From the “grand chemin” to the act of writing: 
questioning the landscape in Julien Gracq’s work.

Introduction:

Relationships between literature and landscape are embodied in the work of Julien Gracq. Along the “grand chemin” that links the Earthen landscapes, he developed a durable and intimate practice of the landscape that influenced his writing (Carnets du grand chemin, p.1). The challenge is to understand the process of landscape writing. His fascination for the coast is present in his work and this allows me not only to explore a writing but also a personal practice of the place that echoes the experience of the reader as Julien Gracq draws a sensible portrait of the coast.

Julien Gracq, whose real name is Louis Poirier, is considered as one of France's major writers. He has been strongly influenced by the French Geography Movement. He followed the lectures given by the geomorphologist Emmanuel de Martonne and read the Tableau de la France written by Vidal de la Blache. These insights gave him the knowledge to read and understand the shape of the Earth. He also received an education in history and throughout his writing he establishes a dialogue between the two disciplines. He recognises some landscapes as “paysage histoire”, shaped by the constant interference of people on the land. He was also the student of the philosopher Alain and became a friend of André Breton after the publication of the Château d’Argol.

This paper is based on the analysis of the coastal writings of Julien Gracq. To understand the construction of his written landscape is a way to look for meanings, expression of a practice and to understand how a relationship can be established with a land. His writing is a combination of thoughts and feelings where representations, myths and memories can play a large role. His texts have evolved over the years. He mainly wrote novels and poems at the beginning of his career before moving on to an essayist and a short writing style that evoke his poems in prose. Through these various formats, he has given a predominant place to landscape.

Landscape is a mosaic concept that has numerous definitions and has given rise to many debates. The question I am posing while studying Julien Gracq's way of writing is what is landscape? Is it a group of artefacts, experiential perceptions, built by representations, or is it their combination? (Berque, 2000; Cosgrove, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Lorimer, 2005; Wylie, 2005). One of my goals is to interrogate the links between the practice and the production of images. This is where study of Julien Gracq landscape writing comes into play.

“The ‘grand chemin’ [...] is the one that crosses and links the Earthen landscapes.” (Carnet du grand chemin) This idea of chemin, which we can translate as pathway or route, is interesting. It is the place of meeting, and it highlights the landscape experience, observation and movement. It underlines the importance of walking, cycling, driving or simply being in space that gives rise to the consciousness of that landscape. Being on the route, surrounded by landscape, permits people to re-explore the idea of being in the world, as developed by Merleau-Ponty. He states that the body is the continuation of space where the body appears as being a mediator between space and the self. How does the perception of landscape involve...
with the body position? Interactions between people and landscape may offer the conditions for artistic and literary creation.

Then, what place is there for invention within the formalisation of landscape? Again, the question of creativity is questioned. Is imagination the main conveyor? Creative production brings new representations and the practice of place seems to be the means through which Julien Gracq develops imagination. In the following abstract, the elements are melting; the water becomes soil under the power of imagination that creates new images issued from the observed landscape. The sea “avait cessé d’occuper, telle qu’une perspective un moment plus tôt encore brûlante et remuée qui se fût brusquement figée en trompe l’œil. Une teinte froide et violâtre l’éteignait, la suspendait, croûtée, opaque, presque minérale, à l’horizon brouillé [1]” (La presqu’île, p.131). This raises several considerations. This scene is a description where the viewer is present. The metaphorical vocabulary, the sonorities and the rhythm underlines how the consistence of the sea slowly changes. It is an invitation to question the way Julien Gracq writes landscape.

Description

Julien Gracq wrote “La description c’est le monde qui ouvre ses chemins, qui devient chemin, où déjà quelqu’un marche ou va marcher [2].” (En lisant en écrivant, p.15) In this approach to description, he clearly emphasises his interest in movement and dynamics. Landscape is not considered as a fixed image, but as a moving entity.

He reads the landscape forces, fluxes, shades and meanings and transcribes them in writing. His geographical knowledge influences his analysis and the construction of writing landscape.

The following elements are essential in Julien Gracq’s appreciation of landscape: water, sand, ground, and air. Their interaction is systematically noted as the reflection of the light on water is perceptible in the coastal sky. The sea can be perceived as a clay sculpture. His descriptions are not precise but give an idea of movement, of instability. From this instability, the creation of written landscape is made possible, as space is constantly renewed and re-imagined through its practice. In Sion, on the French Atlantic coast, the writer re-formulates every movement, recognizes the sounds, and gives a shape to the multiple facets of the elusive sea that perpetually changes. He takes into consideration both spatial and temporal dynamics. The spectacle of the sea is described with delectation – and the sounds so recognisable of the rising tide:

“Il y a dans la mer qui monte – calme ou houleuse, peu importe – toujours une animation, un affairement de branle-bas, un remue-ménage de camp qui se rassemble, quelque chose aussi de l’agressivité d’une foule qui grossit et puise son mordant et sa confiance dans l’afflux pressenti à l’arrière-plan de ses réserves profondes; tout exprime une résolution enjouée, une humeur belliqueuse et allègre: on y va! et on est en force: cette fois-ci, c’est sûr, on va prendre la Bastille.

La mer qui se retire est comme absente, dégrisée et distraite, l’esprit ailleurs.[3]”

(Lettrines 2, p.128-129)
The snapshot is in fact not possible, or we lose the sound shades of the rising or descending tides, the light shades of the clearing haze, of the far showers that dig out the horizon and the interacting colours that alternate, depending on the hour of the day. The writer and the reader nourish a sensible intimacy with the seascape that is born a second time during the writing act and a third time during the reading.

Julien Gracq re-creates a mobile world, where landscape works as a system of relations where people and elements participate in its animation. So the description of landscape in literature creates a movement into the landscape and into the reader. This abstract illustrates this idea.

“La dune, sous la grande brise de mer levée avec le soir, fumait comme un erg saharien et semblait arracher d’elle une à une, ainsi que des voiles translucides, les très fines pellicules de sable que le vent faisait glisser sans trêve sur elle, comme dans un vertige de nudité. Devant moi, je vis B. se déchausser au long de la crête, les cheveux défaits; une aigrette de sable ailant dans le vent enragé chacune de ses chevilles, saisie par je ne sais quelle ivresse de l’étendue et de la virginité [4].” ([Lettrines 2, p.27]).

People/Landscape relationship: from interaction to assimilation

“Dans les paysages vrais tout autant que dans les tableaux continuent ainsi à m’intriguer ces flâneurs de la méridienne ou du crépuscule, qui dans un angle crachent, lancent un caillou, sautent à cloche-pied ou dénichent un nid de merle, et rembrunissent parfois tout un coin du paysage d’une gesticulation aussi ininterprétable que possible.[5]” ([Un beau ténébreux, p.16-17]).

In this abstract, the idea of being in the landscape is noted and questioned. The emptiness of the coast brings out feelings. However, the perception of landscape is also modified by feelings or mood in Julien Gracq’s writings. In the novels, the landscape is never a setting; it accompanies the characters, contributes to their frames of mind, leads them, or helps them to find themselves in a mutual appeasement. Dialoguing with the geographer Jean-Louis Tissier, Julien Gracq affirms that “Tout cela va ensemble. Je dis souvent, et j’ai même du l’écrire dans un roman, ce peut être le propos d’un personnage qui fait lever de soleil ou inversement, c’est un changement de temps qui, tout à coup, change la conduite des personnages. Tout cela est totalement soudé et il est impossible, comme dans la vie réelle, de les séparer l’un de l’autre.[6]” ([Œuvres Complètes, p.1207]. There is self projection from people on the surrounding landscape,

Similarly, in [Un beau Ténébreux, Christel writes to Gérard: “Quelquefois je regarde la mer et les dunes, les bois de pins, la plage serrée au fond de sa baie, et il me semble que je sens tout au fond de moi ce paysage comme une apparition inconstante se fondre, se dissoudre brusquement.[7]” (p.165). The reader clearly has the impression that distances between landscape and people disappear, that landscape inhabits the body and the mind.

Going further in the analysis of people/landscape interaction, the body becomes part of landscape in a mutual assimilation. It shows the influence of imagination and surrealism in his work. Especially during the Bath scene in [The Château d’Argol when the water absorbs the characters, while the body is dissolving in the sea waters, progressively becoming water itself. “Il leur sembla que leurs muscles participaient peu à peu du pouvoir dissolvant de l’élément
The force of interaction between people and nature clearly shows the fascination for the coastal landscape, and how an intimate relationship was established. It also shows how Julien Gracq is conscious about its complexity, about how the practice of place animated landscape. But his writing is also built around recalled landscapes.

**Recalled landscapes**

Julien Gracq also recalls and relays other landscapes that I call ‘recalled landscapes’. As he travels along the pathways, he memorises landscape. Recalled landscapes have a huge influence on the creation of written landscape. Landscape is written not only under the influence of the one seen, but also the recalled one.

He also insists on the importance of how other texts influence his writings. It is interesting to develop an intertextual approach through all his writings. He says to Jean-Louis Tissier: “Parce que, quand on voit un paysage, en fait ce n’est pas une découverte c’est la comparaison entre une chose lue et une chose réelle.” (Oeuvres completes, p.1208). In this way, the construction of a written landscape occurs through practice and memory, through texts and also through the map.

The map appears in Julien Gracq’s writing as a conveyor, especially in the short novel *La presqu’île* where the main character waiting for his lover goes back to the place of his childhood holidays. The map is at the core of the novel. It draws the routes that will be followed and creates a reference but also a first experience and image of the coast, while the map is read. Bernard Vouilloux, studying the image in the writings of Julien Gracq, underlines that “La carte ne donne pas une représentation, mais une structure: la topographie permet de déceler les lignes de force d’un paysage; elle répond à une tendance profonde du paysage gracquien, à son devenir-carte: le paysage s’écrit – comme on dit ailleurs qu’il se peint –, il est déjà écrit lorsqu’il est décrit.” (De la peinture au texte. L’image dans l’œuvre de Julien Gracq, p.128). His journey is organised with the map. The image of the map comes before rediscovering the place and then accompanies the character and the reader. Place-names are a first land-script. They convey images projected from memory.

So to write landscape is to create a composition of present, seen and imagined landscapes.

**Writing seascape**

Writing landscape is the same as telling a personal story. It mobilises memories, perceptions and feelings, but also representations and practices. With the scheme, I tried to integrate all the elements conducting Julien Gracq to the creation of a seascape. Firstly, we can notice the
attraction the coast exercises over people. This attraction is completed by an assimilation of
the people by the coastal elements and vice versa. Located on the coast, there is an analysis by
the writer that brings him to understand the forms and the spatial organisation of the area. The
landscape topographies and topologies and its elements are understood and reproduced in
writing. The writer also notices the presence of people, living or being on the coast. There is
then a double movement of the writer exploring and traversing the place and of the people
practising the place. The route allows the writer to be in the place and be aware of his
perception and sensations. Then, he can compare them to his memory and the representations
of the place.

Through this process, Julien Gracq produces a vivid seascape because he describes the
elements interacting. I have to see if this model can be generalised and how I can integrate
considerations on intertextuality, representations and formalisation of landscape. However,
analysing the way of writing landscape gives us the opportunity to think about what is
landscape.

Conclusion

Analysing the way of writing landscape gives us the opportunity to think about what is
landscape. In Julien Gracq’s work, coastal landscape is clearly a topophilia. He takes his
inspiration from his intimate experience of the coast together with his memory and his
sensibility or imagination. Landscapes in general and seascapes in particular, speak as we can
read them. It is a terrestrial writing with discursive strength that needs to be listened and
covered. Simon discovers this strength at the end of his anticipated journey, where the waiting
and the projection of future scenes nourish the story. “Le monde ne parle pas, songeait-il,
mais, à certaines minutes, on dirait qu’une vague se soulève du dedans et vient battre tout
près, éperdue, presque amoureuse, contre sa transparence, comme l’âme monte parfois au
bord des lèvres. [11]” (La Presqu’île, p.135). Similarly, in En lisant en écrivant, Julien Gracq
has the impression that a landscape’s language exists:

“Pourtant ils parlent; ils parlent confusément, mais puissamment, de ce qui vient, et soudain
semble venir de si loin, au devant de nous.

C’est pourquoi aussi tout ce qui, dans la distribution des couleurs, des ombres et des lumières
d’un paysage, y fait une part matérielle plus apparente aux indices de l’heure et de la saison, en
rend la physionomie plus expressive, parce qu’il y entretisse plus étroitement la liberté lié à
l’espace au destin qui se laisse pressentir dans la temporalité. [12]” (p.87)

We can locate Julien Gracq’s way of writing between a topographical writing and a creative
writing of landscape. Therefore, it is interesting to notice the evolution of topographical
writing towards what we could call a geo-writing that is largely influenced by environmental
considerations. It insists on the practice of the ground, on stories and how place-names
remember those stories. The sensitive experience of the place brings out meanings and the self
is written as well as landscape. So, the knowledge of place is essential in their work: the land,
its shapes, its people are part of landscape and the understanding of their relations enhances
the vision of landscape. Looking for a sense of place and meaning, the cultural aspects play a
large role in understanding the landscape. But that’s another story, still under construction.
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Notes: (Translation by the author)

[1] “was not drawing attention anymore, as a perspective that was a moment before still rustling and agitated and was suddenly frozen in trompe-l’oeil. A cold and mauvish colour has faded and has suspended it, crusted, opaque, nearly mineral, to the muddy horizon.”

[2] “Description is the world that opens its pathways, that becomes pathway, where someone is already walking or is going to walk.”

[3] “There is always in the rising tide – calm or turbulent, it is the same – an animation, a bustling activity, the hurly-burly of a camp reassembling, something also of the aggressiveness of a crowd that becomes bigger and bigger and takes its keenness and its confidence, sensing the following afflux of its profound reserves in the background; everything expresses a cheerful resolution, a bellicose and lively mood: let’s go! and we are in force: this time, it is sure, we will conquer the Bastille.

The descending sea is as absent, sobered up and absent-minded, its spirit somewhere else.”

[4] “The dune, under the evening breeze, was smoking like a Saharan erg and seemed to pull up one by one, like translucent sails, the very fine sand layers that wind was making glided along without rest, as in a vertigo of nudity. In front of me, I saw B. taking his shoes off, on the peak, with tousled hair; in the furious wind a sand brush flying at each of his ankles, seized, by I do not know what exhilaration of space and virginity.”

[5] “In real landscapes as well as paintings, I am still interrogated by those flâneurs in the afternoon or in the crepuscular, those that spit in a corner, throw a stone, hop away or find a blackbirds nest, and darken sometimes all a corner of landscape with an non interpretable gesticulation.”

[6] “Everything is linked. I have often said, and I could even have written it in a novel, it can be the words of a character that make the sun rising, or conversely, it is a change of weather that, suddenly, modifies the characters’ behaviour. All that is totally fused ad it is impossible, as in the real life, to separate each others.”
“Sometimes I look at the sea and the dunes, the pines woods, the tight beach in its bay, and I have the impression that I feel this landscape deep down as an inconsistent apparition melting, suddenly dissolving.”

“It seemed to them that their muscles took part little by little of the dissolving capacity of the element which carried them: their flesh appeared to lose density and to be identified by an obscure osmosis with the liquid filets which enclosed them. They felt uprising in them purity, and a unique freedom.”

“When we see a landscape, it is in fact not a discovery; it is the comparison between something read and something real.”

“The map does not give a representation, but a structure: the topography allows us to detect the landscape’s lines of force; it answers to a profound tendency of the Gracquian landscape, to its devenir-carte: the landscape is written – as we could say for something else it is paint –, it is already written when it is described.”

“He thought, the world does not speak, but, within some minutes, we could say that a wave is growing from inside and is coming closely to fall, wild, in love, against its transparency, as the soul comes sometimes on the edge of the lips.”

“However, they speak; they speak inaudibly, but with strength, of what is coming, and suddenly seems to come from so far, in our direction.

“That’s also why, everything that, in the distribution of the colours, the shadows and the lights of a landscape, gives to it a more visible material part to the time and season’s indices, and make its face more expressive, because it interlaces more closely the freedom linked to the space to the destiny that we can sense in temporality.”