From the ‘grand chemin’ to the act of writing. Questioning the landscape in Julien Gracq’s work

Helen Maulion
Université de Nantes
University College Cork

« A stroll on the sand, after dinner. Noble beach, melancholic and glorious. » (Un beau ténèbreux, p.17)
Julien Gracq’s seascapes

Julien Gracq: French writer
(born in 1910),
geographer, novelist and essayist.

Studied Geography as major and History in the École Normale Supérieure.
Student of Emmanuel de Martonne, geomorphologist from whom he learned to read the shapes of the Earth.

‘Reading Writing’

- **Three novels:** Au château d’Argol (1938), Un beau Ténèbreux-Dark Stranger (1946), La Presqu’île (1970)
- **Poems:** Liberté grande (1945)
- **Interview with Jean-Louis Tissier**

=> Evolution of his writing through the years
=> Develop a reflection on writing and landscape
=> Coastal landscapes are transcribed through both an imaginative and a realist style sometimes influenced by surrealism.
Context of this research

- PhD research: to characterise Irish and French coastal landscapes on the Atlantic and their recent evolutions
- Landscape as a mosaic concept:
  Artefact? Practice product? Representation?  
  (Berque, Cosgrove, Duncan, Lorimer, Wylie, etc.)

=> Study landscape through representation but also experience and practice of space.
=> Interrogate the links between practice and the production of images

‘Grand chemin’ as a link of landscapes

“The ‘grand chemin’ [...] is the one that crosses and links the earth landscapes.” (Préambule, Carnets du grand chemin)

- Place of meeting, allows landscape experience, observation, movement.
- The importance of walking, cycling, driving or simply being in space => consciousness of landscape
Conditions for landscape writing

• ‘Being-in-the-world’ => what role is given to the body. Mediator to the landscape or part of the landscape?
• Re-invention of landscape, role of imagination in the formalisation of landscape
• Construction of landscape through writing.

=> Creative production: brings new representations often based on place practice.

The sea “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.” *(La presqu’île, p.131)*
Describing coastal landscape dynamic

“Description is the world that opens its pathways, that becomes pathway, where someone is already walking or is going to walk.” *Reading Writing*

- Reading landscape forces (geomorphology, history, space organisation), shades (sensibility), meanings (history, myths)
  ➞ Geographic knowledge allows construction of landscape and influences vocabulary.
- The landscape is viewed, lived through the elements (sand, wind, drops of water and their conjunction).
- Spatial and Temporal dynamics
  ➞ Re-creation of a mobile world where landscape works as a system of relations

“The dune, under the evening breeze, was smoking as 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; and in the furious wind a sand brush flying at each of his ankles, seized, by I do not know what exhalation of space and virginity.” *Lettrines 2, p.27*
People/Landscape Relationship: From Interaction to Assimilation (1)

- Emotions and feelings modify the landscape perception, or its qualities.
  => Expression of a self-projection
  => Guide the writing

- Christel writes to Gérard:
  “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 deep down this landscape as an inconsistent apparition melting, suddenly dissolving.”(Un beau ténébreux, 1946)
  => Distance between landscape and people disappears.

People/Landscape Relationship: From Interaction to Assimilation (2)

- Body becomes part of landscape: mutual assimilation
  => Bath: absorption by the water
  “It seemed to them that their muscles slowly participated to the dissolving capacity of the element which carried them: their flesh seemed to lose its density and to identify itself by an obscure osmosis to the liquid filets which enclosed them. They felt rising inside a purity, an unique freedom.” (Château d’Argol, p.91)

  => This participates to the intimate relationship established with the coastal landscape
Recalling landscape

- Memory
- Imagination
- Intertextuality:
  “When we see a landscape, it is in fact not a discovery, it is the comparison between something read and something real.” (Interview with J-L Tissier)

- Influence of the map in J.Gracq’s work:
  => First land-script = place names
  => Drives images from memory
  => Comes before the practice of space

  => Writing landscape: composition of present, reminded and imagined landscapes.

A model?
Conclusion

- The coastal landscape is a topophilia
- Dynamic and animated landscapes
- Inspiration from the coast
- Intimate and memory writing

- Between topographical writing and Geo-writing
  ‘Geophanies’ Tim Robinson, ‘Géopoétique’ Kenneth White
  => Practice of the ground, stories, sensitive experience, self writing.
  => Knowledge of place enhance the practice of landscape

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