LANDSCAPE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN CHAUCER

for Patricia Shaw

So spoke the sage in his heart; he sat apart in thought.
Good is he who keeps faith: nor should care too fast
Be out of man's breast before he first know the cure:
A warrior fights on bravely. Well is it for him who seeks forgiveness,
The Heavenly Father's solace, in whom all our fastness stands.
(The Wanderer)

I

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1). Then God separated light from darkness, day from night, heaven from earth. Waters were gathered together in one place and the dry land appeared. And in the earth God put vegetation, fruit trees, living creatures according to their kinds. In the waters He put great sea monsters and living creatures according to their kind and birds which fly above the earth and the sea. In the firmament made two lights, a great light to rule the day and a lesser light to rule the night, and signs for seasons and for days and years. And God saw that it was good (Gen 1: 1-25), and He created *the* landscape. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Gen 1:26). So God

Ricardo Sola, *Selim* 8 (1998): 77—90

> created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27).[1]

At this step we realise two things, and I presume it is more or less the same in other books dealing with the creation of the world, for instance Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. First that God created from Chaos an ordered world, a world which has all the basic elements of any landscape. This opposition between chaos and order is sometimes represented by philosophers, historians and literary writers with different landscape archetypes (uncultivated versus cultivated, court and forest, etc.) Second that once landscape was created man and woman were created too and put in it to dominate and take profit of it, but , at the same time, to belong to it. Both this landscape and man/woman are universal emblems for the world and for humankind, and drawing an analogy we reach the conclusion that any one of us is linked to, belongs to and is identified by a specific landscape. So the starting point is this distinction between an ideal *universal landscape* and the *personal landscape* of our natural world. We need a landscape to write our private and singular narrative and although the description in Genesis can be read as allegorical it is also real, it is *the* landscape, we see in front of our eyes and are partially part of it.

The book of Genesis goes on and it says: "And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed (Gen 2:8). A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. (Gen 2:10). But God forbade man and woman to eat from the tree of life. They did not obey the commandment and ate from that tree and therefore "the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. (Gen 3:23). Here we are in front of a different landscape, we are in front of a *religious landscape* and all the actions, reactions, sins and punishments refer to this symbolic way of life. From now on in the Bible we will find these two different perspectives in landscape, the real, natural, even historical journey of man/woman through visible with our senses landscape, and the allegorical, symbolic, inner landscape. All our lives are divided between these two visions of a landscape, be-

[1] The quotations from the Bible are taken from the *Revised Version*.

tween a promised land "flowing with milk and honey". (Deut 11:9), to which we want to return, or "forty years in the wilderness" to test us and to know what is in or heart (Deut 8:2), and our daily, hard life of work and suffering in the natural world, in the natural landscape. There are many other landscapes in the Old and New Testaments which in an allegorical, spiritual manner refer to different steps in religious life, though they are not relevant now to our approach, nevertheless we should bear in mind.

Let us go now a step further and take some Classical references. We can clearly state that Greek and Latin literature have a due point of reference in landscape, and with landscape classical writers show their permanent relationship between man/poet and known and unknown world.

The Homeric poems, yet having a clear tone as songs to the greatness of a given economic and social class, the nobility, contain landscape elements that denote the importance that the Greek man gives to his environment. Those elements are evident and strong in *Odysseia (The Odyssey)* , the voyage of Ulysses in search of his homeland which includes a series of wonderful elements and the special conditions of the marine world, but also in *Ilias (The Iliad)*, where a struggle between the prime elements, the water, the wind, the fire, the earth, represented by the Hellenic divinities will serve the first Greek philosophers to explain the operation of Nature. Hesiod, especially in *Labores et Dies (Works and Days)*, brings a first break with Homer's grandiose and epic world. The individualism bursts out for the first time in the literary world, and the natural environment is described as a source, not only of inspiration for the man serving the gods, but also for the man serving the land. One of the writers who developed an archetypal description of the ideal and bucolic landscape was Theocritus. In his *Idyllia (Idyls)* are framed the basic elements of pastoral poetry which have been widely imitated and emulated in Western literature: shepherds, goatherds, places of tranquillity and infinite silence, linked with his sentimental and material worries.

Theocritus will be followed by the great Latin masters, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, Virgil and Ovid and landscape acquires a central role in their works emphasising the mixture of an objective scene and the expression of their inner feelings.

As we know Latin writers during August era suffered great political hardships and strict censorship on the part of the emperor.

In *Corpus Tibullianum*, attributed to Tibullus, the topic of love and disillusion is seen adorned by a singular landscape, simple and free from worries and wealth. Horace describes in his love poems the topic of the *locus amoenus*, a place in which his feelings, marked by the change of the seasons, are extreme when he sings to the beloved one. Two particular examples I will like to mention are Virgil and Ovid. Virgil was on the point of being expropriated of his lands to be given to the soldiers in reward for the war. Ovid was actually expropriated and banned out of Rome; he lived part of his lifetime on exile. In Virgil and Ovid we see the two opposite faces of landscape as a reflection of the political and personal situation at that time. Virgil, in spite of the confiscation of lands after the civil wars, thanks the Prince August for not taking his properties and expresses in a happy and bucolic landscape his new personal situation. In the other side Ovid represents in his elegies the sadness of the exile and his terrible and dark description of the Black Sea expresses the fear that produces to him to live in so a different territory from his beloved Rome. Virgil and Ovid see their individual state of affairs expressing their feelings and fears in *The Eclogues*[1], the former and in *Tristium*[2], the latter.

[1] MELIBOEUS: "Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi / siluestrem tenui musam meditaris auena: / nos patriae finis et dulcia linquimus arua. / nos patriam fugimus: tu,Tityre, lentus in umbra / formosan resonare doces Amaryllida siluas." (You, Tityrus, 'neath a broad beech-canopy, reclining, on the slender oat rehearse your silvan ditties. I from my sweet fields, and home's familiar bounds, even now depart. Exiled from home am I; while, Tityrus, you sit careless in the shade, and, at your call,"Fair Amaryllis" bid the woods resound.)

[2] TRISTIUM. LIBER PRIMUS IV: "Tingitur oceano custos Erymanthidos ursae / Aequoreasque suo sidere turbat aquas; / Nos tamen Ionium non nostra findimus aequor / Sponte, sed audaces cogimur esse metu. / Me miserum! quantis increscunt aequora uentis, / Erutaque ex imis feruet arena uadis! / Monte nec inferior prorae puppique recuruae / Insilit et pictos uerberat unda deos. / Pinea texta sonant, pulsu stridore rudentes, / Ingemit et nostris ipsa carina malis. / Nauita confessus gelidum pallore timorem, / Iam sequitur uictus, non regit arte ratem. / Vtque parum ualidus non proficientia rector / Ceruicis rigidae frena remittit equo, / Sic, non quo uoluit, sed quo rapit impetus undae, / Aurigam uideo uela dedisse rati." (The guardian of the Erimanthy Bear bathes in the ocean and with its influx agitates the waters of the sea. We, however, sail the Jonic Sea and not by our will, but fear compels us to be bold. Unhappy of me! How with impetuous winds grow the waters and even the extracted sand from the deepest abysses boils! A wave, curled as a mountain, assaults the prow and the bent stern and flogs the images of the gods represented in her. Resound the beaten pine flanks of the vessel and we hear the tackles crunching, and the same vessel groans to our misfortunes. The pilot, revealing the panic in his pallor face, relinquishes expired the impulse of the ship and with his skill cannot

In both writers we appreciate two different perspectives which express "real world" in two different levels: the daily life and the fictional, "literary" level. Consequently we have two different landscapes, or we may say two different views of the same landscape. The physical description which have all the elements we saw in the book of Genesis, the forest, the birds, the cattle, the sea, the storm, the light, the darkness, etc., and the psychological description full of happiness and beatitude in Virgil and full of anxiety and fear in Ovid. In fact both quotations build up a *literary pattern of landscape* to which we can refer, and indeed do it, when we want to define, in Literature, character, plot and mood, among other things.

II

So we see how both in the Bible and in the Classical references the *archetypal landscape* is a way and means of interpreting life, but also literature and art. But what is more important the study of the literature and its relationship to landscape and Nature must take into account those references that present not only recognition, but also mediation. Every literary expression is a response to some needs and social conditions, individual and historical of the era in which appears and the form that adopts reflects, in some way, the form that the society, the individual and the historical propose for their own consolidation. The ideological critique unveils the ways in which the use of the landscape masks or forgets social and political aspects. On the other hand the intellectual history has sought the property of various forms of landscape to express a given historical period. When these periods are critical the writers and artists favour or are opposed to the renovations or to the revolutions using landscape to show the effects in the social scene.

Art that can be "read" through reference to a body of shared iconographical knowledge whose meanings are no longer public but arise from a private encounter between the viewer and the work of scene. We build up a sympathy and preference or a rejection, we adopt a positive or a negative attitude in front of specific, real, landscapes. We describe the landscape "as we see it" not "as it is". But, sometimes, even this perception that we believe personal

govern it yet. And as a auriga intimidated abandons the reins, that no longer serve him, on the hard cervix of the horse, thus I see the untied sails of the ship go, not where he wants, but where the pulse of the waves drags them.)

and subjective is also mediated by given conventions and perspectives. Literary, artistic genre is one of those conventional perspectives. Literary genre has its conventions and rules, and forces us to accept as plausible and adequate to the genre specific landscapes. Deviation from those generic rules produces either a reinterpretation or a rejection of that genre.

From the period of the invasions landscape is presented as a vital reality that adopts different ways in different literary expressions. If we had to establish a brief taxonomy we would talk of three groups:

a. - the epic and lyric poetry

b. - the chronicles and histories

c. - the travel and exploration reports.

In the epic or lyric poetry, either of religious or pagan character, given to the importance of the presence of Christian feeling and thought in it, we can see the influence of the biblical archetype and the description of the landscapes is strongly shaded by the values of good and evil, purity and sin, loneliness and pardon, the idea of life as a pilgrimage full with obstacles that one must surpass to reach the Celestial Jerusalem, as we read in *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *Bewoulf*, *St Andreas*, *Juliana*, *Judith*, etc. On the other hand, we see how poetry shares the personal attitudes expressed by Virgil and Ovid when they describe landscape as an image of individual fate and destiny.

If we except the *Historia* by Bede, most of the chronicles written in the Old English period reflect the vital hardships of the peoples who conquer and invade unknown lands. In this sense there is no evident influence of the archetypes mentioned above, though it would be worth checking the degree of similarity and/or difference with Greek and Roman histories and chronicles. The description of the landscape corresponds, then, to the vital tour that the invading hosts take along the conquered land, introducing occasionally supernatural or magic aspects close to the epic vision. In the case of Bede, his *Historia*, in many cases is written shaded by the religious feeling that impregnates it and so the influence of the biblical archetype is clear.

Much more interesting are the exploration and travel reports since they come from the traveller or reporter's personal point of view, that is to say

from a subject. Brevity and accuracy are rules in these pieces of prose and they must offer a synthesis of what is seen and heard, using some conventional standard patterns, or formulas as in poetry, that will allow the receiver of the report a tight comprehension and perception of what is being described to him. An excellent example of this sensibility in front of an unknown land is Othere's report to king Alfred in which Othere describes his experiences and impressions in his trip to the North Sea. If we look at it briefly, the first thing we find is a axial coincidence between space and time describing geographically the visited coasts, so that the traveller's references are always the cardinal direction in which they are and the time elapsed in travelling them. The second descriptive criterion uses waters and winds, seen as positive or negative elements according to if they favour or not the traveller and explorer's way through. Here we realise how the medieval archetype of the "homo viator" is appearing and, consequently the confrontation between movement and settlement, between enclosed and open spaces, between court, town and country. Nevertheless the reporter, Othere, emphasises the oppositional patterns:

deserted, bare land versus cultivated

hunting versus agriculture

non linguistic communities versus linguistic

primitive versus civilised

Since Ohthere's aim is to inform Alfred about his forbears' place of origin, the final social evaluation, about possession and dispossession, transforms landscape into a field and forest ready to be manipulated and used by man and so the reporter offers us a "marked" vision of that landscape. This is also the case, for instance, of the 12th century trip chronicle written by Gerald of Cambriae, *Topographiae Hibernicae*, in which Gerald uses this same opposition, primitive/civilised, this time with a political value, since making of Ireland a primitive and uncivilised country that fact justifies the English invasion lead by Henry II as an invaluable benefit in the education and culture of that land.

The Norman invasion and the medievalization of the literature and culture of the islands stress also the codification of the elements that build them up, and among these elements is the landscape. Two characteristics prevail and are pre-eminent in the use of the landscape as a "pattern" in medieval literature. In the first place the link of a specific landscape model with the motive or topic that governs the literary form, either be it lyric or narrative. While courtly literature calls to mind life at court, the forest is an archetypal landscape in which the knight's adventure is validated emphasising the unknown and unrefined[1]. As relevant examples we may mention, the topic of love, the topic of the adventure and the dream-vision motive. In second place the alternation and contraposition of landscapes with given spaces, that is to say the contraposition, for example of the closed space, the castle, and the open space, the forest. As an example we may mention the landscapes in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Piers the Plowman* and *Pearl*. In all those cases landscape is made into a formula or group of formulas that favour or contribute to frame the tension, the atmosphere, and even define the properly said literary genre. But, also, in all those cases landscape has an objective quality and be what they might be its situational modification can be defined and recognised as literary "patterns", narrative or lyric, that very rarely express a subjective pose and attitude. Nevertheless we accept Corinne's stand that in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* there is a move to social and moral realism and the forest is both real and fantastic, " a fictional landscape poised midway between ernest and game"(155).

In the 14th century due to the economic and social change, a change in the artistic taste and literary perception happens. "Gothic" realism and naturalism together with the appearance of the economic subject give way to the literary subject. In this situation the writers of the period reinforce their literary creations with necessary doses of subjectivy. Almost unimportant in John Gower and in the Pearl-poet. Scarce in *Piers the Plowman* where the sleeper and dreamer when he awakes is identified with a real family and place, it is no doubt in the prose of John of Mandeville and John of Trevisa, in

[1] Corinne J. Saunders in her book *The Forest in Medieval Romance: Avernus, Borceliande, Arden*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993, examines the development of this landscape as an instrument of revelation of the human psyche in romance literature in Medieval and Renaissance periods.

theatre in *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* and in Chaucer mainly in *The Canterbury Tales* where the use of landscape acquires its modern function.

In Chaucer the treatment of landscape undergoes the customary review of all the literary material affected by the characteristic realistic pose in this medieval author. It is true, that this progressive "simplification" of landscape towards an expression of it in relation to the "modernisation" of the narrative character and of the narrative itself is not exclusive of Chaucer. The search for a greater reflection of reality or "mimesis" in romance as well as in the Briton lay or in lyric poetry deprives landscape of its pattern connotations or arquetypic marks and endows it with a particularity that only affects to a character, to a situation or to a narrative. However, the change is not absolute, but partial and is mixed with the traditional uses known.

In this way we observe that the descriptive standards of landscape are kept in *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the first, since it is an allegorical romance with an elegiac tone, the forest and the hunt are the landscape settings that point to the literary genre, but the use of a “real” dog -also a deviation from the bestiary tradition- as a guide that leads the poet through the forest and the realistic final strokes that wake up the dreamer and reminds the reader/listener of the time of the day, consequently, of the medieval felling of the passing of time, are innovative elements in the use of natural world. In *The House of Fame* we see a double "deviation" of landscape pattern in one of the best known literary conventions: the dram-vision". Here the dreamer is not “cotextualised” by the usual spring setting, but by desert and, furthermore, the desert here is not presented as place of retirement and pray, according to the biblical model, neither as the untilled land according to the romance model. Here the desert and the winter issues the difficulty that surrounds the road towards the unknown and ephemeral: fame.

In *Troilus and Criseyde* with its mixing of trojanisation, medievalisation and gothicism the innovation is much weaker, and the author focuses his attention on the renewal of characters and their psychological study. There are, nevertheless, details that confirm a will of realistic use of the landscape, but it is in the central sequence, that in which Criseyde is cheated and seduced, where Chaucer incorporates an element of landscape, rain, as a singular and specific part of this narrative.

The variety in way and function is much more evident in *The Canterbury Tales* and also absence or minimalism. The interest is centred on the subject, to whom is given frequently a proper name and who is usually identified with profession, craft and trade. Except for the presence of landscape in its traditional way in rare instances as in the "opening" of the General Prologue, in the "fairy tale" told by the Wife of Bath, in the oak where death is leaning in The Pardoner's Tale, in most of the collection landscape has modern, realistic function. For instance as a body metaphor in the description of the Squire in The General Prologue:

> Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
> Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede
> Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day;
> He was as fressh as is the month of May (GP 89-92)[1]

or in the Miller's Tale when Alisoun is compared to a pearl-tree (MT 3248) or that she "…koude skippe and make a game,/As any kyde or kalf folwynge his dame." (MT 3259-60). Sometimes landscape is used as a definition of craft, profession and trade: The Yeoman was "a forster", (GP 117) a man of the forest; the Shipman "knew alle the havenes" (GP 407), and the Miller "Ther gooth a brook, and over that a brigge,/Upon the whiche brook ther stant a melle;" (RT 3922-23). Other times landscape describes the "personal habitat" of a character placing her or him in social rank and status: The Maunciple was living in a house "…ful faire upon an heeth;/ With grene trees shadwed was his place". (GP 606-607); or at the beginning of the Nun's Priest' Tale when we read that an old and poor widow "Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,/Biside a grove, stodyng in a dale. (NPT 2822-23). As knowledge of Nature and natural phenomena, as the poor scholar of the Miller's Tale that could foresee if being asked at certain times "Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures,"(MT 3196) or the Host using all these elements as a time reference and break of the travel. The sun si getting down. It is late and the Host knows that because landscape shadows are changing

> Oure Hooste saugh wel that the brighte sonne

[1] All references have been taken from Larry D. Benson, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: OUP, 1989.

The ark of his artificial day hath ronne
The ferthe part, and half an houre and moore,
And though he were nat depe ystert in loore,
He wiste it was the eightetethe day
Of Aprill, that is messager to May;
And saugh wel that the shadwe of every tree
Was as in lengthe the same quantitee
That was the body erect that caused it.
And therfore by the shadwe he took his wit
That Phebus, which that shoon so clere and brighte,
Degrees was fyve and fourty clombe on highte,
And for that day, as in that latitude,
It was ten of the clokke, he gan conclude,
And sodeynly he plighte his hors aboute. (ML's Prologue 1-15)

Or it can be used as a place for pleasure and relax opposite to town. We realise that if we listen to the Wife of Bath's words:

And so bifel that ones in a Lente
So often tymes I to my gossyb wente,
For evere yet I loved to be gay,
And for to walke in March, Averill, and May,
Fro hous to hous, to heere sondry talys--
That lankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys,
And I myself, into the feeldes wente. (WT 543-549)

or opposite to norm and discipline the Monk was "An outridere, that lovede venerie,"(GP 166). There are more examples, but I would like to finish with an image in the Knight's Tale that in some way is emblematic of this new function that landscape is acquiring to Chaucer's modern eyes. The scene describes the funeral pyre in which Arcite's corpse is going to be burn. To build up the pyre the "medieval" forest is destroyed an so is the archetype. The duke Theseus willing to honour Arcite is looking for the right place to build the funeral pyre and finally he reaches the conclusion that the best place is the place in the forest in which Palamon and Arcite first fought each other for Emily's love:

And at the laste he took conclusioun
That ther as first Arcite and Palamoun

Hadden for love the bataille hem bitwene,
That in that selve grove, swoote and grene,
Ther as he hadde his amorouse desires,
His compleynte, and for love his hoote fires,
He wolde make a fyr in which the office
Funeral he myghte al accomplice. (KT 2857-2864)

He orders to cut down the old oaks -the romantic, "knightly" oak of the *Book of the Duchess*- and make of them wood to feed the fire:

And leet comande anon to hakke and hewe
The okes olde, and leye hem on a rewe.
In colpons wel arrayed for to brenne.
His officers with swifte feet they renne
And ryde anon at his comandement. (KT 2865-2869)

A few lines further the destruction of the archetypal landscape is fully accomplished and all kinds of trees and plants are cut down and thrown into the fire, so many in quantity and kind that the author decides not to count them all:

Heigh labour and ful greet apparaillynge
Was at the service and the fyr-makynge,
That with his grene top the hevene raughte;
And twenty fadme of brede the armes straughte--
This is to seyn, the bowes weren so brode.
Of stree first ther was leyd ful many a lode.
But how the fyr was maked upon highte,
Ne eek the names that the trees highte,
As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler,
Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chasteyn, lynde, laurer,
Mapul, thorn, bech, basel, ew, whippeltree--
How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me; (KT 2913-2924)

And the gods of the forests, the nymphs and the fawns, and the beasts and the birds are expelled from paradise, from that romantic world, and the bare ground turns pale under the bright and burning sunlight, the light of modernity:

Ne hou the goddes ronnen up and doun,

Disherited of hire habitacioun,
In which they woneden in reste and pees,
Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides;
Ne hou the beestes and the briddes alle
Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle;
Ne how the ground agast was of the light,
That was nat wont to seen the sonne bright; (KT 2925-2932)

In conclusion, the description of landscape and natural world in Anglo-Saxon poetry is impersonal, the sea, the cliffs, the rocks, the forests are the suitable setting for the story or the epic narrative. Yet in the elegiac poetry we appreciate a slight reference and connection between the mood of the first person speaker and the weather, the rough sea, etc., described in the poem. These two ornamental functions, let us say, in the description of landscape and natural world still persist in medieval poetry at large but when we get to the 14th century, landscape is part of character and characterization, a feature that allows us to identify the author and, consequently, his work, his pose and his style. Landscape identifies the narrative and the narrative materials, identifies real places through which the incidents of the characters occur, marks the tempo and tone of the story. Sometimes landscape has the function of showing the traditional uses mentioned above in which pattern was more important than authorial originality, but also contributes to highlight the fact that mediation on the part of the author and reception on the part of the reader is more effective and relevant. Landscape is an instrument of meaning and very frequently we do not see it as it is but as "he" wants us to see it. And, finally, landscape is a reference which marks evolution and change in form, subject, theme and purpose.

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