

Chapter 19

19 - Geography Matters...

LET'S GO ON VACATION. You say okay and then ask your first question, which is...Who's paying? Which month? Can we get time off? No. None of those.

Where?

That's the one. Mountains or beaches, St. Paul or St. Croix, canoeing or sailing, the Mall of America or the National Mall. You know you have to ask because otherwise I might take you to some little trout stream twenty-seven miles from a

dirt road when you really want to watch the sun go down from a white sand beach.

Writers have to ask that question, too, so we readers should consider its implications. In a sense, every story or poem is a vacation, and every writer has to ask, every time, Where is this one taking place? For some, it's not that tough. William Faulkner often said he set the majority of his work on his "little postage stamp of ground," his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. After a few novels, he knew that ground so intimately he didn't even have to think about it anymore. Thomas Hardy did the same thing with his mythic Wessex, the southwest corner of England – Devon and Dorset and Wiltshire. And we feel that those novels and stories couldn't be set anywhere but where they are, that those characters couldn't say the things they say if they were uprooted and planted in, say, Minnesota or Scotland. They'd say different things and perform different acts. Most writers, though, are less tied to one place than Faulkner or Hardy, so they have to give it some thought.

And we readers have to give their decisions some thought as well. What does it mean to the novel that its landscape is high or low, steep or shallow, flat or sunken? Why did this character die on a mountaintop, that one on the savanna? Why is this poem on the prairie? Why does Auden like limestone so

much? What, in other words, does geography mean to a work of literature?

Would everything be too much?

Okay, not in every work, but frequently. In fact, more often than you think. Just think about the stories that really stay with you: where would they be without geography. The Old Man and the Sea can only take place in the Caribbean, of course, but more particularly in and around Cuba. The place brings with it history, interaction between American and Cuban culture, corruption, poverty, fishing, and of course baseball. Any boy and any older man might, I guess, take a raft trip down a river. It could happen. But a boy, Huck Finn, and an older man, the escaped slave Jim, and their raft could only make the story we know as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by being on that particular river, the Mississippi, traveling through that particular landscape and those particular communities, at a given moment in history. It matters when they reach Cairo and the Ohio empties into the big river; it matters when they reach the Deep South, because Jim is running away in the worst possible direction. The great threat to a slave was that he might be sold down the river, where things got progressively worse the farther south you went, and he's floating straight into the teeth of the monster.

And that's geography? Sure, what else?

I don't know. Economics? Politics? History?

So what's geography, then?

I usually think of hills, creeks, deserts, beaches, degrees latitude. Stuff like that.

Precisely. Geography: hills, etc. Stuff: economics, politics, history. Why didn't Napoleon conquer Russia? Geography. He ran into two forces he couldn't overcome: a ferocious Russian winter and a people whose toughness and tenacity in defending their homeland matched the merciless elements. And that savagery, like the weather, is a product of the place they come from. It takes a really tough people to overcome not merely one Russian winter but hundreds of them. Anthony Burgess has a novel about the Russian winter defeating the French emperor, *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), in which he brings to life, better than anyone, that geography and that weather: the vastness of it, the emptiness, the hostility to the invading (and then, retreating) troops, the total absence of any possibility of comfort or safety or solace.

So what's geography? Rivers, hills, valleys, buttes, steppes, glaciers, swamps, mountains, prairies, chasms, seas, islands, people. In poetry and fiction, it may be mostly people. Robert Frost routinely objected to being called a nature poet, since by

his count he only had three or four poems without a person in them. Literary geography is typically about humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time the spaces that inhabit humans. Who can say how much of us comes from our physical surroundings? Writers can, at least in their own works, for their own purposes. When Huck meets the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords or sees the duke and the dauphin tarred and feathered by the townspeople, he sees geography in action. Geography is setting, but it's also (or can be) psychology, attitude, finance, industry – anything that place can forge in the people who live there.

Geography in literature can also be more. It can be revelatory of virtually any element in the work. Theme? Sure. Symbol? No problem. Plot? Without a doubt.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator spends the opening pages describing a landscape and a day as bleak as any in literature. We want to get to the titular house, of course, to meet the last, appalling members of the Usher clan, but Poe doesn't want us there before he's prepared us. He treats us to "a singularly dreary tract of country," to "a few rank sedges" and "white trunks of decayed trees," to "the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn," so that we're ready for the "bleak walls" of the house with its "vacant eye-like windows" and its "barely perceptible fissure" zigzagging its way down the wall right down to "the sullen waters of the

tarn." Never perhaps have landscape and architecture and weather (it's a particularly dingy afternoon) merged as neatly with mood and tone to set a story in motion. We are nervous and dismayed by this description even before anything has happened, so of course when things do begin happening, when we meet Roderick Usher, one of the creepiest characters to ever grace the pages of a story, he can't give us the creeps because we already have them. But he sure can make them worse, and he does. Actually, the scariest thing Poe could do to us is to put a perfectly normal human specimen in that setting, where no one could remain safe. And that's one thing landscape and place – geography – can do for a story.

Geography can also define or even develop character. Take the case of two contemporary novels. In Barbara Kingsolver's *Bean Trees* (1988), the main character and narrator reaches late adolescence in rural Kentucky and realizes she has no options in that world. That condition is more than social; it grows out of the land. Living is hard in tobacco country, where the soil yields poor crops and hardly anyone makes much of a go of things, where the horizon is always short, blocked by mountains. The narrator feels her figurative horizons are also circumscribed by what seem like local certainties: early pregnancy and an unsatisfactory marriage to a man who will probably die young. She decides to get away, driving a 1955 Volkswagen to Tucson. On her way she changes her name from Marietta (or Missy) to Taylor Greer. As you know by now, there's rebirth when there's a renaming, right? Out west

she meets new people, encounters a completely alien but inviting landscape, becomes the de facto mother of a three-year-old Native American girl she calls Turtle, and finds herself involved in the shelter movement for Central American refugees. She wouldn't have done any of these things in claustrophobic old Pittman, Kentucky. What she discovers in the West are big horizons, clear air, brilliant sunshine, and open possibilities. She goes, in other words, from a closed to an open environment, and she seizes the opportunities for growth and development. Another character in another novel might find the heat oppressive, the sun destructive, and space vacant, but she wouldn't be Taylor Greer. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead grows up without ever learning who he really is until he leaves his Michigan home and travels back to the family home country in eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia. In the hills and hollows (not unlike the ones Taylor Greer must flee to breathe) he finds a sense of roots, a sense of responsibility and justice, a capacity for atonement, and a generosity of spirit he never knew before. He loses nearly everything of his associated with the modern world in the process – Chevrolet, fine clothes, watch, shoes – but they prove to be the currency with which he buys his real worth. At one point direct contact with the earth (he's sitting on the ground and leaning back against a tree) provides him with an intuition that saves his life. He responds just in time to ward off a murderous attack. He could have done none of those things had he stayed in his familiar geography; only by leaving "home" and traveling to his real home can he find his real self.

It's not too much to say, I think, that geography can be character. Take Tim O'Brien's Vietnam masterpiece, *Going After Cacciato*. The main character, Paul Berlin, admits that the American soldiers don't really know the land, don't understand what they're up against. And it's a forbidding place: dry or wet, but always hot, full of microbe-filled water and leeches the size of snakes, rice paddies and mountains and shell craters. And tunnels. The tunnels turn the land itself into the enemy, since the land hides the Vietcong fighters only to deliver them virtually anywhere, producing surprise attacks and sudden death. The resulting terror gives the land a face of menace in the minds of the young Americans. When one of their number is killed by a sniper, they order the destruction of the nearby village, then sit on a hill and watch as shell after shell, alternating high explosives and incendiary white phosphorus, pulverize the village. A cockroach couldn't survive. Why do they do it? It isn't a military target, only a village. Did the bullet come from the village? Not exactly, although the shooter was either a VC villager or a soldier sheltered by the village. Is he still there? No, the place is deserted when they look for revenge. You could make the claim that they go after the community of people who housed the enemy, and certainly there's an element of that. But the real target is the physical village – as place, as center of mystery and threat, as alien environment, as generic home of potential enemies and uncertain friends. The squad pours its fear and anger at the land into this one small, repre-

sentative piece of it: if they can't overcome the larger geography, they can at least express their rage against the smaller.

Geography can also, and frequently does, play quite a specific plot role in a literary work. In E. M. Forster's early novels, English tourists find ways of making mischief, usually unwittingly and not always comically, when they travel to the Mediterranean. In *A Room with a View* (1908), for instance, Lucy Honeychurch travels to Florence, where she sheds much of her racially inherited stiffness while losing her heart to George Emerson, the freethinking son of an elderly radical. She finds what looks like scandal only to ultimately discover freedom, and a big part of that freedom stems from the passionate, fiery nature of the Italian city. Much of the comedy in the novel grows out of Lucy's battle to reconcile what she "knows" is right with what she feels to be right for her. Nor is she alone in her struggles: most of the other characters stumble into awkwardness of one sort or another. Forster's later masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, focuses on other types of mayhem growing from English misbehavior as the rulers of India and from very confused feelings that beset recent arrivals on the subcontinent. Even our best intentions, he seems to suggest, can have disastrous consequences in an alien environment. Half a century after Forster's lightweight comedies of folly in Italy, Lawrence Durrell reveals an entire culture of libertines and spies in his beautiful tetralogy, *The Alexandria Quartet*. His northern European characters displaced to Egypt exhibit every sort of kink, sexual and otherwise, from the old sailor with a glass

eye and a predilection for young boys to the incestuous Ludwig and Liza Pursewarden to nearly everyone's inability to be faithful to spouse or lover. Darley, the narrator of the first and fourth volumes, tells us that there are at least five genders (although he leaves specifying them to our imaginations) in Alexandria, then shows them to us at full throttle. One might suppose that the heat of an Egyptian summer would induce some lassitude in these already overheated northerners, but there's little evidence of that. Evidently an Englishman released from perpetual rain and fog is nearly unstoppable.

What separates the sexual behavior of Forster's characters from that of Durrell's, aside from time, is D. H. Lawrence. His works, culminating in the overwrought and infamous, if not always successful, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, opened the way for more sexual directness. Like many modern writers, he sent his characters south in search of trouble, but curiously, that trouble was not typically sexual, since he, being quite advanced, could get his people in sexual trouble right in the midst of inhibited Britain. Instead, when his travelers find sunshine in the south, they also encounter curious and sometimes dangerous political and philosophical ideas. Crypto-fascism in *Australia in Kangaroo* (1923). Psychosexual male bonding in *Aaron's Rod* (1922). The return of the old Mexican blood religion in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). Desire and power in his little novella *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928). What Lawrence does, really, is employ geography as a metaphor for the psyche – when his characters go south, they are really digging

deep into their subconscious, delving into that region of darkest fears and desires. Maybe it takes a kid from a mining town in Nottinghamshire, which Lawrence was, to recognize the allure of the sunny south.

Of course, this is not exclusive to Lawrence. Thomas Mann, a German, sends his elderly writer to Venice to die (in *Death in Venice*, 1912), but not before discovering a nasty streak of pederasty and narcissism in himself. Joseph Conrad, England's greatest Polish writer, sends his characters into hearts of darkness (as he calls one tale of a trip into Africa) to discover the darkness in their own hearts. In *Lord Jim* (1900), the main character has his romantic dreams shattered during his first experience in the Indian Ocean, and is symbolically buried in Southeast Asia until he rises, redeemed through love and belief in himself, only to be killed. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the narrator, Marlow, travels up the Congo River and observes the near-total disintegration of the European psyche in Kurtz, who has been in-country so long that he has become unrecognizable.

Okay, so here's the general rule: whether it's Italy or Greece or Africa or Malaysia or Vietnam, when writers send characters south, it's so they can run amok. The effects can be tragic or comic, but they generally follow the same pattern. We might add, if we're being generous, that they run amok because they are having direct, raw encounters with the subcon-

scious. Conrad's visionaries, Lawrence's searchers, Hemingway's hunters, Kerouac's hipsters, Paul Bowles's down-and-outers and seekers, Forster's tourists, Durrell's libertines – all head south, in more senses than one. But do they fall under the influence of warmer climes, or do those welcoming latitudes express something that's already been trying to make its way out? The answer to that question is as variable as the writer – and the reader.

Now most of this has had to do with fairly specific places, but types of places also come into play. Theodore Roethke has a wonderful poem, "In Praise of Prairie" (1941), about, well, prairies. Do you know how few poems there are of any quality about prairies? No, his isn't quite the only one. It's not a landscape that's inevitably viewed as "poetic." Yet somehow Roethke, the greatest poet ever to come from Saginaw, Michigan, finds beauty in that perfectly horizontal surface, where horizons run away from the eye and a drainage ditch is a chasm. Beyond this one poem, though, the experience of being a flatlander informs his work in obvious ways, as in his poems about this uniquely American/Canadian open, flat agricultural space, in the sequence *The Far Field* (1964), for instance, but in less subtle ways as well. His voice has a naive sincerity in it, a quiet, even tone, and his vision is of a vast nature. Flat ground is as important to Roethke's psyche, and therefore to his poetry, as the steep terrain of the English Lake District famously was to William Wordsworth. As readers, we need to

consider Roethke's midwesternness as a major element in the making and shaping of his poems..

Seamus Heaney, who in "Bogland" (1969) actually offers a rejoinder to Roethke in which he acknowledges that Northern Ireland has to get by without prairies, probably couldn't be a poet at all without a landscape filled with bogs and turf. His imagination runs through history, digging its way down into the past to unlock clues to political and historical difficulties, in much the same way the turf-cutters carve their way downward through progressively older layers of peat, where they sometimes come upon messages from the past – skeletons of the extinct giant Irish elk, rounds of cheese or butter, Neolithic quern stones, two-thousand-year-old bodies. He makes use of these finds, of course, but he also finds his own truths by digging through the past. If we read Heaney's poetry without understanding the geography of his imagination, we risk misunderstanding what he's all about.

For the last couple of centuries, since Wordsworth and the Romantic poets, the sublime landscape – the dramatic and breathtaking vista – has been idealized, sometimes to the point of cliché. Needless to say, vast and sudden mountains – the geographic features we find most spectacular and dramatic – figure prominently in such views. When, in the middle of the twentieth century, W H. Auden writes "In Praise of Limestone" (1951), he is directly attacking poetic assumptions

of the sublime. But he's also writing about places we can call home: the flat or gently rolling ground of limestone country, with its fertile fields and abundant groundwater, with its occasional subterranean caves, and most important with its non-sublime but also nonthreatening vistas. We can live there, he says. The Matterhorn and Mont Blanc, those emblems of the Romantic sublime, may not be for human habitation, but limestone country is. In this case, geography becomes not only a way by which the poet expresses his psyche but also a conveyor of theme. Auden argues for a humanity-friendly poetry, challenging certain inhuman ideas that have dominated poetic thinking for a goodly period before he came along.

It doesn't matter which prairie, which bog, which mountain range, which chalk down or limestone field we envision. The poets are being fairly generic in these instances.

Hills and valleys have a logic of their own. Why did Jack and Jill go up the hill? Sure, sure, a pail of water, probably orders from a parent. But wasn't the real reason so Jack could break his crown and Jill come tumbling after? That's what it usually is in literature. Who's up and who's down? Just what do up and down mean?

First, think about what there is down low or up high. Low: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death. High: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death. Some of these, you will notice, appear on both lists, and you can make either environment work for you if you're a real writer. Like Hemingway. In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), he contrasts the leopard, dead and preserved in the snow on the peak, with the writer dying of gangrene down on the plain. The leopard's death is clean, cold, pure, while the writer's death is ugly, unpleasant, horrible. The final result may be the same, but one is so much less wholesome than the other.

D. H. Lawrence offers the contrasting view in *Women in Love*. The four main characters, tired of the muck and confusion of life in near-sea-level England, opt for a holiday in the Tyrol. At first the alpine environment seems clean and uncluttered, but as time goes on they – and we – begin to realize that it's also inhuman. The two with the most humanity, Birkin and Ursula, decide to head back downhill to more hospitable climes, while Gerald and Gudrun stay. Their mutual hostility grows to the point where Gerald attempts to murder Gudrun and, deciding the act isn't worth the effort, skis off higher and higher until, only yards from the very top of the mountains, he collapses and dies of, for want of a better term, a broken soul.

So, high or low, near or far, north or south, east or west, the places of poems and fiction really matter. It isn't just setting, that hoary old English class topic. It's place and space and shape that bring us to ideas and psychology and history and dynamism. It's enough to make you read a map.