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Village Contemplations

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Introduction

It is the fifth day of my journey. I am in Bukovina, northern Romania, squatting on a crumbling concrete milestone along a road with no name, shaking my ballpoint thermometer style, eking out the last of the ink, memorizing my own words for later transcription. Through a cloud of dust, the wake of a speeding Mercedes, I look back the way I have come and think about the villages.

The Villages

In the villages the houses are beautifully cut from wood taken from surrounding forests. Shingles and shakes, branches and boughs, a universal complexity of interlocking geometric designs. No window is without flowers, great clusters of blossoms shining forth, neighbours to those nodding gaily in the sunlight unaware of their separation by panes of glass.

Little clusters of houses direct the eye to distinctive patches of field, in turn, lined with wooden fences, posts attached in twos, jogging comfortably along the land's natural contour, and rising above the wooden hemline the forest's greens, vertical stretches of light and dark drawing the eye higher and higher until all is lost in a wash of faded blue.

Everywhere there is the finely crafted movement of line. The contrast comes at the edge; be it forest, field or yard. The singsong trickle of water flows in tiny creeks, burbling brooks and washes delicately against the banks of the Moldova as it flows beneath the bridge in Voronets.

At the river's edge cows bend their knees deeply and slip freely into the cool waters to emerge dripping and refreshed on the opposite bank. In slow step the shepherds walk amongst their charges. They have all day to let their thoughts flower in their minds, to take on a breadth and longevity that seems unthinkable in the city.

The cows pick their way through the forest trail and suddenly disappear from sight across the way, the only evidence of their having passed the tolling of their bells. I am reminded of my grandmother telling me that every time I heard a bell peal an angel was present. I thought that those cows must somehow be angels and wondered who would believe me.

Golden haystacks in the fields take on the wild and massive shapes of mastodons whose long spindly elephant hair flickers in the sunlight and ripples in the breeze. I can hear in the wind the rush of grass rising from their coats and then brushing smoothly back.

The bellowing of cattle, the whinnying of horses, the bleating of lambs. Everywhere there is the sound of life growing in the sunlight and yearning toward self expression, finding it in the music of voice.

The clip-clop of horses' hooves drums against the moist earth. Wood beats against wood in clear calm rhythms, a kind of hollow translucent sound diffused into and absorbed by

the soft vegetation: come to mass. come to meal. come to worship. come.

There is reciprocity here, in the woman who unbidden, hands me delicious juicy apples, round orbs of fat fruit passed over the fence from her orchard, wrinkles tilled into her leathery warm hands, rich and aged against my own. There is a mutuality shared between the draught animals and the farmers, in the curled french stitch of buttercup blossoms embroidered onto the neck collars of the cows, the flash of red tassel swinging alongside the horses' ears, the brightly cross-stitched flowers and trees that surround are miniaturized and worn by those within, creating worlds within worlds.

Slivers, shives and shavings. The ring of the blacksmith's hammer.

The quiet village landscape ushers me back to a time that seems to have taken place not so long ago, yet in comparison to the industrial world is far flung and the scene before me arises as if from some distant past. It is here in such agricultural communities that I suppose social processes and ecosystem processes exist in a truer tenure, the philosophical connotations of the landscape integrated through right and responsibility creating that tenure of harmony for which the industrial world quests.

The integrative element is the landscape and the people's life on the land; hence the German word for peasant is *land bauer*, the French, *paysan*, man of the earth, man of the land. Here the whole human meets the whole environment in a subjectivity-objectivity in which utility aspires to beauty. Erazim Kohak, a Czech philosopher, believes that things decorated with life's images and made beautiful bring the eternal into time. Perhaps, that is why the villages offer us, the travellers, the impression of timelessness.

Here is a nature that houses the boundless and a culture that responds with appreciation, the inspiration of the ordinary. Yet, according to landscape ecologists the culture-nature discourse is dialectic: to reattach the two ends of a continuum, to reorganize and attempt to resolve both the content and context of our endeavours.

Having said that, the dualisms that we can see in our own construct of landscape also carry the stigma of superiority wherein human culture dominates nature, humans dominate animals, self dominates other, and where a narrowly defined process of reasoning not only dominates emotion, but all other ways of perceiving. Nature is either the enemy or something to be protected. In both cases it is viewed as Other divorced from human cognition and society.

Our Western desire to forge firm boundaries between wilderness and civilization, a perfect God and an imperfect nature, areas slated for resource extraction and protected areas, engenders a way of mentally constructing landscape that prohibits relativism. By that I mean we are unable or at the very least unwilling to move freely from one system of thought to another, so that wilderness and civilization must exist separate from one another, that God is a civilizing force and, therefore, an idea that cannot dwell implicitly in nature, and that protected areas become witches' gardens in a much larger exploited landscape.

I wonder if our own cultural landscape with its twin desire for control through active "rational" management isn't one of the ways in which we have formally attempted to direct the evolving image of the noble savage that simultaneously allows us to legitimize our adoption of a cryogenic view of the Other, be they Aboriginal hunter-gatherers or, as in this case, peasant farmers. This self-selecting determination of boundaries forces peasants into an either or position in which they are either "civilized" and "modernized" according to our view of civilization and progress, or are relegated to backwoods pockets of poverty and in this way are disallowed full and active participation in our decision-making processes.

Mightn't we prepare our own mental construction of a cultural/environmental landscape to accept the peasant view of cultural landscape as a stage upon which life continues to unfold both in an evolutionary, adaptive, physical process and, perhaps more importantly, as one in which a human oriented value system dwells a priori and cannot be considered out of place?

There is no mistaking the sense of pride and dignity these people hold about themselves like a sacred robe. Unlike us, the people in the villages appear to be participants in the landscape, shareholders in its health, settled in its complexity, and therefore I think displaying a sense of the simple that derives from their comfort in their surroundings. Life appears full as it is, without the trappings of the externally constructed fantasy or fiction on which we have embarked, hoping to be rejuvenated, filled with experiences, and carrying a new lease on our own lives upon return. Saddened, I realize that the people we meet don't appear to have to travel anywhere to find their sense of belonging.

Leaving another village I mourn the sense of the remote. Flip-flop. Remote sensing. Whirling like a satellite through distant regions, mapping things with the mind's eye, noting impressions, photographing things and people, through my own special lenses recreating the villages as a western environmentalist paradise. Leaving behind the urban world and wandering through the villages is like coming out of some horrible dystopia in which pollution and toxic death rule only to enter a completely different world, one in which literally taking a breath of fresh air amidst the poplar and linden lined roads is a joyous discovery. Listening to the polyharmonious bees dancing among the apple trees that have been planted everywhere throughout the countryside who could help but be drawn to the peace and quiet?

I think of the opening verses to the poem High Flight:

O, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth/ And danced the skies on
laughter - silvered wings/ Of sun - split clouds-and done a hundred things.

Such a wonderful sense of freedom envelops me. Yet I can't help wondering if this isn't the tantalizing lure of solace Hooks refers to: her continuum of primitivism. The burden of the machine stamped so indelibly on one's psyche, the metronomic grind of isolation, the unconscious forfeiture of genuine harmony lamented in the controlled panic of periodic get-aways, the perilous celebration of escape and the hazard of re-entry. Certainly one travels to gain experience, but from what type of experience does one flee? The anguish of searching for oneself as an authentic cultural subject? Starving for life-sustaining alternatives one consumes the image of the Other, in this case our own historical selves.

Oh, I do hope I remember everything.

References

Hooks, Bell. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, p. 25.

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