

Insensible places

We tend to think of a place as static. We might imagine the expansion of a population, individuals passing through, the spread of architecture, the disappearance of a forest or fields, but the underlying notion of geographical place remains motionless. We align it with the abstracted, idealised substrata of Euclidian geometry: a constant space that acts as a backdrop against which events occur. But there is a difference between space and place, landscape and community. To experience a place is to sense its social and natural history, to step into the external world and mediate it through subjective perception. You observe a landscape but respond to a place.

You may be reading this text while on the Beacon bus, touring the heritage venues; or you may be about to get on the bus, or you may have been on it last week, or you may not ever be taking the bus but can imagine what it might be like to be driven through the Lincolnshire countryside between site-specific artworks. My question is whether or not this journey – be it real or imaginary, lapsed, imminent or ongoing – is necessary to enable an experience of place. Don't the bus windows simply frame the vista into a moving landscape painting? Doesn't experience hold back until you step off the bus? By which time you have your destination in sight, so your senses are honed, your perception targeted on a particular building or person, unlike your aimless gaze when journeying for its own sake.

To my reckoning there are other mechanisms, beyond the motorised wheel, by which experience of place can be channelled into a dynamic encounter. A number of years ago I was collaborating on a radio project that revolved around the River Thames. We started thinking about expanses of water in literature, and particularly novels that evoke a strong sense of place or are very particular to where they are set. Now, this might sound a bit baggy – surely every piece of descriptive writing is inseparable from its setting – but, in fact, there were certain titles that seemed much more geographically redolent than others. *Swallows and Amazons*, for instance, would be another book altogether if it were really set in the Amazon instead of the Lake District; and the cultural inversion required for *The Heart of Darkness* to become a story told by a bargeman on the Congo about a trip up the Thames might be an

interesting exercise, but not within the political remit, cultural capacity or literary taste, perhaps, of Joseph Conrad.

So, we sat round a table for hours, drinking wine and discussing *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Mill on the Floss*, *Lights Out For The Territory* and so on, jotting down titles on a large sheet of paper. Meanwhile, someone's daughter's hamster was running around inside its exercise ball, bumping into our chair legs. It's funny, thinking back – us talking about places around the world throughout history, while this rodent desperately tried to escape its Perspex purgatory. It was like a filmic device for indicating the passing of time, the whirring of intellectual cogs and the furious activity of cultural production that whiles away our time on this globe.

Anyway, the upshot was that by the end of the evening we had a fantastic list of books to be read from on air. But the next day the person who had been in charge of the piece of paper rang to say that she must have left it in the cab – it was lost. How odd that all those hours reminiscing about places we had never been, things and people we had never seen, which we had alchemically condensed into a cryptic list of totemic words, was itself making an unchaperoned tour of the city. The passing through time and space of myriad other times and spaces is a satisfyingly self-reflexive model: places on the move, beyond our grasp and back into the realm of the imagination again.

Lucy Lippard writes in *The Lure of the Local*, 'The sense of place, as the phrase suggests, does indeed emerge from the senses. The land, and even the spirit of the place, can be experienced kinetically, or kinesthetically, as well as visually. If one has been raised in a place, its textures and sensations, its smells and sounds, are recalled as they felt to a child's, adolescent's, adult's body. Even if one's history there is short, a place can still be felt as an extension of the body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape.' It is certainly true that transport – trains especially, I find – facilitates contemplation of a place. The kinetic experience anodyne occupies the senses, freeing the brain for other activity. Or perhaps it is the movement of landscape that coaxes the flow of thoughts, our interiority emulating sensory information from the external world.

Travel is the connective tissue between different places, and maybe it is the differentiation that enables thought, rather than the movement itself. *Terroir*, to borrow a vintner's term, refers to how place directly informs the character of something that will eventually leave that place. One grape variety, grown in a soil with a unique combination of pH level, aridity and texture, combined with the particularity of local weather conditions, makes the wine taste differently from the same grape produced under other conditions, no matter how infinitesimally slight the variation might be. This *terroir*, then, indicates the transformative powers of place, from geophysical conditions to taste, strength, viscosity. The medical condition synesthesia produces a mysterious sensory confusion whereby one person might associate Tuesdays with red polka dots, another oranges with ringing bells. The grapevine, though, can not only convert place into taste, but also sensibility into disorientation. Imagine: the soil of France somehow communicates with a drunken soul on the other side of the world, rendering them unable to find their way home.

A further unpredictability occurs at the point of drinking, due to the singularity of the body involved. An old book I found in the British Library, *Curiosities: or the cabinet of nature, containing philosophical natural and moral questions answered* by Robert Bassett (1637), tries to account for the various affects of wine drinking as a reaction to the four humours that were thought to inhabit the human body and form personality: melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric and sanguine:

‘Q: How is it that wine works contrary and different effects in the drinkers?’

A: The sun melts the ice and hardens clay, by the diversity of the subject whereupon it operateth. So wine, not of its own nature, but by the nature of the bodies into which it is poured, they being not all of one temper, works diverse and different effects. The melancholy man becomes fearful without cause, and steals away, and starts as fearful at every noise: he talks of ghosts, and dead men, or on the Scripture; and is never more religious than when he hath got a cup or two. The phlegmatic becomes heavy, dull and stupid. The sanguine he laughs, sings, dances and spends himself in mirth. The Choleric he puts all the rest in a confusion, and quarrels. There I leave him.’

I like these long-since discredited theories of medicine involving the humours. They communicate the tactility of moods: the sensuous dilation of drunkenness, the tepidity of boredom, the visceral sap of lust. It is as though, as in the vineyard, there is an internal *terroir* of the individual, a discrete set of conditions that can be interfered with, if not entirely controlled.

In 1790, a century and a half after Basset was collecting knowledge from the world out there, Xavier de Maistre wrote *A Journey Around My Chamber* while under arrest for duelling. The book catalogues the ruminations of a man confined to one room for forty-two days. The prose is at times grandiose and universal, at others rather matter-of-fact about furniture or wistfully nostalgic for past pleasures. It provides a reminder that leisure need not cost a lot, as the most apparently benign objects harbour a wealth of human investment: ‘...I always prolong, as much as possible, the pleasure I find in the gentle warmth of my bed. Is there a theatre which lends more to the imagination, which awakens more tender ideas, than this piece of furniture, in which I sometimes “steep my senses in forgetfulness?” ... In a bed we are born – in a bed we die – it is the ever-varying theatre, where the human race act by turns interesting dreams, ludicrous farces and frightful tragedies. It is a cradle, adorned with flowers; it is the throne of affection; it is a sepulchre.’ De Maistre reminds us of the interior realm of the senses and imagination, essentially relieving us of an encumbering loyalty to the material world. ‘This day, certain persons, upon whom I depend, propose to restore to me my liberty; as if it were in their power to rob me of that for a single moment, and prevent me from traversing, at my pleasure, the immensity of space, ever open to me! They have debarred my travelling in a town – in one atom – but they have left me the whole universe; immensity and eternity are at my command.’

Inner experience and objectified account are notoriously divergent. De Maistre never left his room, but the book attests otherwise. Henri Bergson affirmed this dualism when he described drawing a line on a piece of paper with his eyes closed. ‘The motion I perform is perceived from within, a continuity of consciousness, something of my own flow, in a word, duration. If I now open my eyes, I see that my finger is tracing on the sheet of paper a line that is preserved, where all is juxtaposition and no longer succession; it is the record of the result of motion and its symbol as well. ... If

we carry out these motions ourselves, they have a dual aspect: as muscular sensation they are part of the stream of our conscious life, they endure; as visual perception, they describe the trajectory, they claim a space.' Perusing the village appraisals of Ashby de la Launde, Helpringham, Sleaford, South Kyme and Wellingore, the usual dull information about planning permission and boundaries offered up a glittering gem that illuminates this subtle bifurcation of perception. In 1980 there was a competition in Wellingore to name the footpath between Millgate and Pottergate Road. Out of the 27 entries the name Cumberland Gap was picked. The complex topological and conceptual wrangling that allows a pathway to be conceived as a gap caught my attention. Few people, with the earth underfoot and the briars snagging at their legs, would immediately consider that, rather than being in one place, they are in fact between two; they are at a point on a curve of duration, traversing the gap between extremities. This requires a prioritising of an overview beyond the subjective, self-centred understanding of the universe that lived experience suggests. Gaps and liminal regions between two territories are almost universally recognised as dangerous or magical. Adolescents, no longer children but not yet adults, the purgatory between heaven and hell, the transition from maiden to wife are points of vulnerability aestheticised or ritualised throughout cultures; and shamanism is the welding arc between the supernatural and the secular, supposedly powered by potential energy as it pours across a differentiation. The Cumberland Gap, then, is a place in which the walker can ponder their in-between state, think about where they have been and where they are going instead of dwelling on the mundanity of mud and brambles.

My challenge to you is to imagine de Maistre travelling in a cab along the Cumberland Gap reading a list of book titles while drinking a bottle of wine. Now there is a book that could never be finished.

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