A Literature of Place

by Barry Lopez

In the United States in recent years, a kind of writing variously called "nature writing" or "landscape writing" has begun to receive critical attention, leading some to assume that this is a relatively new kind of work. In fact, writing that takes into account the impact nature and place have on culture is one of the oldest--and perhaps most singular--threads in American writing. Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Thoreau, of course, and novelists such as Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner come quickly to mind here, and more recently Peter Matthiessen, Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, and the poets W.S. Merwin, Amy Clampitt, and Gary Snyder.

If there is anything different in this area of North American writing--and I believe there is--it is the hopeful tone it frequently strikes in an era of cynical detachment, and its explicitly dubious view of technological progress, even of capitalism.

The real topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development. It is writing concerned, further, with the biological and spiritual fate of those communities. It also assumes that the fate of humanity and nature are inseparable. Nature writing in the United States merges here, I believe, with other sorts of post-colonial writing, particularly in Commonwealth countries. In numerous essays it addresses the problem of spiritual collapse in the West and, like those literatures, it is in search of a modern human identity that lies beyond nationalism and material wealth.

This is a huge--not to say unwieldy--topic, and different writers approach it in vastly different ways. The classic struggle of writers to separate truth from illusion, to distinguish between roads to heaven and detours to hell, knows only continuance, not ending or solution. But I sense collectively now in writing in America the emergence of a concern for the world outside the self. It is as if someone had opened the door to a stuffy and too-much-studied room and shown us a great horizon where once there had been only walls.

I want to concentrate on a single aspect of this phenomenon--geography--but in so doing I hope to hew to a larger line of truth. I want to talk about geography as a shaping force, not a subject. Another way critics have of describing nature writing is to call it the "literature of place." A specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavor is, indeed, central to the work of many nature writers. I would say, further, that it is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and human identity.

No writer may presume to speak for his colleagues in defining these matters, but as someone who is identified with "nature writing" I'd like to try to explain the importance of place to me. I am someone who returns again and again to geography, as the writers of another generation once returned repeatedly to Freud and psychoanalysis.

It is my belief that a human imagination is shaped by the architecture it encounters at an early age. The visual landscape, of course, or the depth, elevation, and hues of a cityscape play a part here, as does the way sunlight everywhere etches lines to accentuate forms. But the way we imagine is also affected by streams of scent flowing faint or sharp in the larger ocean of air; by what the North American composer John Luther Adams calls the sonic landscape; and, say, by an awareness of how temperature and humidity rise and fall in a place over a year.

My imagination was shaped by the exotic nature of water in a dry southern California valley; by the sound of wind in the crowns of eucalyptus trees; by the tactile sensation of sheened earth, turned in furrows by a gang plow; by banks of saffron, mahogany and scarlet cloud piled above a field of alfalfa at dusk; by encountering the musk from orange blossoms at the edge of an orchard; by the aftermath of a Pacific storm crashing a hot, flat beach.

Added to the nudge of these sensations were an awareness of the height and breadth of the sky, and of the geometry and force of the wind. Both perceptions grew directly out of my efforts to raise pigeons and from the awe I felt before them as they maneuvered in the air. They gave me permanently a sense of the vertical component of life.

I became intimate with the elements of that particular universe. They fashioned me. I return to them regularly in essays and stories in order to clarify or explain abstractions or to strike contrasts. I find the myriad

relationships in that universe comforting. They form a "coherence" of which I once was a part.

If I were to try to explain the process of becoming a writer, I could begin by saying that the comforting intimacy I knew in that California valley erected in me a kind of story I wanted to tell, a pattern I wanted to evoke in countless ways. And I would add to this two things that were profoundly magical to me as a boy: animals and language. It's relatively easy to say why animals might seem magical. Spiders and birds are bound differently than we are by gravity. Many wild creatures travel unerringly through the dark. And animals regularly respond to what we, even at our most attentive, cannot discern.

It is harder to say why language seemed magical, but I can be precise about this. The first book I read was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I still have the book. Underlined in it in pen are the first words I could recognize: *the*, *a*, *stop*, to *go*, to *see*. I pick up the book today and recall the expansion of my first feelings, a slow, silent detonation: words I heard people speak I could now perceive as marks on a page. I myself was learning to make these same marks on ruled paper. It seemed as glorious and mysterious as a swift flock of tumbler pigeons exploiting the invisible wind.

I can understand my life as prefigured in those two kinds of magic, the uncanny lives of creatures different from me (and, later, of cultures different from my own); and the twinned desires--to go, to see. I became a writer who travels and one who focuses, to be concise, mostly on what logical positivists sweep aside.

My travel is often to remote places--Antarctica, the Tanami Desert in central Australia, northern Kenya. In these places I depend on my own wits and resources, but heavily and more often on the knowledge of interpreters--archeologists, field scientists, anthropologists. Eminent among such helpers are indigenous people; and I can quickly give you three reasons for my dependence on their insights. As a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuance in the physical world. They see more. And from only a handful of evidence, thoroughly observed, they can deduce more. Second, their history in a place, a combination of tribal and personal history, is

typically deep. This history creates a temporal dimension in what is otherwise only a spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral universe as the land they sense. Their bonds with the earth are as much moral and biological.

Over time I have come to think of these three qualities--paying intimate attention; a *storied* relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place--as a fundamental human defense against loneliness. If you're intimate with a place, a place with whose history you're familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you're there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned.

As a writer I want to ask on behalf of the reader: How can a person obtain this? How can you occupy a place and also have it occupy you? How can you find such a reciprocity?

The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe.

My question--how to secure this--is not meant to be idle. How does one actually enter a local geography? (Many of us daydream, I think, about re-entering childhood landscapes that might dispel a current anxiety. We often court such feelings for a few moments in a park or sometimes during an afternoon in the woods.) To respond explicitly and practicably, my first suggestion would be to be silent. Put aside the bird book, the analytic state of mind, any compulsion to identify, and sit still. Concentrate instead on *feeling* a place, on deliberately using the sense of proprioception. Where in this volume of space are you situated? The space behind you is as important as what you see before you. What lies beneath you is as relevant as what stands on the far horizon. Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical hemisphere you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? Through what kind of air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief you *can* smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place--the tensile strength in a willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves. Open a vertical line to the place by joining the color and form of the sky to what you see out across the ground. Look *away* from what you want to scrutinize in order to gain a sense of its scale and

proportion. Be wary of any obvious explanation for the existence of color, a movement. Cultivate a sense of complexity, the sense that another landscape exists beyond the one you can subject to analysis.

The purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption. It should be like a conversation with someone you're attracted to, a person you don't want to send away by having made too much of yourself. Such conversations, of course, can take place simultaneously on several levels. And they may easily be driven by more than simple curiosity. The compelling desire, as in human conversation, might be to institute a sustaining or informing relationship.

A succinct way to describe the frame of mind one should bring to a landscape is to say it rests on the distinction between imposing and proposing one's views. With a sincere proposal you hope to achieve an intimate, reciprocal relationship that will feed you in some way. To impose your views from the start is to truncate such a possibility, to preclude understanding.

Many of us, I think, long to become the companion of a place, not its authority, not its owner. And this brings me to a final point. I think many wonder, as I do, why over the last few decades people in Western countries have become so anxious about the fate of undeveloped land, and so concerned about losing the intelligence of people who've kept up intimate relations with those places. I don't know where the thinking of others has led them, but I believe curiosity about good relations with a particular stretch of land now is directly related to speculation that it may be more important to human survival to be in love than to be in a position of power. It may be more important now to enter into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with everything around us than to continue to work toward the sort of control of the physical world that, until recently, we aspired to.

The simple issue of our biological plausibility, our chance for biological survival, has become so basic a question, that finding a way out of the predicament--if one is to be had--is imperative. It calls on our collective imaginations with an urgency we've never known before. We are in need not just of another kind of logic, another way of knowing. We need a radically different philosophical sensibility.

When I was a boy, running through orange groves in southern California, watching wind swirl in a grove of blue gum, and swimming ecstatically in the foam of Pacific breakers, I had no such imperative thoughts. I was content to watch a brace of pigeons fly across an azure sky, rotating on an axis that to this day I don't think I could draw. My comfort, my sense of inclusion in the small universe I inhabited, came from an appreciation of, a participation in, all that I saw, smelled, tasted, and heard. That sense of inclusion not only assuaged my sense of loneliness as a child, it confirmed my imagination. And it is that single thing, the power of the human imagination to extrapolate from an odd handful of things--faint movement in a copse of trees, a wingbeat, the damp cold of field stones at night--the human ability to make from all this a *pattern*, to compose a story out of it, that fixed in me a sense of hope.

We keep each other alive with our stories. We need to share them, as much as we need to share food. We also require for our health the presence of good companions. One of the most extraordinary things about the land is that it knows this--and it compels language from some of us so that as a community we may converse about this or that place, and speak of the need. •

Barry Lopez is the author of eleven books, among them *Arctic Dreams*, which won the 1986 National Book Award, and his newest book *About This Life*. He is a recipient of a Distinguished Recognition Award in fiction from Friends of American Writers as well as PEN Syndicated Fiction and Pushcart prizes for his stories.

This essay is based in part upon a presentation by the author at the Salamanca Writers Festival in Hobart, Tasmania, in March 1996.

This essay first appeared in this form in the University of Portland's *Portland Magazine*, Summer 1997. Used by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Copyright 1997 Barry Lopez.