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Four Writers and their Settings***Abstract***

Setting is an acknowledged concern for creative writers. In knowing this, we usually think of the authorial creation of settings in fiction, drama and poetry. But also there is the setting for the writing - the actual place where the writer settles and sits. This paper contends that writers make significant choices about the places in which they write. It looks at several real-life settings where significant works in English literature were written. While visiting these writing sites, I kept a journal of my own writings, extracts from which are reproduced (in italics) throughout this piece.

Setting, as a writer sees it

Setting fascinates me. In my writing, setting has often been the first important thing - the 'inspiration'. Characters and issues gained significance as the work developed, but the major setting was established at the start...was the actual start for the piece. I have sometimes been in a place and realised: This is the setting for a work of fiction. I want to use this setting; I want to stage some sort of drama here. In a way, the setting - the place - already contains the drama, already implies characters, issues, particular kinds of action, a plot, or a part of a plot. For me, inspiring places are fertile ground where issues hover and characters spring up. I can never be in a hotel corridor - with doors going off left and right all the way down in perspective to an end point - without feeling a strong sense of: There's fiction here. For me, all the world isn't a stage, but hotel corridors certainly are.

I have written about this before in short pieces - 'Setting, Action and Suspense' (Krauth 1996) and 'The Invisible Story Leapt Out at Me' (Krauth 1999). For me, theme, action, characters and plots are inseparable from setting. If I say *The University Staff Club* you'll immediately think certain sorts of characters, dramas, issues, plots. If I say *The back seat of the family car*, or *An outback waterhole*, you'll think quite different stories. If I had said to you *The Sari Club in Legian Road, Kuta* two years ago you would have thought then an entirely different set of narratives from those conjured up today. And if I use the Sari Club for a scene in a novel set back in 1990, the setting will have a particular edge and resonance, imposed from 'the future'...it will be coded from the reader's time and perspective. And then again, someone reading it in twenty years time may not get the point at all, because the significance of the place might have become obscure.

Places carry meanings, are coded with narrative significances, and these built-in values are useful to writers. Thus, in my own writing, setting is never just a backdrop, it is

always an active participant in the fiction. It is always doing things, meaning things, being metaphor or symbol, in itself analogous - or antithetical - to the foregrounded drama of characters and ideas.

Place making meaning

What writers do with settings in fiction - making place make meaning - is much like what already happens in parts of the world that we recognise as sacred, memorial or celebratory sites. These are bora-rings, birthplaces, burial- and battlegrounds, places where miracles and disasters occurred, places associated with important events in human history, rooms where well-known people grew up or died, temple-sites, cathedral-sites, palace-sites, and so on - sites that resonate with cultural significance and historical narrative energy.

Sometimes this 'place-power' is due to location - the site was chosen as a holy or powerful place for its already existent resonance, its dominant relation to its surroundings, or its resident sense of the sublime. This kind of place instills in us a notion of the grand plan, the cosmic, the divine. We go quiet there - reverent, contemplating the mysteries of the universe, or whatever. Perhaps this is a learnt experience, referring to a set of culturally imposed grand narratives.

In other memorial or celebratory sites, we again go quiet because the history passes through our heads. At Gallipoli, at Bethlehem, at Ground Zero, at Kurnell, in the Keats room of the Memorial House beside the Spanish Steps in Rome, place is animated by the commemorative narratives we have learned. Each of us replay in our minds place-significant dramas according to our education and our interests.

Also, when I return to the houses I lived in as a child, I am overcome with stories from my own history. These are not shared cultural narratives, they involve individual and personal significances. These houses are memorial sites sacred to me in a unique way. My sister lived in these houses too, but her stories are different.

We make places make meanings for us - we imbue them that way - yet some places we acknowledge to be already imbued with significance, and to many others, of course, we assign no significance at all.

Feng Shui and Walking Theory

Individually, we like particular places, and not others. Some like a particular configuration of landscape elements, others don't. I want to see the sea from the balcony, you prefer to view the mountains. And so on. Possibly deep-seated aspects of our individual personalities are revealed in our preferences for one sort of view or another, one sort of location or another...like the Rorschach ink-blot test - a discriminator of personality based on how we view and construct the visual.

This normal practice of reading of place, of interpreting the arrangements of topographies and objects in the environments surrounding us, has been theorised for centuries. From the original exponents of Feng Shui in ancient times to Walter Benjamin's leisured observer (the *flâneur*) in the arcades of Paris eighty years ago, to the very recent work of walking theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Rebecca Solnit, landscape has been read for its significance to human endeavour and for its reflection of the *paysage intérieur*, the 'interior landscape' of the human mind.

Much of the recent work has been done in the context of urban cityscapes, for example, de Certeau's brilliant reading of New York - its shapes, textures, speculated meanings - including as seen from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre (de Certeau 2001: 127-30). But Solnit has taken the theorising back into non-urban environments. Her book

Wanderlust: A History of Walking (Solnit 2001), in focusing on the significances and shapes of the environment when viewed at pedestrian speed (as did de Certeau and Benjamin), analyses the meanings we make of the world when the mind is travelling at 'three miles an hour' (Solnit, 2001: 10). With reference to various peripatetic philosophers and Romantic poets (i.e. some of the greatest literary walkers) Solnit proposes that the pace of walking is equivalent to the pace of thoughts. We have here theory concerned with the pedestrian - with the touristic and the 'exotic becoming familiar'. But also it is theory about the close-to-home and the everyday, about the meanings we make out of the local, the intimately known, the vistas contained in our ordinary vision, the relationship between the thinking we normally do and the places we normally move through. It's a theorising of our neighbourhoods, our locales.

This 'walking theory' gives rise in my mind (and not wholly facetiously) to 'sitting theory'. Major thoughts occur to us while seated (and while, perhaps, the mind gets up and wanders). Writers, in particular, do a lot of sitting. 'Settling', 'sitting', and 'setting' are linguistically (and psychologically) related. The setting of the writer's settled sitting is worthy of study.

As an extension of the above group of ideas, I am interested here in how writers use setting, not in their poetry or fiction, but in choosing the locations and environments for settling down, for having a desk, for putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

By talking about 'a room of one's own', Virginia Woolf politicised the big picture on this matter. Writers need particular space/s to sit and write. They need an understood relationship between the work they do and the space they do it in. In other professional fields this spatial arrangement is worked out according to regulations or established practice - the journalist has a partitioned desk in the newsroom, the sub-editor has her own office. And so on. But self-employed writers must create the working space for themselves. In selecting a place for writing, they hope to be able to say 'Yes, I can write here' as opposed to 'No, I did not find that environment conducive to my work'.

Four writers and their settings

In 2000, while attached to the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona, I conceived the idea of visiting writing sites in the Mediterranean where authors I was interested in had settled and written works I had read. I wanted to experience their writing-places, and I wanted to sit and write too in those places. The writers I chose were selected somewhat randomly. They are probably the best-known English writers associated with Mediterranean island sojourns (that's why I knew about them) but their sites needed to be close along the way of the trip I had planned. Site unseen, so to speak, I chose to visit the writing settings of Robert Graves on Majorca, D.H. Lawrence in Sicily, Lawrence Durrell in Corfu and Lord Byron on Cephallonia.

As a given in this project was the understanding that these writers went to these islands for different, individually-necessitated reasons, whether seeking escape, exile, adventure or stimulation, or because economic or family or emotional reasons demanded it. But in leaving their previous places, these writers had demonstrated actions of choice in terms of deciding upon, and settling in, a location conducive to writing. I had read poetry and novels Graves wrote in Majorca, and poems under which D.H. Lawrence indicated 'Taormina' (a Sicilian cliff-side town close to Mt Etna) as the place of writing. I had also read Lawrence's marvellous *Sea and Sardinia* (Lawrence 1921) which he wrote in Taormina just prior to coming to Australia. I had been through a period of infatuation with Lawrence Durrell earlier in my life, and especially with his brilliant *Prospero's Cell* (Durrell 1945) - possibly the greatest non-fiction work in English celebrating a single island. And I had, at university, read a Canto or two of Byron's massive final work, *Don Juan*, which was still being written (although the point is debated) while he lived in the village of Metaxata on Cephallonia in 1823 just prior to his death. So, without having

visited them, I knew these sites had been highly significant writing-places because I had read the famous works they were renowned for nurturing.

Robert Graves on Majorca

In 1929, aged 34, Robert Graves fled over-industrialised Britain (as he saw it) and went to the outskirts of the remote west-coast Majorcan village of Deià. He built a house that was his home until he died at age 90 in 1985; there he wrote more than 100 books. He is buried in the graveyard of the church of Sant Joan Baptista (Saint John the Baptist) in the middle of - and high above - the village. To get to Roberto's house (they call him 'Roberto' in Majorca) I need to use initially the services of the Ferrocarril de Sóller (the ancient railway system that has run between Palma and Sóller since 1912) then a taxi and, after that, my own legs.

Robert Graves' house was the first writing place I visited on my tour of writing sites. I had no particular expectations in turning up there, and what follows here is from the diary notes I wrote *in situ*, at first outside the poet and novelist's house, and later from beside his grave in the village cemetery.

13.9.00

The taxi twists and turns, up out of the Sóller valley and along the island's cliff-hugging west-coast road. After fifteen minutes of cautious driving on a road more suited to a donkey and cart, I catch a glimpse of the perspective of 'Deya' shown on the postcard in my hand. The village is there, I see, down below the road on a shelf sloping, then plunging away, to the Mediterranean.

'Casa de Roberto Grav-ez?' I say, careful to pronounce his name in something like its Spanish form.

'Si, si.' The taxi driver lets me know that he is familiar with the place and keeps driving. Then on a bend in the road in the middle of nowhere, he stops, and with a gentle, somewhat non-committal, sweep of the hand, indicates that we have arrived at Roberto Grav-ez's house. I thank him, pay and get out. He drives off happily.

I look around. Where am I? I am at a point along a twisting coastal road, high above the sea, bordered by stone walls on either side. This is not the village called 'Deya' apparent on the postcard. That was back a kilometre or so. Here, on one side, is a terraced olive grove dropping away towards the sea. And on the other, is a narrow property which starts out as a single building the size of a double garage, but - as my eyes open - begins to include a larger house further towards the next bend. Two storeys, with an interesting balcony overlooking the sea, and a vine-covered arbour in the grounds. I walk towards the house and find beside its gate a letterbox with Graves's name on it - just the surname - and the name he gave to the house: 'Ca N'Alluny' - 'Remote House'.

Robert Graves' house

I know I am in the right place now, so I stand in the ditch beside the gate (there's nowhere else to stand - it's either the road, the ditch or the wall)...and I seek to feel the place...

There is a quiet here, a big quiet - in spite of the occasional car persisting on the bends. The cars break the quiet, but it mends again. Olive groves are usually silent - silence is secure in them - and these contorted, peaceful trees across the road seem especially calm. The sea below them is a quiet sea too.

This must have been a very quiet place when Roberto first came here. (A car with a loud techno-beat stereo goes by. At the bend, it, and its noise, vanishes). An animal's bell is clinking further up the hillside and I can hear that primitive sound - the braying of a donkey - from somewhere on the steep slopes. Each of these sounds is so clear; it's as if I'm hearing them for the first time.

Sound travels in this crook of mountains like a feel-able thing. And I think it's to do with the loudness of the silence. I don't mean an intensity, but the opposite - it's as if silence has been allowed free here, has expanded itself, has become less dense than it normally is, and much bigger. This quality of silence - this quality of the place - makes sounds very important, would make words very important.

I hear from somewhere the cowbell and the dog-bark - anatomised, detailed in their textures. I know these sounds, but I have never heard them like this before. They are not just sounds: they are like whole languages...

There was a marvellous smell of morning wood-smoke when I got here, an ancient smell of the day getting going...There is about his house a sense of isolation and civilisation - of things now being ancient and primitive and undiminished (even by a techno-pumping Peugeot). In Roberto's garden there are citrus and olive trees, a lovely weeping Mediterranean palm, a struggling tall pine, and grape vines. And by his gate an olive trunk that looks like two figures entwined, embracing.

Beside the rock wall, in the morning shade, at this bend in the road that has Graves's gate, I have a strange urge to write poetry. And also a strange urge to put this, what I've written, into Graves's letterbox...

I decide I will walk where Graves must have walked. I continue along the road, away from the postcard 'Deya'. And around the next bend I am astonished to find the village - the real Deià. Roberto's house wasn't so isolated after all. And on the road ahead I see a hotel with cars negotiating its gates, and further along a crane lifting a barrow of cement for a new set of 'medieval-style' apartments.

At first sight the village is a picturesque clutter of medieval houses and greenery swathing the sides of a sharply jutting, cone-shaped knob with a watch-towered church plainly sitting on top. In turn, this mini-mountain is surrounded by a ravine - like a waterless moat - and from there sweep up mountainsides and towering cliffs that dwarf the village. [The knob is called 'Es Puig', ironically that's Mallorquí for 'the mountain'; it rises 211m (692ft) above sea level. The real mountains surrounding it rise to the cloud-wreathed peak of the Teix, towering 1064m (3491ft) above (Hammer, Oliver and Schauhoff 488).] Even on the seaward side, where the ravine empties in a narrow chasm, the land rises again to cliffs. Yet, while Deià might appear hemmed in on all sides by an enormity of natural walls, seemingly choking it, the effect is quite different. Deià is the point of attention in this cup-like natural structure: it is a podium in an amphitheatre; it is a tongue in an open mouth; it is the contents of a Holy Grail.

I walk into the village and find nothing much happening yet. Just a few tourists wandering; an old man setting up his seat for the day; the postman taking letters from a basket and slipping them under doors. It is still too early in the morning. But there is a strange and definite force at work, an anti-gravity. Even though the cramped alleyways that wind around the mini-mountain towards its top are very steep, they are attractive, they drive you upwards, they make you want to climb. And no matter which way you take, up this jutting knob, you arrive at the church of Sant Joan Baptista and, beside it, the Cementaria Municipal, the graveyard on top of a mountain surrounded by far larger mountains where Robert Graves is buried. On the gate there is a sign in four languages: 'Respect this place'...

I have been standing here for more than an hour, and I barely want to move. Mind you, there's not much space to move. The cemetery is about the size of an inner-city backyard. It has several gnarled trees, cactuses, oleanders, a crazy arrangement of pot plants, various graveside paraphernalia such as urns and framed photographs, and a rickety set of narrow pathways. It's like an eccentric garden cum junkyard. The hardest thing to see is the graves, especially Roberto, whom I come across last, partly hidden by a tree and a flourishing bit of ground-cover growing around him.

There are no raised headstones here. Everyone has a flat square of cement with a name scratched on it when the cement was wet. Most of these flat squares have joined up to form the pathways. One is always careful of one's feet in a graveyard, but it is especially the case here. If you don't walk on a dead person's head, you'll trample the garden! They say the corpses are buried standing upright here, because of the lack of space. I can believe it. But I don't think Roberto would mind taking up forever the stance of a poet reading. Particularly at the peak of this podium-place.

View from Roberto's grave back towards his house

When I look down I can trace my morning's journey from Roberto's house along the side of the mountain opposite and up the winding village streets to where I now stand. It was probably precisely the walk Roberto took many times, to visit the graveyard and contemplate where he would spend his death. It's the kind of graveyard you want to be in, one you could look forward to. The view down into the gorge, out to sea, and up the surrounding mountains is - there's no other word - breathtaking.

Not only can I see where Roberto and I came from, I can also see other paths I might take - a maze of them. And I can see the paths being taken by others. You don't need a map in Deidà, the place is the map. From the graveyard you look down in plan perspective on the jumbled pattern of the village streets, and on the main road snaking around the ravine. In elevation perspective you look across at the interconnected strata of red-dirt terraces going up and up the mountains - each terrace a pathway just wide enough for a single line of olive trees to grow, or for a man or a goat or a donkey to walk. It's a map whichever way you look, in plan and elevation.

Right now I can: watch a game of tennis in the hotel grounds down on the main road; watch people take a walk down the ravine towards the sea; watch new apartments being built across from the hotel; watch cars and buses take the long winding curve of road around the village; watch a waiter spreading a tablecloth on the hotel terrace; watch olive pickers working around a tree; see washing being hung; see whole journeys - such as a walk from home down lanes to buy bread and back again; see rows of vegetable gardens neat in backyards; see a machine digging rocks for a new driveway up into the terraces. And because it is all plan and elevation, all these people can watch me writing in the graveyard beside Graves. The watcher in the watchtower can always be seen...

I am down in the village again, looking for something to eat and drink. It is hot here today. The olive groves bake on their stony ground; the stones of the village buildings reflect the end-of-summer heat.

Walking in the gyre of streets you're not sure if you're in the place or in the place's map. It's a sort of objectifying experience. You're not sure if you're you, or you looking at you. You can't precisely place yourself: Are you in the streets, or up in the graveyard watching yourself in the streets? You can see where you're going and where you've been. It's

disconcerting - disorienting - to be in a place where you can see the path to take: where life is both life and the map to life.

View to the knob of Es Puig, with the tall mountain of The Teix behind

I walk back up to the cemetery. The roads wind up Es Puig like those in depictions of the Tower of Babel. But Deià is not Babel. It is Babel's opposite - a place of separating of sounds, of untwining and unplaiting. From the graveyard, the focal point of this immense natural amphitheatre, you can hear everything. The chock of the tennis ball, the call of the walkers going towards the sea, the whine of the crane lifting tiles for the new apartments, the laughter of the olive-gatherers, the braying of the donkeys. Each sound is purified, because this giant cup of mountains is filled with the most incredible silence.

It is a silence so fecund it pulls sound apart. It unravels it. And it is the place that causes it all - this astonishing amphitheatre. There are no echoes. There is only transcendent clarity. And while there is a feeling of amplification, it's not actually that. It is simply that sound is free here - free to travel; freed to travel. The crunching of a distant shoe on gravel, the closing of a door, the dropping of a bin lid, the kicking of a football... Nothing is louder than it ever is; it's that you can hear it up-close a long way off, and such up-closeness you have never experienced before.

And what can be said for sound in this graveyard can be applied to the visual. Surrounded by terraces of activity, it is as if an open-cut mine of life and history encompasses you; it is like one of those glass-fronted ant farms. Life is happening in such an exposed way - you feel you shouldn't be allowed to watch and hear with such ease, or clarity.

Respect this place.

I don't want to leave this graveyard, but I must. I need to catch the last train back to Palma. I am sure that if I stayed here some great words would be freed by this freed silence. They would form between the atoms of the silence, and become audible, become visible, to me. I would have to write them. But I couldn't take too much of this, perhaps. It might be overbearing, traumatic, poisonous - always having to write, always feeling words coming out of the air at me. I'd need to get away. (As I write this, an old aeroplane goes along the coast. Its motors fill the amphitheatre with sound. And the moment it passes out of sight, it is not heard.)

This is a writer's paradise. Words open up for you, break on you, like constant waves on a beach. But is there any writer who could stand a permanent stranding here...like an immortal Laputan, wishing for a moment when death, or a wordless silence, would arrive? No wonder Roberto hightailed it to Palma from time to time on the Sòller train, and thereby made the Bar Bosch as famous as the village of Deià.

I can hear the sounds outside the graveyard - chooks, cars, and the marvellous, persistent donkey...but they don't break the silence. The silence is separate. It stays silent while the sounds stay sounds. And I hear Roberto say: 'It is an amazing place for writers, isn't it?' Anaïs Nin, Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, Anthony Burgess, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges and others, came and stayed at Graves's 'Remote House'. 'Come to Deià, and be amazed... Do you want to be in a place made for words?'

I know I have to leave. There's a bee busy in one of the little pink flowers blooming around his grave. Stupidly, maybe, I stand to attention and awkwardly salute Captain Graves. I have never saluted anyone before, and meant it. Adios, Roberto. This has been one of the most amazing days of my life.

On one occasion, Graves discussed aspects of the writing environment with particular reference to purity of hearing and vision. In *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (1972), in a section called 'The Inner Ear', he wrote:

Ordinary people in the present technological civilization get most of their mental food from their radio or television set and do not therefore need to cultivate the critical inner ear which depends largely on the eye... I keep no television set in my home and very seldom listen to the radio, or sit in a chattering café where an unnecessary strain is put on my critical inner ear. (Graves 1972: 170)

Having experienced the exceptional qualities of sound and vision in Deià, I can understand the context of this statement. Growing accustomed to the clarity and perfection of Deià hearing and seeing, one would find the rest a cacophony, a discordance, a confusion. One would find mainly, I believe, that normal hearing and vision have lost degrees of meaning. Deià suggests that sound itself - pre-language sound - has meaning, and that the same quality of pristine experience is available through all the senses. Deià exposes the potential of an unhindered hearing - perhaps an unfallen hearing - that Graves relates to 'the critical inner ear', the quintessential ear for writing and reading poetry.

In 1970, in a *Playboy* interview with James McKinley, Graves was asked:

Playboy: You've written that certain places on earth give off mysterious radiations that affect the inhabitants. How? (Kersnowski 1989: 152)

He answered:

Graves: There are some sacred places made so by the radiation created by magnetic ores. My village, for example, is a kind of amphitheatre enclosed by mountains containing iron ore, which makes a magnetic field. Most holy places in the world - holy not by some accident, like a hero dying or being born there - are of this sort. Delphi was a heavily charged holy place. (Kersnowski 152)

It interests me that Graves recognised the amphitheatrical topography of his valley, but did not acknowledge it here as the key factor in its special quality for writers. His answer to the question is abrupt, as if he could say much more about his village, but refuses to. Perhaps he thought *Playboy* deserved no better. Or perhaps he wanted to keep the special qualities of Deià secret.

Graves did not write much 'place-poetry' about Deià (as I judge from his *Collected Works* [1959]). However, the poem, 'The Terraced Valley', stands out because it clearly involves a description of the area around his house:

Calm sea beyond the terraced valley
Without horizon easily was spread,
As it were overhead,
Washing the mountain-spurs behind me:
The unnecessary sky was not there... (Graves 1959: 164)

I noticed this phenomenon at Deià. The Mediterranean and the sky were indistinguishable at the horizon - the two blues matched exactly. Graves uses this feature to create in the poem a 'strange region' - an 'outside-in' world where the narrator, distracted by thoughts about his lover, thinks he enters a different-logic place created by love. He is brought back to the reality of the valley - which is special in itself anyway - by the sound of the lover's voice which 'broke / This trick of time, changing the world about / To once more inside-in and outside-out' (Graves 1959: 164).

Deià does play tricks on one's perceptions, as I too discovered. But elsewhere, Graves wrote about the more mundane, writerly attractions of the place:

I chose Deyá...where I found everything I wanted as a background to my work as a writer: sun, sea, mountains, spring-water... "The air here is extremely pure"...perfect tranquillity reigns; or you can call it vacancy. The Majorcan countryside is not at all a place to go in search of inspiration; but admirable for people whose minds already teem with ideas that need recording in absolute quiet - poets, mathematicians, musicians, sculptors and such. (Graves 1997: 7, 11, 23, 25)

Yes, *absolute* quiet....

D.H. Lawrence in Sicily

In 1920, at age 35, as part of his peripatetic life, D.H. Lawrence went to Sicily. He settled in Taormina - a beautiful Greco-Roman town clinging to a complex of peaks and steep cliffs on the Sicilian east coast, just south of Messina, overlooking the Ionian Sea under the shadow of the Mount Etna volcano. He lived and wrote there from 1920 to 1923. During that period he produced his best poetry (including 'Snake'), worked on several novel manuscripts, and wrote the classic travel work, *Sea and Sardinia* (1921).

Taormina is now a tourist town. It has its Greco-Roman, medieval and *fin de siècle* British sectors. There's no off-season, it seems. Americans, Germans, Scandinavians, British and Australians come in a stream all year round. There's a cable-car up to the town in addition to the bus-jammed switchback roadway, a medieval castle high above, crowded pebble beaches and a railway station at the cliff foot. There's a house in winding, mountainside Via David Herbert Lawrence where a plaque indicates the author's 1920s residence. At the time, the street clearly had a different name. But the house doesn't look as though much has changed since then.

28.4.00

Fading pink, it clings to the hillside: two storeys at the roadway, but four storeys on the precipitous seaward side. Somewhat run down at the moment...the house is a tall box with a simple Spanish-tiled hip roof, no eaves, old green blinds on the windows facing the great dish of the sea, a clutter of houses spilling down the slope away from it now. But it was clearly the first - the pioneer of the new section of town - its architecture simply states that it was once the lone observatory here. Its balconies - narrow at the top level, big and square at the third level - jut towards the Mediterranean horizon. The house

seems as elemental as the sharp peaks around and behind it, as quintessential as the ruined fort high above. It seems to gather the view to itself, a sort of magnet for time and vision. It too is on the edge of an amphitheatre - in the dress circle, if you like - central, it looks down the plunging valley to the sea.

Lawrence's house is below and to the left of the central knob in this photograph - the pinkish building

Lawrence wrote of his attachment to this house in his letters:

I like Sicily... It is so green and living, with the young wheat soft under the almond trees and the olives... We have quite a lovely villa on the green slope high above the sea, looking east over the blueness, with the hills and the snowy, shallow crest of Calabria on the left across the sea, where the straits begin to close in. The ancient fountain still runs, in a sort of little cave-place down the garden - the Fontana Vecchia - and still supplies us. (Lawrence 1984: 489)

High on the top floor we live, and it feels rather like a fortress. You know we have two terraces, one above the other. There we pace the decks... Here one feels as if one had lived for a hundred thousand years [yet it is still] the world's morning... (Lawrence 1984: 497-8)

29.4.00

The climb up to Castelmola [531m], the 13th century castle overlooking Taormina, is severe. After the effort of the climb, and standing among the castle ruins, I am with exhaustion reduced to the simplest way of describing the view. Lying below are the Mediterranean, a group of peaks, a clinging town, and the perched location of Lawrence's house.

Make the left hand flat. Bring the thumb and pinky up until they are upright. Bend them a little. Curve the first and third fingers so that they make the palm concave, keeping them lower than the thumb and pinky. Stretch out the middle finger. There you have, from thumb to pinky: Monte Luretta [427m]; Piano del Porto [107m]; Capo Santa Andrea [75m]; Punta Paradiso (Teatro Greco) [230m]; and Castello Saraceno [379m]. Standing on Castelmola you are on the wrist, at the pulse. Taormina sits in the cupped palm of this hand, clinging round the various peaks of Monte Tauro. Behind, the head is Etna.

In another perspective, seen from the cemetery below, the knob Lawrence's house is built on is very much like the central Deià knob. The writing house on the central peak, ringed by other peaks with valley around it and the narrow drop away to the sea in front, reminds again of a tongue in a surrounding landscape mouth.

The natural amphitheatre Lawrence wrote into was larger than that of Deià, and today any amazing audio properties (if ever it had them) are not verifiable. The spill of modern buildings down the torrente ravine, the tourist busses on the winding access roads, the cars on the autostrada emerging from the tunnels under Monte Tauro, the whirring of the pylon-borne cable-cars, the noise rising from the tacky tourist strip on the narrow coast - all these interventions have killed the acoustics. But in the third century BC, when the Greeks took advantage of the natural cupping of the landscape to build a stunning Teatro Greco, it seems likely the properties of sound in Taormina were special.

30.4.00

The shape of Taormina is a geometry of interlocking and contrapuntal curves and concavities with various centres and focal points. It is three mountainside amphitheatres, really - the old town formed by one ravine, the new town formed by another ravine, and the third - the ancient Greek Theatre itself - beautifully angled between the two, focussed on the cone of Etna beyond... Etna has entered stage right for every performance in this Greek Theatre. The orientation of auditorium and stage are towards this ultimate drama of life - the powerful, destructive theatricals of the constantly rumbling and flaring volcano.

Mt Etna seen from the auditorium of the *Teatro Greco*

The opening section of Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* is taken up with a description of the landscape surrounding Taormina, especially the volcano:

Ah, what a mistress, this Etna!... With her strange, remote communications and her terrible dynamic exhalations. She makes men mad. Such terrible vibrations of wicked and beautiful electricity she throws about her, like a deadly net! Nay, sometimes, verily, one can feel a new current of her demon magnetism seize one's living tissue and change the peaceful life of one's active cells. She makes a storm in the living plasm [sic] and a new adjustment. And sometimes it is like madness.

This timeless Grecian Etna, in her lower-heaven loveliness, so lovely, so lovely, what a torturer! Not many men can really stand her, without losing their souls. She is like Circe. Unless a man is very strong, she takes his soul away from him and leaves him not a beast, but an elemental creature, intelligent and soulless. Intelligent, almost inspired, and soulless. (Lawrence 1997: 2)

Reading Lawrence's writing about Etna, it is a challenge to remember that he is talking about landscape. Unrestrained personification and metaphor aside, this passage is exceptional for the insight it gives into a writer passionately in touch with place. Lawrence shows that setting can affect in highly emotional, physical and intellectual ways. His main point is, I think, that the literary and the landscape are inexorably bound, that we see the world as texts, that culturally-placed (and privately-conceived) narratives reside in the rocks, trees and buildings - in the view - around us.

30.4.00

In the ancient ruins of the Teatro Greco, the tourists swarm over stage and auditorium alike. They are the spectators and the spectacle. They are the performance and the audience. They take photographs of each other - swapping the camera between photographer and subject. They are here to see themselves in other settings, to bring their lives into new dramatic focus, to experience new twists to their usual plots, to take it all back home again...

Taormina is not a place of rest, but of agitation: too gorgeously beautiful and too constantly disturbing for a settlement of the spirit. In this stage-setting, dramatically poised on the lip of the broad-horizoned sea with the imminent eruption breathing close behind, you are reminded of the maddening, inspiring fact that you can't change the basic text for the role you play - your entrance and exit are fixed.

Lawrence Durrell on Corfu

On the east coast of the Greek island Corfu, around the capital Corfu Town, there are several Durrell family writing sites and settings for their books (see Whitton Paipeti, 1999). The Durrell Brothers firmly placed this area on the English literary map. After living in this inspiring environment from 1935 to 1939, Gerald Durrell (Lawrence's young brother) wrote his highly successful *My Family and Other Animals* series (1956ff), and during the period Lawrence Durrell, in his mid-twenties, wrote two early novels plus poems that appeared in later publication. Lawrence Durrell's famous *Prospero's Cell* (1945), a celebration of the entire Corfu island, began as autobiographical notes kept in a journal done at Kalami, some thirty kilometres north of Corfu Town.

Lawrence and Nancy Durrell, newly-married, sailed their small yacht between Corfu Town and Kalami Bay, but I went there by bus - a 90-minute trip on winding cliff-side roads overlooking the narrow strait between Corfu and the Albanian coast.

[To view an image of Lawrence Durrell's house on the *mons* at Kalima Bay, please visit the The Ark Gallery (The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust) (Kalami 2003)]

About the White House, as he called it, at Kalami Durrell wrote:

29.4.37

It is April and we have taken an old fisherman's house in the extreme north of the island - Kalamai. Ten sea-miles from the town, and some thirty kilometres by road, it offers all the charms of seclusion. A white house set like a dice on a rock already venerable with the scars of wind and water. The hill runs clear up to the sky behind it, so that the

cypresses and olives overhang this room in which I sit and write. We are upon a bare promontory with its beautiful clean surface of metamorphic stone covered in olive and ilex: in the shape of a *mons pubis*. This is become our unregretted home. A world. Corcyra. (Durrell 2000: 3)

The '*mons*' entry in *Prospero's Cell* is a beautiful piece of writing (reprinted in Whitton Paipeti's literary guidebook with the '*mons pubis*' reference excised - to protect tourists, I suppose). Almost sonnet-like, it performs a lovely choreography of place, flowing easily between outside and private worlds, between land and body, between setting and sexuality. Durrell's perceptions at Kalami Bay are imbued with an eroticism that is a coming together of passions for land, sea, writing and Nancy's body. And all these elements add up to a particular kind of silence:

7.5.37

It was on a ringing spring day that we discovered the house. The sky lay in a heroic blue arc as we came down the stone ladder. I remember N[ancy]. saying distinctly to Theodore: "But the quietness alone makes it another country." ... We... sat on the white rock to eat, looking down at our own faces in the motionless sea. You will think it strange to have come all the way from England to this fine Grecian promontory where our only company can be rock, air, sky - and all the elementals. ... White house, white rock, friends, and a narrow style of loving: and perhaps a book which will grow out of these scraps... (4)

18.5.37

...I am back on the warm rocks, lying with my face less than a foot above the dark Ionian. All morning we lie... dropping cherries into the pool - clear down two fathoms to the sandy floor where they loom like drops of blood. N. has been going in for them like an otter and bringing them up in her lips... (7)

11.6.37

The windows give directly onto the sea, so that its perpetual sighing is the rhythm of our work [he writing, Nancy painting] and our sleeping... (10)

17.6.37

Southward the land falls gently away to the white cape, luxuriant and steaming; every curve here is a caress, nakedness to the delighted eyes, an endearment... (11)

25.6.37

The silence here is like a discernible pulse - the heart-beat of time itself. (13)

I admit I was excited about visiting Kalami Bay. I wanted to see the White House on the *mons pubis*. I knew from my reading that 'the rooms where [Durrell] lived and wrote now form an apartment, which can be rented from a British tour company' (Whitton Paipeti 18) and I knew I couldn't afford them. But I figured I could still get up close, sit outside that olive-shaded window, and get the feel of the place:

23.3.01

The house itself is especially ugly and has spawned a deal of insensitive development around the bay nearby. The bay is much like a lake - its two headlands reach out towards two headlands coming across the water from the Albanian side of the strait. So, as

Durrell says, the bay seems to be land-locked. Yet this 1.5km wide strait is part of the major ferry line from Italy to Greece.

There are a lot of villas around the bay now, single and in long terraces down the curving hillside. Around the White House there are even The White House Villas - a development complex of holiday places rather more attractive than their progenitor which has its blunt concrete feet in the sea and is, generally speaking, a concrete box.

Again, ho-hum, it's an amphitheatre, and here the stage is the sea. Cypress and olive groves cover the hills rising up from the bay, and now the holiday villas nestle among the trees. But this is not the amphitheatre of the 'tongue in a mouth' variety. More it is the amphitheatre of female thighs opening to the universe.

In Prospero's Cell Durrell talked about working with the sea below his window and this is the key thing here. There is 1) stillness and 2) the sound of the water which is constant movement and becomes a kind of stillness, or silence, itself.

This is not a place that 'stuns' you, as Durrell says of beaches further north. This is a place that you have to grow into. You have to relax yourself and let it enter you...

There is definitely a flow here...it's not a silence (and I don't mean because I can hear hammering)...it's not the same as the other writing-places where it was auditory or visual...the view to Albania is interesting in a bare, motionless, mountainous sort of way - a classic painted backdrop. Behind, the island rises steeply with olive- and cypress-covered hills, but this place doesn't have feng shui. It has something else. It may be the idea of the sea as a lake - the idea of a flow that is at rest - of movement that is stationary. It makes you feel like just lying down and waiting for it to take you - to take you somewhere that will be right here itself. It's rather sexy, and I can imagine it so in a feminine kind of way - like a flow that will come through you, that will lull and rock you gently, that will be ripple after ripple and wave after wave, subtle, subtle as sex without touching.

The stillness is incredible. The sense of stillness - of a deep appreciation of stillness. This rippling, rippling makes me marvel that the buildings are not moving, that the headland and the mountains across the strait are not moving. They are so still. This constant wateriness has become the norm. It is the rippling bay that is still, such that the apartments and villas are frozen, petrified, far too still.

And I keep thinking of lines of poetry - of that kind of flow in stillness. This is a wonderful place to write. Words would just flow out of you. The flow is there already; you just have to ride words like little boats on it. But you'd have to edit yourself very well.

My final view of Kalami Bay, from the ferry on the way to Italy, replicated the view Durrell would have seen from his yacht:

5.4.00

The mons pubis from the sea... Well, I have to admit that it is an attractively shaped promontory - domed, but flattish, gently curving down at its point and sides, covered in smooth foliage. Apart from that it's nothing like a mons pubis, especially in that it must be the mons for a torso that has no legs - for where the legs should be the mons drops away and there is the sea. It's the mons of the anatomy museum, cut from its context...

Wait a minute, I'm wrong, I can see now. It's Nancy swimming naked, just dived for one of those cherries, floating on her back... My eyes are at water level, what I can see is the amphitheatre of her sex floating seductively, her face obscured behind her thighs, her legs disappearing underwater... She is open to the universe of writers...

Byron on Cephallonia

Lord Byron had various Mediterranean adventures, but in 1823 at age 35, just before he died famously at Missolonghi in the cause of Greek independence, he spent four months at Metaxata, a village on Cephallonia. This Greek island is currently known as the setting for Louis de Bernières' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1995). But in 1823 it was newsworthy as the island where the infamous Lord Byron was stationed, awaiting his moment to move as a battle-leader to the mainland in support of the Greeks against the Turks (Nicolson 1999: 103-148). Writing for the centenary of Byron's death in 1923, Harold Nicolson recorded:

The house which Byron rented at Metaxata is still extant...the little cottage, which today shines white and trim against the dun background of the mountain and over the jumbled roofs of the surrounding hovels, has of late been restored...[and included among various improvements] the old balcony on which Byron would sit in his tartan jacket has been renewed and redecorated...

It can scarcely be said that Byron and his staff were roughing it at Metaxata. For this village nestles in one of the richest and most pleasant of all Ionian valleys. Behind, protecting it from the north, rise the colourless but aromatic slopes of the Black Mountain; around the village itself, and running down to the shore, is a luxuriant sweep of vine and cypress, of olive groves and oranges; while in front, framed by the twin southern capes of Cephallonia, stretches a purple segment of the Ionian Sea. (Nicolson [1924] 1999: 127-8)

Julius Millingen, a medical practitioner who visited him there, described first meeting Byron contemplating the view:

'On my arrival...I found him on the balcony of the house...attentively contemplating the extensive and variegated view before him... The valley below the village is highly luxuriant, and even at this advanced epoch of the year was covered with verdure, and embellished by the evergreen olive, orange and lemon trees, and cypresses towering above the never-fading laurel and myrtle. Like an oasis in the sandy desert, this aspect produced the most pleasing impression on the eye...'
(Millingen cited in Nicolson 1999: 146-7)

Cephallonia is like Corfu - an island of rugged mountains, with below them fertile valleys punctuated by the tall exclamation marks of cypress trees. This is lush 'European' landscape, not the stunted, rugged 'Asia Minor' bareness of the Greek Aegean islands. Millingen and Nicolson visited Cephallonia in the 1820s and 1920s respectively, and their views of Metaxata are basically as you see it today - providing that you turn your back now on the sudden recent eruption of the Metaxata Luxury Villas complex up the road from where Byron's house stood. There is a monument in a little park commemorating Byron, and a plaque at the front gate of a very ordinary single-storey, red-tiled house with shutters and a lot of cement paving in the small front yard. But if you go around the back of this house, there is a clump of ruined, overgrown foundations, the sharp fall-away of the hillside, and the view... It is wonderful.

16.3.00

I'm on the heights looking over a sizable stretch of coast, including marvellous blue sea and four islets. This stretch is a dish-shaped, fertile plateau which suddenly sheers off, at a lip, into [unseen] cliffs down to the sea. Quite dramatic...

Sorry, but this is another amphitheatre. I can hear dogs way down on the left of the dish-shaped plateau, and a generator hammering to the right. This amphitheatre is shallower

than Deia, and the mountain behind is much further back, but the site is again a raised section in the middle of - not a cup, but - a saucer.

It's 9.30am. There's a fantastic clamour of birdsong. Deep lush grass and strong verdant smells. A low pile of ruin of an old house at the back of the new house, fenced off, provokes the thought that Byron was there - it's just a low doorway - I see this ruin and I want to people it...

The plain/plateau below is dotted with houses, agricultural buildings, churches, delightful tree-lined fields, but mostly trees, marvellous stands of cypress and olive groves and orchards. There are several villages below with their cream churches and blue-domed towers. There's a tremendous sense of growth, richness and verdure. This is a great scene to look at and not think about war. This is rich, natural life, not sordid death. And the bells in the tower of one or other of the churches are regularly going off.

From above, this looks like luxury. Even though Nicolson talks about the house overlooking 'hovels', this is not poor, hard-won growing country. You really could stay here forever. The place will support you.

I don't want to go, but I have a walk to do and a bus to catch for a ferry on the other side of the island at 3pm. It's now 10am. It's heart-wrenching, because this is another of those amphitheatres that puts you at the centre of a small world - which is the same as being at the centre of the whole world and the centre of yourself - because everything is coming in to you. Sound, light - all vibration is focussed on you - bouncing around out there and radiating in to yourself as the focal point...

Other vibrations too (Graves talks about magnetism!) - but these are related to being able to see life happening - a broad spectrum, a 'god's-eye-view'. Life laid out like on a page - an illustrated page - forming followable patterns, viewable logics or semantics, visible shadings, shapes, contrasts - a plan of life. The panoramic view, both picture and map and the place itself! This is like having the box seat in life's theatre... This place has feng shui...

It seems that in this environment Byron stopped writing poetry and composed instead the ending for the disturbing narrative of his own life (Nicolson 1999: 156, 180). At Metaxata he plotted his own final scene - 'The sword, the Banner and the Field / Glory and Greece around me see!... The land of honourable death / Is here...' (Gordon 1966: 112). The result was, of course, a tragedy.

Feng Shui

In my Mediterranean diary I had been freely using the term '*feng shui*', but my understanding of the ancient Chinese art was picked up from the Lifestyle sections in weekend newspapers. When I returned home to Australia I realised I should do further research. On page 10 of *The Practical Encyclopedia of Feng Shui* (2001) I read:

Feng Shui is about interpreting environments. Practitioners use a number of different approaches to connect with the energy or "feel" of a place, and fine-tune it to make it work for those living or working there... In ancient times people lived by their wits and knowledge of local conditions. Their needs were basic: food and shelter. Observations would tell them from which direction the prevailing winds were coming and they would build their homes in protective sites. They needed water in order to grow and transport their crops so rivers were important, and the direction of the flow and the orientation of the banks would determine the type of crops which could be grown. This branch

of Feng Shui is known as the Form or Landform School and was the earliest approach to the subject. (Hale 2001: 10)

Also on page 10 was this illustration:

(Acknowledgement - illustration from Hale 2001: 10 reproduced solely for purposes of research)

The caption reads:

The Form School regards this as the ideal spot on which to build. The Black Tortoise hill at the rear offers support while the White Tiger and Green Dragon give protection from the wind, with the all-powerful dragon slightly higher than the Tiger. The Red Phoenix marks the front boundary, and the river irrigates the site and enables crops to be transported for trade. (Hale 2001: 10)

Each of my four randomly-chosen writers selected a location in an environment very similar to the Feng Shui ideal for productivity and success. I don't know what significance this fact has. The Feng Shui claim is that the energies released at Creation are most successfully resident and ordered in places of this configuration. But I do know that there have been places where I couldn't write, as well as those where I could.

I'm thinking today of building a new writing office behind my house. I'm being very careful about reading the *feng shui* of the backyard.

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