

THE LIGHTNESS OF STONE: TOPOGRAPHY AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST
Athena Abbott

In the first of his *Six memos for the next millennium*, a series of lectures written just before his death, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino speaks of the opposition between lightness and weight. He takes a roundabout way of defining these terms, citing examples from literature and mythology which describe what he means. I cannot give any definition which would do justice to the concept, nor can I recount all the anecdotes he does in order to paint a picture of it, but I can briefly give one of his images: the hero Perseus in his winged sandals, as light as the clouds; the Gorgon Medusa who turns men to stone with her gaze; the hero who defeats her by looking at her reflection only, in his shield which forms a polished mirror. Calvino is in no hurry to draw a moral from this myth, and I perhaps do it a disservice by doing so, but I see a few interesting ideas represented here. The moral which Calvino shies away from is that Perseus, hero of lightness, is the form a writer—or perhaps any artist—should aspire to. The interpretation is of Perseus as a poet, the artist who looks at the weight of the world through its reflection in his works and draws out its substance through the lightness of that medium. What of Medusa, then? It does well to remember that Medusa did not choose her fate; it was the goddess Athena who placed a curse on her, that all who see her would turn to stone. In this interpretation Medusa is the bearer of weight, not by choice but as a victim of it, forced to see only that which is heavy in the world, and removes herself to her remote cave to be free of this burden. One could also imagine Medusa an artist herself, her garden of statues growing and shifting with time, and when she is gone them crumbling: a patina of cracks and weathered chips lining their faces and forms, the once still and permanent eroding into mere dust on the wind. Time makes stone light.

We see this too in the case of the topographical map. In a topographical map a landscape is formed through a series of flowing lines, each outlining a form representing the cross-section of the terrain at a certain altitude. The continuous curve of a hill becomes a stack of sharp lines, imagined perhaps as cylindrical in space. The act of mapping a landscape draws the concreteness of reality immediately into a realm of the abstract, a realm where the innate artist

in each of us is opened to the prospect of imagining it differently. By simply moving a line on the page, we change the conception of the whole scenery: where two lines touch, a steep cliff appears in the mind's eye, where they drift apart the hill becomes shallow, a meadow of wildflowers blooms. A long, parallel section of two opposing lines following one another fills with water, gushing forth through the mountainous landscape, a new river borne out of nothing; and where they bulge apart a pond, a lagoon, a lake fills their cavity.

Topographical maps have this sense of fluidity about them. It's like the whole landscape is transformed into a series of ever-shifting islands, a metamorphosis of the most concrete and weighty thing of all, stone, into something suddenly light and flexible. Where her form rises and falls in mountains and pits, the earth's true structure is revealed, not one still and constant, but one living and flowing on timescales vaster than we can comprehend. The science of tectonic plate mechanics tells us this is true: that our whole world which we too often see as unchanging—the way it is is the way it must be—sits on top of great islands of stone, drifting over time on a sea of fire, falling through endless space. We are not constant: we are stone, drifting too.

As artists we have the magnificent ability to not only capture our observations of the world on the page, Medusas in reverse, but to reinterpret them, to shift the contour lines of the landscape with our imaginations. We make rivers out of valleys, serving to nourish and inspire the world with their waters. Through creation, we escape the heaviness of reality, and free ourselves in the realm of thought where new connections, solutions, and expressions can be found. Calvino wrote:

“At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life. [...] Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future...” (4 - 7)

REFERENCES:

Calvino, Italo. Six memos for the next millennium. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1988.