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Cinque Terre

Henry Plummer

. . . a house with cosmic roots
. . . will appear to us as a stone
plant growing out of the rock up
to the blue sky of a tower . . . a
natural being whose fate is bound
to that of mountains and of the
waters that plough the land. . . .

Gaston Bachelard
The Poetics of Space

Within a brief stretch of the rugged and furrowed Ligurian Coast, clings an astonishing series of cliffside villages poised between earth and sea. The Cinque Terre (Five Lands), until recently linked to the outer world only by mule track, rail, and water, are medieval fishing villages as well as centers of grape harvest for surrounding hillside vineyards. This dual relationship has given rise to settlements that are virtually amphibious, each leading a double life that is half on land and half in water.

The villages gather the sea as they wrap intimately around small coves, drawing the harbored waters deeply into their stony fabric. Adding to this concave embrace is an overlapping union, the lower village inundated with salty spray and

pounding waves, while tidal rhythms actually carry the swollen sea up into village streets. Peninsulas encrusted with houses enwrap themselves with the sea, in turn, by projecting the village beyond shore and out into the tremulous waters. Settlements tend to crowd around a single main artery, a wide central street winding down to the sea in a sinuous torrent of space, its channel “folded” out of stone, spilling into the bay and disappearing below surface, a kind of elongated threshold along which people flow and boats are launched. This passageway, leading from rock to water, is the primary communication link between mountain and sea, and in this sense it is almost a cosmic axis, a meeting ground that is now terrestrial and now aquatic, now solid and now liquid, now spine and now vein.

Topography is also incorporated directly and metaphorically into the village structure. Basins, crests, promontories, and valleys are accentuated by settlement morphology, and the steeply terraced mountainsides reverberate in tiered dwellings and cascading

footpaths, while bedrock is chiseled into walls and floors. Set against the chipped and faceted terrain are colorful patchworks of weathered houses, their manifold faces as fragmented as rock crystal. The subterranean quality of the narrowest passages, cleftlike and close to the earth, are at the same time ravinelike, as if etched through by watercourses over time, alternately angular and undulant, rocky and watery, landward and seaward.

These coastal villages bring daily life closer to earth and sea, meshing their houses into the great cycles and forces of our planet. But such places also breathe in and out reconciling our own dual needs for settlement and wandering, security and adventure. Here we are rooted and stable, emplaced deeply in a warm and fertile earth, even as we are released into the sea’s vaporous horizons, turbid depths and quivering surface. Within the fluctuating border of these two primeval worlds, dwelling is intensely grounded yet protean, as all life should be for terrestrial beings.



