

Poetry and
place: some
personal
reflections



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Owen Sheers

I fell in love with landscape long before I fell in love with poetry. As a child and a teenager I felt different when I was outside, it was as simple as that. Running on the hills above Abergavenny, walking through a field in the rain, facing up to the breakers on the Pembrokeshire coast or looking at the view from the broken spine of the Skirrid, the hill I woke to, framed in my bedroom window, every morning (Figure 1). In all these situations the landscape affected me in ways I sensed but didn't know. It was only when I began reading poetry that I started to understand something about this 'sensed', yet undefined effect of place; not just in terms of how it worked upon me, but also why.

Many of the early poems I was drawn to as a teenager were rooted within specific rural landscapes, from the sparse yet visually electric poetry of R.S. Thomas to the peaty and lyrical early poems of Seamus Heaney. This was poetry that didn't so much write *about* landscape as from *within* it. The geography of these poems – the stark North Wales uplands and the damp Irish farmland – operated within the poems as both author and subject, often defining a poem's language, rhythm, voice and linguistic climate. In turn the poems excavated the layered associations of their environments, revealing these places to be not just a physical locale, but also, in Heaney's phrase, 'a country of the mind': geographical areas possessed of their own internal geographies of memory, history and language (Heaney, 1989). Sometimes this metaphoric



quality of landscape, its ability to represent its own cultural associations, was itself made physical within the poem, as is the case with Heaney's bog-preserved 'Grauballe Man' with his 'cured wound' that 'opens inwards to a dark elderberry place', or R.S. Thomas's drowned villages beneath the North Wales reservoirs. Both these examples are concrete images that represent how the land can simultaneously hold and embody the contemporary and historical signatures of a place. Such explicit images, however, also point towards a more subtle and enduring relationship between place and poetry; a relationship based not

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Figure 1: Skirrid Hill, the Black Mountains. Photo: Eleanor Rawling.

only upon what informs the place and the poem in terms of their linguistic or cultural context (often originally created by the geography of an area) but also upon *how* the place and the poem work upon *us* as their respective witnesses and readers.

One of the most significant shared qualities of a landscape and a poem that works (in both senses of the word) on us is their ability to 'situate' us by translating the abstract world of thought and feeling into a physical language. When I look out over the Black Mountains from the ridge of the Hatterall (Figure

2), what I see before me seems to embody and define a multitude of vaguer sensations and thoughts about the place: about the relationship between humans and nature in this half-farmed part of the world; about Wales's defensive history; about the sweep of geographical time in the glacier-carved valleys, and the shorter arc of historical time in the concentric rings of a hill-fort on the opposite ridge. It is the kind of view that not only makes you think and feel, but also, crucially, makes you think and feel *differently*, from a perspective at once more intimate and more objective. In a similar way a good poem will 'situate' its reader,

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Figure 2: View of the Black Mountains from Hatterall Hill. Photo: Eleanor Rawling.

pinning down the ‘sense’ of the thoughts and emotions we carry around every day but which we are usually only aware of in the corners of our eyes; those parts of us that we are unable to stand back from and look at clearly until the poem presents us with the words to do so.

In both landscape and poetry, therefore, a vast array of abstract associations are delivered in concrete form and presented as a coherent whole. To do this, however, both a poem and a place will draw upon multiple methods of influence. In the place, these might be the local and national history, the light, the weather, the engagement of humans with that place, personal experience and memory and even the smell and sound of it. On the page a poem employs rhythm, idiolect, metre, imagery and rhyme to bring the many layers of association (historical, linguistic, natural, sensory) into a complete whole. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and in a similar way a landscape can embody and communicate the ‘meaning’ of a place as effectively, if not more so, than any one thousand word essay. Think of a dividing wall in Belfast, or the scar of a torn-away steelworks on a valley floor in South Wales. The history and the contemporary situation is all there in that single image and its associations. I would argue, however, that that

image can be ‘translated’ or explored further and, most effectively, in a poem – a medium that acknowledges and is driven by the same metaphoric qualities we derive from the original landscape. That this process is often particularly rewarding in relation to place and landscape is, I think, not simply because of the dextrous nature of poetry but because landscape and poetry share the same grammar and semantics of association and suggestion, if not the same vocabulary and language.

As I mentioned earlier, the dialogue between poetry and place is just that, a dialogue in which places define poems which define places, and so on. So far I have only discussed rural environments but the same process is even more potent in urban ones, where history and lives and experience overlap with such concentration. I recently moved to New York, and for my first few months here, found myself using the poetry of the city as a map to both its today and its yesterday. In my reading, I’ve been particularly struck by how the city can influence the form of a poem itself, as if the text has to restructure itself to occupy and give voice to such a complex environment as Manhattan. Perhaps the most famous example of this was when Walt Whitman moved to New York and found his lines lengthening across the page, in response to

the city around him. That now well-known 'Whitmanesque' line was, in itself, a product of the subject it was trying to capture. In a similar way, when writing a commissioned poem about Manhattan, I found myself turning to a rhyme scheme of ABCBBA. This pattern of rhyme, was, like Whitman's long line, 'written' by my subject, in that I hoped the tight central couplet and the longer echo of the first and last lines would be able to represent the simultaneous sense of concentrated shared experience, so often a feature of the city, together with the historical 'ghosted' experience that also exists in such an environment of constant change, destruction and resurrection:

Extract from 'Manhattan – A Poem to be Filmed'

*Dusk and the city becomes all window,
a 2D punch-card skyline of light.
Marble-carved women hail taxis like Liberty
as their drivers cross seas to wish goodnight.
And everyone is both where they are and they might
be: in office and home, here and abroad, above and
below.*

('Manhattan' is a commissioned poem about Manhattan, produced for Wales Week, USA by Owen Sheers in collaboration with the film-maker Ben Thompson.)

This article is now a little over one thousand words and I'm not sure if it has even scratched the surface of what I think about place and poetry. Perhaps, therefore, I should follow my own advice and, in the absence of a camera, try to put all of the above into a poem instead, which will, I hope, 'illustrate, as the land here always did,/ what we'd but sensed within ourselves.' (Sheers, 2006)

References

- Heaney, S. (1989) *The Place of Writing*. Atlanta: GA: Scholars Press.
- Sheers, O. (2005) *Skirrid Hill*. Bridgend, Wales: Seren.
- Sheers, O. (2006) 'The Light Fell'. A poem about the Lake District written in memory of Dr Robert Woof, the Director of the Wordsworth Trust.

More poetry by Owen Sheers

Sheers, O. (2000) *The Blue Book*. Bridgend, Wales: Seren.

All poems in the text ('Manhattan', 'The Light Fell', 'History') are © Owen Sheers.

History

Lledr Valley, North Wales

Don't try to learn this place
in the pages of a history
but go, instead, up to the
disused quarry

where the water lies still
and black as oil
and the only chiselling
is that of the blackbird's song

drilling its notes
into the hillside's soil.

And there, beside the falls of moss,
pick yourself a blade of slate,
long as your arm, rusted,
metallic in sound.

Tap it with your heel,
then, with your fingertips
at its leaves, gently
prise it apart.

And see how it becomes
a book of slate

in which you can read
a story of stone -
one that's written
throughout this valley,

in every head, across every heart
and down the marrow of every bone.

(Sheers, *Skirrid Hill*, 2005, p. 35)

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Owen Sheers is currently a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library and is author of two poetry collections – *The Blue Book* (Seren, 2000) and *Skirrid Hill* (Seren, 2005) and two books, *Resistance* (UK Faber, 2007) and *The Dust Diaries* (Faber & Faber, 2005). His poetry has won awards and been short-listed many times, and *Skirrid Hill* won the Somerset Maugham prize in 2006.