

Memory of the Landscape and Ethical Dwelling

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DOI: 10.2478/ejfe-2023-0018

Abstract

In this article, I intend to carry out a hermeneutic study into the relationship between the workings of memory and landscape, and the consequences that such a relationship produces for living on an ethical level. In the first part, I intend to highlight the active role played by memory in the significant interpretations of the landscape. In consideration of this aspect, I will deal with the circularity between building a narrative of the landscape and exercising individual and collective memory. In the second part, I will focus on the role that the narrative, together with memory, plays with regard to the different forms of living. In the light of such activity, living is seen as ethical dwelling for the care of the landscape and of man who inhabits it.

Keywords: Memory, narrative, landscape, dwelling, care.

Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to recall the problem of the relationship between man and landscape from the point of view of memory and narration. I propose to show that the remembered and narrated landscape helps structure the personal identity of man and his different forms of ethical living. I intend to highlight the active role played by memory in the interpretations of landscape. In consideration of this aspect, I will deal with the circularity between building a narrative of the landscape and exercising individual and collective memory. Then, I will focus on the role that the narrative, together with memory, plays as regards the different forms of living. In the light of such activity, living is seen as an ethical dwelling both for the care of the landscape and for the man who inhabits it.

Landscape and use of memory

Often when we move, walk, imagine and reflect in a particular landscape, we are flooded with indefinite, vague, confused, blurry memories (*mneme*). Thus, we are motivated to try to remember (*eanamnesis*), to become aware of something that is

trying to emerge from our distant memory. In *De memoria et reminiscencia* Aristotle uses *mneme* to indicate memory as passivity, as attachment (*pathos*) while *anamnesis* is used for memory as activity (Aristotle 1978). This distinction clarifies two dynamics of memory: there are memories we experience and memories resulting from the activity of remembering. The landscape can remind us of things and involuntary states of mind while it can also lead us to remember. Both dimensions of memory are fundamental in our relations with the landscape and in constructing our idea of landscape.

In this use of memory we discover that the landscape, like the language Ludwig Wittgenstein speaks about, is a stratified memory. Therefore, moving in the landscape means not only walking, climbing or descending, across its different levels, or strata, of its history and memory, but it also means setting out along the winding pathways of one's memory where we meet fragments of our biography, of our story and of our emotions and sufferings. These fragments derive from different temporal levels of our existence referring to places and periods of our life. It is by means of the narratives that we try to connect these surfacing fragments of memory by building a *mythos*, in other words, an intertwining of actions and passions belonging to different moments of our memory linked to diverse times and places. According to Paul Ricœur, this *mythos* is simply a *mimesis*, a creative imitation of reality (Ricœur 1983).

In this perspective, the intertwining as creative imitation constitutes the story, in other words, the landscape narrative. Through the imitative activity of the narrative, we produce a creative imitation of what we find in our memory and of what our interactions with the landscape produce in us. There is no presumption of truth but, moreover, it has the power to reveal to us what has faded into the different strata of our biological, physical, historical and cultural memory.

In short, the activity of narrating the landscape is linked to that of telling about oneself: by recounting the landscape, by projecting our narratives onto the environment, we are recounting ourselves and, in doing so, we are remembering the multiple and varied meetings with things, living forms and with people who have played a part in our lives. It is a narrative activity which intertwines with the contents of our memory. In turn, the implementation of memory makes use of our stories and those belonging to others.

The narrated landscape

Negotiating a landscape means undergoing an emotional and sentimental experience. It is just this kind of experience that triggers memories full of *pathos* and prompts us to retrace the river *Lete*: "Interior space comes into contact with exterior space and evokes it. The past becomes present. The two immense spaces of memory and landscape come into contact" (Lingiardi 2017, p. 219). Not all recollections and research into the past lead to positive states of mind, indeed not all are accompanied by happy memories. According to the period of our present lives, or our past life,

memories leave their mark on us. The act of configuring narratives is fundamental for reconstructing the past in view of the present and future plans. Besides, in a Freudian sense they may be therapeutic. Places do not only form a background to the narratives but they consent the hard work of memory. Thus, we can talk about “therapeutic landscapes”. Self-reconciliation can occur also through the narratives of one’s landscapes. Passing through the landscapes and the places we have experienced and the activity of recounting them allow us to comprehend what lies concealed in the various strata of our memory. The landscape narrative therefore becomes the means by which we can recount our own interior landscape.

Poetry offers an example of such work. Giacomo Leopardi sings the praises of his real places and landscapes. Through his poetic skill he brings to life his recollections and the revelation of interior landscapes which dwell deep down. “Memory is known to be the plot supporting the Leopardian poetic fabric since the *Rimembranze* of the 1700s” (Bonifazi 1991, p. 175.). A particular observation like a half-closed window, a hedge, a church bell, a landscape at night or the moon etc. for Leopardi become memories of “ancient images” triggering recollections which invade the poet’s life revealing a glimmer of unexpected understanding of existence, life, nature, the world of mankind. Landscape narratives can therefore become the chance to recognise not only exterior places but also the interior spaces occupied by memory. They can lead to the recognition of one’s existential condition and being in the world.

Looking at the landscape, therefore, cannot be associated with the limited aesthetic category of beauty. Moreover, neither can it be equated to an aesthetic projection of our emotions or feelings. Indeed, more often than not, it is the landscapes and places which conjure up long-forgotten memories resulting in new forms of perception and thinking. They encourage us to build narratives which turn out to be open paths towards the formation of self and one’s identity. The *who* in the narrative is the *who* that finds himself through the narratives – both his and those of others – with the use of memory. The woven memory of locations and landscapes places the *who* of the recollection and his identity in a space and a time. In this way memory bestows upon the *who* of the recollection a specific dynamic ontological dimension intertwining space and time. This dimension forms the base of various behavioural, moral and ethical components of the *who*.

Memory and landscape narrative

Memory, a fundamental trait of our identity, is also memory of landscapes and places which have formed and permeated our existence. Situations, events and facts we have experienced or given importance to, for better or worse, are part of our memory and are recalled as references to a *where* and a *when*, to portions of landscapes *where* we once lived or, more simply, crossed. The narratives can relate places and landscapes to persons, things, animated beings, events and facts according to different temporal variations. In this configuration of a mimetic weave, the memory of places takes over. Imagination, which is fundamental when recounting, would not excel without

recollection or the workings of memory. By using memory, through which we draw up our narratives, we build our identity based on places and landscapes, stages we have trodden, theatre of others' and our own actions and sufferings. The working of memory is always accompanied by emotions and feelings, as well as thoughts and ideas.

A happy memory is a memory which reconciles us with the landscapes and its places. It is a memory that makes us feel *settled*. At times we feel part of a landscape, while at other times it may seem alien, indifferent or even hostile. All these experiences of the landscape become part of our existence, part of our living-dwelling and, in return, they change us. Remembering and the narrative of places visited, lived in or those to which we are indifferent, therefore become part of us, of what we have been, of what we are and what we would like to become. "Within the landscape, *that* landscape, we hear the sound of memories we cannot remember.

Sometimes we believe we feel welcome, recognised and uplifted and we would like to call *that* place our home in the world" (Lingiardi 2017, p. 138). Feeling welcome, recognised and at home in a landscape is a sign of an interaction full of emotions, feelings, thoughts and memories that we establish with the landscape and its guests. It is the act of narration and self-narration, intertwined with memory, which offers a direction for our dwelling in a landscape. If such interactions are lacking, it is difficult to avoid narratives made up of unfamiliarity, loss and disorientation. In these cases the landscape is experienced as a *non-place*. As highlighted by the anthropologist Marc Augé' (1992), parts of our landscapes and surroundings, such as airports, railway stations, motorways and supermarkets, are environments which promote depersonalisation and the deprivation of human relations.

Anthropological places are characterised by identity of their inhabitants. These *simboli* contexts, or "existential spaces" (Merleau-Ponty 1945), in which continuous human interactions are generated are the result of historical processes where the members of the local community can interact with one another in a fluid network of a personal, linguistic and *simboli* nature. These places are spaces in which people come to know themselves and reciprocally acknowledge others as being part of human experiences. In addition, they are places of remembrance and hospitality, and also provide a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the modern city is frequently built according to an instrumental rationale which, with no regard to man's social nature, generates non-places for specific purposes. Augé defines non-places as spaces which have lost their identifiable social and historical traits.

A landscape that has been disfigured and devastated by man can also turn out to be a non-place. However, for each of us a non-place can become a landscape that we do not feel part of, that is unfamiliar, harsh, hostile and unwelcoming due also to the people living there. In such instances memory can come to our aid by transporting us towards those places we have within, welcoming us and making us feel good. Even the memory of a negative can help us to remember the places we have loved,

becoming part of our identity. But, it may also help us to question ourselves and to be receptive to novelties, to the unfamiliar in order to discover humane, social and cultural dimensions which become part of our interior landscape.

The work of narrating memory and living as ethos

Places of the landscape as places of our interior landscape and vice-versa refer to and nourish our idea of the “good life”. *Ethos* also means dwelling, home. The *ethos* of *who* dwells, of *who* lives. Martin Heidegger, in a passage in *Letter on Humanism* (Heidegger 1975) describes *ethos* as a residence, as a place to live. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand floors* observe that “ethos is at the same time dwelling and manner, homeland and style” (G. Deleuze, F. Guattari 1987, p. 464). That is to say that *ethos*, on the one hand, refers to customs, behaviour, actions and, on the other hand, to living, dwelling, to our relationship with the world, the landscape and the place. Living, consisting of close interactions, stimulates man to remember himself and to search for a sense of his living-residing. This sense is not only theoretical but it is essentially made up of *care*, *worries* and *consideration* with regard to the landscape, the biological environment and one’s neighbours both near and far.

However, the close relations that qualify a space as a *place* are loaded with memories (Casey 1993). Indeed, we always have an intimate original memory “in and with” the places and landscapes, which contributes to building our identity. Memory, narrative and the practical dimension of living permeate and constitute one another influencing the formation of *who* we are and they are an integral part of our identity. The narrative dimension of memory and personal identity mingles with that of the ethics of living and forms the basis of the multiple practical dimensions of caring. This care affects the places, the things, living forms and the people that live and constitute the landscape, but it also implies a care which leads us to self-reflection. In this sense, taking care of the landscape means caring for ourselves, reminding us of our intentions and responsibilities.

The landscapes transform us as they have done so since birth. Yet, we also transform the landscapes: the collective narrative memory constitutes the dynamic identity of a landscape and its places encouraging close relations between people, between people and other living forms and things. This represents an ethical dimension of our living leading us to discover or, simply, reminding us that we are involved in continuous biological and cultural inter-relations.

On occasions, when silently admiring a landscape we realise that landscape and memory come into contact and can be confused. “In the silence the space between us and the landscape becomes more subtle. The outside world offers us a form, we give it a memory” (Lingiardi 2017, p. 222). It is in this memory that our living acquires a sense, a nearness, a feeling before gaining a comprehensible reason. It is a sense that is expressed through the narratives of the landscape and living, where such narratives bestow an ethical sense upon our dwelling.

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