

LINDA LAPPIN

Deep Maps & the Soul of Place:

Techniques for Creative Writers and Teachers of Creative Writing

In his poem, “A Lost Tradition,” the Irish Poet John Montague writes: “All around, shards of a lost tradition/...The whole landscape a manuscript/We had lost the skill to read/ A part of our past disinherited.”¹ In that poem, the Irish context, the search for an identity connected to a land, territory, tradition, and language, is very specific – but the imaginations of many writers today will resonate to those words “The whole landscape is a manuscript we have lost the skill to read.” This paper deals with the deciphering of that manuscript and will give some suggestions on learning how to read the language of place and landscape and translate the signs and stories of that language into our own writing. The original context of the experiments which I will be describing in this paper was a creative writing workshop for undergraduates, but the approach outlined here can be adapted to any creative writing context and to writers of any age.

A mark of any great novel, memoir or literary travel narrative is the rich rendering of a unique place and time. Bruce Chatwin’s *Patagonia*, Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria*, Paul Bowles’ *North Africa*, Proust’s *Combray*, Alice Munro’s small town Canada all share a vivid evocation of place and a keen sense of how place shapes identity and generates stories. These issues –the interchanges between place and identity; identity and story-places –hinge upon what the ancient Romans called the *Genius Loci*, or the spirit or soul of place.

In the Ancient Mediterranean world, it was believed that every physical place, from an individual room to a road, or continent ,had its in-dwelling spirit, its spark of sacred, individual identity, the *Genius Loci*,² which imparted to that place its specific character and preserved its existence. The spirit of place determined the development and vitality of all life forms in a given place, and influenced the character and destiny of human activities unfolding there. In order for human beings to flourish in a given spot, it was necessary for them to harmonize their lives with the soul of place. It was essential that the residents of a place respect and revere the soul of that place. In return, the *genius loci* would protect and nurture its inhabitants. Similar beliefs in guardian spirits of place have been recorded in such diverse cultures as Africa, Tibet, Australia, Japan, Polynesia, the American southwest. One modernist writer particularly sensitive to the vibrations of spirit of place was D.H. Lawrence, whose own work may be read as a journey from one inner and outer location to another³ – England, Italy, Australia, Mexico – for each of his great novels and literary travel books recreates a particular environment, emphasizing the unique bond between character and place and the devastation that arises when that bond is broken, contaminated, or exploited.⁴

Many of the great themes of modernism and post-modernism: the identity and character of urban space, the nostalgia for a more primitive past, the conquest of the exotic, and the theme of the journey all deal with the concept of the spirit of place. We write to discover who we are and what we know – but we also write to discover where we are and where we have

been in this shrinking universe of ours. Lawrence Durrell once stated that character IS landscape and that the task of the literary travel writer was to discover the ways in which people reflect their environment, while capturing the atmosphere specific to a given place.⁵

I believe that investigation into the spirit of place by entering into contact with the Genius Loci can unleash a flood of inspiration and unlock the gates to a bounty of memories, impressions, sensations, and other material to the benefit not just of travel writers – but all writers who wish to describe inner or outer landscapes, or merely create vivid settings.

So how does a writer go about conjuring up the spirit of place? Where do we look to find the spirit of place, which seems to compound landscape, geology, flora, fauna, and climate with the history of human presence in a given location? The Genius Loci may be manifest in a feature of the landscape or a quality of the light or the climate. It may be manifest in a mineral, animal, plant, person, entity, atmosphere. It may take the form of a symbol, a work of art, a mode of speech, a myth, a recipe, a taboo. In short, we are surrounded by and immersed in a rich interweaving of its signs and signatures, vibrating at different rates, with different degrees of tangibility. That’s the manuscript we can’t read, or sometimes just don’t take the time to read.

A few years ago, when asked to teach a creative writing course on memoir and literary travel writing to American students enrolled in a study abroad program in Italy,⁶ I found myself faced with a challenge. The class also had the opportunity to publish student work in a local travel magazine with regional distribution. I was asked to design a course in which students would produce potentially publishable literary travel essays for this magazine, writing about a place whose language they did not yet speak, whose history, culture, geography, and people they were just getting to know. My main task was getting them to capture those first fresh impressions of the newcomer, but also help them find keys, doors, and mental maps to guide them into and around an alien place and culture. Seeking exercises, prompts, and materials to construct a class based on writing about places, I came across William Least Heat Moon’s explorations of the Deep Map.

The term “deep map” coined by Least Heat Moon is now regularly employed by geographers, sociologists, and environmentalists – but in order to define the term, I think it best to describe the process through which his first deep map was created. Least Heat Moon selected a plot of territory in the heartland of the American Midwest, a tiny corner of Chase County Kansas. He then obtained U.S. Geological Survey maps for the territory, and set about following a highly structured itinerary on foot, taking note of everything he found there, and compiling his findings in an extraordinary book entitled *PrairyErth*.⁷ Heat Moon’s ramble across this territory is a vertical descent through recent and remote history down into geological time, and his book weaves together exquisite passages of nature writing, cartography, poetry, local history and folklore, oral testimony by local residents, autobiography, sociology, anthropology, and archaeology. He penetrates deep into the realm of myths and legends belonging to the ancient Native American residents of the area, with whom he conducts an inner dialogue. Looking at the book as a whole, we might define the “deep map” as a sample section of the many layers of natural, cultural, and personal history superimposed upon a given geographical spot: a close- up of the Genius Loci and its multiple manifestations.

As a person who loves maps and collects them and has used them as the basis for my own creative work,⁸ Least Heat Moon’s construct really intrigued me. I began to explore ways to adapt the Deep Map approach for my writing classes. Our work evolved in five stages: selecting a site and observing it, gathering information available through sources other than

direct observation, stepping back to examine our approach to the place, selection of a specific focus within the map, and lastly, using the material we had gathered in writing poems, stories, and creative nonfiction essays.

I asked each student to find an area to study and observe on a regular basis (hourly, daily, weekly) and to begin by drawing a map of it. The map could be as crude or detailed as possible -- they weren't required to show their maps to anyone else. They were to observe the place selected at different times of day, in different conditions of weather/ light for a period of no less than a month -- although some continued with the project for three months or more until the end of term -- and to note down all of their impressions and observations.

Cafes, squares, markets, subways, ruins and abandoned buildings, street corners, bus stops, train stations were areas they chose. Another student chose a window in his apartment, while yet another his kitchen. The first assignment was to fix the boundaries of the space to investigate and then to explore it on foot, using all senses, trying out different routes, pathways, perspectives, and times within those boundaries. They witnessed the human stories unfolding in that place, tasted its atmosphere, noted bits of its history emerging through architectural features; observed natural phenomena: plant life, animal life, insects, climate, and most importantly, they observed their personal response to all this

From a technical point of view in terms of the craft of writing, in this phase we examined descriptive language. Whether we are describing places, settings, physical objects, atmospheres, people, what makes a piece of description vivid? How to be economical but precise? What details to include; what to leave out? In class time, students brought in examples of good descriptive writing about places to discuss.

After familiarizing themselves with the place, next came a period of research -- using whatever means available -- written and pictorial documentation of any kind, official -- libraries, history books -- or legends, stories, metropolitan legends, or simply interviews with local people. Investigations into the origins of place names also produced some interesting results.⁹

In phase three, we stepped back to consider our attitude towards the place we were exploring. In what way did our attitude and preconceptions of a given place, as well as our emotional state, shape our perception of our environment and what we found there? How did changes of mood effect our experience and observation of a place? How could we convey this in our writing about a place? We examined passages of fiction in which descriptions of environments primarily reflect character's inner worlds. In this phase we explored the question of tone in writing and studied perspective and "slant."

Related to the question of attitude, we studied Mihail Bakhtin's formula of "adventure time" or "quest time" in narratives¹⁰ -- and tried to decide which of the two tendencies matched our personal inclinations. In other words, to use a different terminology, were we seekers/questers OR flâneurs. "Flâneur," is a term for which there is no adequate English translation. A flâneur in the tradition of Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin is an aimless urban Rambler who loves to walk leisurely through a cityscape, poking into its most obscure corners, observing crowds and events, then passing on without ever becoming involved with them.¹¹ A seeker or quester instead is focused on his or her interior life, has a specific destination in mind, and desires to receive some benefit or reward connected to his/her exploration of a place. These two modes of investigating our environment as flâneur or quester correspond in some ways to Russian critic Mihail Bakhtin's concepts of "adventure-time" and "quest-time." In adventure time, we observe events and people encountered on the

road without being changed by them. In quest time we have a predetermined conception of what we will find when we reach our destination. Students were asked to determine which of these two modes of exploring spaces came more naturally to them. Could they switch modes, and if they did, what changed in their perception and in their writing? Meanwhile we looked for examples of deep maps in literature, considering *Mrs. Dalloway* as deep map of London; *Catcher in the Rye* a deep map of New York City; *Ulysses* of course, of Dublin and studied the slant or perspective from which these deep maps were viewed.

As our attention became more focalized on specific aspects of our maps, we tried to single out tangible objects or specific sense impressions which in some ways encapsulated our entire experience related to a place charted on our deep map - for example for one student it was a lemon growing on a lemon tree in a park, for another it was the carcass of a motorino chained to a lamppost, while to another it was the sound of espresso coffee bubbling up in her coffee pot. That talisman, charged with the power of place, reflected our individual contact with the genius loci. From there, we explored the way stories are encoded in the objects that make up our physical environment. All this material provided a springboard for creative work.

Aside from writing their own individual pieces in the concluding phase, students joined forces to make deep maps of different contiguous areas. They also accompanied their writing projects with photos, paintings, sketches, and multimedia presentations connected to the ideas and places we were exploring. Lastly we applied the deep map approach to places in our past and recreated them in memory.

The results of this exercise were the following. Students discovered a hands on approach to research. They learned that good writing is grounded in the real world and that our attention, as writers, may be developed, exercised and refined. They developed a knack for feeling out the genius loci, or the spirit of place and found new ways to express their feelings and their connections to places in their lives. They began to learn how to size up a place or situation and describe it in a few broad strokes and how to select vivid details that help render the sense of place and time. Beginning with concrete descriptions of places and settings, we moved on and learned to describe and recreate our inner landscapes.

Further applications: for younger writers in grades K-12, these exercises can be easily adapted working together with geography and local history teachers for individual or group projects. For accomplished writers of any age, the applications are endless. Fiction writers can apply the technique to structure pieces of fiction or to explore aspects of their characters. Writers of memoir and literary travel essays will find a valid tool for organizing their ideas. And for those interested in more experimental forms of narrative research, it may be adapted in many ways. For example: In a more sophisticated version of this exercise with poets we tried to make maps based on other senses: Mapping a territory (the word "territory" is to be taken very flexibly) – by smell, taste, touch, sound, as well as synesthesia – the employment of the terminology belonging to one sense to describe another.

In conclusion: British Writer Vernon Lee believed that in places to which we become attached, part of ourselves mingles with the spirit of place to become part of it. Making your own deep map of a place you love will allow you to discover just to what extent that is true.

¹ John Montague, "A Lost Tradition," *The Rough Field* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1979).

² See Robert Turcan, *The Gods of Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2000) on the religion of the Ancient Romans

³ See L.D. Clark, *The Minoan Distance: The Symbolism of Travel in D.H. Lawrence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980) for a full discussion.

⁴ *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is an example.

⁵ Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character," *Spirit of Place: Letters and Essays on Travel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969),

⁶ The USAC program in Viterbo, Italy, hosted by the University of the Tuscia. <http://usac.unr.edu/>

⁷ William Least Heat Moon, *PrairieErth: A Deep Map* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999).

⁸ See Harriet's map in Lappin, *The Etruscan* (Galway: Wynkin deWorde, 2004).

⁹ Viterbo is famous for its piazza, still called, Piazza della Morte (Death Square).

¹⁰ See M.M.Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

¹¹ See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964).