

# THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME AND PLACE: A VOEGELINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## I. Introduction

I address herewith the interlinked roles of the landscape and history in human experience and symbolization. To my knowledge neither Voegelin nor his many interpreters, with the exception of Brendan Purcell, have given much attention to this ubiquitous dimension of human experience, and it is ubiquitous because the landscape is a ubiquitous component of our everyday experience.<sup>2</sup> I attempt to highlight the nature of landscape symbolism and use Voegelin's work, particularly regarding the paradoxical structure of consciousness, to elucidate it. Furthermore, I will examine some aspects of the historic preservation movement, a collection of government agencies and non-profit organizations which have a substantial impact upon the way that historic places are perceived and interpreted today, through which the symbolism of the historic landscape is both promoted and deformed.

Given Eric Voegelin's emphasis on personal experience and anamnesis, perhaps I can be forgiven beginning this essay with a reminiscence. I was raised on the site of an extinct nineteenth century town--Palo Alto, Mississippi--where my family had resided since my great-great-grandfather founded it in 1846. There were however, no buildings remain from the old town, giving the ostensible impression that there was little temporal depth. However, as a small child I began to discover physical clues to a deeper past. In and around our yard, fragments of pottery and bricks, rusted nails, and other artifacts, recalled past activities in Palo Alto. Sunken roads running through our pasture marked the sites of old streets while depressions in the ground marked the sites of filled-in cisterns.

I eventually learned to collect a wide variety of facts--from the ground, from oral history, and from written records--and transform them into a history or story, if you will, of Palo Alto, which began with the founding, continued through the rise, then decline of the town, until the only continuing thread was the history of my family which culminated in me, the teller of the tale. This opened various questions, most notably the rather

<sup>1</sup>Brendan M. Purcell, "In Search of Newgrange: Long Night's Journey into Day," in Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind. Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp. 39-55; also published as Chapter 2 of Brendan M. Purcell, "Newgrange after the Dawn of Humanity," in *The Drama of Humanity Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 56-74. paradoxical position of being both the teller of the story and part of the story at the same time. I also became aware of the role of my imagination in the whole process, and that the story was a collection of mental images of peoples and places, which all pointed me to times and dimensions beyond the everyday. As a result of this experience, particular places in the landscape, came to inchoately represent more than just a collection of dirt, buildings, and trees; here I learned of the power of places to evoke a dimension of mystery in the midst of the everyday.

In later years, my work in Israel aroused a sense of the symbolism inherent in ancient sites--tells

and ruins--that went beyond the positivistic focus of archaeology. Furthermore, I began to see a relationship between the archaeological sites and the Holy Land shrines which only differed from archaeological sites by degree. The end result is that I began to see a continuity between the everyday places that we live in and the places that we regard as being sacred.

On November 4, 1987, I was examining the new arrivals shelf at the Mississippi State University Library when I stumbled across a volume entitled *In Search of Order* by one Eric Voegelin, a name that I had only briefly encountered in the works of sociologist Peter Berger. I daresay that few will disagree when I say that this book is probably not the best introduction to Voegelin. Indeed, being unfamiliar with his previous work and his terminology, I found much of it to be incomprehensible. However, there was something about it that rang true. I was immediately struck by the self-reference of the text, in which the writer through self-reference in the text recalled my experience of being both an actor in and the teller of the tale of Palo Alto.

Intuiting that there was something present in that slim volume, I set out to read Voegelin and his interpreters. With this and through continued reflection, it became increasingly apparent that my youthful interest in historic places had a linkage with the complex process associated with the emergence of symbolic and sacred places. It also seemed clear that there was also an integral relationship with fundamental issues pertaining to the mystery of "consciousness" and the structure of conscious within reality.

## **II. Cultural Landscape and Meaning**

At this point we need to step back and examine the landscape, more specifically, the cultural landscape. The landscape, the physical form of the land in all of its complexity, within which we live is such an omnipresent aspect of life that it often fails to reach conscious awareness.

The term "landscape" is derived from the Dutch word for a "tract of land." It passed into English usage as a result of the Dutch mastery of a burgeoning landscape school of art during the sixteenth century, where it was interlinked with the notion of the artistic depiction of the land. Jumping further ahead to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where under the influence of geographical and environmental studies the term was used by the German school of *landschaftskunde* to denote the complex human and natural phenomena that constitute the surface of the land.<sup>2</sup> In this usage the term "natural landscape" referred to any landscape which, theoretically, had not been affected by humans, while "cultural landscape" referred to a landscape that had been created by both human and natural factors. In that we encounter virtually no land that is not a cultural landscape, this more specialized term is almost de facto synonymous with the more generic term "landscape." The landscape, as we know it, is at the interface of man and nature; it is, so to speak, "in-between" world and society.

Until recently the geographical study of the landscape tended to be empirical and positivistic and consequently denied its relationship to the artistic sensibility associated with the origin of the term. However, a phenomenological response eventually developed which stressed human perception and symbolization of the environment. This was perhaps in part due to the fact that landscape is not a discrete "thing" that can be readily defined. Because of the landscape's

ubiquitous nature, its unboundedness, and its complexity, its understanding is not subject to concise definition and explanation. It is the product of various natural and human processes that leave their fossils or material residue as the constituents of the land, and reminders of that which has occurred before. These "fossils" include all of the components of the land, which have been produced from billions of years ago to seconds ago, and include geological formations, land forms, soil, plants, and a wide range of material culture from buried artifacts to buildings, roads, and cultivated fields.

The complex associations that the landscape recalls means that it has a powerful, multivalent symbolic quality, and through its integral relatedness to our personal experience and to society and history; this quality is quite neatly captured by geographer Philip Wagner who observed:

Environment at any instant is participation in a multitude of histories. Its chains of personal acquaintance afford direct connection to all ancestral and contemporary mankind.... any given environment of the moment is of a piece with the unbroken fabric of a life, and through it run the warp-and-wool strands of the perceiver's continuous existence and experience.<sup>3</sup>

All of this points to a complex interrelationship between consciousness and the landscape in which it exists. At the most basic level we interact within a mentally mapped landscape, those places and routes over which we pass everyday, forming much of the everyday world as we know it, the familiar landmarks separated by a continuum of myriad phenomena. Places like home, work place, church, the homes of friends and relatives, and other places are simultaneously physical forms and meanings. Indeed as geographer Peirce Lewis has stated "*all human landscape has cultural meaning*,"<sup>4</sup> no matter how ordinary that landscape may be.

<sup>2</sup> Preston E. James and Geoffrey J. Martin, *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas*, 21 ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), pp. 176-179.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Wagner, *Environments and Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 3-4.

Above and beyond the landscapes of our personal lives there are other layers of social meaning pertaining to the formation of communities. From his earliest work Voegelin stressed the role of the individual human in community formation, for communities are not discrete entities but are evoked through symbolizations which he early on referred to as political ideas. Largely of a verbal nature he later came to the understanding that there was a deeper stratum lying beneath that of verbal formalizations, about which he observed that "[o]ne could not handle under the title of "ideas" an Egyptian coronation ritual or the recitation of the *Enuma Elish* on occasion of Sumerian New Year festivals." <sup>5</sup> The landscape, I would suggest, has provided a host of spatial symbols, that are not always easily translated into verbal formulations and hence are likely to be overlooked by exegesis.

There are two basic categories of such symbols that are never completely separate from each other. The first consists of actual places, components of the landscape that have acquired various meanings through personal and social experience. The second are images that are derived from symbolic places that gain something of a separate existence within social discourse.

The first category, actual places, includes to varying degrees almost any place that has some personal or social meaning, from the everyday personal landscape of home and workplace to the places that are associated with social identity to the places that symbolize the Transcendent. For example, political identities are defined in part upon their defined territorial domain, so that a particular land may become associated with nationalistic symbols. Symbolic centers, cities, capital buildings, and monuments, which are all landscape elements, can also play important roles in social definition. Furthermore, sacred places such as shrines, temples, graves, can play serve to define religious societies.

Given the complex meanings that places can acquire, mental images that are derived from these places can pass into social discourse bearing a wide variety of meaning. For example, images from travel--pilgrimage and odyssey--take on more universal meaning that applies to individual lives and the struggle for higher goals. Another example is Jerusalem, a very real place, which has passed from being the religious/political center of Israel/Judah to the image of the New Jerusalem, the symbol of human-divine rapprochement.

Although scholarly interests in phenomenological geography and related subjects have pointed out the complex dimensions of meaning inherent in the interaction between humans and the landscape, yet there has also been a tendency to treat this as only more "subjective" material for academic study. What it *means* to each of us as individuals in search of meaning is seldom mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in D. W. Meinig (ed.), *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 63.

### III. Voegelinian Insights

Having examined a range of examples in which elements of the landscape have been incorporated into meaning systems from everyday life to symbols of the transcendent, I can return to Voegelin. It was his work more than any other that best interpreted my own struggling questions regarding the interplay between consciousness and the landscape.

Ironically, it was that first book *In Search of Order* that held the key. In saying this I reiterate Lissy Voegelin's report that her husband had stated that this volume is "the key to all his other works."<sup>6</sup> As Robert McMahon has recently emphasized, the key lies in the articulation of a theme which had underlain much of Voegelin's previous work, that is, the paradox of consciousness. The paradox of consciousness,<sup>7</sup> of course, refers to the participatory role and self-referential nature of consciousness within reality in which one finds two inseparable structures of consciousness--intentionality and luminosity--copresent in all our experience.

With intentionality reality is apart from consciousness; the general model of structure of

consciousness is the perception of a thing, that is, reality appears as objects or things. Consequently, the structure of reality that corresponds to intentionality is termed "thing-reality."

<sup>8</sup> With luminosity, consciousness is part of the structure of reality termed "it-reality." Examples of luminosity are apprehensions of meaning, such as inspiration, insight, identity, and aesthetic arrest. Because intentionality and luminosity are inseparable, we experience reality as both things and as illuminations, having both an intentional "surface" of thingly reality with underlying depths of meaning. <sup>9</sup> Consequently, whereas the perceived object in its intentional aspect has become the model for the modern view of reality, it also has a luminous aspect, although the modern mind tends to forget this. One can readily see the value of this in terms of landscape symbolism in which the world of sensory phenomena that surround us, that dominate our perceived thing-reality, would simultaneously be suffused with luminous meaning.

<sup>6</sup> (Lissy Voegelin, Foreword, in Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), p. xv. 7

<sup>7</sup> Robert McMahon, "Eric Voegelin's Paradoxes of Consciousness and Participation," *Review of Politics* (1999), LXI, pp. 117-139.

<sup>8</sup> Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> McMahon, pp. 120-123.

As McMahon points out Voegelin's paradox of consciousness provides "a deeper appreciation of ordinary human experience." <sup>10</sup> With these insights into the paradox of consciousness one gains a better appreciation of the landscape and symbolism. Providing the ever-present backdrop of our lives, with its complex "chains of personal acquaintance" making it a "participation in a multitude of histories," to repeat Philip Wagner, the landscape both dominates the surface which is the perceived thing-reality, while simultaneously being suffused with luminous meaning. Voegelin further distinguishes his third dimension of consciousness--reflective distance--previously referred to as "anamnesis" and "noetic" consciousness. This refers to the acts of self-reflection by means of which one becomes aware of the paradox of consciousness, of the interplay between intentionality and luminosity. It is by means of reflective distance that one can become aware of the tyranny of phenomenalism.<sup>11</sup>

As Voegelin emphasized the concrete experience, then a concrete example of a reflection on a landscape feature would be useful. An excellent example can be found in the reflections of physicist Niels Bohr on the occasion of his visit to Kronberg Castle in Denmark, the home of the historical Prince Hamlet:

Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists, we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect puts them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a different language.... Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle.... But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depths he was made to reveal.... <sup>12</sup>

Here we have a man who struggles with the intuition that there is more to the world than mere phenomena of thing-reality. From reflective distance, Bohr concisely articulates the phenomenal surface of the castle, that is its physical parameters, then moves on to the luminous depth which through association with Hamlet and universal question, causes the castle to "speak a different language."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>11</sup> Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 36-37; Michael Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> This is Werner Heisenberg's rendering of Bohr's musings, as quoted in Ilya Prigogine, "*Only an Illusion*," *The World of Physics*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 11, p. 691.

#### **IV. Historic Preservation: Substance into Phenomena**

Landscape symbolism today is often associated with institutionalized activities known as "historic preservation," by virtue of their focus on the experience of historic places. The existence of these activities paradoxically represents a retreat from more positivistic history while at the same time representing something of a triumph of the same. The retreat derives from the fact that public history and historic preservation deal with history and historic places, not so much as an attempted mirror reflection of the world, but as a form of participation. The triumph of positivism is that those involved in these fields are still likely to deal with subjects of their concern as simply facts and things.

Members of the Eric Voegelin Society are already quite cognizant of the positivistic and scientific reduction of reality to phenomena or thing-reality by modern thought. Of relevance herewith, a few decades ago J. H. Plumb heralded what he saw as the triumph of growing, positivistic historiography which was emancipating society from an exemplary past. For him, "industrial society, unlike the commercial, craft and agrarian societies which it replaces, does not need the past.... The new methods, new processes, new forms of living of scientific and industrial society have no sanction in the past and no roots in it." The past is now recalled only as "a matter of curiosity, of nostalgia, a sentimentality "<sup>13</sup>

However, geographer David Lowenthal persuasively disputed this conclusion. After examining the numerous and varied ways that twentieth century Western humanity participates in the past through historical reenactments, reading history books and historic novels, viewing television shows and movies with historic themes, and visits to historic sites, buildings, and ruins, he concludes that Plumb's observations are "dubious" because "the cult of nostalgia, the yearning for roots, the demand for heritage, the passion for preservation show that the spell of the past remains potent. Indeed, history can never bring about the death of the past, for every act we take, every plan we make, entail the past's more or less conscious re-evaluation, revision, and re-creation...." <sup>14</sup>

This observation is based upon the fact that history and place cannot be reduced to facts and things in a detached thing-reality. Proceeding from the depth of experience of history and place, organizations have developed devoted to preserving those places which convey a sense of participation in history. Many early efforts at preserving historic places were devoted to preserving the homes and places associated with national figures and events of national importance, which must often be seen in the light of the growth of nationalism.

More sustained efforts appear to have been as a response to sudden changes that disrupted historic places associated with community identity and community order. In

<sup>13</sup>J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973) p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 411-412.

their study of 120 years of preservation activities in Salzburg, Austria, geographer Lester Rowntree and anthropologist Margaret Conkey linked preservation to the symbolism of the cultural landscape which serves as "an explicit cosmology" and "the means whereby social identity and reality are created." They have suggested that preservation movements tend to arise when a society is in stress as a symbolization process whereby "landscape symbols are promoted to alleviate stress through creation of shared symbolic structures that validate, if not actually define, social claims to space and time." <sup>15</sup> Similarly, in her study of preservation in Charleston, South Carolina in 1920-1940, Robin Datel saw the beginnings of the movement as a symbolization process aimed at alleviating stress from social and economic change in whose face historic preservation offered Charlestonians "the reassurance of a familiar place"<sup>16</sup>

These efforts illustrate attempts at articulating a community's sense of order in the face of threats to that order. They also illustrate an awareness of the role of the landscape and its role in evoking a sense of community and the common good. One of the few to meditatively reflect upon the interplay of thing-reality and It-reality between landscape and community is Robert Archibald who in his well-named monograph--*A Place to Remember*--wrote that:

The community we create is founded in shared remembrance and grounded in place, especially those places that are conducive to the casual associations necessary for emergence of shared memory, common ground, and commitment to the common good. Places, memories, and stories are inextricably connected, and we cannot create a real community without these elements.<sup>17</sup>

The most sustained and wide-spread historic preservation activities in the United States have been a product of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, legislation that was precipitated by major demographic, social, and transportation changes and the consequent destruction of architectural fabric in traditional community centers. The greatest decline has been in those areas that have the most meaning for us as societies, that is the community centers where social and economic life converge. These centers range from villages to the central business and residential districts of urban areas.

The report that led to the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, *With Heritage So Rich*, observed that the rapid changes had resulted in "a feeling of

<sup>15</sup>Lester B. Rowntree and Margaret W. Conkey. "Symbolism and the Cultural Landscape." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 70 (1980), pp. 459-474.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Elisabeth Date], "Southern Regionalism and Historic Preservation in Charleston, South Carolina, 1920-1940," *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 16 (1990), pp. 197-215; cf. Anne Buttimer, "Home, Reach, and the Sense of Place," in Anne Buttimer and David Seamon (eds.), *The Human Experience of Space and Place* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 166-187; Robin Elisabeth Datel, "Preservation and a Sense of Orientation for American Cities," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 75: 125-141, 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, California: Alta Mira Press, 1999), p. 24.

rootlessness combined with a longing for those landmarks of the past which give us a sense of stability and belonging." It furthermore noted that "If the preservation movement is to be successful, it must go beyond saving bricks and mortar .... It must attempt to give a sense of orientation to our society, using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place." <sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, transcendent dimensions of historic landscapes are occasionally hinted at, usually in promotional literature, but little else. For example, a National Park Service brochure--"A Heritage So Rich"--informs us that: "Historic places help us understand who we are as well as the meaning of our accomplishments and shortcomings." Additionally, a recently released film on historic landscape preservation interprets historic places as being of value because they ask the questions: "Who are we? Where do we come from? and, Where are we going?"

However, these questions are seldom discussed in preservationist literature or in dialogue among preservationists. As Peirce Lewis has argued: "in our enthusiasm for preservation .... we have spent far too much time acting, and too little time thinking about *why* we want to preserve old things." <sup>19</sup> It is evident that the motivation for the birth of historic preservation lies far deeper than a superficial desire to preserve antiquities and collect data, for it was born out of the experienced loss of order from the threat to places associated with public life. Indeed it was born out of an attempted reflective distance or noesis through which the relationship between community life and the implicit symbolism of the cultural landscape was articulated to an extent. Yet despite this there is, as Lewis points out, relatively little effort made at dealing with the foundational dimensions of the historic preservation movement.

Much of the problem arises from the lack of reflectiveness inherent in modern education which results in an inability to think about matters in terms of anything other than things, in this case, *old things*. In other words, the luminous depth has been absorbed into surface phenomena, where devoid of a noetic understanding, preservationists often focus upon preserving things largely for their own sake. Many times have I heard it said that something should be preserved simply

because it is the oldest building, or a unique building, or because it is our heritage without regard for the complex interplay of meanings that we are invoking.

<sup>18</sup>Special Committee on Historic Preservation, United States Conference of Mayors. *With Heritage So Rich* (2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1983, originally published New York: Random House, 1966), p. 193.

<sup>19</sup>Peirce F. Lewis, "The Future of the Past: Our Clouded Vision of Historic Preservation." *Pioneer America*, Vol. 7 (1975), 6; cf. Datel, "Preservation and a Sense of Orientation for American Cities," p. 141; Roderick S. French, "On Preserving America: Some Philosophical Observations," *Preservation: Toward an Ethic in the 1980s*, (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1980), pp. 182-192; William J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America* (Pittstown, N.J.: The Main Street Press, 1988), p. 167; George Percy, "Preservation at a Crossroads." *Historic Preservation Forum*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (1996), pp. 30-35.

This lack of reflectiveness will probably come as no surprise. However, it constitutes the contradictory nature of historic preservation and public history, in that having somewhat naively discerned that there is greater depth to reality than things, and having institutionalized this insight, yet there is a widespread inability to reflect upon the issue, largely due to the academic training of practitioners, which has directed them to more technical and positivistic aspects of their work. The result is a reification of meaning, intentionality is confused with luminosity, substance is treated as though it is phenomena.

It is because of this confusion that Voegelin's third dimension of consciousness-reflective distance--could play an important role. By reflecting upon the range of the experience of place, historic preservationists could more adequately dealing with all of the dimensions of landscape symbolism in all of its depth and ambiguity. Thereby they could have a more flexible approach that would highlight potentials for the cultural landscape and preservation activities to contribute to the common good rather than being reduced to saving old things, a mindset that I refer to as "naive antiquarianism."

Furthermore, there is to varying degrees potential for transcendence in the symbolism of the landscape which I became aware of as a youth when the land around me pointed me toward the dimension of mystery. It is reflected in the wonder at the opening of new horizons by the experience of historic places and buildings; it was indeed a driving force in the struggle against social disorder that gave considerable impetus to preservation. However, this potential is lost, or suffocated, by a social milieu that loses sight of this dimension and deforms luminosity into intentionality.