

FROM THE EDITORS

THE MAGIC OF PLACE

Immanuel Kant, who is said to have only reluctantly traveled outside Königsberg,¹ held that space does not actually exist, not even as a concept. Instead, he believed that space is a form of outer intuition which enables the mind to form the representations of objects. Thus he wrote: “Space is a necessary representation, *a priori*, which is the ground of all outer intuitions. One can never represent that there is no space, although one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it. It is therefore to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances, not as a determination dependent on them, and is an *a priori* representation that necessarily grounds outer appearances.”² Isaac Newton, who—unlike Kant—did not confine himself to one place throughout his life, held a contrary view and claimed that space does actually exist and has an absolute nature. As such, it can be conceived as a ‘container’ in which material bodies are located: the existence of this ‘container’ is in no way related to that of the objects in it.³

Regardless of whether it is the Kantian insight that we regard as epistemologically cogent or it is rather a metaphysics built within the framework proposed by Newton (or, for that matter, the concept of spacetime⁴ used in modern physics) that appeals to us, the modern philosophy of the subject tends to conceive of space in terms of the territory given to human beings in the

¹ See Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, trans. Marshall Farrier (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 8, 10.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 24, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 158.

³ See Gideon Freudenthal, *Atom and Individual in the Age of Newton: On the Genesis of the Mechanistic World View* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster and Tokyo: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986), 13. See also I. Bernard Cohen, “A Guide to Newton’s *Principia*,” in Isaac Newton, *The Principia*, trans. I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), 106–8.

⁴ Edward S. Casey holds that, together with the ascent of the concept of spacetime, philosophical insight into the meaning of place was unnecessarily abandoned. See Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiv.

world.⁵ In this sense place is conceived as space which transcends all physicality and—due to the presence of human beings—becomes a moral realm, marked by a particular understanding of concepts such as the good, value, responsibility, and dialogue. On the grounds of this conception, place is also a space of shared emotions and experiences, in particular the liminal ones, such as anguish or suffering, and, additionally, one of a shared language. It is precisely owing to such a phenomenon of place that the history of culture embraces notions of ‘rootedness’ and ‘homeland,’ which serve the purpose of naming the special bond that signifies a shared lot. It is also for this reason that the topography of the world is simultaneously one of cultures and the languages attached to them.⁶ This topography reveals the fact that space conceived as place is both a specific catalyst of human efficacy, and thus of subjectivity, and a raw material in which human beings put their stamp.⁷

A deep, substantial relation between places and the ideas they either triggered or continually inspired, is reflected in names such as the “Ionian School,” the “British Empiricism,” the “Vienna Circle,” the “Frankfurt School” or the “Lublin School of Philosophy,” which are used in all languages—indeed, we have become so accustomed to such names that we use them automatically. And yet one might venture to ask why cosmology originally appeared in ancient Ionia rather than in the territories that are India and China today, why it was in the British Isles rather than on the European continent that empiricism originated and was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, or why the philosophers who made up the Vienna Circle, the Frankfurt School or the Lublin School of Philosophy were driven to those particular intellectual centers. The issues in

⁵ On the various meanings of the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ and on their ambiguity, which comes to light in philosophical and anthropological scrutiny, see Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2018), 24–31. Malpas points out that the words used to render such concepts in various languages have different representations in different cultures and are thus, in fact, semantically distant. See *ibidem*.

⁶ An interesting “atlas of civilization” which renders a map of cultures conceived in terms of the humanity’s striving to grasp the meaning of the world was developed in the works of Zbigniew Herbert and inspired Seamus Heaney to reflect: “Herbert is as familiar as any twentieth-century writer with the hollow men and has seen more broken columns with his eyes than most literary people have seen in their imaginations, but this does not end up in a collapse of his trust in the humanist endeavour.” Seamus Heaney, “Atlas of Civilization,” in Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978–1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 58.

⁷ Even the non-places described by Marc Augé are not completely *non*-places: hotel rooms, railway stations, airports, waiting rooms or shopping malls never look the same, provided there are human beings in them. Human beings are unable to renounce their efficacy or become completely anonymous and they reveal their subjective uniqueness through various manifestations of their presence, which breaks the anonymity of non-space assumed by its designers. See Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

question undoubtedly deserve a detailed analysis, and yet mere common sense prompts that in each of the cases one could observe a unique interaction between human beings and the place in question—an interplay of diverse subjective and objective factors and conditions: the external ones, such as the level of economic and social development, the political situation, and even the climate, and the internal ones, among them those related to the individual human curiosity, mentality, and the need to construct the image of the world, the latter necessarily developed within the framework of the existing intellectual culture of the given place.

A much more convincing and undoubtedly further-reaching insight into the circumstances that together bring about the quality one might describe metaphorically as the magic of places can be found in literary works. Among those who have analyzed this astounding phenomenon was Seamus Heaney, who wrote: “I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension.”⁸

Indeed, such tensions frequently come to light in literary works in almost archetypal a way, as is the case in English Romantic poetry, which is frequently described as topographical.⁹ Place, conceived as the nexus of nature and culture (as, for instance, in William Wordsworth’s poem *Tintern Abbey*) overlaps with the subjectivity of the lyrical subject, and as a result of this fusion, a moral space comes into being: by transcending the worlds of nature and culture which cannot fulfill its desire, the mind experiences the sublime. “Revealed in the moment of the sublime is that the mind is not wholly of the world, but this revelation may be triggered by a particular setting in the world”¹⁰—and a result of this experience is the ethics of love for the world.

⁸ Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place,” in Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (n.p.: Faber and Faber, 1980), EPUB.

The motif of the “magic of place” and its manifestations in poetry, as well as that of its impact on poetry, frequently recur in the works of Heaney as the object of analysis. See, e.g., Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989; Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Grasmere: Dove Cottage, 1984); Seamus Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” in Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978–1987*, 3–14; Seamus Heaney, “Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain,” in Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 396–415.

⁹ See Adam Potkay, “Słowo i więź: O etycznym wymiarze poezji topograficznej na podstawie utworów Jamesa Thomsona i Williama Wordswortha,” trans. D. Chabrajka, *Ethos* 25, nos. 1–2 (97–98) (2012): 193–215.

¹⁰ Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 121; see also *ibidem*, 121–47 (chapter 7, “The Moral Sublime”).

Heaney's insight concerning a deeply internalized experience of place is not unique for the literary tradition of the Western culture and it can be found for instance in the Japanese haiku poems. "Each haiku is an image, a sketch rendering the present state of a place in the world in possibly fullest a way, since it displays its hue, its music, even its scent, as well as its entire ambiance, which affects the emotions of both the poet and the reader"¹¹—writes Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda. Indeed, Matsuo Bashō usually describes the experience of places he has visited in no more than three short verses, as for instance, when he confesses, "Loneliness—/ among the blossoms / a false cypress."¹²

While he does so much more extensively, twentieth century writer Lawrence Durrell constructs an image of loneliness on a principle similar to Bashō's, by pointing to the tensions between the conscious and the unconscious experience of place. The main protagonist of his tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet* is by no means any of the tragically entangled persons whose story is told in the novels, but the city itself, the place and the scenery of the plot. In retrospect, the narrator explains: "I return link by link along the iron chains of memory to the city which we inhabited so briefly together: the city which used us as its flora—precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own: beloved Alexandria! I have had to come so far away from it in order to understand it all! Living on this bare promontory, snatched every night from darkness by Arcturus, far from the lime-laden dust of those summer afternoons, I see at last that none of us is properly to be judged for what happened in the past. It is the city which should be judged though we, its children, must pay the price. Capitially, what is this city of ours? What is resumed in the word Alexandria? In a flash my mind's eye shows me a thousand dust-tormented streets. Flies and beggars own it today—and those who enjoy an intermediate existence between either. Five races, five languages, a dozen creeds: five fleets turning through their greasy reflections behind the harbour bar.... Notes for landscape tones.... Long sequences of tempera. Light filtered through the essence of lemons. An air full of brick dust—sweet smelling brick dust and the odour of hot pavements slaked with water. Light damp clouds, earth-bound yet seldom bringing rain. Upon this squirt dust-red, dust-green, chalk-mauve and watered crimson-lake. In summer the sea-damp lightly varnished the air. Everything lay under a coat of gum. And then in autumn the dry, palpitant air, harsh with static electricity, inflaming the body through its light clothing. The flesh

¹¹ Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda, "Od tłumacza," in *Haiku*, trans. Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1983), 5. Translation is my own.

¹² *Bashō's Haiku: Selected Poems of Matsuo Bashō*, trans. David Landis Barnhill (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 197.

coming alive, trying the bars of its prison.”¹³ The protagonists whose story Durrell tells in a way become victims of the city which provides the scenery for their story. Just as the lyrical subject of the Romantic poems, they experience moments of the sublime accompanied by an awareness of transcending their lot and the place they inhabit, and yet an experience of this kind only deepens their bond with the city, which they, unconsciously, as if against themselves, come to love more and more deeply.

The tension between ‘rootedness,’ or attachment to place conceived as space which releases human efficacy, and ‘uprootedness’ manifested in the realization that the mind “is not wholly of the world” and will never come close enough to it¹⁴ was acutely expressed by Albert Camus, in whose writings the concepts of exile and the kingdom function as archetypes. They are elements of the deep structure of these writings and reflect the ontological condition of the human being: human subjects inevitably find themselves ‘between’ these two spaces-places.¹⁵ The topography of Camus’s literary works, which plays a pivotal role in their structure, for instance, Oran in *The Plague*, the prison in *The Stranger*, the artist’s apartment and study in the short story *The Artist at Work*, and the sea in the *American Journals*, frequently points to the ‘territories’ of exile: they are, above all, spaces of the subject’s quest for the meaning of reality (or of the realization of the absurd, for that matter) and involve experiences such as isolation, separation, longing, alienation, and intense loneliness.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Camus frequently describes also the experience of the magic of the places he visits which, as if an isthmus, leads towards participation in the ‘kingdom.’ “Deep among wild scents and concerts of somnolent insects, I open my eyes and heart to the unbearable grandeur of this heat-soaked sky. It is not so easy to become what one is, to rediscover one’s deepest measure.... How can we forget the lesson of sight and seeing on this earth?... I love this life

¹³ Lawrence D u r r e l l, “Justine,” in Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 17–18.

¹⁴ See Albert C a m u s, “Nuptials at Tipasa,” in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 68.

¹⁵ See John W a l s h, “The Cooper and the Painter: The Topography of the ‘Atelier’ in *L’Exil et le Royaume*,” in: *A Writer’s Topography: Space and Place in the Life and Works of Albert Camus*, ed. Jason Herbeck and Vincent Grégoire (Leiden and Boston: Brill and Rodopi, 2015), 104.

¹⁶ References to physical places, recurring in Camus’s autobiographical prose, point to the fact that each of them—due to the presence of the human subject—inevitably overcomes its objective confines. Thus Camus says, for instance, “Though born poor in a working-class neighborhood, I never knew what real misfortune was until I saw our chilling suburbs. Even extreme Arab poverty cannot be compared to it, because of the difference in climate.” Albert C a m u s, “The Wrong Side and the Right Side (Preface, 1958),” in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 8. He also refers to his visits to particular cities and, as if a *flâneur*, confesses: “They are often secret, the love affairs we have with cities.” Albert C a m u s, “Summer in Algiers,” in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 80.

with abandon and wish to speak of it boldly: it makes me proud of my human condition. Yet people have often told me: there's nothing to be proud of. Yes, there is: this sun, this sea, my heart leaping with youth, the salt taste of my body and this vast landscape in which tenderness and glory merge in blue and yellow.... The happy weariness of a day of nuptials with the world."¹⁷ This positive experience, however, involves a difficult truth too: one that is true as if against the human mind and so turns the subject back to the territory of exile. Thus the isthmus leading to the 'kingdom' turns out too narrow: "There are places where the mind dies so that a truth which is its very denial may be born.... But men die in spite of themselves, in spite of their surroundings.... Djemila is telling the truth tonight, and with what sad, insistent beauty!... I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror.... And the melancholy song of the Djemila hills plunges this bitter lesson deeper in my soul."¹⁸ The 'kingdom,' which remains an eternal prospect, as if the Platonic reality momentarily grasped owing to its reflection in the reality of earthly places, appears a safe territory in which the human mind finds its destined harbor: "To feel one's ties to a land, one's love for certain men, to know there is always a place where the heart can find rest—these are already many certainties for one man's life.... What is strange about finding on earth the unity Plotinus longed for? Unity expresses itself here in terms of sea and sky.... To be pure means to rediscover that country of the soul where one's kinship with the world can be felt, where the throbbing of one's blood mingles with the violent pulsations of the afternoon sun."¹⁹ It is in his pursuit of such a homeland that Camus explores places he considers special to the human experience, such as the desert, the beach, the street, the monastery, the labyrinth, and the hotel room, but also others, which he perceives as if collectively: the ones from which "we have exiled beauty"²⁰ and those "without intelligence,"²¹ the Europe of the Second World War among them. He writes about the ontic meaninglessness of place deprived of the presence of human beings²² and observes that "there is no country for those who despair."²³

In the Western culture, however, the idea of the magic of place as the warrant of the continuity of the subject's existence has been expressed not only at the intersection of philosophical and literary insights. A noteworthy attempt to convey this concept was made by Lars von Trier in the ending scene of his

¹⁷ C a m u s, "Nuptials at Tipasa," 67–69.

¹⁸ Albert C a m u s, "The Wind in Djemila," in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 73–79.

¹⁹ C a m u s, "Summer in Algiers," 90.

²⁰ Albert C a m u s, "Helen's Exile," in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 148.

²¹ Albert C a m u s, "The Almond Trees," in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 134.

²² See Albert C a m u s, *The Desert*, in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 103.

²³ Albert C a m u s, "The Sea Close By: Logbook," in Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 173.

movie *Melancholia*,²⁴ in which, just before a rogue planet collides with the Earth (a disaster tantamount to the apocalypse), the protagonist, who wants to save her nephew and his mother from an overwhelming fear, uses some wood sticks to construct the “magic cave” about which she once told the child. And it is in that tepee that the three of them—one might say: trustingly—wait for the unavoidable to happen.

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²⁴ *Melancholia*, Denmark, Sweden, France and Germany, 2011, dir. Lars von Trier.