

Place, Identity and Ecology in the Poetry of Michael Hamburger

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The focus of this paper is on *place* as a nexus of identity construction and ecological thinking: it is intended as an exploratory study for a project on ‘Place – Identity – Ecology: Perspectives in Literature and Film’.

A working definition of ‘place’ is “space that has historically acquired or been consciously invested with meaning”. Through inhabitation or repeated encounters, a landscape or urban environment becomes associated with certain values. These can be personal, but they are often collective, cultural values. The look of a place, and its pictorial and literary representations, can be important elements in the process of individual and collective identity formation. Images and conceptions of ‘home’ have always played a role in literary and cultural tradition, and they have acquired special importance at times when national identity and cultural values are seen as challenged and threatened by political, social and technological developments.

The rearguard, conservative aspect of such concern with ‘home’ is especially evident in German Studies, where the *Heimat* or homeland was associated with ultra-conservatism towards the end of the nineteenth century, and with racist nationalism in the Third Reich. After the Second World War, speaking of *Heimat* was therefore regarded by many as ideologically suspect, i.e. as an expression of lingering resentment over the loss of territory, power and status.

However, in today’s globalised society, with its waves of migration and fluid identities constantly under construction, interest in home and place is experiencing a revival. Terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists and anxieties about economic pressures and cultural change have led to a reassertion of the need for shared values and national identity in Western Europe. The

inclusivist models of multiculturalism which dominated the late twentieth century have been subjected to critical scrutiny. This has given new impetus to traditional conceptions of place as the site of cultural values threatened by the globalising forces of modernity. The process has been bolstered by a growing sense of the *environmental* importance of locality, be it in terms of food sourcing or leisure activities. There can be no return to earlier conceptions of place as a haven in a world of globalisation, opting out of progress and history, or to romanticisations of a 'home' which never existed. But *locatedness* and *embodiedness* have attracted new attention as desirable social and cultural goals.

This political trend was preceded by a revival of academic and theoretical interest in place over the last few decades. Since the 1980s, Postmodernism has contributed to a resurgence of interest in the spatial dimension, at the expense of the temporal, which thinkers such as David Harvey and the postmodern geographer Edward Soja see as having dominated modernity. This development coincided with a new interest in place-identity in the context of memory studies (Pierre Nora, *Lieux de Mémoire*). And finally, Place Studies has emerged as a new discipline in the US and elsewhere, based in ethnology and cultural anthropology, but also embracing literary and cultural studies. It is driven at least in part by the sense that we ignore place and deny the significance of place-identity at our peril. The philosopher Edward Casey, for instance, has argued in his books *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place* that 'place' has increasingly been eroded and endangered in modern society. The French anthropologist Marc Augé has written of the emergence of 'non-places' as a characteristic feature of our age of 'supermodernity'.

Contemporary place theory also draws on postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha, Spivak), feminist theory (Doreen Massey), and ecocritical theory (Buell, Bate, Rigby). The new conception of place has an important ecological dimension: in environmental ethics, it is argued that a *sense of the particular character of a place*, and a feeling on the part of individuals and groups of *belonging* to a place or places are conducive to a caring relationship with the natural environment. On this basis, literary critics such as Lawrence Buell have

written extensively on the potential of the arts to contribute to *dwelling* and *reinhabitation* by fostering a sense of place.

If place was neglected for decades after the Second World War in social theory, it is at least in part because of the problematic aspects of popular conceptions of dwelling and place, especially their association with possession, validating the rights of the social elite, and the exclusion of racial others. Martin Heidegger was one of the most sophisticated theorists of place and dwelling in the first half of the twentieth century. His thinking, though steeped in conservative-racist ideology, nevertheless offers valuable perspectives today. For Heidegger, dwelling involves not only *belonging*, but also *safeguarding* and *preserving* place. This means not so much nature conservation as kinds of cultivation and building which are sensitive to the environment: actions which enhance nature and bring it into being rather than subjecting or 'enframing' it. Heidegger is of special interest to literary critics, because he also saw the function of literature and poetry as lying in facilitating *dwelling*, and resisting the self-destructive forces of modern civilisation.

Advocates of a revival of interest in place today recognise the need for such a revised conception of it, one embracing the ecological dimension of place. In his book *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate stresses three aspects of the necessary reconfiguration of place:

- the need to shift the association of dwelling with the ethnically or politically defined *Volk* or nation to one with the inhabitants of a locality, province or region
- the need to distinguish between ownership and belonging: to inhabit is not to possess, and dwelling is not owning. Indeed, poets who find their home in a specific environment often have an "imaginative, not a proprietorial, interest in belonging"
- recognition that the eco-poetic vision must be "inclusive, not exclusionary", i.e. open to outsiders and newcomers. (p. 280)

In *Topographies of the Sacred*, Kate Rigby develops the idea of place in two further important ways. Drawing not only on Bate, but also on the post-Heideggerian theorist Michael Zimmermann, she argues that

- some form of loss or exile is intrinsic to dwelling. We must encounter the absence or strangeness of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. All belonging is thus a product of *re-inhabitation*, after experience of loss of place.
- Secondly, she notes that dwelling is “an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment, not something that is in any sense ‘in the blood’” (p. 11).

These ideas are paralleled by those of the feminist geographer Doreen Massey. Massey's book *Space, Place and Gender* is principally concerned with the gender dimension of space. However, she develops some interesting ideas concerning place. She argues, for instance, that if we are to provide an alternative to the problematic conceptions of a static place-based identity which dominated the past, place must be conceived of as itself constantly changing, open-ended, and defined by its links with what lies beyond it, rather than bounded and characterised by the counterposition of one identity against another (p.7). Above all, our understanding of place must avoid problematic association with notions of an ‘authentic’ home to a particular population, through multi-layering and openness to others. Space is in her words “an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (p. 3), and place an undoubtedly significant, nevertheless only momentary stabilisation of its meaning. Like individual and national identity, which come into being over the years and centuries through a layering of interconnections with the wider world, the identity of place must be recognised as always unfixed, contested and multiple.

Questions for the literary critic are therefore:

- what role do poets play in reimagining identities involving new relationships with place which promote identification with and care for the natural environment?
- How do they locate us in the world, through representation, critique and reconfiguration of social constructions of place?

- And to what extent do they conceive of place as a basis for *solidarities* (to use Massey's term), rather than *differences* between individuals and peoples?

One of the possible ways of seeking answers to these questions in German literature is to look among the nature poets of the last fifty years, and even the first half of the twentieth century. Among the most likely of these to reward study are German émigrés who left the country fleeing Hitler, and writers who grew up in German-speaking communities in eastern Europe and suffered displacement at the end of the Second World War or later. Images of home and reflections on the experience of loss of home have played a key role in their work. The Austrian Jewish poet Theodor Kramer, for instance, celebrated not only the countryside around Vienna, but also the lives of the people who lived there – small farmers and tradesmen, agricultural labourers and tramps. Combining love of nature with concern for social justice and appreciation of the damaging impact of economic, social and industrial modernisation, Kramer anticipated some of the aspects required of a sense of place today. Another precursor of today's poets of place is the East German Johannes Bobrowski, whose poems in the 1950s and 1960s movingly evoke his lost East Prussian homeland. After 1945 East Prussia was divided. The southern part became Polish, while the northern, and the Lithuanian countryside in the hinterland of the border town of Tilsit, where Bobrowski spent his childhood, became inaccessible under Russian administration. Bobrowski, who had served as a soldier and witnessed the murdering of Jewish civilians, avoids nostalgia by writing in a laconic, suggestive poetic diction and constantly reminding us of his countrymen's guilt over the centuries in their relationship with their Slav and Baltic neighbours. He stresses the polyglot, multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of the population of the East Prussia, and constructs parallels between the plight of the Jews and his own experience of displacement. Avoiding the very term *Heimat*, Bobrowski developed forms and a language consonant with the sort of non-proprietary understanding of belonging to place which is needed in our world of increased mobility and multiculturalism.

Michael Hamburger, who I am speaking about today, can be described with some justification as a German poet writing in English. Born in Berlin in 1924, he came to Britain aged 9, when his father, a paediatrician practising in the Charité, one of the city's foremost hospitals, lost his job in the first wave of purges after Hitler came to power. Hamburger's father had to learn English and retake his medical exams before being permitted to practise in Britain, and the family initially lived in straightened circumstances. However, his mother came from a wealthy banking family, and they could afford to send Hamburger and his brother to the prestigious Westminster School. He grew up seemingly fully integrated in English society, and went on to study modern languages (French and German) at Oxford. Here he wrote poetry indebted to Eliot and Auden, Pound and Yeats, mixed with poets including Dylan Thomas and German émigrés (Jesse Thoor), and published his first translations (Baudelaire, father of French Modernism, and the German Romantic poet of alienation and loss, Friedrich Hölderlin). After serving in the army from 1943-47, he resumed his studies, graduated and attempted for some years to make a living as a freelance writer and translator. In the mid fifties he became a lecturer in German in London and Reading, and soon gained a reputation as a distinguished translator (especially of "difficult" German poets such as Hölderlin and Paul Celan, the best known poet of the Holocaust) and critic. (His best known critical studies of modern German literature are *The Truth of Poetry* and *A Proliferation of Prophets*.)

Hamburger never found the drudgery of a university-based academic career congenial, and gave up his position at Reading in the mid-sixties to translate, lecture on poetry (including visiting professorships in the US), work for radio, review books, and most importantly, write. His poetry, most of which has been published mainly by Carcanet and the Anvil press, was reviewed politely but unenthusiastically. Over the years, he became a respected literary figure and a personal friend of poets such as Ted Hughes. He was invited to the Aldborough, Cheltenham and Cambridge Literature and Poetry festivals, but met with limited public resonance in the UK. This contrasts with the reputation he acquired in Germany. Through appearances with leading poets, many of whom he translated in to English, he became a familiar figure on the literary

scene. Except for a brief period of experimentation in the 1960s, Hamburger wrote almost exclusively in English. However, he spoke fluent German, albeit with an English accent. He undoubtedly attracted sympathetic interest as a German-Jewish émigré, but this alone cannot explain the fact that he became the most frequently translated living English poet. His mature poetry can be seen as part of the German poetic tradition, engaging innovatively with the ideas of his contemporaries. (The relative importance of his affinities with German poets he translated and English writers he admired and was influenced by such as Yeats, Eliot and the Kentucky writer of place, Wendell Berry, is a subject which cannot be further explored here.).

Place features significantly in Hamburger's writing. The theme of exile/ displacement in his early work is modified by environmental concern in the 1960s, leading him to develop a new conception of emplacement. Hamburger evolves a perspective acknowledging the loss of home place/ birthplace, but seeing it in the context of constant change and the need for periodic reimplacement in new places. Emplacement is a mode of ecological and social dwelling, in harmony with the non-human and simultaneously open to others dwelling there. The interaction of humans with the natural environment is a theme running through all Hamburger's work. Of particular interest are suggestive formulations such as the concept of "ownerless earth".

Hamburger's ecological interest started in the late fifties (coinciding roughly with that of contemporaries such as Günter Eich and Hans Magnus Enzensberger). Among the poems reflecting his concern about the impact of urban development and modernisation, the destruction of landscapes and habitats, pollution, and the dangers of nuclear and other technologies are 'A Horse's Eye' (*Collected Poems*, p. 81), 'Omens' (p. 95), and 'First Thing in Berkshire':

I wake
 To the interdict:
 A valley, true, Thames valley,
 And the thrushes burble
 Where asphalt and concrete have suffocated
 Mile after mile of earthworms,
 The sparrows, driven from bulldozed hedgerows,

Make do with aerials,
 Fight for the nests vacated
 By martins that failed to return. (p. 119)

In the mid-eighties such concerns were to develop into an apocalyptic gloom (Hamburger once quipped that his friends knew him as “Gloomburger”), which is reflected in poems such as ‘In the Country’, ‘To Bridge a Lull’, and ‘Song and Silence’. ‘To Bridge a Lull’ describes the extinction of the passenger pigeon in the United States in the nineteenth century, a bird which migrated in flocks of hundreds of thousands between Mexico and Quebec. He ends with an image of nuclear winter:

Alone in your genus, ectopistes,
 Your flocks were thunder-clouds
 That discharged themselves on forests,
 Clattering down, breaking thick branches,
 With the weight of your roosts or nests
 When you broke your journeys, rested.
 In thousands then you were slaughtered,
 Smoked out with sulphur, clubbed
 Or shot on acres white
 With your acid dung. [...]

Ectopistes. Vagrants. A dead name I write
 To bridge a lull. Absurdly let
 Lips, tongue that will be dumb
 Address what is not, never could make out
 The spoken or the written vocable, dead.
 And hear the clatter still,
 Come down to ravage forests razed
 By your self-ravaging destroyers
 Whose obsolescent words I write.
 And see the sky blacked out
 Not where your millions passed,
 Light breaking as you hurtled to escape
 Eagle or hawk, armed with their talons only,
 But by a larger, lingering darkness that’s unbroken.
 A stillness, cold, your kind could share with mine
 Fills with your flocks, absurdly
 Brings back what dead men call you, passenger. (pp. 367f.)

Hamburger’s environmental awareness is only one aspect of a new beginning in the early 1960s. This started with a personal crisis: Hamburger visited Berlin, his birthplace, in search of his Jewish and German roots, and attempted to write in German for a time, both poems and memoirs. This left

him painfully confused, as he writes in his autobiography *A Mug's Game*, and bereft of a sense of being in control of any language, either German or English. Over time, Hamburger's struggle with language and with his identity led to him finding his own voice and his distinctive themes as a writer. This is not to deny continuities with his earlier poetry – from the start he had been concerned with place and identity. Since the late 1940s he had written poems of alienation and outsidership which reflected his situation as an émigré. The theme of the alienation of the sensitive, artistic mind in a philistine age is interlinked with that of the displaced, lonely, and homeless individual. (See 'The Death of an Old Man' (p. 23), and the portrait poems to Friedrich Hölderlin and others.) Hamburger's polished but cold and abstract early verse was influenced by the French Symbolists, and the English Modernists Eliot, Pound and Yeats. Stoically elegiac in tone and elitist in spirit, it relied heavily on mythical, religious and literary allusions. The poem 'The Dual Site' (1955) reveals frustration with the sterility of this form of writing and a related way of life, and expresses longing to be reconciled with dimensions of the self which it suppressed – Hamburger's 'natural' other, living in harmony with the seasons and the animals (p. 39).

In the first half of the 1960s, Hamburger writes a number of poems which describe birds, trees and fish with a new realism, vividness and empathy. It is as if he is dealing with real creatures rather than words for the first time.

Among the best examples are 'The Jackdaws' (p. 125), and 'Loach':

Loam, slimy loam, embodied, shaped,
 Articulate in him. The strength, the softness.
 His delicate eye draws light to riverbeds,
 Through water draws our weather.

In gravel, mud, he lurks,
 Gravel-coloured for safety,
 Streamlined only to shoot
 Back into mud or merge
 In gravel, motionless, lurking. (p. 145)

At the same time, Hamburger wrote poems about the intimate, harmonious integration of individuals in nature such as 'Old Poacher' (p. 93) and 'Feeding the Chickadees' (p. 150). The garden is, as Edward Casey points out, a site of

myriad variations on the theme of man's interaction with nature. Hamburger's gardening poems range from 'Man in a Garden' p. 49, 'Spring Song in Winter' p. 62 and 'A Gardener Explains his Absence From the Flower Show' p. 68, all dating from the 1950s, to 'Weeding' p. 219 and 'Garden as Commonwealth' p.220, written in the early 1970s, and beyond. While Hamburger's gardening poems are often, like Seamus Heaney's 'Digging', poems about poetry – e.g. 'Man in a Garden' – they are primarily reflections on the necessity to accept ageing and death as limitations of our physical existence, and the possibility of a symbiosis between nature and culture, man and the natural environment:

Here I am again with my sickle, spade, hoe
 To decide over life and death, presume to call
 This plant a 'weed', that one a 'flower',
 Adam's prerogative, hereditary power
 I can't renounce. And yet I know, I know,
 It is a single generator drives them all,
 And drives my murderous, my ordering hand. (p. 219)

Similarly, in 'Night', a further gardening poem, dating from 1981, he writes of the "Delinquency of hands/ Driven to impose an order still on rankness/ When, our own order lost, we are less than grass" (p. 452). 'Home' records the fate of the Victorian house and garden Hamburger spent several years living in, in Tilehurst, a suburb of Reading. The house was demolished to make way for a housing estate. 'Home' celebrates belonging and the birds, apples, trees and wilderness of then poet's garden, and mourns its loss:

1.
 Red house on the hill.
 Windward, the martins' mud nests
 Year after year filled
 With a twittering, muttering brood.
 On the still side, hedged,
 Apples turned in on themselves,
 A damp, dull summer long
 Until ripe. Rare hum of bees.
 The two great elms where the jackdaws roosted,
 Beyond them the wild half-acre
 With elm-scrub rising, rambling
 From old roots –
 Never tamed or possessed
 Though I sawed, scythed, dug
 And planted saplings, walnut
 Hazel, sweet chestnut,
 A posthumous grove.

And the meadow's high grass,
Flutter of day-moth over
Mallow, cranesbill, vetch:
All razed, bole and brick,
Live bough and empty nest,
Battered, wrenched, scooped,
Away to be dumped, scrapped. (p. 127)

Hamburger was fortunate enough to find another home with a comparable garden in the Old Rectory in Saxmundham in Sussex, where he moved in the 1970s. However, he already seems to me to be passing beyond elegiac lament in the second and third part of this poem, where he seems to substitute an imaginative form of belonging for actual inhabitation and ownership:

2.
A place in the mind, one place in one or two minds
Till they move on, confused, cluttered with furniture, landmarks.
The house let me go in the end, sprung no more leaks or cracks,
The garden ceased to disown me with bindweed, ground elder.

What's left is whole: a sketch or two, a few photographs,
A name on old maps. And the weather. The light.

3.
Seeing martins fly
Over a tiled roof, not mine,
Over concrete, tarmac,
A day-moth cling
To a nettle-flower,
Hearing children, not mine,
Call out in a laurel-hedged orchard,
I'm there again. Home. (pp. 127-8)

A sense of loss and deprivation perhaps still dominates here. However, the motifs of not owning the home and the need to remain in movement which are present in the phrase 'a place in the mind' are expanded in several poems written in the 1970s, such as 'In Massachusetts II' (p. 149) and 'Gone' (p. 246). And Hamburger had already prefigured this conception of belonging to place as neither permanent nor tied to ownership in the poem 'Conformist', written in 1961. The poem speaks of overcoming the desire to conform, and finding his own identity. He writes of finally being admitted to the halls of English literature after years of striving, but of then passing directly "out

again... to breathe the ownerless air/ Night sky transfigured, lucent, fresh and clear/ After the ceilings puffed in emulation./ His own place found at last; his own self found –/ Outside, outside – his heritage regained/ By grace of exile, of expropriation”. He repeats in the final lines that he is “Come late into the freedom his from birth,/ To breathe the air, and walk the ownerless earth” (p. 89).

The experience of losing his home is for Hamburger a repeated one, but the very repetition of the experience helps him to leave lament behind, and find himself through new home-making. At the same time he develops a conception of dwelling as non-proprietary belonging, as imaginative inhabitation and reinhabitation. The identification with migratory birds which we have seen is at least partly due to their serving as models of non-static belonging, through departing and periodic returning – however likely it is, given our treatment of the environment, that they may one day not return (see ‘The House Martins I’ and ‘The House Martins II’, pp. 123-4). The theme of non-proprietary belonging is also implicit in other poems such as ‘Meeting’ (115) and ‘S-Bahn’, which were prompted by his encounter with Johannes Bobrowski in Berlin in 1962.

Edward Casey has argued that ‘dwelling’ possesses two complementary aspects, residing and wandering: “Dwelling as nonresiding? What does that mean? We can find an important clue by tracing the word *dwelling* back to two apparently antithetical roots: Old Norse *dvelja*, linger, delay, tarry, and Old English *dwalde*, go astray, err, wander. [...] Dwelling is accomplished not by residing but by wandering.” (p. 114) The second dimension of dwelling which Casey identifies, ‘wandering’, tallies with Hamburger’s understanding of belonging and dwelling as achievable by walking, wandering and travelling as much as by staying put. As early as 1957, he juxtaposes two types of travelling in the poem ‘Travellers’: the first a restless, alienated and superficial movement involving constant conquering of new places, neither remembering home nor returning to it, while the second is characterised by discovery, learning and self-discovery. Such travelling, which is associated with translation as an imaginative movement between the cultures (the poem is

dedicated to the Kafka translator Edwin Muir), leaves the subject “seven times blinded, seven times healed,/ Battered into identity”. (pp. 53f.)

Staying and moving as forms of belonging are central themes of Hamburger’s three major poetic cycles, ‘From the Notebook of a European Tramp’ (pp. 12ff., written at the end of the Second World War), ‘Travelling’ (pp. 252f., written in the late sixties and early seventies), and ‘In Suffolk’ (pp. 407f., written at the end of the 1970s). The form of these cycles is modelled on musical variations: Hamburger describes the seasons and landscapes, and reflects on man’s quest for love and fulfilment, and his embeddedness in nature. In the ‘Travelling’ cycle, Hamburger reflects on moving as a form of staying, and the inevitability of movement and change within all staying. He also writes of his poetry as a way of ‘voicing nature’:

Mountains, lakes. I have been here before
And on other mountains, wooded
Or rocky, smelling of thyme. [...]

And I moved on, to learn
One of the million histories,
One weather, one dialect
Of herbs, one habitat
After migration, displacement,
With greedy lore to pounce
On a place and possess it,
With the mind’s weapons, words,
While between land and water
Yellow vultures, mewing,
Looped empty air
Once filled with the hundred names
Of the nameless, or swooped
To the rocks, for carrion. (p. 252)

This theme is further developed in the poems of the ‘In Suffolk’ cycle, where he conceives of poetic language as a silent one, not imposing arbitrary names. Here he also touches on the final theme identified by Kate Rigby: the need to *earn* belonging, a belonging which always to be understood as a tenure rather than an ownership:

So many moods of light, sky,
Such a flux of cloud shapes,
Cloud colours blending, blurring,
And the winds, to be learnt by heart:
So much movement to make a staying.

So much labour, with no time for looking,
Before trees wrenched free of ivy
Behind lowered eyelids began
To be ash or alder or willow.

So much delving down
With fork, spade, bare hands
To endangered roots before,
Weighed, breathed in, this earth
Made known its manyness
Of sand, humus, loam,
Of saturation, and so
Began to permit a tenure. (p. 407)

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