

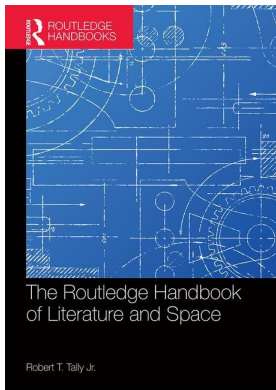
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.104

On: 05 Apr 2020

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space

Robert T. Tally

Senses of Place

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315745978-4>

Neal Alexander

Published online on: 19 Jan 2017

How to cite :- Neal Alexander. 19 Jan 2017, *Senses of Place from: The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* Routledge

Accessed on: 05 Apr 2020

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315745978-4>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

3

SENSES OF PLACE

Neal Alexander

The idea of a sense of place occupies an important position at the intersection between literary studies and human geography, figuring prominently in the conceptual vocabularies of both disciplines. However, the precise content and meaning of the term can be difficult to define, particularly when it is conflated with similar, but non-synonymous concepts, such as *genius loci* or “spirit of place.” In what follows, my purpose is to sift out and distinguish between the layers of meaning that have accrued in the idea of a sense of place, before going on to explore the relationship between “sense” and “place” in a more literal manner. Drawing upon recent research on sensuous geographies and cultures of sense, I will argue that senses of place (in the plural) emerge from the engagement of our five senses not only in apprehending but also in actively making places, and in making sense of the worlds in which they take place. In this regard, it is crucial to maintain a clear understanding of the irreducibly dual meaning of “sense”, which entails both perceptions and conceptions, embodied and cognitive involvements with place.

Sensory perceptions are at once fundamental to any geographical awareness – which means making sense of the places and spaces we inhabit or encounter – and crucial to the aesthetic dimensions of literature. “Aesthetics” derives from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning the perception of the external world by the senses; though, as Jacques Rancière observes, for two centuries “aesthetics” has been used more narrowly to refer to “the sensible fabric and intelligible form of what we call ‘Art’.”¹ “Sense” is both a material encounter within the world and an act of understanding directed towards that world, as though from outside it. Sense implies physical proximity and mental distance, immersion and detachment simultaneously. This distinctive – even paradoxical – duality is central both to artistic figuration and to what Paul Rodaway calls geographical perception: “Geographical perception is simply the perception of a world around us, of spatial relationships and the identification of distinctive places – to recognise our situation in a world and to have a sense of a world.”² It is necessary, then, to have a sense of a world in order to recognize distinctive places and to identify with particular places – to have a sense of place. Literature draws extensively upon such geographical perceptions and, by augmenting or transforming them imaginatively, plays an important role in creating senses of place.

Genius loci

The conceptual origins of sense of place can be traced to the Roman idea of *genius loci*, or the “spirit of place”. *Genius* denotes a guardian spirit thought to protect both individuals and specific places, and to require propitiation. Perhaps the most important gods of place in Roman religion were the *lares*, spirits presiding over the household and occupying a domestic shrine; but many features of the landscape – fields, springs, rivers, groves, valleys – were also believed to have their own *genii loci*.³ Thomas Blagg notes the prevalence of the idea of spirits or gods of place in Roman Britain:

Romans and Britons both believed that various natural features of the landscape had divine associations, either as the homes of gods or as gods in themselves. In both peoples the same kinds of place attracted feelings of reverence, which the Romans expressed in terms of the worship of river gods, the nymphs or other deities of springs and fountains, the woodland god Silvanus, or the *Genius* of a particular place.⁴

The idea of *genius loci* therefore articulates a specifically spiritual conception of places – particularly those places associated with nature and the natural world – as zones of encounter with the divine. This spiritual conception of the relationship between people and places has carried over into a modern, secular context, where the “spirit of place” is conceived as that which is essential to its character and therefore transcends both history and material reality. For instance, Edward Relph argues that spirit of place “can persist in spite of profound changes in the basic components of identity” but that it typically manifests as something “subtle and nebulous”, resisting analysis in formal or conceptual terms.⁵ Spirit of place is that which persists in defiance of the effects of time, conveying the unchanging individuality or uniqueness of a place in a manner that can be readily intuited but not defined. Similarly, Mike Crang contends that through the concept of *genius loci* “people experience something beyond the physical or sensory properties of places and can feel an attachment to a spirit of place.”⁶ Interestingly, spirit of place is here understood as that which exceeds mere physical sensation, for it belongs to the realm of the numinous or metaphysical and can be experienced only as a vague but powerful “feeling”. Crang suggests that it is by turning to literature and the arts that people seek to give such experiences and feelings expression.

One of the most emphatic expressions of belief in the spirit of place can be found in the introduction to D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), where he declares that: “Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.”⁷ Quasi-religious terms (“vital effluence”, “vibration”) jostle alongside the vocabulary of science (“chemical exhalation”, “polarity”) here, so that Lawrence’s version of *genius loci* seems to straddle the realms of material and spiritual reality. Moreover, his emphasis upon difference, individuality, and particularity anticipates the priorities of those humanist geographers who took up the idea of spirit of place and transformed it into sense of place during the 1970s. As part of this process, the concept of *genius loci* was largely stripped of its religious meanings and recast in terms adapted from Heideggerian phenomenology. For instance, Relph distinguishes between “authentic” and “inauthentic” senses of place, arguing that an authentic attitude requires “a direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places.”⁸ In his 1979 book, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Christian Norberg-Schulz notes the Roman origins of the term “spirit of place” but continues in a manner that owes much to Heidegger’s late thought: “It suffices to say that ancient man experienced his environment as consisting of definite characters. In particular he recognized that it is of great existential importance to come to terms with the *genius* of the locality where his life takes place.”⁹

For Norberg-Schulz, as for humanist geographers such as Relph, the *genius loci* does not refer to a tutelary spirit but rather denotes the essential “character” or personality of a given place, that which distinguishes it from other places and makes it possible for human beings to dwell there.

Sense of place

Although there is a wide margin of overlap between the concepts of *genius loci* and sense of place, and they are sometimes used interchangeably, it is the latter term that has predominated in both geographical and literary-critical discourse since the 1970s. Its suggestiveness and flexibility have made it popular but also given rise to a number of ambiguities and potential confusions. For example, it is not always clear whether a sense of place should be understood as inhering in the place itself, as a quality or attribute to be apprehended, or if it describes a distinctive sensibility adopted by human subjects. On the one hand, John Brinckerhoff Jackson interprets sense of place as “the *atmosphere* to a place, the *quality* of its environment.”¹⁰ On the other, Relph conceives of it as “an innate faculty, possessed in some degree by everyone, that connects us to the world.”¹¹ Consequently, in the discourse of humanist geography at least, a sense of place appears to vacillate somewhere between objective property and subjective experience. The ambiguity of the concept also brings into relief some fundamental differences in the way that place is construed. For Yi-Fu Tuan, individual human experience is paramount, and the “concrete reality” of place only emerges via a “total” experience combining sensory perceptions and mental reflection.¹² Any such “elemental sense of place” also rests upon the assumption that place is stable, bounded, and familiar; as “an organized world of meaning”, place is “essentially a static concept.”¹³ “If we see the world as process, constantly changing,” Tuan argues, “we should not be able to develop any sense of place.”¹⁴ However, for Doreen Massey, Tuan’s neat dichotomies between space and place, and place and time, simply cannot hold. Because places necessarily change over time they are not fixed environments but processes, “*spatio-temporal events*”; and Massey contends that a “global sense of place” entails grasping place in terms of its relations with what lies beyond it, as “a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.”¹⁵ According to one influential view, then, place manifests itself as static and intimately closed; whereas according to another equally influential line of geographical thought, it is always in process, inherently open-ended in time and space.

These sharply contrasting conceptions of place each also find their articulation in two important literary-critical accounts of the poetry of place by practicing poets. The first, Seamus Heaney’s 1977 essay, “The Sense of Place,” exemplifies Tuan’s observation that literature’s role is “to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place.”¹⁶ For Heaney, place is most often the first place of home and provides a steady anchorage in the world, offering not just a situation and context for the poetic imagination but also emotional sustenance. Drawing a distinction between conscious and unconscious, learned and lived ways of knowing place, he prioritizes the latter, commending Wordsworth for articulating “the nurture that becomes available to the feelings through dwelling in one dear perpetual place.”¹⁷ Moreover, he contends that the Irish “*sensing* of place” is distinctively “sacramental”, construing the Irish landscape – countryside rather than city – as a cryptic fabric of signs instinct with spiritual significance.¹⁸ This is to combine the pagan idea of *genius loci* with an Irish Catholic conviction that regards the land itself as a repository of collective values. Yet the relation between poetry and place is also fundamental: if poetry serves as “a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings”, then place provides an essential grounding for the poetic sensibility, and it is to “the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity.”¹⁹ For Heaney, a sense of place is manifest in its attributes of stability and continuity, whilst the poet’s relation to place is one of sedentary belonging, dwelling in (and on)

place. There are clear echoes here of the contemporaneous work of humanist geographers such as Tuan and Relph, although the latter are more appreciative of reflective and self-conscious senses of place than Heaney's emphasis upon instinct and intuition allows.²⁰

A very different perspective on the poetics of place is offered by Jo Shapcott in her 2000 essay "Confounding Geography." Shapcott explicitly rejects Heaney's method of grounding the poetic utterance in a known locale, looking instead to the exilic example of Elizabeth Bishop, whom she describes as "my geography teacher, or perhaps even my anti-geography teacher."²¹ Where Heaney espouses the poet's immersion in the unconscious, lived experience of place, as an aspiring poet from the new town of Hemel Hempstead, Shapcott finds it impossible to "delve into the language and landscape of [her] own territory."²² Her own geographical experience leads her to disarticulate the idea of a sense of place from the condition of dwelling or rooted belonging. In Bishop, whose early life was characterized by uprooting and lost identity, she recognizes a poet who forges "an aesthetic of the fragmentary and rootless experience" that is increasingly characteristic of contemporary societies and determines "to discover how to be a different kind of writer, for whom place and language are less certain, and for whom shifting territories are the norm."²³ Importantly, Shapcott's affirmation of uncertainty and shifting territories emphasizes not only movements in, through, and between places but also the mutability of those places themselves, their dynamic openness to historical and social processes. In this regard, her sense of place accords with a wider set of preoccupations that Eric Falci identifies in post-war British and Irish poetry with "dissolving landscapes, places that open underfoot into murky indeterminacies, and spaces made and unmade by modernity's alterations, accidents, and disasters."²⁴

However, if it is true that we inhabit a world in which displacements and indeterminacies appear to prevail, we might well ask whether it still makes sense to speak of a sense of place at all. Only, I contend, if we articulate "sense" and "place" in the rather literal manner that I am espousing here, for the richness and suggestiveness of literary representations of place often resides in what Bertrand Westphal calls their "polysensoriality". That is to say, the plural, labile character of spaces and places is conveyed in terms of combinations of, and interactions between, bodily modes of perception and awareness. Thus, in literary representations "space is subject to the infinite variety of sensory perception" and texts may also challenge culturally and historically specific sensory hierarchies (such as the priority given to vision and the visible).²⁵ In doing so, they illustrate one of the key political functions of art, which for Rancière "consists in suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience", thereby recasting the delimitation of spaces and times, the visible and the audible that makes up "the distribution of the sensible."²⁶ A reconfigured sensorium makes possible new ways of apprehending, understanding, and being in the world; it therefore also makes possible other senses of place.

Geographies of the senses

The role of all five senses in creating a sense of place is exemplified in the work of the American nature writer, Barry Lopez. Indeed, for Lopez, perceptual acuity and an attitude of patient attentiveness are central to any ethical relationship to place and the natural environment. Consequently, the literature of place begins with physical sensations:

Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical hemisphere you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? Through what kind of air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief you *can* smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place – the tensile strength in a willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves.²⁷

Lopez's account of how the meanings of place emerge from active and reflexive sensory engagements with the environment bears resemblance to recent work in cultural geography that foregrounds the contingencies of situated embodiment in place and explores the processes involved in the matter of things taking place. Where humanist geographers emphasize the agency of the coherent human subject in perceiving place as a pre-existing object with which she is concerned, contemporary cultural geographers are more likely to foreground the "multisensual engagements" through which both subject and object are constituted.²⁸ Here, firm distinctions between person and place, self and landscape are dissolved in a flux of movements, relations, and becomings. According to Nigel Thrift, non-representational theory "is concerned with thinking with the whole body" and seeks to "valorise all the senses."²⁹ However, that body is constantly in motion from one location to another, travelling "paths that constantly intersect with those of others in a complex web of biographies. These others are not just human bodies but also all other objects that can be described as trajectories in time-space: animals, machines, trees, dwellings, and so on."³⁰ Cultural geographers also increasingly speak in terms of affects and percepts rather than feelings and sensations. As John Wylie explains, affects and percepts are "domains of experience that are more-than-subjective" for they radically unfix any delimiting boundaries between interiors and exteriors, subjects and objects. Thus, an affect "denotes the shifting mood, tenor, colour or intensity of places and situations", whilst a percept is "a style of visibility, of being-visible, a configuration of light and matter that exceeds, enters into, and ranges over the perceptions of a subject who sees."³¹ On this account, a sense of place would be neither a subjective faculty nor the property of an object but something that circulates between the two and plays a key role in creating selves and places as such.

Polysensoriality or multisensual engagement is also a central theme of Michel Serres's philosophy of mingled bodies, wherein sense and place are conceived as intricately woven or knotted together. Indeed, Serres describes the tangled implication of the body's senses as a variegated geographical terrain:

The organs of sense form knots, high-relief sites of singularity in this complex flat drawing, dense specializations, a mountain valley or well on the plain. They irrigate the whole skin with desire, listening, sight or smell. Skin flows like water, a variable confluence of the qualities of the senses.³²

Equally, the surface of the earth is imagined as a kind of skin composed of multiple layers and patches, "a tatter-landscape dressing itself piece by piece."³³ In Serres's geography of the senses, places, bodies, and things, natural and cultural processes are inescapably imbricated in one another, folded or raveled together as skeins, fabrics, and knots. Place is defined not in terms of the borders that circumscribe it but by its capacity for associative connections, and is "organized like a tied or untied knot, like a star or a living body."³⁴

Serres particularly emphasizes the role of touch and kinesthesia in producing senses of place. Just as the body always senses itself, is conscious of itself and its sensations through the reflexive character of touch, so geography is conceived as a mode of auto-inscription, an earth-writing:

It would be better to call geography the writing of the earth about itself. For things – resistant, hard, sharp, elastic, loose – mark, hollow each other out and wear each other away. [. . .] What the earth reveals results from what should be called the reciprocal marquetry of things.³⁵

Geographers are those who seek to read such marks or traces of erosion, establishing a sense of place that is attentive to the encounters, contacts, and relations that are always taking place. Serres

also extolls the virtues of wandering or visiting, following oblique and complicated paths that weave together the diversity of places, the local and the global, in the bodily sensations of the wandering subject. The wanderer is thus a composite figure who “accumulates in his [*sic*] body passages, landscapes, customs, languages and mixes them: mulatto, quadroon, hybrid, cross-bred, octoroon . . . the mingled waters of all the rivers of the world beating in his veins.”³⁶ Moreover, far from abolishing place the movements of weaving or knotting that characterize wandering as a mode of sensory involvement with the world have a creative function. In Serres’s memorable formulation: “Knots fashion places through which a thousand new knots can be threaded.”³⁷ Consequently, we might say that senses of place are created by way of the weaving and knotting together of diverse sensory perceptions, which are themselves shifting, elusive, and subject to hybridization.

Senses of place: Roy Fisher

A particularly striking literary example of such multisensual engagements with place is to be found in the poetry of Roy Fisher, for whom the city of Birmingham’s industrial modernity and post-industrial reconfiguration are abiding themes. Sean O’Brien describes Fisher as the “most place-obsessed of poets”, in whose work the city is “both an analogue of consciousness and a feature of it.”³⁸ And Peter Barry proclaims him “a kind of laureate of the urban-prosaic”, “the quintessential city poet” of the past half century.³⁹ Certainly, Fisher’s attentiveness to the histories, geographies, and strange imaginative life of Birmingham across his long career is remarkable, and it is grounded in a rich appreciation of the city’s material substance. In “Wonders of Obligation”, the poet-speaker confesses: “I’m obsessed/ with cambered tarmacs, concretes,/ the washings of rain.”⁴⁰ Yet, it is worth noting that his poetry often reveals a fascination with suburbs and edgelands, trunk roads and outskirts where the urban fabric frays and merges with landscapes of agriculture, declining industry, even natural beauty. Since the late 1970s Fisher’s work has frequently linked Birmingham to locations in rural Staffordshire and the Derbyshire Peak District, describing the inter-digitations of city and country in texts that create knotted, hybrid geographies. Ecological but not-quite-natural, linking the urban to the rural, human sensibilities to the impersonal effects of industry and architecture, Fisher’s texts mine the sedimented meanings of place through reflexive inquiries into processes of consciousness and perception. In particular, Fisher’s poetry emphasizes the creatively productive, rather than merely responsive or reactive, character of the senses in any event of taking-place. As John Kerrigan observes, “he is alert to what nostrils, fingertips, ears and eyes tell him, not as neutral receptors but as filters on what we can know, as organs which construct space.”⁴¹ There is both an aesthetic and a political dimension to this active conception of the role of the senses, for Fisher has remarked that the poem’s reason for existing is that the reader “may have his [*sic*] perceptions rearranged by having read it or having used it.”⁴² The poem seeks to make an intervention in the distribution of the sensible, of what can be seen and heard and felt. By refracting the flux of perception, or pointing up its limits, it makes manifest the changing, changeable contours of the world.

The first of Fisher’s major texts, *City* (1961), is an appropriately ad hoc assemblage of diverse elements, subsequently much revised, in which short autobiographical lyrics are placed alongside blocks of documentary prose and passages of surreal hallucination. This unstable amalgam of forms and materials parallels the accretions of urban growth and contraction that the poem chronicles. The text opens significantly on a scene of post-war “desolation”, in which a whole district has been demolished, the traces of its social life abruptly erased: “There is not a whole brick, a foundation to stumble across, a drainpipe, a smashed fowlhouse; the entire place has been

razed flat, dug over, and smoothed down again.”⁴³ *City* is preoccupied with losses in both the built environment and the human geography of Birmingham as it lurches into a protracted period of post-industrial decline. “Most of it has never been seen,” remarks the narrator, reflecting on the civic authorities’ minimal concern for the needs of their citizens; and Fisher seeks to redress this neglect by making the invisible visible, effecting “*material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said.”⁴⁴ So, the poem interests itself in the lives and deaths of “marginal people”, “lost streets”, landscapes of train sidings and cooling towers, as well as the ordinary routines and cares of its half-forgotten working-class residents.⁴⁵ Its narrator walks nocturnal suburban streets “sens[ing] the simple nakedness of these tiers of sleeping men and women whose windows I pass,” imagining “the bodies of strangers” with a mixture of humane tenderness and voyeuristic pleasure.⁴⁶ This passage treats the mundane with unsettling surrealism, reminding readers of the material, physical circumstances of social life in urban environments, where strangers live together in conditions of intimate alienation. Importantly, the narrator worries about “living so much by the eye”, prioritizing the dominant sense of sight as a means of projecting power over his fellow-citizens and resolving the fractured plurality of place and experience in the unified image of “a single world.”⁴⁷ Perhaps this is why the poem returns so often to images of haziness, blurred vision, and diffused light: “frosted-glass”, “the greenish-blue haze of light”, “brick-dust in sunlight”, “milky radiance”, “zinc light”, “a blind white world.”⁴⁸ In this way, obstacles to perception turn attention towards the processes by which it occurs, raising questions over what can be seen, said, or sensed.

Fisher’s most ambitious and challenging poem of place to date is *A Furnace* (1986), in which Birmingham’s long association with heavy industry provides one of the text’s many strands of imagery. In a short preface, Fisher speaks of the poem as “an engine devised, like a cauldron, or a still, or a blast-furnace, to invoke and assist natural processes of change; to persuade obstinate substances to alter their condition and show relativities which would otherwise remain hidden by their concreteness.”⁴⁹ This distinctly Heraclitean sensibility conceives of creation and destruction as a continuum, pitting flux against order and structure in its representations of place. The poem’s seven sections are conceived as a double spiral, folding in on itself towards an “unmoving core” before unravelling outwards again in a movement of centripetal dynamism, acknowledging landscapes to be fluid, complex, mutable: “There’s no/ holding it all.”⁵⁰ As John Matthias comments, *A Furnace* “explodes the matter of Birmingham into something like a verbal analogue to an expanding universe.”⁵¹ This action of folding and unfolding, through which self and place are co-constituted, is crucially mediated by the processes of consciousness and perception. Thus, as he rides on a trolleybus through the city’s north-western suburbs, the speaker reflects in a curiously detached manner upon the way places happen to the senses:

Something’s decided
to narrate
in more dimensions than I can know
the gathering in
and giving out of the world on a slow
pulse, on a metered contraction
that the senses enquire towards
but may not themselves
intercept.⁵²

Here again, Fisher describes the limits of perception as they struggle to mediate and interpret the multiple dimensions of experience. The narrator is himself narrated by forces he cannot contain

or comprehend, whilst the world's rhythmic pulsations are paralleled by the irregular rhythms and varied lineation of the verse paragraph in which they are described.

Andrew Crozier notes that the language of *A Furnace* is “so grounded in the specifics of sensibility and attention that the world of empirical reference is constantly interrogated, disclosed not as familiar but other.”⁵³ Interrogated and defamiliarized, but not dissipated altogether; for Fisher remains concerned to recover ordinary lives and locales from the wreckage of history, specifically by positing a channel of communication channel between past and present, life and death: “the pass-and-return valve between the worlds.”⁵⁴ On the one hand, he depicts the city of the present as restlessly metamorphic, “unstable, dividing, grouping again/ differently”; on the other, he imagines connecting with a reality beyond time itself:

the sense of another world
not past, but primordial,
everything in it
simultaneous, and moving
every way but forward.⁵⁵

Even in this timeless world of simultaneity, however, everything is in motion; it is only the dominant model of history as linear progress that is denied. One of the most arresting features of *A Furnace* is the way in which different landscapes are superimposed upon one another but also undergo kaleidoscopic shifts in their mutual interrelations. Opening with a vista of “the brick house-fields towards Wolverhampton”, the poem juxtaposes Saltley Viaduct with Gradbach Hill, urban redevelopment with ancient burial chambers in Brittany, Adolphe Sax's plans for the new city of Paris with the raising of warships “from the floor of Scapa Flow.”⁵⁶ Clair Wills rightly observes that such techniques question “the boundary between the artificial urban environment and nature”, but they also effect a more radical intermeshing of local and more distant horizons, decentering the poem's nonetheless powerful fixation with Birmingham as an imaginative locus.⁵⁷ *A Furnace* fashions a “pragmatic/ skein of connections” between disparate places and times, creating what Massey would call a global sense of place, but does not attempt to fix them in any stable configuration.⁵⁸ Fisher's keen awareness of perceptual processes and the processual character of place ensure that mercurial movements and energies predominate in his sense of place, in spite of the mortifying influences of authority and ideology.

A recurrent motif in Fisher's cityscapes is that of radiating waves or spokes, disseminating human and inhuman energies along a ramifying network of axes and connections. “In the Black Country” describes a panorama of Dudley as if it were painted by Arthur Kokoschka, the town's “plural perspectives” fractured by modernist aesthetics into “four or five/ landscapes of opportunity”, each of which “wheels, dips,/ shoulders up, opens away/ with clarity and confusion.”⁵⁹ The sequence “Handsworth Liberties” also begins with an open, dispersive urban landscape that “radiates outwards” and is discernible chiefly in terms of “the tracks of waves/ broken against the rim/ and coming back awry.”⁶⁰ In both cases, the city seems to be apprehended in terms of shifting patterns of light and color, as much a matrix of optical effects as a set of material environments. At the same time, Fisher's city manifests itself as a variable amalgam of solid and liquid elements, settled materials and coruscating flux. In “Texts for a Film” the city's sandstone “bedrock” is acknowledged to be soluble and the speaker deconstructs his own whimsical origin myth by asking:

But what is it when you're first let loose in it, with only your nostrils, fingertips, ears,
eyes to teach you appetite and danger?⁶¹

The answer is equivocal, turning on the actual and symbolic significance of Birmingham's rivers and waterways, which provide connective threads to the natural world but are themselves conduits shaped and directed by human purposes. These "living rivers" supplied drinking water to the city's growing population, "drove low-powered mills" and enabled industrial expansion, collecting "sewage, factory poisons" only to sink "out of sight/ under streets, highways, the back walls of workshops."⁶² Once again, Fisher reveals how what is invisible or overlooked is integral to the histories and geographies of place he describes. Indeed, Ralph Pite astutely notes that in "Texts for a Film" "water offers memories, survivals and revivals of the used."⁶³ If the city is an "artefact", then its "factories, floods of houses,/ shallowing as they spread", are imagined as "congealing" from a liquid substrate.⁶⁴ Moreover, if place is a "pivot" on which the world turns, then "[t]o touch/ the centre keeps everything round it/ fluid."⁶⁵ Although his earlier poetry is notably chary of centers and centralizing impulses, in this poem Fisher can extol the virtues of a centrality that is at once personal, provisional, and inherently unfixed. His idiosyncratic sense of place conceives of Birmingham in briskly utilitarian terms, as an implement to "think with", but also as something much less solid and reliable, a "slaggy lacework of roads, bastions,/ breeding cubicles" under which there is "nothing/ you can sense."⁶⁶ In fact, in Fisher's poetry the city often manifests itself most characteristically through the stubborn resistances it offers to perception and sense.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is the very ambiguity and openness of the concept of sense of place that makes it so richly suggestive. In this essay, I have sought to identify and distinguish between the various layers of meaning that it has acquired in the discourse of literary criticism and human geography. The origins of the concept lie in the Roman idea of *genius loci*, the guardian spirit of a particular place, which implies a distinctly spiritual conception of places as sites of encounter with the numinous or divine. During the 1970s, humanist geographers reconfigured this idea in the terms of Heideggerian phenomenology, using the modified term "sense of place" to describe the essential character, quality, or atmosphere of a place. In this modern and secular interpretation, the emphasis falls less on metaphysical presence than on what makes individual places unique, differentiating them from other places and so enabling humans to dwell there. More recently, cultural geographers have emphasized the role of multisensual engagements in the processes of place-making. Here, the focus is upon material, embodied interactions through which the identities of places and human subjects are co-constructed. Consequently, senses of place can be understood in terms of the ways our five senses both apprehend and interpret the physical world of places, people, and things. The poetry of Roy Fisher offers one particularly impressive literary example of such multisensual engagements with place. Indeed, Fisher's depictions of Birmingham are remarkable not only for the ways in which he seeks to intervene in the distribution of the sensible, calling attention to what remains unseen, unheard, or unsaid in the city. His poems also highlight the extent to which places may elude or obstruct our attempts to perceive and make sense of them, thereby describing the limits of sense itself.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* trans., Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), ix.
- 2 Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (London: Routledge, 1994), 13.
- 3 Martin Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1984), 168.
- 4 Thomas Blagg, "Roman religious sites in the British landscape," *Landscape History* 8 (1986): 15.

- 5 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 48.
- 6 Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 108.
- 7 D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 12.
- 8 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 64.
- 9 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 18.
- 10 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 158.
- 11 Edward Relph, "Sense of Place," in *Ten Geographic Ideas That Changed the World*, ed. Susan Hanson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 208.
- 12 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 18. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 8–12.
- 13 Tuan, *Space and Place*, 138.
- 14 Tuan, *Space and Place*, 179.
- 15 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 130; Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 154.
- 16 Tuan, *Space and Place*, 162.
- 17 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 131, 145.
- 18 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 132.
- 19 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 52, 149.
- 20 See Yi-Fu Tuan, "Rootedness versus sense of place," in *Cultural Geography: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*, vol. I. eds. Nigel Thrift and Sarah Whatmore (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 263–271; Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 66–67.
- 21 Jo Shapcott, "Confounding Geography," in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, eds. Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 41.
- 22 Shapcott, "Confounding Geography," 41.
- 23 Shapcott, "Confounding Geography," 42.
- 24 Eric Falci, "Place, Space, and Landscape," in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, eds. Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 201.
- 25 Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* trans., Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 134. On sensory orders or hierarchies see David Howes, "Introduction: Empires of the Senses," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 3; and Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 1–7.
- 26 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* trans., Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 25.
- 27 Barry Lopez, "A Literature of Place," *EnviroArts: Orion Online*, accessed 6 August, 2015, http://arts.envirolink.org/literary_arts/BarryLopez_LitofPlace.html.
- 28 Hayden Lorimer, "Cultural geography: The busyness of being more-than-representational," *Progress in Human Geography* 29, 1 (2005): 86. The term "multisensual" derives from Rodaway, who remarks that "everyday perception is characteristically multisensual, involving more than one sense organ in generating an experience of the world." Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 11.
- 29 Nigel Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (London: Sage, 1996), 7. See also Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 5–18.
- 30 Thrift, *Spatial Formations*, 8.
- 31 John Wylie, "A single day's walking: Narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, 2 (2005): 236. See also John Wylie, *Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), 211–215.
- 32 Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)* trans., Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 52.
- 33 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 236.
- 34 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 247.
- 35 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 275.
- 36 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 258.
- 37 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 301.
- 38 Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), 115, 112.

- 39 Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 9.
- 40 Roy Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955–2010* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2012), 20.
- 41 John Kerrigan, “Roy Fisher on Location,” in *The Thing about Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*, eds. John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 19.
- 42 Roy Fisher, *Interviews Through Time & Selected Prose* (Kentisbeare: Shearsman Books, 2000), 64.
- 43 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 29.
- 44 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 37; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* trans., Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 39.
- 45 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 33, 32.
- 46 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 42, 43.
- 47 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 43.
- 48 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 30, 32, 35, 37, 38.
- 49 Roy Fisher, *A Furnace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), vii.
- 50 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 76, 80.
- 51 John Matthias, “The Poetry of Roy Fisher,” in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, eds. James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 56.
- 52 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 53.
- 53 Andrew Crozier, “Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher’s *A Furnace*,” *PN Review* 18, 3 (1992): 27.
- 54 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 64.
- 55 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 70, 61.
- 56 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 51, 57, 58, 65, 74, 75.
- 57 Clair Wills, “*A Furnace* and the Life of the Dead,” in *The Thing about Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*, eds. John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 271.
- 58 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 82.
- 59 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 242.
- 60 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 270.
- 61 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 286, 287.
- 62 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 291.
- 63 Ralph Pite, “Roy Fisher’s Waterways,” in *An Unofficial Roy Fisher*, ed. Peter Robinson (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2010), 115.
- 64 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 288, 289.
- 65 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 287.
- 66 Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It*, 285, 293.