



RADICAL METAPHOR: or why Place, Nature and Narrative are each other but aren't themselves

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In this article, I am going to try to think through some big, fuzzy ideas schematically and with some precision. Specifically, I want to suggest that each in their own way, place, nature, and narrative are each constituted by metaphor, and integrally related by metaphor. So let's first consider those three domains, before turning to their interrelationships.¹

First, *place*. As usual, one of the best ways to understand a term is to contrast it with its opposite: what the term doesn't refer to, at least in the intention of the user. In this case, the opposite of *place* is *space*. A place is necessarily local and particular, and ultimately unique. (I say 'ultimately' because of course up to a point, its attributes may be shared with other places.) It is constituted by qualities – sensuous, no matter how subtle – which make it what it is and not some other place, or no place. By the same token, it must be limited, in the sense that its particularity rules it out from being any other place, let alone all places. In this sense, which is by no means a negligible one, it is perfectly fair to say that places have characters or personalities.

At the same time, a place is unlimited in the sense that there are no limits, except those of the inhabitant, on how deeply or completely it can be apprehended. And although each place is ultimately unique, there is not and cannot be only one place; *place* is necessarily plural. The reason lies in their particularity: what makes a place itself, and therefore a place at all, only exists, and is only perceptible, in contrast to other qualities, and thereby places, from which it differs.

Finally, on account of the character of place existing as sensuous qualities, a place only becomes real in lived experience by *being* experienced. You can only realise a place – that is, both understand it and make it real – by participating in it, affecting and being affected by it. Observing but not being observed, manipulating without being manipulated by it: these are not enough, because they are not relationships properly so-called; and only relationships can provide access

to those qualities. The price – or perhaps privilege – is being accessed in turn. And you can't 'make a place real' by an act of pure will; you can only cooperate with the place, and become real together.

Space, in contrast, is single and universal. (These are the same. As we know from monotheism, anything posited as universal, if it is to succeed, must also be singular; and vice versa. There isn't any room for incommensurable others or for exceptions.) Furthermore, as universal, space is necessarily abstract. It cannot be concretely particular because from that would flow limitation, which would render it less, or rather other, than universal. Space therefore supposedly has no qualities or character, and exists regardless of participation, whether you know it or not, and no matter what you do or don't do.

Another way to put this would be to say that space is equivalent to *logos*, the principle of reason itself. That, quite rightly, would cast place as *mythos*, and places as mythic.

I should add that this is how space has been presented to us in the dominant philosophical, quasi- or crypto-religious, and scientific discourses of the last 350 years or so: a process in which space has displaced the concept of place so completely that even the potential internal critique of quantum physics hasn't affected it much, while external resistance has been left to phenomenologists, pragmatists and a few others largely discredited or simply ignored by those discourses.² Myself, I think it's an elaborate con which has been remarkably successful for reasons that have nothing to do with 'reality' and everything to do with the dynamics of professionalisation, institutionalisation and power-knowledge.³ To put it another way, it is impossible to even imagine, let alone experience in any more 'direct' way, pure space as such; it is a concept that, in William James's blunt but useful expression, can never be cashed in. In practice, space cannot be utterly devoid of place, be it ever so aetiolated, thin and impoverished, and indeed inauthentic

from pretending otherwise.⁴

Alfred Korzybski influentially asserted, 'the map is not the territory'. That's an important thing to remember. However, to anticipate what I'm going to say a bit later, the territory is not the territory either, if by that is meant a place entirely itself, *simpliciter*, and already given. And a map is itself, however peculiar, a kind of place.

Let's turn to *nature*. This term is famous for being polymorphously perverse, so let me try to be clear. I am using it as a cognate of 'the wild': not wilderness, which is the wild at its wildest, but *wildness*: what simultaneously constitutes us, limits us, and enables us to do whatever we can do. And not only us, but all our fellow creatures; and not only creatures but other organic wholes such as ecosystems, bioregions and, indeed, places. Nature is thus more-than-human⁵ – it includes humans, but also vastly more – and wild, not under our control. (If it was, it would be only human.)

It follows that the wild nature is to be found anywhere that hasn't been wholly made over for solely human purposes, that hasn't been completely instrumentalised. What would be examples of nature that has?

Between a nuclear power station and an airport or a shopping mall, it would be hard to pick just one. But does that mean that such places are unnatural? Insofar as the wild has been effectively or tendentially extinguished there, yes. With such things, we have taken a significant step beyond the natural conditions (including our own) that made them possible. And a sign of that is their gross unsustainability, in any remotely plausible or robust understanding of 'sustainable', with respect to life on Earth.

Please note that power stations, airports and shopping malls are also about as close to *space* as possible: in effect, interchangeable places with minimal personality that are as close to non-places as it's possible to get. This is a sign too, by implication, of the elective affinity, the internal coherence or resonance, between places and nature.

By the same token, nature, like place, is mythic. Robert Bringhurst derives the etymology of *faërie* from the Greek *phēres*, meaning 'creatures of the wild', and related to the Latin *ferus*, which gives rise to feral, ferocious and fierce. In this perspective, *faërie* is 'not a playground filled with diminutive amusements for young minds but the mythworld itself, which is everything outside of our control. Faërie is an old name for the world of nonhumans that surrounds, feeds and (sometimes) tolerates us all.' And he adds that 'In North America, we call this world Nature or the Wild.'⁶

The contrast-class here is with Nature plc, an inert, nonsentient set of resources. 'Resources' is a sadodispassionate term that does a lot of dirty work and should set alarm bells ringing.⁷ It denotes whatever is apparently simply there to be used, without any ethical dimension, by humans for humans (in practice, of course, by some and for some humans). This version of nature is both anthropocentric – strictly human-

centred – and instrumentalist. It recognises no intrinsic value in nonhuman nature, and since it sees no one out there, there is no need for relationships; nor, therefore, are there any ethical considerations. Similarly, note that like space, Nature plc is abstract. Before wild nature can be used, all its particular sensuous qualities must first be converted into interchangeable, quantified units (trees into so much lumber, mountains into so much mineral, and now soil into so much oil).⁸ To put it another way, nature must first be *disenchanted*.

It seems to me that in parallel with place as against space, our primary and aboriginal apprehension of nature is as more-than-human wildness; that we must *learn* and are *trained* to regard it as a dead set of resources; and that we can only ever do so incompletely and inconsistently. (But all too successfully, collectively and over time, for all that.)

I should add that I am not setting up a fundamental contrast between nature and culture. Although for some practical purposes, including intellectual ones, it is valid to draw a contrast between them, it cannot be foundational.⁹ On the one hand, culture is part of humans' nature; it is natural to humans.¹⁰ On the other, nature has effective equivalents

to any defensible concept of culture; where do you draw an impregnable line between a culture and an ecosystem, say? And there are no human conceptions of nature into which our culture does not enter, so no 'purely' natural benchmark is possible in practice. Even theoretical or scientific practice.

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Now *narrative*. I understand narrative to mean discursive patterns, unfolding through time, which give rise to meaning. Such patterns share vital characteristics with both place and nature. They are *mythic*, in the sense that the most powerful stories are the most mythic, and in the additional sense that stories as such cannot be fully rationally grounded or exhausted. They are *wild* in the sense that their meanings cannot be finally controlled or, again, exhausted, even by those who write them or tell them. They are *particular* and *local*, in the sense that even the most putatively universal narratives must be particularised, localised and personalised in order to become meaningful. And they are *participatory* in the sense that that process cannot take place without the readers or listeners finding themselves, and allowing themselves to find themselves, in the story. (I say 'finding' rather than 'locating' because the latter is an act of will, and as such an insertion, even imposition; so 'discovering', which entails relationship and cooperation between story and participant, is more accurate.)

How does such participation take place, and what are its effects? In a nutshell, through the imaginative experience of self-and-other, in all its variants – self vs. other, self as other, other as self – as it develops through narrative time. I will take it as read (so to speak) that there is no self without an other or others, and that the same goes for them; so every time I say 'self', others are already implicated. On the one hand, the narrative realises (makes real) a self, one that was not fully

formed before its participation in the narrative. On the other hand, the self realises the narrative – its meaning(s), its truth, its reality – through participating in it. We might equally say that in this way, the narrative realises itself through the reader or listener, and the self realises itself through the narrative.

For narrative, the contrast lies on a spectrum with randomness and arbitrariness, amounting to meaninglessness, at the extreme other end, and mere information, paradigmatically digital, somewhere in the middle: impoverished story and, insofar as its handlers think it is something else altogether, deluded.

Now putting place, nature and narrative together, many other connections can be perceived/ made in addition to the common ground that I have already indicated. For example, one of the most powerful ways nature exists for us is as particular places. And places exist most powerfully for us as storied, ongoing narratives in which we may participate by (really) being there. Indeed, can we even help doing so? If I may put it personally, you can take the boy out of Winnipeg (or rather, he can take himself out of there) but you can't, I have learned, altogether take Winnipeg out of the man.

Stories too are emplaced, whether in and as 'literal' places (which are also imaginal) or as 'imaginary' places (which, upon pain of positivism, are also real). They are necessarily set somewhere, and that setting, it seems to me, necessarily informs the story itself.

Again, stories are how we exist as selves, as anyone in particular. We co-narrate ourselves and others into existence. In this connection, it is a pleasure to be able to quote a scientist, Antonio Damasio. (His work is a good instance of the truth that when a scientist is being creative, insightful and helpful it is just because he is engaged in the mode of the humanities, where truth is metaphoric and metaphor tells the truth.) Damasio writes:

The story contained in the images of core consciousness is not told by some clever homunculus. Nor is the story really told by you as a self, because the core you is only born as the story is told. You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told and only then: as long as primordial stories are being told, and only then. You are the music while the music lasts.¹¹

Finally, it is the wildness in places, nature, and stories, and in ourselves – the unbiddable actuality, and its potentiality – that allows anything to live, to grow, to change. That wildness is not 'ours'; we belong to it. And I would add that we don't 'project' stories or meanings onto nature or places; that is just one more piece of human vanity. They arise from the relationships between nature, places and ourselves, who are already a part of nature. Nor is it a case of first nature or places, then stories about them. The existence of all three as such – as anything in particular at all – arises and falls together.

Now at this point I want to take a further step and try to begin

to answer the question, what links these three domains and how does it work? In response, I am going to suggest that what constitutes each of them is also what connects them, namely *metaphor*.¹²

Let's call the approach I am taking 'radical metaphoricity'. Very briefly, here is how it works. Metaphor is paradigmatically not a thing; its essence is precisely not an essence but a relation, or perspective, connecting and affecting, even constituting, two or more entities. It is thus far from a mere literary device. Metaphor has an epistemic dimension, which is *seeing-as*, or *understanding-as*, and the corollary is that we only understand anything as and in terms of something else. But more radically still, metaphor is ontic: *being-as*. Here, the implication is that everything and anything only exists as something else, and nothing and no one exists purely or completely in or as itself. The idea of anything in itself, or self-sufficiently itself, is another philosophical cheque that cannot be cashed in. In certain select circles, it might be put this way: 'self-identity' – that is, persons or things being fully identical with themselves – 'is a constitutive impossibility'. (Here I'm tempted to insert a smiley face.)

By the same token, as Nietzsche pointed out, 'literal' is simply a metaphor whose metaphoricity we have, through force of habit and mutual convenience, forgotten. You can kick a stone as hard as you like but to maintain that it is 'only a stone' is already ridden with metaphor, both positively (all the metaphors of stoniness) and negatively (all the metaphors of everything with which it is being contrasted). In short – and it doesn't get any shorter than this formulation by Brook Ziporyn – 'Isness is asness is metaphoricity'.¹³

What does it mean to be 'something else'? It's peculiar, not to say highly irregular, in the grey light of Aristotelian logic, because it both is and is not whoever is at the other end of the relation. Let me use an old example: 'Achilles is a lion'. Now note that that isn't a simile, a kind of domesticated metaphor; it doesn't say 'Achilles is like a lion is certain specifiable respects'. It asserts that he is a lion, and precisely therein lies the power of metaphor to both create and discover. Yet at the same time, Achilles is plainly *not* a lion: plainly both because he is a man, not a lion, and because if he was a lion then the statement would be empty, telling us nothing. But it does tell us something new and important about Achilles: in short, a truth. The price (if it is one) is deep paradox, or what Ricoeur calls *tensive truth*: is *and* is not, simultaneously.¹⁴ To fasten on to just one end or the other exclusively (he is a lion or, he is not, full stop) is to lose that truth... To lose the human plot, really.

I suppose the ultimate test of radical metaphoricity would be when someone or something is most intensely himself, or herself, or itself: what Mahayana Buddhists call 'suchness'. But it passes this test easily, for when a flower (say) is being intensely itself, that only happens by virtue of a metaphorical connection between the contingent flower and the eternal flower. Let me add immediately that the latter is decidedly not a Platonic archetype which is more important than the

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contingent flower, which is therefore supposedly imperfect or inferior; that is not a relationship but a reduction of one to the other, even if it does reduce ‘up’ rather than ‘down’. Rather it is the idea of that flower inherent in it: what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called ‘an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth.’¹⁵ To put it vulgarly, one might say: that rose is *really* a rose – the rose – roseness. But that’s metaphor. If it was just an ordinary flower, I’m not sure it would even be noticeable. So paradoxically, only for someone is there an *in-itself*.

At this point it might be asked, this may be all very well but why should we assume it takes in place, nature and/or our narrative selves? The very short answer is this. Places, if you remember, only exist as such by virtue of their qualities, and unlike the uniform stuff of space (‘matter’ or ‘energy’), qualities cannot be singular and universal: a sensuous quality is what it is only in contrast to at least one other quality, so they are necessarily plural and relational. And where is the difference between one and another? Gregory Bateson used to ask his students this: where is the difference between any two objects: a glass and a book, say. It’s not in either one or the other, and it’s not in the space between them, so where is it? The answer, of course, is that difference, being a relation, is precisely no-where; it’s ‘in’ the in between, the gaps, that make metaphor possible. And that is what places depend on.

Turning to nature, I can be even briefer, because what is the natural world but the ongoing sum of its relationships, the study of which is called ecology? Not least the dance between living nature and the abiotic elements which they entirely depend.

Regarding ourselves, both individually and as a species we are, like every other life-form, distinct. On the other hand, like all other creatures we are also completely dependent upon the relationships that comprise our so-called environment, both ‘internal’ (genes, proteins, cells, organs and so on) and ‘external’ (sun, earth, rain, plants, other animals and other humans). More than that: those relationships actually comprise us; ultimately, we *are* them. So every being in the great republic of life both is and is not itself. We are, to borrow a term from the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeings; we exist as if we existed; we are and are not ourselves... Which is the essence of metaphor.

Now we can understand that place, at its richest, is constituted by a great number of *something else*s, of which nature offers the most, deepest and sharpest range. In contrast, space, approaching as it does nonparticularity and therefore nonbeing, entails metaphor on life-support. Nature, in turn, is metaphorically constituted by perhaps the widest range of others of all,¹⁶ where Nature *plc*, being tendentially abstract, has the same effect as space. Narrative is virtually the metaphorical practice of metaphor, all the more so as it is mythic, with information as its pale and undernourished sibling. Mutual metaphors powerfully link all three domains with each other, and, since our selves are constituted by narrative metaphor in particular, with us. We humans are natural, emplaced and storied beings, part of what Merleau-Ponty called ‘the Flesh of the world’.¹⁷ The final upshot, then (an interesting metaphor: it’s the final shot in archery, as well as the conclusion to an argument), is that we and all living beings are embodied and ecological metaphors. 🌿

REFERENCES

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was given in a seminar at the University of Strathclyde on 20 March 2013 at the invitation of Dr Rune Graulund. I am grateful to him, together with his colleagues and students, for the opportunity.
- ² See the work of Edward S. Casey, especially *The Fate of Place*, rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- ³ See the work of Paul Feyerabend and Michel Foucault.
- ⁴ For place as the wild parent of the emaciated child constructed by humans as indeterminate space, I refer the reader to *From Wonder into Wonder, Existence Opens*, forthcoming by Sean Kane, who elicits the theory of differential perception from indigenous American and European mythopoetics.
- ⁵ David Abram’s term in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1997).
- ⁶ Everywhere Being is Dancing. *Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2007): 248; ‘Introduction’, pp. 11-18 in Alice Kane, *The Dreamer Awakes*, ed. Sean Kane (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995): 15.
- ⁷ Teresa Brennan’s term in *Exhausting Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2000). On the secular religion of ‘resouricism’, see Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).
- ⁸ This process has been admirably analysed by James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
- ⁹ As Tim Ingold has shown in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), ‘Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment’: 40-60.
- ¹⁰ This is not an invitation to evolutionary psychology or neuroscience to take over, because I am not using ‘nature’ in the sense those discourses do: essentially, however subtly, nature as an object and specifically a machine.
- ¹¹ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (London: Vintage, 2000): 191. The final sentence is a quotation from T.S. Eliot. (With thanks to Hans Kortekaas.)
- ¹² Gregory Bateson saw this and discussed it. I have also learned much from the work of Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phillip Wheelwright, Owen Barfield and W.D. Winnicott.
- ¹³ Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism (*La Salle: Open Court*, 2004): 173. See also pp. 101-102, 171-73.
- ¹⁴ Metaphor generally: see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003). On paradox, see Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962) and various remarks by Neils Bohr.
- ¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968): 51. *Emphasis in original*.
- ¹⁶ Raymond Williams thought so, although he didn’t put it in my terms or meanings.
- ¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*. For an attempt to put intellectual flesh on the bones of the conclusion here, see my ‘Embodiment, Alterity and Agency: Negotiating Antinomies in Divination’, pp. 85-118 in Patrick Curry (ed.), *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

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