Luminol Theory
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Deadly Landscapes
The *Locus Terribilis*, Colorado Gothic, *The Shining*

*I believe that it is possible to claim the existence of a structure of philosophy, but unlike social structure, the structure of myth or kinship structures, this structure does not relate to an original or nuclear formal element, to any kind of basic cell that contains the semantic and morphological data of the system. Instead, the structure of “structural plastic analysis” should be understood as a result, an *a posteriori* structure, a residue of history.*

— Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*
1. The Locus Terribilis

Chechnya: certainly that’s a pastoral. Those people just have nothing but suicide.
— Joyelle McSweeney, The Necropastoral

Fictional Colorado under the plastic dome in Michael DuPlessis’s Memoirs is a crystallised idyll, hermetically sealed, where violence has no release, and remains trapped. This pairing of idyllic natural beauty with violence, particularly sexual violence, can be traced back to Ovid, whose Metamorphoses contains meadows, grottos, and forests that form the backdrop to extreme sexual violence, traps where the dead must linger on, even after they have been the victims of trauma, abuse, and rape.

The trope of the locus terribilis or locus inamoenus, the “terrible or unpleasant place,” arose from its opposite, the locus amoenus, or “pleasant place.” The ancient trope of the locus amoenus was prevalent in classical poetry, where it is strongly linked to the pastoral as it appears in the work of Horace, Virgil, and Seneca. The locus amoenus is a sylvan idyll that traditionally contains grass, trees, and water. Ovid later inverted this trope to create the locus terribilis, a place of natural beauty that hosts violence, rape, and murder. Daniel Garrison coined the term locus inamoenus in his article on Augustan literature, “The ‘Locus Inamoenus’: Another Part of the Forest.” Garrison traces this inversion to a specific historical incident: the battle between the Romans and the Eburones in 54 BCE. In this Northern European battle, the Romans suffered a great defeat that was partly attributed to the landscape. The thickets and bogs created the perfect conditions for a surprise attack against Caesar’s troops.

By Augustan times, the period in which Ovid was writing, the locus terribilis was a “well-established topos, and one


that Seneca also used for his tragedy *Thyestes*."3 Though Ovid didn’t invent the motif, he certainly put it to the most inventive and sustained usage. Garrison illustrates this inventiveness by way of *Thyestes*. Seneca writes: “Throughout the forest a flame is wont to flicker, and high tree-trunks burn without fire. (673–75)”4 Garrison contends, “These fireless flames may be literary exhalations of natural phenomena more common in the damp forests of northern Europe where decaying wood emits the eerie phosphorescent glow of foxfire, and decomposing organic matter gives off methane that burns with a bluish-yellow flame.”5 What Ovid does is to combine these two ideas to create a new “special effect,” as Garrison describes it. Ovid does not pair frightening events with sinister locations, nor does he retreat into the sentimentality of Hellenic literature. Instead, his *Metamorphoses* contains several descriptions of sexual violence, torture, brutality, and murder that take place in beautiful, idyllic settings. These horrors are all the “more striking,” according to Garrison, because they occur “in a pretty place that we lull ourselves into thinking is also a safe one.”6 Ovid often introduces a sacred grotto, a lush spring, a secret grove, or a dark and impenetrable forest to set a scene. Within these sublime, numinous spaces, he contaminates the landscape with violence and degradation. The spaces continue to be haunted by the violence committed there as the victims of the crimes do not disappear, but rather metamorphose into elements of the scene itself—from Myrrha’s agonizing pregnancy while trapped in the form of a tree, to the terrified Callisto, who was transformed into a bear only to be hunted by her son.

The classical *locus amoenus* contains trees, water, and grass. In Ovid, there are several instances of this particular combina-
tion that signal danger and (often sexual) violence. An example of this can be seen in the episode of Salmacis and Hermaphrodite.\(^7\) In this story Salmacis, a nymph who has broken away from the virgin-hunter Diana in order to live a life of sybaritic excess, rapes Hermaphrodite, son of Hermes and Aphrodite — the only example of rape by a nymph in classical mythology. The setting is a typical *locus amoenus* with grass, trees, and especially water functioning not only as setting but also as plot. According to Ovid, Hermaphrodite undresses and enters Salmacis’s pool in order to bathe. Salmacis watches him from behind a tree and is overcome with lust for him. She enters the pool and forces herself upon him physically, calling out to the gods to join their flesh eternally. The gods honor this extremely sexually violent act, and the two are joined together in one body.\(^8\)

Ovid’s use of setting to signal danger is of peculiar relevance to luminol theory. The natural setting is a crime scene, a scene

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\(^7\) The *Metamorphoses*, from which the story of Salmacis and Hermaphrodite is taken, was not the first of Ovid’s works to introduce the trope of the *locus terribilis*. In fact, Ovid was working against an established pastoral tradition. In the earlier works of Latin poets Virgil and Horace the pastoral is closely related to sentimentality and nostalgia. Ovid’s response to this tradition was to use landscapes to subvert their meanings for political effect. An earlier example of the *locus terribilis* in Ovid is present in his work the *Ars Amatoria*. In this book he explores the topography of Augustan Rome only to recall the violent history of the rape of the Sabines. He chose to avoid propaganda and sentimentality, though he still loved Rome dearly and was inconsolable with grief to be exiled by Augustus at the end of his life.

\(^8\) This is the origin of the word *hermaphrodite*, used frequently to describe people who identify as intersex. In her essay “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” Amy Richlin asks, “How are we to read texts, like those of Ovid, that take pleasure in violence — a question that challenges not only the canon of Western literature but all representations. If the pornographic is that which converts living bodies into objects, such texts are certainly pornographic.” Richlin goes on to describe in detail some of the *Metamorphoses’* “fifty tales of rape in its fifteen books,” including those of women who were “transformed as a *punishment* for their rape and mutilation” — punished, that is, by the gods. Myrrha, Io, Callisto, and Medusa belong to this category, and Leucothoe and Perimele are murdered by their fathers (by proxy to the gods). Amy Richlin, “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. Amy Richlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 158–65.
of unimaginable terror for Hermaphrodite. Ovid describes the pool as hypernatural, a simulacrum of nature:

No barren sedge grew there, no spiky rush;  
The water crystal clear, its margin ringed  
With living turf and verdure always green. (4.303ff.)

This setting is at once fertile and sterile. The water is a symbol of generation but simultaneously does not sustain life of any kind. The surroundings that have been constructed are unnaturally perfect and anodyne; however, the fusty colour of the turf reveals excess, decay, and overstimulation. Charles Segal speaks about the Ovidian landscape as a place where “innocence is never preservable […] where even the place of refuge and peace is invaded; there is no safety, no escape from arbitrary force.”

The rape that occurs is facilitated by the beautiful location. The trees hide Salmacis from Hermaphrodite, allowing her ambush, and the water inflames her lust by revealing Hermaphrodite’s naked body. It is the grass, however, that bears the most symbolic weight, its spookily beautiful “verdure” the unsettling clue that there is something wrong with the scene. While luminol testing is anachronistic, luminol theory can still be applied here. Ovid reports that the fountain is eternally cursed, that the bodily fluids that entered the water upon Hermaphrodite’s rape cannot be removed. He tells us that there is a trace of the original crime in the water forever and that anyone who drinks the water will be affected:

[...] “Dear father and mother, I pray you,  
grant this boon to the son who bears the names of you both:  
whoever enters this pool as a man, let him weaken as soon

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as he touches the water and always emerge with his manhood diminished!”

Venus and Mercury both were moved and fulfilled the prayer of their androgyne son by infecting the pool with a neutering tincture. (4.382–385)11

The scene retains a material trace of the original narrative that cannot be removed, and that, further, is reactivated by an encounter with biological material. The locus amoenus becomes the locus terribilis, a place of exquisite beauty that is both the setting and the explicit facilitator of violence. Luminol theory illuminates the flashes of horror that remain deep in the cursed water, which is at once inviting and terrifying, hostile, hospitable, and haunted.

This blurring of the hostile and the hospitable, and the crime scene and not-crime scene, that luminol theory illuminates is exemplified in Jacques Derrida’s portmanteau concept of hostipitality, which is used to demonstrate the collapsing of binaries between etymologically related words.12 Hosting, according to Derrida, is etymologically associated with a range of contradictory terms: hostile, hospitality, ghost, hotel, and hostelry. Derrida’s essay can be considered a guide to viewing hostility and hospitality as nonbinary, ambiguous concepts and to consider what happens when natural locations become crime scenes. These deeply uncanny, haunted landscapes pervert the classical notion of xenia, or hospitality. Xenia is a central concept in ancient thinking and was considered a sacred principle whose betrayal risked grave consequences from the gods. It is a mutual bond: the guest who refuses xenia—or worse yet, betrays it—in some way offends the gods as much as those who do not offer proper xenia. The most obvious literary example of this

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is the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Klytemnestra in his homecoming bath, an act that results in generations of miasma, or vengeance. The damaged spirits who throng Ovid’s scenes are not afforded proper xenia; they are guests who have been mistreated and cannot leave.

One way to read the locus terribilis and use it to apply critical theory to contemporary literary works is to take hostipitality as a framework. Derrida discovers “troubling” meanings lurking inside: “Hospitalität, a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest [hôte] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body.”13 Guest, host, hostile, and ghost are all enmeshed within this word. In the literary example of Klytemnestra, it is possible to see how she embodies this troubling range of meaning. On the surface, Klytemnestra offers xenia to Agamemnon by pouring him a bath, behaving as a host would. Yet soon after, she becomes hostile to him and he becomes her undesirable guest. When she murders him, he becomes a ghost, haunting generations of his family with miasma. In the same way, when Ovid presents idyllic settings as places that are at once desirable and deadly, their lushness is undercut by impending danger. He plays with the concept of the locus terribilis as a place of hosting and hostility, changing it to a place of enmity, violence, and horror. When Derrida argues that “hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct,” he could be talking about Ovid’s landscapes, which “self-destruct” in precisely this way.14 It is the ambiguity between hospitality and hostility that creates the Ovidian thrill and which turns the locus terribilis into a crime scene. Hostipitality can also be understood as a way of thinking through luminol. Luminol excavates and, more specifically, illuminates the horror beneath even the most beautiful surface. In the same way, hostipitality always reminds us of

13 Ibid., 3.
14 Ibid., 5.
deadly landscapes

the hostility at the heart of the guest-host exchange and of the ghostly luminol trace that remains.

Hostipitality can also account for the uneasy and contaminatory relationship between host and parasite. The crime scene is riddled with bacteria, fungus, and spores bursting from decomposing bodies. Contamination at the crime scene is inevitable. Pandemics such as the great plague of Athens in 430 BCE, the devastating influenza outbreak of 1918, and the Ebola crisis of 2014 turn whole nations, and indeed international zones, into scenes full of dead and dying people who are partially or wholly buried and transmitting horror and disease. Forensic anthropologists are able to discover information as to the kinds of violence that have taken place by analyzing human remains and other artifacts at mass graves, often revealing cultic or ritual material.

In Lucretius’s account of the formation of the earth, he describes the land itself roiling with “a great abundance of heat and moisture” and how “wombs would grow, holding to the earth by roots.” This disgusting image is compounded by a Kristevan image of how “nature would direct thither pores of the earth and make it discharge from these open veins a liquid like to milk.”

The earth in Lucretius’s formation is both generative and obscene. There is no “border between inside and outside,” and the earth itself is a “supersaturated, leaking membrane.” Later passages of Lucretius describe in great, loving detail the symptoms of plague and disease using terms such as “clogged,” “oozed with blood,” “burning,” “thirsting,” and “trembling.” The earth itself is responsible for the transmission of disease, with every creature affected. The countryside is equally dangerous, with no

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chance of a “permanent, separated rural peace.” This poetics of annihilation imagines the entire earth scattered with corpses:

Many in public places and roads you might see all about, bodies half-dead with fainting limbs caked with squalor and covered in rags, perishing in filth of body [...] all the temples of the celestials everywhere remained burdened with corpses, all which places the sacristans had crowded with guests [...] they would lay their own kindred amidst loud lamentation upon piles of wood not their own, and would set light to the fire, often brawling with much shedding of blood rather than abandon the bodies.

These are the very final words of Lucretius’s poem, cut off suddenly and without warning, serving to heighten their effect. Here he describes how hard people fought in times of utter extremity to provide proper burial to their kin, or as proper a burial as they could manage under the circumstances of universal plague and horror. Such was the importance of ritual burial that there was “much shedding of blood” to protect the right of families to bury their dead. In spite of fears of contamination and the very real threat of transmitting disease, still the ritual remained.

Whilst the plague was the disease that informed Ovid’s writing, as the most terrifying example of a pandemic in ancient times, Colorado Gothic arises from another form of bacterial invasion, the so-called “white plague,” that most Gothic of illnesses which briefly turned Colorado into “the world’s sanatorium” — tuberculosis.

18 McSweeney, “Can the Necropastoral Be Political?”