

Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach

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Abstract. How places are made is at the core of human geography. Overwhelmingly the discipline has emphasized the economic and material forces at work. Neglected is the explicit recognition of the crucial role of language, even though without speech humans cannot even begin to formulate ideas, discuss them, and translate them into action that culminates in a built place. Moreover, words alone, used in an appropriate situation, can have the power to render objects, formerly invisible because unattended, visible, and impart to them a certain character: thus a mere rise on a flat surface becomes something far more—a place that promises to open up to other places—when it is named “Mount Prospect.” The different ways by which language contributes toward the making of place may be shown by exploring a wide range of situations and cultural contexts. Included in this paper are the contexts of hunter-gatherers, explorers and pioneers, intimate friendship, literary London, Europe in relation to Asia, and Chinese gardening and landscape art. There is a moral dimension to speech as there is to physical action. Thus warm conversation between friends can make the place itself seem warm; by contrast, malicious speech has the power to destroy a place’s reputation and thereby its visibility. In the narrative-descriptive approach, the question of how and why language is effective is implied or informally woven into the presentation, but not explicitly formulated or developed. Ways of making place in different situations—from the naming of objects by pioneers, to informal conversation in any home, to the impact of written texts—are highlighted and constitute the paper’s principal purpose, rather than causal explanations, which must vary with each type of linguistic behavior and each situation.

Key Words: language, speech, words, names, place, narrative-description.

A central task for geographers is to understand the making and maintenance of place—the varied features, localities, regions, and landscapes that make up the earth’s surface. Physical geographers study natural landforms and the forces that have brought them into being. Cultural geographers study humanly constructed and modified places and the forces (socioeconomic, political, technological, etc.) that have brought them into being. A curious gap in the extensive and growing literature on place is the attempt to address directly the role of human speech in the creation of place: curious because, obviously, without speech—without the use and exchange of words and the ideas they convey—there cannot be, in the first instance, any human action or force directed toward preconceived goals.

A principal reason for the neglect of speech is that geographers and landscape historians (and, I believe, people in general) tend to see place almost exclusively as the result of the material transformation of nature. They can see farmers chopping down wood and putting up fences and they can see workers raising the roof beams. What they do not see and hear are the discussions and commands crucial to the process of making anything that is not so routine as to be almost instinctive. The farmers, for example, are likely to consult with their helpers about the best method or time to clear another patch of forest, and even if they do not do so and are entirely on their own, they speak to themselves, that is, engage in an internal dialogue. And in the construction of a large building, workers must necessarily have talked with the foreman and the foreman with the architect, and the architect with clients. This talk is an integral part of the process of construction, critical especially at the initial planning stages but not expendable at any stage. It is simply not possible to understand or explain the physical

motions that produce place without overhearing, as it were, the speech—the exchange of words—that lie behind them.

Speech is a component of the total force that transforms nature into a human place. But speech can be an effective force acting alone or almost alone. Westerners raised in the Hebraic-Christian tradition should find it easy to accept the creative power of words. They are used to hearing, "God said let there be light, and there was light." Another source, almost as familiar, is the Gospel according to John, in which the evangelist claims that in the beginning was the Word or God, and that "all things were made by him." Quite apart from these well-known lines and their possible effect on people exposed to them, humans in general know the power of speech in ordinary, day-to-day experience. They know that although speech alone cannot materially transform nature, it can direct attention, organize insignificant entities into significant composite wholes, and in so doing, make things formerly overlooked—and hence invisible and nonexistent—visible and real.

Approaches to Linguistic Place-Construction

Several approaches to speech and place are possible. Someone trained in linguistics will probably want to start with the nature of language itself. The grammar of a language can tell us something about what aspects of an object (or place) is emphasized. For instance, "although some languages indicate whether an object is singular or plural, close or far away from the agent, or capable of activity simply by adding a linguistic feature, called an inflection, to the relevant term (like a plural *s*), it is rare for languages to add an inflection that signifies an object's color or usefulness" (Kagan 1984, 216–17). There may thus be a tendency for grammar to direct attention more to the location and power (specifically, a capacity to move and act) of objects than to their color or usefulness. Perhaps even more important, to a linguist and anyone enamored of literature, is language's metaphorical power—the way individual words and, even more, sentences and larger units impart emotion and personality, and hence high visibility, to objects and places (Ricoeur 1979; Tuan 1978).

The second approach is sociolinguistic in emphasis; that is, it focuses on the use and effectiveness of speech in particular social contexts. One might, for instance, study in some detail the kind and amount of verbal exchange necessary in the planning stages of construction and during construction in different cultures. Language is here taken to be a practical activity, engaged in along with gesticulation, and (in some societies) the making and use of plans and maps. Words and visual images (including nowadays computer-generated graphics) together constitute a force, without which large constructive projects are barely conceivable. For the purpose of this paper, however, I shall focus on speech rather than on image—on what one says, hears, and reads rather than on what one draws and sees—in the processes of world-making.

Sociolinguistic research can, of course, adopt approaches other than noting the kinds of words used in making place. The two approaches currently most favored by European philosophers and critical theorists raise issues of epistemology and the game of power. In the last fifteen years or so, a number of influential geographers have joined these European thinkers in showing a sustained concern for language at the level of epistemology ("what a geographer can know") and at the level of the hermeneutic interpretation of landscape—that is, treating landscape as a text with subtexts, the tangled meanings of which are seldom clear (Olsson 1979, 1982; Pred 1988, 1990). The increasingly common application of the word "text" to architecture and landscape suggests, in itself, how deeply the linguistic viewpoint has penetrated the geographer's world. Language in relation to power is another topic that has received much attention in current research. Geographers, and indeed society at large, have come to see that speech—the right to speak and be heard, the right to name and have that name "stick"—is empowerment. It is fair to say, however, that the literature on power, under the influence of thinkers such as Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), deals more with techniques of control, social hierarchy and inequality, domination and its contestation, than with the creative acts of making and building—or, to put this another way, with what comes to mind when one speaks of the power of eloquence, and, more generally, the power that emanates from any successful work of art.

The third approach, which is the one adopted here, I shall call narrative-descriptive. It draws on the first two approaches, absorbing them into its story line, without pausing for theoretical overviews or going into analytical detail. All narratives and descriptions contain at least interpretive and explanatory stratagems, for these are built into language itself. In a narrative-descriptive approach, however, the explicit formulation of theory is not attempted, if only because such a theory, by its clarity and weight, tends to drive rival and complementary interpretations and explanatory sketches out of mind, with the result that the object of study—a human experience, which is almost always ambiguous and complex—turns into something schematic and etiolated. Indeed, in social science, a theory can be so highly structured that it seems to exist in its own right, to be almost “solid,” and thus able to cast (paradoxically) a shadow over the phenomena it is intended to illuminate. By contrast, in the narrative-descriptive approach, theories hover supportively in the background while the complex phenomena themselves occupy the front stage. For this reason, the approach is favored by cultural and historical geographers, historians generally, and cultural anthropologists—scholars who are predisposed to appreciate the range and color of life and world. Their best works tend to make a reader feel the intellectual pleasure of being exposed to a broad and variegated range of related facts and of understanding them a little better (though still hazily), rather than, as in specialized theoretical works, the intellectual assurance of being offered a rigorous explanation of a necessarily narrow and highly abstracted segment of reality.

There is another reason, already mentioned, for eschewing a heavy dependence on theory for the purpose of this paper, namely, social theories, in part because they aspire to be scientific and analytical, seldom address the still baffling phenomenon of creativity—of power as it is understood by artists. While not everyone can paint or compose music, all of us can use words effectively. Words have the general power to bring to light experiences that lie in the shadow or have receded into it, and the specific power to call places into being. It may need only a few kind words among friends to change an ordinary kitchen into a bright and happy place. At another level of accomplishment and at another scale, the personality of

certain cities (nineteenth-century London, for instance) owes much to the influence of a powerful literature. A great city may be seen as a construction of words as well as stone, of politics (again, dependent to a high degree on the persuasive use of words) and economics.

In the main body of the paper, my intention is to show something of the broad range of ways through which language makes place, proceeding from forager-hunters and pioneer settlers to the sophisticated worlds of Europe and China, each with a long-standing literary tradition. Included in the range are private ways of place-making, as in the casual use of words at home, and public ways of place-making, as in the creation of the geographical-political entity called Asia. Only in the latter case does power, in the sense favored by social theorists, come prominently and fully into play.

Words, Myths, and Song

Textbooks on people-environment relationships often include an account of forager-hunters. Such people, with their simple material culture, tend to be described as “living in the midst of nature.” They do, but the description is nevertheless misleading, for one can assert as truthfully that they live in a deeply humanized world. Outsiders say “nature,” because the environment seems barely touched. Insiders see “homeplace”—an environment that is familiar to them, not because they have materially transformed it but because they have named it. It is their place—their world—through the casting of a linguistic net. Plants and animals become a part of the human socioeconomic order when they appear in a classificatory scheme. At a more affective level, storytelling converts mere objects “out there” into real presences. Myths have this power to an outstanding degree because they are not just any story but are foundational stories that provide support and glimmers of understanding for the basic institutions of society; at the same time, myths, by weaving in observable features in the landscape (a tree here, a rock there), strengthen a people’s bond to place.

Almost any ethnographic report of a nonliterate people includes accounts of their legends, myths, and rituals, and of the natural objects they identify and classify for a variety of reasons and purposes. These are treated, usually in separate sections, as custom, social in-

stitution, and knowledge (or ethnoscience). Rarely are they taken to be, as a geographer would, verbal and gestural efforts to construct and maintain place—to create a world that resonates to human needs and desires out of neutral environment. Ethnographic reports on the Australian Aborigines are an exception, for they almost always tell of how important places have come into being during what the Aborigines call the Dreamtime. The island-continent of Australia is criss-crossed by hundreds of paths, left behind by totemic ancestors in their Dreamtime wanderings. Place is not primarily the locality of an economic resource—a waterhole, for instance; rather it is wherever an ancestor has stopped to perform some action, which may be quite ordinary like cooking a meal, or extraordinary like the institution of a particular rite; and place is also where something has happened to the ancestor and he/she turns into (say) a prominent ridge (Elkin 1964, 151–55). Natural features such as a heap of stones, a clump of trees, a cave or a billabong—some of which have economic importance, others not—acquire visibility because of Dreamtime actions, as these are told in myths. The telling itself, not always accompanied by ritual, has the power to endow a site with vibrant meaning. Telling is perhaps not quite the word, for frequently the myths are delivered through songs (Berndt and Berndt 1964, 200). Dreamtime ancestral tracks may thus be called, as Bruce Chatwin (1988) has, “songlines.” The ancestors have sung the world into existence.

Explorers and Pioneers

In stories for beginning students of how the New World was settled by Europeans, place emerged with the first swing of the pioneer's ax. A place was initially a clearing in the woods, then farm and log cabin, then village or town, and in the course of time the city. Place, in the standard literature, is a product of the physical transformation of nature. But the ordering of nature—the conversion of undifferentiated space into place—occurred much earlier. It occurred with the first ritual act of possession.

When Columbus went ashore at Guanahani, his captains beside him, the royal standard was displayed, the banners of the expedition were unfurled, one bearing an F and the other a Y for Ferdinand and Isabella, and over each initial there was displayed a crown and on the reverse a cross.

After all had come ashore, the crews knelt, they gave thanks, they embraced the ground with ceremonial tears, and two notary publics solemnly recorded the words and the ceremony (Jones 1964, 100).

Although the act was done primarily to establish legal-political possession, to the participants it no doubt also carried a religious-baptismal significance. Speaking for the New World as a whole, Mircea Eliade (1959, 32) asserts that when the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores raised the cross over the new territories, they consecrated them in the name of Jesus Christ and believed that, by doing so, they enabled the territories to undergo a “new birth.” For through Christ “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians, 5, 17). The newly discovered country was “recreated” by the cross—reinstated into God's cosmos—as though it had no prior existence, or that its prior state was one of unredeemed wildness.

The ritual creation of place was the first step, followed by other steps, less formal, as explorers pushed inland. Consider the European settlement of Australia. Australian explorers and surveyors often preceded farmers. Long before fields were cleared and houses built, the island continent was being converted into strips or passageways, punctuated by places, through the processes of naming, surveying, mapping, and the writing up of trip logs and journals. Confronted by vast stretches of unfamiliar desert, explorers, in order to go forward at all, needed to use names and words to differentiate space, to call this feature a “mount” and that feature a “river.” The names thus used were often inappropriate. A mount or mountain evoked an image, originating in England or some other part of western Europe, that fitted poorly with Australian geographical reality; likewise, and even more so, words like “river,” “meadow” and “pasture.” But, for that very reason, they were suited to the purpose of the explorer. An explorer needed to have home bases and rest stops along a path that opened to the horizon and led to an ultimate destination. Words like “mount” and “meadow,” applied to unfamiliar features, made them into temporary places of habitation, without which the explorer would be disoriented and could have no way or reason to proceed (Carter 1988, 47–55).

An explorer might have named features and envisaged routes and prospects without telling

anyone or putting anything down on paper. But that would have made his conversion of space into place private and fleeting. With the keeping of journals and field notes, and especially with their subsequent rewriting and publication, his private experiences—his temporary places of habitation—could gain access to and take hold on public consciousness and achieve thereby a higher degree of stability and permanence even though no physical manipulation of nature had occurred. "Mount Prospect" became not only a place for the pioneer explorer—the spot where he once stood or where he (from a camp nearby) knew he could stand to survey the next stage of the journey—but also a virtual or possible place at which to gain a prospect for all who read his narrative and wished to follow his footsteps.

In the course of time, pioneer farmers and sheepherders moved in, and by clearing bush, building houses, and otherwise physically altering the environment, created material places. "Mount Prospect" or "Mount Misery," now standing on a corner of the ranch, would have lost much of its original meaning as the marker of a traveling narrative and a process of discovery. To the rancher going his rounds, the hill was simply an object on the horizon that conveniently delimited the edge of his land. But to the degree that the hill retained an emotional meaning for him, it might well be the result of his awareness of the original event that made the explorer call a mount "Prospect." The rancher might, for instance, sit on the porch after a hard day's work, rehearse and thereby enhance his awareness of the hill's emotional coloring by retelling its story to a visitor. As more time lapsed and Australia became a settled country, another type of narrative emerged. This was the standard textbook of the schools, which depicted the history of settlement more impersonally, but which in its own way could promote a sense of regional identity and of place. As for the dramatic, linear route maps of the early explorers and surveyors, these would be replaced by the more static and objective spatial maps, which showed areas and sites rather than routes, and, eventually, compendious "coffee-table" atlases.

Names and Naming

Generic terms are not as powerful evocators of place as are proper names. To call a feature

in the landscape a "mount" is already to impart to it a certain character, but to call it "Mount Misery" is to significantly enhance its distinctiveness, making it stand out from other rises less imaginatively called. The proper name and the geographical feature so merge in the consciousness of the people who know both that to change the name is to change, however subtly and inexplicably, the feature itself. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet." But in the experience of most people, this is simply not true. Most people take names seriously, whether they be their own, those of other people, or those of geographical places.

"That the Rockies are called the Rockies is now written in stone, but how subtly different they—and North America itself—would seem if the range had been named the Northern Andes, as it was called in 1804" ("Notes and Comments" 1989, 62).

Normally, only a sociopolitical revolution would bring about a change of name in a city or a nation. The idea behind taking such a step is not only that a correct label should be affixed to a new entity, but also that, somehow, the new name itself has the power to wipe out the past and call forth the new.

Naming is power—the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things. God ceded to Adam the right and the power to name "all cattle, the birds of heaven, and every wild animal" (Genesis 2:20). Parents have the right to name their children, masters in traditional China the right to give pet-names to their young servants. European explorers have presumed the right to name the geographical features in the lands they have discovered, sometimes displacing, sometimes adapting native ones. Often, they introduced names that embraced larger entities than were clearly recognized by the local inhabitants. Thus, French explorers in the seventeenth century carried the word "Mississippi" (of Algonquian origin) all the way from the source of the river in Minnesota to its mouth on the Gulf. In time, "Mississippi" displaced all other names (both Indian and Spanish) that applied to only limited stretches of the river (Upham 1969, 4–6). The name "Mississippi River," henceforth, evoked an image of a vast hydrological system: the name can be said to have created the system by making the entire river, and not just the parts visible

to observers on the ground, accessible to consciousness.

The most striking evidence of the power of naming to create a seemingly coherent reality out of a congerie of disparate parts is the existence of Asia. As we know from geography textbooks, Asia is a vast continent with a most curious western boundary that extends through the Straits of Dardanelles and Bosphorus, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, to the Ural Mountains. The continent, being made up of at least three major civilizations (Islam, Hindu, and Chinese) and a host of other cultures, including the nonliterate cultures of Siberia, obviously lacks any sort of unity (Steadman 1956). Its origin and early importance lay elsewhere than Asia. We may trace the continent in its present shape and size back to the end of the seventeenth century, when modern Western people felt the need for a collective name to designate their own society and culture. The traditional name "Western Christendom" no longer served in view of the Protestant Reformation which had split the West along theological lines; moreover, the Wars of Religion made Westerners doubtful of the aptness of Christendom (Toynbee 1954, 8:708-29). "Europe" came to be seen as the handy term with which to describe a geographical area and an assortment of peoples, which, by the late seventeenth century, did have a large measure of unity in linguistic and civilizational origin, in physical (racial) type, and in religion. Asia, then, was defined negatively as all that was not Europe. Asia's reason for existence was to serve as the backward, yet glamorous because exotic, Other. It had no independent reality; and yet, in the course of time, people who lived in this European creation began to accept it and to exploit the name of Asia, and the sociopolitical reality it could call into existence, for their own purposes. Thus, in 1943 during the Second World War, the Japanese assembled a pan-Asian conference, at which Asian leaders were encouraged to see the conflict, not as Japanese aggression, but as the struggle between East and West, Asians and Occidentals. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was another Japanese attempt to capitalize on the unifying power of a word and a concept, although in this case the countries of Asia quickly saw through the ploy (Dower 1986, 6). After the War, the Bandung Conference of 1955 markedly enhanced the awareness of peoples of very

diverse backgrounds that they were, collectively, Asians and Africans. At another level, the establishment of celebratory occasions such as the Asian Olympic Games continues the process of reifying the concept of Asia so that by now this original European conjuration, with hardly any basis in fact, is a permanent reality for Asians and Westerners.

Maintenance and Enhancement of Meaning: Oral and Informal

A material building, if not properly maintained, will soon fall apart. To continue to exist, places must be kept in good repair. They can also be improved upon through alterations and additions. Much the same is true of places created by language, oral and written. "Mount Misery" will fade from consciousness if it is not kept alive by social support—if the name is not passed on by word of mouth or written on a map that is periodically consulted. "Mount Misery" will continue to exist in people's minds and even, in the course of time, seem more real if not only the name is used but stories, continually elaborated, are told. What was a mere marker on the horizon can be transformed, by imaginative narration, into a vivid presence.

Friends may help each other build a house and, later, help to improve it with the offer of a fine landscape painting that would fit nicely on a bare wall in the living room. Friends can also help each other build place by verbal means. They may be less aware of this verbal assistance because the changes it brings about are psychological rather than material. Our society tends to discount the psychological, even though we know from common experience that changes in perception and attitude can seem to alter an environment more markedly than if it had been physically changed. Here is an illustration of how the process works. It is taken from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1944, 69-70). Mole and the Water Rat are good friends. Rat has entertained Mole in his delightfully cozy rowing boat. Now it is Mole's turn to reciprocate the hospitality. But he is ashamed of his house which he regards as a "poor, cold little place." Rat's handsome response is to recreate his friend's house verbally and with appropriate gestures. "So compact! So well planned! Everything here and every-

thing in its place!" He sets to build a fire, gets Mole to dust the furniture, but Mole discovers a new source of shame: there is no food.

"No bread!" groaned the Mole dolorously; "no butter, no—"

"No *pâté de fois gras*, no champagne!" continued the Rat grinning. "Ah, that reminds me—what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute."

Down Rat goes, and back he comes, a bottle of beer in each hand, and one under each arm: "Self-indulgent beggar you seem to be, Mole," he observed. "Deny yourself nothing. This is really the jolliest place I ever was in. Now wherever did you pick up those prints? Make the place so home-like, they do. No wonder you're fond of it, Mole. Tell us all about it, and how you came to make it what it is."

One house may look much like another, as in a housing estate, and yet such houses may be very different places to the people who live in them because, in the one, a Mole-Rat kind of dialogue has occurred and, in the other, it has not; in the one, a cellar, a little door at the end of the passage, or a wall with prints on them, has been illumined by the remarks of a friend, and in another, not. Homes are "cold" without people, and come alive with them. But how? The precise way by which the human presence, human feelings, and human communication add to the warmth and aliveness of a place, or, to the contrary, drain it of warmth and meaning is little understood: indeed, social scientists and cultural geographers have taken little notice of the fact itself—the fact that the quality of human communication, including (preeminently) the kinds of words and the tone of voice used, seems to infect the material environment, as though a light—tender, bright, or sinister—has been cast over it.

"Look at the rivulets of rain on the window pane," says a man to a woman as they finish a second cup of coffee in the kitchen one Sunday morning. Remarks, so ordinary in themselves but multiplied and spread over the years, sustain and enhance the meaning of place. Such meaning is private to the individuals concerned, and the space thus illumined is indoor space. The stranger walking along the sidewalk cannot hear the talk or see the room in which it occurs. Language, however, is not confined to the private sphere: it is not only the casual spoken word that leaves no mark except in the consciousness of the listener. Some stories have mythic power; they can be told over and over

again to an entire group and so belong to the public realm. Dramatic narration is able to create and sustain place, as the experience of the Australian Aborigines shows.

Maintenance and Enhancement of Meaning: Literary Works

In modern literate societies, the written text has largely supplanted storytelling. The written text, which is both more private and more public than the spoken word, has its own unique powers of transforming reality. Books are often read and savored in the secluded privacy of one's home: passages too subtle and complex to be understood at first can be read over and over again so that, in time, they seem to express one's own deepest feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, books have a certain permanence as physical objects. They are there on the shelf, potentially accessible to all who can read, and all who read the same book share the basic material furnishing and feeling-tone of a common world—the world of a Lady Murasaki, Balzac, or Conan Doyle. Fictional worlds can profoundly infect the real world. 221B Baker Street is more vividly present to some Londoners than are the apartment homes of their maiden aunts, and more real by far to tourists than are the hotels they temporarily occupy (Tuan 1986). Although people who read little may still be affected second-hand by the masterworks of literature, it goes without saying that a literary person's sense of reality is more thoroughly penetrated by what he or she has studied and absorbed. Here in capsule form is an example of how John Updike (1980, 35–36) experienced London.

The city overwhelmed our expectations. The Kiplingesque grandeur of Waterloo Station, the Eliotic despondency of the brick row in Chelsea . . . the Dickensian nightmare of fog and sweating pavement and besmirched cornices that surrounded us when we awoke—all this seemed too authentic to be real. . . . We wheeled past mansions by Galsworthy and parks by A. A. Milne; we glimpsed a cobbled eighteenth-century alley, complete with hanging tavern boards, where Dr. Johnson might have reeled and gasped the night he laughed so hard—the incident in Boswell so beautifully amplified in the essay by Beerbohm.

London has an unmistakable personality, thanks in part to the influence of its rich literature, and yet, at the same time, the city can

seem unreal precisely because it is so thoroughly transformed by the literary imagination. In a modern society in which empiricism, hard science, and control over matter are highly valued, people still find it difficult to accept the seemingly magical idea that mere words can call places into being.

Chinese Garden and Landscape

Societies differ in the degree of importance they assign to the written word. Chinese society is exceptional in that its people are believed to hold the written word in almost superstitious awe. As evidence, one might point to the culture's rich historical record and the high respect given to the scholar. I would like to offer another line of evidence, which bears directly on our theme, namely, the role of words in the completion of a garden and in the appreciation of landscape art and landscape.

In eighteenth-century Europe, a major source of inspiration for garden design was the picturesque painting. Landscape painting and landscape gardening were commonly viewed as branches of the same art: one composed a garden as one might compose a picture. In China, too, painting and gardening were closely linked. But, in contrast to Europe, the provisioning of short texts—made up of only a few words—was and is an integral part of Chinese landscaping art. Words complete the garden: the eloquence of rocks and water, pavilions and balustrades, seems muted and uncertain without the added eloquence and authority of literary texts. How a great garden is constructed and completed is told in a novel, written in the middle of the eighteenth-century, and called *The Story of the Stone*. The novel describes a great family, which was about to be honored by a visit of a daughter of the house, who also happened to be an Imperial Concubine. A special garden had to be built to accommodate such an august personage. The work was all done except for the inscriptions. The head of the family, Jia Zheng, and his guests came to take a look.

"These inscriptions are going to be difficult," Jia Zheng said. "By rights, of course, Her Grace should have the privilege of doing them herself; but she can scarcely be expected to make them up out of her head without having seen any of the views which they are to describe. On the other hand, if

we wait until she has already visited the garden before asking her, half the pleasure of the visit will be lost. All those prospects and pavilions—even the rocks and trees and flowers will seem somehow incomplete without that touch of poetry which only the written word can lend a scene (Cao 1973, 1:324–25).

Note again the last sentence. The physical features of the garden are all very well, but they will seem unfinished and lacking in poetry unless the written word comes to their aid. The Chinese connoisseurs have not actually said that words call objects into being, wake up rocks and flowers, imbuing them with life and meaning, and yet something of that belief is there. The visual alone does not rise to the full potential of its power. Words must also be used. And if they are needed in the garden, the multifaceted reality of which is already provided for by its power to stimulate multisensorially, they are all the more needed on a purely visual object—a landscape painting. Far more words appear on a painting than on the plaques of a garden. Indeed, words may form a dense composition that covers half the space of a scroll. Westerners, accustomed to a short title or even the word "untitled" on their canvases, are taken aback by this dependence on verbal interpretation, until they learn that to the Chinese artist, calligraphy, poetry, and painting are all part of one venture, the purpose of which is to evoke—or, to put it more strongly, to conjure or create—the personality and mood of a landscape.

Words enhance the picture by directing attention to sensory effects that cannot be directly shown, such as sounds and fragrances. But they enhance a visual image in other ways as well. Consider the approach of Li Rihua (1565–1635), one of the most important artist-literary figures of his time (Li 1987a, 20). On a fan painting of his, he inscribes the following poem:

Rain from the hills comes from time to time; Light mist appears morning and evening. I open my book without knowing where to turn, and find moss all over my desk.

The words supply a temporal dimension to landscape that the visual image alone cannot provide. How can one show pictorially a light mist that appears "morning and evening"? How can one show the mood of a poet listlessly opening his book and finding "moss all over [his] desk"? One may not be able to show, but one can tell, and this the Chinese artist has always been quite willing to do. Temporal

depth—the past—carries prestige. A gnarled tree already suggests age, but perhaps more can be done for that tree, making it even more forcefully present and worthy of respect, through the use of a literary allusion? In Li Rihua's painting of six different trees in a natural setting, he has written six lines over the work, each of which identifies a tree with an ancient wise man—thus: "The sparse fir, cold and stern, is like Wang Wugong."

If copious writing appears on a pictorial scroll or in an album, the reason may lie in that it contains not only the artist's poem or prose but also those of his friends, written perhaps at different times. The owner of a scroll, who may not be the artist, can increase the value of a work by asking famous literary figures to provide colophons: the more such colophons are inscribed on the picture, the greater will be its value, even though the spread of words may threaten the integrity of the pictorial image itself. An artfully depicted image already has presence: the mountains and water, the gnarled trees, already potently signify. But the Chinese characteristically believe that poems and poetic prose can deepen the visually projected meaning, and even that the more eloquent words accrue to the painting, the more it comes to life, especially if their addition occurs over an extended period of time.

What is true of a picture of place is also true of a real place. The meaning of an actual physical place is the result of a historical and social process, built up over time by large and small happenings. The large happenings may enter a people's lore and be passed on orally. The small, seemingly inconsequential happenings will, however, quickly fade from memory if their unique flavor and poignancy were not recreated in words, preferably written words that endure and have a certain public visibility. The meaning of a picture deepens with the gradual swelling of coordinated voices—the colophons, which are written with not only the picture and its artist in mind but also in response to the verses that are already there (Li 1987b, 41). We have, then, an instance of the social—more specifically, the conversational—construction of pictorial place. The meaning of a real place is constructed in a like manner, through accretional layers of gossip and song, oral history, written history, essays and poems; and through pictures, but we have just noted that the pictures themselves draw meaning from

the (sometimes ample) inscriptions. To an extent perhaps unique among civilizations, Chinese cities and landscapes have been spoken and written into existence.

Geographers and the Making of Place

In studying how places at all scales have come into existence, geographers have focused almost exclusively on material processes and socioeconomic forces, without raising, explicitly, the role of language. It is as though all the socioeconomic (and political) forces can be marshaled and the processes of material transformation occur, in the absence of words. Put this way, the idea is manifestly absurd. If geographers in the past nevertheless appear to have accepted it tacitly, one reason may lie in their long-held belief that geography is the description of the earth, and that words which simply describe have no power to bring about change. On the face of it (that is, without raising the complex issue of the relations of language to reality), this belief is psychologically incomprehensible, for why would anyone want to talk about or write on geography if the effort has no effect whatsoever?

What effects can the geographer's words have? My answer is that the geographer's words are a special case of the power of language in general; hence, their effects are of two kinds. The first is practical. I have noted earlier that in any cooperative effort to effect change, some sort of plan and procedure must be formulated and communicated to members of the group: one person says to another, "Here are the facts, as I see them. These are the forces that operate, and these are the steps that need to be taken to carry out our project. What do you say?" The applied geographer says something similar, only more specialized: "Here is a map of the traffic flow of the city. The bottleneck downtown is created by the space-time paths of workers and shoppers from points X and Y. If we want to ease the bottleneck, the following steps need to be taken. What do you say?"

The second kind of effect—the one I have focused on in this paper—is perceptual. And it is the more basic of the two, for it rests on the fact that words—names, proper names, taxonomies, descriptions, analyses, and so on—

can, for a start, draw attention to things: aspects of reality hitherto invisible, because unnoticed, become visible. The explorer-geographer's power to name, and thereby establish the presence of a topographic feature, is an example I have already used. Academic geographers seldom have the opportunity to name a mountain or river, but they nevertheless have "named" entities on earth, from the climatic zones of the ancient Greeks, to the natural regions favored by nineteenth-century geographers, to the modern geographer's metropolitan fields. Do these entities exist independently of the geographer's (as it were) formal pronouncements—official baptism? A full answer would take us too far afield. Tentatively, I would say that we are dealing with degrees of perceptual presence: a mountain or a river is present to the people who live in its neighborhood even though they have not applied words to it; climatic zones can be felt by anyone who has traveled some distance along a meridian, but the vividness of these zones in consciousness is very likely enhanced if the traveler is also aware of Eudoxus's classification and its evocative (torrid, temperate, frigid) labels. At the other extreme, natural regions may have no existence outside the consciousness of geographers. And yet if geographers are eloquent enough they can persuade other people to accept these entities, with possible political consequences.

Geographers are able to create place by their eloquence. Theirs is a special kind of eloquence, based on knowledge, which makes it more precise and rounded than, say, that of the local Chambers of Commerce. Ronald Abler et al. (1976) have enhanced the image—the visibility—of the Twin Cities by their skillful marshaling of facts, use of words and pictures. A person reading their monograph, if only the section called "The Good Life in a Good Place," may decide to waver no longer and move to the Twin Cities. J. B. Jackson (1970, 61–72) has eloquently argued that the strip which so often stretches along the highway of a booming American town has its own aesthetic panache, overlooked by traditionalist planners and architects. Listening to his arguments can make one shift one's mental-perceptual habit so that one attends to, rather than avoids, what the strip can offer or has the potential to offer. Jackson's view has influenced the architect Robert Venturi, who in turn has produced an

influential book called *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi et al. 1972). On the other hand, a geographer can subtly undermine the innocent eye or the official view. David Harvey's (1979) study of Sacré-Coeur in Paris comes to mind. This white, shining Byzantine-Romanesque basilica—a tourist if not a religious attraction of considerable drawing power—has been given a more sombre tone by Harvey's excavations into its history, which makes one wonder whether, to anyone who has read the article, it can still be the same edifice.

Making and Unmaking: The Moral Dimension

If people have the power to build, they also have the power to destroy, and on the whole, it is easier to destroy than to build. It takes skill to put up even a modest house and little skill to deface or burn it down. It takes full documentation and a high degree of eloquence to elevate a person's reputation, relatively little to denigrate it, as all who have sat on selection committees and read letters of recommendation know. In this paper, I have chosen to emphasize the use of language to build rather than to destroy, but this does not, of course, mean that it is always morally superior to create than to decreate, to put a place up than to tear it down. Indeed, we are often under moral obligation to belittle and decreate: witness, the recent heart-warming history of the Berlin Wall—first its defacement by graffiti, then its physical destruction. Likewise, in the name of truth, we may be under obligation to deflate the reputation of a geography guru, a dominant culture, an upscale restaurant, or a booming city.

Yet, it remains true that denigration, defacement, and destruction are means rather than ends. Moreover, the very fact that destruction is relatively easy should make one pause and ask, "Do I really have something better to put in its place?" My concern is with the linguistic creation of place. The place thus created can be good, but it can also be a monster, as some material places are monsters. Has the creation of Asia really benefited the peoples of that part of the world? Is the nation-state, unrealizable without a gargantuan structure of (often) bloated words, really a good place? Words have consequence. Almost everything we say illumi-

nates some object and casts shadow over others. The kind of place that Rat recreates for his friend Mole, bringing into light qualities of which Mole himself is unaware, is within the power of most people, although the act does call for skill and wisdom, including moral sensitivity; and in the case of speech, this means when and what to say and how to say it.

The power of words is exercised daily in the private sphere. It may well be that there language enters its true element; for, in general, language's capacity for nuance and subtlety, for evoking a multisensorial and multisignificative presence that no simple physical action can, requires a circumscribed setting. But surely we would not want to confine the creative power of language there. Public places too are made and sustained by language. To a degree little recognized by geographers and planners, the visibility and viability of places—neighborhoods, downtowns, regions, and the globe itself—rest on the quality of human speech. Grandiloquent speech usually goes with grandiloquent action, and may well end in pretentious and inhumane monuments. If we are under obligation to build well, we are also under obligation to speak well, for the two are part of the same uniquely human, world-making process.

Implications for Human-Cultural Geography: Summary and Concluding Remarks

In the early 1960s, a new way of doing human-cultural geography emerged, and it now goes generally by the name "perceptual" (Lowenthal 1967). The success of the perceptual approach is attested by its inclusion, as a matter of course, in nearly all recent historical and cultural studies. I now urge that speech and the written word be considered integral to the construction of place, and therefore integral to the geographer's understanding of place. Language is important to students of place not only because a Thomas Hardy or Willa Cather has written evocatively on landscape, and has thus provided a literary standard that geographers should seek to emulate in their own writing; rather language is important—indeed central—because humans are language animals, and

language is a force that all of us use everyday to build, sustain, and destroy. It is a practical force, as when workers discuss among themselves how best to raise the roof beam, and it is an imaginative force as when a person recommends a seaside resort to a friend, making that particular place visible, casting others in the shade; and it can be an imaginative force, affecting the quality of place, even when the topic of the verbal exchange has nothing to do with the place itself, for it is a common experience that warm conversation, as such, brightens a room and violent confrontation, as such, makes it look sinister.

Taking language seriously has a number of intellectual consequences or rewards. It enables us to understand the process of place-making better by recognizing a force previously neglected, if not wholly ignored. It enables us to understand the *quality* (the personality or character) of place better, for that quality is imparted by, along with visual appearance and other factors, the metaphorical and symbolic powers of language. Taking language seriously shows, moreover, that the "quality" of place is more than just aesthetic or affectional, that it also has a *moral* dimension, which is to be expected if language is a component in the construction and maintenance, for language—ordinary language—is never morally neutral. There is another reward, which I can only touch on here, namely, it helps us to see why environmentalism (the idea that the physical environment influences behavior and perception) sometimes works, but rarely in a decisive or determined way. One reason is that speech may mediate between environment and behavior. In a restaurant, for instance, the conversation may indeed be about food, thus showing the influence of the environment; but it may be about something very different—say, unhappy marital affairs, in which case the tenor of that conversation will affect the participants' eating behavior and probably also their attitude to the physical character of the restaurant (Tuan 1990).

Finally, students who read this paper may ask, "But what method or methods does the author recommend for pursuing this line of inquiry?" It will go far beyond my original intention to attempt an answer here. However, I would note that, in the 1960s, when the perceptual approach was advocated, students raised the same sort of question, including, "How can one cap-

ture and study something so subjective and elusive as perception?" The answer is that one can, and the methods eventually used by geographers range from the scientific to the cultural-humanistic, from social and field surveys to the reading of perceptual values in images and texts. As to how to incorporate language, I would say, first of all, that an extensive body of data, oral and written, already exist and that these can be examined with an eye to their role in the creation of place. I have indicated how varied the linguistic material can be—everything from plant names and Australian Aboriginal songs to fictional works and colophons on Chinese landscape scrolls; and I have also indicated that the power of language can be explored at a variety of scales, using different methods and approaches. I have mentioned three. One is cultural—the varying ways by which different societies use speech and/or the written word to realize place. (This is the scale and approach adopted in the present paper.) The second is sociopolitical—how, for example, Europeans have been able to acquire enough power to utter the word "Asia" and make it take hold firmly and permanently all over the world. The third is purely linguistic and literary—the as yet little understood process by which words, grammar, semantics and syntax can evoke place.

Approaches differ in the scope and depth of the area they illuminate. Linguistic and sociopolitical approaches, drawing on specialized methods and concepts, tend to be more penetrating than inclusive. By contrast, the cultural approach, which draws on narrative and descriptive techniques that in their fundamentals are intuitively understood and employed by all story-telling humans, has the merit of being more inclusive and faithful to the complexities of actual experience, but it is less analytically penetrating. My principal task here, however, is not to solve any technical problem, such as the way metaphors do and do not work; rather it is to provide a broad overview of how language creates place. I wish to show with the help of a wide range of examples that words and speech are a vital force, and to carve a place for this force in human-cultural geography; it would be ironic if I fail, for failure will have demonstrated that in this particular instance words—my words—are neither persuasive nor enlightening.

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