihr durch das verwandte Steinmaterial ähnlich, werden als schön empfunden*" (Adorno 1996a: 101). The human activity stratified over the centuries is grafted here without violence onto the conformation of the natural territory. This non-brutal integration of these two contrasting elements has a chance of success not limited to the pre-industrial and pre-capitalist eras. In addition to medieval towns, which fully account for this phenomenon, Adorno's philosophical challenge is also measured within contemporary scenarios, shaped by the most advanced technological developments.

The theoretical reflections outlined above reach out to the essays of *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*. Consequently, only a simultaneous reading of these two philosophical works could give us back the completeness of Adorno's investigation, where dry theoretical formulations and direct experiential moments grow together, illuminating each other. In this respect, it is worth remembering that the production of these essayistic materials dates back to the period 1958-67, the same years that see Adorno deeply absorbed in the attempts to compose *Ästhetische Theorie*, then left unfinished. Hence, it is no coincidence that Adorno himself explicitly defines *Ohne Leitbild* as a propedeutic³ to his arduous aesthetic volume (Tiedemann 1996b: 838).

In order for this connection to acquire textual concreteness, a good place to start would be *Luccheser Memorial* (Adorno 1996b: 396-400), which narrates with its aphoristic and discontinuous flow – as if in frames – Adorno's stay in Tuscany. Here, the natural and urban context are considered – in a Hegelian sense – substantial, instants of a profound comprehension of reality and rationality, of life and spirit. Observing it with Adorno's aesthetic eyes, one grasps aspects of Lucca that, on the one hand, envelop this city in an aura of backwardness and immediacy that would otherwise be lost. On the other, they do not omit to underline the manifestations of the unstoppable technical progress that permeates it.

³ Christoph Menke proposes to read this propedeuticity à la Jean Paul, in other words in the sense of a "*Vorschule*", legitimising de facto both *Ästhetische Theorie* and *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica* under the sign of aesthetics (see Menke 2006: 61).

Therefore, the substantiality of this scenario can be detected by perceiving these antagonistic instances in a possible reciprocity. Let us analyse some passages in more detail.

Adorno describes southern life as pervaded by a more authentic innocence: here, there is still a real sharing between public and private, where *“das Leben im Süden auf der Straße sich abspiele”*, *“wird die Straße zum Hausinnern”* as well (Adorno 1996b: 396). It is impossible not to notice the strong contrast that opposes these quotations to the image of Kierkegaard's *intérieur*, a symbol of a philosophical but also residential attitude, typical of the nineteenth-century Northern European middle-class. In its sterile and vain monadic closure, the private cannot help but relate to the public social structure – the street – even if only polemically and *ex negativo*. The latter is reflected within the domestic interior through the reflecting mirror, the so-called “spy” (Adorno 1990a: 61-70). These remarks will take on an even more radical and drastic tone during the post-war German reconstruction, when the withering of the private sphere will affect the dwelling itself too, now *“ohne alle Beziehung zum Bewohner”* (Adorno 1996c: 42).

Alien to such schisms, southern life proves its substantiality also in its critical attitude towards tradition. Here, even when an obsolete tradition is rightly rejected, it is still recognised the force of a subterranean and inescapable one that invokes the past by no means of reaction, but of correspondences (Adorno 1996b: 315-6). According to this tendency, Adorno is able to establish an association between the twelfth-century relief in San Frediano's baptistery and the last Picasso (Adorno 1996b: 399). Such a not-dogmatical redemption of historical memory safeguards the concept of beauty itself, endowing it with a strong ethical component, evident in a landscape, *“die dort bereits der Ruine ähnelt, wo die Häuser noch stehen”* (Adorno 1996a: 102). Adorno experiences it in the *“verwahrlostem Glanz”* (Adorno 1996b: 397) of a Luccan garden preceded by an entrance cluttered with rubbish and bicycles; or in San Michele's façade *“schutzlos, als könnte sie jeden Augenblick einstürzen”* (Adorno 1996b: 400) and yet, for this very reason, beautiful. These images of the Tuscan cultural landscape, expressions of the historical process, witness the resistance of nature – thereby of the aesthetic –, binding it to the memory of past sufferings. Therefore, they do not derive their significance from a peaceful survival outside the technological progress, but rather from their ability to account for the latter. Accordingly, Adorno does not offer us an illusory and deleterious portrait of nature, devoid of heterogeneous elements. On the contrary, he does not conceal the presence

of the highway between Lucca and Pistoia, however incapable “*die Schönheit der toscanischen Landschaft zu verbergen. So groß ist sie, daß sie noch gegen die verwüstende Praxis sich behauptet*” (Adorno 1996b: 398); or of the airplanes that regularly fly across the skies of Lucca above the Renaissance ramparts, but they paradoxically “*passen nicht schlecht dazu*” (Adorno 1996b: 398).

3. Artistic experience of the landscape

On an artistic level, it is certainly not an imitative and banally naturalistic transposition that indicates an adequate awareness of the aesthetic experience of nature. This automatically excludes all those pictorial representations that Adorno discovers in hotel rooms, which can be ascribed to the “*Bund für deutsche Hotelbildmalerei (BfdH)*” he sarcastically coined. Among “*die Heidelandschaften, die Seen mit Mondreflexen, die Gänserupferinnen und die Blumenstücke*” (Adorno 1996b: 332), one can only recognise vulgar expressions of a Kitsch that never seems to fade.

Conversely, the French Impressionists are an example of an artistic practice capable of grasping the vital value of those disturbing elements that in their paintings interrupt the irenic – and now untrue – isolation of nature. In this particular respect, they considerably differ also from their German counterpart. To further confirm the textual interweaving, chosen as the foundation on which our argumentative building is erected, we propose the following quotation from *Ästhetische Theorie* as an eloquent synthesis of the previous formulations:

Der grüne Wald deutscher Impressionisten hat keine höhere Dignität als der Königssee der Hotelbildmaler, und die französischen spürten genau, warum sie so selten reine Natur als Sujet wählten, warum sie [...] ihre Landschaften mit zivilisatorischen Emblemen durchsetzten, die zur konstruktiven Skelettierung der Form beitragen. (Adorno 1996a: 105-6)

In his essay *Im Jeu de Paume*⁴ gekritzelt (Adorno 1996b: 321-5), Adorno records how the primarily French Impressionist tendency attempts to integrate these opposing moments almost in a contrapuntal logic. It is highly significant that the term explicitly used here is *Kontrapunkt*

⁴ This is the name of the building erected for the Ballgame at the Tuileries. It became then famous for having housed the Museum of Impressionism from 1947 to 1985, later relocated to the Musée d’Orsay.

(Adorno 1996b: 321). This stands for a compositional technique – in Adorno’s case, a linguistic and speculative one too – consisting precisely in establishing a tension between distinct elements brought into a unity that however preserves their individual determinations. For this reason, according to Adorno, the Impressionists were able to successfully merge “*Die Flüsse mit Eisenbahnbrücken, die sie bevorzugen*” (Adorno 1996b: 321) with their surrounding natural environment, as Cézanne masterfully demonstrates in *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire vue de Montbriand* (1882-5).

However, it is not only through traditional art forms that a productive juxtaposition of the natural and the technical can be achieved, but to some extent also through film. The character that makes it art lies in the ability of the film to objectify an experience of images that follow one another discontinuously, similar to that of “*bunte[r] Bilder der Landschaft*” (Adorno 1996b: 355), visiting in his drowsiness who has allowed himself an ascetic time-out in the mountains. As a result, Adorno claims that “*das technische Medium par excellence ist tief verwandt dem Natur-schönen*” (Adorno 1996b: 355). The relevance of this affinity consists in sensing the – both material and artistic – possibility of a humanly worthy condition. Such a “*Rationalität, die solche Motive aufgriffe, könnte die Wunden von Rationalität schließen helfen*”, because its potential “*liegt in einer friedlich gewordenen Technik*” (Adorno 1996a: 76), not in a short-sighted denial of the latter. The chance of an application of productive forces emancipated from the purpose of an extreme exploitation of nature as well as of humans can already be glimpsed in the adaptation of functional infrastructures to the lines of the landscape: “*Was Kulturlandschaft heißt, ist schön als Schema dieser Möglichkeit*” (Adorno 1996a: 76). Therefore, the aesthetic experience of natural beauty could disclose the utopian scenario of a reconciliation between man and nature, inextricably intertwining itself with an undeniably ethical dimension (Schweppenhäuser 1992: 1412-3).

4. *Coincidentia oppositorum*

Not only the Italian views offer Adorno experiential material for his theorisations, but also the notes collected in the Engadin, entitled *Aus Sils Maria* (Adorno 1996b: 326-9), reveal meaningful passages to this extent. Just as the cows seem to appreciate the construction of roads, marching on them; so, the mountain villages are incorporated into the landscape, “*als*

wären sie von oben mit leichten Fingern hingesezt" (Adorno 1996b: 326). The landscape sketches analysed so far give an account of a balance between what is man-made and what is not, which is as fertile as fragile and extremely rare. Traces of this succeeded matching can already be found in the terminological components of Adorno's expression "*Kulturlandschaft*".

However, beside such edifying examples, Adorno juxtaposes the excruciating reality of an always more totalising domination of the natural. This is what happens "*als das Camping vordrang*" (Adorno 1996b: 327), which makes it increasingly uncommon to hear the whistles of marmots in the mountains. Similar experiences of mutilated nature can also be discerned in some of Vienna's symbolic places, right where the city used to gently integrate with the former. Adorno sadly realises it during a visit at Prater, one of the most famous and oldest public parks in the Austrian capital, so dear to the philosopher. The alterations it underwent during and after the war stripped it of its intrinsic specificity, leaving a palpable but not materially evident sense of deprivation, so that "*ein Gefühl des Abgeholzten bleibt, obwohl die Bäume nachwachsen*" (Adorno 1996b: 423). The loss of the sensation of sinking one's foot into the wooded soil, a trace of the happiness it once held, is marked by the asphaltting of its avenues, an effective measure to minimise personnel costs (Adorno 1996b: 423). "[D]er utilitaristisch verkrüppelte Fortschritt der Oberfläche der Erde Gewalt antut" (Adorno 1996a: 102): the principle of profit rules the domination over nature, which nevertheless constantly threatens the existing with its uncontrolled and catastrophic eruption.

Nonetheless, equally suspicious would be an immediate and simple Rousseau-like *retournons* (Adorno 1996a: 106): the ideal of uncontaminated and entirely pure nature is ideologically overturned, *coincidentia oppositorum*, into its opposite. This is attested by the fact that "*ähneln die Moränen, für jene Landschaft [of the Engadin] charakteristisch, Industriehalden, Schutthäufen des Bergbaus*" (Adorno 1996b: 327 and 1996a: 107). Hypostatizing a natural idyll as a still authentically practicable possibility would foremost damage nature itself, denying its historical core and with it the pain endured during centuries of mutilation. Adorno is perfectly aware of the price to be paid to abstract nature from its historical mediation and thus to return to a situation prior to human intervention. For this very reason, he acknowledges the undesirability of this hypothesis as well: progress – both in its positive and negative aspects – is irreversible. That is why, only where the Engadin landscape does show signs of human interference too, it is really able to offer an "*illusionslose[...] Wahrheit*" (Adorno 1996b: 327).

Following Adorno, an ideal of pure nature reveals its criticality as symbol of a process of complete absorption into the cultural industry and advanced capitalism, since “*Gegenden ohne Fabriken [...] gewinnen durch ihren Seltenheitswert Monopolcharakter und werden selber Luxuswaren, Komplement zum Industrialismus, in dessen Mitte sie gedeihen*” (Adorno 1996b: 408). To be more precise, the thesis of a propensity to the mercification of landscape dates back to Adorno’s reflections of the late 1920s. In particular, it takes shape in an interesting textual occasion, namely the essay *Schubert* published in 1928 for the centenary of the composer’s death. Here, Adorno focuses his critical attention against the picture postcard [*Ansichtskarte*]: a typically nineteenth-century fashion that portrays the experience of a “*Miniaturlandschaft als bürgerliches Gebrauchsobjekt*” (Adorno 1982: 23). The landscape uprooted from history imposes itself as a mythical and timeless reality, completely exchangeable and therefore commodifiable (Adorno 1982: 23). As ideological representations of a given location, postcards must not betray any traces of degradation or modernisation, so that the atmosphere of an idyllic tourist destination, perfect for an escape from real life, does not get disfigured (Mittelmeier 2019: 55).

In a sharp contrast to such an ahistorical landscape conception devoted to commercial exploitation, Adorno begins the essay with a visually and theoretically different scenario: the almost infernal lineaments of a volcanic crater and its surrounding territory (Adorno 1982: 18). As Mittelmeier argues (Mittelmeier 2019: 94-9), the philosophical image of the volcano is plausibly inspired by Adorno and Kracauer’s climb to the summit of Vesuvius during their trip to Naples in autumn 1925. Leaving aside this biographical element and the parallelism with Schubert’s music – the original intention of Adorno’s essay –, what needs to be underlined is the theoretical implication of the volcanic environment, since it undoubtedly represents the laceration of the natural perfection pictured by the postcard. This bourgeois hallucination shatters dramatically against the devastated but still fascinating landscape of the crater. As a tangible expression of the historical process marked by natural catastrophe, the latter protests vehemently with its own lacerated appearance against the imposition of an ahistorical contemporaneity that reduces everything to a homologating and generalised substitutability.

As all previous landscape analyses intended to show, an experience that would do justice to nature at the time of the wrenching domination over nature itself could only be aesthetic. In the experiential process with

the cultural landscape, the aesthetic operates by bringing into manifestation the forcefield that is generated between the moments of technique, history and nature, without unilaterally hypostatizing any of them. This means that the performativity of the former lies in the different modality through which the reality of the cultural landscape appears to us. Thereby, it is the relational instance that shines out, the almost imperceptible yet ineradicable rift that shapes the manifestation of the landscape as a parallelogram of tensions, as an aesthetic phenomenon. To this extent, “[n]ur *Aberglaube kann erhoffen, aus ihm* [a primary and monolithic element] *eine latente ästhetische Struktur herauszupressen*” (Adorno 1996b: 387).

This would explain why Adorno rejects a landscape experience that relies on the immediate antitheticity of technique and nature, i.e., that supposes to be able to separate the one from the other without losing anything essential. This is indeed a form of relationality, but an artificial one, which arises at a second stage after the independent constitution of the atomic singularities it extrinsically binds. Conversely, what Adorno proposes is a co-formation and a mutual interaction of the poles in the relational mediation itself, which – as a modal and non-substantial structure – cannot be subsistent on its own. In other words, the aesthetic acts performatively by making nothing but the already existing appear, enhancing its relational connection, usually subordinated to the related terms and *de facto* distorted. Therefore, the aesthetic proposes another *modus* of making the reality manifest and, consequently, of making it perceptible, which provides a richer and more authentic experiential content. An aphorism from *Minima Moralia*, entitled *Paysage*, offers a pregnant textual evidence of the value of relationality, stating that the deficit of the American landscape consists in the fact:

daß in ihr die Hand keine Spur hinterlassen hat. Das bezieht sich nicht bloß auf das Fehlen von Äckern, die ungerodeten und oft buschwerkhaft niedrigen Wälder, sondern vor allem auf die Straßen. Diese sind allemal *unvermittelt* in die Landschaft gesprengt, und je glatter und breiter sie gelungen sind, um so beziehungsloser und gewalttätiger steht ihre schimmernde Bahn gegen die allzu wild verwachsene Umgebung. (Adorno 1996c: 53, stress added by the author)

5. Amorbach

A privileged crucible of reflections is certainly the essay *Amorbach* (Adorno 1996b: 302-9). The narration of these glimpses of Adorno's childhood, immersed in a Proust-like atmosphere, undoubtedly recalls Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, which was edited for the first time in 1950 by Adorno himself. His text exudes an intense scent of idyll and childish naivety, which characterises the first experiences of little Teddie – later revisited by a now adult Adorno – in the small town in Lower Franconia, where he used to spend the summer with his family every year. The conceptual patterns that gather here confirm once more the centrality of the cultural landscape, i.e. “*wo die Materialien, aus denen Artefakte gebildet wurden, ihrer Umgebung entstammten und dieser sich einfügten wie manche Burgen und Schlösser*” (Adorno 1996a: 76). Amorbach and its surroundings are masterly examples of it: the forest leading up to a gate that when “[d]urchschreitet man es, so ist man plötzlich, ruckhaft ohne Übergang wie in Träumen, auf dem schönsten mittelalterlichen Marktplatz”; the feudal architectural skill at Klein-Heubach that “*Schloß und Anlagen derart aufeinander abzustimmen vermochte*” (Adorno 1996b: 306); a secret underground passage leading from a cave in the ruined monastery of St Gotthard to the monastery of Amorbach (Adorno 1996b: 302).

However, through Adorno's process of remembrance, the value of this German village transcends the strictly affective level, landing as a theoretical place. Amorbach is for the Frankfurt philosopher the receptacle of experiences that, since childhood, brought him closer to the encounter with the otherness, with the non-identical, even with utopia. The theoretical depth of the essay is further demonstrated by an eloquent parallelism between some of its passages and the following quotation from *Negative Dialektik*:

Was metaphysische Erfahrung sei, wird, wer es verschmäht, diese auf angebliche religiöse Urerlebnisse abzuziehen, am ehesten wie Proust sich vergegenwärtigen, an dem Glück etwa, das Namen von Dörfern verheißen wie Otterbach, Watterbach, Reuenthal, Monbrunn [...]. Was Proust an Illiers aufging, ward ähnlich vielen Kindern der gleichen gesellschaftlichen Schicht an anderen Orten zuteil. Aber damit dies Allgemeine, das Authentische an Prousts Darstellung, sich bildet, muß man hingerissen sein an dem einen Ort, ohne aufs Allgemeine zu schießen. Dem Kind ist selbstverständlich, daß, was es an seinem Lieblingsstädtchen entzückt, nur dort, ganz allein und nirgends sonst zu finden sei; es irrt, aber sein Irrtum stiftet das Modell der Erfahrung, eines Begriffs,

welcher endlich der der Sache selbst wäre, nicht das Armselige von den Sachen Abgezogene. (Adorno 1996d: 366)

Amorbach represents the place – whose uniqueness Adorno later retracts – where he experienced the irreplaceability, the permanence of qualitative differences as well as the very ability to perceive and recognise them. It is interesting to note how these experiences are conveyed with a certain insistence throughout the essay by auditory stimuli. For instance, the rumbling of the blacksmith's blows that "*brachten mir das Echo des längst Vergangenen*"; the sounds of the ferry on the water, which "*sind so beredt, weil sie vor Jahrtausenden nicht anders waren*"; the resounding of his footsteps on the cobblestones; the – *ante litteram* – dissonant vibration of an old, out-of-tune guitar (Adorno 1996b: 302-6). These experiential cores, which impose themselves with a relevant force in the textual development, elude the conceptual logic and the discursive language, as ciphers of something conceptually indeterminable.

The traces of the perceptible presence of the otherness scattered throughout the essay find their *climax* in the paragraph on utopia, which is placed not without reason exactly at the centre of the entire text. At this point, Adorno recounts how, as a child, he amused himself by playing in the strip of land delimiting the *Länder* of Bayer and Baden, whose he pretended to be the lord. Perhaps, something similar to what he experienced with that soil, free from the constraints of regional colours, Adorno felt during the exhibitions of the Ila (*Internationale Luft-Ausstellung*). This kind of internationalism was not the expression of an "*Einheitsstaat. Ihr Friede versprach sich durch das festliche Ensemble von Verschiedenem*" (Adorno 1996b: 304). It is not difficult to see in the *Einheitsstaat* the historical-political transposition of the system of *Identitätsphilosophie*, which does not rescue what is different, but incorporates it into the synthetic unity by means of logic identification. Thus, Adorno's philosophical effort turns towards another possibility, namely the one that in the *Einführung in die Dialektik* lectures could be defined as *Utopie des Verschiedenen*:

daß das Verschiedene nebeneinander besteht, ohne sich gegenseitig zu vernichten, daß ein Verschiedenes dem anderen Raum läßt, um sich zu entfalten, und daß – könnte man hinzufügen – das Verschiedene sich liebt, das wäre eigentlich der Traum überhaupt einer versöhnten Welt. (Adorno 2017: 105)

The utopian reference is not evoked out of context; it is rather Adorno himself who, referring to the experience of that no-man's-land, explicitly uses the word 'utopia', "*das ich damals desto besser verstand, je weniger ich es kannte*" (Adorno 1996b: 304).

Thus, the encounter with the utopian moment is not the result of an *Erkenntnis*, of a traditionally intended knowledge, but of a *Verstehen*, a comprehension of a different matrix. This brings us to inquire how Adorno succeeded to have access to such an experience in the first place. His *modus* of perceiving what was around him was strongly affected by the mimetic attitude that dominates the logic of childhood games. Following his playful intentions, Adorno interacted with that strip of land as if it were his kingdom, but at the same time "*ich keineswegs glaubte*" (Adorno 1996b: 304) it. As a matter of fact, this undeniably aesthetic gesture does not allow for any ontological increase: that soil does not turn into an Adorno property, it still remains the border between the two *Länder*. However, this aesthetically oriented approach opens up a different way of making that land perceivable, which permitted little Teddie to gain a richer experiential content out of it. Instead of restricting itself to the artistic practice, the potentiality of the aesthetic forcefully manifests its own performative instance. The latter operates by deeply sinking into the qualitatively irreplaceable singularities of the object – *parva aesthetica* – obtaining the kind of universal that the above-mentioned passage from *Negative Dialektik* asserts. The child does not know that this experiential tension can also be found outside of his favourite village. Nonetheless, his dedication to fully abandoning himself in that presumed *unicum* provides a model of experience, of an aesthetic use of the concept, capable of adumbrating the possibility of the utopian: to grasp with the concept what is no concept, without homologating it to the former (Adorno 1996d: 27).

6. *Feeling the landscape, feeling nature*

To conclude, we would like to analyse in which terms Adorno characterises the moment of aesthetic perception of landscapes in an impersonal sense as well as in relation to his direct experience. This implies, for example, questioning how Adorno conveys the landscape portraits commented on so far, starting from those belonging to *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*. Consequently, emphasis should be placed on the narrative mode through which the philosopher reports his contact with the various

landscapes. In fact, the stylistic coordinates according to which the discussion of a certain kind of experience is set up already reveal a lot about the experience itself. This is particularly true with regard to thinkers such as Adorno, who notoriously invest a large part of their intellectual efforts in a meticulous formal work on the text, aimed at establishing a profound interpenetration with the content it expresses. On the basis of this philosophical attitude, we now verify what can be deduced about the reception of landscapes from Adorno's writing

So far, in examining the occurrences of the landscape motif in Adorno's production, it has been privileged the most conceptually and theoretically relevant aspect, without paying attention to the lexical component, which, however, has interesting implications for the present investigation. If we consider the spectrum of verbs and phrases Adorno employs in his various essays, we can easily spot a trait they all have in common, in spite of the sharp differences among the landscapes they describe: the tendency to movement. To this extent, it does not matter whether it is cows marching on the roads of the Engadin, planes flying over the skies of Lucca, or Adorno himself walking in a Viennese park next to Belvedere (Adorno 1996b: 426), or on the cobblestones of Amorbach, or through the gate of Schnatterloch. The constant is rather the necessity to perceive the landscape by interacting with it, by crossing it. Even the volcanic scenario of the essay on Schubert is similarly presented: the point of view is that of a climber who ascends from inside the abyss of the crater to re-emerge in daylight (Adorno 1982: 18). An unusually inverted perspective for sure, visibly opposed to the routes of organised mass tourism that annihilates the genuine experience of nature (Adorno 1996a: 108). Nevertheless, the impulse to movement and interaction with the landscape is kept perfectly intact.

By "interaction", we do not mean a manipulation of the natural element as a working material, as it may be the case for farmers or scientists. The term helps rather express a clear distance from contemplative paradigms. As a matter of fact, the attitude "*der gespannten Konzentration*" (Adorno 1996a: 108) is emblematic of a museum-like – and therefore essentially static and frontal – fruition of works of art. Thus, according to Adorno, such disposition is inadequate to glimpse the beauty of nature, so much so that "[v]ergeblich ist meist der absichtsvolle Besuch berühmter Aussichtspunkte, der Prominenzen des Naturschönen" (Adorno 1996a: 108). In line with these considerations, panoramic points are extremely rare in Adorno's narration and when they are indeed present – for example the alleged Vesuvian environment –, they appear deeply distorted.

Unlike those intentional contemplations, natural beauty pops up as a sudden manifestation, so that any “*Vergegenständlichkeit, die aufmerksame Betrachtung bewirkt*” is harmful to it (Adorno 1996a: 108).

In the background there is once again the thorny subject/object question and the attempt to overcome their traditional opposition. The complexity and the relevance of this thematic for Adorno’s entire philosophy make it impossible to summarise it in the concluding remarks of this short essay. However, we cannot avoid mentioning how, following Adorno, the object does not abstractly face the subject, opposing it as a *Gegen-stand*, or how the subject itself is not free at all to set and categorise its own object autonomously. The former is rather an agent – at first even a reagent – towards what is imposed on it (Tavani 1994: 41-4). This is particularly true in relation to natural beauty, since the aesthetic experience of nature presents itself as an experience of images (Adorno 1996a: 103). As a manifestation that looms in all its gratuitousness and conceptual indeterminability, natural beauty escapes any fixation produced by the denotative language, which already damages it with an apparently harmless “*wie schön*” (Adorno 1996a: 108). In order to authentically experience the silence of nature, the subject must then somehow conform to its mutism. A generalised and immediate language abdication does not serve this purpose, though. As a matter of fact, a linguistic component is nevertheless essential for a full aesthetic experience, i.e., an active response of the subject to the solicitation that has seen it initially passive and taken by surprise. What Adorno therefore suggests is an attempt to adopt a language “that is consumed in the gesture of saying, without actually saying anything at all” (Matteucci 2012: 151, transl. by the author).

The immediacy – of the manifesting nature – and the mediation – of the subject – are both as necessary as they are insufficient if taken in their one-sidedness. The gain in terms of meaningful experience is only possible in the accumulation and exacerbation of the tension exploding through the contradiction generated between them. Not by suffocating it, but by crossing it in all its intricacy, aesthetic perception can finally aspire to reach a critical immediacy, that is paradoxically mediated through conceptual tools, which have aesthetically opened themselves to the encounter with their otherness (Matteucci 2012: 154). Once again, the knot is tightened around the performative and relational aspect that connotes the critical potential of the aesthetic as an operativity capable of concluding the experiential process, safeguarding – but always mediating – that gap of inexpressibility and otherness that is essentially inherent to natural beauty.

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