

APPROACHING THE LANDSCAPE

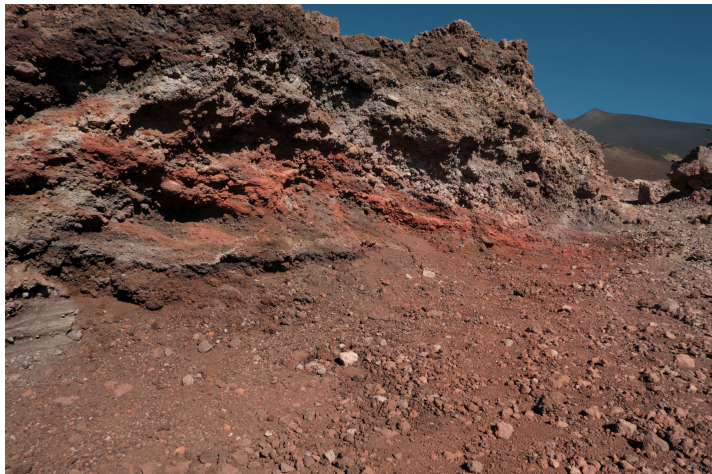
“No eye could be too sound
To observe a world so vast:
No patience too profound
To sort what’s here amass’d.
How man may here best live no care too great to explore.”

Arnold 1852, 26

The eyes are trying to grasp the craters of Valle del Bove, while the feet carry me through the labyrinth of branchy areas full of long spiky bushes. Their needles, the colour of the dried grass, occasionally pierce my sneakers full of basaltic ash, as if reminding me of my foreignness in the Sicilian landscape.

With a local volcanologist, we walk through the foothills of Mount Etna in north-eastern part of the island, starting from the Silvestri Crater, formed in 1892. We follow invisible paths wading through the fine particles of ash. Alessio, a skilled hiker, leads our small group through the intricate roads that he alone can recognise. He seems to know every twist and turn that is invisible to the eyes of foreigners; while growing up in Catania, he fell in love with Mount Etna, eventually becoming a volcano researcher.

Caressing the dark grey basalt boulders, he talks about the collision of the African and Eurasian continental plates and the origins of Etna that emerged beneath the seabed of the Mediterranean (Santagati 2014, 18). His darkened glasses reflect my image; we talk about iron, oxidation rates, and the age of the craters. In one of them, I notice layers of moving red; chunks of hardened basaltic lava are lying on the slopes, coated with a thin crust of oxidized mineral deposits. The black is replaced by red, the red by purple. My shadow falls directly on their rough surfaces, and



Weathered basalt at Silvestri crater

as I observe my silhouette on the ground, I begin to feel blurred into the landscape, in a way losing sense of myself. I become a nameless human figure trying to observe the structures of stones, to dismantle their stories. My pockets are slowly filling up with coloured stones; I put them in bags and mark the place and the date of collection.

Valle del Bove, Sicily. October 3rd, 2023.

A GESTURE OF OBSERVATION

As we drove up one of the narrow streets of Catania in a battered passenger bus, the volcanologist talked about the myth of Empedocles. Matthew Arnold's poem *Empedocles on Mount Etna* (1852) reveals the story of a Greek philosopher who contemplates the natural world with his two pupils (a harp-player and a physician) in the shrubby foothills of Mount Etna.

When walking, I try to recreate how he visited the slopes of the volcano, which became a space for contemplating the coherence of the elements that make up the world and the efforts of the human mind to grasp their essence. The poem omits the part about how he walks;

I wonder if sweat was dripping from his forehead as he ascended, as it is dripping from mine now? Did he walk leaning onto a wooden cane? Did he notice the greyish tones of the basalt ash and felt the dust settling in his nostrils?

Empedocles asserts that the chronological scale of time, created by the human mind, limits the understanding of time; the attempt to organize the world's events into linear historical systems becomes futile in the presence of natural phenomena. In ascesis, he turns to the [four] elements of the world—these silent friends whose harmony and oppositions make up the structures of nature. Through the gesture of observation, the landscape becomes a space in which the enigmas of the world unfold; for a moment, he desires to become a shining mountain, to float on air, to be filled with starlight. The bones will be deposited into mountains, the blood will settle as iron in the waters, the breath of the lungs will mingle with gasses of the air.

“Nothing retains its original form, but Nature, the goddess of all renewal, keeps altering one shape into another. Nothing at all in the world can perish, you have to believe me; things merely vary and change their appearance. What we call birth is merely becoming a different entity; what we call death is ceasing to be the same. Though the parts may possibly shift their position from here to there, the wholeness in nature is constant.”

Ovid 1958, 383

At the intersection of myth and empirical reality, the figure of the philosopher combines a rather rational perspective (an attempt to look at objects from the outside, describing their characteristics and principles of operation) with an allegorical worldview that associates the forces of nature with ancient deities. Although his mindset is steeped in myths of the ancient world, in his reflections I can sense that he does not unconditionally associate the laws of the earth's geological activity with human perception.

The hundred-headed monster Typhon, imprisoned by Zeus beneath the bottom of Etna, is still smouldering at the heart of the mountain of fire (Hesiod 1953, 76); wrapped in storytelling, nature comes to life. The bubbling lava becomes an utterance of the mythical creature's rage, the origin of which the philosopher contemplates while standing on the ledge.

One of Empedocles' sandals falls inside the crater.

As I ascend the mountain, I look for connections between my temporal presence and mythical events that occurred more than two thousand years ago. This exercise of thought becomes a way to distract myself from the weight of my body and the hefty backpack, which I am slowly filling with stones. The story of Empedocles [unintentionally] becomes an abstract foundation for contemplating the approach of an artist-researcher, who can replace facts with interpretations, imaginings, and engage with parallel realities.

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I observe the craters that have formed on the southern side of Mount Etna, which, even from a distance, appear to be filled with thick layers of red sediments. The environment of active volcanoes is dynamic and rarely predictable; the fiery debris spat out by volcano quickly covers the magma-encrusted basalt blocks at the foot. While walking through the valley, I notice the glistening chunks of young lava, known to geologists as "flakes," which soon will again be covered by freshly settling ash. Basalt is a rock rich in iron; along the crater ledges, it is deposited in coloured layers that transform to brownish shades in some places, leaning towards violet in others. The lava erupting from the volcano carries a large amount of gas from the depths; these processes are known as pneumatolysis. As they cool down, the fluids turn to a liquid state and begin to react with the older lava beds, replacing them with iron hydroxides; this produces a variety of coloured compounds (Sedlačková 2021, 106–112).

This way, secondary iron minerals (or simply ochres) are formed—varieties of haematite and limonite minerals, whose colourfulness dilates in the pupils of my eyes.¹

Interestingly, when I discover how the ochres in the landscape were formed, I begin to focus on the structure of the landscape as a geological body and this arranges my thoughts into an orderly system. The structure becomes a scientifically valid foundation; its geological past—a binding material that determines *how* and *why* the ochre is formed. At the same time, intuitively I ponder on the incompleteness of such a [narrow] approach, which excludes the experiential aspect. Although my knowledge is likely not extensive enough in the eyes of a scientist, and there is an element of naivety, I enjoy not being obliged to provide immutable responses. This kind of approach has fluidity, a certain openness to incorporate poetic elements, which are based on observations and tactile engagements. In the landscape, observation presupposes both practical and cognitive access: it becomes a method of generating insights while considering the contextuality of the material. In this way, I am more drawn to the alchemical mindset of a natural philosopher rather than the zealous empiricist.

"And clearly you don't have to know the names of rocks—or trees or plants or birds—in order to enjoy a landscape. But if you do have this information, something changes about the way you exist in that space. A named landscape thickens. It's to do with history and context but also, I think, with the quality of attention. To assign something its name, you need to take the time to pick out identifying features. You look for longer. And the more you know, the more things stop being a backdrop—blurred, indistinguishable, hurried over—and become somehow more present in the view, more insistently themselves, the way a familiar face stands out in a crowd."

Gordon 2021, 273

¹ When the pupils dilate, more light enters the retina, this way increasing color sensitivity.

My thoughts drift on the windswept volcanic peak; I imagine Empedocles whispering to Etna as if trying to awaken her from deep sleep. According to the legend, he finally leaps into the crater, surrendering himself to the element of fire. The almost poetic gesture of self-destruction becomes an unconditional devotion to the reality of nature, to the ungraspable substance of the landscape, to the threat of the geological forces of the earth, which, when woven into the words of a skilled storyteller, become alive. The volcano that swallowed Empedocles' body spits out his ashes; he becomes dust (again) and drifts through the valley. He assumes that he will become part of the earth, since none of the particles that make up the world disappear, but rather take on different shapes—only the proportion of the elements that make up the material and the nature of their interrelationships change.

Empedocles' ashes settle in my lungs.

CONTINUITY OF SEEING

In 1977, the artist James Turrell glid in his airplane over the Painted Desert of Arizona and observed a landscape of various hues, fractured by the craters of extinct volcanoes that had begun to form around two billion years ago. A plan for the crater began to take shape in his mind, as a patch of land untouched by man, from which he could ideally observe the light and trajectories of celestial objects. *The Roden Crater* was constructed at the core of an extinct volcano. Turrell dwells in the depths of the volcano; just like Empedocles, he contemplates the phenomena of the world, the movements of astronomical bodies, the orbits of the planets, the sound of the spheres of light. The volcano becomes his observatory; a place where light and time become diffused. A place where the flow of deep time can be experienced; a space untouched by human light, a deep darkness that swallows up the lights of the cities. To observe and reflect on the landscape is to reflect on



Collection of volcanic ochres from Sicily

time: "I 'm interested in creating a place where you become involved with geologic time, making you feel as if you really are on the surface of the planet" (Cork 2023, 77). In the soft daylight, he meets a Hopi man in the Arizona desert; side by side, they lie on the dusty ground. Above their heads, on the ledge of a crater, the flat horizon bends into a curve.² The sight becomes relative, dependent on the position from which one observes.

It is engaging to think that both the melancholic Empedocles and Turrell, two thousand years later, hovering over an extinct volcano, share an awareness of their insignificance in the scale of deep time. The gesture of observation becomes a way of approaching the landscape embedded with geological time beyond the grasp of reason through imagination. Histories shift; the relevance of the human time scale becomes limiting, and in the eyes of a thinker millions of years dissolve to make space for the imagination to wander. The visual perception acts as a tool for discovering materials embedded with events marked by forces of nature.

² *Passageways*, directed by Carine Asscher (C.A. Productions & Centre Pompidou, 2006).

I scoop the red dust into my palms; these are the ancient sediments of eroded basalt that has now taken the form of red ochre. Colour becomes the criterion for recognition; the eye selectively focuses colour, the brain recognises it and distinguishes fragments of ochre from the landscape, the veins of soft, crumbly iron that sealed the cracks of the rocks. My hands quickly turn red, and I almost want to taste the dust (this time I refrain). Once sorted into bags, they will travel two thousand kilometers back to my studio, where I will sift the red particles from the grey ones to extract the pigment, which, once purified, will get labelled as *volcanic ochre*.

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