

Introduction

MH editors

The idea of place and particularity may be emphasised practically or addressed theoretically; in both cases, the importance of our own time, space, and experiences, and how these relate to what is different or other, is evident. Thinking the tension between the particular and the universal, or between the part and the whole, and of how one's own sense of things fits into or departs from historical heritage and cultural traditions, theorists and artists have sought to express how we inhabit, contribute to, and represent our understandings of presence and place. The importance of one's own place and particularity cannot be blindly affirmed, however, as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shown how arrogant self-assertion has forced many individuals, families, and even cultures to undergo exile, both voluntary and involuntary. Whether experienced as traumatic or freeing, individual and mass uprooting has brought about careful consideration of the fundamental relation of person and place, and of home both as nourishing ground and as confining familiarity.

The vantage point from which one sees the world arises from the place in which one is. This place structuring the contents of the world of one's experience can be a momentary place of rest (say, a park bench), a place more habitual (one's office), a place in which one moves around (the city in which one lives, filled with the customary routes one takes), a place to which one belongs even if one only physically inhabits a very small portion of the whole (a nation), or the global place made up of these varying levels of emplacement. The structuring role these places perform in relation to one's view of the world is, at one level, quite literal. The particular environment available to one's view from a park bench is filled by the trees, the expanse of grass, and people walking, and ends, perhaps, at a horizon of tall buildings in the surrounding distance. Such views making up one's daily life necessarily shape one's understanding of the world. While the sight from this park bench seems a mundane, over-literalized example of perspective's relationship to place, this example implies several things about the experience of the person living it. Such a view is available to one who lives in a city (and a part of that city that sets aside this non-productive, non-profiting expanse as community space), to one who feels safe to sit in this park, to one who has the time, freedom, and health to sit in a park. The views from other places—a hospital window, a curb in an urban centre, a tractor on a farm—present other scenes suggesting other experiences. In a time in which media allows many of us easily to see places not our own, it may not be immediately apparent that our daily surroundings, the places of our direct experiences, inform who we are, our interpretation of the nature of the world and our place in it. Our horizons of meaning arise from the places of our daily lives. That is, the concrete world acts as a counterbalance to more abstract understandings of experiences not our own.

As these places build into the layered framework of our emplaced existences (passing locations, habitual locations, city of inhabitation, nation of citizenship, world), the viewpoint shaped by place shifts from a literal sight to a figurative perspective. The nation to which one belongs shapes one's understanding of the world without presenting itself, in its entirety, literally before one's eyes; one belongs to a nation whether or not one ever leaves the circumscribed area of a single city. Nation shapes perspective not only as a grounding aspect of

one's identity—one's self perception—but also in the particular stories of that place—traditionally and in ongoing creation—that depict, organize, and interpret the world for individuals learning and growing into their own personal modes and capacities of thinking. These stories tell us about our place through the language in which they are told, their artistic traditions and conventions, modes of production and telling, their circulation, the kinds of stories privileged in the education system, the stories given social and cultural value, their ways of recounting, critiquing, and memorializing histories, their omissions, and the way they enact, build, or question national identity. These stories are also relational: national identities have meaning through their similarities and differences with identities of other places.

As is apparent in the invocation of national identity, to consider place—with its environmental, social, cultural, and historical shaping forces—as the ground of one's way of seeing the world is often necessarily to generalize. While the particularity of personal difference is lost in the understanding of a shared national identity, the construction of a collective identity deriving from a common place usefully introduces a tension between particularity and the accumulation and averaging of particularity to create the general. This tension between the daily personal vistas and the wider forces shaping the places that touch us is balancing—while the tension exists, the interpretation is strengthened through the shifting lens of example and rule.

However, assumptions and considerations arising from the general rules of an emplaced approach to meaning can become monolithic. There is value in recognizing the habits and biases in thought particular to, for example, the Western world. Yet, the deployment of the phrase “Western thought” appears to indicate that the speaker has thought carefully about his or her own worldview, taking into account potential habits and biases, when in fact the invocation, though taking on the form of thoughtful care, may be without its content. That is, what seems like awareness of one's potential ideological bias arising from one's place in the world, might in fact be the invocation of a cliché, a preformulated thought that does not require attention to one's particular personal perspective. As a phrase ready at hand, invoking “our Western privilege” is easily used as an apology that qualifies but does not alter an argument, an admission of guilt without further consideration.

A more nuanced use of the label “Western” could involve more actively the modes of thought and experience against which this perspective is defined. Awareness of one's own outlook involves awareness of alternative approaches. In order for one set of beliefs to serve as a check for another, the intersections between one framework of meaning-making and another require attention. It is not only our particular perspectives that shape our understanding, but also our interpretations of the relationships between various perspectives: any understanding is shaped not only by the place from which it arises, its own ground of meaning, but also by its relationships within networks of interpretation.

Such openness to other systems and instances of understanding is a kind of making space. This cognitive space-making is not limited to the incorporation into one's own approach of new ways of thinking; making space involves recognizing a wider landscape of meaning in which other interpretations can be seen in juxtaposition with one's own. This attention to divergent meaning requires the critical capacity to entertain inconsistency, paradox, and the active simultaneity of various interpretations, without reconciling all options to an integrated system of understanding.

This openness to the accumulation of viable perspectives is itself a particular perspective. As a worldview, it suggests the possibility that meaning exceeds the capacities of human thought for assimilation and understanding. The study of literatures is one mode of learning which promotes such deliberate confluence of perspective, perhaps most specifically in comparative literature or of art created in exile, but also in literature generally as a place for working out truths of human existence. We can think about literary works as places that can ground interpretations of the world. The place of the start of a story and the particulars through which it moves creates a new landscape of meaning, or creates a place to depict the investigation of meaning. How one understands literature's relationship to the world impacts the possible ways in which one might interpret literary meaning-making. Does art represent, depict, mimic? How does a truth developed within an artistic context function outside of art?

The relationship a work of art structures between itself and its audience in part determines the context of its truths. In the ironic mode of satire, or the polyphonic genre of the novel, or in a poem that directly addresses a reading "you," the reader is differently situated in relation to the work and its truths. To take genre as a place with loose rules structuring its ways of framing meaning, it is apparent that the reader's position is partly pre-formed, an aspect of response structured by the generic place of the work. Ideas of readerly relationships to certain genres can become hardened. Given the larger places of interpretation within which works fall, attention to the particulars, a work's specific arrangement of its elements, is essential for an awareness of the relationship the text structures between itself and its reader, itself and the world. Similarly, different temporal moments create news forms, or approach forms from new angles. A thought is not only shaped by the convention of the form in which it is communicated, but by the larger conventions and requirements of what counts as thinking in a time and place, the set of historical conditions structuring any particular thinking or artistic community.

In this issue, the thematic approach to place and particularity allows for the consideration of any time or place in relation to our own particular contexts of thought and being. In the papers to follow arise questions of presence and culture, modes of being, and moral codes. What are the ethics related to sharing a place with another and how does presence *in* a place relate to belonging *to* a place or the groups, communities and individuals that inhabit that place? What kinds of responsibilities come with belonging, and to whom or what is one responsible? How might we find the place – the mental habitat, the contextual understanding, and the appropriate relational environment – in which we have a just presence in our relationships and communities? How might we avoid hindering those with whom we share a place, whether our closeness is chosen or forced? What is the appropriate intimacy or distance with which to approach another?

The tension of distance and proximity, difference and sameness, intimacy and strangeness plays out in the situation of imagined presence. We can take, for example, the trope of a map: the map points to the relationships between places in order that its reader might position his or her body in one of those places. That is, a map is a point of connection between the physical body and the non-presence of a possible location that a body might occupy. Whether or not a map includes the marker "you are here," every depiction of place on the map is offered with the potential of becoming the location for your presence. How might we understand ourselves based on the possibilities for our placement, both literal and figurative?

The distance and potential for travel implied by the image of the map recurs in questions of nation and identity. The idea of national identity implies borders or boundaries, and the possibility of transgressing them. The limits traversed might be those of the place to which one belongs but can also suggest movement over from one place to another, over the distance that both separates places and puts them into relationship. Understanding limits with this flexibility, we might, in relation to identity, consider the places where belonging and otherness come into contact.