

A Room of Nature's Own: Mario Rigoni Stern's Household between Mind and Meadow

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Abstract – Nature – more particularly wilderness – often takes on a salvific role in modern consciousness. In view of the malaises caused by the acceleration, discipline, and complexity of modern sociality, the natural world appears to many today as an oasis of simplicity and peace. This nostalgia, however, is not an immediate desire. Rather, it is the product of an internalization of nature realized in the privacy of a room whose essentiality resonates with the consoling candor of natural environment. In this essay, such interpretative framework is tested against Mario Rigoni Stern's writings and the role played by nature in them as an agency of «counter-terror». The major question I focus on at the end of the essay is whether this semiosis of nature is tantamount to a betrayal of it or not.

Keywords: Mario Rigoni Stern – nature – storytelling – moral resilience – house

1. A Spiritual Conundrum: The Paradox of the Nature Storyteller

Those who write about nature *for the sake of nature* experience a significant paradox. For, in most cases, they cannot do so – and probably would not even want to do so – *in the midst* of nature, but are forced to do it in a secluded place, in some kind of «house», in a building, that is, raised specifically to serve as a bulwark *against* nature (or at least against part of it).

I do not think that this paradox represents, so to speak, a «performative» contradiction (as it happens when the behavior of the speaker contradicts its semantic content, its assertion), making any form of literature that puts natural environment at the center of its creative efforts in principle inauthentic. The tension, however, is meaningful.

Given that, in this case, the source of inspiration seems to be at odds with the deeper meaning – the *pointe* – of the very practice of writing, why would a lover of nature feel the urge to write about it, rather than simply immerse himself or herself in it? Hence, it makes sense to ask whether nature is not treated here instrumentally by the writer for the by no means «natural», in some respects even «anti-natural» purposes of their literary vocation. But is this not always the case in any «spiritual» exercise worthy of the name, be it intra- or ultra-mundane?

Broadly speaking, the mental habitat of those who see nature as a crucial element of a spiritually uplifting life has something deeply enigmatic about it¹. For how can an entity that in the eyes of moderns embodies the ultimate exteriority be at the same time the access point to a most intimate experience? In what follows, I want to gesture towards a tentative account of this crucial junction in the contemporary Western way of life. My end goal is to show that there can be a mutually empowering relationship between the quintessential solitary gesture of artistic writing, and the pull of wilderness, which is regarded by many today as a saving power in a world often seen as morally out of joint.

In order to articulate and understand the major characteristics of this creative spiritual tension, I will devote the rest of my paper to a thoughtful reflection on a key aspect of the work of the Italian writer Mario Rigoni Stern². In the context of Italian literature, which unlike American poetry and prose, is generally distrustful of any epic of wilderness, Rigoni is one of the few writers who deserves to be called a «Nature Storyteller», in the dual meaning of the term, as long as he tells stories about nature and for nature's sake. Apart from the dramatic experience of war and a few rare cases of urban storytelling, Rigoni Stern has written mainly about woods, forests, mountains, seasons, plants, hunting, animals, and human activities that take place in close contact with nature, in a dialectical harmony with it³. And he did so with a language that fits the subject matter like a glove: essential, sparse, almost photographic. The senses, by the way, are very important in his prose, particularly the sense of sight – the vigilant, receptive, stereoscopic gaze of the hunter – and Rigoni's main effort as a writer is to systematically make them prevail over their intellectual sedimentations.

¹ On nature as an axis of resonance in the modern age, see C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, chap. 20; C. Taylor, *Poetiche romantiche*, in *Modernità al bivio. L'eredità della ragione romantica*, ed. by P. Costa, Bologna, Marietti, 2021, pp. 23-127; H. Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, pp. 268-279.

² Mario Rigoni Stern (1921-2008) is universally celebrated as the «accidental» writer of the wartime memoir *The Sergeant in the Snow* (original Italian edition, 1953, trans. by A. Colquhoun, Evanston IL, The Marlboro Press - Northwestern, 1998). In this essay, however, he is treated as an exemplary «Nature Storyteller», that is, as a vocational writer who sees nature as a powerful attention arouser and an endless source of true tales. In this respect, his most important texts are collected in *Le vite dell'Altipiano. Racconti di uomini, boschi e animali*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008. All translations of Rigoni Stern's quotes, except where indicated, are mine.

³ A self-interpreting account of his own attitude to «nature» can be found in M. Rigoni Stern, *La natura nei miei libri. Vestone 16 settembre 1989*, in A.M. Cavallarin - A. Scapin (eds.), *Mario Rigoni Stern. Un uomo tante storie nessun confine*, Scarmagno TO, Priuli & Verlucca, 2018, pp. 15-26.

In short, nature must speak for itself. That is, its expressive power should be protected as much as possible from being stifled by non-natural devices. Only in this way, it will be able to play its role as «counter-terror»⁴, by exerting that munificent consolatory power, which Rigoni tacitly ascribes it and which accounts, at least in part, for the enduring success of his books, well beyond the narrow circle of lovers of Alpine environments.

From this point of view, writing appears as the repository, the inscription in individual memory of an overflowing sensory experience, which was gratifying beyond all expectations. The inscribed memory, we might even say, is the «house», the abode, within which nature can continue to exert its invigorating influence after the experience has fully consumed the energies of the Nature Storyteller. In writing, put otherwise, nature continues to resonate even after the subject has lost, through exhaustion, the ability to deal directly with it.

Through scripture, hence, nature, so to speak, doubles up. It is simultaneously inside and outside the house, as if knocking on the writer's doors and windows to bring them back to the source from which their memory, intelligence, creativity have drawn inspiration. The Nature Storyteller's house is therefore by definition porous, and the window, the attic, the cellar, the woodshed are liminal spaces where nature continually makes its presence felt.

It is no coincidence that these home environments constitute crucial places in Rigoni Stern's creative space. It is in front of the window that Mario sits down to write, and it is thanks to the window that what is put down on the page never belongs entirely to the page. Accordingly, all it takes is a small sign for the outside world to re-assert itself, reclaiming its ontological priority, so to speak, over any inwardness.

Giorgio Bertone articulated this point with enviable clarity:

«Mario Rigoni Stern writes in front of the window. With the window open. If the window, ever since it became the generative core of perspective painting, the original entry of the landscape into our modern culture, has taken upon itself the whole symbolic load of the relations between inside and outside, inwardness/outwardness, private world/public world, meditation/action, uniqueness and solitude of the individual/multitude of individuals, self/nature, what will an *open* window mean? What will it mean to write in front of it? 'As is my habit, I was working with the window open to the meadows, woods and *contrade* [districts]'. In short, the

⁴ Retrieving an insight by René Char, Francesco Biamonti has aptly described «nature» as the counter-terror that Mario Rigoni Stern «continually creates for himself» and «serves him on all occasions when life gets into tragic knots». See F. Biamonti, *Mario Rigoni Stern*, «Sentieri sotto la neve», in F. Biamonti, *Scritti e parlati*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008, pp. 99-103. Both quotes are from p. 102.

window is the other doorway, the true threshold: it stands *in limine*. Through it, the wholeness of the surrounding world is housed within the writing. Invisible membrane of a permanent and indispensable osmosis. Those who enter and leave as both hosts and guests are curiosity, wonder and thoughtful attention, conscious action, which cannot occur in the all-in or all-out. As soon as the seated man hears the sounds of a coming thunderstorm, he gets up, leaves the table (he never says 'desk') and looks out of the window 'to watch the lightning over the woods and bell towers'; when the heather blossom comes, 'working with the window open', he hears the flight of the bees and gets up from the table; when it rains, he immediately opens the window to hear the 'voice of the rain'. Just as the gesture of getting up is actually a bow of regard to that which is superior to the papers spread out on the table, so access to the window is a tribute to something without which the house that structurally supports the window itself would not exist. Something that may even represent salvation»⁵.

This in-front-of-the-window writing habit also accounts for the restraint that saturates Rigoni's language. Nature, looming over the blank page, operates in his texts as an anti-lyrical stronghold, vigilant against any expressive abuse, for example against any attempt to sentimentally flatten its ambivalent profile.

2. Four Houses

Rigoni Stern spoke of the houses that deeply affected his existence in a famous short story entitled *Le mie quattro case* [My Four Houses], first published in *Amore di confine* [Border Love], 1986. His list is quite interesting.

The first one is the house in which he was not born: «his non-lived before»⁶. For the corner house, guarding the central Kantàun vun Stern in Asiago, was razed to the ground a few years before Mario was born by the attacks and counter-attacks of the Austrian and Italian armies during the First World War. This is the building that will turn up in some of his most beautiful stories, particularly in *Storia di Tönle* and *L'anno della vittoria* [The Year of Victory]⁷. It can be legitimately seen as the household, which embodies his visceral bond with his homeland/Heimat: the Asiago Plateau⁸.

⁵ Cf. G. Bertone, *Le case di Mario Rigoni Stern*, introduction to M. Rigoni Stern, *Le vite dell'Altipiano*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008, pp. 11-12 («Dello scrivere con la finestra aperta/ On Writing on an Open Window»), here p. 12.

⁶ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, in *Le vite dell'Altipiano*, pp. 310-314, here p. 310.

⁷ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *The Story of Tönle*, trans. by J. Shepley, Evanston IL, The Marlboro Press / Northwestern, 1998; *L'anno della vittoria*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985.

⁸ On this, see U. Sauro, *Mario Rigoni Stern tra mistica cosmica ed esperienza dell'Heimat*, in A.M. Cavallarin - A. Scapin (eds.), *Mario Rigoni Stern*, pp. 181-196.

The second house is «somewhere between old and new»⁹. It is the house where Rigoni Stern actually grew up. Located less than a hundred meters from the previous one, it was rebuilt immediately after the First World War (it actually dated back to 1910 and had been commissioned by his grandfather because it promised to be «bigger and more modern»¹⁰. Here, young Mario's favorite places are the hearth («where I used to dry my clothes and shoes after spending the afternoon playing in the snow»¹¹ and, besides the cellar («very cool in summer and warm in winter»¹², the large attic, which is described as a lively edge between indoors and outdoors, that «was filled with the flight of swifts and the air was all vibrating; for them we left the only window open, which faced south»¹³. This house is not only the repository of childhood memories, but is also doomed to be a place of decline and abandonment: «The crisis of the 1930s came, and with it the deaths, the family layoffs came, and the big house began to empty out, to become silent. And I found myself a soldier in the war»¹⁴.

With an unexpected image, the third house is presented by Rigoni Stern as «a refuge of the unconscious»: a place never physically inhabited, but psychologically vital¹⁵. (And, with this, the houses lived less in physical reality than in memory and imagination are already two). It is the house fantasized and designed in the concentration camp in East Prussia where Mario had been imprisoned by the Nazis after the armistice of 8 September 1943. In such inhuman context, intoxicated by hunger, endless abuse of power, and a lingering sense of prostration, Rigoni finds less a refuge than a vital foothold in a future that, in those terrible circumstances, could at best be imagined as nature's victory by a narrow margin over the impotence of civilization to counteract the degrading effects of human greed, cowardice, and mean-spiritedness.

⁹ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, p. 312. For another take on the issue, see P. Cognetti, *Baite, isbe, tane. Le case di Mario*, in G. Mendicino (ed.), *Mario Rigoni Stern. Cento anni di etica civile, letteratura, storia e natura*, Dueville VI, Ronzani, 2022, pp. 103-111.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, p. 312.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 313.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 313.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

This is his eloquent account:

«On a piece of paper I had found, I meticulously and patiently drew the house I would build on my return. The place I had chosen was far from other dwellings, in a forest I knew very well and at the junction of two cart tracks, on a small rise. But this house was like an underground den, with a place to sleep, a place for a fire, a place for about twenty books; I would live off hunting and the wood by-products, and a small vegetable garden in a clearing. In this basement house, made of logs and stones, rammed earth and moss and bark, everything necessary for my life was within reach, and after what I had seen and experienced, it seemed to me the only possible solution to my existence. It was not meant to be, of course, but then and there, the project of this house kept my thoughts occupied and quenched my hunger»¹⁶.

The fourth one, finally, is the house in which most of Rigoni's books were actually written. It is a house designed and built by himself,

«as simple as a beehive for bees: comfortable and warm; silent to the distant disturbing noises and close to the sounds of nature; with windows that look far away, the woodpiles on the walls in the sun and, today, with snow on the roof, on the birch and fir trees in the orchard, on the beehives, on the kennel. And inside, in the warmth, my wife, my books, my pictures, my wine, my memories ...»¹⁷.

Mario, thus, ended up living on the border «between forest and meadow»¹⁸. Through the windows, the woodpile, the *orto* (vegetable garden), the beehives and the *arboreto salvatico* (his sacred grove: simultaneously redemptive and wild), his final house keeps a direct contact with nature. At the same time, however, it creates the conditions for states of grace that, with the support of personal relations and their supply of human warmth, bodily and spiritual pleasures, memory, succeed in transmuting nature's outer bark without betraying its substance¹⁹.

3. A Room of Nature's Own

Even during the Second World War, both in the terrible and chaotic Albanian campaign and in the tragic retreat from the Russian front, people's 'home', if respected, symbolizes in Rigoni Stern's writings the threshold between the decency of common human *compaesantà* [paisanity] and the unleashing of the most senseless violence. Conversely, warfare, by

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 314.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Una stagione di vita in compagnia ...*, in M. Rigoni Stern, *Le vite dell'Altipiano. Racconti di uomini, boschi e animali*, p. 232.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Arboreto salvatico*, Torino, Einaudi, 2021.

upsetting any natural balance, brings out nature's «wild-salvific» force, without however concealing its harshness and moral ambivalence²⁰.

As an agency – probably the most important agency – of counter-terror, the «nature» narrated by Rigoni Stern in his «wild tales» becomes thus the sign of something else. In particular, it is the contrastive sign of that «brave new world», which modern men, by denaturalizing themselves, have repeatedly shown to be capable of turning into a hell on earth. In order to fulfill its consolatory function, though, nature can only be a sign in a secondary sense, that is, as a side effect of its autonomous expressive power. In fact, the resonant bond with nature is so original, so constitutive of the Nature Storyteller's personality that it ends up dismantling the very distinction between inside and outside, performing the feat of crossing, at least for a moment, the boundaries on which the human form of life is ordinarily based²¹.

The spiritual power of nature surfaces precisely here. Thus, Rigoni's mirror immersion in seemingly antithetical forms of attention and care for the inner and outer world – mind and meadow, so to speak – poses a genuine challenge to anyone concerned about the distinction between what really matters and what has only the semblance of something of import. Put concisely, the question is whether studiously moving back and forth between home and nature may not be the best way to try out the humanly inescapable distinction between appearance and reality. Cannot be the case, then, that the art of the essential is best practicable in the porous boundary between the self and the non-self, fullness and emptiness, mastery and dispossession? And might not be the country household precisely one of such liminal spaces?

With this background in mind, it may be claimed, I think, that the house in which Rigoni Stern actually lived after his journey to the end of the night is precisely the one that, with a last burst of imagination, he had

²⁰ An emblem of the sacredness of the house is the famous episode recounted in *The Sergeant in the Snow* (p. 88) of Rigoni Stern's entry into the *isba* during the Nikolajewka battle, where three Russian soldiers had already taken refuge, who nevertheless let the woman who hosted them to feed him with a dish of millet and milk. According to Rigoni, his own candid, «natural», gesture of knocking on the door before entering even in the heat of combat encapsulates the deeper moral meaning of the story. See also M. Rigoni Stern, *Quota Albania*, Torino, Einaudi, 2022. For a full-fledged account of the issue, see my forthcoming essay *Moral Resilience: Endurance, Faith, Belief, Commitment*.

²¹ The best evidence of this is the consoling role that nature plays even on the war front. This is a key aspect of Ermanno Olmi's reading of the *Sergeant in the Snow* in the script of the film that was never meant to be. Cf. E. Olmi - M. Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve. La sceneggiatura*, ed. by G.P. Brunetta, Torino, Einaudi, 2008. For a more detailed discussion of the ethical role of nature in Rigoni Stern, see my *Forza e fragilità nella vita etica. Un caso speciale di resilienza morale*, in M. Leone (ed.), *I discorsi dell'oltre: fascino e pericoli della polarizzazione*, Trento, FBK Press, 2023, pp. 11-22.

76 | designed not against, but within nature, and to which his residual fortitude had clung in the darkest moment of his life. 'Natural', after all, is also a synonym for 'essential', and essential is what stands in principle on the side of being²².

²² On the existential meanings of mountain landscape, see P. Costa, *L'arte dell'essenziale. Un'escursione filosofica nelle terre alte*, Udine, Bottega Errante, 2023.