

Introduction

The influence of place

Is it some influence, as a vapour which exhales from the ground, or something in the gales which blow there, or in all things there brought agreeably to my spirit. . . ?

(Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 21 July 1851¹)

We are all familiar with the effect of human thought and activity on the landscapes in which human beings dwell. Human beings change the land around them in a way and on a scale matched, for the most part, by no other animal. The land around us is indeed a reflection, not only of our practical and technological capacities, but also of our culture and society – of our very needs, our hopes, our preoccupations and dreams. This fact is itself worthy of greater notice and attention than perhaps it is sometimes given (it is indeed a theme to which I shall return). Yet the human relation to the land, and to the environing world in general, is clearly not a relation characterized by an influence running in just one direction. There are obvious ways, of course, in which the environment determines our activities and our thoughts – we build here rather than there because of the greater suitability of the site; the presence of a river forces us to construct a bridge to carry the road across; we plant apples rather than mangoes because the climate is too cold – but there are other much less straightforward and perhaps more pervasive ways in which our relation to landscape and environment is indeed one of our own *affectivity* as much as of our ability to *effect*.

The relation of person to place is a recurrent theme in Wordsworth's poetry. Following immediately after 'Poems on the Naming of Places', at the end of the second volume of the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*,² Wordsworth's 'Michael' is explicitly tied to an identifiable place, Greenhead Gill or Ghyll, in Grasmere, Cumbria (see Figure 1) – in what used to be known as Westmoreland. Place is invoked at the very start of the poem with the first lines effectively leading the reader into the landscape to which the poem belongs, and so also into the story of the place and of the shepherd, Michael, after whom the poem is titled:

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If from the public way you turn your steps
 Up the tumultuous brook of Greenhead Gill
 . . . one object which you might pass by,
 Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
 Appears a struggling heap of unhewn stones!
 And to that simple object appertains
 A story . . .³

Michael dwelt, we are told, 'upon the Forest-side in Grasmere Vale',⁴ and that 'stragling heap of unhewn stones' appears as his unintended memorial. Of Michael's relation to the countryside in which he dwells, Wordsworth writes:

. . . grossly that man errs, who should suppose
 That the green Valleys, and the Streams and Rocks,
 Were things indifferent to the Shepherd's thoughts.⁵

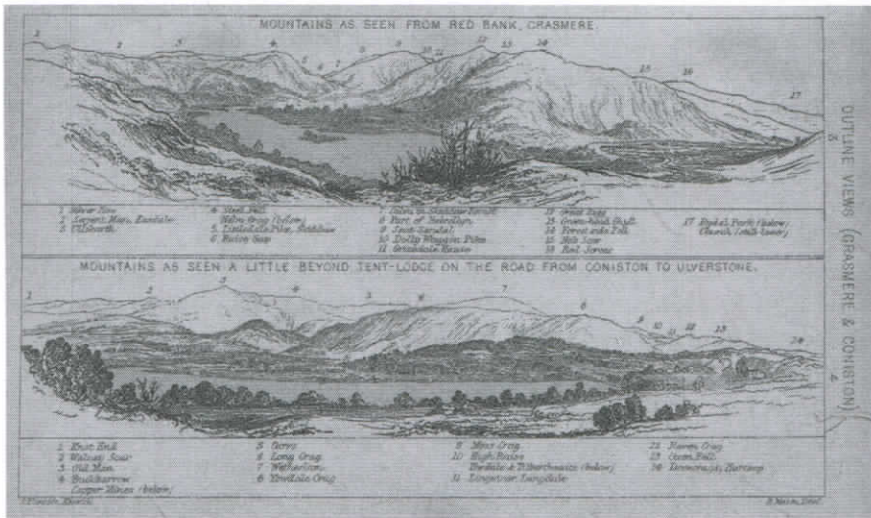


Figure 1 Print, lithograph, 'Outline Views, Grasmere and Coniston – Mountains as seen from Redbank, Grasmere, and Mountains as seen a little beyond Tent Lodge on the Road from Coniston to Ulverstone', by J. Flintoft, Keswick, Cumberland, engraved by R. Mason, Edinburgh, Lothian, about 1900, found at 'Greenhead Gill', in *Old Cumbria Gazeteer*, accessed 28 August 2017, www.geog.port.ac.uk/webmap/thelakes/html/lgaz/lgazfram.htm. Greenhead Gill, marked here as no. 13 in the upper view, is the place named as the location for Wordsworth's 'Michael'.

The point here is not to direct attention to the shepherd's own influence on the landscape around him (though a part of the story focuses around the building of a sheepfold by Michael and his son), but rather to the effect of those surroundings on Michael himself. Wordsworth's concern is to make plain, as Seamus Heaney puts it, the way in which 'the Westmoreland mountains were . . . much more than a picturesque backdrop for his shepherd's existence, how they were rather companionable and influential in the strict sense of the word "influential" – things flowed in from them to Michael's psychic life. This District was not inanimate stone but active nature, humanized and humanizing.'⁶ Not only is Michael's own identity bound up with the hills and valleys around him, and which themselves take on an almost personal character, but Heaney seems to suggest that it is the shepherd's very humanity that is bound in this way – nature is both 'humanized and humanizing'. As Wordsworth writes of Michael and his relation to the countryside in which he lived: 'these fields, these hills. . . were his living Being, even more Than his own Blood. . .'⁷

The idea that human identity is somehow tied to location is not, of course, peculiar to Wordsworth, nor even to romantic nature poetry. It is an idea that has both a long ancestry over the centuries and a wide currency across cultures. Indigenous Australians had – and many still have – a conception of human life, and indeed, of all life, as inextricably bound up with the land (something graphically expressed in the image of ancient handprints on rock – see Figure 2). In his historical investigation of the Indigenous shaping of the Australian landscape, Bill Gammage writes of the centrality and intimacy of Indigenous peoples' relation to place or 'country': '[they] felt intensely for their country. It was alive. It could talk, listen, suffer, be refreshed, rejoice. They were on it and others were not because they knew it and it knew them. There their spirit stayed, there they expected to die. No other country could ever be that. Country was heart, mind, and soul. Country was not property. If anything, it owned.'⁸ Tony Swain explains how the closeness of the relation between self and country is reflected in Indigenous beliefs concerning conception: 'The mother does not contribute to the ontological substance of the child, but rather "carries" a life whose essence belongs, and belongs alone, to a site. The child's core identity is determined by his or her place of derivation. The details vary; the location might be directly linked with feeling the child enter the womb or, alternatively, dreams or foodstuffs may provide clues as to the site from which the spirit derived. . . Life is annexation of place.'⁹ A child's identity is thus derived, on this account, from a particular place and thereby also from a particular spiritual and totemic ancestry. So important is this tie of person to place that for Australian Indigenous peoples the land around them is everywhere filled with marks of individual and ancestral origins, and is dense with story and myth.¹⁰ In traditional



Figure 2 Hand stencils, northern Australia, image courtesy Paul S.C. Taçon.

terms, then, for a person of Australian Indigenous heritage to be removed from that country to which he or she belongs is for them to be deprived of their very substance, and in past times such removal – particularly when it involved imprisonment – frequently led to sickness and death.¹¹

While such indigenous views of the relation between persons and place may seem rather extreme or even peculiar to non-indigenous eyes – though perhaps less so in places like Australia where there has been, in spite of entrenched racism and narrowness of vision, a gradually broadening appreciation and understanding of the importance of place and ‘country’ in Indigenous culture – such views have clear correlates around the globe. Across the Tasman, in New Zealand, Māori beliefs also emphasize connection to place and to the land as constitutive of identity – perhaps most clearly expressed in the idea of *Turangawaewae*, meaning ‘a place to stand’ and referring to that place in which one is grounded through ties to genealogy and tradition. In *The Coming of the Maori*, Te Rangi Hiroa writes eloquently of the Māori connection to the land:

In the course of time, the principal tribes with their subtribes came to occupy definite areas with fixed boundaries. The love of their own territory developed to an absorbing degree, for tribal history was written over its hills and vales, its rivers, streams, and lakes, and upon its cliffs and shores. The earth and caves held the bones of their illustrious dead, and dirges and laments teemed

with references to the love lavished upon the natural features of their home lands. The prestige of the tribe was associated with their *marae* sites and terraced hill forts, and their religious concepts were bound to their *tuahu* shrines. Captives in distant lands have begged for a pebble, a bunch of leaves, or a handful of earth from the home land that they might weep over a symbol of home. It is the everlasting hills of one's own deserted territory that welcome the wanderer home and it is the ceaseless crooning of the waves against a lone shore that perpetuates the sound of voices that are still.¹²

Even if expressed in very different ways in different cultures and traditions, the basic notion of a tie between place and human identity is thus both widespread and explicit in indigenous cultures from Australia to the Americas.

The idea that there is a close tie between place and human being is not, however, peculiar to indigenous cultures alone. It is an important and recurrent theme in Western European thinking, especially Western European art and literature, and more explicitly so over the last two to three hundred years. There is no dearth of examples here, but one especially significant literary instantiation of this preoccupation with place and locality is Marcel Proust's seven-volume *In Search of Lost Time*.¹³ One should not allow oneself to be deceived by the apparent focus on time or on the past that is suggested by the title of the work (especially by its original English translation as *In Search of Lost Time*¹⁴). Proust's work is as much about place and space as it is about anything temporal (a point to which I shall return), and Proust treats the relation between persons and their locations in a manner that is particularly striking. In Proust's work, persons and places intermingle with one another in such a way that places take on the individuality of persons, while persons are themselves individuated and characterized by their relation to place;¹⁵ persons come to be seen, to use a phrase from Lawrence Durrell, almost 'as functions of a landscape'¹⁶ – in some cases, even of a particular room or setting. In fact, the narrator of Proust's novel, Marcel, grasps his own life, and the time in which it is lived, only through his recovery of the places in relation to which that life has been constituted. *Remembrance of Things Past* is thus an invocation and exploration of a multitude of places and, through those places, of the persons who appear with them. As Georges Poulet writes, 'Infallibly, then, with Proust, in reality as in dream, persons and places are united [*lieux et personnes s'unissent*]. The Proustian imagination would not know how to conceive beings otherwise than in placing them against a local background that plays for them the part of foil and mirror.'¹⁷

The idea that the self is to be discovered through an investigation of the places it inhabits is the central idea in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*.¹⁸ Both the love of place – 'topophilia' – and the investigation of