

PREFACE: ENTERING SODOMSCAPE

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur
and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew
those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the
cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind
him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

—GEN. 19:24–26¹

Mon amie, il faut que je parte.	I must leave, my dearest.
Voulez-vous voir	Would you like to see
l'endroit sur la carte?	The spot on the map?
C'est un point noir.	It's a black dot.

En moi, si la chose	Inside me, if things
Bien me réussit,	turn out well,
ce sera un point rose	there will be a pink dot
dans un vert pays.	in a green country.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, "Départ"²

September 12, 2000, Ein Bokek, Israel. I have arrived at the Dead Sea, in search of Lot's wife.

Things have not turned out well. I had forgotten that the most important word in Rilke's poem is the conjunction *if*, the indiscriminate and thus always faithful messenger of contingency. The black dot on the map has not become a pink dot in a green country. The legendary image of a mortified landscape is what I expected to find, having apparently forgotten the observation, documented in virtually every travel guide book in recent circulation, that the unusual geological features of the region—the hypersaline lake and the seven-mile salt ridge called Kashum Usdum—now share space with a sprawling industrial and consumerist complex. A further impediment arose at the time of my visit. Because of structural renovations on the southbound highway along Mount Sedom, the solitary road sign directing tourists to the salt pillar had been temporarily removed. Without the visual index, the designated escarpment yielded something I was not looking for. What appeared instead of the fabled remnant was the breakdown of a Gestalt principle: nothing less than the dissolution of figure into the blankness of ground.

Help was eventually at hand, in the form of an impromptu archive of photographic images hastily pulled together from a circuit of concierge desks and souvenir shops in the vicinity. The resulting collation of landscape and archive finally produced the likely candidate (fig. 1). The photographic testimony to the object that tourists are directed to find at Mount Sedom no doubt speaks to the claims of fanciful antiquarianism or literal-minded piety, but the salt outcrop has virtually nothing to do with Lot's wife. My excursion through the Dead Sea region has supplied a different perspective. The more provocative remnant of Lot's wife resides not in the geological artifact that tradition has settled upon, but instead in the scattered expressions of the biblical figure's narrative conundrum—the porous interface of motion and stasis. This piecemeal rendering of the legendary topography of Sodom is not locatable on a map. Instead, it is hidden, and on the move, in plain view.

Let me put this another way. The essence of Sodom, and not least the enigmatic face given to Sodom by Lot's wife, belongs to an *elsewhere*, driven by the sense that localized determinations of commemorative practice capture neither the conjectural nor material grounding of the conjured place or event. This *elsewhere* belongs to the mutating syntax and roving provocation of what I call Sodomscape. The key to the notion derives from the linguistic components gathered to produce the term. For all the suppleness of its applications, the word *Sodom* adheres to the stabilizing properties of a proper noun. As such, even when it is coaxed into adjectival variants, the word harbors the collector's dream of a stilled cabinet of knowledge, where questions are brought into the beautiful composure of the possessed fact, the statistical datum, and the type of domesticated wonder incarnated by the inert "piece of the pillar" that met Georg Christoph Stirn's curious gaze as he toured the Anatomy School in the Bodleian Quadrangle in 1638.³

The addition of the suffix *-scape* silently changes all that. Derived from the Germanic root *skap*, the suffix has an etymological twin that more clearly conveys the sense of composure just described: *-ship*, which invokes settled or typical attributes of a condition or state of being.⁴ Friendship. Hardship. Connoisseurship. Landscape, the most commonly used word in which the suffix *-scape* appears, touches on a neighboring semantic region by conjuring an aesthetically gratifying vista: scenic composure. But landscape also instills a certain discomposure, a kind of metabolic energy harnessed by the suffix's root sense: to create, install, or bring into being. Landscape therefore holds two seductions in precarious balance. It is, one might say, the unnervingly perfect host, because it sustains both the docil-



Figure 1. Pillar of Salt, Mount Sedom, Israel. Photo courtesy of Jay H. Geller.

ity of harmonious composition and the sheer eventfulness of the moment of onset or emergence, the *dérive* or drift into something that has not yet settled into place.⁵

Sodomscape captures the precariousness of the double seduction, and it does so through the particular homonymic tincture that the noun *Sodom* adds to the suffix *-scape*. Because notions of flight, exile, and exposure are deeply ingrained in Sodom's semantics, the converted place name reminds us that the soundworld of *-scape* also hosts two coincident senses of the noun *scape*: as variant of the nominative form of *escape*, and as back-formation of *landscape*.⁶ Though it does not mention Sodom, Jean-François Lyotard's essay on landscape's unnerving solicitations captures the train of

thought just described. Provocatively titled “Scapeland” (in both the original French and the English translation), Lyotard’s causerie also presents a threshold into the itinerary pursued in this book.

“Deserts, mountains and plains, ruins, oceans and skies”—all phenomena conventionally associated with landscape.⁷ This topography, however, is not essential to the strange alchemy that the sensation of landscape produces. For Lyotard, the etymological root of the French word for landscape, *paysage*, draws us outside the naturalized purview of what may be said to count as landscape: “It used to be said that landscapes [*Paysages*]*—pagus*, those borderlands [*ces confins*] where matter offers itself up in a raw state before being tamed—were wild because they were, in Northern Europe, always forests. FORIS, outside. Beyond the pale [*En dehors de l’enclos*], beyond the cultivated land, beyond the realm of form.”⁸ The intuition preserved in the word *pagus* is that any place, any scene—whether rural or urban, indoors or outdoors—may metamorphose into a “scapeland:” “even the cacophony of the Place de la République,” Lyotard observes, “can become a landscape at 5:30 PM on a winter’s day, when it is choked with thousands of jammed vehicles.”⁹ Landscape’s indiscriminate generosity turns on one precondition, which also makes itself felt as the unfailing result of what comes to be apprehended as landscape: “ESTRANGEMENT [*dépaysement*],” separation from the familiar contours of place.¹⁰

“If place is cognate with a destiny,” as Lyotard suggests, then landscape draws one into an estranging experience of “a place without a DESTINY.”¹¹ *Sodomscapes* expresses the intent to take Lyotard at his word and to see where this may lead. For Lyotard, the intuition leads at one point to the edge of the Genesis text: “In order to have a feel for landscape you have to lose your feeling of place. A place is natural, a crossroads for the kingdoms and for homo sapiens. The mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms are ordered by knowledge, and knowledge takes to them spontaneously. They are made, selected for one another. But a landscape is an excess of presence. My *savoir-vivre* is not enough. A glimpse of the inhuman, and/or of an unclean non-world [*l’immonde*].”¹² The mention of homo sapiens and the three kingdoms (*règnes*) makes it clear that Lyotard has Linnaeus on the mind. This makes perfect sense, given the stature of Linnaeus’s contribution to the modern scientific “feeling of place” as a taxonomic grid filled with objects that conform to designated morphologies. It bears recalling, however, that the virtual Ur-text of Linnaeus’s *Systema naturae* is the Priestly account of creation in Genesis, with its serene depiction of hierarchical orders of the cosmos that are brought into being and sustained in place by the correlation of naming and knowledge.

Lyotard wants to leave all this behind in his search for the essential, if counterintuitive trait of landscape as a “mark,” not an “inscription” but “the erasure of a support.” Indeed, the argument bids fair to take leave of the Linnaean system, for there is no discernible place in that system for the “excess of presence” unleashed in Lyotard’s essay’s textual arena. But the Genesis text is more hospitable. Its name for the estranging proximity of excess, the *immonde*, the unworldly dimension to the perceived world, is Sodom. Sodom is the essence of landscape. Its portal is the figure of Lot’s wife, the inscrutable salt pillar, falling into the anonymity of space and time.

And the figure is portable.

SODOMSCAPES

