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PLACES, LANDSCAPES, AND ENVIRONMENTS IN LITERATURE
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Fictions contain and involve action, time, and place—abstractions that serve as generics for events, sequences, and settings, covers for observable referents. Since Aristotle developed his theory of action in drama as an imitation, other critics developed time as a limitation. Action and time obviously have to occur somewhere, so place, not mentioned by Aristotle, was added, completing the sometimes sacrosanct unities, in England more honored in the breach than in form, but still adhered to as an ideal from which to deviate. Our concern here, however, is with place, which is not exactly landscape, but my license claims that I can use in this time and action place, landscape, and environment as synonyms for placing of fictions in spatial situations.

The study of space in fictions has developed only recently, mostly through work done by members of the American Name Society, and primarily through the efforts and publications of Wilbur Zelinsky and W. F. H. Nicolaisen. Each has contributed interpretations of landscapes that inhabit our concepts of space, although Zelinsky has not applied his subtleties to literature, but Nicolaisen has compiled a substantial list of publications that involve places in fiction or space as one of the functions of literature.

Fictions and other writings have to be tied to, nested in, swallowed up by, smeared over by, or enlivened in space. As a
unity, then, space simply is. What needs to be observed is the is-ness. For instance, action and time can be contained, along with some actors, in a space as small as a bed for one of John Donne's erotic poems. But even that limitation extends to the gossipy and intruding outside world; or, it can be as extensive and expansive as the cosmology of John Milton's Paradise Lost. And, of course, some of the authors of science fiction mark off much more space, dragging a kind of earth space along with them, since their environments are extensions of concepts properly inherent in the minds of earthlings in the first place (or space).

Categories can be arranged raggedly into realistic, transparently realistic, and imaginative, with some overlapping. The realistic names can be found on a working map, one used to find places or to direct persons from one place to another, or whatever use a map with named points can do. The transparently realistic names can be deciphered from the real places, reduced to a placename alias but not always corresponding exactly with the mapped environment. The imagined space is wholly created in the sense that such a place does not overlay either a realistic or a transparently realistic place but may co-exist with such space: its qualities and measurements are mythical. It may have co-extensional features, attributes to the former two, but the
place has been imaginatively created out of materials from the authors' experiences with space.

Here, the term place can be important in the context. It is a common term and can "refer to anything from a building to an entire country," or to outer space, too. More narrowly defined, "it applies to a part of the earth's surface arbitrarily delimited by an investigation. . . . Whatever it is, it is down to earth. It is not some elusive fantasy. It is real. It can be seen, traversed and measured." A place is real when it is named. If it does not have a name, it must be given one (number, measurement, or locational description). For instances, the islands inhabited by Prospero and Robinson Crusoe were not given names by their creators, but we know them as Prospero's island and Crusoe's island. Place is stable in fictions, although, as is well known, place can move around in what we call reality. The stability of space in fictions derives probably from its not being considered of any great importance in the development of action and character. It serves only as a background; yet its condition, situation, and characteristics can control action and character, as we shall see. An example would be that conditions and action are different in Moscow, Warsaw, Panama City, or Winesburg.

Fictions which have real names used in externally real ways, that is, as places that can be recognized by those familiar with
the mapped territory, usually have veiled specific locations
where events take place, such as companies, buildings, addresses,
or institutions. In a batch of novels that have been almost
randomly selected, this can be detailed. In The First Book of
Eppe (1980), the central character is placed in Cleveland, Ohio,
with the part of the city in which he is first noticed being
described in a realistic way:

The boulevard looked like the entrails of a
radioactive snake. It was lit up with neon signs
advertising dirty books and movies and places where
they sold foot-long hot dogs or hero sandwiches. There
was a huge purple cross proclaiming that Jesus not only
saved but cured acne or something.

Descriptions of brownstones, sidestreets, warehouses, and other
locations follow the same line. But the Great Lakes Discount
Auto Parts Company and Craigie Glen Sanitarium are fictitious,
probably veiled, as no doubt is Jesus Christ Church of Holier
Than Thou. The Ohio Turnpike, Boston, Warwick (RI), Pittsburgh,
and Pride's Crossing (Prides, postal form) exist, while Franham
Brothers Pottery, Inc., and East Heidelberg do not, except as
voils.

In The Land That Drank the Rain, the Cumberland Mountains,
eastern Kentucky, California, San Bernardino, and the land
violated by the strip miners are real; but Crowtown in Crow
County are veils for a rundown town and county in the devastated coal-mining area of Kentucky. In The Palomar Arms contains the mapped places of Ventura, Seattle, Ventura College, Malibu, UCLA, and Camarillo, while The Palomar Arms Senior Home is not a mapped place. Long Day at Shiloh contains no fictional placenames, except as they are used in a fictional account, itself a recreation of the first day of the battle, April 6, 1862. Many other novels exhibit this place structure with mapped names and veils. Places appearing in titles force the setting and sometimes the condition onto the reader: The Mosquito Coast; In the Palomar Arms: Jane's House; The Kissing Gate; or The Women's Room.

A different use of space occurs in Doctor Rat, a satire promoting a message, disclosing the horror of experimentation with animals. All settings are realistic, replicas of the laboratories with their torture devices, their pain cells, and other places securing animals selected for scientific investigations and ultimate slow death. Confinements include, besides the laboratories, zoos, slaughter houses, egg-laying factories, and sausage-making plants, all contrasted with the outdoor setting of freedom and peripatetic roaming. Mapped names are also used, including universities where the animals are painfully killed in the name of scientific progress. All places,
needless to say, are subsumed under the main theme:
Experimentation with animals should not be allowed.²

Transparency realistic settings or places can serve as
allegories for a fiction, with many examples apparent in literary
history: *Middlemarch* (Eliot), *The Mill on the Floss* (Eliot),
*Mont-Oriel* (de Maupassant), *The New Grub Street* (Gissing),
*Nightmare Abbey* (Peacock), *Typee* (Melville), *Our Town* (Wilder),
*Penguin Island* (France), *The Pit* (Norris), *The Prairie* (Cooper),
and many, many others that fiction readers know.⁹ These exhibit
the power of the placename, which connotes an attitude, a
purpose, or metaphor for the theme and subject matter of the
fiction. To be sure, the title serves merely as a label, but
labels have meanings, too. The names also limit the authors,
provide psychological direction, and subject action and time to
situational control. Within each fiction, names are subsumed
under the title; that is, they connect interstitially.

Often, the transparencies copy mapped names, rendering an
authenticity that abrogates the fiction if not entirely at least
to an extent that the reader has to overcome imaginary suspense
and accept the mapped entity as real, thereby accepting the
content as real. Whether this frustration and confusion enhance
artistic merit of the fiction is open to debate, but for an
author mapped names serve as shortcuts to creativity while
covertly adding all the connotations arising from the opacity of
the mapped name. For instance, the reader of a novel titled
Three Mile Island would have a ready-made set of reflections,
geographies, analogies, and other predisposed attitudes to apply
before beginning to read. Naturally, the same would be true when
a familiar personal name is used, but then, probably without
exception, the fiction would be historical, Burr, for example. A
mapped name, however, is not always so easy to stereotype;
Rochester, New York, would not be certain giveaway, despite its
camera industry. On the other hand, Gore Vidal’s Washington,
D.C. is predictable. Winesburg, Ohio was not.

Imaginary places arguably do not exist. All settings, as
noted before, are extensions of what we know about external
reality, including our heavens and hells and other meta-earthly
spaces, for we put some kind of recallable space in some kind of
recallable combination so that the extension will be within the
perception and understanding of the audience. Otherwise, what is
fiction for?

A division of what we call imaginary places probably needs
to be made. First, science fiction contains settings that often
move beyond the mapped ones; they exist between the ears only, a
place not yet amenable to measuring with any degree of accuracy,
although the places created by authors can be mapped, measured,
peopled, or otherwise turned into thirteen ways of looking at a
blackbird. Imagine then a visit to places appearing in the
world of fantasy or other worlds and situations not mapped for
our daily numbing usage. Immediately, names appear to be
invented from fragments of known languages, and in most cases
are. Taking my examples from a list of "imaginary places," the
following are indicative of the types and methods of creation:
Abaton (Greek a 'not' + baino 'I go'); Aepyornis (an island in a
swamp some ninety miles to the north of Antananarivo - H. G.
Wells); Aphania (kingdom in central Europe); Nimpatan (a large
island in the south Atlantic); or X (a boundless city or
uncertain location). The better known among such places are
Xanadu, Houyhnhnms' Land, and the curiosities missed out of the
mind of J. R. R. Tolkien.  

The fantasies exhibit much ingenuity, while not all manage
to obtain such popularity or show such depths or organized
imagination as do the Tolkein books. Many contain puzzles or
allegories that escape interpretation. One is Capillaria, "an
extensive, submarine country, comprising the ocean bed between
Norway and the United States." The title is hardly a
placename, since it so obviously is capillary, but it
tangentially relates to the story line. The "inhabitants are a
race of beautiful, stately women, all of them over six feet tall,
with blonde hair that floats around them like a cloud," and they
have translucent, alabaster-like skin, and, quite throbbing of
veins, the movement of blood. The women are called Oihas
'perfections.' Men do not live in Capillaria, but slick little creatures known as bullpops, parasites, "some nine or ten inches long, with cylindrical bodies, human faces, and bald, nobby heads" seemingly are everywhere. They are eaten by the Oihas who believe that the consumption of the bone marrow of the bullpops is in some way linked with the ability of the Oihas to reproduce, as though the creatures were a type of philoprogenitive stimulus, which, of course, they are. The bullpops are obnoxious wonder worms that try to couple with the women (the Oihas) but always lose. They erect towers which are constantly demolished, reduced to flab and soft gristle. Male visitors are either eaten or forced to do the labor of the bullpops. All this nonsense, and this summary does not do justice to the content, covers an allegory of the sexes which vaguely supports the allusions in the name of the place.

Fantasylands can also be grouped under or with utopias and dystopias. Ideals have a commonality that deserves more attention than it is often given, since they tend to be more than dreams or fantasies that allow escape. They take on meanings of their own and can become patterns for realities, although most or them can be viewed as philosophical romances, thinly veiled satires on existing governments. The most famous is probably Sir Thomas More's Utopia (Greek, ou 'no' + topos 'place'), the negative placement (not really a name) indicative of More’s
recognition and realization of the impossibility of any society being or even becoming perfect (his perfection). More probably punned on the name, too, with eu connoting "good." since he also placed Nolandia (also a possible translation of utopia) as a country to the southeast of Utopia. A reformist document during a reforming age (1516), it was a departure from the Hellenic ideal of the elitist state with class distinctions: "The Utopian citizen...labours with his hands, studies in his spare hours, and, though he hates warfare, is, at need, a soldier." The genre can be traced to Plato’s Republic, which, according to Hegel, was an "anguished response to the present" from which Plato was alienated.

Women are represented by one of the better utopias, Herland (1915-16) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This utopia lay dormant for many years but was recently republished and has had success as a book within the pale of the women's liberation movement. Women give birth to girls only and without sexual intromission, for no men live in the country. It is literally her land.

In these utopias, the placename title reveals content and is tangible evidence of the strength of setting over time and action. The latter is almost non-existing because of the opinionated (some sublimate this to philosophical) narrative which forces the message to be more important than the psychological underpinning—possibly castles in the air only, not
'perfections.' Men do not live in Capillaria, but slick little creatures known as bullpops, parasites, "some nine or ten inches long, with cylindrical bodies, human faces, and bald, nobbly heads" seemingly are everywhere. They are eaten by the Oihas who believe that the consumption of the bone marrow or the bullpops is in some way linked with the ability of the Oihas to reproduce, as though the creatures were a type of philoprogenitive stimulus, which, of course, they are. The bullpops are obnoxious wonder worms that try to couple with the women (the Oihas) but always lose. They erect towers which are constantly demolished, reduced to flab and soft gristle. Male visitors are either eaten or forced to do the labor of the bullpops. All this nonsense, and this summary does not do justice to the content, covers an allegory of the sexes which vaguely supports the allusions in the name of the place.

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foundation. That does not make them less interesting, for escapism, as noted before, has its benefits; otherwise, life would probably be unbearable, which itself is a contradiction. Western utopias are patterned in their settings upon the model of the ultimate paradise, the Garden of Eden.

My last shaggy category is the imaginative, where the author creates space, still sometimes veiled but setting that takes on character of its own and becomes confused with personae, actors who intrude on action and serve as catalysts for action, in contradistinction to, say, the utopian settings, which merely squat, passive, echoing a lost paradise. In fictions, all names by nature of the work become fictionalized, but the fictionalization can occur by degrees. Generally, if New York is used, it is reflecting part or all of the real mapped New York and is fictionalized only to the extent that it becomes a part of the action of the fiction; that is, a street in New York mentioned in the fiction may not be mapped, non-existent except as created. Space that is imagined, then, moves with the action and intermingles with characters.

Imagined space also can act in different ways depending on its use. Shakespeare, for instance, ostensibly cared little about the space he allowed his characters. He, in a sense, had no problem with space, for he had a limited area, a stage, and that frame was sufficient. A secondary space, less real, was
that which the characters were allowed to call their own.

This space is almost completely visionary in that it has no real point of reference other than the name. Yet its floating, cloudy existence serves as background, vaguely realized, for universal actions, a broad, bland screen that can encompass any action. No doubt, Shakespeare's universality of character and action come from a creative source not necessarily concerned with place, but all action has a place named in which it purportedly and dramatically takes place, and even then the scenes are not specifically localized, unless they occur in a throne room, a hallway, a bed, or a tavern. In such specialized places, scenery is evoked through speech. The geography elsewhere allows an everywhere, despite names, places nebulously fixed, such as Padua, Venice, Belmont, Verona, Arden, Athens and a wood near it. Vienna, Messina, Britain, Scotland, England, in several parts of the Roman Empire, or an uninhabited island. Such vague names, not like the specific New York, allow universal geographical (universal from Elizabethan and Jacobean English point of view) setting that hardly affects action nor does it necessarily have any effect on action. Greeks are Greeks in name only because the setting is said to be Athens; the same is true of the Italians. such only because of setting, not character or action, recalling the lines from A Midsummer Night's Dream:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V, i, 12-17).

And that is just about all Shakespeare did, but this do-nothing kind of naming connotes a geographical space that allows the dramatist to play out domestic situations that have universal meaning without being contaminated by preconceptions of known space. 18

Several broadly imaginative places have become fixed in literary minds, among them Tolstoy's Moscow, Proust's Balbec, Trollope's Barchester, or, with some misgivings, Dickens's London. Unlike Shakespeare's lacy geographies, these places move directly into the tapestry of the fictions. Although these or others like them have been called "in effect disguises, or pseudonyms, for existing locales," 19 they are integral devices of the fictions that in every sense they govern. Three others of this kind need some attention here.

One, Anopopei, the name of the island in The Naked and the Dead, has some kinship with Prospero's island, for the name never figures in the fiction. Mailer never carved out a huge background, as did Proust, in which to place his characters.
moving them from one fiction to another until all become one, as in Faulkner's structure of Yoknapatawpha County. An island is not necessarily a large backdrop, but it is a clichéd place that authors have used over and over to capture a point of view and limit it in space. Mailer uses the limitations to test his platoon of ethnic characters.20

In a larger territory, Thomas Hardy revived the old name Wessex for the southwest part of England that he used for settings. He tended to mix mapped names with invented ones, the latter sometimes veiling mapped places. That Hardy knew his onomastic mind is certain from comments in his General Preface to the novels and poems in which he states that there is "quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose. So far was I possessed by this idea that I kept within the frontiers when it would have been easier to overlap them and give more cosmopolitan features to the narrative."21 It is doubtful that in all of literature any territory has been allowed by an artist to control characters so terribly and fatally. Hardy, more than other novelists, imposed place upon his tragic characters, whose misfortunes can be attributed to the land as much as to their passions.

The last great writer to embody place in extension and through many fictions was William Faulkner. Cleanth Brooks writes that "through locating certain strange and sometimes
depraved expressions of the human spirit in an authentic
community, Faulkner made their occurrence more nearly credible
and endowed them with universal significance."²² He further
states, "Faulkner's invention of Yoknapatawpha County...was
crucial to his career as a writer. His mythical country
provided him with a social context in which what was healthiest
in his romanticism could live in fruitful tension with his
realistic and detailed knowledge of the men and manners of his
own land."²³

Vision probably saved Faulkner, as it did Hardy and Tolstoy,
from becoming merely a regional writer, for he transcended region
by distributing generously universal qualities among his
characters, meanwhile attending to the exactitude of place,
something Shakespeare, reducing his territory to the picture-
frame stage, did not have to worry about. The families of
Snopes, Sartoris, Compson, McCaslin, and Stephens have space that
is named, measured sometimes, and prolifically inhabited. The
characters play out their lives in heroics, pettinesses,
ambitions, vengeances, dullnesses, adulteries, fornications,
murders, and whatever else humans manage to entangle themselves in.
Here we are impressed with a sense of community containing
persons, not types of persons.

Place, then, contains more than a name, for once it is
called something—the swimming hole, the fishing spot, Devils
Millhopper, where the skunks den, Norway, or the house where Emily lived with her dead lover—the place and name exist. When existence endows the place with a history other than origin, symbolic features attach themselves. Furthermore, an artist can name directly and encrust the name with any characteristics that invention allows and the characters portray. Such places, richly described, truly become powerful adjuncts to the myths, perhaps informing fiction with the metaphorical strength necessary to its literary qualities and success.

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NOTES

1 Wilbur Zelinsky, "By Their Names You Shall Know Them: A Toponymic Approach to the American Land and Ethos," New York Folklore, 8, Nos. 1-2 (1982), 85-96, notes that the patterns of placenaming reveal important deep-seated, possibly subconscious elements of the national character, the collective personality of a community, and its variability over time and space. His "Unearthly Delights: Cemetery Names as a Key to the Map of the Changing American Afterworld." in Martyn Bowden and David Lowenthal, eds., Geographies of the Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 171-195, creates a map legend of what Americans visualize as the realm inhabited by the departed.


3 Frederick MacLeish, _The First Book of Eppe_ (New York: Random House, 1980), passim.

4 William Hoffman, _The Land That Drank the Rain_ (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).


A few would include *Purple Land* (Hudson), *Quality Street* (Barrie), *River of Earth* (James Still), *Tobacco Road* (Caldwell), *The Tower of London* (Ainsworth), *Treasure Island* (Stevenson), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe), *U. S. A.* (Dos Passos), *Windsor Castle* (Ainsworth), *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Bronte), *Barchester Towers* (Trollope), *The Big Sky* (Guthrie), *Bleak House* (Dickens), and *The Castle* (Kafka).

This is not the place to become entangled in the imbroglio of trying to define science fiction, a catch-all that masks some very real problems in how we interpret or conceptualize art. When some of our better writers, such as Ursula Le Guin, C. S. Lewis, Gore Vidal, or Doris Lessing, who have written "straight," deviate into kinky landscapes, *faery lands* and fantasies, then such matters need to be taken seriously if madly.

We can follow the analogy of a statement by a Supreme Court Justice who said, "I cannot define pornography but I know what it is when I see it." Here, I cannot define with satisfaction to me and others science fiction (which may be fantasy only), but I know what it is when I begin to read it. I can be small-minded and write, "Pornography and fantasy are pretty much the same; after one run through, they have the same content, repeatable and replicable." Still, pornography aside, science fiction as fantasy is the
staple of many readers, no doubt used for purposes of
escape—all fiction readers can be accused of being
escapists, ultimately with good reason—into a wealth of
fantasies that can somehow detach the reader completely from
known reality, even from clean sanity of mind. Without
question, an addiction to science fiction can be
destructive.
11 Albert Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of
1980).
12 Some careful studies of the naming characteristics in
fantasy have been made, but not enough for patterns to be
delineated. Some of the studies can be found listed in John
Algeo, "Magic Names: Onomastics in the Fantasies of Ursula
John Krueger, Walter E. Meyers, W. F. H. Nicolaessen, Robert
Plank, and others. Additional listings can be found in
Elizabeth M. Rajec, *The Study of Names in Literature: A
Bibliography* (New York: K. G. Saur, 1978), and later
editions.
13 Frigyes Karinthy, *Capillaria*, Budapest, 1921, summarized
in Manguel and Guadalupi, pp. 66–68.
16 Other creators of ideal societies did not always follow the placename title, but Samuel Butler with his Erewhon (1872) and Erewhon Revisited (1901) playfully translated and reversed the letters, nearly, so we have to call the title an anagram of nowhere. Butler's books definitely are satirical, hence, dystopian. Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm are also dystopias. Some other serious ideals would include Bellamy's Looking Backward (1888), H. G. Wells's A Modern Utopia (1905), Bacon's New Atlantis (1627), and Wright's Islandia (1944).
17 Few remember that in the Garden Adam and Eve did labor for the Lord. But critics of utopias criticize them for being too austere for the hedonist, which critics peculiarly believe they are. Utopias are democratic in that everyone labors for the welfare of all, a condition interpreted by lazy soreheads as an excuse for communism. The true utopia is communistic, or communal, which has nothing to do with the kind of totalitarianism we now attribute to communism. The anti-utopias (by Orwell and Huxley) are procapitalistic, claiming that when everyone has to work there is no fun for the rich. Of course, in the true utopia, no rich could exist. The dream setting of the desired Eden reflects the

18 Some of the locations came from sources, but they are not detailed or otherwise made to leech the action or the characters. Such statements are not applicable to the histories, which depend as much on place as on action and character. They are mapped settings, historically coated with events in time and, therefore, not amenable to imagination. But in the romances, comedies, and tragedies, locations play their part in universalizing the emotions of the characters and their actions. The psychological conditions are real and universal; the locations are vague and generally anywhere, never a fixed domicile. For instance, the statement that *King Lear* takes place in Britain has no severe implications, other than to connote a broad geographical screen upon which the events are played.

19 Manguel and Guadalupi, p. [ii].
Mailer makes do with all the clichés in setting and then adds some. The island is a place to be taken by the Americans from the Japanese. But for the novelist it is more than a mere island; it is a place to test men under the most intense conditions of stress, advancing on an entrenched, protected enemy who is intent on killing them. It is also a limited area in which the novelist can place different ethnic types of men to find out how they will act. The platoon that forms the cadre for the novel is composed of a Texas hard-ass sergeant, a small, slim and very handsome Mexican, a short wiry Irishman from Boston, an auto mechanic from Georgia, a young man of Polish descent, another of Italian, a sensitive Jewish soldier, and a concerned lieutenant, the latter acting as a mediator between the enlisted men, the proletariat, and the officers and generals who represent management and capital. Anopope! then contains the elements of the conflict between classes and, hence, is a testing ground for the working out of problems deriving from theories of Hegel and Marx in confrontations between labor and ownership. Mailer has muted the name of the island, which figures only as an isolated laboratory. Still, the limitations of the area of the island, much as in Shakespeare’s uninhabited island, control the action because of its location and laboratory conditions.
Within Wessex are the settings for all the great novels: 

*Jude, Tess, Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge,*

and *Far from the Madding Crowd,* as well as many of the

poems. Egdon Heath is probably the most famous of all the

places, the brooding heath that becomes central to the

action and symbolic of the Immanent Will, or impersonal

fate, that meddles in the lives of all. The characters

struggle against the Heath, but all lose to the gloomy

majestic wasteland. The Pathetic Fallacy works overtime in

this strange wilderness.

22 *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New


23 Ibid, p. x1. Also, "In Yoknapatawpha, the nympha and
tauns of his [Faulkner's] early imagination take on flesh

and blood. This is one side of the equation. But the other

side is indeed of equal consequence: the realistic, earthly

life of Yoknapatawpha could be invested with an aura of

imagination, a mythic quality that could give vital import
to what otherwise would have proved merely drab and

pedestrian."