

Earth, World, and Land: The Story of the Missing Term

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This talk takes its start from two recent concerns of mine. On the one hand the idea of the end of the earth, its very edge, and on the other the importance of land as a middle term between earth and world. The first stems from an ancient obsession with discovering the limit of the physical planet we inhabit, its endpoint or ultimate horizon. The second from a much more recent problem, one found within Heidegger's influential essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." My hypothesis is that Bachelard, though not dealing with either of these concerns directly, casts remarkable light upon them, and that conversely they help to illuminate his thought in *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, so beautifully brought into English in the book whose publication we are celebrating this weekend. My deeper obsession is with a term that is missing from all three sources: land. Why is this so? What kind of blind spot is operative here? It will turn out that we have to do with three distinctive forms of blindness, of which only Bachelard's harbors redemptive resources for poetry, for painting, and for life. How can this be?

Consider the ancient case first of all. The ancient peoples of the Mediterranean—the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Cretans, the Carthaginians, and others—had their own obsession. This was to find the end of the known earth, the *eschaton* or the *oikoumene*. Perhaps precisely because of the self-enclosed status of the Mediterranean, they were

fascinated with going beyond its outer edges; intimations of a greater earth were given in the Caspian Straights, as they led to the Black Sea to the east, and above all to the Pillars of Hercules to the west, as we know from the accounts of Hanno the Carthaginian and others. The pillars beckoned to an unknown world where the ocean, Okeanos, ruled. Okeanos signified the undelimited, and the question it posed to the early navigators and equally to the early poets and philosophers was whether it had any ultimate limit. The existence of the horizon over land and sea alike suggested that some kind of perimeter out there existed, but just as the horizons recede with every advance toward them, so these oceanic *eschata* vanished continually from view as sailors headed into the open sea. Pindar, contemplating this daunting prospect, had this sobering thought: "What lies beyond [the Pillars of Hercules] cannot be approached by wise men or unwise. I shall not try or I would be a fool." No wonder, then, that Hanno the Carthaginian clung so closely to the West African coast in his voyage of the sixth century BC, very happy to find mountains, and beaches, and very hairy people who inhabited them. Looking east as he sailed south, the land provided the reassuring limit which the voyage otherwise failed to provide when one wheeled around and faced the west, which was limitless. Yet it was the west in its limitless limit that drew out the earliest known sailors, not just from Carthage or Greece, but from Scandinavia and Ireland, indeed from ancient China, and so on.

What were all these people seeking? They were not trying to prove some overriding theory about the extent of space. Rather, the interest was in going beyond land's end, beyond its reassuring limits to an open region whose apparent endlessness

struck terror in the hearts of the early explorers, and yet lured them ever outward beyond shores and accustomed limits. The terror was already evident in the fact that, within the Mediterranean itself, sailors preferred to go from one coastal point to another in the ancient manner of the *periplous*, the voyage whose epic expression was the *Odyssey*, and whose actual technique came to be called *costeggiare* by later Portuguese navigators, meaning sailing by hugging the coast. Despite the by anxiety occasioned by the trackless sea, there was a palpable push toward finding out where the largest possible body of water, the ocean that surrounds the earth, might come to an end, and how it could do so – as a sharp edge, as a blunt recession, or as a slow fading out? So powerful was this question that it dominated many generations of Mediterranean peoples, and it leads us to ask, Why was this so? Why, if it not only courted danger and disaster, when it was literalized in outer-sea voyages, but also tempted whole peoples to forsake their own countries of origin, indeed their own land, more notably the fearless Vikings, the Mediterraneans, and so on, who were always wishing, like Ulysses, to return home, a phrase that exactly translates the *nostos* root of the word “nostalgia.”

To find an answer we need only consider that every place is a place *on earth*, and that earth in turn, as we feel it under our feet and see it receding in the distance, not only supports us physically and biologically, but conveys to us a distinct sense of a greater spatial whole that exceeds the very place in which we find ourselves at any given moment. To be in place is to know that we are part of a much more extensive place of places, which is that of the earth itself. The earth is at once utterly concrete – so much so that phenomenologically it never seems to move, except in earthquakes – and

it is resistant to our efforts to displace or transform it. What would resistance be, asks Bachelard, without its stubbornness, its deep substantiality, its depth – that of matter itself. Not only depth, but breadth is a major access of our primal experience of the earth, which brings with it a sense of outgoing outreach toward the visible horizon; breadth takes us out and beyond, thus even when I stay in place, lingering at home in Athens, I sense that the earth goes wide as well as deep, and I start wondering, how wide? How far can I go on land or sea to get to its final limit? Without going to sea, I begin to experience that primordial wonder, or *thaumazein*, which the Greeks treasured as the beginning of philosophical thought.

But the full sense of this earthly width is to be had outside the walls of the polis, the city, in that unmapped space of the margin in which Plato's *Phaedrus* is set so precariously: "Forgive me, my friends," [says Socrates, as he reluctantly leaves the city for a rare conversation that cannot take place in the city], "I am devoted to learning. Landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me. Only the people in the city can do that." In fact, much of great interest is to be found out there in the liminal zone, the margin: the nature of beauty, whose more exact delineation is pursued in this same conversation in this same place outside the city. The perception of the horizon, the character of unbounded space, not to mention the natural world in its teeming multiplicity – all this arises, in short, in the landscape, a concept that has no proper name in Greek. Indeed, there is no coherent notion of "land" in ancient Greek culture and language; there is *place*, *region*, and *unbounded space*, but no *land* proper, a curious and telling omission with enormous consequences, one of which is precisely the passion

for finding the edge of the earth at the risk of losing secure footing on the land. One is driven to go at any cost to earth's end, whether in speculation or in actual exploration, and to do so by leaving the land that subtends one's home place and entering the ever spacious sea beyond the wildness of the boundless. The obsession with land's end comes at the expense of land itself.

A second loss of land occurs in 1935, the date of Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art." This is a short late modern tale, but one just as instructive. But let me first say that I take earth to be what subtends human experience; in Husserl's phrase, it is the basis-body for all more particular bodies that reside in it or on it, whether animate or inanimate. Earth stands under the movements of our bodies, the upsurge of organic matter, and the settling down of stone. For all its vulcanism, its metamorphic shifts and evolutionary drifts, earth is the guarantor of all that we do on it. Its felt immobility puts paltry human motions in their place. It is an ultimate place of places against which we measure the comparative instability and waywardness of whatever we humans and other animals do. Even earthquakes eventually equilibrate. Land is something else again. Not merely is it the crust of the earth, its surface, whether as soil for agriculture, as the basis of landscape, thus something for viewing and painting, or as objectified property for possession as real estate, it is also land, a *mediatrix* between earth and world, where I take world to be the communal and historical and linguistic domain of human speech and action. Heidegger, who dramatized the earth-world contrast in his celebrated essay of 1935, significantly failed to single out land in his insistent emphasis on the polemical relationship between earth and world, their unremitting struggle. I

have long felt that we cannot leave matters just there, that there is an unacknowledged *Zwischenraum*, a space of the between, between the two epicenters of earth and world, and this is land – the very land that is the inspiration of landscape painting, earthworks, photography of nature, and of much mapping.

Land is a liminal concept, it is both literally liminal – a *limen*, or threshold, between earth and sky in our direct perceptual experience – and liminal in the more expanded sense that it is the arena in which earth turns toward world and thereby gains a face, a *facies* or surface. Land is not a surface in the sense of a mere covering, that is, as sheer topsoil, but rather in the richer sense of that which bears out its own depths. Here “the depths are all the surface” (Wittgenstein), and just as “land brings earth out into visibility” (Gibson) in that layout of surfaces which is the experiential basis of the natural environment, so land allows earth to become imageable in paintings or photographs or maps and intelligible in the historical deeds and language of a given human life-world. Land turns earth inside out, as it were, putting tellurian contents on display, setting them out in particular places and regions, so as then to become subject to articulation in language and to play a role in the history of those who live on it. The configuration of the local lands here in Texas not merely expresses the character of the geological forces beneath it, but it also furnishes soil for wheat and other crops, as well as redoubts for ranchers and the current president of this country.

That Heidegger misses the crucial *tertium quid*, the third term, or dissolves it into one or both – either earth or world – is not accidental. This critical omission reflects his anti-Hegelian effort to eliminate third terms, and to conceive of human culture in terms

of a pitched *polemos*, a battle royal; it also reflects his own world-time, the mid-1930s, a time of mounting armed conflict and forced choices, with no compromise allowed, no middle ground, no land that is not *ours* or *theirs*. Understandable perhaps, as a response to the terrors of his time in which he was himself complicitous, Heidegger's bipolar model is nevertheless ill equipped to deal with the subtlety of land, its complex configurations. Here I am not so much rejecting Heidegger's framework of earth and world as letting it stay in place in order to show how at every turn it must be supplemented. What is called for is a much more resolute commitment to the concreteness of experience of the land, which draws earth and world together in one embrace as their deeply common term. This is land, which in effect deconstructs the dyad of earth and world from within; land is a *mediatrix*, but odd and upsetting, and metaphysically untenable.

Land undeniably relates closely both to earth and to world. Earth subtends it from below, world extends it above, but land has its own unique form of being as depth in surface; it is the basis of the places and regions that fill out earthscapes, and it makes possible, directly or indirectly, the worlds that are established in its midst – in farms and cities and cultures, languages and traditions – thereby creating worldscapes. It is the primal scene of **concrease** tellurian forces downward and cosmic directions outward. It is itself always singular; it is always just this land, located in this particular place and region and nowhere else. We are lucky to have it; no wonder we crave it so much, and miss it so mightily when we have lost it. Not just its sheer materiality as soil or property, in the phenomenological fact that land is the inner frame of all outgoing

and ongoing perception, a basis for personal as well as public identities, just where we are, after all, has much to do with just who we are.

From the ancient mariners to Heidegger is a giant step, and one can hardly imagine a more landlocked philosopher than Heidegger, who once wrote an autobiographical essay entitled "Why I Stay in the Provinces," but from Heidegger to Bachelard the distance is much less drastic. In the same period when he wrote "The Origin of the Work of Art," Bachelard was starting his series of books on the material imagination. Each thinker had a special sensitivity to the elemental character of the poetic imaginary. Each was of peasant stock and grew up in a small rural village far from any metropolitan center. Perhaps precisely because of this deeply ingrained *Bodenständigkeit*, or earthboundness, neither philosopher felt the need to thematize the land as such in their writings; it was in their blood, part of their habitual body-memory, thus did not call for articulation in so many words. Was this the basis for the conspicuous absence of land at the very point where one would have most expected it in Heidegger's "Origin" essay and in Bachelard's *Earth and Reveries of Will*? Maybe, but this absence cannot be considered innocent. More than oversight or the taken for granted is at stake.

Land is a concept that does not fit into familiar western schemata; it is a maverick notion, it is what Kant would have called a *reflective concept*, that is to say, an idea that cannot be subsumed under an already existing concept. Exemplary cases of reflective concepts on Kant's own list include the beautiful and the sublime, and it is not accidental that these latter arise in the realm of art, just where land is so strikingly

missing from the aesthetics of Heidegger and Bachelard. I consider it symptomatic that in the common preface to both of his volumes on earth, Bachelard explicitly disavows any recourse to land in the work to come. To quote:

Before concluding these general remarks, I want to explain an omission for which I will doubtless be reproached in a work devoted to earth. I have left out images of agriculture. Certainly this is not due to any lack of love for the soil; in fact, it seemed to me a betrayal of the orchard and the garden to speak of them only in one short chapter. It would require an entire book to unearth the agriculture of the imagination, the joys of spade and rake.

Here Bachelard admits that it is his rootedness in the land that leads him to avoid it as a topic for treatment in the two volumes on earth. The entire book that would unearth the agriculture of the imagination is a book he chose not to write. These convictions do not prevent him from adverting to aspects of land from time to time in *Earth and Reveries of Will*, notably in the first chapter of this book where he talks of the laborer, a poet with hands that kneel, who gently works the sluggish elasticity of matter. Surely the paradigm case of such a laborer is the farmer, who can very well be said to work the sluggish elasticity of soil. Indeed, many other passages in the same book betray an uncanny proximity to descriptions of land, even though the term itself, *le sol*, is not used. I pick out at random the following instances, all from the first chapter:

By means of imagination we human beings convince ourselves that we are responsible for bringing the energies potentially in matter to life. We sharpen the mineral hostility of what is hard, and bring the fruited orbs of what is soft to ripeness.

When prevented by the ever-renewed resistance of matter from becoming too mechanical, manual labor restores to our bodies, to our energies, to our expressions and even the words we use their original force.

The tactile sensation of digging into matter with one's fingers, discovering its substance beneath form and color, gives one the illusion of touching the very essence of matter.

In each case we can replace matter with land. Land after all is a form of matter, perhaps even the primary form for earthlings. Thus energy's potential can lie as well in land as in matter per se. Both "mineral hostility" and "fruited orbs" belong to the land. The agriculturalist, a word that signifies cultivating the field or reshaping the land, and surely digging into matter with one's fingers and discovering its substance, are experienced at the most primal level in relation to the land.

This is not to mention the entire thematics of energetic dualism of hand and matter in Bachelard's book, which is pervasive in the book as a whole. Is not the first and most abiding form of such dualism that of hand and *land*? And if this is indeed an

active dualism quite different from the classic dualism of subject and object, is this not because the land that links them is recalcitrant to this very dualism? A related question concerning “resistance,” with which Bachelard opens his entire analysis of earth, don’t we first find the resistance of matter itself in the ground on which we stand and in the soil we plow and plant; that is, in the land which our active bodies, hands and feet alike, encounter as we cope with being on earth? And is it not the same land that is also simultaneously yielding, thereby forming the basis for what Bachelard later calls ideal earth and matter—a perfect synthesis of yielding and resistance, a marvelous equilibrium of the forces of acceptance and refusal?

More generally, can we not say that land is where will meets earth? If so, land would be every bit as much the absent third thing between Bachelard’s will and earth as it is between Heidegger’s earth and world. At least this is so on a first reading of Bachelard’s text, but a more generous reading would detect in Bachelard a saving grace not found in Heidegger, or for that matter in those ancient exploration narratives. Even if the explicit language of land, for which there is admittedly no precise French equivalent—the closest cousins are *sol*, *terre*, *terrain*—it is rarely used in Bachelard’s discourse. There are promising ways by which land becomes a positive presence in its own right, and not merely a *tertium quid* between home-place and open sea, or between polis and *eskaton*, or between earth and world.

I have in mind two ways in particular. First there is Bachelard’s intriguing model of the nexus of imagery, energy, and matter: “By experiencing the curious condensation of imagery and energy that characterizes work with matter, we experience for ourselves

the synthesis of imagination and will. This synthesis, largely ignored by philosophers, is nonetheless the first synthesis to consider in a dynamology of the human psyche." If we extend this claim expressly to land, we can begin to think of the latter as a comparable nexus that, far from being sheer soil, is something dynamic and changing and moving, and doing so not only in the natural world outside us, where mass is enlivened, but within, psychically, where habits are dissolved in an onrush of transition. All of this happens slowly, as befits dealing with land, and it results in what Bachelard calls "a dialectical animism," where matter reveals to us our own strengths.

Put in terms of land, this means that the working through of any concerted intervention on the land is in effect an inter-animation of psyche and soil, self and other. This is more easily glimpsed in the gentle intentionality of gardening than in the willful and sometimes violent actions of farming. Wherever genuine cultivation of earth takes place, we witness preoccupation with the land, with its potentialities and its vistas, rather than being a matter of labor alone, as Bachelard often tends to hold. Such preoccupying cultivation can be creative work, as we see most notably in the case of earthworks created by Smithson and Heiser, Oppenheim and Stuart. To move to the level of land is to open up the prospect of such concrete creativity, which is the equivalent of poetic possibility in the realm of extension.

A second way by which land is enlivened is found in Bachelard's emphasis on the sublimation of earth in works of art. This had already been a theme in *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, where Bachelard distinguished between discursive sublimation in search of a beyond and dialectical sublimation in

pursuit of the close-by. Bachelard discerns two directions of sublimation. In the first, we sublimate upward, toward the beyond, *au-delà*, toward height in the preferred word of *Earth and Reveries of Will*. To sublimate in terms of the close-by, *à côté*, on the other hand, suggests movement into the proximity of one's local place, into the here and now of being on earth. Instead of height, the pertinent dimensions now become depth and breadth: "The contemplation of the landscape whose depth and breadth would seem to call forth dreams of limitlessness gives rise to a sort of panoramic dream state."

Landscape is the face of the land, its visual garment, as it were. If its surface brims with depth, its edge creates breadth, the felt width to which I alluded earlier as being intrinsic to land; thanks to the horizon that at once encircles land and leads it ever further outward, it also invokes the limitless immensity, which Bachelard ascribes specifically to the earth:

The fundamental image of immensity is terrestrial. The earth is immense, vaster by far than the sky; naturally the sea too forms part of the earth, a simplified earth, and, where quasi-elemental meditation is concerned, one whose primary attribute is its immensity. Earth is an instance of absolute grandeur, at once beyond compare, yet concrete and material.

So much for any equipoise among members of what Heidegger sometimes calls the twofold: earth and sky. So much, too, for any claim that the sea is vaster than the known earth. Rather than Okeanos as the boundless, it is earth itself that is out of

bounds. We need not settle this ancient competition for the most limitless element or regions, for our purposes what matters is that according to a certain notion of sublimation, we do not transcend the earth but return to it, like Antaeus, in its concrete immensity. At its most concrete, such immensity is that of the land around us and under us, which knows no precise limit, least of all that of any property line. As in the perception of any field, we cannot determine the exact edge of land, which is limitless without being colossal, specific without being formal or geometric, finite yet not closed, fitting into the sweep of our look, but not measurable by human means. In short, land gives to us a progressive solidification in the materials offered in the human imagination. It hands back to us what our hands reach out to touch in it— not an absolute grandeur but an intimate immensity that shares the scale of our lived bodies and experienced histories. It gives us a place, a very particular place, on the earth itself. Thanks to his ideas of the energetic nexus and a localizing sublimation, Bachelard allows us to deliteralize land, to free it from the perennial temptation to regard it as something merely functional or cartographic or legal, and thus to see in it possibilities for a redemptive role in poetry and painting, in earthworks and earth mappings, and in our daily lives as well.

Now we are left with a question: Why land? Why, if earth presents us with such an embarrassment of riches, as Bachelard and Heidegger so surely demonstrate, do we need land beyond earth? My answer runs like this: If land is earth turned inside out and made available to us, it is the effective concretization of earth, the arena in which earth comes forward to meet us, as it were, there where we can work and play with it, and if

it is true that in J. J. Gibson's words the surface is where most of the action is, the land is indeed the surface of the earth, the place where its depths are put on display for labor and work, delectation and delight. Land is also the wherewithal for the intertangement of the human and the natural. Only in the land is it the case – as in Merleau-Ponty's words, "everything is cultural in us, and everything is natural in us" – everything is historical in us, and everything is wild in us. In contrast, world in Heidegger's sense is only cultural-historical, while earth for him is only wild. We need land not just to bridge the conceptual gap between earth and world, but to ensure that the antipodes of the cultural and the natural truly connect and interpenetrate. In land alone do these extremes *se touchent*.

This is true as well for the extremities of the ancient world, home and horizon, coast and sea; the diremption of these dyads as oppositional, as Heidegger's preferred pairs of earth–world, earth–sky, fails to take into account the connective tissue of land. This is not the land of "land and sea" – the familiar phrase that keeps land locked into a literal opposition to water – but land as felt and imagined, needed and plowed, that is to say, worked through with hands and feet as well as shot through with words and images, those of poetry and painting and maps. Then land can be seen not as the sublimation of raw matter in an ascensional direction, but as something sublime within matter itself; it becomes the descension of material images (a phrase from Bachelard) rather than their rarefication; a matter of concrete reflection instead of abstract determination; and finally, as many things in many modalities rather than one kind of thing in one sort of format. Land circulating polymorphically in our equally wild and

cultural lives, moves to the level of landscape, deliteralized and at long last worthy of this latter, still powerful, still mysterious notion that is called for insistently when we reflect on the place of land in human experience. To move from earth to land, as I have done in this talk, is one bold step we need to make in the wake of two and a half millennia of confusion and neglect. To move from land to landscape would be another major step, but I shall leave making the case for that move, mercifully, for another occasion.