

## **Holding Center: Ecopsychological Portraits on the Poetics of Place**

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(See also: <https://www.depthinsights.com/Depth-Insights-scholarly-ezine/holding-center-ecopsychological-portraits-on-the-poetics-of-place-by-dana-swain/> )

*One thing is certain: the very act of putting the nonhuman world at the periphery of what is cultivated marginalizes Nature . . . What if the supposed margin is itself center?* (Casey, 1993, p. 186).

Ecopsychology is a relative newcomer to the psychological scene, emerging in the latter part of the 20th century to address the peculiar and particular pathos of the modern human—alienation from our ecological roots. Theodore Roszak, who coined the term, understood that it is a new discipline but an old path, one that indigenous cultures have walked for millennia. According to Roszak (1992), “Ecopsychology seeks to heal the more fundamental alienation between the recently created urban psyche and the age-old natural environment” (para. 9). Ecopsychology has close affiliation with Jungian depth psychology particularly because both disciplines recognize the reality of the unconscious, and accept that psyche and nature exist not as separate entities that orbit each other, but as a continuum of an animated expression. A basic tenant of ecopsychology is that there is a “synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being . . . the needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the rights of the planet” (para. 13).

The discipline of ecopsychology is the study of the psyche’s relationship with its natural environment, her fundamental home. When we reflect on one, we are reflecting on the other. James Hillman (n.d.), recognized by many as the founder of archetypal psychology said, “an individual’s harmony with his or her ‘own deep self’ requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world” (n.d, para. 6). Philosopher Edward Casey (1993) suggests that nature too, has its interiority and can never be completely separate from us, because there is no ultimate Cartesian boundary of “in here” and “out there.” (p. 187).

Place is a fundamental reality that it is often overlooked. Place is the earth, the landscape, the region, the home, and even the body. Differing places elicit their own unique contemplations, their own voices, but it requires someone to take the time to attune and witness them. Place is also narrative, because it is in the narrative about place that our interiority of imagination interweaves with the materiality of “place-ness,” which in turn creates a field of reciprocity, and in reciprocity we are never alone. It is *poetic* narrative that navigates the interiorized and exteriorized landscape best because poetics hold the essence of narrative most closely in the formation of image, which touches our emotions and our experiences most intimately, drawing us in a closer embrace to our natural world. When we care for places, we are caring for our own subjective vivacity, tending our own creative imagination, forming inner realms and regions as we attempt to responsibly, thoughtfully, participate in the formation and stewardship of the regions of the earth.

In our post-modern culture our high-speed, high-tech urbanized landscape has left us fundamentally disoriented. Not only has modern culture “paved paradise and put up a parking lot” (Mitchell, 1970) in most every developed and developing nation in the world, we rarely have the time to notice what has transpired. We seem to be stumbling after an idea of center that is always tantalizingly out of reach, and somehow has become conflated with the ideology of consumerism. The phenomenological reality is that center is always in the present, always wherever one is, always in nature because we exist within nature. Casey (1993) asks the fundamental and obvious question that our lack of mindfulness repeatedly overlooks:

What if Nature is the true a priori, that which was there first, that from which we come, that which sustains us even as we cultivate and construct? . . . Nature is not just around us; or rather, there is no getting around Nature, which is at all times under us, indeed in us. In this regard, Nature can be considered the ‘Encompassing’ . . . in the literal sense of the word, ‘to be within the compass of.’  
(p. 186)

This essay is a contemplation of aspects of nature as center, as landscape, as a priori space and place, as it changes in form, in function, in expression, but always reflects and dialogues with the psyche of the human world. Gary Snyder (1990), in his book, *Practice of the Wild* suggests, “It is not enough just to ‘love nature’ or to want to ‘be in harmony with Gaia.’ Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (p. 42).

## **The Symbolic Landscape**

Since Neolithic times humans have left evidence all over the earth of their communion, worship, and celebration of nature. Egyptians made pyramids so that pharaohs could be laid to rest with many of their worldly belongings so they would not pass through the gateway of the underworld empty handed. Older still than the pyramids are the henges and megalithic structures scattered throughout the landscape of the United Kingdom. These henges ranged from singular sites of worship that seem to have aligned with astrological aspects, like that of Stonehenge, to sites such as the Avebury henge that appears to have been a complex of sites used to celebrate life, death, and seasonal rituals (Devereux, 1992, p. 116). There are thousands of sacred or symbolic sites in the landscape across the globe, and they speak to an older way of acknowledging, respecting, and living with nature. While some sites were chosen for their relationship to the landscape or to the sun, moon, and stars, other sites seem arbitrary to our modern mind, but no doubt held deep, cultural relevance.

Snyder (1990) suggests that places in the landscape are given a sacred meaning by the cultural heritage endemic to a place, by the elevated amounts of wildlife in the area, or for stories that happened at the site, or even for qualities in the earth that resemble human or animal form—such as faces that seem to protrude from rocky areas. Snyder notes that

“these places are gates through which one can . . . more easily be touched by a larger-than-human, larger-than-personal, view”☞ (p.100).

Casey (1993) delves even more deeply into the subtlety of the atmosphere of place. For Casey, perhaps beyond concrete appearance or fruitfulness and fertility of an area there is a presence in nature itself that humans sense when they perceive it as sacred:

The *atmosphere* is more thoroughly pervasive of wilderness than any other factor . . . It is the wildwise equivalent of what Heidegger calls ‘moodwise situatedness’ (*Befindlichkeit*). Atmosphere embodies the emotional tonality of a wild place, its predominant mood. When we are in such a place, we sense it not only as continuous with our own feeling—or as reflecting that feeling—but also as itself containing feeling . . . *The atmosphere permeates everything*. (p. 219)

Casey links the word “atmosphere”☞ etymologically with the meaning of smoke and breath, and notes that it shares a root with the Sanskrit “atman,”☞ which means “Self”☞ and “soul”☞ which is also linked etymologically with “breath”☞ (p. 219). The breath for eastern meditation practices and philosophies is associated with pure consciousness, or that which leads to pure consciousness. Perceiving Nature’s atmosphere in this manner means attuning to an all-pervasive sense of consciousness, sentience, and presence in the landscape.

Like a Mobius strip, comprised of a single, non-orientable surface, the atmosphere of place and the atmosphere of human interiority iteratively and organically intermingle. If we experience consciousness and presence within ourselves, we also experience it “out there”☞ in the primeval landscape where presence existed first, long before humans had the capacity to detect it. If we fall into the hubristic perspective of the primacy of the subjective ego above all other forms of consciousness, the landscape does not lose its sentience; its gift of itself is simply removed from us by our own ignorant agency.

## **The Imaginal Landscape**

What I term here the imaginal landscape is concurrent with the symbolic landscape, but with a subtle difference. I define “symbol”☞ in the manner C.G. Jung defined it, as the image that arises from the unconscious, whether personal or collective, that has a particularly compelling affective quality associated with its archetypal foundation. The imaginal as I am conceiving it, is closer to Henry Corbin’s concept of the creative imagination. According to Corbin, the creative imagination is an organ of perception that lies between the rational conscious thought process and the objects of perception, and “a means by which we perceive symbols”☞ (Cheetham, 2012, p. 102). The symbolic landscape is perceived through the imaginal organ of perception, which is co-located—or pervasive—to both human beings and the landscape. In this sense the imaginal landscape and the atmosphere of place are closely attuned.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1958) meditates on a similar concept that links the imagination to the landscape in his book, *The Poetics of Space*. He suggests that the daydream, similar to fantasy and perhaps cousin to Jung's concept of active imagination, has a tendency to muse about grandeur, or immensity. In so doing, a particular quality of subjective space ensues that resembles infinity (p. 183). It is through quiet contemplation that a person daydreams, or activates the creative imagination, and the objects of contemplation are forms that exist in the world. The immensity that lies within as imagination or daydream is also external in space, and the two have a symbiotic relationship:

It would seem, then, that it is through their 'immensity' that these two kinds of space—the space of intimacy and the world space—blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical . . . In this coexistentialism every object invested with intimate space becomes the center of all space. For each object, distance is the present, the horizon exists as much as the center. (p. 203)

Bachelard suggests that “each new contact with the cosmos renews our inner being, and that every new cosmos is open to us when we have freed ourselves from the ties of a former sensitivity” (p. 206).

James Hillman (1982) holds a similar notion, but situates his argument psychologically. Hillman suggests that the popular western view of a subjective psychic reality and an external dead world of objects is a limited and lop-sided view. He re-introduces the term *anima mundi* or “world soul,” as the Platonists conceived it (p. 101). Hillman suggests the world soul is not to be found in a transcendent world or a kind of unifying life principle that runs throughout the world:

Rather let us imagine the *anima mundi* as that particular soul-spark, that seminal image, which offers itself through each thing in its visible form. Then *anima mundi* indicates the animated possibilities presented by each event as it is, its sensuous presentation as a face bespeaking its interior image—in short, its availability to imagination, its presence as a psychic reality. (p. 101)

For Hillman, it is not that we psychologically project our internal psychic life onto objects, but that objects contain in themselves their own expression that compels us and enlivens the imagination. It is not only when a thing is beautiful that we are attracted to it, but that “the soul of the thing corresponds or coalesces with ours” (p. 102). Hillman argues for an aesthetic sensibility towards the world. He says, “the *anima mundi* is simply not perceived if the organ of this perception remains unconscious by being conceived only as a physical pump or a personal chamber of feeling” (p. 108). If this organ of perception is the creative imagination, then it is through the aesthetic sensibility of the creative imagination that the animated, alive ontological atmosphere of the *anima mundi* is perceived.

Jung, Casey, Corbin, Bachelard, and Hillman all point to facets of an emerging (and already eminent to many non-western cultures) ecological image: an ensouled natural environment that is not as separate as our western cultural worldview conceives of it. It is an image of the natural world that interacts with us not only physiologically, but also symbolically and imaginally. We can experience this reality directly when we take the time to notice it, become still and engage our imagination and our aesthetic sensibility, and relativize the ego from its dominant position in our perception, which blocks a more comprehensive vision.

## **The Mythopoetic and Cultural Landscape**

As long as humans are interacting with the natural environment, there is culture. Part of culture is the poetic narrative of myth. One function of myths is to speak about the origins of the world and the role of the people within that cosmological order. Myths often hold deep psychological wisdom and truth. Myths are embedded in the landscape, as if the landscape invoked the myths and the culture itself by its presence. The forms in myth are taken from form in the landscape; the way a culture develops—cuisines, language, wardrobes, architecture, and stories—are all at least partially dictated by the landscape. The landscape evokes its own expression in part through the humans who are occupying its domain. This is not to say that the landscape requires humans for expression, rather that the inter-subjectivity of physical, symbolic, and imaginal landscape with the human psyche creates a third field of expression that is culture. Depending on the landscape the culture is enmeshed in, certain archetypal energies embedded in the land will also be apparent in the culture.

Jung often spoke of the importance of myth for a culture. Myth implied meaning, direction, and archetypal and psychological truths. While entire cultures would adhere to a particular mythic story, Jung believed in the necessity for personal myth as well. Without the individual mythic narrative a person would suffer from lack of meaning. Part of Jung's own myth, and no doubt his way of connecting deeply to emanations of new myths arising in his psyche, was to spend time in nature. He built his own tower home in Bolligen, Switzerland, where he could escape the chatter and busyness of the city. Jung (1961) wrote:

At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things . . . There is nothing in the Tower that has not grown into its own form over the decades, nothing with which I am not linked. Here everything has its history, and mine; here is space for the spaceless kingdom of the world's and the psyche's hinterland. (pp. 225-226)

At the same time, traveling to other locations and experiencing the atmosphere and people of a totally unknown region tremendously inspired Jung. He was impressed and overwhelmed by New York, moved deeply in Taos, New Mexico, by a Native American who instigated his realization that the European civilization "had another face—the face of a bird of prey seeking with cruel intentness for distant quarry" (Jung,

1961, p. 248), and felt a deep kinship with Africa and the African people. Something stirred Jung deeply when witnessing a solitary African warrior on a ridge. Jung wrote:

I had the feeling that I had already experienced this moment and had always known this world which was separated from me only by distance in time . . . I could not guess what string within myself was plucked at the sight of that solitary dark hunter. I know only that his world had been mine for countless millennia. (p. 254)

The experience of different landscapes and cultures gave Jung access to his own psychic depths in a manner he would not have experienced by staying in Switzerland. These quotes from Jung are personal narratives with mythic and cultural implications for all. When we witness the landscape, regardless of whether it is our place of origin or a place alien to us, we are dialoguing consciously or unconsciously with nature, as with the urge to travel, to see new sites, to hike a mountain because one can. The explicit goal may not be to have a dialogue with nature, with the landscape, or to deepen our psychological knowing and healing as a result of this dialogue, but often that is the unconscious urge.

### **The Global Soul in a Techno-fied Landscape?**

The ideal situation to heal the earth as we heal ourselves is to engage the natural environment through the concrete and the imaginal, having the time and the solitude to tune into the interiority of psyche as human and psyche as world, and experiencing the interconnection, indeed the continuum, of beingness between the two. This is what ecopsychologists strive to bring to human awareness. But what is the current reality of our global life? If our natural world is a reflection of the state of the soul in humans as well as the earth, we are in dire straits. Our technology has given us access to vast amounts of information and led to profound breakthroughs in many science and technologies, but it has sped up the lived experience of time. When time is of the essence, everything is urgent, but there is no sitting with the essence of time. Particularly for Westerners, time becomes a series of tasks, the next text, the next bauble of information to play with. Studies show that the speed of technology has withered our ability to focus for long periods of time because we have become addicted to quick bytes of data to download like junk food that never satisfies. Andy Fisher (2013), in *Radical Ecopsychology*, gets to the crux of our addiction to technology when he insightfully observes, “we generally prefer to *stimulate* ourselves . . . rather than to *resensitize* ourselves. To the extent that we can do the latter, however, the benefits are tremendous, for (among other gains) we reclaim a centre for ourselves” (p. 183).

Technology has also made the entire world more accessible through transportation and travel, allowing engagement with many different landscapes. There is a diversification of cultural populations in foreign countries never seen before, much of it a result of dislocation from countries in economic or military conflict. The friction of cultures intermixing at a furious rate is akin to a global Tower of Babel with no one speaking the same language or currency of culture, scattered over the planet in dizzying and disorienting arrays. It as if the earth itself is muttering through all its different languages,

feeling the loss of its own mythic meaning. Pico Iyer (2000) addresses this postmodern dilemma in his book *The Global Soul*. Iyer suggests this “global soul” is part of a new myth arising, one that is as problematic as it is a potential opportunity. For Iyer, the global soul:

Would be facing not just new answers to the old questions but a whole new set of questions . . . His sense of obligation would be different, if he felt himself part of no fixed community, and his sense of home, if it existed at all, would lie in the ties and talismans he carried round with him. Insofar as he felt a kinship with anyone, it would, most likely, be with other member of the Deracination-state. (p. 53)

There are potential rewards in this level of diversity. There are possibilities for new ways of being in the world, a deepening of understanding of our own humanity and of working with the earth. However the negative potentials are just as obvious and just as frequent. We experience more alienation, more conflict, more overuse and squandering of resources. There exists a tension of opposites in the global psyche of epic proportions. This tension revolves around the question of how to stay connected to place, to a sense of home, to the earth itself that gives us (and has for millennia) a sense of center, when the center is in fact not holding. This is the tension that the ecopsychologist must endure. The ecopsychologist must look back as he or she looks forward to what is, to the myth as it is actually emerging, not only to old myths that we wish to hang on to or re-instate. It is a tension of holding our very rootedness to the earth, with our techno-nomadic wanderings that will only increase. To be ecopsychological is to remember the old ways while becoming attuned to what is newly emerging. It is birthing a psyche into the world that hasn't forgotten where it comes from, but learns to find center everywhere.

So how do we find center everywhere? I think Iyer hints at this in the above quotation. It is in “the ties and talismans” one carries around. The etymology of the word talisman goes back to the ancient Greek word “telos,” or completion and wholeness, and “telein,” a religious rite. When we consciously carry our sacred connections with us, whether as object, memory, or narrative, we are staying whole and complete. When we tell stories of our home, create rituals where we are, and listen to the stories of others, we are weaving a new myth in the present time, one more complex and intricate than any that has yet emerged. We tie ourselves to place, wherever we find it, and for however long. This requires an awareness that our manic cosmopolitan pace rarely allows for, and so discerning times for technology and times to abstain from technology is also required. Holding to center means truly experiencing center everywhere—within ourselves and within the landscape. The pace at which the landscape slips by us, like a scene on a movie screen, increases exponentially, but the center is the screen and the screen is the earth and there is no place that is not earth, so we must tend to this center whether as interior or exterior landscape. As Fischer (2013) says, we re-sensitize ourselves, not by feeding our sensitivities, but by recalibrating our sensing bodies to the world around us.

As we listen and witness the individual and collective narratives of psyche and culture, we begin to hear the voice of the earth speaking through us a part of our shared creative

imagination. Perhaps the answers to our dilemmas lie not just in our conscious rational minds, but are embedded in the earth, as they always have been and always will be, whether we heed the increasingly drowned out voices of the earth or not. Perhaps a new myth is emerging as old ones disintegrate, and the chaos of now is the psychic disorder before a new order can unfold. Eco-psychologists are part of the emerging myth, as champions and psychopomps for and from the more-than-human world.

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