

Place and Space in Wendell Berry's Poetry

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المكان والفضاء في شعر ويندل بيري

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Abstract

It has been centuries that humans have had a great negative impact on nature and its inhabitants. In Eclogues 7 (38 BC, lines 49-50), the Roman poet Publius Vergilius, known as Virgil describes how people more than two thousand years ago cut down trees and destroyed forests for their use. Also, in Retracing the Aurochs: History, Morphology and Ecology of an Extinct Wild Ox (2005, p 78), Cis Vuure and T. Vuure write that people were the reason behind the disappearance of aurochs in the year 1627 through hunting and expelling it from its habitat. The negative impact of people on nature and its organisms increased in the postmodern age, especially with the rapid development in technology, building a large number of factories, creating numerous means of transportation, producing, testing and using many kinds of weapons. This step and its impact have led many American ecopoets to write their poems focusing on nature and all organisms, among them Wendell Berry (1934-). The poet believes, people should have a good connection with all the living beings in the world and work to protect them. A term used to talk about this relation is being in place. Berry also has the view that people should realize they occupy a small place in the universe. This recognition helps them to understand why they need to be in total harmony with all the creatures. The term used here is to value space. This paper aims to demonstrate Wendell Berry's emphasis on creating a healthy relationship between humans and other living beings. It also highlights Berry's belief that recognizing humanity's rightful place in the natural order fosters humility and contributes to a harmonious coexistence with other organisms. Texts chosen are The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (1977), Home Economics (1987), Long-Legged House (2003), Imagination in Place (2010), "The Peace of Wild Things" (1968), "The Sycamore" (1968), "The Design of a House" (1968), "To the Unseeable Animal" (1970), "The Current" (1970), "The Man Born to Farming" (1970), "A Country of Marriage" (1973) and "The Record" (1994). Keywords: ecopoets, space, place, nature, harmony, interrelatedness wilderness.

مرت قرون وللبشر تأثير سلبي كبير في الطبيعة وكائناتها. ففي *الرعويات ٧* (٣٨ قبل الميلاد، الأسطر ٤٩-٥٠)، يصف الشاعر الروماني بوبليوس فيرجيليوس، المعروف باسم فيرجيل، يظهر كيف كان الناس قبل أكثر من ألفي عام يقطعون الأشجار ويمدرون الغابات لاستخدامها لأغراضهم. وأيضاً، في كتاب *تتبع خطى الثور البري: تاريخ وتشكل وبيئة ثور بري منقرض* (٢٠٠٥، ص ٧٨)، يكتب (سيس فور) و(ت. فور) أن البشر كانوا السبب وراء اختفاء الثور البري وطرده من موطنه؛ في عام ١٦٢٧. وقد ازداد التأثير السلبي للبشر في الطبيعة وكائناتها في عصر ما بعد الحداثة، خاصة مع التطور السريع في التكنولوجيا، وبناء عدد كبير من المصانع، وإنشاء العديد من وسائل النقل، فضلاً عن إنتاج واختبار واستخدام أنواع كثيرة من الأسلحة. وقد دفعت هذه الخطوة وتأثيرها العديداً من شعراء البيئة الأمريكيين إلى كتابة قصائدهم مع التركيز على الطبيعة وجميع الكائنات، ومن بينهم ويندل بيري (١٩٣٤-)، حيث يعتقد الشاعر أنه يجب أن تكون للناس علاقة جيدة مع جميع الكائنات الحية في العالم، وأن يعملوا على حمايتها. والمصطلح المستخدم للحديث عن هذه العلاقة هو "الوجود في المكان". كما يرى بيري أن على الناس أن يدركوا أنهم يشغلون مكاناً صغيراً في الكون. هذا الإدراك يساعدهم على فهم سبب حاجتهم إلى الانسجام التام مع جميع المخلوقات. والمصطلح المستخدم هنا هو "تقدير المساحة" يهدف هذا البحث إلى إظهار تأكيد ويندل بيري على خلق علاقة صحية بين البشر والكائنات الحية الأخرى. كما يسلط الضوء على اعتقاد بيري بأن إدراك المكانة الصحيحة للإنسانية في النظام الطبيعي، يعزز التوازن ويسهم في التعايش المتناغم مع الكائنات الأخرى. النصوص المختارة هي *زعزعة أمريكا: الثقافة والزراعة* (١٩٧٧)، *الاقتصاد المنزلي* (١٩٨٧)، *المنزل طويل الساقين* (٢٠٠٣)، *الخيال في المكان* (٢٠١٠)، "سلام الأشياء البرية" (١٩٦٨)، "شجرة الجميز" (١٩٦٨)، "تصميم منزل" (١٩٦٨)، "إلى الحيوان غير المرئي" (١٩٧٠)، "التيار" (١٩٧٠)، "الرجل المولود للزراعة" (١٩٧٠)، "بلد الزواج" (١٩٧٣) و"السجل" (١٩٩٤).

الكلمات المفتاحية: شعراء البيئة، الفضاء، المكان، الطبيعة، الانسجام، الترابط، البرية.

Place and Space in American Eco-poetry

Nature in the contemporary world is different from the nature of old times, in the sense it has been negatively impacted. That is why poets, some of whom that are known as eco-poets, deal with it differently. Also, critics observe expressions and techniques used in that genre in this new era, because they might discover that some of the expressions and techniques reflect this new reality. Place and space are two terms utilized in this field. If readers comprehend them well, they have a better understanding of the subject raised by the poets. Yi-Fu Tuan (2001, p. 6) defines place as an area that is well-known to a person. According to F. Lukermann (1961, p. 169), a place has some basic features, including a sense of restriction, as everything there is familiar to the person who lives in it. Edward Relph (1976, p. 49) adds more to this term and says, when someone is in a place, it means they are connected to it. The more they find themselves in that place, the more connection and relatedness they have with it. Relph (1976, p. 49) cites Lyndon's work on place (1962), who believes that when people are in a place, they find themselves inside a circle. That is why they know quite well where they are. For example, the womb of the mother is a place for a child as they feel safe and grow there. Then, the place enlarges to include the hug of the family members and the house where they live. As the child grows up, the place for them grows to involve the street where the house lies, the school where they study, the park in which they play, and the town or city they dwell in. For some people, the region and the country where they live become place too. What about space? According to Tuan (2001, p. 6), if an area holds secrets to a person, it is a space for them. This area might be a spot in which they expect a lack of safety and even danger (Relph, 1976, p 49). But it could be a region with the potential to be discovered, and so there is "freedom," as Tuan names it (2001, p. 6). For example, a big city is regarded to be a space for a tourist who has visited it for the first time, because they do not know much about it and might be obliged to have a guide or ask questions at times about destinations they want to go. Also, A big forest, like the Amazon, is a space, not only to the people of North America, Europe, Asia or Africa, but to the ones where part of the rainforest lies, like Brazil. Thus, knowing, safety, confidence, and familiarity come with place, while unknowing, secrets, fear or freedom accompany space (Tuan, 2001, p. 6).

Eco-poets; place and space

Earth is a big planet. There are areas where anyone in the world, no matter where they are, knows them well and feel safe there. But the more they travel and see cities, forests, deserts, mountains, seas and oceans, the better they realize they have little knowledge about this planet and occupy a small place in it. Hence, there is place and space for everyone in the world. According to Scott Bryson (2005, pp. 8-13), many eco-poets show a

world in which these two concepts are vital. What they emphasize is “to create place” and “to value space.” As far as the first expression is concerned, it means people must realize they are not the only living organisms in the world. So, they need to care for everything and should not be “placeless.” If someone is placeless, it does not mean there is nowhere for them to live and stay in. It rather means they do not think they belong to a place, and so they do not care for it. The second expression gives the sense that a lot is unknown to anyone in the world. That is why they must know they only occupy a very small place in this universe. Reaching this point is vital, because then they would be humble and work to protect all the species and even the non-living things in the world. Keith Basso (1996, pp. 32, 55), the linguistic anthropologist, calls the Western Apache tale-tellers of the United States place-makers. The tale-tellers offer versions of the world in their stories which are different from the one people live in and are familiar with. The storytellers make use of images and other elements of the past to tell the people that much has been changed in the past centuries in the world, including in their region. Consequently, the tale-tellers awaken the people and tell them that a lot needs to be done to make their environment a better place to live in. Bryson (2005, p. 11) believes the eco-poets do a similar work in the sense they push readers to think carefully and observe the area where they live. That is to say, to leave “space” and enter “place”. The result would be building a very strong link between people and the environment, and so there would be ‘place-making’. According to Leonard Scigaj (1999, p. 11), many eco-poets express the need for a healthy relationship between all the world's organisms in their poetry. They say what people do, affects the other living beings, and what happens in the world has an impact on humans too. Tana Welch (2014, p. 3) explains how in some works of Juliana Spahr's 2011 collection under the title *Well Then There Now* (2011), the reader sees the bond between man, Earth, and other organisms. For example, in “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours,” the poet shows the robust link between people, soil, trees, and birds. The poet repeats the expression “we are all in this world together” (pp. 13-14) several times. It means place in the Tuanian sense. But at the same time, she adds the other layer, the sense of space in the same work, as she later adds a word to the expression and says, “we all the small ones are together in this world” (p. 14). Joy Harjo is another American eco-poet who pays attention to the same connection in many of her poems. An example is “Remember” from the poetry collection *She Had Some Horses* (1983). The speaker reminds the addressee of many events and incidents. Some of them are related to celestial bodies, like the sun, the moon, and the stars. Some others are concerned with people, including father and mother. Others are about trees and animals. Sara Constantakis (2010a, pp. 185, 189) states, the poet uses the word remember sixteen times in the 26-line poem. The word plays a very important role and connects the addressee with all the elements of the universe. Harjo says: Remember you are all people and all people are you Remember you are this universe and this universe is you. (lines 19-22) At the same time, the reader can get the idea from the poem that humans are small beings in the whole cosmos, by observing the words mentioned: the sky, the stars, the Moon, the Sun, Earth, the plants, animal life, history and the universe. That is, there is space and place in the poem. Mary Oliver is another American eco-poet who highlights the need for harmony among all the living beings in the world and the necessity of being aware of human's position in the universe. In “The Black Snake,” from the poetry collection *Twelve Moons* (1979), Oliver shows how humans and other organisms share many things and are related in many ways. In the first stanza of the poem, a driver moves on a road that used to be a natural place where many plants and animals lived. The car hits a snake and kills it. In the second stanza, the poet mentions the snake as a dead sibling. Sara Constantakis (2010b, p. 25) suggests, this expression means all creatures are linked together and their current division is human-made, because nearly all have the same main components. For example, the flow of blood in their body is similar, and they are alike too in the work of their organ system. They are even born similarly and die nearly from the same causes. At the same time, readers might find themselves in a position of realizing their limited role and shortness of life in the face of the forces in this universe, as the poet thinks about death after the accident and knows it comes suddenly with “its terrible weight” (line 15). That is to say, many things remain mysteries and unknown, which indicate space.

Place and Space in Wendell Berry's Poetry

Wendell Berry (1934-) cares a lot for place in the Tuanian sense. After spending years in different cities in the United States and Europe, he returned to Kentucky in 1969 where generations of his family lived. In *Imagination in Place* (2010, p. 2), Berry talks about living in that state and says: The most intimate “world” of my life is thus a small one. The most intimate “world” of my fiction is even smaller: a town of about a hundred people, “Port William,” and a few farms in its neighborhood. Between these two worlds, the experienced and the imagined, there is certainly a relationship. Also in *Long-Legged House* (2003, p 223-224), Berry talks about

a hill near the town where his family lives. The hill is “an arm of Kentucky’s central upland known as The Bluegrass”. There are two creeks in the valley down the hill, “Gullion’s Branch” and “Cane Run”. Berry’s house is only about one “hundred steps” away from the river formed by the creeks. This detail description demonstrates Berry’s deep knowledge and sense of security in this area, supporting Tuan’s concept of place. This connection is directly expressed when Berry writes (p. 224), “all that any of us may know of ourselves is to be known in relation to this place.” When it comes to personal experience, Berry writes in the same work (pp. 223, 225) that his life cannot be separated from that place. Then, he goes into detail about how he spent his time out of school by playing, hunting, and riding horses there. He remembers many “small rocks”, the “daylight”, the animals as they eat grass, the people working there, and finally, “I had come to be aware of it as one’s body. There are plenty of examples in Berry’s poetry in this field. In “The Strangers,” from the poetry collection *A Country of Marriage* (1973), some travellers move around on a hill “at dusk” and ask the speaker: “Where are we? Where/ does this road go?” (lines 3-4). The speaker says, the travellers only know the place on map and have no information about it in real life (lines 5-8). Their situation is in sharp contrast to the one of the speaker who has a close connection with the land. The relationship the speaker forms with the land has been going on for six generations (line 19), and he is a person who “holds this to be its place/ and is conversant with its trees/ and stones” (lines 21-23). That is why he knows the answer to the questions being asked (line 30). “The Record,” from *Entries*, a collection of poetry published in 1994, is another poem where the idea of place-making is seen. The poem talks about the knowledge “an old friend” has about a place, Cane Run in Kentucky in the United States, but everything is in the process of change, and some of the features of the old times have disappeared, like “the grist mill” (line 2), “the peach orchard” (line 3), “the creek ran three weeks/ after a good rain” (lines 5-6) and the way the land “was plowed” (line 7). A young friend asks the speaker to record all that the old friend knows, because “It is precious. It should be saved” (line 13). The speaker answers by telling the “young” friend, “live here/ as one who knows these things” (lines 30-31). The speaker asks the “young” friend to “stay and wait. Tell your children” (line 35) what should be said to them about the place and “tell them/ to tell their children” too (lines 35-36). “The Peace of Wild Things” from the poetry collection *Openings: Poems* (1968) is one of the most anthologized poems of the poet that has the same sense of place-making. At the beginning of the poem, it is clear that the speaker is not happy with what goes on in the world. The situation they have found themselves in, makes them awake easily at night (lines 1-2). So, they leave their bed and go somewhere in nature that is well-known to them, where the male duck “rests in his beauty on the water, and the great/ heron feeds” (lines 5-7). The result soon appears as they calm down (line 8), and then they are in total harmony with nature as they are tranquil, just like “the still water” (line 10), and feel the stars above them (line 11). These lines show that one result of place-making is being happy as people are well-aware of what is found there, and every natural element appears to them as if they are among the best of their acquaintances. Sara Constantakis (2009, pp. 160-161) writes that the speaker of the poem knows the answer to their bad state of mind. The birds, the water, and the stars in the sky are enough so that they would get back to their normal state.

Having a strong connection with the land and all the other organisms constitutes a basic component of the concept of place-making. In “The Body and the Earth” from *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977, p. 110), Berry emphasizes the importance of this bond and states that if a farmer, for example, does not know what health exactly means, then their farm would be unhealthy, from which unhealthy food would be produced to the whole community, which is catastrophic. Berry used the term “patterns of interdependence” while referring to this connection between people and all other beings in the world (1977, p. 103). “The Sycamore” is a poem from the poetry volume *Openings* (1968) where this idea is found. Berry shows the connection the tree of the title has with its surrounding as “it stands in its place, and feeds upon it, / and is fed upon” (lines 20-21). This close connection empowers the tree to stand against all that people and some forces of nature do to it, like tiding fences to it, putting nails in it, having hacks on its skin and lightning (lines 4-5). In *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (1999, pp. 129-130), Scigaj mentions, the relation seen in the poem is beneficial for the soil too, because the tree gives organic matters to it. The speaker is fascinated by the “principle” found in the environment, especially in the tree. So, they love to “be ruled by” that principle (line 19). “The Design of a House” from the poetry collection *Findings* (1969), is another poem where this concept of interrelatedness is seen. In *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (1999, p. 144) Scigaj says, building a house plays a very important role in the poem. The house is not only a place to settle in, but it attaches its owner to the place, nature, family and even ancestors. In 1964, Berry went back to Kentucky where he bought land less than 10 kilometres away from where his ancestors had lived since 1803. The first decision of the owner is

to build the house “among trees” (line 14), then “croplands” and “gardens” are used to finish its “architecture” (lines 163-164), plants are grown in such a way that their branches reach its windows (line 170) and when they get out of the house, they see how the “Queen Anne’s lace” blossoms (line 28). The poet also states that dwellers put their heads “on the pillow” in the “dark rooms” of the house (lines 58-59) in the “short days” and “long nights” of the winter (line 24). They also stay there in the summer where there are “cover and grass” out (line 40). There is also Tanya, Berry’s wife in the poem when he says, “This is a love poem for you, Tanya” (line 114). This is how all the living things are interrelated and building the house links all of them. Wendell Berry has the view that farming is the best tool for people to have a strong relationship with the place they live in (Scigaj, 1999, p. 133). In “The Body and the Earth” from *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977, P. 97), Berry says: no matter how urban our life, our bodies live by agriculture as we live in flesh. While we live our bodies are moving particles of the ground, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures” Berry has written down many poems where this idea is clear. An example is “The Current” from *Farming: A Handbook* (1970) which starts in this way: Having once put his hand into the ground, Seeding there what he hopes will outlast him, A man has made a marriage with his place And if he leaves it his flesh will ache to go back. (lines 1-4) The poet talks about the relationship between a farmer and his land as if it were a marriage. Jeffrey Triggs (1989, p 101) states that the bond links the farmer with the past and people who have been there before him, also with the future and people who will follow him. How? He has married the land and so he is the child of “the old tribespeople” (line 9) that lived there before him. He also “sees one descended from him” (line 21) and “the bearers of his own blood” (line 15) that stay there and work on the farm too. Bryson (2005, p. 27) says, the word “current” in the title indicates a metaphorical stream that starts from the past, passes through the present and goes into the future. As far as the farmer is concerned, he represents the present moment “The Man Born to Farming” from *Farming: A Handbook* (1970) is another poem where the gardener puts his hands in the soil so that a new life begins (line 2), as for him “the soil is a divine drug” (line 3) The area that is out of the control of the humans is of vital importance to Berry too. The word he uses most of the time to refer to it is “wilderness”. For example, in the first paragraph on page 100 in “The Body and the Earth” from *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977), the word has been used five times. Berry (1977, p. 99) states, by being in “wilderness”, man realizes his “true place” in the universe and knows he is a “tiny member of a world he cannot comprehend or master or in any final sense possess, he cannot possibly think of himself as a god” In “Preserving Wildness” from *Home Economics* (1987, p. 138), Berry writes more about the relation between humans and “wilderness” and says, “we and our works occupy a tiny space and play a tiny part...we are absolutely dependent upon it” (p. 138). In “Native Hill” from *The Long-Legged House* (2003, p. 211), Berry indicates, it is important for people to change the view that suggests human beings have the right to do whatever they wish and say: We must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of majesty of creation and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do no doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it In the same work, Berry says, it is important for anyone “to leave the regions of our conquest” (place in the Tuanian sense) and enter “woods” (space in the Tuanian sense). Then, he can get “the sense of the world’s longevity, of its ability to thrive without it, of his inferiority to it and his dependence upon it”. The poet states, when people go out into nature and observe the universe, one of the first realizations they get is to feel to be “a flea in the pelt of a great living thing” (2003, pp. 220, 223) There are many poems of Berry in which this idea is found, including “To the Unseeable Animal” from *Farming: A Handbook* (1970). At the beginning, the poet names some known animals and familiar places, like “the foxes” and “their edges” (lines 7-8), “the little fish” and “pools” (lines 9, 13). These animals and places mean place in the Tuanian sense. Then, the speaker enters “the woods” (line 18) to see “the Unseeable animal” and the poem concludes with: That we do not know you is your perfection and our hope. The darkness keeps us near you. (lines 23-26) Bryson (2005, p. 32) states since the animal is unseeable and unknown, it is a thriller of the world. Also, the “darkness of the wild” is where the humans do not know much, which is not far from them too. That is what space means as Tuan has mentioned.

Conclusion

Place and space are two terms used in the postmodern age to show the connection and relation of people with the outer world. Being in place means people are familiar with the place they live in and with all the trees, birds and animals dwell there. Being in space gives the sense that a person is not the only living being in the area, but rather one among hundreds of thousands in the environment. These two terms can be applied to the poetry of

Wendell Berry. The poet refused positions and jobs offered to him in many states, rather has chosen to stay in his hometown in the state of Kentucky for more than 50 years. After reading his poems, the reader realizes why the writer has chosen that life and what a strong connection he has built with the environment. A result of that connection has been caring for the living beings in the place. The poet also pays attention to the area beyond human control. Berry believes being in such a place gives people the sense that the world is so huge and they occupy a small place in it. This realization teaches people humility towards other living beings and helps them understand they don't have unlimited authority over nature. As Berry states, a poet should write down about what is vital to people and all organisms, because finally the subject of poetry is the world, which is shared among all people.

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