

**TRIGGERING LANDSCAPES IN THE POETRY
OF RICHARD HUGO, PHILIP LEVINE, C. K. WILLIAMS,
AND JAMES WRIGHT**

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This essay explains how landscapes might sometimes engender poems. Using memory, one can construct a poetic self that sustains a credible mythology of a landscape as the setting for a poem. It does not matter that the referent of this **emotional landscape** may be gone or transformed beyond recognition – it has already claimed a place in the poet’s consciousness and found a poetic life.

The American poet Richard Hugo (1923–1982) writes, in his seminal essays on poetry writing, *The Triggering Town*, about the natural need of the landscape poet to be emotionally situated in a specific geographical location, real or imagined: “If you ain’t [situated] no place, you can’t go nowhere” (TTT, 7). Knowing one’s bearings can be a source of creative and emotional stability and may even supplant the primary need for guidance by the poetic form (or the lack thereof). By **emotional landscaping** in poetry, I therefore mean the process of ordering the poet’s emotions related to landscapes into the shape of poems. Much like designing a garden, the poet according to Hugo takes leave to people (and it takes considerable arrogance to do that) the town or any place of his choice with all the pertinent details that suit the poem – the next-door drunk, a silo full of grain, an empty church, angry workers laid off from work, the soot falling on the poor neighborhood. Typically, the speaker of the landscape poem is involved in the fate of the landscape and comments on it.

From Emotional Thinking to Landscaping: The Limitations

Although the process of choosing landscapes for poems seems arbitrary, there are certain givens stemming from the poet’s obsessions. The imagined **triggering subject** (eg the town/landscape that causes a poem to be written) can’t be chosen at random: “Though you’ve never seen it before, it must be a town you’ve lived in all your life” (TTT, 12). If the landscape of the poem does not agree with the poet’s disposition, the poem may ring untrue and contrived. A Northwesterner, Hugo claimed he would never have been able to write about the big cities of the East. By the same token, an urban Easterner might have problems writing authentic poetry about fishing in the Northwest. After hearing Dylan Thomas read, in the early 1950s, his poems about

barns and owls, a flood of New York City urban poets tried writing bad imitations of pastoral lyrics (Stephenson).

The poet should know intimately his triggering landscape and yet be capable of detachment from it, wondering at its strangeness, discovered and explored in the act of writing. The poet's detachment from his subject is useful – it both harnesses and liberates: “If you have no emotional investment in the town, though you have taken immediate emotional possession of it for the duration of the poem, it may be easier to invest the feeling in the words” (TTT, 13). And the poet's primary emphasis should be on language, even at the expense of abandoning verisimilitude.

Landscape poets tend to overuse a few key words (as well as landscapes). Richard Hugo, Philip Levine and James Wright each have a limited, private vocabulary which they obsessively use much too frequently. Hugo argues that to avoid using such words (his favourites: “wind”, and “gray”, Levine's word: “to waken”, Wright's: “beautiful”) would mean lying about one's feelings, an unforgivable thing to do (TTT, 15). The preferred way in landscape poetry is to risk repetition, sentimentality and critical disdain.

How Triggering Subjects Change Into Landscape Poems

The process of **emotional landscaping** is summed up well by Hugo:

Your triggering subjects are those that ignite your need for words. When you are honest to your feelings, that triggering town chooses you. Your words used your way will generate your meanings. Your obsessions lead you to your vocabulary. Your way of writing locates, even creates, your inner life. The relation of you to your language gains power. The relation of you to the triggering subject weakens. (TTT, 15)

To illustrate this process of poetic composition via emotional landscaping, Hugo gives the opening stanza of a nonsensical poem that uses a silo as the triggering place and the ‘l’ sound as his language obsession for this particular piece:

That silo, filled with chorus girls and grain
burned down last night and grew back tall.
The grain escaped to the river. The girls ran
crying to the moon. When we knock, the metal
gives a hollow ring– (TTT, 13)

The outrageous linking of images is unrealistic (there are no chorus girls in grain silos) as are the actions described (the silo burns down and grows back tall). Strangely, the poem works, locale-jumping from the earth to river to moon to silo again, all in the matter of five lines. As Philip Levine says, the poet is free to lie if that makes the poem fresh, or, to “start with a truth and break through to a deeper one” (Stephenson). Ultimately, this exercise poem by Hugo seems to be about a lonely landscape and one's capacity for loving in a loveless place, which is **the real/generated subject** of the poem. The triggering subject is easily mistaken for the real/generated subject – for example, a plethora of black hole poems are not really about the black holes (the

triggering subject), but manifestations of essential human emotions like loneliness, boredom, love, fear of death (Bell, 8).

A full-length example of emotional landscaping might be Hugo's well-known poem "Lady In Kicking Horse Reservoir". Hugo was a fishing fan and his poems often use underwater imagery and riverscapes as a backdrop to the drama played out on solid ground. Overall, his poems sympathize with the losers of any kind, including the unemployed, crazy, impoverished, presenting a generously inclusive "social landscape of the margin" (Allen, 6). The emotion that triggered "Lady In Kicking Horse Reservoir" is the speaker's anger towards a lover who had walked out on him. He imagines her dead, and puts her on the bottom of a reservoir surrounded by mountains: "So in real life I suffered but in the poem I had my revenge – at least early in the process" (TTT, 61). The speaker gets his own back:

Not my hands but green across you now.

Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing in your hair. Summer slime

will pile deep on your breast. (Making Certain It Goes On, 201)

After this opening, mean in its application of river imagery, the speaker backs off and becomes more tender and human, Hugo – like, in his memory of a lover who can be retrieved neither in life nor in the poem (imagining her drowned is easier for the speaker to handle): "Lie there lily still. The spillway's closed. / Two feet down most lakes are common gray." Although the speaker still cherishes his revenge ("Your jaws go blue." and "already faded, lover, where you bloat"), he also recalls, ruefully, making love to her on the beach ("Wave to the ocean where we crushed a mile of foam"). Although the triggering emotion is a lover's hurt, the triggering landscape a reservoir, the poem unfolds to be a sweeping love poem, including a meditation on human loneliness and indifference (especially the fifth stanza about a drowned factory worker whom the speaker tries, in vain, to bring up). The poem's final stanzas evoke a sense of the speaker's gradual reconciliation with the loss of his lover ("My hope is vague"). He is almost generous, identifying her with the life-bringing water in the reservoir that is used for "irrigating crops / dead Indians forgot to plant." At the end, the speaker assumes a unity with Indian arrows, the ineffective weapons the Indians faced the white builders of the reservoir with. He arrows out of the scene, sailing to the beach to seek comfort in "dissolving foam/where waves strand naked Dollys." Typically, the speaker in Hugo compares his lover, an attractive woman, to a trout, a favourite kind of fish.

The poetry of C. K. Williams (b. 1936) operates in a very different landscape from that of Hugo – in the poet's head. His long-winded, narrative poems are usually stories, dramatic enactments and elaborations of everyday gestures and situations. The speaker tends to be conscious and resentful of the passage of time. Williams uses his trademark long-line (since his third poetry collection, With Ignorance, 1977) to muse, often within a single poem, the transition from rebellious and ambitious youth to acceptance of family life in middle age to wisdom of old age. In "The Dress",

a powerful poem from his last collection, *Repair*, the triggering image is the house-dress women used to wear at home in the 1930s:

in those long-ago days, women, my mother, my
friends' mothers, our neighbors,
all the women I knew, wore, often much of the day,
what were called housedresses,
cheap, printed, pulpy, seemingly purposefully shapeless
light cotton shifts,

that you wore over your nightgown and, when you had
to go to look for a child,
hang wash on the line, or run down to the grocery store
on the corner, under a coat,
the twisted hem of the nightgown, always lank and
yellowed, dangling beneath. (11)

The snowball elaboration on such a detail widens into an homage to the mother, a meditation on the passage of time and how it felt to be living “in those days”. The dress symbolizes hidden sensual power, a kind of mother-nature-idyl gone yet remembered. Triggered by the image, Williams goes on to bring back a whole social universe – the way men and women exchanged affection, the social roles of the sexes, and the working conditions of the era. The poem ends on a nostalgic note, with an introspective resolution of the speaker to stay in the present and leave his precious past alone:

you could go out by yourself even to a half-block-
long empty lot, into the bushes:
like a creature of leaves you'd lurk, crouched, crawling,
simplified, savage, alone;
already there was wanting to be simpler, wanting, when
they called you, never to go back. (14)

Williams's narrative voice is Whitmanian, containing cerebral multitudes rendered with stylistic confidence a lesser poet could not execute without sentimentalizing (Cf the effective pile of adjectives in the last stanza – “you'd lurk, crouched, crawling, / simplified, savage, alone”). Even though the focus here is on the speaker's reflection of the dress of his mother's time and the way people lived, the poem paints a landscape proper, an intellectual homecoming to the time of the poet's youth.

Emotional Landscaping: A Struggle Against Regional Transformation

Why not compare two landscape poems on a common theme – “Degrees of Grey in Philipsburg” by Richard Hugo and “One for the Rose” by Philip Levine (b. 1928). The speaker in each poem pays a visit to a town he knew in his youth. Both towns are ghost-dead, which invites a vigorous reaction by the speaker. Hugo's Philipsburg is a mining town that has gone down, only “churches are kept up” and “the principal supporting

business is rage". In Levine's poem, the Ohio small town is defeated, "so ripe with the smell / of defeat that its citizens lied / about their age, their height, sex, / income, and previous condition of anything." The speaker of either poem is hardheaded, like "the man inside [his decaying home] who sold it long ago, forgot he made the deal and will not move" (MCIGO, 245). His feelings about the transformed place are mixed:

I feel a little drunk and a lot more empty,
like passing through some unknown factory town
knowing it must be home. (MCIGO, 424)

What differs in these poems, apart from the way Hugo and Levine evoke their ghost-towns by specific images of decay and hopelessness, is the attitude of the speaker. While Hugo's speaker still sees hope in picking up a red-haired waitress whose "hair lights the wall", the speaker in Levine's poem is resigned. A loser, he draws an analogy between his slow, painful way in life, whose each turn had been anything but smooth, and "smells like an overblown rose / yellow, American, beautiful, and true". In both poems, the speaker winds up reconciled with the failure of his beloved landscape to come up to its expectations. The speaker in each poem (and this can be generalized) passionately cares about the people inhabiting his favourite landscape, wants them to be exemplary in their lives and takes it personally when they fail.

James Wright (1927–1980) was another elegiac regionalist. His work from any period typically centers around a lonely American landscape, whether it's set in Ohio, North Dakota, West Virginia – Wright presents the ghostly debris of human promise treated with redeeming compassion. The people in his poems are marginalized – drunks, criminals, prostitutes. In "Beautiful Ohio", the speaker ponders on the transformation of a former Indian ground (Ohio=beautiful river) into ugly industrial spillage. Unlike Hugo and Levine (whose poems on such landscapes are resentful and/or angry), Wright, in Baudelairean fashion, sees beauty in the sunlight as it reflects in the diseased water leaving a sewer pipe:

But I have my own song for it,
And sometimes, even today,
I call it beauty. (318)

Whereas a Levine poem would imply something like *shit, it sucks, but I love this place*, Wright renders the dying garden as more mellow: *it stinks, but it's beautiful*.

Why Emotional Landscaping

"The American experience," Philip Levine writes in The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography (1994), "is to return and discover one cannot even find the way for the streets abruptly end, replaced by freeways, the houses have been removed for urban renewal that never takes place, and nothing remains" (Levine, 181). Emotional landscaping is an authorial means of keeping that experience alive. Levine's triggering town is typically the industrial city of yore – a prosperous place where anybody who worked hard could earn money and have a good time. Although Levine's subject is

a ghost-town, he has modified his angle from the incantatory anger of mid-age poems like "They Feed They Lion" to sayings of a wise landscapist who understands the finality of life and is reconciled with it. Under the mask of a streetwise guy who angrily indulges in social criticism, Levine is the tenderest of the present four landscape poets, and in his later work he is no longer ashamed of it. He has come to accept "the eternity of the earth and of aspiration, the permanence of breath, and of hope. There is in this acceptance ... a sort of delight in the fact that things are as they are, and that the world continues, with us or without us" (Davison).

Conclusion

The refusal to lose hope is at the core of emotional landscaping in the work of the four American poets discussed. Richard Hugo, Philip Levine, C. K. Williams, and James Wright give moving testimony to a dead/vanishing landscape (urban, rural, or even, in the case of Williams, intellectual) and its people. Their poems challenge the "you can't go home again" dictum of Heraclitus and Wolfe by establishing the "home" of the poem in any landscape that triggers the imagination. Landscape poetry, "the very means of escape, is ironically also the agent which brings the fugitive back" (Costello, 221). The poet tries to transcend the painful memory of the landscape, yet there is no escape. The chance of epiphanic transformation may well stay forever dormant in the triggering landscape/event/person, yet emotional landscaping is a handy tool for the writerly exploration of the regionalist aspects of humanity. These poems show, too well, and painfully: landscapes and their people are imperfect, stinky, bleak, enraging, and beautiful.

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