

“In Comes I”: Performance, Memory and Landscape, Mike Pearson
(Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006)

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‘I can take any empty space’ Peter Brook wrote famously in 1968 ‘and call it a bare stage.’

A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

This *any* empty space, of course, for the purposes of titling Brook’s observations on making theatre, took the definite article, and has become something of generational catch-phrase—theatre as *the* empty space: a site of pure potential, a blank canvas upon which the theatre artist is free to create. Brook, along with the usual suspects—Grotowski, Barba, Schechner et al—has long since become identified with a universalist theatrical aspiration, championing a radical theatrical pan-culturalism in the name of Man, in the name of Art, in the name of Theatre and so on: the roll-call of Kantian absolutes. The Empty Space, realized in a thousand black box theatres, removes practice from context; each black box presents as an atopia, a no-place unburdened by mere location, holding out the possibility of numberless eu-topias, each dedicated to the ideals of holiness and/or roughness, and the celebration of a transcendent, pan-human togetherness predicated upon the fundamental unity of all mankind.

How long ago that all seems. The post-colonial critical charge against Brook, led, among others, by Rustom Bharucha, has convincingly laid bare the ethnocentrism of the model (even if the international festival circuit seems unconvinced—Brook’s name is still good box office). More recently, the convergence of human geography and phenomenology, perhaps most fully realized in the work of Edward Casey, offers a significant new lens through which to understand the metaphysical underpinnings of the Brookian project: that of the critique of the idea of space in western thinking.

For Casey, no space is empty. Indeed, Casey has little time for space per se: his project, broadly speaking, is the rehabilitation of an erstwhile 'lost' understanding of the primacy of place in pre-Socratic thinking. On Casey's account, the history of western philosophy is a history of the dis-placement of *place* in favour of an abstract notion of *space*, conceived, ultimately, as a vast emptiness, of infinite extension, within which stuff happens, and in which no one location has any more ontological significance than any other. Or rather: that every location is as ontologically significant as every other location. Casey's project, spanning evocatively titled monographs such as *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and my particular favourite, his 'Phenomenological Prolegomena' to Steven Feld and Keith Basso's *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), fetchingly titled 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', is not so much an attempt to re-enchant the world by means of a pan-psychic revival, but to assert the necessity of place: being in place as a condition for being at all.

And, of course, *place* is the absent term in Brook's formulation of the necessary conditions for an act of theatre; on the contrary, for Brook, the placeness of place is what must be eradicated in order for the *ex nihilo* act of creation constituting theatre to occur at all.

Theatre and performance studies have, of course, independently of Casey (and others)'s work, developed a long-standing interest in site-specific performance, including Una Chaudhuri's 1996 *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (University of Michigan Press) and Richard Gough's seminal *On Place: Performance Research* (Routledge, 1998). More recently, publications from America (Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs's collection *Land/Scape/Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2003)), Great Britain (Helen Paris and Leslie Hill's *Performance and Place* (Palgrave, 2006)) and Australia (Gay McAuley's collection *Unstable Ground: Performance and the*

Politics of Place (P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006) and Joanne Tompkins's *Unsettling Space* (Palgrave, 2007)) have drawn, variously, on the post-Caseyan phenomenological literature, human geography, traditions of environmental art theory, and Pierre Nora's 1984 work *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. The emerging hypothesis is not simply that place creates particular patterns of meaning (in the manner, perhaps, of an implacable placial determinism), but rather that place and agency, in a complex dialectic, co-create both unmarked, everyday praxis and the broad spectrum of aesthetic and cultural performance.

In Comes I takes up the rubric of place with a vengeance. The work, partly provoked by a 1998 symposium on place and performance at Aberystwyth, is, Pearson explains, 'enthralled by the "lure of the local"', "resolutely rural" and "topophilic", drawn to the "affective ties between people and place" (4), as captured by the evocative Welsh terms *yr aelwyd* —'hearth'—and *y filltir sqwâr*—'the square mile of childhood'. In a compellingly attractive, beautifully produced volume, full of maps, photographs, cartographical coordinates, anecdotes, recollections, analyses and speculations, Pearson offers an autoethnographic account of his own performance practice, grounded in the otherwise—he admits—unremarkable lowlands of the Hibaldstow district of North Lincolnshire, adjoining Scunthorpe (the latter immortalized, for me, at any rate, in punk poet John Cooper Clarke's memorable rant, *Twat*, which annoyingly refused to leave my mind throughout my reading of the book). The district is, Pearson reports, 'out-of-the-way . . . off the tourist track and lacking conventional scenic heritage' (4). Indeed, so untarnished by allure—touristic, anthropological or otherwise—is this area that it boasts what Pearson describes as 'the emptiest place in Britain': Ousefleet on the banks of the River Humber. '[G]rid square SE830220', he writes, referring to the 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey map of the area, 'shows no information, no symbols denoting features of topography—contour lines—or indicating human activity, apart that is from the foot of a pylon' (187).

In his wonderful, theoretically dense and provocative introduction, in full interdisciplinary flight, Pearson treats us to a natural history of the district—an

enchancing couple of pages of geomorphology reprised in subsequent sections dealing with specific sites—segueing into a conventional historiography that had me firing up Google Earth, twiddling the little trackball on my mouse, tumbling from deep space into the minutiae of Pearson's *lieux de mémoire*. I spent far too long wonderingly tracing the route of the old Roman road to the Humber ford, the braided courses of the Old and New, canalized, Ancholme Rivers, the oblate cruciforms of overgrown World War Two airstrips, and the shadowy foundations of the long-since deserted Medieval hamlet of Gainsthorp. *In Comes I* sets about the task of rendering this (arguably) overwhelmingly unremarkable locale fascinating, luring me into a deep, albeit virtual engagement.

The main body of the book consists of three sections, 'Village', 'Neighbourhood' and 'Region', each of which consists of an account of a particular performance—Pearson's own 'Bubbling Tom', the 'Hibaldstow Plough Play', and the 'Haxey Hood' respectively—and ten 'excursions' to particular sites, followed by a proposal for a future performance piece. The overall effect is of an eclectic workbook: more than a glimpse—a thorough immersion in—the careful sifting, reflection upon and development of Pearson's practice as a performance maker.

The genre Pearson evokes to frame his performance autoethnography is that of the late medieval 'chorography'. Chorographies, from the Greek *khora*, for 'region', 'collected and arranged natural, historical and antiquarian information topographically' (9), of a district, 'place by place, village by village . . . without necessarily relating it to larger spatial frames' (9), taking the form of a gazetteer: systematic descriptions of people, natural features, customs and so on.

As the title suggests, however, the specific affective ties addressed in *In Comes I* are those binding Pearson himself to this place. The key questions Pearson claims to be addressing are those driving his own practice: 'Can performative manifestations . . . demonstrate or illuminate particular relationships with place, constituting, in themselves significant phenomena . . .

?’ and ‘can contemporary forms of devised performance enable us to reveal landscape as a matrix of related stories?’ (17).

To this extent, then, Pearson is not so much interested in the quotidian interanimation of place and people that constitutes the ‘cultural’—the concern, perhaps, of the ethnographer, as the extra-daily, aestheticising thematising of those processes constituting his own artistic practice. And in a sense, these are not ‘genuine’ research questions but provocations or stimuli to making work.

Of course, Pearson is one of the most sophisticated theorists doing the performance studies rounds, and he acknowledges up front that, in the context of

the adoption of performance in the social sciences as a synonym for human agency—as a trope of the transitive, as people doing things—*In Comes I* focuses upon activities with an aesthetic or rhetorical quotient—moments of extra-daily practice (3).

It is a little churlish of me, then, to admit that the sections of the book that I enjoyed are those closer in tone and structure to conventional ethnography: the account of the ‘Haxey Hood’—a sprawling, arcane, carnivalesque rumble enacted annually across the reclaimed fenland of the Isle of Axeholme—being a highlight. This is, however, merely my preference . . . and yet, in a sense, the logic of the entire work is predicated precisely upon a kind of selective arbitrariness, rendered as a pluralist polysemy that leaves me a bit unsettled.

In the fine introductory essay from which I have quoted above, Pearson draws upon Gregory Ulmer’s interest in chorographic epistemology, and the usefulness to Ulmer’s ‘grammatology for the digital age’ of a ‘rhetoric of invention concerned with the history of ‘place’ in relation to memory’ (Ulmer, 1994: 39). Pearson follows Ulmer’s rhizomism to espouse a peripatetic epistemology, to write a ‘mystory’ in terms of which we do not choose

between registers of writing—personal, popular and expert—but weave with them. *In Comes I*, then,

takes up the challenge to develop a non-representational style, in which there is no last word. In so doing, it meanders through time and across land, drawn to particular historical moments and topographic details as much by personal proclivity as academic obligation (16).

The result, in some ways, is, as my own response suggests, unsettlingly open. There is, indeed, no last word: Pearson offers two conclusions, neither of which is particularly conclusive, deliberately so. This epistemological playfulness, embodied in the persona of the Fool, to whom, in the local traditional drama of the region, Pearson ascribes the entrance line ‘in comes I’, is successful in the hands of such a fine writer, and such a subtle thinker. As the various ‘excursions’, from village to neighbourhood to region (reversing the sequence of my own Google Earth crash-zoom) mound up, chorographically, the reader might be seduced into a kind of wonderment at the seemingly effortless way in which a sense of place is evoked, emerging unheralded as ‘it meanders through time and across land’. But here, the passive construction masks the organising hand of the writer himself, and of the practice and personal history in service of which the book is written. For all the Ulmeresque, post-Deleuzian evocation of non-closure, then, the logic of autobiography is ultimately dominant in what is a wonderful, thought-provoking, engaging book.

After all, as Pearson notes, ‘politically’ chorographies ‘were intended to legitimise claims to title and land’ (9). There is, in a sense, a process of legitimisation at play in Pearson’s texts, one that has implications for the rapidly developing field of ‘performance-research’. Part of me wonders how the legacy of *In Comes I* might play out in less sophisticated hands.

Reference

Ulmer, Greg. *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

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