

Chapter 1, excerpt translated and edited by the Author of the book
IL GEOPOETA. AVVENTURE NELLE TERRE DELLA PERCEZIONE
THE GEOPOET. ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF PERCEPTION
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GEOGRAPHY IS POETIC

About the horizon beyond the map

From perceptions to knowledge

A long time ago I realized how geography speaks to us with the language of freedom. I was driving in my car, observing the inner ring road of a small town in Lombardia, stage for millions of vehicles that drive across this stretch of highway, every year and stage – or area as I should call it – where thousands of humans dwell. The buildings passing by had been built in the post WWII era, here in a stretch of land that used to be the town's outer belt and whose soil, countryside, history, and geography were swallowed by the urban race of “development”. At least three generations of people had to adapt, with different degrees of awareness, devoid of a horizon and to the pressing presence of a limit – a limit represented by the insurmountable border represented by a *non-landscape* made of cement, asphalt, gray sky, smog and noise: a lot of noise, for twenty fours a day. A very similar background to the one thrown to the worldwide public attention after the collapse of the Morandi motorway bridge in Genoa, in the August of the year 2018: the unspeakable image that keeps questioning us about the sense of building overpasses so close to the roofs, the windows, the human lives rooted inside tall buildings that were already there before the motorway was built.

In that morning of many years ago, inside me those gray shapes turned into a sensation; the knowledge and the rejection took on the outline of the ultimate realization – a realization I felt the urge to represent and share. Coming up to the ring road and approaching the oldest building I noticed new condos that had taken the place of that last free space in the landscape – a sort of “dignity distance” between the overpass and the existing buildings. Gone forever was that sense of proportion, leaving room to the bulimia so well explicit in the consumption of soil. The geography and the genius loci of the place had been murdered and in its stead new beehive-buildings had sprung up.

In the following months, families would move in there with the certainty that to have some calm, they would have needed to sever any sort of sensory connection with everything that was on the other side of the window. They would relinquish the very idea of the proximity with a visible and daily horizon; maybe they would create a small vegetable garden for consolation on their little balcony, trying to attract beauty in their permanently opaque sky with some flowers, plant, or a colorful object. I thought, Well this *non landscape* is a class-conscious message. Long before any articulated analysis, the geography I was observing induced emotions born out of the meeting between my knowledge, my life style, the idea of dwelling and a horizon: a powerful feeling made

of different fabrics, all tied to the inevitable and by now accepted soulless arrogance of a standardized society erasing character in favor of conforming. I should have not be surprised: we have spent the last forty thousand years destroying our planet's biodiversity. I should have not be surprised by the fact that, in the last quarter of century, our society violently steered towards regressive forms that reject all that represents what is different – instead of learning from, knowing, understanding. I should have not be surprised by the fact that the poetry of the landscape, so good to inspire all the activities that allowed us to survive through the millennia, was never included in the yardsticks used to asses our social life.

Landscape is not a sin.

I can not feel mistaken when beholding a rich and varied horizon. Every year, I meet so many people sharing this perception – a perception that often goes unspoken in words, but still very well reflected in the daily choices made by each individual. And not only the landscape is not a fault, but it is so real to emerge as the representation of deep symbols and collective archetypes – therefore impossible to manipulate, so regulated by a poor elaboration of our surroundings. Then, as now, what was clear to me was that those who ended up in such houses would daily need to negotiate an escape route from urban hell where breathing is not a right, walking is a nuisance, and to have a vital space – therefore a spiritual space – only an optional. Things have slightly changed, since then. In some instances, even for the better and in favor of those who do not use motor vehicles. But it is yet to be imagined the road to convert the culture at the base of this arrogance. For someone like me, who had decided to leave city life behind to enter the spaces offered by the mountain life moving to dwell in a village far from such aberrations, not only the above looked so unbearably wrong, but it would politically set up as a crime against humanity and the landscape.

The production machine has become increasingly unequivocal, even impudent, in its manifestation and the non-value conferred to each individual human being – a useful but not irreplaceable cog for the global machine; we are constantly reminded that sooner or later we will be replaced, as if we were androids programmed to function in more and more sophisticated ways for the advantage of the few – but not us. If you alter the physical geography you are also modifying the mind geography. Yet, geography is first and foremost a poetic, an ever flowing creative act evolving and always becoming. Should its importance be recognized – in the moment when the landscape would ultimately impose itself at the core of the public speech, the need for a real research on the methods to create communities based on social, political, cultural, recreational interconnections would arise.

In the past everything was largely predicted from those who could put forward a vision and a prediction of what we would inevitably turn into, in books and movies such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) or Andrej Tarkovskij's *Stalker* (1975); these

works clearly unveil the preordained plan to keep humans from entertaining and developing a true relationship with geography.

In so many years of living, studying, traveling, walking, exploring and meeting with common people and politicians, teachers, academics, company leaders, bureaucrats, I came to the conclusion that geography is *dangerous* – and dangerous it is, because geography does not lie. Geography sets us free, it is an invitation to explore, to discover and acknowledge a stronger tie with everything that is around us. This is the reason why a primary and essential relationship, for the great majority of the people who lives in the city, was transformed in a mass of fears and aggressive impulses, inevitably destined to spill out on the land in the shape of abuse, disregard, separation; a dangerously similar relationship to the hamster that remains still running in circles instead of going forward and therefore reflected in the depletion of our individual and collective emotional alphabet of the imagination.

The wonderful art, science - or both – we call Geography (from the ancient Greek γεωγραφία meaning “the description and representation of the Earth”), is the oldest writing of this planet; it is the land's true language in its own right – a land we have modified and lived, speaking its same idiom that has taught us and that we have listened and learned, making it our own, for thousands and thousands of years. It is a widespread writing that the living creatures, traveling on the earth and the seas, used to connect rivers, mountains, plains, promontories, valleys, highlands, canyons and deserts in the same fashion we connect nouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, adverbs to convey emotions, thoughts, ideas, theories - and literally scanning new narratives made of stories, discoveries, doubts. The chapters written in an incredibly long span of time form the great book we started to write since the beginning of human life is now facing a turning point: we are the storytellers, therefore we must make our minds up and establish if it will really be possible to live without this writing and consequently the awareness of being in a relationship with the habitat.

With an act of responsibility we must decide if mankind can really make progress in its long walk by giving up those nouns, verbs, adjectives, syllables that the Earth – the source of this writing – is ceaselessly offering to our sensory, emotional and intellectual dictionary. The consumption of the planet is a truly reckless act because it equals the consumption of this “scriptures”; we are becoming techno illiterates, incapable to explain the reasons of our actions. This is why we are increasingly becoming so dangerous to life on the planet. Altering geography, overwriting on its message with that unbearable and useless noise, is like giving up being human to play our role in the Earth Community. Do we really want to have a virtual life formed by that network of environmental relationships and connections we learned to describe and interpret in the course of thousands of years? Let us not disown the synapses, the communication apparatus of the great human nervous system that led us here; let us not disown the opportunity to replicate the web of life

in the worldwide web we use every day to communicate by utilizing the current technology. Let us try to infuse these interconnections with quality, and morph them into verses turning all this in what it already is so apparent through the calligraphy of Earth: poetry. Geography is *poetic* and poetry is a geography of the human perception.

Geography is the single most inexhaustible source of knowledge and interpretation of life we have at hand. Today we do need this planetary writing, because each microcosm represents a bigger one, in which the greater community dwells. And yet, geography is not a theory: for such reason, our ancestors knew each little recess of their landscape and even without traveling they would take a phenomenal walk, embedding every little corner in the paragraphs of the big book. Cartography, since the early rudimentary maps drawn on skins and on papyrus, configured itself as a core element for the development of all civilizations. Being a branch of geography, it came to be defined starting in the first half of the nineteenth century and it is at the origin of the current shape of nations, of land management and development. A cartography explains why we are how we are, but it can never transcend from the larger context we call Geography, the magnificent show Earth gives us every day.

Why are we here? Where do we come from? Who are we? What kind of effect has our presence on Earth? The vision we have of our being and what is around, including the questions arising from our being in this world, deals with geography. Not by chance, being able to translate reality into a narrative, since the early days of our human adventure, was the key to our survival. By inventing the beautiful name *geographia* the ancient Greeks gave mankind the gift – a verse of the great poem, *the writing of the Earth*; because, if it is so true that geography exists beyond us, beyond our perception, it is also true that there is a correspondence that allows us to see in it the effect of our acts. In time, this perpetual process manifested itself through a variety of creative modes: poetry, music, painting, sculpture, cinema, photography, writing. So, if what we call “poetic” is a structured unity of the expressive intentions and goals of the artist contents he needs to affirm, in the same way as geography is “metamorphosis” - creation and re-creation – then poetic and geography both mirror the cycle of Life.

The writing of the earth speaks the truth. Maybe, the most paradigmatic instance is represented by the lines of this music sheet – the ways of communication: trails, roads, appearing and disappearing sea and sky routes, that once forgotten by man remain engraved in the geography lingering in the shape of memory, cornerstone, spine of the narrative that the human history gives to itself about itself. Maybe we should ask ourselves, How do the other creatures of the Earth Community regard this metamorphosis? Do they consider it as part of all the other changes? Do they adapt in the same way we adapt? It is a charming practice, because it implies our physical involvement – inside the geography – in everything we do to become testimony, memory.

The connection with geography is the most evolved form of protection that we can get for ourselves and all that is part of our ecosystem. There is no fortuity in the defying will to surgically act right on the deepest psychic relationships with the land, given the tight interconnection between this and the inner geography, that Barry Lopez defines *An intimate geography*. To sever this tie – to unpack the knowledge and put it into boxes grouped by labels concerning the same (albeit partial) subject, is like preventing the emotional experience of people with their own landscape, meanwhile creating the basis for the forthcoming detachment. The Cartesian dualism made us believe we can live in the geography of our brain as if we did not have a physical geography – that same Earth that is also our body and of which we are its shapes. And which is also is the true cognitive context at hand.

To prevent the emotional experience, severing the deep communication with the land to take it to a merely mental level, as a scheme, avoiding to explore the endless connections between the elements in it, is like giving way to the looting and altering our geography by the hands of our rulers. Just like being taken away from our mothers and forced to live in an affective mode – a generally indifferent social body when faced with negative changes, or maybe only capable of an intellectual and aesthetic assessment with no practical consequences to better the situation.

The lack of an emotional link, which is the artery where true knowledge wisdom and holistic learning flow, leaves free ground to those who assault, harass, rape this mother: if we, as a society, do not perceive this violence for what it is, it is because we are well provided with gadgets to tune our emotional transfer and whose satisfaction charge depletes at the speed of light. This is how we are induced to consume more and more, and therefore, to consume ourselves on the altar of work, almost without ever getting to meet the contentment offered by the deep connection with the land.

Ecology is a spiritual act – only after this it becomes intellectual and practical. It is the education of our perception. It is impossible to deny the disease of the material welfare, and this because the social behaviors are measured with objective parameters and they reveal a toxic unease – they are telling us we are not well. The only cure would be to sew up the tie, and again become able to tell what is right and what is wrong in our relationship with Mother Earth.

All through the modern ages, starting from the great German scientist Alexander Von Humboldt, and proceeding with poets of geography such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and getting to Barry Lopez, the problem was greatly studied and understood. In their own way, with different approaches, these men of literature (and poets, scientists, explorers too) explained that life is not a plot unfolding like the line from a spool of thread used to sew a dress – but a principle made of connections and synchronic mechanisms developed in the course of our evolution. The events in our psyche, just like those ruling of the cosmic energy, do not know a linear chronology but a cycle made of arrhythmia: and in the spaces

among events, the flow of energies gushes spurring us to act. An iceberg crashes in the sea, the ice melts and the salinity of the arctic ocean changes, as the climate itself changes – all is metamorphosis: in the face of a legitimate fear for ourselves, though, we need to make a step beyond to understand and accept the fact that this is also an opportunity to see a different world to which we can adapt – a world that will be changed also as a consequence of our actions and not in a way we might like, or even an harbinger for a hospitable habitat for us humans.

But life is still important – it is more important than ever: it is not a private question between humans and the universe, because the cycle of life is a circle. As we will see in the following pages of this book, the imaginary impetus towards the farthest lands it is the same that let us come full circle to tell which seeds we have found along our journey. There is no other creature on this planet – not a rock, not a plant, not a river, not a winged one, not a fish, not a bear - complying with the artificial mandate of the linear order, which is just a human projection.

Today, I see, observe, and absorb, events that I might be able to understand in two, three, twelve, or twenty seven years. But I can catch the fleeting vision, though: I can create paragraphs and stories gathering the words from the rapture established when the time to translate the writing of the Earth comes. I respond to this faraway, but pressing, call and what comes to me in the shape of an idea materializes and goes through my hands, just like a scene of a movie unveiling itself while happening on the screen. This essence expands itself until it becomes a narrative. It literally is a cerebral photosynthesis - a process stemming from the emotional experience and going through the synapses until it becomes a form of knowledge – a temporary but solid enough knowledge to endure its freshness and lead me towards the next experience - the following fleeting glare. This glare is like the cairn – the stone man erected by peoples and wanderers since the old ages to show the way to follow; it allows me to overcome fear to reveal that the goal is never there. And that every step of the way is just a passage.

We have so many tools at our disposal: they are like the hidden wires of our nervous system. We only need to recognize and make them visible, and learn to open them and use the contents. In Zen they say that the master appears when the student is ready. In recent years, these ever growing glares, like the trail signs of a rugged path, seem just able to lead us towards a vision of the deeper truths – those belonging to the human psyche. It is there, where we recognize that the ways of communication with the walk of life are not classifiable, where we also understand that through the principle of the interconnection between the elements, our being is one single fluxus – Life.

For a geopoetic learning

If we only allotted more space to elaboration instead of behaving like flypaper absorbing every impulse we perceive - and therefore getting lost in the aimless maze where we feel the urge to label and classify everything - we would see a landscape similar to the one unfolding under the wings of the eagle when this big creature flies above the land. From up above, the view, not being burdened by gravity, makes everything clear – just like when we perceive the coming of the dawn even before we have opened our eyes, instinctively catching the arrival of light and the end of darkness. In that split second of our perception - neither sleep nor being awake – while we are not unconscious anymore but not aware yet, we just see everything as it is. This essence coming from the infinite space existing long before ourselves, goes beyond any given interpretation because it is a narrative, a message from the energy flow and it is up to us to interpret and conjugate in order to proceed along the path of discovery.

Sometimes I happen to get up and, right away, to enter in daylight and awake mode. In a blink, I perceive all intuitions, and they all - as fleeting as a balloon in the sky – just disappear from my inner view. Waking up and taking care of business, this is what the daily life organization demands from us. Dreams exist in the space without borders. What a pity when we lose the fleeting glimpse – the journey inside the unfathomable rhythms and the unspeakable knowledge, all cocooned in the act of perception – the act transcending our ordinary idea of time and space. It is there that the creative work sinks its roots: the work of the artist experimenting new languages, or the philosopher changing the shape of thought by littering what is redundant. The work of the master who is learning to teach.

From nothing, everything is created. The never dormant flow resurfaces due to the work we have long tested in books, writings, *en plein air* activities, but most of all, in living like a new skin the specially unique ecstasy called “continuous creation”. If this looks like a too abstract thought, well, just ask the man who could put so many different seeds in the same narrow piece of land to transform them in food, by putting to good profit the full cycle of life of each plant; just look at that three year old child who, without instructions, can find its own way by following the great clearing to the border of the forest where he has seen the tracks of the wild deer. Or ask the musician who sat at the piano and came up with a song that we can all sing. This is the “action of nothingness”. It is the geopoet's poem: the act of creation, according to which any word is irreplaceable because it “materialized” out of the blue just like any element in the physical geography becomes something defining a landscape. Maybe a literary-poetic landscape. The huge work that nothingness commits to bring forth is the same as the will to live in the here and now of any given landscape defining

each of us. And for those who are writing, the making of nothingness should be a state of being. Writing is only one stage in the walk towards the awareness of belonging to the Earth. The very act of writing can not proceed regardless of the topography recorded by our psyche all along the way.

Writing is a physical act. It is like plowing - we have the seeds to bury, the seeds to entrust to the earth, the seeds to cover and to care for, while signing a deal with that same Life that gave birth to us. But before we do this, these seeds must be intercepted in the breeze lulling them. Without listening, without the silence walking with us, it will be hard to catch that light filtering through that breeze. Why, then, should we give up the defining web of human connections that are part of the greater context - the great Earth Community? Writing should precisely mirror the will to go the whole route of rewilding, the way along which the word of the wild can become again the center of the stage. We can do this with the use of geography, the human vehicle with the astonishing power, the perfect science, the Phoenix rising again to become truth and revelation, stimulating the seeker who, while boldly exploring, trusts the finer tuning, the clear awareness of the relationship between the landscape and the conception of a more intimate geography.

The emotional character makes this kind of learning holistic: the path towards a temporary truth disclosing horizons for the next try, just like in the way we discover geography. I repeat this: the geopoetic learning surpasses the dualistic philosophy that failed so noisily because it only aimed at consolidating the Homo Sapiens role at the top of the chain food; this thought has justified all our acts and presented us with a mechanistic world unacceptable to me. We have played the grand delusion that furnished us with the unforgivable justification for looting and destroying our home, the Earth. Intellect alone can not - and should not - rule reality. Our mind can help us to interpret, create it, live it, if in our mind we leave room for the emotions and the ever changing rhythm of our heart, the intangible spirit, the power of vision. Today, while trying to face the worldwide climate emergency, we need a revolution against spiritual capitalism. We are not products - on the contrary, we are the makers of empty spaces that create outlooks and shapes; the wonder, the amazement before and inside the world - it all spring out from the making of nothingness (the acts of nothing).

A luminous symbol of this way of thinking and of feeling is represented by the life and the work of Alexander Von Humboldt (1769- 1859), who very well embedded them in the *Naturgemälde* image and concept: «poetry was necessary to understand the mysteries of the natural world» he used to say. Adding that «nature was mysteriously in communication with our intimate feelings». The ultimate goal is to extract geopoetics from the human spirit to understand that mind and body are instruments of perception, radars intercepting the new languages within the stellar code given in the universe.

The land should emerge in its fullness as an absolute value, in turn part of an interconnected web of values needed by the greater community to evolve. And in order to do this we need to adopt

the poetry as the intangible but powerful vehicle to imagine, explore, walk, observe, perceive, transform any kind of landscape – be it physical, artistic, human.

We should imagine writing as a mechanism working in a fashion similar to natural processes. We are an infinitesimal fraction of the biological presence on this planet: let's come to terms with this notion. We are not at the center of the universe or the history of life. A geopoet must be the one who points at a spot in the land from where to start by using new crops, sniffing different and forgotten essences; the geopoet should be inspired by what has been, in order to go further without forgetting the past. It is an emotional fault from which the incandescent magma gushes out and that, once cooled down, will give birth to new forms. An age is by now long gone, and in the middle earth of today we are risking to slip in irrelevance without the opportunity to give our contribution to the greater community. We are risking to turn into useless selfies dimming away with billions of forgotten bytes through an abysmal cyberspace.

To be a witness and to be also makers: do we really want to postpone again? To each, then, his own poem. To each, then, his own geography.