Two Essays on a Sense of Place

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A Sense of Place

Yi-Fu Tuan

In a teasing mood at the beginning of the semester I may say to my class, “Welcome to the United States. You will find that this is a great country. I hope you will grow to like it.” The young Americans express surprise. How is it that this Oriental person is inviting us to feel at home in our own country? I quickly explain: “Well, I came to the United States in 1951, and have lived here ever since, which means that I have eaten more hamburgers and participated in more July 4ths than any of you. As an old-timer I am trying to make you—the newcomers—feel at home.”

It is by now a well-worn cliche to say that America is a country of immigrants. I would like, however, to give a novel twist to the concept. Broadly interpreted, an immigrant is a new arrival—a relative stranger to the land. As I grow old, I tend to see all people under forty as new arrivals—hopeful immigrants unburdened by the past. The new arrivals will make a home here. What will it be like? Making a home for ourselves on earth, in harmony with each other and with other living things, is what life is about. It is the fundamental human enterprise. “Home,” in all its variegated meanings, captures the essence of what it is to be human. We raise deep questions concerning our own humanity when we explore the meaning of our homes. We probe the nature of our being when we seek to understand our sense of place.

Spatial Scale

By now there is a large literature on the sense of place. Its importance is recognized. Nevertheless, what we mean

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by it is still unclear, in part because the idea tends to be
distorted and constrained by nostalgia and sentimentality.
Having a sense of place is installed too soon and too unre-
 reflectively in the pantheon of good things, along with country
and flag, motherhood and apple pie. Let us try to expand
from our rather narrow views and ask as adventuresomely as
we can, What does “a sense of place” mean? Consider
the word place. Geographers have taught us to think of it at
the scale of neighborhood, city, and region. But obviously
place reaches far beyond this medium range. The single
dwelling, for example, is certainly a place. Within it are rooms,
each of which has perhaps its own personality and history,
and hence each can be a unique place. Within the room are
intimate places of still smaller scale—the hearth, the kitchen
table around which the family sits for Sunday breakfast,
an armchair, a bed.

At the other end of the scale, beyond the town and the
city, is the region. The region can be as large as the state
of Wisconsin. To the question, “Where are you from?” I
reply, “I am from Wisconsin. Wisconsin is my home state.”
Unself-consciously I have claimed an area of more than
56,000 square miles as my place, even though, personally, I
may know only a small corner of it. In saying simply that I
am a Wisconsinite I have enlarged my sense of self to include
pine forest and prairie, blizzard and heat wave, cheese
and Frank Lloyd Wright. All these disparate things, in the
fleeting duration of the claim, have become necessary to my
being; they are who I am. If one thinks a bit, one can
readily see the giddiness of the boast, and yet we do it
offhandedly all the time.

Beyond Wisconsin are regions of still greater size, to all
of which a human being can acquire a personal attachment.
Recall how as children we took a certain pride in putting
down our address on the envelope: it begins modestly with
street number and city and ends grandiosely with Northern
Hemisphere and the Earth. Yes, even young children can
feel that not just their neighborhood but the planet earth is
their home—that it is their place in the universe. We used to
know this through a leap of the imagination. Now, it is
actually possible to see the earth as a bounded entity—to see
rather than know through the mind's eye that it is our

only home. Pictures of the earth taken from the moon or a
spacecraft show a marbled planet—a beautiful island of
life surrounded by cold, sterile space. It is understandable
that we should feel both pride and affection for the
earth and to speak of it in the eloquent language that Shake-
spere (in Richard II) has used for England. Of our planet
we can say, “This scepter'd isle, this earth of majesty,” “this
precious stone set in a silver sea,” “this blessed plot.”

Time and Awareness

We wish to form a deep bond with place. Will the
establishment of such a bond take a long time—years and per-
haps even generations? There is no simple answer. One
source of complication is that human beings are capable of
falling in love at first sight. We know this to be true with
another person, but enthrallement can also happen—as unex-
pectedly—with a landscape. I speak from personal experience.
As a young and naive graduate student I camped for the
first time in Death Valley, California. I arrived a little before
midnight, exhausted after a long drive. I dived into my
sleeping bag and was immediately overcome by sleep. I woke
up with the early morning sun shining on my face. I
opened by eyes and what confronted me seemed a revelation
from another world. Nothing in my life had prepared
me for it. I felt at the same time the utter strangeness of the
desert scene and its deep familiarity: I had ventured into
an alien country, which nevertheless made me feel as though
I had finally come home.

Curiously, then, prolonged stay may not even be
necessary to feel a strong affinity for place. But the kind of
experience I have just described is probably rare. It is
far more common to have a relationship with place that
develops and matures over an extended period of time. The
question “how long?” has different answers depending
on the type and depth of attachment. Thus, a tourist's appre-
ciation of place is often superficial. One reason is this: to
forestall disorientation, the tourist organizes his experience of
the new environment in the most efficient way, which is
to use his eyes to compose more or less stereotypical images
and scenes. A different kind of awareness is required if
one is to claim familiarity with a particular place. As the
novelist William Maxwell says, “It is not enough to see the
fishermen drawing in their wide circular net, the tropical vil-
lages lying against a shelf of palm trees. . . . You must
somehow contrive, if only for a week . . . to live in the houses
of people so that at least you know the elementary things—
which doors sometimes bang when a sudden wind springs
up; where the telephone book is kept; and how their lungs
feel when they waken in the night and reach blindly toward
the foot of the bed for extra cover.”

To know a place and its people well, one must be aware
of the elementary and elemental things that are intimately
woven into the fabric of human lives. A novelist will sympa-
thize with this view. I would only add that one also needs to
know a people’s routine. Routine, which is not a good
word in our dynamic go-getting society, lies at the heart of
being in place. For a person to feel thoroughly at ease
anywhere, he must have lived there long enough to have
acquired cyclical habits of behavior—daily, weekly, seasonal,
and yearly—each with its own unique patterning and
pulse, its own ceremonies and rituals. As the airplane
approaches the Dane County airport I feel a surge of well-
being. The trip out of state has been enjoyable and
profitable, but after all the excitement and uncertainty I yearn
to be plugged in again to the effortless rhythms of day-to-
day life—to know without thinking where to buy the Sunday
Times and where to take my laundry. A degree of humdrum-
ness, I believe, is essential to the profound experiencing of
place.

In a poem, Greg Kuzma drew a gentle picture of a
couple who “never went anywhere,” “who sat and listened to
stew bubbling.” If they got up, it was to move the “rocker
back a couple boards.” They spoke desultorily of the weather.
If there was a question, “Father would sit and think about it.
Mother would fold her hands into her lap. She was always
getting ready to relax.” This couple probably never left their
hometown. Even if they had, I dare say they would have
missed, at the deepest level, their rocking chairs and those
aimless chats about the weather rather than the bigger, more
showy occasions that intruded into the even flow of their
lives. Let me give a personal example. I moved to Madison,
which is now my home, from Minneapolis, where I had
lived for fourteen years. One of the things I miss most about
Minneapolis—and I am a little ashamed to confess it—is
the quite ordinary daily drive from my apartment to the cam-
pus and back. Through sheer repetition—day after day,
week after week, year after year—that circuit of streets and
freeway, traffic lights and unremarkable housing has come to
be imprinted on my muscular coordination and psyche;
it is a part of me. I can never return to this circuit, although,
of course, I can always go back to Minneapolis, and like
any other tourist, shop in the crystal court of the IDS tower.
When we return to visit our former place of residence,
we may find it as welcoming and delightful as ever. The old
landmarks are still there, friendly but also a little cool
and withdrawn because we know they are no longer a part
of our routine.

Routine is made up of cycles of time which, through
repetition, can feel as natural as breathing. The categories
“past” and “future” do not apply to cyclical time. What
human beings experience in it is a rhythmically extended
present. Deeply rooted people, in their unchanging rounds,
lack the sense of an historical past. They may have lived
in the same place for hundreds of years, but their active
memory goes back only a couple of generations. They tell sto-
ries of founding ancestors or of cultural heroes in primordial
time, but for them this time does not lie in a distant and
inaccessible past; rather the events have taken place only a few
generations ago and the ancestors themselves continue to
make their presence felt on the world of the living.

Who are these people unburdened by an excess of
historical consciousness? They tend to be those who have no
written literature, whose material possessions are few, and
whose social organization is communal and egalitarian. They
are the hunter-gatherers and peasant cultivators of the
world. They are the short-statured inhabitants of the Congo
forest, the Marind-Anim of south New Guinea, villagers
in Asia, and many other groups. To an urban sophisticate,
such folks seem to merge with their natural environment and
belong to the earth as native flora and fauna do. An urban
sophisticate sees this intimate bond between human beings
and nature, society and place, with envy and perhaps also
unconscious condescension. He believes (and I think rightly) that to such rooted people the question of a sense of place—whether one has it or not—does not arise. If posed to them, they will be baffled. Only human beings who are no longer sure of who they are and where they belong would raise that type of question.

Sense of History

A sense of place implies a certain distancing from place and a loss of embeddedness in time. It surfaces as a problem when belongingness is no longer taken for granted. How can one narrow the distance and restore an unproblematic sense of belonging? We have here a paradox, for it is clear that we cannot deliberately, by taking thought and action, enter an unreflective state. The couple on the front porch in Kuzma’s poem are rooted because they do not try to be rooted: they are not city people pretending to be unsophisticated country folk. You and I can play at being such a couple; self-consciousness prevents us from being such a couple.

One method for enhancing a sense of belongingness is through history. In the West, history was vigorously promoted as a school subject in the nineteenth century. Rulers and political thinkers recognized that in a world that was becoming increasingly secular, nonreligious means had to be used to bind citizens to the nation-state. History books served that purpose. The history that was taught in schools was linear; it represented time as an arrow pointing to the present. We all know the scripts. In France, history marched from Roman Gaul, through Joan of Arc and the Louises, to the Third Republic. In the United States—and in Wisconsin itself—the panorama of successive change is so familiar that it has the inevitable and time-defying quality of myth: Indians, fur traders, and farmers; forests, villages, and cities. History thus perceived offers two consolations. On the one hand, it promotes a nostalgic pride in the past; on the other, it instills confidence in the present, for it is also a story of progress culminating in the present.

We do not perhaps fully realize that this conscious use—and even exploitation—of history is modern, and in certain respects uniquely American. Historic preservation, including the maintenance of museums and historical societies for the purpose of memorializing the past, is alien to Oriental civilizations. To the extent that public museums exist in China and India, the idea for them came from the West. In the West itself, Europe lags behind America, where almost every city of any size can boast a museum and every major highway is punctuated by historic landmarks, most of which refer to events that have occurred barely a hundred years ago. To see how extraordinary such commemoration of the recent past is, try to imagine Henry II of England putting up a plaque at the landing site of William the Conqueror. Most remarkable of all is the use of history as advertising—a use that is characteristicly American. Perhaps we can even claim it as a Wisconsin Idea. I refer to our historical society which was established in Madison in 1846 even before there was a state of Wisconsin. A society that came into being to devote itself to the past had at the same time its eyes on a glorious future.

The past is reassuring if we focus on those real or imagined events that can make us feel proud. It also provides comfort, as I have said earlier, if it is seen as an arrow reaching out from a dark past to the bright present and even brighter future. The past, however, can also be a bewildering place—a foreign country—as the geographer David Lowenthal says in his recent book. Its familiarity is largely an illusion, the result of being highly selective in what one wishes to remember and commemorate. Wisconsin’s own past has its woeful moments. In recall, these are not necessarily the battles fought or the bitter struggles against nature to survive, for those can now be made to seem heroic; rather they are the more ordinary human failures—ignorance, bigotry, delusion, and helplessness; the depressed, suicidal lives of rural Wisconsin people in the 1890s—lives resurrected for us by Michael Lesy in his book The Wisconsin Death Trip.

Richard Current, the historian, writes: “For many years Wisconsin was something of a living ethnological museum.” It was an unplanned museum, the natural result of immigration from a variety of countries. When we talk fondly of restoring a sense of place, we might think of this heterogeneity of cultures and peoples in the past, each devoted to its
own ways. Remember, however, the conditions that sustained cultural distinctiveness: isolation, the soul-constricting work necessary to making a living, the fear of difference and change, the need for social cohesion in the face of hardship and of competition from rival groups. Think, again, of the bursts of virulent intolerance that stained American history, the harsh antagonism between different traditions, the narrowness of view, the chauvinism born of ignorance and fear. When German customs and traditions were threatened in Wisconsin, citizens of German descent felt the need to join an alliance whose principal purpose was to preserve Teutonic civilization. In a speech given in 1915, the national president of the alliance told its Milwaukee members that they must keep their culture distinct or else "be prepared to descend to the level of an inferior culture."

Not too long ago, words like superior and inferior were used without apology. Difference, in those days, had strong moral and value connotations: to see another group as different, whether in matters of diet and dress or of religion, was to see it as bizarre and inferior. This bias was widespread and by no means restricted to the numerically dominant German-Americans. Of course, cultural and ethnic chauvinism still exists today, but in a weaker form than in the past. Together with the disappearance of blind loyalty to one's own culture is the decline of attachment to place. The two passions are inextricably bound. While we are glad to see the waning of bigotry, the loss of local customs and of places with unique character saddens us. The old unself-conscious rootedness is gone, probably forever. A sense of place can, however, be artfully introduced. It can be introduced by encouraging, for instance, ethnic dances and festivals. Nevertheless, these events, no matter how carefully designed to replicate the past, will be conducted in a radically new spirit, for they will occur playfully. Wisconsinites who remove their T-shirts and jeans—the uniform of workaday America everywhere—put on a peasant dress, eat lutefisk or sarsa will do all these things from choice: a certain self-consciousness—an ironic distance—is unavoidable.

A consequence of sophistication is the loss of tenacious beliefs and the taken-for-granted nature of one's world. Another consequence is a gain in tolerance. The bitter ethnic and religious divisions of an earlier period no longer haunt us. With the passions gone—the passions that in the past made these divisions seem permanent and the differences irreconcilable—we can now at last celebrate diversity. Wisconsin was once an unplanned, living ethnological museum. In its place, we now have a museum called Old World Wisconsin, established with much forethought in Waukesha County in 1976 as part of the nation's celebration of its bicentenary. This transformation from culture as a skin we cannot remove to culture as fancy dress, this shift from being rooted in place to having a sense of place, is—in my view—liberation and progress.

Nature, Time, and Place

What makes us a little uneasy about this progress is that we cannot quite give up the ideal of timelessness. That arrow of historic time, pointing toward the future, even if it is a cause for hope, can also be a source of strain. We do not always want to be on the move, even if the move is forward and upward. How can we stop time and catch our breath? The backward glance that I have just described is one possible method. However, because it is itself dependent on a sensitivity to time and its passage, it cannot restore to us a state of timeless innocence. What can? Routine is one answer, as I have discussed earlier. If only we can establish the daily round, submerge ourselves in rewarding repetition, we should be able to forget past and future. Another method is geographical. To escape temporality we can try to distance ourselves from all reminders of it. The city, Lewis Mumford says, is time made visible: almost everywhere we can see, in the juxtaposition of architectural styles of different ages, temporal succession. So we leave the city for the countryside, which offers at least an illusion of stability—of human lives ordered by the cycles of nature rather than bound to the forward thrust of time. But the countryside is still an arena of human intention and striving. Wherever one sees human beings one sees time, for we know that time is an inexpugnable burden of human consciousness.

So there remains unmodified nature. In its midst, we are at last free of all signs of human time. Our sense of
liberation when surrounded by forests and lakes is only partly the result of a change of scene; at least as much of the feeling derives from an altered sense of time. To the extent that nature consoles, it seems to do so for rather surprising and paradoxical reasons. On the one hand, nature offers assurance because it is real: it exists independently of human will and imagination. On the other hand, nature is out of time and nowhere—and in that sense unreal—delightfully so for the human visitor. A town or a city has to project a sense of particularity if it is to win our approval. Otherwise, we say that it has no identity, that its people lack a sense of self and of place, and that no one would want to make an effort to see it. But with nature, particularity does not matter if what one seeks is not novelty but consolation or bliss: in a rowing boat in the midst of a lake, as we look up at the sky and feel the sun on our skin, we can be almost anywhere in the world. For certain kinds of profound place experience, the geographical location of the place is of little import. Unless a person is a diehard naturalist, what makes him or her feel happy and free in a forest is the primal experience of being surrounded by trees of a certain general character; the precise botanical composition of the forest, which distinguishes it from other forests, is of less importance.

Time—human time—is forgotten in the midst of nature. The watch is left behind at home. We live by the sun. Historical time also loses significance. In the wilderness, one can pretend to be in any time period one likes; whatever period is chosen will not be contradicted by the evidence of the senses. A French fur trader of the seventeenth century, should he be able to visit us, would be astonished by what he sees in modern Madison or Milwaukee. We in turn would look upon him as a visitor from another world and feel ill at ease in his presence. But should we meet in the white pine forest, by the shore of a lake, the gap of time would seem erased and we could forget the accretions of culture and relate to each other as contemporaries. If to have a sense of place we need to be aware of culture and of a distinctive past, the feeling of ease in a place—the kind of ease that we imagine animals to possess—calls for blessed forgetfulness.

Construction of Place

Places are human constructions, but they are also human constructs—that is, mental-emotional edifices. At the most basic level, people create place by making clearings in the forest and raising towns and cities in the clearings. In contemporary society, however, few of us are builders—makers of tangible environments out of raw materials. Almost all of us are consumers. We buy things; and as the geographer Robert Sack has pointed out, we create places—havens of nurture and of prestige—out of the goods we purchase, guided in our endeavor by the models offered in ubiquitous advertising.³

Human beings require not only food but meaning to live. Whatever it is we do—whatever we make or buy—must carry human sentiment and value. Art is a great begetter of value and meaning. The sense of place is dependent on the power of art to focus, delineate, and enliven human experience. Without art—that is, without words, pictures, and music—experience is private and transitory; even when it is intense and lasting it remains locked in an individual’s emotional life where it can fester for lack of air and some form of public acknowledgement.

Art does not have to be great to have effect. A simple tune or a postcard can be evocative of place; it can briefly call a neighborhood or street corner into existence. We know how a few words said at a critical time can establish or destroy a person’s reputation; likewise they can affect the reputation and hence the visibility of a restaurant or a shopping plaza—a place. Pictures and words have this power even when directed at very large places. Consider that geographical and political entity known to us as Wisconsin. How much does its presence depend on the myriad images of the state found in school atlases and road maps, on T-shirts and beer mugs? Literature, we know, has the power to create, but so, for good or ill, does propaganda. And so do individual words—especially names. Naming is a creative act. Can our state be the same without the word Wisconsin? Would we really live in the same state if it were called—as it might have been—Meskousing? What is in a name? I myself do not think that Wisconsin would smell as sweet if it were known
by some other name. Words create places as powerfully as do physical manipulations. With both kinds of action, the formless are given form, the neutral are clothed in value, the invisible become visible.

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Notes
Place: A Condition of the Spirit

Gretchen Holstein Schoff

Imagine for a moment three people deep in conversation. One is a blue-eyed, slouch-hatted academic, a pipe-smoking professor with enough credentials to be on the lecture trail or working the halls of legislative bodies, when he is not teaching and guiding graduate students. The second is a graduate of an expensive women’s college. She is the child of a Pittsburgh family of considerable wealth. Her grandmother has a chauffeur, and the young woman remembers going to the library accompanied by the family’s live-in black maid. The third member of the group is a dirt farmer, lean, a worker, and owner of a small piece of land. His land can support his wife and children, but not much more.

An unlikely trio, but if they were able to meet across the barriers of death and space and time, they would probably have much to talk about. These three Americans, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, and Wendell Berry, are among the most trenchant of our observers of American landscape and their journeys into that landscape, like all great travel literature, are revelations both external and interior, a probing of the world of trees and stones, but also of the heart and mind.

Let us begin with the places they write of with such feeling. Aldo Leopold was born in Burlington, Iowa in 1897, and grew up in that small, but bustling river town in a household that valued quality, books, and the out-of-doors. He hunted birds and deer with his father and brothers, was adored by his mother, and was sent off to Yale in a time when such opportunities for mid-Western boys from small towns were unusual.
For many years, the long period of Leopold’s early life was known to his readers and colleagues mostly through the essays published in the edition of *A Sand County Almanac* that records his experiences with places in the Southwest, in Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Then in January 1988, for the Centenary of Leopold’s birth, his biography was finally published, and we now have a record not only of the early events of Leopold’s life but, because of his intimate connection with some of the most important conservation movements of his time, a record of the American conservation story as well.

Professionally, Leopold was a rigorous scientist, founder and first chairman of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin; he was not only mentor to a distinguished generation of graduate students who followed him but father to the only family in American history in which father and three children have been elected to the American Academy of Sciences.

But it is Sand County, a particular place he loved, for which Leopold is most famous and will probably continue to be remembered. In 1935, Aldo Leopold bought a piece of run-down, marginal land near Baraboo (his Sand County) and on that land an equally unpromising building, “The Shack”.

The Shack and its surrounding land became, for Leopold, his place of escape. Here he went on weekends and vacations to share the dawn with birds, to teach his children the importance of scientific observation and of hard physical work, to see how land could get along if you nudged it with tree planting, but mostly he let it be itself.

The “calendar” tradition of *A Sand County Almanac* is a time-honored one in letters. Leopold was certainly not the first to recognize that the seasons of the land are indeed like seasons of the soul, that we all have our moments of wintry feeling, spring-like spurts of pure joy. Those familiar with the literary tradition of the Western world recognize that when Leopold writes of October’s gold, there is in his lines an echo of Shakespeare’s

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruin’d choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Leopold’s use of the seasonal metaphors, or the calendar tradition, (the diary of a year, month-to-month) not only has a host of predecessors in poetic expression but also in natural history writing going back at least to Thoreau in American letters and to 18th Century Gilbert White and the Romantic poets in England. What happens when you come to know a place intimately and watch it year upon year? A transformation is wrought on the sensibility, these writers tell us, when we match our own moods and weathers to the roll of the seasons. Observing the cycle of nature, birth, death, rebirth, humbles and exalts the observer at one and the same time. How right Burns was about mice and men, our common destiny and our difference. We share with the mice the prospect that the plow may go through our nests, that our best laid plans “gang aft agley.” Into the bargain, we also possess powers of reflection that mice are spared. “Back and forth I cast my eye,” Burns wrote. And there’s the rub. Unlike the mouse, “the wee, cowering timorous beastie,” we have sentence enough to be able to attempt reconstructions of our past and guesses at our futures—the awesome power at least to contemplate where we fit into this place. Knowing our powers of reflection and speculation, we are at the same time humbled by how little we are able to learn in a lifetime. Nature is so intricate, has such a no-nonsense, irrevocable kind of order. And nature, as meteorologist Reid Bryson is fond of saying, “always votes last.”

It is this indifference to the human presence that Leopold invites us to think about—and accept. We are not masters, but only citizens of that larger order. The rules of nature will apply even though we may not like them. It is nature’s matter-of-factness and our acceptance of the rules that Emily Dickinson, mistress of the vast statement in little space, remarks upon:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play
With accidental power.

What distinguishes Leopold from his many pale imitators is that his prose, so often allusive and richly wrought as
poetry, rides on the back of solid science. He can be read, superficially, as an advocate of getting away from it all to a place in the country, but underneath the smooth surface of his endlessly polished one-liners are the solid sciences of ecology—a lifetime of fieldwork with species inventories, tables, charts, histories of plants and animals. If you want to have a sense of place, Leopold insists, then you must become its natural historian. How many of us could do what he asks? Could we list the first blooming flowers of our woods, know what animals lived in our backyards 100 years ago, or what Indian fished our lake before we did and what he caught?

Leopold demands a sense for the historical; but he asks more. Late in his career, and after endless revisions to the text, he took on the most daunting of questions: What constitutes ethical behavior toward the land? “The Land Ethic” essay is more often cited than any in conservation literature, and in it he laid down the question: How do we accommodate the aesthetic and the beautiful and the apparently useless when the world seems to live by the GNP? No easy question! Philosophers, ecologists, and economists return to the dilemma every day, with no end in sight. Every day answers become more tortuous, more difficult as our human numbers sweep past the five billion mark, and as this place we share becomes more battered, abused, and polluted.

The second of our trio of writers is Annie Dillard, born in Pennsylvania in 1945. The book which catapulted Dillard to national attention, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, was first published 14 years ago, in 1974. It won a Pulitzer Prize that year, and it was an astonishing book, full of unusual, sometimes bizarre observations of insects, small animals, birds. What attracted national attention was, in part, its natural history; Dillard’s gift for making you actually see a frog deflate is probably unmatched in observational power. Edward Abbey has remarked that of all nature writers now working, only Dillard approaches Thoreau’s power. Dillard, says Abbey, is “entitled to wear the master’s pants.” Besides the natural history, what attracted readers equally was a deep exploration of a particular place, Tinker Creek in Virginia, and the effect of that place on a young woman’s mind. Dillard quickly became deeply absorbed in asking the Big Questions of life. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard’s first prose publication, was written when she was in her twenties and readers and editors alike took notice. Where did this voice come from? What accounts for this breathless, purple, nervous style, this irreverent and nose-thumbing anxiousness? How can she know so much and be so young?

Many of the answers are in the text itself. Dillard tells us that she decided to “hole up” at Tinker Creek, to spend time alone, to watch the place and see what it had to teach her. It was not long before the place began to work on her and speak to her. She begins to have the experiences and visions that so often appear in the writings of solitaries, religious mystics, and monastics. She turns off the voices of the break-neck, technology-mad world, tunes out the thousands of visual messages on television and movies, and chooses instead to listen to crickets and starlings, to look at puddles and muskrats’ eyes, the things which have been there all along, waiting for someone to notice.

Dillard’s description of her mystical exploration uses the modern idiom. While Wordsworth, for example, favors the high road of language (“Nature haunted me like a passion”), Dillard indulges in wild swings of level and tone, sometimes arcane and sometimes plain-spoken. Quite often her most effective images are the simplest. (Nature is like one of those live drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children; can you find hidden in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra, a book?) But the experience itself places her in the long tradition of those who, like William Blake, are able to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour. When she sees an ordinary tree transformed into a tree with lights in it, she writes,

> It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.

Dillard, in her hiking boots and blue jeans, belongs with the mystics at times like this—a slightly hippie Teresa of Avila standing in the convent kitchen, kettle suspended in air, mouth open at the vision she sees.

The effect of the place called Tinker Creek—its mountains, muskrat, and lacewings—on Dillard is fundamentally
metaphysical. She calls her book “a meteorological journal of the mind,” and once she finds the mental space and the right place, she is forced to shed easy presuppositions and to forego most of the snappy answers that outworn doctrines and popular theology seem all too willing to supply. The questions Tinker Creek poses to her are the blockbusters. What kind of intelligence/mind devised the created order we call Nature? Why does it work the way it does? Is it headed anywhere?

She asks these questions in a particularly impertinent way in her essay on “Fecundity.” Watching an insect spew eggs, she begins to wonder: Why does nature make so many million of sperm, salmon, pine cones, only to kill most of them off? Dillard casts her theological puzzlement in the form of a parable— an admonitory tale. She asks you to pretend that you are the manager of the Southern Railroad, trying to move three engines along a stretch between Danville and Lynchburg. You go to great expense and effort to get things built just right, and you make 9,000 engines. Then you send all 9,000 out on the run, with engineers at the throttles, and no one manning the switches. The inevitable happens. The engines collide, jump track, crash, burn up, and “at the end of the massacre” you have three engines left, which is what the run could support in the first place. Then you go to your board of directors to make your report.

The playing out of the tale is quintessential Dillard. She begins with the obvious and very concrete conclusion to her little story.

And what are they going to say? You know what they’re going to say. . . . It’s a hell of a way to run a railroad.

From here, Dillard leads you straight into a Cloud of Un-knowing.

It’s a hell of a way to run a railroad. Is it a better way to run a universe? Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don’t believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I when we’re both so lovable?

Since the publication of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard has gradually been answering some of her readers’ questions about details of her life and the influences upon her.

Last year an autobiography of the first fifteen years of her life, An American Childhood, appeared. In May 1982, in the New York Times, she provided a recollection of the seminal books that had fired her imagination and shaped her early life. Among these was a most unlikely book, found in the darkness of a Pittsburgh library on a bottom shelf, a book printed on fine paper like the Book of Common Prayer. The title of this wondrous book was The Field Book of Pond and Streams and Chapter Three described how to make plankton nets, glass bottom buckets and killing jars. One was to go into the field carrying test tubes, a white enamel tray, cheesecloth nets. As a ten year old city girl, Dillard was bemused; in fact, she contemplated writing the author a letter, but was afraid of seeming ignorant. But she knew what she would ask him. “What, for example, was cheesecloth and where do scientists get it? What, when you really got down to it, was enamel? Where might a sixth grade student at the Ellis School on Fifth Avenue obtain such a legendary item as a bucket?”

Dillard uses the history of her reading habits as a vehicle for explaining her early esthetic and intellectual development. She tells us that by the time she was a teenager her reading had become subversive. Through books, she had seen Jews gassed at Auschwitz, battled Germans in the North Atlantic, manned mine sweepers. Just out of high school, learning to smoke cigarettes, learning Latin, French, and German, reading Rupert Brooke and Emerson, she was on her way out of Pittsburgh and toward Hollins College. She writes, “I was gaining momentum; I was approaching escape velocity.” Within a few scant years, she would settle down to think about things at a place called Tinker Creek.

The third of our trio, Wendell Berry, could probably be found at this very moment driving a team or harvesting his garden on his ancestral farm in Kentucky. Born in 1934, he spent his early professional life as a writer and teacher in New York and California. Then, while still in his 30s, he went home to 75 acres of Kentucky land and has been there ever since.

For Berry, the sense of place is so inseparable from the sense of life’s meaning that they cannot be extricated from one another. Every essay and book and poem he writes
is a statement of his belief in the connection between one human being, Wendell Berry, and his place. In reality, his place has several aspects—one geographic and literal; one social, economic, and civic; and one emotional, spiritual, and esthetic. Geographically, Berry's place is a particular plot of land in Kentucky. It can be located on a map, its boundaries defined, its fence rows and fields paced off. Through long years of association, Berry knows the contours of his land, which grass grows best, how the place looks in a snow storm or in a dying sun. One has the feeling, after reading Berry, that if he were presented with a map of the United States, his finger would settle immediately and unerringly on a spot in Kentucky and he would say, "Right here is my place."

But Berry's place is more than a quadrant of land on a map. It is a place defined as a social, civic, and economic entity. On the other side of his property line is his neighbor's place. With his neighbor, he shares rainfalls, and sunsets, and in tobacco harvest time, machinery and hard work, meals and conversation. Berry and his neighbors are citizens of a county, a state, a nation, a world, and as citizens, they have responsibilities. They traffic with these other places—vote, pay taxes, worry about nuclear arms and violence. They buy seed and plows, sell pigs and chickens, visit the public library, travel on roads that everyone uses and everyone pays for. Righly conceived, Berry's place is both private and public, as self-sufficient as possible, but undeniably situated within a network of other places, dependent upon them, responsible to them.

Most significantly, Berry's place is the wellspring of his emotional, esthetic, and spiritual life. In an era when the national polls tell us that the household with two parents and their children is becoming the exceptional household, when toddlers and the elderly are being warehoused and families are moving as often as every 18 months, Wendell Berry pleads for a sense of place that is ancestral, multigenerational, and steady. I know of no contemporary writer more convinced that the long-term health of a nation depends upon keeping alive a sense of place within the family, and on the land.

He describes, in a wonderful poem, how his father had carried him, holding him like a hooded bird on his arm, and how, many years later, he experienced the self-same moment, as a father, holding his own son like a small hooded bird on his arm—preparing him for the moment of flight and maturity.

At my age my father
held me on his arm
like a hooded bird,
and his father held him so.
Now I grow into brotherhood
with my father as he
with his has grown,
time teaching me
his thoughts in my own.

Since the ability of a place to renew and reproduce itself, to flourish, is fundamental to its health, it comes as no surprise that sexuality and the erotic are potent elements in Berry's work. His love poem to his wife, "Country of Marriage" (note the metaphor of the title), is a subtle reading of the relationship of married love which he likens to an intricate country of shades and lights, birth and death. Marriage is a place to be lived in, travelled, gardened, if you will, by a man and woman.

Sometimes our life reminds me
of a forest in which there is a graceful clearing
and in that opening a house,
an orchard and garden,
comfortable shades, and flowers
red and yellow in the sun, a pattern
made in the light for the light to return to.
The forest is mostly dark, its ways
to be made anew day after day, the dark
richer than the light and more blessed
provided we stay brave
eough to keep on going in.

In brief, for Berry the sense of place is holistic—total, and thus ultimately religious. He envisions living in a place in which the Kingdom of God is truly within you, where the dividing line between the sacred and the profane has washed away. The birth of a calf in his barn is a minor Bethlehem—"life on its legs again." A sweaty day at the plow is a Benedictine exercise, Laborare est orare—to work is to pray.

If you read the complete canon of Berry's work, you also come to realize the breadth and sophistication of his
learning. His literary criticism has a different ring. It is difficult, deeply reasoned, authentic, probably because he shakes the dust of academe off the pages and even tries to live by the wisdom others have set down with such care and pain. Berry is a rarity, a subsistence farmer who knows Shakespeare like the back of his hand, who lives on easy terms with John Milton. Berry is a formidable husbandman who takes the ideas of civic order and original sin seriously and uses Areopagitica and Paradise Lost as Milton probably hoped they might be used.

The opening suggestion that Leopold, Dillard, and Berry would find much to talk about may now, I hope, seem less improbable. Two men and a woman, the professor, the young mystic, and the farmer—each found a place, loved it, read it closely, and was changed by it.

Ronald Blythe, English writer and author of Characters and Their Landscapes, once wrote that our sense of place is laid down very early in childhood, in that crucial period of intuition before tuition. He calls this a period of protosensibility—place experienced in the bones, waiting to be transformed by life’s educating process. As Blythe ponders his own sense of place, he tries to recapture what it was like when he was a child. “What particularly was I experiencing before I was educated in history, and ecology, and most potently, in literature?” We can only guess at the seeds that were sown when Leopold hunted deer with his father, or Dillard puzzled over a book of ponds and streams, or Berry sat like a hooded bird on his father’s arm. But seeds they were and they came to flower in a sand county, a Virginia valley, and a Kentucky homestead. As a student of landscape and its power, Ronald Blythe has come to be a believer in the wisdom of Henri-Frederic Amiel. Leopold and Dillard and Berry would probably agree. It was Amiel who wrote, “Any landscape is a condition of the spirit.”

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Works Cited

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