

Hissing mushrooms

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Václav Cílek

TO BREATHE WITH BIRDS

Translated by Evan W. Mellander

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One of the many delights of this high-spirited, diverse collection of essays is the discovery of new places and terms. What, for example, is topophilia? As becomes evident in his accounts of geological field trips around the Czech Republic and beyond, it is the spirit that drives this book and everything Václav Cílek has done in his professional life as an earth scientist. "Just as there is love at first sight between people there is love at first sight between a person and a place", he writes. Cílek's exuberant love for his native Bohemian landscapes permeates the prose, giving it an almost rhapsodic ring, which is refreshing in a scholarly work. Cílek is a fêted Czech writer on human geography and winner of the Tom Stoppard prize. This book has the richness of a lifetime compendium of his travails with the land.

The core message of *To Breathe with Birds*



is urgent: without landscape, there is no culture. Topophilia, our ancient ability to experience the earth's "emotional charge", is increasingly replaced by the corporate bureaucrat's topophobia, disguised by palliative language. As I read Cílek on how "we sometimes feel grief over the landscape that we are losing under a network of highways, suburban developments and industrial warehouses full of things that in the end we do not need", because too often "politics triumph over culture" – I looked at the rural view from my window. It is a section of the gigantic Beaulieu-Denny power line whose pylons and wind farms (and their extensive infrastructure) have deforested some of the last wilderness of the Scottish Highlands, with disastrous consequences.

Cílek writes beautifully of the species-wide sacredness of old forests, "the cathedral of the deer"; the way old stones and small natural monuments are vehicles for memory; and the possibility that our inner life may be defined by the landscape of our childhood and the objects we touched in it. This intriguing idea was first expressed by two Czech surrealist writers, František Dryje and Vratislav Effenberger, who lived in order to live, and not in order to create, as Cílek explains in a footnote. In fact, the footnotes here are as interesting as the main text – in one of them, he tells of a Bohemian village known for its tenth-century vampire burials.

"To have the right feelings in our souls, we need physical contact with objects and places", Cílek writes, and this strikes me as a key insight: power-brokers tamper with landscapes from a distance, in places that are not meaningful to them. This is another of Cílek's themes: the usefulness of cherishing one patch of the earth's surface, because "a person is at home in only one landscape" and we can only "renew our roots at home". (Does this apply to everyone, though, and what of those who, unlike Cílek and all the cited Czech authors, are ejected from their original home? His use

of "home" and "abroad" is perhaps deliberately conservative.) The implication is that if we know one landscape intimately, all landscapes will matter to us.

Cílek writes eloquently of "the levelling, draining, and linearizing impulse" that propels engineering projects, and the visible and invisible reverberations on a landscape "depleted stone by stone". It doesn't have to be so, he suggests, if a newly created "anthropogenic environment" is sensitively handled; a deeply recessed motorway can coexist with an oak forest.

In the opening chapter, "Geodiversity and Changes in the Bohemian Landscape", Cílek gives us a portrait of a region threatened by the homogenization of global forces. A startling statistic: in Europe and America, 20 tons of rock or soil are displaced per capita per year. Far from opposing industry as such (there is a chapter on asphalt where he concludes that "asphalt still has its best years ahead of it"). Cílek is concerned with its misuse. Nothing in nature is in a straight line, he writes, and if we can't avoid tampering with the land, we should at least follow its contours and listen to its subterranean voices. In the most vivid parts of the book, he has done just that, tapping into his thirty years of working as a geologist in caves and quarries.

Cílek takes both the long view and a micro-perspective when dealing with particular groves, mines and hillsides. The essays combine direct accounts of local people's experiences, potted histories of major and minor figures from Czech literature, religion and mythology, and his own reflections. Packed with the esoteric and the minutely local, the structure of the book is dense with different narrative registers. There are letters from the living and the long dead, definitions and whimsical asides, all of which imbue the text with a playful unpredictability. Cílek justifies this use

of eclectic registers with a nod to "medieval and baroque literature", including their interest in signs and oral histories. This works brilliantly in the chapter called "Places from the Other Side", where he presents several case studies of locations with a distinctive energy. The poignant section on Sudetenland and its "dual character", where "postwar immigrants can never be certain whether the gods of the Sudetenland are with them or against them", offers a glimpse into a traumatized landscape and the healing mechanisms its people have developed. In other mini-sections, we learn of the history of a Carmelite monastery in an area called Poppy Mountain, the mirror-like hamlets on the border with Austria where nature has reclaimed depopulated landscapes, and the Gothic and Renaissance towns of Bohemia which are "one city with many centres". Cílek's immense erudition is matched by his tireless physical explorations.

Frustratingly, the wealth of perspectives can descend into narrative cacophony. It isn't always clear whose voice we are hearing; the change of tone isn't always flagged up, and it is sometimes hard to know when the paraphrasing of a medieval saint begins and ends. The author's naturally clear voice is sometimes drowned out by sudden lapses into Victorian language and tendentiously poetic titles that promise too much – for example, "The Mental Morphology of the Unhuman". Some of the language is also puzzling, including Cílek's approving use of "patriot" when describing Czech writers and rulers. This jars with his view, supported by his writing, that a "nationalist understanding of the landscape" has shifted to a more "ecological, harmonizing, and mythical" view of it. Some of these inconsistencies may be due to the editing of the translation, though when the prose works, it is crystal clear – and that is to the translator Evan

Mellander's credit. This must have been a hugely challenging text to render in English.

Directly, sometimes orally, recorded experience offers highly memorable scenes which Cílek loosely unites under a Slavic mythological world view; I wished there were more of these. There are several astonishing accounts of how the land manifests itself in the human psyche: the fishing boys who saw three gnome-like creatures moving fast above the ground; the fellow geologist who observed a human forearm floating in a mine shaft; the man who dragged a heavy stove through the forest just to block a medieval audit, "out of some archaic inspiration to close an entrance to the underworld"; the Old Honey Woman healer in eastern Slovakia who had "the ability to cause one specific thing from the outer landscape to resonate with the sick part of the collection"; the hissing mushroom in a Slovakian cave, as opposed to the "defolklorized" Czech mushroom". Cílek's comparative gloss on folkloric imaginations is engaging: he touches on the world views of Norse, Celtic, Slavic and Hindu civilizations, where "humans and animals were not so divided from one another, their fates intertwined and the world they created a common space for the elements, forces, and creatures".

An openness to these marvellous glimpses of what he calls the "unhuman" world is, Cílek contends, essential to preserving our humanity. The ability to accept that "on the outskirts of Prague, fairies still dance", that "people need animals to go where they cannot", and that the landscape reveals to its intimates "riddles that can't be solved", is our only antidote to the homogenizing impulse. Without walking in "the cathedral of the deer", without feeling the breath of the earth with our bodies, as Václav Cílek has done, we will never catch a glimpse of eternity.