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Henry James and the Analeptic of Place

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Kate Fullbrook

Henry James and the Analeptic of Place

In an essay published in 1992, the geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, one of the most brilliant of the current analysts of the importance of place in the formation of culture, proposed a tripartite division of the ways in which the conjoined experience of place and culture are available to the human imagination. First, he notes, place and culture evoke interpretations in terms of ‘techniques of adaptation and survival.’ Secondly, they are read ‘as manifestations of human creativity.’ Thirdly, however, Yi-Fu Tuan proposes another view of place and culture ‘as a salve or analeptic for our ineluctable separateness (a consequence of our individuality) and the world’s indifference.’¹ Because we are isolated in our multiple varieties of uniqueness—in the ineradicable differences of our sensory abilities, talents, and proclivities, and in our even more fundamentally isolating experiences of mind—the ground on which culture is built has always been that of profound loneliness. Further, argues Yi-Fu Tuan, although through most of human history ‘explicitly or implicitly nature is perceived as sentient, almost human,’ whether that perception is filtered through mythic, religious, romantic, pragmatic or scientific accounts, these responses are themselves ‘attempts to overcome the half-buried awareness that nature is neither hostile nor loving toward humans, but is simply there, going about its own business’ (*Mapping* 41, 42). The half-buried consciousness that nature is indifferent to suffering, and that all human lives are lived in essential isolation, is what makes the signs of ‘original human intention for pattern and meaning’ so valuable in the consideration of place (*Mapping* 44). The identification of undifferentiated space as place affords an analeptic, a restorative remedy against the psychological terror of the void by registering in the isolated human consciousnesses the traces of other human minds and bodies on the vacuity of nature’s indifference.

¹ ‘Place and Culture: Analeptic for Individuality and the World’s Indifference’ in *Mapping American Culture*, ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 28, hereafter, *Mapping*.