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Review Article
The World itself is a Becoming

Anna Ryan, *Where Land Meets Sea*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. ISBN 9781409429357. £65.00 hbk.

Where Land Meets Sea opens with reference to recent and not-so-recent explorations through ice, sand and sea, and with revealing excerpts from the writings of explorers on the psychological impact of these extraordinary, vast, unbounded and elemental spaces. Past and future dissolve and the protagonists find themselves moving in a continuous present. The repetitive, un-measurable, vast spaces of the Arctic, Siberia and the Sahara force a confrontation with self and with the nature of being. Writing about the expeditions to the South Pole in 1910, Anna Ryan quotes the geographer John Wylie, who discusses the attitudes to landscape of Amundsen the Arctic explorer and Scott, an English naval officer; Scott 'was intimately bound up with his understanding of landscape conceived of as view, panorama, gaze, along with the implied power that looking entails', a stance that was to eventually cost him his life and that of his four companions. In contrast the Norwegian explorer, Amundsen, had a deep understanding of the ice landscape, how to move across and live within it, and consequently returned alive with his team of craftsmen from the South Pole.

The tragic story of Scott's expedition, perhaps more than any other, sounds the deathknell for our concept of landscape as a static entity and the idea that landscape is something that is viewed from a distance. In this book we are reminded that our surroundings are *not* a background, but rather a place within which we move, act and have our being, and with which we must fully engage. Furthermore, Ryan's research shows us that this engagement is reciprocated; place imprints itself on us, 'persists as an embodied feeling of presence', and we carry that presence within us even if we are remote from the place. Ryan quotes the contemporary philosopher Edward Casey who takes a more radical view than reciprocity, and uses the term *co-ingredience*, an extension of Merleau Ponty's 'body and world made of the same flesh'. Casey writes that:

Places come into us lastingly; once having been in a place for any length of time – or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense – we are forever marked by that place, which lingers in us indefinitely and in a thousand ways, many too subtle for us to name. The inscription is not of edges or outlines, as if place were some kind of object; it is of the whole brute presence of the place.

Following Casey, Ryan argues for an acceptance of the ‘fluidity between self and surroundings’. The earth is a changing and evolving entity, and she further reminds us that, given a particular time perspective, the parts of the earth that we usually regard as static – mountains, deserts, rock, -- also move, as described in a memorable passage of Tim Ingold’s essay ‘The Temporality of the Landscape’ from *World Archaeology*:

Imagine a film of the landscape, shot over years, centuries, even millennia. Slightly speeded up, plants appear to engage in very animal-like movements, trees flex their limbs without any prompting from the winds. Speeded up rather more, glaciers flow like rivers and even the earth begins to move. At yet greater speeds solid rock bends, buckles and flows like molten metal.

While, the movement of rocks at unimaginably slow speeds lies at one end of the spectrum of earth mobility, perhaps at the other end is that constantly moving, changing place of indefinable boundaries where land meets sea, the coastal zone, and chosen location of Ryan’s investigation and research. It is a place where awareness of our bodily relationship to our surroundings is heightened, a perception made possible by the sensual experience of the sea at the edge of the land. All of our senses are engaged when we encounter the sea: the sound in a description by author E.B. White, is ‘the most time-effacing sound there is. The centuries reroll in a cloud and the earth becomes young again when you listen, with eyes shut, to the sea.’ While there is, in *Where Land Meets Sea*, a fine discussion of the changing, dynamic patterns of light on sea water I was surprised that there was not more reference to the unmistakable, evocative smell of the sea, which

awakens in me and perhaps in all of us memories of encounter with our primordial mother, of collecting seaweed in what Rachael Carson calls ‘that brief and magical hour’.

Ryan fluently investigates and describes the twin possibility of transcendence *and* grounded-ness that the encounter with the in-between landscape offers. In that last potentiality we find the sixth sense of eastern philosophy, consciousness, which is perhaps the primary concern of the author. *Where Land Meets Sea* seeks to encourage awareness of the relationship between ‘self and surroundings’; it seeks to reveal, by experiential means, that consciousness can be altered by an encounter with nature and that by fully engaging our senses, and thereby opening the boundaries of our enclosed individual worlds, we can recognize the interconnectedness of all things and become aware that we are ‘fully part of the ever emerging world’. As architect and academic, deeply immersed in the worlds of philosophy and geography, Ryan locates her work in the current stream of theory which describes itself as non-representational while including representational methods (such as drawing and photography) both in the participatory research project and in the writing of the book. She has a strong commitment to the importance of ‘situated knowledge’ and is interested in what can be revealed by watching and listening to the repetitive, everyday activities that occur, in this case, along the coast. Ryan holds that the experiential knowledge of ‘ordinary’ people is equal in importance to that produced by reading and scholarship, and recognises that bodily experience of our environment and awareness of that experience is a valid way of knowing. One of the most interesting parts of the book is that in which the author interprets the insights and descriptions of the research participants in the light of the words of the philosophers – here we begin to see the connections between everyday spatial experience and learned theoretical interpretations of the human relationship to place.

Ryan situates her research in two places: the sandy peninsula of the Maharees in Co. Kerry; and the granite South Wall in Dublin. The first was constructed by geological time. Na Machairí, a name which may mean ‘cultivated plain’, or may be related to *machair* – a raised dune system flattened by grazing and wind - is an example of a tombolo – ‘a narrow piece of land linking an island, offshore rock or stack, with a mainland shore or other island’. The second, the South Wall, was constructed in the

eighteenth century to facilitate Dublin Port, which it continues to do. It is a wall in the bay, extending from Ringsend to the Poolbeg lighthouse, which inhibits sand from piling up in the channel bed and therefore allows shipping traffic to move up the mouth of the river to the city. The top of the wall, which is approximately eight metres wide, is surfaced in granite slabs from the Dalkey quarry and Blackrock. In addition to its technical function the South Wall has become a place of recreation – people go there to swim, fish, walk, and meet friends.

There is little talk of swimming in this compelling book, perhaps because the Irish climate does not allow for much swimming except for the intrepid. The activity that the research concentrates on is walking. Surfing is discussed because of its recent arrival in Ireland – the Maharees have optimal conditions for windsurfing, and the sport has altered the appearance and human experience of the coastline. That change is memorably described in a comment by one of the Maharees' participants; when she first arrived there in the late 1970s the fields were full of people, on their hands and knees weeding the beds of onions and carrots that were the primary produce of the peninsula at that time. Now, the fields are virtually empty, but the sea is dotted with people, surfing: 'even on a cold day in February you can see over forty people in the water'. This image elucidates that change in Irish society that has seen us move from being an agrarian society to an urbanized one in less than a generation. We now visit rural Ireland for the purpose of leisure – to walk, surf, climb the mountains and make a connection with land and family.

Walking has many characteristics that make it a suitable activity for the research, and like much else in this erudite book many pages are devoted to why that particular activity is chosen. Walking allows for a mobile view of the surroundings (this point is critical because there is a 'deep sensibility of movement' underpinning the research) and, crucially, the rhythmic activity of walking allows for an awareness of the rhythm of breathing; 'by embracing the connectivity of the cycles of air, wind and breath, self and surroundings become more intimately understood as *deeply of* each other'.

Ryan's methodology in *Where Land Meets Sea* was to recruit as participants and respondents two groups of people who regularly walk in these places – linearly on the South Wall and taking circular routes on the Maharees. Participants from the latter also generally live on the Maharees, or nearby. They were invited to record their experiences,

to explore why they go there and what is important to them in that place. They were asked to take photographs and make drawings. They also met and talked to the author about their experience, using the drawings and photos as prompts for discussion.

Both places protrude into the sea and offer the participant the possibility of immediacy and close encounter with the world of the sea while physically remaining on *terra firma*. Both places turn away from the everyday world – in the case of the South Wall, the world of noise, traffic and the busy city are left behind. The walkers physically turn their backs on the city and walk out to sea, and when they turn again they see their city from a new perspective. In the Maharees too, the everyday world of contemporary Irish society becomes marginal in the mind when faced with the extensive and ‘more than human’ proportions of the great ocean, and the workings of nature on its cosmic scale. The geography of the place, its flatness, and the narrowness of its projection into the sea, add to the dominant presence of the sky and the ocean. Both groups of participants are aware of how the removal of overstimulation and the busy-ness of our contemporary world allows experience of a different order – there is room to think, a psychic space, in which true awareness, deep thought, creative thought or no-thought can emerge.

There is a sense that both the walkers and the author enjoyed the participatory research process. Friendships were forged and changes occurred in the minds of all. Reflecting on, documenting, talking about and bringing their spatial experience into conscious awareness led the walkers to a deeper understanding of their relationship with their environment. Their insights and comments are often inspirational: one participant described the marram grass on the Maharee peninsula as ‘hair on the body of the earth’; a walker on the South Wall spoke of the therapeutic value of the walks and how she invites friends who are bereaved to come walking with her as a means of coping with grief; another described the South Wall as a musical instrument, where the sound of the sea is intoned by the booming and lapping of water against stone; one man speaks of the drama and excitement of living on the Maharees, of standing at his front door and watching the sun sink into the sea at evening, or, of watching the weather systems as they approach land from across the ocean.

Where Land Meets Sea is a fascinating and important book. It is fascinating not least because of the range of voices that we hear on the subject of the human relationship to landscape, from the explorers, philosophers, geographers and artists to the diverse group of research participants who happen to walk by the sea and who are prepared to share their experiences of that activity. The interweaving of these voices not just in words but also in paintings, photographs and drawings forges a new reading of our relationship to landscape and draws us into a deeper awareness of our surroundings. Ryan's research suggests that our relationship to our environment may not be as dysfunctional as we had thought, but that it is, generally, unconscious. Her mission, or political intent, is to make our spatial embodiment conscious – to raise our awareness of our connectedness with the environment, with nature and with the earth.

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