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Genius loci

Experience and the time

In his essay *The Lost Places*, Czesław Miłosz wrote:

Rootedness is perhaps a constant urge in human nature. It may be connected somehow with the laws of human organism, and strictly speaking – with the law of rhythm. The familiar and homely allows us to maintain the same inner rhythm, of which we know little – which doesn't mean it does not exist. A change of surroundings results in a disturbance in the rhythm and a significant expenditure of energy in trying to transfer to a new rhythm. The fact that humans become accustomed to places is without doubt a mysterious one, and it invites numerous interpretations.

Maybe it is just the *genius loci* – the spirit of the place which cares for buildings, squares, cities – that makes the surrounding space so rich and open to the discovery of exceptional places and unique atmospheres. These are the places which attract and connect people, stimulate the growth of skills and talents and construct a clear hierarchy of universal values.

Genius loci is a idea originating in Roman times which has survived through evolution until today. According to Roman

mythology, the term denotes a benevolent spirit looking after families, homes or countries. The ancients also believed that every human being, from birth to death, had their own *genius*. This belief gained a new dimension in Christianity. *Genius loci* became a guardian angel, a protector and defender, always vigilant over mankind.

As a metaphor, *genius loci* has more than one meaning. The term can be understood in many ways and subsequent definitions seem to complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive. The spirit of the place does not belong to history or modernity – it could be said to be everlasting. At present, the trope seems to be enjoying a renaissance, as it has become the subject of numerous interesting discussions, articles and academic conferences both in Poland and abroad.

The book project by authors from the University of Silesia and the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, is a discussion of “the spirit of the place” in European culture. The project emphasizes the versatility of the term, resulting from a synthesis of social, cultural and geographical factors which influence human existence.

The modern *genius loci* is the aforementioned spirit of the place, a protective force and a decisive factor in its uniqueness and peculiar magic. Its influence also flows into other places and even influences non-residents. Can this exceptional force belonging to a place be experienced nowadays? The postmodern space is eclectic and multicultural, which makes experiencing the *genius loci* a difficult task. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the phenomenon of *genius loci* is undoubtedly a transcendental one. Secondly, modern social archetypes lead us into a world of new consumer behaviour, which in turn make it difficult to experience the magic of a location and its roots in a *locus*. The *homo viator*, a

person relating to a particular space, is today transformed into a consumer-tourist.

The discovery of *genius loci*, therefore, means above all “being” in the place, “pausing” – not only to take a snapshot of a famous sight, but also to “exist” in harmony with the *locus*, “inhabit it” in order to discover oneself.

It is worth thinking about this peculiar phenomenon which permits us to become emotionally involved in spaces, landscapes and histories of different places. Researching the trope makes it possible to discover its various manifestations – to demonstrate that *genius loci* is a synthesis of values. It allows humans to become immersed in the *sacrum*, to admire the beauty of the surrounding space in its tiniest details, to cultivate respect for tradition and legacy, and finally – to care about the harmonious growth of others by shaping their higher needs.

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