

SACRED PLACES AND THE SENSE OF BELONGING

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The sacred place, if it has not yet become an archaic dream, returns the pilgrim to a sense of community. To situate my poems in a landscape is to rescue my own tenuous connections with the histories of both my father and my mother. To find the place that brings the spirits of the past back from death and neglect is a kind of return to the birthplace of ancestry. In an early poem I wrote:

My ancestors were always formal, like a myth
that relaxes, sleeps too long
and is forgotten.

their house is a box of matches now
fringed in ghost laden jungle

This is my mother's ancestry, but my father's is in another place entirely, and goes back to Scotland. For me the sacred place is an abstract homeland that is transnational, or still in the process of Becoming. Without an a priori claim to Australia, I don't have what the law defines as "a single continuous occupation of the land". Unable to find my identity represented in any single landscape tradition, there can never be *one* source of the sacred for me. My work draws on three at least: the indigenous Aboriginal, the Anglo-Celtic, and Asian Buddhism.

The transnationalist tends to be flexible and wary of fixing the sacred in stone, as Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, or the granite tors of Scotland. But the sacred place is also an intermediate space where religious and cultural differences are tolerated. In my poem "The Reply", the migrant expresses a wish to understand the culture of his Australian girlfriend,

to recover what I loved, but didn't understand
at reunions, weddings for your Christian cousins.
Whose breed was I weird history, you can't
explain? This suburb my grow my kind

weed along its tracks and window boxes
and you would call this tolerance.

But tolerance is not enough. The migrant wants a presence which transforms what is already established in the landscape. The sacred place,

therefore, will need to be transcultural and symbolise the multiplicity of claims, as Uluru can be, the meeting place of the many tribes.

Sacred places must be portable and can be made anew. The Hindu use of holy water blesses a house or a burial ground. My mother's Buddhist statues sacralise the room they occupy. For Aborigines, encountering your totem at a certain spot gives that spot a certain sacredness.

It is often said that the sacred place has the power to render us humble or egoless, a romantic merging of Self and Place. As we try to establish our presence through connection with a place, there is a need to strengthen identity by having the land symbolise our presence. A sacred place is a space which we must occupy, in this world, not beyond. The Aboriginal Land Rights movement, as well as refugees, seeks residency and a dynamic relationship to place. In the Aboriginal sense a re-connection with spirit, totem, land and tribe fixes identity. Similarly a migrant must find the space which is clearly his or her own.

The sacred place is no longer a fixed place of pilgrimage, but a worldwide network in which we move as tourists and as pilgrims. Of course, I do not claim to be an initiate or a custodian of all sacred places. Angkor Wat, the Wailing Wall, or the Dome of the Rock; one's subjective relationship to these sites is tied to the wider religious/political symbolism of those places. As my friend, the poet John Bennett, says

My sacred sites are the Blue Mosque Istanbul, Skara Brae, Orkney, Kandy, Perahaya, Avebury, a bear berrying in the Rockies, Haputale, the edge of the world, my first LSD trip. They are temporal, natural and cultural.

Tourism, like pilgrimage, is a process of satisfying our yearning for the authentic, for wholeness. Such a desire won't go away, but strengthens as wholeness disappears. Global capitalism continues to rationalise and break down the perceived boundaries between sacred and profane, between regional and national interests. The industry of tourism changes the mechanisms of inheritance and distorts the nature of custodianship, acquires sacred land, and decontextualises sacred art, so that the object loses its vitality.

On the other hand tourism requires the wayward custodians of a place to double their efforts. Tourism can therefore affect a return of traditional customs to sacred places, which then function within the rules of capital. These complexities energise my poem "To a Hindu Goddess":

I drove her to a temple by the sea

on a World Bank moped,
a triple A rice spirit
two hours late for a ceremony.
She showed me a brochure
her face on it,
and practised a vengeful look
in her handbag mirror.
Chanting bamboo pages, annals & spells,
she sharpened her scythe, worn down
by the last imagined harvest.
I loved her then, but she
was spoken for,
underwritten,
payment dates
and the humble gifts I gave that day
deferred
to a distant, fiercer god.

To be able to dismiss the "brochure" of the spectacle, to recognise false gods, to be able to feel authenticity: can any one landscape provide that? A place, or nation must allow us to *disappear* into its sacred places, not just observe them from a hotel window. We expect the spectacle of the sacred to provide the magic of presence in rationed lots, like real estate. But I prefer to think that the Hindu Goddess can go on being powerful outside of my Gaze. She has a productive life despite me, despite the economic system which controls her.

I prefer to think of sacred places as "layered events", like a text on which all manner of cultures leave their mark. The palimpsest is a useful metaphor for this. This layering is happening to some extent at Uluru. Secret, prohibited areas control and divide initiates from the rest. Yet every sacred site needs an outsider, even if that means buying a ticket to climb the Rock. To tread lightly over the sacred place visitors pay it homage, and affirm the attraction and its powerful difference from our cities.

Sacred places are margins that assert their centrality. We go to the sacred place, it does not come to us, and we go back to where we came from as transformed people.

Where the original custodians have vanished it is up to us to remake the sacred place. Occasionally the council comes to scratch fresh grooves in Biddigal rock carvings near Bondi Beach, where I live. But there is no fencing and no memorial. We must go further than restoration. We can

never claim to be true custodians if we acquire ownership through neglect. For there is no return to *Terra Nullius*, no blank page.

The truly sacred place is resistant to insidious colonialism, and the cosmetic attempts of governments and mining companies to disguise their misuse of the land:

The goldfields finance a botanic effect
on pulverised hills and cyanide spills.
No soft furnishings for the soul
to wander in...

Similarly the art markets tend to reduce the meaning of a painting of a sacred place to little more than decoration and commodification. What model of the indigenous artist are we left with? I wrote of a sand painter I saw negotiating in an Alice Springs gallery, and wondered if "There are better things to do outside the art shop / making art I suppose, instead of eating ice creams, drinking Coke".

Poems are like dot paintings, metaphorical maps of a songline that may or may not get you to a sacred place, the place of delight or the *locus amoenus*. Poems can be a ritualised lyric which allows a certain freedom and excess. Like my mother's Buddha statue, writing is metaphor for a metaphysical abstract state that we aim for:

statues in his ruined palace we had saved from fire
cleansed them in old soap and water
placed them in our fields, hid them from museums

Even after the original places have gone, we are left with inner perceptions, still centres, and the trace of sacred memories. In the midst of a Bangkok traffic jam, a potent symbol of material wealth and secular triumph, I recognised that within the chaos and the endless chain of suffering, another kind of being *does* exist:

A mint-scented handkerchief
dabs away my tears - dust and fumes
in my eyes, not sadness
nor nostalgia

the traffic's stalled
and there is respite in
this vehicle's endless weaving

Despite the forces of division in Australia, our works should offer metaphors for the reconciliation of our own separate views of the sacred place, to signify a love requited, or in the words of Judith Wright, to find "Among green shades and flowering ghosts, the remembrance of love..." Until that need for requited love is fulfilled, I write with the sense that those who feel dispossessed can still imagine a space that is unambiguously whole, in both geographical and cultural terms: a space in which they cease to be marginal.