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A LANDSCAPE LEARNS TO WALK

Translated by John K. Cox

IN THE YEAR 1825, from the summer months into the fall, Hermann von Pückler-Muskau went daily in the early morning hours out to his cottage in the garden of his hunting lodge, not coming home until late in the evening. There were rumours about Muskau, this “picturesquely” clad and artistically minded prince who was both a horticulturalist and a Casanova. He was the “elective contemporary” of Heinrich Heine, who referred to him twenty years after they met as “the liveliest of all who have predeceased us” and who wondered where he was spending the afterlife: “in the Orient or the Occident?” The rumours had it that this Saxon-Prussian bird-of-paradise was pursuing one of his eccentricities out in that cottage. No one knew that Pückler, listening with great interest to the swirling rumours and writing with magisterial speed, was “taking his meals at his writing desk” and soon covered thirty-one folio pages with writing. He called his first book *Andeutungen über Landschaftsgärtnerei* (Hints on Landscape Gardening, 1833). It was only after his second book, *Briefe eines Verstorbenen* (Letters of a Dead Man, 1830), which brought him international success and a flattering remark from Goethe to the effect that “[t]his allows us to make the acquaintance of an exceptional man,” that he had the first one published in an outrageously expensive format, even though he was already in debt up to his ears. It begins with Lessing’s words: “When art transforms itself into nature, then both nature and art have taken effective action.” And it closes with these sentences: “Let the landowner only begin to idealize his property, and then he will soon perceive that cultivation of the land not only brings financial advantage but also is capable of providing genuine artistic pleasure . . . Because only the man who restricts himself can be free.”

One hundred sixty-one years later, on the final day of July, the hottest one since meteorological records have been kept, I am driving in the

company of a group of experts over lanes and tracks that are off-limits to general traffic. I am on a route I had long wanted to see by car, curious as I was about what was transpiring on the sandy landscape of the Lusatian coalfields. Here the largest power stackers ever made had stood the Tertiary on its head, hauling away layer after layer, relocating and dumping, filling in villages, scraping together new mountains, gobbling up villages, gnawing away at the peripheries of cities, helping themselves to hectare after hectare of productive land, as if it were just a lark to pile a million years of earth into the scoops and to take this silty clay and the boggy top soil of Mother Earth on a one-way ride. This was the earth that the upstanding *homo erectus* recognized as being more useful when he loosened and fertilized it and from which had grown the word “culture” with the increase in fruit and yield, even before the small cerebrum of its producer could turn it into an idea. The deposited stocks were scrambled, the veins were tapped and sucked dry, the first seam was worked out, and the pulped trunks of the subtropical redwoods and swamp cypresses were unearthed and burned for light. Now they are going after the second seam, which, lying so deep, was disregarded years ago. The tipped sands will be turned over and carted away yet again, and old holes will be opened up once more. The earth will travel anew over conveyor belts to places the engineers have agreed upon in historically and wickedly short order. It is being chased by the numerals from planning documents on account of the coal on which the temperature of the country depends. There the earth will be dumped parallel to the ancient riverbed, and at right angles to it when need be, as dictated by necessity. It will be going onto already reclaimed land and recultivated expanses where cows are grazing and magnificent pine trees are growing, and the forest will get backfilled to such an extent that not a single tree branch will be left peeking up, as the flood of Pleistocene sand and clay will be ten metres thick.

The hot midday air scintillates over the bulldozed flats. We stand there for a bit because there is hope to be gleaned from the landscape created since the 1960s, when the matured brain of *homo luzonensis* grasped that something comes after coal, that the upended Tertiary must be helped back onto its feet, that the ground requires culture, and that in addition to pecuniary gain it must create aesthetic value so that the people who will someday sit along the banks of the lake that originated as an abandoned open pit will say: here nature and art took action. Someone points out to me the spray irrigation systems, the “frigate” that twists automatically, and the stink-

ing penetrating ammonia in the air that comes from the mix of rainwater and wastewater generated by these state production companies. We walk out onto the steep slopes of a waste heap, where peas grow on Pleistocene earth along with sunflowers, beans, and ryegrass. One can see the efforts the plants are making to reclaim the earth—the ordeal they are enduring when they drive their roots into the ground and explore what can be done with this lifeless material. One of the men takes out his pocketknife so he can break through the hard crust on the ground. We behold the delicate subterranean portions of the plants he pulls up and look excitedly for the little nodules on them, for they are a sign of bound nitrogen pulled from the air, and they demonstrate that the process has begun. We poke around a bit more in the new field until we get our hands on a little plant that we think has tiny nodules on it. A ladybug rests on a yellowish-green leaf next to my foot. Surely it occurred to it on its journey that it was flying across a flowerless land. Here, finally, the bad dream is over. But there are no other insects there. Not yet. The thousand living creatures in the ground aren't there either, such as the useful bacteria and the rhizobia that acquire the nitrogen. One could cultivate them and then turn them loose, immunizing the soil with the free productive forces of nature. Something like this has already been done on a level spot farther down. It has also been done on landfills in Hungary, where potatoes grow as big as your fist, causing visitors who see them to shake their heads and inquire about the mysterious bacterium that can make such a thing happen. But those Hungarians are sly rascals, and they do a lot of things very differently. Between friends, say my companions, it's going to be a while yet before the surface in front of us, which the mining company has finally made arable (something the law requires it to do), is recultivated to the extent that it brings forth full yields. Until now the best soil at one of the collective farms, the *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft Schwarze Pumpe* (Agricultural Production Cooperative Black Pump), produces half as much as unspoiled land. People hear this and rub their chins with an expression of concern and satisfaction. It is something, but it damned sure is too little.

We drive farther. There is only a narrow causeway, probably for the engineers' jeeps, that brings us over the ravine of the dark mountain, on whose flanks nothing grows. The winds make dunes out of the dirty sand, which is the only perceptible movement. The machines have penetrated this far in order to cover the craters with cultivable soil with the precious glacial

loam from the Ice Age, which one hits on the way down towards coal and which, for the purpose of making land arable, can be selectively extracted. This involves expensive and inconvenient mining decisions of the type that short-sighted people frequently avoid. For perhaps a year one would have to haul out clay instead of coal. And people imagine this as a procedure that generates no announcements of accomplishments, and so for example the buried silt treasure of the Gosdaer alluvial channel remains underground; the geologic disruption remains disrupted. With this clay one could have coated 5,000 hectares of successor landscape one metre thick, giving back to agriculture what has been taken from it. Topsoil also gets steam-shovelled away. We lose land in this and similar ways. Since the beginning of mining in Lusatia in 1840, about 30,000 hectares have been lost. By 1990, 10,000 more will be gone. How much of it is coming back?

Too little, as all the commissions know, even at WUM (the working group for uniform calculations of manure and mineral data), where the experts on land reclamation sit, pensively closing their file folders, hoping that the opening scissors do not one day snap shut, as that could slice us and leave us gasping for air. Concerns of this sort, though, are still skipped over with the advice to go full steam ahead! The wheels turn on the power of coal, and the lights burn and furnaces heat. Everything moves along smoothly, lubricated by what's under the ground. There's enough to eat, so what's the matter? But from certain tones one can already perceive that the almightiness of coal is fading, its omnipotence is losing credibility, and its occasionally excusable arrogance won't be tolerated. The questions are growing louder and are repeated at conferences on land reclamation and on agendas in consultations. The road we're travelling down now leads to the government ministries, and the government needs to see what hangs in the balance.

So along I come with Pückler's hints on landscape gardening. You wouldn't dismiss them as the comments of some feudal blowhard if you knew what he knew: "[I]n all of our efforts to fathom nature, it nonetheless always keeps something up its sleeve, inaccessible, and sooner or later to the poor men and women it cries out: Up to this point, but no farther!" To me it seems as if the "man of leaves" intuited, while he was sitting there writing in his cottage, that his region a century and a half later would be in need of his recommendations for how to deal with nature.

His park-building serfs must have stumbled across coal while clearing

land, and they probably piled up the lumps on the side of the road. Just a few years later, half a day's ride away, blackened men burrowed into the black earth. Even in the grey-haired prince's lifetime, blind horses, deprived of the light of day, travelled back and forth in the galleries of the Senftenberg mines. And now the surrounding strip mines are threatening to desiccate the parklands, which have since become famous, by depriving them of groundwater. You may drain up to this point, but no farther, says the *homo luzonensis* to the water of the biotope in which he stands, and he inserts a concrete barrier into the ground, sixty metres deep and countless kilometres in length, in the hope that it will bottle up the underground seas from which the built environment takes its sustenance. The Lusatian bestirs himself, occasionally still rubbing his eyes after his long sleep. The time of reparation has arrived, following on the heels of his energetic pursuit of energy sources. Now he cannot and does not want to go blindly back and forth anymore, like the horses of Senftenberg, as if there were no borders to bump up against in the empire of black gold.

The men have brought along maps that show the projected face of the future landscape: the abandoned pits filled with ground water and rain are blue, the recreation centers are circled in red, the areas to be recultivated are yellow and green, and there are relocated roads and sections of railroad track. There are no new settlements in these coalfields. Why not, when there are examples that they'd be possible? It must be the cost, the daunting expense, that causes the circle of territory-creators to balk. So no one foresees any new villages, but there will be monuments to the ones that have been bulldozed. We drive past the waste tip on which they will stand. At the top stands an observation tower and a track for sledding. Even an artificial lake on the mountain is going to come into existence. Something will keep the water up there.

In Pückler I read: "Blessed is the man whose forebears bequeathed to him forests and ancient oaks, beeches, and lindens standing proudly by themselves, these giants of our northern land, untouched by the murderous ax. He will never regard them without reverence and joy and will guard them jealously, for money and might may be able to acquire almost anything, but no Croesus or Alexander is capable of returning a thousand-year-old oak tree to its majesty, once a poor peon has felled it. For it is all too true: ferocious and swift is the power of man when he destroys, and weak and insubstantial when he builds! May an old tree, friendly reader, you who

embrace nature with friendly affection, be to you a sacred thing . . .”

Ah yes, that same old song and dance about old trees! My own sense of melancholy seems a bit fishy and totters on the edge of sentimentality. I don't want to belong to the “men (and women) of leaves,” who poetically imbue the harvesting of every tree with the end of nature. We do not need a call for the protection of our woods coming from literature, such as happened in the U.S.S.R. with Leonid Leonov's novel *The Russian Forest* (1953). We threaten every poor day labourer with prison if he goes at the majesty of a tree with his axe without authorization. I know that the equipment of strip mining cannot spare the “proud giants of our northern land.” Here “the individual” yields to “the whole” because it's necessary, and it's as if we were following Pückler's princely advice. Except: we build the largest stackers in the world. Could we not also invent an inserter to take the carefully dug-up and well-preserved beeches, lindens, and oaks and put them up again on reclaimed ground? Pückler wrote about his experience transplanting “trees that are already very old”: “[W]ith greater or less expense it is possible to do it, so that in three to four years they have returned fully to their previous beauty and freshness, without the loss of a single branch from the dome of their foliage.” There would be no shortage of load-bearing conveyances now, and there'd be no need to tear down the city gate of Cottbus in order to permit a sizable, handsome tree to enter, although daring souls like Pückler in his day had to “fight endlessly with the professional gentlemen” who “even seeing it with their own eyes were left shaking their heads,” because do you really believe your eyes when things that have never happened before happen? Pückler says: “Fewest of all are the people who stand by their own beliefs.” We have to stand by ours and risk doing things that are superfluous elsewhere. I have a premonition of what the crowning glory of newly erected mature trees would be. For now, falcons and vultures have to make do with wooden crosses when they, as birds of prey, dive once more into the biological state of equilibrium. They have to be satisfied with those dismal and crownless poles that are evocatively called “sitting crutches,” as if they are trying to demonstrate that the attempts of a landscape to learn to walk are desperately dependent upon our support.

That's why Pückler and his little book, in which we read about how gardens can be made out of estates, are coming our way at precisely the right time—Pückler, our “elective contemporary,” a living figure from the ranks of the departed.