

Stories of Place

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The idea of place has always haunted language. At the most basic level, we might think of a word as a place built of sound where we store certain more or less complex impressions: hill, sweet, blue, desire, origin. Less speculatively, the idea of language as a set of places is a very old one. Aristotle used the idea of the *topos* to catalogue standard headings for strategies of argument or inquiry, such as genus and species, nature, authority, consequence, etc. *Topos* is simply Greek for “place”, and from it we derive our own sense of a “topic” for speech or writing. Later writers on rhetoric also spoke of the *topoi*, or “commonplaces”—a large fund of wisdom, lore, or argumentative strategy from which a practiced writer or speaker could produce new material at need, according to whether the topic was “duty” or “Death”, “virtue” or “the Golden Age”. Ancient and medieval practitioners of the art of memory also understood the importance of the idea of “place”, and recommended visualizing separate mental “places” for each section of a speech or complex argument. In an age of few books, a scholar could digest and master a large and complex work by disposing it into a series of local “places” in the mind, from which it could be recalled. The idea of the mind as itself a place of “places” was central in early accounts of our mental life.

Actual geographical places as a source or topic of writing were also known from antiquity, usually in the form of verse-geographies and accounts of voyages. Poems or other writings about specific places or landscapes were comparatively rare however, except perhaps in the ancient Hebrews’ recurrent image of their desert as a landscape of spiritual struggle. As with painting, it was only in the seventeenth century that geographical place itself became a regular topic for poetic and other creative writing—in English, first with the “country-house” poem of Jonson, Marvell and others, and then also with the so-called “topographical poem” of the wider landscape, which enjoyed especial vogue in the following century.

The sense of place and region with which our Symposium is concerned seems to me to belong to that tradition which Wordsworth’s poetry invented when it absorbed the topographic back into the philosophical by claiming landscape and region as among the wellsprings of mental life. The ancient notion of the intellectual *topos* and the existential experience of “this place” were thus assimilated, so that landscape—and especially rural landscape—became a source and repository of values philosophical, spiritual, and social. The rise of self-consciously regional writings and schools of writing—and hence of the idea of a Muse of place rather than its older counterparts, the *genius loci* and the various springs and mountains haunted by the Muses—can in some sort be traced to this Romantic and nineteenth-century development. What the place of place may be for us now, in a world where, for many of us, our experience of geography and local commitment have become increasingly tenuous and fluid, remains to be seen. By looking to the history of “place” as a source of writing in the Western Reserve, we may learn important lessons about how the idea of place itself has been experienced, employed, and adapted over the last two hundred years.