

Article

The Palm Stone as Non-site in the *Long Silence of Mario Salviati*

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I

In the introduction to his collection of essays, *White Writing* (1988), J.M. Coetzee describes the South African landscape as “a land of rock and sun, not of soil and water” and asks, “What relation is it possible for man to have with rock and sun?”

¹ He suggests that “the stones are silent, will not come to life”² and that the “landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it.”³ In Etienne van Heerden’s *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (2002), city-dwelling Ingi Friedländer arrives in the small Karoo town of Yearsonend to purchase a sculpture on behalf of the National Gallery. Exposed to the vastness of the Karoo landscape she observes, “It’s a big stretch of earth ... Makes words seem redundant.”⁴ Ingi’s acknowledgment of the inexpressibility of such immensity is suggestive of a sublime encounter. The sublime at its most basic level can be defined in two ways: in the first place the sublime “has an affective force” which can move one and induce overwhelming feelings that are both elevating and frightening; secondly, the sublime experience cannot be “fully represented” since “[a]ny discourse of the sublime also embodies, paradoxically, its own representational failure as the immensity of the sublime object or experience exceeds the capacity of language to represent it.”⁵ The artist Robert Smithson, who has worked with earth and rocks in his monumental sculptures, Non-Sites⁶ and earthworks, is aware of the limitlessness of nature, referring to it in terms of the “oceanic.”⁷ It is through the Non-Site that he attempts to contain and express that immensity and limitlessness. In this paper, through analyses of the Kantian sublime and Robert Smithson’s Non-Sites, it will be determined to what extent the deaf and dumb Mario Salviati, a prisoner of war and stone-cutter from Italy, attempts to represent the unrepresentable, the “oceanic”, the silent Karoo landscape, by means of a single stone, the Palm Stone.

II

In “Analytic of the Sublime” which appears in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant is careful to distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime:

The beautiful in nature concerns the *form* of the object, which consists in *limitation*; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a *formless* object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it... Thus the satisfaction is connected in the first case with the representation of quality, but in this case with that of quantity.⁸

However, the difference is not bound solely to form; for Kant the essential distinction between the two is determined by what he calls *Zweckmässigkeit* or purposiveness.⁹ Therefore a landscape that serves a purpose, such as a domesticated landscape, is considered beautiful, whereas the sublime landscape is that which is untamed. Kant posits two classifications of the sublime, namely the mathematical and the dynamic. Nature falls into the category of the mathematical sublime “in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity,”¹⁰ such as trying to imagine the number of grains of sand on a beach. However, it is important to note that the mathematical sublime has less to do with the physical aspects of nature, and is more concerned with “the exercise of reason internal to the subject’s mind,” for it takes reason to think of an object’s infinity.¹¹ The affective force of the mathematical sublime results in an exceptional moment in which the mind is able to grasp the fact that the infinity of the object is incomprehensible. In that single moment, the mind compresses the vastness of the object, thereby bringing it under the control of reason.¹²

The dynamic sublime is less dependent on reason, being predominantly centred on the aesthetic experience and the resultant feeling of being overwhelmed, as, for example, the sight of fierce cliffs and massing thunder clouds will,

make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover

within ourselves the capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature.¹³

Having been overwhelmed by the sight, the viewer is nevertheless able to control their reaction so that they are able to reaffirm their mastery over such an experience.¹⁴ Therefore, taking the two classifications of the sublime into account, it becomes apparent that the Kantian sublime is “brought about by the capacity of reason to convert the imagination’s sensory overload into a single abstraction that allows the mind to grasp that which had previously been overwhelming, vast and unintelligible.”¹⁵

As has been noted above, the sublime, as opposed to beauty, “is to be found in a *formless* object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it.”¹⁶ It is this limitlessness to which I now wish to turn my attention. Robert Smithson has written about a tendency in art where “tools are undifferentiated from the material they operate on” and gives as an example Robert Morris’ description of “the paint brush vanish[ing] into Pollock’s ‘stick’, and the stick dissolve[ing] into ‘poured paint’ from a container used by Morris Louis.”¹⁷ Smithson believes that the result of being unable to distinguish between tools and the materials on which they operate, is “an empty limit, or no limit at all,” which he refers to as “‘oceanic’ undifferentiation.”¹⁸ In Smithson’s view, the “*rational* critic of art” cannot allow the “abandonment into ‘oceanic’ undifferentiation”¹⁹ and, accordingly, he poses the question, “How can one contain this ‘oceanic’ site?”²⁰ The desire expressed by Smithson to contain the “oceanic” is motivated by reason, and consequently bears correlations with the Kantian belief that the mind’s response to the sublime is to compress the immensity of the object, bringing it under the control of reason. For Smithson this compression or containment occurs in what he describes as the Non-Site:

I developed a method or a dialectic that involved what I call site and non-site. The site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality – the earth or the ground that we are really not aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that – and so I decided that I would set limits in terms of this dialogue (its back and forth rhythm that goes between indoors and outdoors), and as a result I went and instead of

putting something on the landscape I decided it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the non-site, which is an abstract container.²¹

It is Smithson's work with site and Non-Site which becomes particularly interesting in relation to the Palm Stone of Salviati. However, before this connection can be discussed, it is necessary to determine the significance of the Palm Stone in relation to the novel as a whole, as well as its rôle as a tool of communication for Salviati.

III

Captured as a prisoner during the Second World War, Mario Salviati is sent to South Africa where he is "billeted in towns and farms that were devoid of men because so many South Africans had gone north to fight."²² While still on the train approaching his eventual destination, the town of Yearsonend, Salviati observes that "[t]here was more stone than vegetation here"²³ and he begins to feel more at home; "the world had been too green before"²⁴ However, despite the fact that there is an Italian translator, Salviati, who is deaf and dumb, is unable to use normal means of communication in order to convey what skill he possesses to the Yearsonend families who have gathered at the station. Finding himself in a situation where language is required, but without access to words, Salviati turns to a stone in order to forge a metaphorical language: "He picked up a stone. It was an oval ironstone that must have lain there for years, trampled by many feet. He held it up above his head."²⁵ The decision made by Salviati to communicate by means of a stone becomes unsurprising when one considers that there is a similarity between words and rocks, for both "contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void."²⁶ The voids to which Smithson refers stand for the gaps in language; those instances when we encounter the limits of language and realize that it is not always possible to express ourselves adequately. Smithson discusses this further when he explains that "language operates between literal and metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of

disparates.”²⁷ In the case of Salviati, the void or the inadequate context is characterized by his status as a deaf mute. Denied the literal, Salviati embraces the metaphorical. Fortunately for him, Big Karel Bergh is able to interpret his gesture with the stone and takes part in the communication via *metaphorical signification*:

Big Karel walked up to Dumb Eyetie,²⁸ took the stone from him, drew the side of his hand across it in a cutting movement and looked questioningly at the man before him... [Salviati] took the stone ceremoniously from Big Karel, and with an archetypically Italian gesture, he raised the stone dramatically to his lips and kissed it.²⁹

What Salviati learns with time is that he has entered a community which is obsessed with the vast landscape around the town. This obsession does not stem, as Salviati's does, from a love of stone; rather it is founded in a lust for gold. Many years earlier a wagonload of Kruger gold was hidden somewhere in the area surrounding Yearsonend. Three maps, each showing only a third of the route to the gold, were drawn up, but by the time of Salviati's arrival in the area, only two of the maps were known still to be in existence. Consequently, the possibility of discovering the hiding place of the gold is a constant concern of the inhabitants of the town, such as General Taljaard, a man whose desire for the treasure has given him unnatural longevity. The incredible age of the General serves to underline the uninterrupted inaccessibility of the gold. This fact is further emphasized by an incident which occurs after the death of Meerlust's first male ostrich. Upon opening up its stomach, three Kruger pounds were found inside:

[E]veryone [began] speculating about which grazing-run the ostrich had been in when he ate the coins – until somebody reminded them that Meerlust put the bird out to stud (at a price) all over the district, and further afield. The ostrich could have eaten the coins almost anywhere, so it was impractical to start digging.³⁰

Thus, even after this tangible encounter with the gold, the treasure's location remains a mystery.

In fact, Big Karel's ready affinity with Salviati on his arrival is a result of the former's interest in discovering the gold. Big Karel had planned a venture whereby a channel would be constructed to carry water through the surrounding rocks and mountains to the town. Having this project on his mind, Big Karel had been "hop[ing] there'd be an Italian on the train who knew how to cut the hard ironstone of the hills through which the water had to run He needed a man with a spirit for stone."³¹ However, it was not only the conveying of water to the town that Karel was after through this construction work, rather, when he spoke of the water "bringing prosperity to our children and our children's children,"³² the prosperity he was searching for was the hidden gold. As it turned out, he did eventually come to know its hiding place.

IV

It is the complicated history of the gold – its being hidden, the eternal search for it, the effects of the hiding and seeking of individuals over the years – which becomes interesting in relation to Smithson and the Non-Site. For Smithson "the strata of the earth is a jumbled museum" and he believes that "in order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the earth's crust."³³ Coetzee, too, views the history of the rocks that make up the South African landscape as significantly fundamental and unalterable: "South Africa [is] a vast, empty silent space, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and [is] destined to be vast, empty and unchanged long after man has passed from its face."³⁴ Similarly, for Salviati, the lover of stone, rock has a divine omnipresence in the history of a landscape:

I sit and dream of stone: first rough-hewn, serrated in places, ripped out of the earth... I smell in you [the stone] the lava and the eruptions of long ago, when God was still dreaming man and woman into being, when you, older than all of us, were born here of materials as soft and fluid as water. You were there at the beginning of all things, with your rough cheeks like the face of an old father, maybe God himself, maybe God as stone, as the quietness among us, nothing and everything, omnipresent, the ground beneath our feet.³⁵

Both Coetzee and Salviati note that rocks were present prior to human existence, and, as Coetzee observes, they will remain once humans have disappeared. However, while the period of time in which a landscape will be peopled is minor in comparison to the billions of years of human absence, it is nonetheless a period which cannot be ignored, specifically in the case of *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*, a novel in which generations of families have a deeply vested interest in the landscape around the town of Yearsonend, with many of the deceased inhabitants remaining after death to observe the actions of the living.

Smithson's recognition of the earth as historical text is incorporated into his work through mapping. He explains that the Non-Site is a "3-dimensional map:"³⁶

By drawing a diagram ... or a topographic *map*, one draws a 'logical two dimensional picture.' A 'logical picture' differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for... *The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* is a three dimensional logical picture that is *abstract*, yet it *represents* an actual site... It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it.³⁷

Smithson's emphasis on the fact that the Non-Site is a "logical picture", recalls Kant's view that it is only through rationalizing the sublime into a single abstraction that we can try to understand and control it. Furthermore, Smithson's belief that a Non-Site is "a 3-dimensional perspective that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment"³⁸ echoes Kant's description of the sublime, whereby the sublime is "a *formless* object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it."³⁹ In other words, the Non-Site becomes a means of rationalizing the vastness of a landscape in abstract form, while still showing an awareness of its limitlessness.

It is at this point that we can return to the Palm Stone, for as it turns out, the stone is a map or abstraction of its own. Big Karel, fleeing after the initial failure of his channel, came upon the missing third map, which was revealed when the water subsequently began to flow through the channel and thus dislodged some rocks and earth. Salviati had given chase when Big Karel fled, and when he

caught up with the man, Big Karel “took the stone out of Mario’s hand [which he always carried]... He took out his pocket knife and slowly carved the precise directions to Gold Pit ... onto Mario Salviati’s beloved stroking stone.”⁴⁰

Consequently, it is through mapping the vast plains and mountains of the landscape surrounding Yearsonend on the Palm Stone that a “3-dimensional perspective that has broken away from the whole” is formed. The stone has become a tool not only for communication, but also for representing, or rationalizing, the sublime.

It is the role of the Palm Stone as rationalizer and communicator of the sublime that is of particular significance with regard to the larger extra-textual context of the relationship between South Africans and the South African landscape. For the stone represents an answer to Coetzee’s question, “What relation is it possible for man to have with rock and sun?”⁴¹ As an instrument in the act of representing the limitlessness of landscape in a contained space, the Palm Stone offers an alternative to the “alien, impenetrable”⁴² and “silent”⁴³ landscape with which Coetzee is concerned. Instead of silence, the Palm Stone of Mario Salviati suggests the possibility of a language “in which to win [the landscape], speak it, represent it”⁴⁴

Notes

¹ J.M. Coetzee. *White Writing* (New Haven and London: Radix, Yale University Press, 1988) p.7

² *Ibid*, p.9

³ *Ibid*, p.7

⁴ E. Van Heerden. *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*. Trans. Catherine Knox. (London: Sceptre, 2002) p.81

⁵ H. Wittenberg. *The Sublime, Imperialism and the African Landscape*. (PhD Thesis, University of Western Cape, 2004) p.15. Italics in the original.

⁶ Robert. Smithson. *The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) Here, “Non-Site” is at times written with capitalized initial letters, and other times not. For purposes of consistency I will be using the term as it appears in the introduction to the book, that is, with capitalized initial letters, unless it appears otherwise in a quote.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.102

⁸ Immanuel. Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthew (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.128; emphases added

⁹ Wittenberg, 2004, p.37

¹⁰ Kant, 2000, p.138

¹¹ Wittenberg, 2004, p.38

¹² *Ibid*, p.38

¹³ Kant, 2000, pp.144-145

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- ¹⁴ Wittenberg, 2004, p.40
¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.38
¹⁶ Kant, 2000, p.128; emphases added
¹⁷ Smithson, 1996, p.102
¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.102
¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.102; emphasis added
²⁰ Smithson, 1996, p.111
²¹ *Ibid*, p.178
²² Van Heerden, 2002, p. 46
²³ *Ibid*, p.53
²⁴ *Ibid*, p.54
²⁵ Van Heerden, 2002, p.58
²⁶ Smithson, 1996, p. 107; original italics
²⁷ Van Heerden, 2002, p.61
²⁸ Salviati is known by this name by the inhabitants of Yearsonend.
²⁹ Van Heerden, 2002, p.59
³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 260
³¹ *Ibid*, p. 52
³² *Ibid*, p. 52
³³ Van Heerden p. 110
³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7
³⁵ *Ibid*, p.194
³⁶ *Ibid*, p.111
³⁷ *Ibid*, p.364; original italics
³⁸ *Ibid*, p.111
³⁹ Smithson, 1996, p.128; emphases added
⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.418-9
⁴¹ Coetzee, 1988, p.7
⁴² Coetzee, 1988, p. 7
⁴³ *Ibid*, p.9
⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.7