

ECOCRITICISM AND CULTURAL MEMORY: A CASE STUDY

In my paper I am going to approach the concept of place from the point of view of ecocriticism and cultural memory studies. The papers presented at this conference reflect the many facets of place: the way in which it celebrates a sense of belonging to the land and can lead to environmental awareness and conversation, but also the ways in which the concept has been abused. Challenges facing place have also been addressed, such as for instance the shift from the local to the global in an age of globalization advocated by critics such as Ursula Heise (Buell *Future*; Garrard; Heise). I want to focus on two challenges which I think place faces, namely the idealization of pre-industrial and indigenous societies and the challenge of mobility. Images of place often rely heavily on an idealized view of the lives lead by pre-industrial people who are believed to have closer to the land. On the other hand, the traditional stress on rootedness and staying put inherent to place clashes with the translocal and global forces which shape the lives of modern people. I will address these challenges by discussing John Burnside's 2001 novel *The Locust Room*. First, however, I briefly want to elaborate on my definition of place from the point of view of ecocriticism and cultural memory studies.

Lawrence Buell defines place as "a space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations and physiographic distinctiveness" (*Future* 145). I associate place, then, with a sense of belonging to and knowledge of a piece of land which is meaningful not only because of its physical characteristics but also because of the meanings which have been attributed to it – myths, personal memories and experiences. All these factors are in turn important to the identity of the person or group experiencing a sense of belonging. In other words, experiencing a sense of belonging to a certain bit of land influences who someone is.

I want to add another dimension to this definition by approaching the concept of place from the perspective of cultural memory studies. In defining place, I stressed the meanings which places acquire through stories and the fact that individuals or groups derive their identities from these same places. This double focus inherent to place recurs in cultural memory studies. Cultural memory can

be defined as a stock of images which have been acquired throughout the centuries and which are vital to the identity of a group of people. One of the leading figures of cultural memory studies, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, uses examples from Jewish history to illustrate his theory of cultural memory. The Exodus, for instance, is a defining event in the history of the Jewish people which is commemorated each year at Pesach and has shaped Jewish identity. In other words, the Exodus has become part of the cultural memory of the Jewish people. Assmann – and much of cultural memory studies in general – is concerned with the social rather than natural images that make up cultural memory. Yet paradise, for instance, which is frequently used to represent nature, is part of our cultural memory as well: it has its roots in creation myths, it has shaped how people think about their relation with nature and themselves and it persists. As such, it has become what Assmann terms a figure of memory: an image which has become part of our cultural memory. Given its importance in culture throughout history I will read place as a figure of memory as well.

Figures of memory are always derived from a certain root event or image: the figure of memory Exodus, then, originated in the flight of the Jewish people from Egypt, whereas the image of paradise derives from myths relating the beginnings of the world. The way in which the concept of place is frequently employed suggests that it has been most heavily influenced by an idealization of pre-industrial or indigenous societies in an industrialized age. As a result, place is often used in contexts in which a sense of belonging to the land is lost and lamented, or in which attempts are made to return to something we have lost. Examining the roots of place, however, suggests another element that has shaped it: Virgil's poem *Georgics* and the georgic mode that developed out of it.

Virgil's *Georgics* (36-29 BC) were written at the end of a period of political unrest. In this work Virgil uses farming to celebrate the Roman Empire as well as to promote Roman values. Unlike pastoral, georgic is not meant as an idealization of country life. Whereas the pastoral is set in the Golden Age, the *Georgics* is set in the Iron Age in which mankind has to work the land in order to sustain himself. Georgic, then, acknowledges the hardship of living with the land while celebrating the sense of belonging achieved by this. Hereby, the mode seems particularly apt in redefining place

in an age in which the difficulties of the human relationship with the nonhuman become ever more present.

Burnside is a Scottish poet and novelist whose work demonstrates an increasing concern with ecology and environmental themes. *The Locust Room*, set in 1975, tells the story of a student in Cambridge, Paul, who during the spring and summer works at a field station. This narrative is set against the background of the historical figure of the Cambridge rapist, who attacked women in their flats and bedsits in the mid-1970s. Paul is a solitary figure, an outsider at parties and at college, who prefers to take pictures of Cambridge at night. This sense of solitude is deepened by his work at the field station, where he spends days alone – feeding and watching the animals. Originally unaware of the function of the field station, Paul discovers that the animals bred there are used for animal testing when he stumbles on a shed full of rabbits. Towards the end of the summer Paul's father dies, and Paul spends some time in Scotland. He compares his father to other men in his life that he admires – his friend Richard and his supervisor at the field station, Tony – and comes to the conclusion that these men seem to live in the solitude that he craves. They are separate from the rest of the world; as Paul thinks, “they didn't need other people to be contended” (170). In this paper, I will focus solely on Paul's narrative and the ways in which the concept of place is used and adapted to contemporary circumstances.

In *The Locust Room*, the concept of place – a sense of belonging – is approached through the concept of homelessness, which is one of the major themes of the novel. As Paul's friend Richard says, “the principal philosophical discovery of the twentieth century [has] been that we are alone and homeless in the world” (269). Paul suggests that redemption comes from accepting homelessness. Redemption, however, is not to be found: “There's just this. Homelessness. Solitude. The sooner we get used to that, the better” (269-70). In most, if not all of the men in the novel Paul recognizes this sense of homelessness. He divides them into two groups: those that seek outlets for their homelessness, such as Paul's roommate Clive, an aggressive and macho rugby-player, and those that

deliberately seek solitude in order to confront their homelessness, such as his father, his friend Richard and his boss, Tony.

Paul's father is described as a man who, although he has been married for decades, appears to live in a world of his own. He takes long, solitary walks through the countryside and spends much time in his workshop. Before he dies, he has come to live a life in which – although he fulfilled his social obligations – only the land, the weather and the elements mattered. Paul eventually realizes that what characterizes men such as his father is a desire for solitude: “the only way to become themselves as they could be was to be alone” (274). The solitude his father chose was not a way to escape – as his mother thinks – but instead a form of dwelling, “a place of safe keeping for what Paul could only think of as the spirit” (211). Solitude, then, eventually results in a deep connection to the more-than-human and a sense of feeling at home in the world.

In a 2006 essay, titled “A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology”, Burnside writes that as an ecological poet, poetry is the way in which he reclaims membership of the more-than-human world (95), by distancing himself from the social world (104-5). This is echoed in *The Locust Room* in which those men that Paul admires retreat from the social world at frequent intervals: his father takes solitary walks, his friend Richard disappears completely from the Cambridge social scene at times and his boss Tony finds solitude through his job at the field station.

The novel traces Paul's development from first observing the sense of belonging his father and other experiences to feeling this sense himself. There are two key experiences to this development, the first being his work at the field station. Spending entire days alone, surrounded by insects and their silence, makes him retreat even further into himself and seek an even deeper sense of solitude. Slowly but certainly Paul gets so used to the silence and the life of the animals that he feels an alien in the human world (171). Eventually, he discovers that the solitude that he had begun to learn there is taking over his life.

Paul's work and experiences at the field station are framed in terms of the georgic: by working with nature, he starts to experience a deeper sense of belonging to the land. William Major

has argued that farming – a key aspect of traditional georgic – has been perceived by some environmentalists as a way of abusing the land. This is hardly surprising in an age of large-scale farming and genetic modification. Agrarianism, however, advocates ethical farming which acknowledges that we need crops to live, while keeping a sense of balance and harmony (55). Traditional georgic promotes a similar kind of agriculture, for instance, in stressing the need for crop rotation. On the other hand, as numerous critics have noted, it is defined by the struggle between mankind and nature and the subsequent domination of nature (Chalker 204). Both these elements recur in Paul's work at the field station. On the one hand, he displays a sense of stewardship in caring for the insects and plants. On the other hand, this is contrasted sharply by his discovery of a shed full of rabbits strapped to a board and his realization what the insects are actually for: "What function could they fulfil in a zoology department, other than the most obvious one?" (193-4). Without knowing it, he has contributed to the domination of nature. At no point does the novel legitimate animal testing – the sense of belonging which Paul had experienced at the field station is lost, he quits his job and Tony gets rid of the rabbits. Hereby *The Locust Room* presents a contemporary georgic which does not celebrate or advocate the domination of nature. Rather, it advocates a relation with the land which is respectful even, or especially, when the land is worked or used.

Despite the rather abrupt end to Paul's work at the field station, this experience is significant in developing his sense of place. For instance, he recalls the conversation he had earlier with Richard on homelessness and realizes that redemption, if there is such a thing, comes from accepting solitude. The final chapter of the novel, titled "Fox", does constitute a new beginning, and a new phase of Paul's life. On Christmas morning he takes a solitary walk in the countryside. It is perfectly quiet outside and Paul is surprised to suddenly see a fox on the path in front of him. In the moments before the animal walks away, Paul has an epiphany and realizes not only that his father sought solitude in order to be himself, but that he, Paul, now feels like he is no longer part of the social world either. In fact, "there was nothing to which he could truthfully say he belonged, other than this

world of silence and light, and this dangerous nostalgia for other animals. It was this nostalgia, this longing for the unnamed world of other creatures, that made him homeless in the world” (275).

At the end of the novel, then, Paul has achieved a deep sense of belonging to the land – a sense of place – which is not expressed in terms of idealization. In its depiction of place, the novel also moves away from traditional representations of the concept in terms of rootedness.

Traditionally, rootedness is perceived as being more ecologically sound than the opposite – what some environmentalists have called nomadism and vagabondage.¹ Nevertheless the spiritual connection which is often attributed to place-attachment is not a necessary result of staying in a particular place. This is reflected in Heise’s suggestion that instead of thinking of mobility in terms of nomadism or vagabondage – which have negative connotations – we turn to the more ecologically suitable concept of migration (*Sense of Place* 31). *The Locust Room* similarly suggests that truly experiencing a sense of place does not depend on a particular place – either Cambridge or Scotland in Paul’s case. Midwinter and Scotland – which Paul perceives as home – together with the fox-encounter enable Paul to truly grasp a sense of being at home in the world, a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, the novel suggests that this sense will stay with him even when he leaves Scotland. This is illustrated by his father who carefully balanced his social responsibilities with his solitary walks. Similarly, as Burnside said in a 2003 interview, he does not feel that he belongs to a nation or a particular region. Rather, in his work he reflects “a relationship with a piece of land and that could be anywhere” (“Poets” 17). The sense of place which Paul has discovered, then, is illustrative of a certain way of being in the world, of experiencing a relationship with the land, which can – in fact – be everywhere. Exile only exists in a world where he is not in touch with the more-than-human and is thus not a matter of being either in Cambridge or in Scotland. Likewise, when asked whether he felt an exile during the years he lived in England, Burnside replied that living in Scotland he feels as much an exile as before. He believes that he will feel this way as long as he does not live “in a world which respects all living things and their habitats” (“Poets” 10).

¹ For instance Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put* (1993); Wendell Berry, “Regional Motive”.

This paper serves as a case study which illustrates an ecocritical approach informed by cultural memory studies. One of the benefits of this approach is that enables a new look at the images we use to represent nature. Reading them as figures of memory stresses the importance of these images for our identity, their roots as well as their historical development. In turn, this leads to a revaluation of the ways in which images such as place as employed in contemporary culture. *The Locust Room*, then, suggests ways of employing place in which a sense of belonging can be indeed combined with a relation of mutual dependency, with working the land and even that mobility does not prevent place-attachment. It creates a new challenge too, however. At the end of *The Locust Room* Paul has come to experience a sense of place, a sense of belonging which is very much a sense of belonging to the non-human world. He realizes that he is essentially making a choice in distancing himself from the social world and other people: "it was simply a necessary choice between estrangements" (276). Hereby the novel suggests that we cannot have it both ways: either we feel a sense of belonging to the non-human world, or we feel alienated from it while living social lives. This brings us back to the issue which I started my paper with: despite the fact that my reading of the novel suggests that a sense of place is possible in the twenty-first century, the question remains whether this type of place is feasible at all.

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