

YI-FU TUAN: THE COMPOSING OF WORLDS

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In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Addie Bundren reflects on the terrible division of words and deeds:

I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle one to the other.¹

Yi-Fu Tuan has spent a life-time trying to straddle those two lines. The lines have had several names — philosophy and geography, culture and environment, cosmology and place — but they have always stretched in different directions. The philosophical line is *vertical*: it projects vision upward toward the universal, toward the permanence of the stars and the truths of eternity. The geographical line is *horizontal*: it extends vision outward toward the particular, toward the relativity of the horizon and the truths of this time and place. Life astraddle these lines requires the coordination of detail and pattern, the integration of experience with essence; it requires the composition of a world.

Tuan's biography certainly reflects his search for an integrating vision.² He was born in Tientsin, China, in 1930 at the beginning of a decade in which his country endured famine, floods, and foreign invasion. For ten years, the Tuan family was in constant flight, moving from place to place to avoid the assaults of the Japanese army. In 1940, as World War II threatened to engulf all of Asia, the Tuan family escaped to Australia where Yi began his schooling. After six years in Australia, and another six months in the Philippines, the Tuans moved to England where Yi

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completed his undergraduate education at Oxford in 1951. In that same year, he came to America to begin graduate work in geography at Berkeley. Since completing his doctorate there in 1957, he has held faculty positions at Indiana University, the University of New Mexico, the University of Toronto, and the University of Minnesota, where he has taught since 1969.

Tuan admits that his extensive travel accounted for his early interest in geography. The wide variety of terrain, life style, and cultural attitudes he had experienced in his childhood fascinated him, and the discipline of geography gave him a method for analyzing these different places. The method was systematic, the information solid, but the conclusions were somehow unsatisfactory. To work as a geographer, Tuan says, you must believe in the United Nations theory of reality. You must believe that after you have described every place on the globe, you will have created a meaningful composite of the world. The philosopher Albert Camus once suggested the limitations in the geographer's approach: "I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, [but] I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. Were I to trace its entire relief with my finger, I should not know any more."³

For awhile Tuan continued to work as a normal geographer, publishing studies on "Soil Evolution and Land Form Development," but gradually his vision shifted away from what he calls "the earthbound subject of geography" to the universal themes of philosophy. The change occurred while he was teaching in New Mexico. Under the vast dome of the desert sky and with the enthusiastic encouragement of his mentor, J. B. Jackson, Tuan began to explore the relationship between physical environment and philosophical assertion. He published studies on "Architecture and Human Nature"; "Mountains, Rivers and the Sentiment of Melancholy"; and *The Hydrological Cycle and the Wisdom of God*.⁴

In each study, Tuan focused on the coordination, the connections he could discover between the physical world and the philosophical world. Philosophy itself did not interest him. If geography alone was too earthbound, philosophy alone was too empyrean. Tuan felt uncomfortable, both intellectually and temperamentally, in the world of abstract speculation. He was also innately suspicious of

philosophy's endeavors to answer what he called children's questions: What is true? What is real? How do we know what we know? Because philosophy's answers to these questions seemed unsoiled by sensual data, Tuan considered them illusions, words that evaporated quickly and harmlessly in the air.

Eventually, Tuan settled on the subject of PLACE as a way of straddling the two lines. As seen by a geographer, place is a unique physical setting whose peculiarities can be described. As seen by a philosopher, place is a unit in a cosmological scheme whose position can be debated. But as seen by Tuan, "place is a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is known not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resists objectification. To know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another. At a high theoretical level, places are points in a spatial system. At the opposite extreme, they are strong visceral feelings."⁵

Place is the subject of Tuan's best known book, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*.⁶ Because this is an extraordinarily complicated study (drawing its examples from anthropology and literature, psychology and landscape painting, and the cultural histories of East and West) my brief summary of its major ideas will hardly do it justice. I wish to introduce those ideas into this discussion, however, because I believe we can write and teach writing more effectively once we understand what Tuan calls the grammar of environmental awareness. *Topophilia* is literally "the love of place." Tuan defines it as "the affective bond between people and places" (p. 4). That bond is formed by the fusion of the three terms in Tuan's subtitle — *perception*, *attitude*, and *value*. However Tuan arranges these terms — and sometimes he sees them horizontally as on a continuum, and sometimes he sees them vertically as in an hierarchy — he sees the extremes as representing passive perception and purposeful conception. The connection between those two extremes he finds conveniently expressed in the old adage "seeing is believing." For Tuan, our most casual views of the physical world contain subtle but substantial clues to the way we form and express our world views, our system of beliefs.

Tuan believes that perception is a reaching out, a way of exploring experience and affirming our existence. Of the

five senses, we are most dependent on sight, but we rarely see everything in our field of vision. To actually see something in the blur out there, we must consciously focus on detail, color, perspective, and dimension. We must, in other words, compose a scene. Everything in our culture — from picture postcards to picture windows — encourages us to frame our experience into scenes. We even drive an extra twenty miles to see a mountain range from the recommended scenic overlook. But Tuan reminds us that visual composition is a limited way to perceive the environment. A scene is an artificial structuring of reality: the word *scenery* comes from the world of theater not the world of nature. And the composer of a scene has restricted his potential awareness: an observer, after all, is merely an on-looker.

To really perceive the world, we must be *in the scene*; we must learn to understand the information communicated to us by our other senses. Touch, for example, is more than mere sensitivity to surfaces. It is also a system of pressures that confirms our being: the pinch of the shoes on our feet, the brace of the chair at our back, the weight of gravity on our skin reassures us that we are separate from yet in touch with our surroundings. And although our “eyes gain far more precise and detailed information about the environment than our ears, . . . we are usually more touched by what we hear than what we see. The sound of rain pelting against the leaves, the roll of thunder, the whistling wind in tall grass, and the anguished cry excite us to a degree that visual imagery can seldom match” (p. 8). Smell and taste may be our most powerful senses: strong odors or strange tastes are often associated with vivid, emotionally charged experiences that defy easy explanation.

Tuan’s analysis of the unique functions of each physical sense illustrates one of the human mind’s most common *attitudes*: its tendency to divide and classify experience. Because our three-dimensional vision enables us to separate objects in the foreground from the pattern of the background, we organize all phenomena in terms of near and far, high and low, center and periphery. Tuan argues that these binary oppositions carry complex associations that when articulated at the conscious level explain how our psychological attitudes select what we see and shape how we see it.

The idea of “center” and “periphery,” for example,

emerges from the natural tendency to place self at the center and to see everything else as contained in concentric zones of decreasing value: the center is sacred; the periphery profane. Other spatial attitudes are associated with front and back: going forward is easy; going backward is not. Moreover, "turning back" is psychologically unpleasant, since it suggests error and defeat. Open and closed convey a complex set of associations: "open space signifies freedom, the promise of adventure, light, the public realm, formal and unchanging beauty; enclosed space signifies the cozy security of the womb, privacy, darkness Vertical elements in the landscape evoke a sense of striving and defiance of gravity, while the horizontal elements call to mind acceptance and rest. The existence of a kinesthetic relationship between certain physical forms and human feelings is implied in the verbs we use to describe them: for example, mountain peaks 'soar,' ocean waves 'swell,' arches 'spring,' landscapes 'unfold' " (pp. 27-29).

Tuan argues that once the information provided by our physical senses is colored by such psychological associations, we develop a conscious system of beliefs to explain our world and our place in it. Two of Tuan's examples from primitive culture illustrate how "seeing" becomes "believing."

The BaMbuti Pygmies of the Congo are enclosed in a pervasive rain forest. There is no sky, no horizon, no landmarks. No hill that can be recognized; no tree that stands in sharp isolation. The sun is not a bright disc with a trajectory across the sky but patches of flickering light on the forest floor. Seasonal variation is minimal because the tropical plant world gives little visual evidence of going through the life cycle. With no cosmological or seasonal reference points, the Pygmies exist in a timeless place. They have no myths of creation, no sense of the past, and little interest in genealogy. Their legends and rituals have one focus, the all-sustaining, all-encompassing rain forest.

By contrast, the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest live on a semi-arid plateau which presents to the eye sweeping vistas and prominent landmarks such as mesas, buttes, and cliffs of sculptured stone. The cliffs expose layers of sandstone and shale that change color according to the progress of the sun across the sky. Everything in the Pueblos' world view is well-defined and stratified. The earth is conceived as square with a god housed at each corner.

Their myth of creation tells how the first people lived inside the earth but climbed through the successive layers to emerge on the surface. Every ritual on their ceremonial calendar is determined by the changing positions of the sun relative to landmarks on the horizon (pp. 79-83).

If primitive cultures are defined by their response to an existing environment, then modern cultures are defined by their ability to design new environments. Tuan sees these new environments as natural extensions of the perception-attitude-value continuum. Gardens and cathedrals, for example, not only reflect environmental values, but also embody conscious attempts to perfect those values. The green world of the forest may be momentarily restful, but eventually its darkness and disorder provoke confusion and fear. Organized behind a cloistered wall, however, the shades of green suggest security and sanctuary. The black void of space may prompt thoughts of eternity, but it may also expose the insignificance of earthly existence. Recreated in the vault of the cathedral, however, the dome of heaven inspires visions of God's majesty as well as reassurances of God's protection.

The garden and the cathedral are new environments, but they function like the established environments of the rain forest and the arid plateau. They shape our perceptions, attitudes, and values so that we value trees and stars because they remind us of gardens and cathedrals. In other words, Tuan completes his environmental continuum by converting it into a circle — the end connects with the beginning. Our world helps us create our world view, and our world view helps us recreate our world.

What is there in Tuan's theories for the teacher and student of writing? To answer that question we need only recall our working definition of writing as "a transaction between an individual and the world." We use the word *transaction* because it suggests that the relationship between self and surroundings is in a constant state of negotiation: the world shapes the writer and the writer reshapes the world. Writing, in other words, is a way of expressing the affective bond between people and places. For Tuan, writing has the potential to be more than a mere summary of that relationship. Like the garden and the cathedral, writing can interpret a world and be a world: the word and the deed can be one.

Tuan's perception of the writing process is closely related to his attitudes toward the transcribing process. He admires the ideographic quality of the Chinese language where the character is considered word and picture, summary and scene. He also admires calligraphy, the practice of fine handwriting. With a fine, old fountain pen, Tuan writes in his journal, exercising what he calls "a pathological compulsion for neatness." He believes that there is a connection between the clarity of the idea in his head and the clarity of the vertical and horizontal lines he strokes on the page.

The arts of drawing and handwriting, while still basic requirements in the Chinese curriculum, have all but disappeared from American education. We identify drawing with elementary school or special art classes, and we associate penmanship with Palmer and pre-Smith-Corona America. But Tuan has convinced me that both arts should be restored to our curriculum as methods of establishing closer connections between the processes of perception and conception. In fact, Tuan's analysis of environmental awareness and attitudes toward transcription have so remapped my curriculum that I would like to conclude these remarks by illustrating how I connect *Topophilia* to the teaching of writing.

The terms of Tuan's grammar of environmental awareness display a remarkable similarity to the terms we employ to describe the stages in the writing process. *Invention* is also a reaching out, a way of looking about in the world for writing topics. We see these topics first as vague shapes against a fuzzy background, but as we bring them into focus we discover detail and dimension. In Aristotle's rhetoric, a *topic* was a *place* to stand, a perspective from which to view something. In Tuan's grammar, a *topic* must be converted into a *subject*: we may see the world first as scene, but to fully understand its complexity we must live in it.

Living in the world of the subject is what we writing teachers call *exploration*. Invention frames the outline of the world and discloses its details; exploration maps the world and reveals its significant landmarks. Some of these landmarks arrange themselves according to natural patterns as in first to last or center to periphery. Others suggest the need for some more complex form of re-arrangement as in type to anti-type or individual to universal.

Just as perception and attitude lead to value, so invention and exploration lead to *illumination*. Framing and mapping the world produces enlightenment. We now can assign values to everything in our world, arrange it according to a meaningful cosmology, and declare our beliefs about it. We can, in other words, outline our subject and state our thesis.

The last stage of the writing process is called *verification*. At this point we reproduce our subject in a new form — the essay. This document not only verifies our perception of the world, but also becomes a world for its readers, stimulating their perception, encouraging their associations, and shaping their system of beliefs.

Last week, the members of my high school writing class went through this process as they prepared to write an essay about some special place in their world. They were not interested in writing about public places, those that had been certified scenic by the National Park Service. They were interested in writing about private places, the holy ground that defined who they were and what they believed. For some students, even these private places were so crusted over with clichés that they had to invent new ways to see them. For others, their private places were so buried in memory that they had to invent elaborate schemes to retrieve them. Discussing the unique functions of the senses, analyzing the unique environmental situations of other cultures, meditation, free-writing, thumbing through family photo albums, and actual site visitations helped stimulate their perceptual awareness.

Invention merged quickly into exploration as each student was asked to draw a place map. A place map is a kind of geographical Rorschach test. Using a large sketch pad and a tray of colored markers, students drew the boundaries, landmarks, sacred spots in the world they wished to re-create. Color, line, perspective, and dimension revealed the attitudes that shaped their world. The students were also encouraged to annotate every trail and historic marker so that later image and word could be computed into some value system.

The illumination came as map was converted into outline and thesis statement. Essentially, students had to re-map their map, or cover their initial map with an overlay that would reveal the system of beliefs that had emerged in their drawing. The overlay (or outline) was then transcribed in

carefully crafted word-symbols that conveyed the texture of the life that was to be re-created in prose.

And finally, the essays were written. I offer as verification this essay written by a sixteen year old girl in a fifty minute period. Her place map hangs from the easel.

The Flag Patch

In our time, the cities have stretched their ugly fingers across our landscape. I belong to a generation of nature-lovers who must rely on small bits of wilderness for satisfaction. As I grow older, even these bits of beauty seem to slip away from me, and I have nothing left to cherish but carefully hoarded memories.

From the time I was quite small, one of my favorite little spots was the blue flag patch by the pond we owned for ten years. From the patch, you could see a whole world that had built itself around the pond; you had an insect's-eye view of the tiny dramas that were played out by the water's edge! You were safe, and small. There was a *rightness* about being insignificant in that miniature setting. It put you on a level with the water-bugs. From the flag patch, life was complete and wholesome.

As you walked toward the pond through the mowed field, the patch was the first bit of color you saw. Everything else was green, exquisitely shaded through the landscape. In late summer, soft browns and golds stood out, but in June, when the grass was thick with dew in the early mornings, the iris patch went unrivaled.

It lay beneath the willows. When you sat beside the irises in the afternoon, the grass was cooled by the trees, and long gold-green willow tendrils brushed your face. There were young cottonwoods, too, sending soft white fluff drifting across the surface of the pond.

Even surrounded by these distracting scenes, the irises drew your attention. Wild iris, or blue flags, as some people still call them, grow in thick clumps, their stiff leaves standing up from the ground like little sabers. They have beautiful art nouveau blooms, shaded from dark blue to violet as the sun shines through their petals. Irises have four petals. Two of the four stand up like people leaning against each other. The other two hang softly down like silk tongues, one on each side of the flower. On every petal is a piece of gold velvet ribbon, like a soft strip of cat's fur, and following the ribbon, one finds delicate white streaks at the

heart of the flower. Curled there, as if hiding from the sun, delicate stamens grow.

The flower on its sturdy stalk seems so vulnerable. When the sunlight shines through the petals, tiny veins are revealed. Golden powder falls from the yellow fur along the petals when they are touched, streaking the fingers. Insects linger in the little shelter formed by the standing petals. Sometimes a bumble-bee rests clumsily among the stamens.

The life of the pond, seen through the green frame of iris stalks, was fascinating. Tiny spiders wove webs in the trees overhead. Water sparkled in the boggy grass, and in the mid-summer, the pond receded, leaving steaming, deep-cracked mud-flats to bake in the sun.

Everything hummed or buzzed until the very leaves of the grass seemed to vibrate with tiny noises. Birds sang in the cottonwoods. When the wind paused among the leaves for a moment, the clear call of a red-winged blackbird rang out.

The grass around the iris patch smelled better than grass anywhere else in the world. It was a rich smell, clean and fresh, and beneath that smell was a scent of soil. The mudflats stank on hot days, when the scum-filled cracks were heated by the sun and the old algae burned away on the surface.

When evening came, and it was time to go back to the house, I would carefully break a few of the blue flags off their bulbs to take with me. In the deepening dusk, the color of the flowers was hidden. But on moonlit nights, the flowers became a soft, pale blue. I saw them by moonlight only a few times, however, because unlike them, I was mortal, and had to sleep in preparation for the next day's adventures.

NOTES

¹ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, 1930), p. 165.

² The discussion of Yi-Fu Tuan's career, his attitude toward writing, and his assessment of the relative merits of geography and philosophy come from my interview with him. (September 29, 1979). Unless otherwise noted, the source for information and direct quotations is that interview.

³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York:

Random House, 1955), p. 15.

⁴ See Yi-Fu Tuan: A Selective Bibliography attached.

⁵ "Place: An Experiential Perspective," *The Geographical Review*, 65 (April, 1975), 152.

⁶ *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974). All citations from *Topophilia* will be documented by page numbers in parenthesis.

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