



Karl Jaspers' Philosophy of Nature What is Still Worth Reading in Jaspers' Works in Times of Ecological Crisis?

Jean-Claude Gens
University of Burgundy, France
gens.jc@club-internet.fr

Abstract: This exploration of Jaspers' philosophy of nature evidences its closeness to the depiction of nature landscapes in Chinese art. It is also concerned with gauging in which way and to what extent it is pertinent for meeting today's ecological challenges in a sustainable manner that are brought about by subjection and exploitation of nature. Jaspers' philosophy of nature is mainly to be found in his "On My Philosophy", in his typescript "Nature and Ethics", and in his main work *Philosophy*. There is a notable tension between Jaspers on the one hand being drawn to nature conceived of as an autonomous being originating out of the depth of being and on the other hand his fear of losing himself in it and thereby becoming unfree, hence, no longer doing justice to his own tenet of the centrality of communication with fellow-humans for the end of attaining transcendence. Jaspers attempts to resolve this tension by way of advancing an approach that integrates these two "abysses" into an ethical perspective.

Keywords: Shitao, Chinese art, Miroku Bosatsu, Bodhisattva Maitreya, nature, landscape paintings, cultural landscapes, existence, transcendence, ethics.

Just as one can see it already at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* with regard to Socrates, in the philosophy since the seventeenth century nature is not given much importance either.¹ With the exception of romanticism and the philosophies of nature in German idealism, philosophy has unfolded itself for the main part as philosophy of history. This also holds true for the existential philosophies, exemplary in this regard is the one by Sartre.² In Jaspers, human beings' belonging

to nature is not simply actualized by belonging to history as the experience of transcendence is to him more fundamental to him than merely that. However, as human beings find themselves today in an era of ecological crisis, this begs the question whether Jaspers' philosophy can tell us or even teach us something regarding this crisis. In other words, I enquire whether his philosophy is something of the past or whether it is relevant today.

In order to answer this question, I shall first take into consideration a few passages in his writings that are on nature, and, secondly, examine Jaspers' own relation to nature; I aim to explore what one can expect to get to know from this approach, given one knows, that he suffered from chronic bronchiectasis, and that perhaps for this reason he preferred living in towns. His relation to nature can also be seen from pronouncements made by him on art; yet, in my

¹ A version of this essay was first presented at the Eighth International Jaspers Conference: Karl Jaspers in a Global Context, in conjunction with the XXIVth World Congress of Philosophy, August 13–20, 2018, Beijing.

² Some contemporary philosophers, such as, for example Bruno Latour, go as far as to state that humans "have entered into a *postnatural* period." Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, transl. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2017, p. 142.

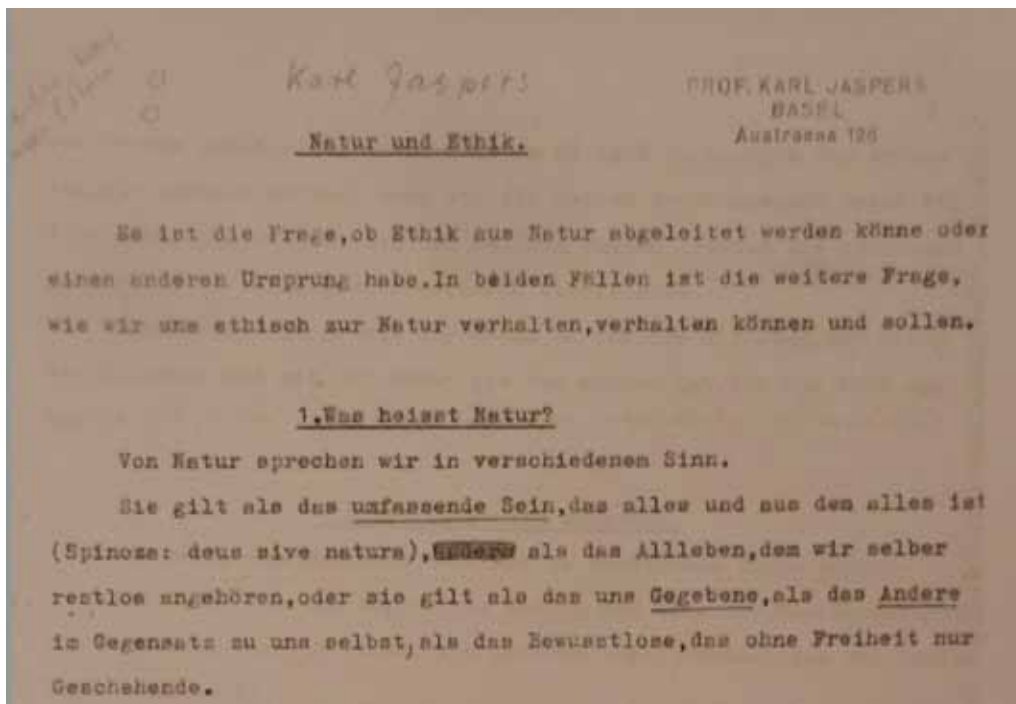
opinion, in order to be able to evaluate these remarks in an adequate manner one should consider them in the context of his China references.

Two Opposing Ways to Relate to Nature

Three passages in Jaspers' writings are pertinent to start with: namely, a remark in Jaspers' intellectual autobiography "Über meine Philosophie" that he wrote in 1941, an undated 15-pages typescript with the title "Nature and Ethics" that was given to me by my friend, Bernd Weidmann, and that contains six sections; and finally, his three-volumes-monograph *Philosophie* (1932).

nature is a marvelous potential spring for possible being oneself, but for the one who remains solitary in it moves onto a path of impoverishing one's self and to lose it in the end. All closeness to nature in the beautiful world became, hence, questionable to me, if it does not lead back to the community with human beings.³

This criticism can be understood even better if one keeps in mind the times when it was written, namely in 1941. Yet it remains nevertheless typical for all existential philosophies, and even today such criticism is made against ecological movements, provided that one believes that the interest in ecology is not compatible with classic political activism despite the fact that ecological problems also have economic,



"Natur und Ethik," an undated typescript in which Karl Jaspers explores the question as to whether ethics can be derived from nature or whether its origin comes from a different source.

In the text "On My Philosophy" that was written ten years after his *Philosophie*, Jaspers criticizes a devotedness to nature that is based on fleeing the human world:

The solitary dedication to nature, this deep experiencing of the universe within the landscape by way of the embodied vicinity to the figures and elements, this spring of strength regarding one's own soul, could appear to me like a fault *vis-à-vis* humans, if it were to become a way to avoid them, and it becomes a fault against myself, if it entices one to adopt a final self-sufficiency within nature; although solitude in

social, and political consequences. In Jaspers, the criticism is advanced in a nuanced manner: first, the conditional "if" is used twice; this means there are reservations and restrictions regarding the criticism, and, secondly, the opposite point of view is being equally criticized. If one thinks contrariwise that nature has to be dominated through human beings'

³ Karl Jaspers, "Über meine Philosophie (1941)," in *Rechenschaft und Ausblick*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1951, pp. 333-65, here pp. 351-2. [Translation Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]

deeds and interventions, then this would mean to exchange plague against cholera or it would be an attempt to expel the devil with the Beelzebub.

The typescript "Nature and Ethics" and his *Philosophy* criticize the science-superstition that since the seventeenth century rises again and again like a phoenix. This holds particularly true in view of the ecological crisis; it is, indeed, very convenient to think that salvation would come from new scientific discoveries or from a voyage to planet Mars or from the discovery of a bacterium that devours our plastic-continents whilst remaining passive oneself, instead of taking the decision to change one's life style right away into a more ecofriendly and sustainable version of it. "Nature and Ethics" and his *Philosophy* emphasize that a devotion to nature that loses sight of the human world, and the delusion of wanting to dominate nature are simply two opposed yet complementary errors. In the penultimate paragraph of the said typescript Jaspers writes:

Was ist der Grund für das die Grenze überschreitende Planen und Machenwollen von allem, schliesslich des Menschseins selber, des neuen zu schaffenden Menschen? Es ist entscheidend ein einziger: Der Mensch möchte weglaufen von seiner Freiheit. Er sucht zur Deckung seiner Flucht, die sich im wildesten Wollen verbergen kann, die rational aussprechbaren Anschauungen, die diese Flucht zugleich rechtfertigen und verschleiern.

Excerpt from page 13 of the typescript "Natur und Ethik"

What is the underlying motivation for the planning and will to the deed of everything that seeks to exceed the limitation, ultimately of being human itself, of the novel human being that is yet to be created. The reason is decidedly a single one: The human being wants to run away from his freedom. For the end of covering his flight, that can conceal itself under the guise of the wildest wants, he seeks out the rationally pronounceable views that justify and at the same time veil this flight.⁴

⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Natur und Ethik," undated and unpublished manuscript in German language, fifteen typed pages with editing notes. Henceforth cited as *NE*. All translations by Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer. A published English version of this

In *Philosophy* Jaspers warns in this sense also about two wrong modes of behavior toward nature, that is, he cautions regarding two "abysses" in the parlance of the book. One can think of nature either in terms of a mere object of an insubstantial handling, a material or substrate out of which one ought to produce something, in order to transform the earth into a world-factory or global production plant or in terms of an autonomous being originating out of the depth of being (*NE* 6). In the first instance humans would cause their "own roots to wither" and in the second instance one gives into the temptation to engage in unwholesome excessive sentimentality toward nature, and by viewing oneself as being a product of nature, one no longer does justice to the self that is intrinsic to oneself.⁵ In "Nature and Ethics" Jaspers claims that the consequence of the reduction of nature to a substrate of exploitation amounts to an "impoverishment of the human soul," and as a consequence leads to the "destruction of nature," which in turn means that human beings "in the end destroy themselves" (*NE* 7).

Just as in "On My Philosophy," already in his *Philosophy* Jaspers emphasizes that the abandonment of the self in nature is about the substitution of communication through nature. Jaspers words this as follows:

manuscript is Karl Jaspers "Nature and Ethics," transl. Eugene T. Gadol, in *Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers 1952, pp. 48-61. The translations of this manuscript provided here differ significantly from the published version.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 3: Metaphysics*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1932, p. 158. [Henceforth cited as *P3*]

To the man who loses himself in isolation, nature is a substitute for communication. [P3 158]

Yet, conversely, can one not also argue that an essential reason for the ecological crisis is precisely the loss of our sensibility for nature—a sensibility, that Erwin Straus defines in his *Vom Sinn der Sinne* (1935) as "a mode of communication."⁶ So far, I have confronted the readers with abysses which one was to avoid, however, it is indispensable to also explore how the relation with nature ought to be conceived in a positive mode. In other words, which positive task intends nature for humans, which positive task do humans need to perform in order to give nature its due?

In the fourth paragraph of "Nature and Ethics" Jaspers describes a relation with nature that avoids the two abysses: At first glance this relation seems to be impossible to achieve, at any rate for human beings' intellect, as it consists of two opposing aspects. On the one hand one should preserve the personification of one's self and on the other hand one also should not forget one's belonging to nature:

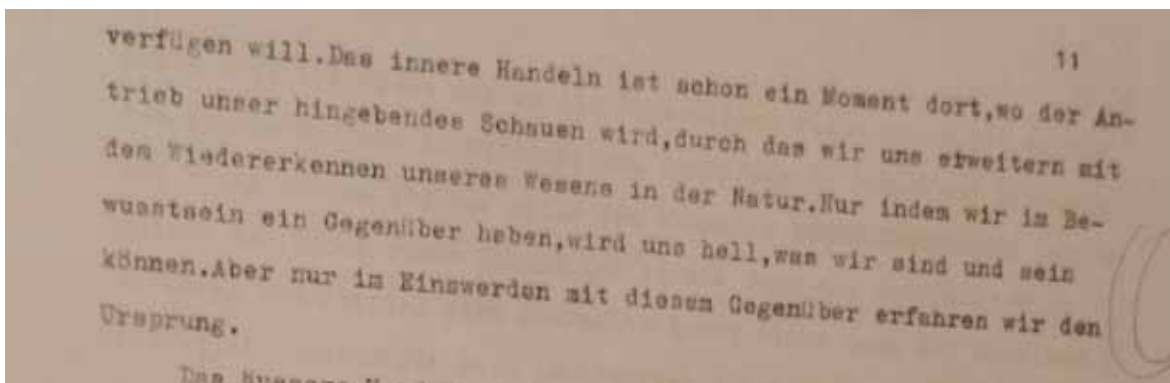
Only by being mindful that there is otherness opposite to us, we come to elucidate what we are and what we can be. Yet only in becoming one with this otherness can we come to know the point of origin. [NE 11]

unsearchable presence, and this existent becomes the symbol or cypher of transcendence. In Jaspers' words: "All existence becomes a phenomenon of transcendence" (P3 135). This also holds true of all natural existents, and Jaspers writes in this sense of "nature as a cipher":

The dawn and the puddle in the street, the anatomy of a worm and the Mediterranean landscape—all these contain something which mere existence as a scientific research object does not exhaust. [P3 153]

Such a perception is more than a perception, Jaspers describes it as a "reading," and this reading is an experience or an event: something comes about by way of experiencing a confrontation with an occurrence that is transcending humans.

But that cannot yet be the end of the matter, for firstly, if everything can be perceived as cypher, one's relation to nature becomes very unascertained, and secondly, the "becoming one" is up to this point equally unascertained. Yet this different perception and the different relation to nature can also be perceived in the language of the "Nature und Ethics" typescript. Provided that humans do not simply perceive the earth as being a "world factory" and nature as substrate for exploitation, but rather comprehend it as autonomous



Excerpt from page 11 of the typescript "Natur und Ethik"

What does this "becoming one" mean, that predicates much more than simply belonging? At least that it is possible to have a relation to a form of existence (an existent) that is beyond the relation between subject and object, namely the mere subject-object relation that defines scientific objectivity. Hence, into any given *Dasein* shines an existent and

entity, then it is our task to give nature a voice to which we listen by devoting us to it (NE 6). Yet in his *Philosophy* Jaspers writes: "Nature speaks to me, but when I put a question to it, nature stands mute" (P3 154). In this case occurs something that has to do with veritable communication rather than being a mere replacement for communication. As such it could be regarded as precisely the task of art.

Jaspers describes a task that belongs at once to ethics and art when he alludes to the importance to

⁶ Erwin Straus, *The Primary World of Senses: A Vindication of Sensory Experience*, trans. Jacob Needleman, New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe 1963, p. 202.

comprehend our surroundings in the infinite multiplicity of its possible shapes, to behold and let flourish the earth in its bounty of appealing cultural landscapes that are borne by history. [NE 6-7]

Jaspers' Relation to Nature

Jaspers has always lived in rather big cities (Oldenburg, Heidelberg, and Basle); a fact that is explainable to some extent through his state of health. For instance, in his "Krankheitsgeschichte (1938)" he notes to himself:

Taking a bath only indoors.
Taking caution in order to avoid colds requires furthermore:
No talking in the streets is needful, at least not in windy

In ersten Fall ist das Ziel, die Erde zu verewandeln in eine Weltfabrik und unser Dasein hineinreissen zu lassen in die Funktion dieser Fabrik, durch die wir am Leben bleiben. Im zweiten Fall ist das Ziel, unsere Umwelt in der unendlichen Mannigfaltigkeit ihrer möglichen Gestalten zu fassen, den Erdball zu erblicken und gedeihen zu lassen in der Fülle der ansprechenden, von Geschichte getragenen Kulturlandschaften.

Two elements of this citation are remarkable: firstly, in today's terminology it is a defense of biodiversity, and, secondly, the reminder that nature, at least in Europe, cannot be understood as wilderness. A cultural landscape is nature that has been worked on by humans, and that is simultaneously untouched nature that one lets simply grow. Precisely in these moments when nature is being regarded as landscape, one can see it as an interlocutor, and thereby becoming one with it. This transformation of nature into landscape, has, for example, been analyzed by Joachim Ritter in his well-received *Rektoratsrede* at the University of Münster, "Landscape: On the Function of the Aesthetic in Modern Society."⁷ Ritter has evidenced that the experience of nature as landscape appeared only very late in history, namely, in the eighteenth century. One last detail I need to add here: Jaspers' very first example of cultural landscapes is the Chinese cultural landscapes (NE 7). In comparison to this, the European cultural landscapes get simply mentioned albeit without there being provided details. In order to further explain the task of giving a voice to nature, I commence now with making a second point, namely Jaspers' own relationship to nature and to what extent he mediated this relationship through art.

⁷ Joachim Ritter, *Landschaft: Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Münster, DE: Aschendorff, 1963.

Beispiele für Erscheinungen auf den beiden Wegen sind etwa einerseits die Schutthalgen in Industriegebieten, die Aussenviertel grosser Städte, die modernen Ruinenfelder, andererseits die chinesischen Kulturlandschaften, welche in den rationalisierten Formen einer Geometrie in der Tat aus dem Sinn für geschichtlich bestimmte und schöne, der natürlichen Landschaft angemessene Umwelt erwachsen sind, und auch die europäischen Kulturlandschaften.

Excerpts from pages 6 and 7 of the typescript "Natur und Ethik"

conditions. — When there's wind and cold air, the neck needs to be protected by turning up the coat collar. — It's imperative not to sit near open windows.⁸

Due to his illness Jaspers, of course, was not much of a wanderer. Yet he nevertheless was not insensitive with regard to natural landscapes, for example, when visiting together with his wife the Alps. Jaspers' sensibility can also be felt in a letter to his parents from the first of August 1902 in which he compares the Alps with the moods of the landscapes he had perceived at the Frisian coast. He writes:

At the sight of the sea its regularity and steadiness pleases and comforts, in contrast to this emanates from the landscape a completely opposite mood with its jagged forms and chunky masses that appear to dominate through arbitrariness and inordinateness.⁹

⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Schicksal und Wille: Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. Hans Saner, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1967, p. 124. [Henceforth cited as *SW*]

⁹ German text quoted in Suzanne Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers: A Biography. Navigations in Truth*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2004, p. 244. [Henceforth cited as *KJB*, translation by Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]

Fifty years later, in August 1951, he writes in a letter to Hannah Arendt about the marvelous tranquility and precious landscape in Sankt-Moritz, Switzerland:

This noble landscape impresses itself anew on one and will continue to exert its influence through the year, as it has before. It emanates a demand, as if a response of a high order should necessarily follow.¹⁰

The contemplation of nature pertains not only to such vacation times, but also forms part of Jaspers' daily work, as he expounds it in his *Philosophical Autobiography*:

Often I gazed out on the scenery, up at the sky, the clouds; often I would sit or recline without doing anything. Only the calmness of meditation in the unconstrained flow of the imagination allows those impulses to become effective without which all work becomes endless, non-essential, and empty.¹¹

Occasionally Jaspers' sensibility also gets awakened by means of paintings as one can behold it from his description in a 1938 manuscript of memoirs regarding the scenery in Heidelberg:

The landscape at the beginning of the Neckar Valley was, to be sure, of incomparable, noble beauty, something in the style of Claude Lorrain. [KJB 34]

One can find a similar comparison in Jaspers' letter to his parents sent from Sils Maria, dated first of August 1902:

The landscape has a beauty similar to the representation of the giants in Wagner's Ring – summits that stand against wind and clouds seem to show less the persistent power of virility than man's defiant and shameless nature – like Böcklin's dragon in the Schack Gallery or the giant Polyphemus in Homer. [KJB 19]

Art, as in the case of Jaspers' painting, can be helpful to behold nature and also give nature a voice as, for instance, in the above cited passage: "Nature speaks to me, but when I put a question to it, nature stands mute" (P3 154). This is also Oscar Wilde's view,

when he writes in the essay "The Decay of Lying":

For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold.¹²

Jaspers was interested in painting from very early on; this evidences for example his trip to Italy in 1902, which he undertook in order to see the works of art about which the art historian Henry Thode had spoken in his Heidelberg lectures, or when Jaspers visited the 1912 *International Art Exhibition of the West German Sonderbund* in Cologne. Moreover, Jaspers himself was painting, albeit he painted not as well as his father did, whose paintings had impressed him. Jaspers dedicated nearly four pages of his text "Parental Home and Childhood (1938)" to his father's paintings, especially to his watercolor paintings, for example *Rothsandleuchtturm* (SW 77-80).¹³ Hans Saner describes this and other paintings and drawings by Jaspers' father in the following manner:

A possibility to express his sensibility he found in drawing and in painting in watercolors. Apart from actual "studies," the oftentimes-virtuosic copies, he succeeded best in creating the drafts of landscapes, light-hearted images with expansive space, bright light, in which the objects are virtually dissolved.¹⁴

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, "6 August 1951 letter to Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, p. 171.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Autobiography*, in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp, La Salle, IL: Open Court 1981, pp. 1-94, here p. 37.

¹² Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," in *Intentions*, London, UK: Methuen 1891, pp. 1-54, here pp. 39-40.

¹³ The painting is reproduced on a glossy-paper insert in *KJB* between the pages 168 and 169.

¹⁴ Hans Saner, *Karl Jaspers: Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg, DE: Rowohlt Verlag 1974, p. 12. [Henceforth cited as *KJS*, translation Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]

These words might as well describe the young Jaspers' 1902 watercolor painting of the Lake Sils. In any case these drawing and painting activities by father and son convey their concrete experience of nature in Friesland, especially when Saner in the subsequent lines of his description mentions "wide horizons" and a "light-flooded atmosphere."



Der Silsersee (Lake Sils) watercolor painting by Karl Jaspers, dated 1902.¹⁵

Yet, Saner's descriptions add a valuable detail:

The juxtaposition of sharply delineated color boundaries and converging color spaces, the low-level, wide horizons and the light-flooded atmosphere had at a later time been transposed by the son into elements of his philosophizing. [KJS 12]

I agree with Saner that the mood of the Frisian Nature has a lot to do with Jaspers' philosophizing, namely that the experience of nature is not of secondary importance, rather on the contrary, this experience permeates Jaspers' philosophy.

The importance of the sea for Jaspers' philosophy can be seen from the following comment:

When engaging with the sea there is from the outset the mood of philosophizing. [SW 16]

But what kind of experience allowed for this kind of handling the sea? Jaspers writes:

I grew up with the sea...At that time I have experienced infinitude in an unreflecting manner. [SW 15]

On account of this it is comprehensible that Jaspers also repudiated very early on the idea of art as being ornament or entertainment. Together with his wife Gertrud he visited the museums and art exhibitions in Paris in order to get to know better the paintings of the impressionists. On 12 May 1912 he writes to his sister Erna:

Everything is purely aesthetic, tasteful, artistically moving, even if an idea (I mean a deep feeling, not a thought) is effective in all of that, it does not actually come anywhere near to our feelings. [KJB 124]

In order to further develop Jaspers' comments on art, one could take the writings of Helmut Rehder into consideration who had studied with Jaspers and whose father, Julius Christian Rehder, is a well-known painter and lithographer.

Under Jaspers' supervision, Rehder wrote his dissertation on the topic of the origin and perfection of the infinite landscape.¹⁶ In view of Friedrich Schlegel, Rehder writes on Romantic painting: "In mere adumbration the life of transcendence moves within the appearances" (PUL 76). Jaspers beheld, for instance, in the works of Rembrandt or Leonardo or Shakespeare the testimony of an experience of the presence of transcendence in immanence.

It is likely that Jaspers would have valued highly the pastel drawings of the contemporary painter and climate activist Zaria Forman who draws photorealistic landscapes in order to bring attention to their beauty and fragility, their transient beauty. Forman writes:

When viewing my pieces, people are compelled to move closer to look at the details, especially when they realize they're not photographs. The movement creates an intimate connection that may not have happened had they simply kept their distance. This helps to immerse viewers in the details of these beautiful places...I choose to convey the beauty as opposed to the devastation; if people can experience the sublimity of these landscapes, perhaps they will be inspired to protect and preserve them.¹⁷

¹⁶ Helmut Rehder, *Die Philosophie der unendlichen Landschaft: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der romantischen Weltanschauung*, Halle, DE: Max Niemeyer, 1932. [Henceforth cited as PUL]

¹⁷ Zaria Forman, "Flying with Operation Icebridge," *ASAP/ Journal* 3/3 (September 2018), 480-483, here p. 481.

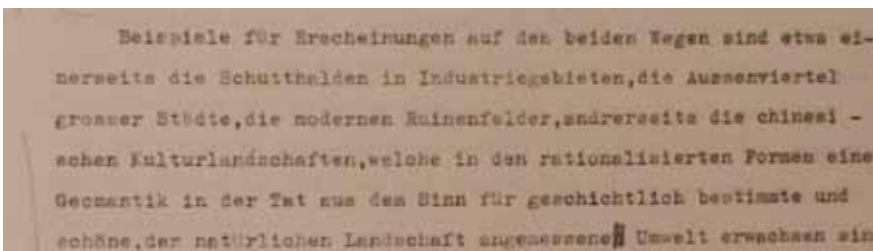
¹⁵ By courtesy of The Karl Jaspers Library at the Jaspers House, University of Oldenburg.

The final section of my essay takes up again Jaspers' thoughts concerning cultural landscapes.

Jaspers on Chinese Art

Chinese cultural landscapes are Jaspers' prime example for cultural landscapes. Human activity shapes the earth in two opposing ways: the destructive way of the atomic bomb and environmental catastrophes that result from industrial recklessness, and a creative way that utilizes the infinite beauty of nature in order to bring about an aesthetic quality of life. Jaspers juxtaposes industrial disposal sites and urban slums with the beauty of shaping the environment as the home for human life in which nature becomes the "illuminating language" for human beings. Examples for this kind of beauty are Chinese and European cultural landscapes (NE 7).

Jaspers most likely had obtained his ideas regarding Chinese landscapes from the novels which he read at the time of his inner emigration, and especially from his reading of Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of The Red Chamber*.¹⁸ I think of Xueqin's famous description of the Grand View Garden (*Daguanyuan*).

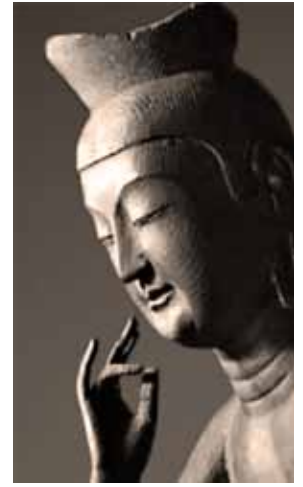


Excerpt from page 7 of the typescript "Natur und Ethik"

Yet more pertinent is the following: provided that art can and should give expression to human *Existenz*, then it is noteworthy that Jaspers identified the most perfect expression of this *Existenz* in a Buddhist statue, namely, in the statue of Bodhisattva Maitreya (Miroku Bosatsu) in the Koryu-ji temple in Kyoto. For Jaspers, in comparison to it the statues of the ancient Greek gods and the religious statues of Roman time are an expression of humans that remain "stained by earthly impureness." Gerhard Knauss, who taught philosophy at Tohoku University in the 1950s, recalls a commemorative plaque that is placed next to the statue

of Miroku Bosatsu at the Koryuji temple in Kyoto. In Japanese language, the inscription displays Jaspers' words that Knauss translates back into German. Here is a brief excerpt where Jaspers addresses the contrast to these Greek and Roman statues:

In contrast to this is the statue of the "Miroku" in the Koryuji the highest idea of the most perfect human Existenz expressed in an exhaustively manner. He is a



Bodhisattva Maitreya at the Kōryū-ji temple in Kyoto.

symbol for the most blessed, perfect, eternal image of human Dasein that was erected by overcoming all ties of temporality on earth.¹⁹

In a letter of January 1947 Jaspers writes to Arendt that China had become "almost a second homeland" for him,²⁰ and twenty years later he notes: "there in the East I was in a manner of speaking at home."²¹ By means of reproductions Jaspers had acquired an indirect familiarity with Chinese painting, and he was also in possession of several books on it. His

¹⁹ Gerhard Knauss, "Karl Jaspers und die Indische Philosophie: Jaspers und Nagarjuna," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Karl Jaspers Gesellschaft – Yearbook of the Austrian Karl Jaspers Society* 22 (2009), 25-48, here pp. 47-8. [Translation Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]

²⁰ Karl Jaspers, "1 January 1947 letter to Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hands Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, p. 72.

²¹ Karl Jaspers, *Antwort zur Kritik meiner Schrift "Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?"*, München, DE: Piper 1967, p. 19 [transl. Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer].

¹⁸ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, 5 Volumes, transl. David Hawkes and John Minford, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979-1987.

comments on Mai-Mai Sze's book *The Tao of Painting* are remarkable in this respect.²² In 1957 Hannah Arendt gifted him this book as a birthday present.

he is familiar with Osvald Sirén's commentary and translations of Chinese paintings from earlier periods. Jaspers writes that these paintings are



a phenomenon of the highest order that has a parallel in the Western world only in the person of Leonardo (Dürer is in a different category): philosophizing in the process of artistic creation itself and conscious reflection about this philosophy.²⁴

Remarkable here is that Jaspers finds the exposition by Sze as being superficial and that the author

seems to speak about it only from the outside and without clarity of thought – merely piling up Chinese ideas. [JAC 312]

Jaspers criticizes the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* as being

a late work in which the philosophical thinking of the painters gradually transformed itself into a "cookbook" of painting. [JAC 312]

This criticism is also taken up by Sze in her introduction to the manual, when she quotes a passage from Sirén regarding a painter of the same epoch who comments on the paintings of his time:

Modern painters apply their mind only to brush and ink, whereas the ancients paid attention (applied their minds to) the absence of brush and ink (i.e. the empty spaces). If one is able to realize how the ancients applied their mind to the absence of brush and ink, one is not far from reaching the divine quality in painting.²⁵

Shitao: "This oneness of brush strokes is the origin of all beings, the root of ten thousand forms."²³

In his letter to Arendt from 24 February 1957, Jaspers writes that the publication is beautiful and that

Jaspers was also able to contemplate in Sze's book a reproduction of the landscape painting by the Northern Song dynasty (mid-eleventh to early twelfth century) painter Guo Xi, "Clearing Autumn Skies over

²² Mai-Mai Sze, *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting; with a Translation of the Chieh Tzu Yüan Hua Chuan; or, Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, 1679-1701*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1956.

²³ Earle Jerome Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting by Shih-T'ao: A Translation and Exposition of his Hua-P'u (Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting)*, The Hague, NL: Mouton Publishers 1978, p. 36.

²⁴ Karl Jaspers, "24 February 1957 letter to Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hands Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 310-3, here p. 312. [Henceforth cited as JAC]

²⁵ Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Translations and Comments*, New York, NY: Schocken Books 1963, p. 199.

Mountains and Valleys."²⁶ Jaspers' criticism with regard to the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* can be better understood when comparing it to a painting by the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) painter Shitao (1642-1707)—whose name from a European perspective actually translates to "stone wave"—which brings mountain and water nicely together, namely the ink and color painting *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River* a section of which is depicted here:²⁷

Jaspers has at the very least seen this painting and read the citations and comments regarding Shitao in James Cahill's book *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting* and particularly in Victoria Contag's book *Chinesische Landschaften: Zwölf Tuschbilder von Shih-T'ao* that was always in his library. Western-language translations of Shitao's philosophy yield different strengths and hence leave room for interpretation. Jerome Silberman offers a helpful translation of Shitao's central philosophical concept, the single brushstroke:

What we may rely upon, truly, are the principles of spiritual nourishment and liveliness, regulating all things through unity, and regulating unity through all things. Do *not* rely on the mountains, do *not* rely on the water, do *not* rely on brush and ink, do *not* rely on the past and present, do *not* rely on the sages — what one may rely on is the Truth they possess: in short, the unitary-brushstroke, that-without-limitation, the Way of Heaven and Earth.²⁸

In contrast to Caspar David Friedrich's painting (c. 1818), *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*,²⁹ where the

wanderer contemplates the sea of fog and nature in general from above, depicts *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River* a monk who, looking upwards, beholds the peak of a rock whilst standing on a boat; this monk appears to admire this huge rock. Yet at the same time one could also argue that the rock on his part beholds the monk as well, and even bows to him. Other well-known works of this kind are: the handscroll painting *Peach Blossom Spring*,³⁰ that illustrates a narrative of the same title by the poet Tao Yuanming (aka Tao Qian), or any of the various renditions of Shitao's *Man In a House Beneath a Cliff*,³¹ *Colors of the Wilderness*,³² or Zhong Li's *Li Bai Gazing at the Waterfall on Mount Lu*.³³

In conclusion of my deliberations, I suggest that surprisingly one finds in Jaspers at least three important elements of a philosophy of nature, that are necessitated today. First, the reminder to the fact that the reduction of nature to a substrate of exploitation means an impoverishment of the human soul, just as the destruction of nature issues ultimately also the destruction of humankind.

Second, Jaspers offers the possibility to analyze in a clearer way human beings' responsibility for nature. The responsibility is tied to a guilt that has nothing to do with the guilt regarding "in the face of humans" versus "in the face of myself," about which Jaspers reflects in *Über meine Philosophie*; rather it is a guilt that is connected to the historical situation of human beings. In other words, the limit situation of our era is given by the ecological crisis, and in this sense, one could apply Jaspers' analysis and distinction between four categories of guilt (that is, criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical) to this crisis.

Third, the thesis, that it is the task of human beings to give nature a voice — which one can expect from and that agrees with the Chinese idea of a cooperation of man with heaven and earth, as this is fostered, for instance, in *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhōng Yōng)* through the idea of being centered and being in harmony. With regard to this thought defend today some Confucians that also in

²⁶ A large color reproduction of this painting (H x W: 25.9 x 205.6 cm) is published in the multimedia magazine of the arts, *Aspen* 10 (1971), https://www.ubu.com/aspens/aspens10/autumn_large.html [accessed 31 January 2023]

²⁷ "Reminiscences of Qinhuai River," album leaf 8, ink and color on Song paper (H x W: 25.5 x 20.2 cm). Open access reproduction by courtesy of The Cleveland Art Museum, <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.31.8>

²⁸ Jerome Silbergeld, "Philosophy of Painting by Shih T'ao: A Translation and Exposition of his *Hua-P'ü* (Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting). By Earl J. Coleman. The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton (Studies in Philosophy No. 19), 1978. 147 pp. Notes, Bibliography. D. Glds. 37," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39/1 (November 1979), 162-164, here p. 163.

²⁹ <https://artincontext.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Wanderer-Above-the-Sea-of-Fog-by-Caspar-David-Friedrich.jpg> [accessed 31 January 2023]

³⁰ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1980-0225-0-4 [accessed 31 January 2023]

³¹ <https://www.alamy.com/man-in-a-house-beneath-a-cliff-by-shitao-image398208432.html> [accessed 31 January 2023]

³² <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49176> [accessed 31 January 2023]

³³ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44703> [accessed 31 January 2023]

Confucianism there is an experience of transcendence that, as it is also stated by Jaspers, can only be thought of as being in immanence.³⁴

Yet in *Von der Wahrheit* (1947) Jaspers goes much further when he questions in humanism the classical preference of human works in comparison with the natural beings; although it is rather long it is worth reading this passage for with the aid of which one can better behold what Jaspers means with "experience of the infinite":

I stand in the thunderstorm at the beach of the North Sea, I see nothing but the dazzling, then pale and eerily weird light in the clouds and the sea, walking in storm and rain, nearly becoming one with the elements. When the soul of this landscape speaks, then in fact this is objectively nothing at all, but in experience

it is the corporeal presence of something that was known to Rembrandt and Shakespeare. It is as if it were a revelation of Being. I feel as if the most magnificent things that human beings have created (Parthenon and Strasbourg Cathedral, Chartres and Sistine ceiling) can become lost to me, but not this presence.³⁵

This passage suggests that with regard to nature, Jaspers seems to be closer to Taoism than to Confucianism for in contrast to the latter whose aim is forming and maintaining social hierarchies, the Taoists seek a peaceful life in harmony and unity with nature. For them intervention into nature's way potentially causes conflict and destruction. Yet the action of non-action allows for being in the now and within the flow of nature.

³⁴ Mou Zongsan, *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy*, transl. Julie Lee Weii, <https://nineteenlects.org/index.html>, lecture 4 [accessed 31 January 2023]

³⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit*, München, DE: Piper & Co Verlag 1947, p. 897. [Translation Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]