

“The earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24, 1)

Philosophical meditations on the beauty and sacredness of nature

Many roads lead to Rome. Many roads lead to a spiritual relation to nature, to understanding that “the earth is the Lord’s”, as Psalm 24, 1 has it, “and the fullness of the earth, the world and those who dwell therein.” Adoring the beauty of nature is one of the roads, one of the powers that lead to spirituality.

I would like to start my brief reflections on natural beauty as one road to spirituality by reading to you a literary passage. The passage stems from a contemporary German writer by the name of Peter Kurzeck. He lived nearby, in Uzès, for more than two decades before he died in 2013. The summer morning that he evokes in the passage is however set in the village of his childhood, Staufenberg in Germany. But it could just as well be set here in the South of France. As a matter of fact, Peter Kurzeck once remarked that Uzès as it is today reminds him more of Staufenberg as it was in his childhood than does Staufenberg as it is today. How much of our world has changed in the second half of the last century is the major topic of all his novels. On his view our world has changed from a world for people to a world for cars. Here comes the passage. It talks about a beautiful summer morning and personalizes this morning as a painter:

And then, I said, the colours. Especially in the summer. Most especially at the beginning of summer. Cornfields, blue hills. As you walk towards the village. But in the village, too. In front of the tower. From our kitchen window. At the fence to Stephan’s little garden. And sometimes, in the sun, the light’s so bright that all the village is white. A summer’s day. Still early. The roads and paths not yet tarred. Been dry for weeks, growing paler and paler, turning first to sand and then

to dust. A fine, dry dust, almost like flour. Hazy, early in the morning— a fine layer of cloud. Sometimes all blue in the upper village. Light blue and purple, while further down you can make out paths and fences and tiled roofs. But it can also be the other way round: sun on the castle and upper village, and the houses below still in the mist. A pale, luminous mist that soon lifts—though not until the cocks have started to crow on all sides. And if you wanted to paint the village, with the mist gone (*one* picture wouldn't be enough!), you'd have to paint everything white. White on white. Except, perhaps, the faintest wisp of light-blue morning shadow, almost see-through and soon to vanish too. Or some of the lanes in the upper village, where the blue lingers a little before giving way to white. Even the blue basalt cobblestones gleam so brightly, you'd have to paint them white in the end. Morning herself is the painter, I said. Takes her time and goes on and on painting. You can watch her. She's in the valley gardens with her paintbrush just now. After that she'll move on to the horizon. So much light, I said, how are we to bear it? As a child, a small child, maybe four or five, you take a few steps into this bright and luminous day, and find somewhere to sit. Somewhere where the world has room to move about you. You'll see soon enough what happens next.

(Peter Kurzeck: *Eve (Vorabend)*, Frankfurt: Stroemfeld 2011, 935-936, translated by Imogen Taylor)

I cite this passage because it richly and touchingly evokes aesthetic nature contemplation or “resonance” as I prefer to call it. When you move along with the text, a manifold ever-changing scenery unfolds before your eyes. Peter Kurzeck brings out well the character of our aesthetic resonance with nature which is dialogical, a kind of I-Thou relation. Peter Kurzeck brings this out by *personalizing* nature, that is, by finding and developing the metaphor of morning as painter. When you enter into this intimate dialogue with nature, you do not only experience the “fullness of the earth”, you may also be set free from time and from being driven by your desires and how to fulfill them.

You may be set free from the question “What’s next?”. You may live in the present, you may get a glimpse of eternal life, you may experience time as “kairos” and not as “chronos”. The Ancient Greeks had these two words for what we call “time”. You may become more confident and feel at home in the world. Or as the last sentence of the Kurzeck-passage reads: “You’ll see soon enough what happens next.”

This peacefulness, this sense of belonging is akin to a spiritual or religious feeling towards the world. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said about this attitude in his famous “Lecture on ethics” that it involves gratitude for the gift and the wonder of life as well as a feeling of safety whatever may happen, a feeling of being safe as if in God’s hands. “*As if*”, because talking of God’s hands that hold us is as much a metaphor, a personification as talking of a summer morning that holds a paintbrush in her hand.

The beauty of nature, of a fine summer morning, lies all around us, it speaks to all of us. You do not have to study or follow a particular denomination. All you have to do is to open your eyes and your hearts and SEE. And when you see, you may appreciate literature like Peter Kurzeck’s or philosophy like Ludwig Wittgenstein’s as friends who may help you further on your road. Or religious texts, hymns and rituals. As you wish, “à votre guise.” Many roads lead to Rome.

Yet more and more places on earth today are turned into non-places, “non-lieu”, where you cannot resonate and belong any more. I have just written a book about this. The book defends the beauty and sacredness of nature. Here it is (see attached). It’s title reads “The world-view of the hedgehogs”, in German “Das Weltbild der Igel”. In this book, Peter Kurzeck is my literary guide to the beauty and sacredness of our natural world.