

Chapter One

Placing the Past

This book is an inquiry into how memory of childhood places and things endures and works its way into poetry. Its purpose is twofold: to attend to memory in poetry; and to hear, through poetry, how memory may work its influence in a multitude of lives.

The subject of environmental memory relates to all the fittings of the physical world that surround us: the natural world of animal, vegetable, and mineral, and the built world of human artifice. Its scope covers three dimensions of perception: individual objects; settings such as home, city, and region; and global moods or feelings for the world. These three dimensions—objects, settings, and moods—may be isolated for study, but in lived experience they are inseparable. Memories of single things evoke their settings. Settings evoke moods. Moods evoke settings and associated things. Remembering places is like scrutinizing a landscape painting. There are foreground, middle ground, and background; but which is which shifts, depending upon our point of focus.

This book explores environmental memory with the specific purpose of considering the influence of childhood experience. What do we remember regarding the world we knew as children, and what do these memories mean to us? How do we assimilate childhood places into our sense of self? In particular, how do we accommodate childhood experiences of the natural world into adult beliefs about our relationship with nature?

To explore these questions, I have turned to poets, because their reflections on this subject have become a cultural legacy. Childhood memory has been an important theme in poetry since the Metaphysical and Romantic literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Our modern habits of autobiographical self-scrutiny and our emphasis upon childhood as a time of formative influence date back to this historical period. As poets such as Wordsworth developed the theme of memory, they claimed that children enjoy a special receptive relationship with nature, which leaves lasting endowments in maturity. Edith Cobb's observation, cited in this book's introduction—that autobiographers repeatedly return to childhood memories of nature in order to renew creative power—accords with this claim.¹

The Romantic theme of childhood memory, however, took form under conditions that no longer exist. The pastures, forests, and farmland dotted by mines and mills, which composed the world of Romantic writers, have given way to massive industrialization and urbanization. By the year 2000, half of the world's population is projected to live in metropolitan areas.² Two hundred years after Wordsworth began his Romantic musing, people grow up in a changed world. I began this book after I discovered that Cobb's collection of autobiographies was written mostly by writers, musicians, and other artists who grew up in the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Would poets who grew up after the First World War, I wondered, report the same resonant memories of relationship with nature? The central question that this book addresses is what has happened to environmental memory, and in particular memory of nature, under the changed physical and cultural conditions of the twentieth century?

Choosing Five Poets

To pursue this question, I decided to read and speak with contemporary poets who grew up under varied social and geographical conditions far removed from Wordsworth's Lake Country. If poets have been doing what we expect of them, I wondered—if they have

been sensitive to their own experience and if they have spoken for many of us who are less articulate—what new stories about childhood have they been telling? Have they given us new words that we can use as we think, feel, and speak for ourselves?

I took these questions to Allen Mandelbaum, poet, translator, National Book Award winner, and teacher at the City University of New York Graduate Center, where I was pursuing a doctorate in environmental psychology. He gave me introductions to advisors and participants for interviews. One introduction was to Elizabeth Sewell, who guided me to sources of the Romantic concept of childhood and nature. Poet, novelist, literary historian, and expert on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his influence upon Wordsworth, she was eminently qualified for this role. I met her at her home in Greensboro, North Carolina. In the course of the day that we spent together, I discovered that she had been a close personal friend of Edith Cobb and had followed the unfolding of her ideas. Sewell observed that Cobb was not only much indebted to Wordsworth, but deeply impressed by the English countryside—so much so that Sewell believed that whenever Cobb used the word “nature,” she had the English landscape in mind.

British and unabashedly Romantic herself, Sewell astonished me—a young psychologist well schooled in contemporary developmental theory and scientific objectivity—when she threw back her head with ringing laughter at modern psychologists’ analysis of childhood animism and their presumption that the earth and sky are not alive. She considered the “de-animation” of nature by empiricist science a temporary cultural aberration. Living in a garden apartment in urban Greensboro, Sewell herself had often pondered the significance of childhood in a changed world, and therefore she encouraged my inquiry. When I returned to New York, I read more about the sources of the Romantic tradition that she had outlined, and also investigated the history of contemporary developmental theory. The second chapter of this book comes out of this review.

Given this background, I was prepared to talk with contemporary American poets about their use of their childhood experiences of the natural world. In my choosing whom to work with, one criterion was diversity. I sought people whose residential, social, and cultural backgrounds represent some of our nation’s contemporary diversity, and whose styles of writing represent some of the major divisions within modern poetic theory. At this point, Allen Mandelbaum came to my aid again, giving introductions to David Ignatow and Henry Weinfield, and to Jane Cooper, who recommended Marie

Ponsot. Cooper said that she would be happy to contribute herself, but that everything she would say about her rural Florida childhood would duplicate Wordsworth; and therefore, if I wanted a sympathetic but different voice, I should speak with Ponsot, a city poet who grew up in urban Queens, New York, and who still lives in the neighborhood of her childhood home. Weinfield arranged the interview with his friend William Bronk. Audre Lorde accepted an invitation by letter to participate.

These five poets evaluated their childhood memories of nature from five distinct perspectives. William Bronk expresses a Buddhistlike nihilism, a consciousness of the awesome void of nature that annihilates self-identity. David Ignatow describes changing orientations to childhood memory as he moved from youthful Transcendentalist enthusiasms to a stoic existentialism. Audre Lorde, of West Indian descent, reviews childhood according to her African heritage that she reconstructed. Marie Ponsot, a Catholic, works within her spiritual tradition. Henry Weinfield, the most scholarly of the five poets, gives Romanticism the most deliberate personal reappraisal.

In addition to their different philosophical perspectives, these five people represent different human conditions: three are men, two women; one is black, four white; three were raised in secure upper middle-class homes, two in struggling immigrant families; four have children of their own, one does not; one grew up in Harlem in Manhattan, three in quiet boroughs of big cities, one in a rural town. In age, they ranged from Weinfield, who was in his mid-thirties at the time of the first interview, to Ignatow, who was almost seventy. Through their distinctions in age, background, and belief, they express widely shared human circumstances.

In addition to this representative diversity, my other criterion in choosing these five poets was anticipation that I would find repeated reading of their work rewarding. In reflecting upon what made their work intriguing, I found a distinction made by the poet Denise Levertov applicable. In *The Poet in the World*, Levertov distinguishes poetry that is narrowly self-expressive from poetry that expresses, or reveals, the world.³ The first, which is self-absorbed, tends to be autobiographical. The second may or may not be autobiographical, but it always examines the poet's relationship to the world and the significance of experience. Given that I began with questions about the significance of memory and nature, whether or not childhood explicitly appears in a poet's writing, it follows that I gravitated to poetry of the second kind.

In observing how these poets were chosen, I must note that "choice" is a double-pointed word. These people chose to contribute, finding their use of childhood memory a subject worth their time and reflection. All five extended an unhurried friendliness and courtesy in response to my questions.

Before meeting each poet, I read everything available that he or she had published: poetry, essays, autobiography, reviews of other writers, journals, letters. Where available, I also read interviews by other people and critical reviews of the poet's work. As I read, I formulated questions regarding childhood and beliefs about nature and memory. I formed an initial interpretation of the significance of the poet's childhood experience, which I prepared to test during interviews.

After I had completed reading and reflecting upon each poet's work, we met for tape-recorded interviews. Bronk was the only poet who lived outside the city of New York, so that I traveled to spend an afternoon with him in his upstate New York home. Given Lorde's full schedule of speaking engagements, she made time between trips to share a long lunch at a restaurant in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood she had frequented since adolescence. I met Ignatow and Ponsot for two interviews, he in his office and she in her home. Because Weinfield was in his thirties and his ideas were still in flux, I met him initially for two successive interviews at the City University of New York Graduate Center, and later shared two follow-up conversations.

Chapters 3 through 5 of this book come out of these interviews and my close reading of each poet's work. These chapters present these poets' accounts of the sources of their creative strength and the role of early memories in their life and writing, and they review how each poet has imaginatively shaped memories for use. The presentations are grouped thematically according to the orientation that each poet has described. In chapter 3, Bronk and Weinfield share an essentially common confrontation with nature. Lorde and Ponsot, in chapter 5, share an essentially common connection. Chapter 4 traces how Ignatow has moved from alienation from nature in mid-life to a resigned reconciliation.

By chance, I worked with these poets in the following order: Ignatow, Weinfield, Bronk, Ponsot, and Lorde. I interviewed the three men, followed by the two women. I listened with growing surprise to what the men had to say about childhood and nature. Their views challenge those of Wordsworth, as chapters 3 and 4 show; but I had anticipated these differences. What surprised me

was that the relationships to nature and childhood that the men expressed contrasted so much with my own experience that at first I found them difficult to comprehend. My surprise was intensified, because I had never previously recognized these differences as starkly as this research forced me to do. I had grown up among men, gone to school with them, worked with them, and married one, always taking for granted that they experienced nature and childhood in essentially the same way that I did. It was not until I was immersed in the intensive reading and close listening that this research required that I recognized how deeply disparities may run. As this research proceeded, it demonstrated how feelings and beliefs determine the meaning of remembered places more than do physical qualities, important as physical qualities may be.

When I came to the reading and interviews with Ponsot and Lorde, I found myself back in my familiar world again. At the end of their interviews, I was able to talk about the differences I had observed between our self-understanding as women and the men's experience. Both women had raised sons and daughters, and were already sensitive to these differences. Chapter 6 presents my attempt to articulate the distinctions that I discovered and Lorde's and Ponsot's attempts to account for them. Both Lorde and Ponsot find themselves in sympathy with the Romantic image of childhood and nature, but this male tradition contrasts with their experience in some respects. Therefore chapter 6 discusses the women's alternative forms of relationship to nature and childhood at length.

None of these five poets laughed at prevailing psychological theory as Elizabeth Sewell had done; but all of them initially met my introduction as a psychologist with something varying between slight alarm and quizzical reserve, warming to their subject as they found that I was familiar with their work and with poetic tradition in general. All of them, I found, believe that psychology distorts and diminishes human experience by forcing it into the sterile language of jargon. Therefore in working with them I had to reassess the language that I had learned as a psychologist, as well as psychology's explanations of children's relations with places and things. Whereas chapter 2 traces the historical origins of dominant developmental theory in psychology, chapter 7 suggests how theory can change to accommodate the diverse perspectives of childhood and nature that emerged in the course of this research, in a language that enlarges rather than diminishes human experience.

The Language of Memory

In seeking to understand why the subject of environmental memory has been prominently explored in literature but largely neglected in psychology, I concluded that the poets' concerns about language were well founded. The language of contemporary psychology is based upon presuppositions that exclude the full-bodied memory of places of personal significance. Poetry, in contrast, appeals to these memories. This observation may be best explained by the following five examples.

In the following texts about memory, note their use of words and their assumptions about time and place. Three of these passages are by poets, one by a psychologist, and one by a literary critic. They represent the different literatures that I searched for past research and reflection regarding the long-term significance of remembered places; and they suggest why I found little relevant material in the psychology of memory or literary criticism, but an *embarras de richesses* in poetry. The passages are presented in the historical order in which they were composed.

The origins of Western thinking about memory are oral and mythic. In the eighth century B.C., the Greek poet Hesiod related the myth that memory gave birth to the nine muses who inspire tragedy, comedy, dance, music, sacred song, epic and lyric poetry, history, and even astronomy, the apex of ancient science. According to this myth, memory is a great power, a Titaness, daughter of Gaia and Uranus, earth and sky. She is the source of all civilized arts, enabling us to talk about the present and the future as well as the past. For Hesiod, this myth was local history, for the muses chose for their dwelling place Mount Helicon, famous for its fragrant plants and cool springs, on whose slopes, legend has it, he kept watch as shepherd. Near the beginning of the *Theogony*, Hesiod recorded the muses' story:

Come thou, let us begin with the Muses who gladden the great spirit of their father Zeus in Olympus with their songs, telling of things that are and that shall be and that were aforetime with harmonious voice. . . . Them in Pieria did Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory, who reigns over the hills of Eleuther, bear of union with the father, the son of Cronos; they bring a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the

months waned, and many days were accomplished, she bare nine daughters, all of one mind, whose hearts are set upon song and their spirit free from care, a little way from the topmost peak of Olympus.⁴

Twenty-five hundred years after this mythic account, in the early nineteenth century, the German poet Goethe stood up at a dinner party to protest a toast which had praised memory as a static image of the past. For Romantic reasons, he reaffirmed a conception of memory as the mother of creative inspiration, but rather than making it an external power, he described it as a power integral to human beings:

I do not recognize memory in the sense in which you mean it. Whatever we encounter that is great, beautiful, significant, need not be remembered from outside, need not be hunted up and laid hold of, as it were. Rather, from the beginning, it must be woven into the fabric of our inmost self, must thus live and become a productive force in ourselves. There is no past that one is allowed to long for. There is only the eternally new, growing from the enlarged elements of the past; and genuine longing always must be productive, must create something new and better.⁵

In mid-twentieth century, the poet William Carlos Williams created a modern epic, *Paterson*, out of the material of his time and place. In the following fragment, he identifies memory with the falls of the Passaic River, whose banks he tramped as a boy. Between his boyhood in the late nineteenth century and the 1950s, he watched his native New Jersey landscape suffer cataclysmic change as it went from pastoral farmland to urban industrial wasteland. In the waterfall, a constant configuration of movement from his childhood through old age, Williams found a metaphor that reaffirms the mythic and Romantic tradition that memory can bring renewal. Like Hesiod, he invested memory in an external power, but like Goethe, his words suggest that he considered it an integral human accomplishment:

The descent beckons
 as the ascent beckoned
 Memory is a kind
 of accomplishment

a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
places⁶

Writing after Williams, in the 1970s, the literary critic Barrett Mandel reworded Goethe's and Williams's rejection of a static past in more radical terms. In his words, memory is no longer a productive force "growing from the enlarged elements of the past," nor a power of renewal. In keeping with late twentieth-century literary criticism's emphasis upon language as the primary human reality, to be constructed and deconstructed, Mandel made memory purely mental, a fictive verbal creation:

The past . . . never really existed: it has always been an illusion created by the symbolizing activity of the mind.⁷

Also writing in the 1970s, the psychologist Henry Ellis defined memory in another set of mental terms. Behind his definition lies an empiricist tradition that goes back three hundred years. Ellis's image of memory as a data-processing system for encoding, storing, and retrieving information echoes John Locke's seventeenth-century phrase that memory is "the storehouse of our ideas."⁸ Ellis describes memory atomistically, as pieces of information—as it has been for research purposes since Ebbinghaus studied the retention of nonsense syllables one hundred years ago. In a popular review text, Ellis defined the main processes that contemporary research has identified:

Memory refers to storing information and to accessing or retrieving information. *More generally, memory encompasses three basic processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval.* . . . *Encoding* refers to arranging information so that it can be placed in storage. The process of encoding includes modification of information such as selecting certain features for storage. . . . *Storage* refers to storing information in the memory system. The fact that we can remember information for days, weeks, or years implies that information is stored. *Retrieval* refers to the process of accessing or getting at the stored information. Information may be stored in memory, but storage is no guarantee that we can get at the information. All three processes are part of memory, and thus it follows that a failure in any one of the processes can lead to a failure in memory.⁹

For the purposes of this book, the critical observation regarding these five passages is that they assume different relations to time and place, which implicate different uses of language and memory. These differences illustrate why autobiography and the imaginative literature of poetry and fiction stand almost alone in their examination of the significance of environmental memory.

Placeless Memory

As psychology and literary criticism have usually been practiced, it can be said that they have no place. As chapter 2 reviews, when the foundations of modern science were established, the philosopher René Descartes explicitly boasted that his consciousness had no place. In different ways, the passages by Mandel and Ellis continue this tradition. Both authors employ a language of abstractions, in the literal sense of the Latin root *abstraho*, "draw away." They draw thought away from particular people, places, and things in order to speak in universal generalizations.

Mandel's claim that the past is an illusion created by mental symbols takes the present out of the body and deracinates its connections to physical places and things. In the tradition of the later work of Wittgenstein and the deconstructionism of Derrida, Mandel's position privileges linguistic activity over physical knowledge. Finding meaning a web of words rather than something inherent in embodied experience that words seek to express, this tradition of linguistic and literary criticism does not acknowledge that qualities of places may have intrinsic significance. As Mandel says elsewhere, the present creates the past "by inspiring meaningless data with interpretation, direction, suggestiveness—life."¹⁰ Applied to places, the implication is that, here too, human consciousness gives life, in the sense of order, direction: places do not have "a life of their own."

Later in his essay, Mandel argues that memory becomes organized around a theme, in the sense of a vital principle of character and personality that gives human life narrative structure. I have accepted this argument; and in chapters 3 through 5, I have looked for the autobiographical themes that organize how five poets use memories of nature. Given a focus on words rather than relations with the world, however, Mandel, as well as other critics in his analytic tradition, have nothing to say on the subject of place memory itself.

I also reviewed psychological research on memory, which Ellis summarizes. This work, I found, has a paradoxical relationship to place. It belongs to the empiricist tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and

Hume that privileges sensation as the primary form of knowledge. In this sense, this research emphasizes physical experience, but only as it is measured by the objective quantitative instruments of the laboratory. Applying this standard, psychologists have inventively manipulated different conditions to assess the accuracy and quantity of people's memories vis-à-vis verifiable physical facts. This empiricist standard has been so pervasive that it has influenced literary criticism, which has been predominantly preoccupied with analyzing how autobiography departs from factual verity.

Because sensation occurs in the present, empiricist psychology, as much as linguistic analysis, has been locked into a time scale of isolated successive instants of mental processing. This sensationalist approach, however, is even less equipped than linguistic analysis to explore people's interpretations of memory. Ellis's text, for example, devotes more than fifty pages to a review of laboratory research regarding the mechanics of memory, but includes no line on research into the long-term significance of remembered places and events.

There are a few exceptions to this research pattern. In the 1920s, Frederic Bartlett performed experiments on people's perception and memory of meaningful pictures and stories.¹¹ He found that, from the outset, people attend to things selectively and that what they notice varies with social background, interest, values, and age. He also observed that once material is encoded into long-term memory, details quickly become stereotyped and organized around a theme that persists indefinitely—a discovery that supports Mandel's claim that each human life has a theme that organizes memory. Other researchers have noted that accessible memories do not become numerous until the age of five or six, after children have acquired language and learned the routines of everyday life.¹² Rubin, Wetzler, and Nebes found, nevertheless, that people recall more events from childhood and young adulthood than from more recent middle age.¹³ Comparing autobiographical records by women and men, Herrmann and Neisser observed that women tend to have more memories about childhood and to value them more highly than do men.¹⁴ Despite this useful general information, as I searched the vast psychological literature on memory, I found nothing directly relevant to my questions about the significance of remembered places.

Placeless Language

Psychology has also been predisposed to neglect the meaning of places because it has adhered to the empiricist tradition of word use. As Hobbes noted in 1640, "by the advantage of *names* it is that

we are capable of science," but names come in two kinds.¹⁵ Some words, Hobbes noted, are equivocal and inconstant, referring to passions, opinions, sentiment. Others are unequivocal, propositional terms. Hobbes established that science must only use bare denotations of the second kind. In keeping with this rule, Ellis begins his review of memory research by strictly defining his terms. The consequence of this tradition is that psychologists have been interested, for example, in whether people can name from memory items in a room or buildings on a street, but not in the sentiments or passions associated with them.

Bound within the empiricist tradition as it is, contemporary psychology has ignored the personally construed significance of memory. In 1978, the cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser reviewed the existing literature to satisfy an interest in "real uses of memory in humanly understandable situations." He balefully concluded that, "If X is an interesting or socially significant aspect of memory, then psychologists have hardly ever studied X." In contrast, he suggested:

What we want to know . . . is how people use their own past experiences in meeting the present and the future. We would like to understand how this happens under natural conditions: the circumstances in which it occurs, the forms it takes, the variables on which it depends, the differences between individuals in their uses of the past.¹⁶

Partly in response to Neisser's criticism, there is now a thriving study of memory in everyday contexts. The latest edition of Ellis's text includes references to it, and there are several recent review collections.¹⁷ All this work remains preoccupied, however, with what Neisser has termed the verity, or accuracy, of memory. For example, a chapter on "Memory for Places, Objects, and Events," in *Memory in the Real World* by Gillian Cohen, is limited to people's ability to identify objects, recall where they are located, and navigate a route based on map reading or previous familiarity.

This new literature includes a number of studies of "environmental reinstatement effects," or people's recall of events when they return to a former place.¹⁸ Given people's testimonies about how memories assail them when they revisit a childhood place, I expected to find insights into my subject here. I found, however, that this work has limited itself to recording how memories increase in number and accuracy under reinstated conditions, so that laboratory

rooms adequately serve its purposes. Therefore even in the new research on memory in everyday contexts, the personal significance of childhood places, and their use in meeting the present and the future, remain unaddressed.

The Poetry of Memory

In contrast to the literary criticism exemplified by Mandel, or the psychological research reviewed by Ellis, the work of Hesiod, Goethe, and Williams *has place* in the sense that it is situated in personally meaningful geographical settings, whether real or imaginary. Whereas the tradition of linguistic analysis has focused on word use, and empiricist psychology on sensations, poetry has explored the complex qualitative interplay between words and sensations. Whereas linguistic philosophy and psychology have pursued general conclusions in abstract language, poetry has explored the universal in the particular, relying upon readers' common experience of a common earth to secure sympathetic participation and understanding. Therefore the qualitative significance of place experience has been one of poetry's subjects since earliest recorded times.

The language and formal structure of poetry invite this focus. Poetic form derives from music and dance, and therefore from body rhythms. The "feet" of prosody were originally dancing feet. The "verses" or turns of poetry were dance turns. Poetry was danced and sung to commemorate the marriages, births, deaths, seasons, and harvests that mark the cycles of nature and human life. As Hesiod observed, by placing human events in this formal order, poetry "brings a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow." Drawing upon embodied knowledge deeper than "the symbolizing activity of the mind" and more integrated than discrete pieces of encoded information, poets have traditionally treated memory as a power "woven into the fabric of our inmost self."

Poetry also evokes embodied experience through myth and metaphor. Myth communicates human powers through external things, and metaphor notices likenesses between one thing and another. Elizabeth Sewell has observed that myth and metaphor connect the mind to its physical surroundings.¹⁹ When we say that our memory is like a waterfall, or like a larger-than-life mother who inhabits mountains and couples with the powers of the sky, we know ourselves in relation to the world's sensed qualities. Sewell has also observed that science tends to relate the mind to machines—as in Ellis's comparison of memory to a filing cabinet or a data processing

system. In contrast, poetry maintains human relations with nature through its predominant use of natural metaphors.

Whereas empiricist and analytic traditions since Hobbes have emphasized words' denotations, poetry emphasizes connotations. This orientation to language opens it to environmental memory. Rooted in bodily experience, poetry seeks not to simplify words' multivocality but to compound it and to set it in play. Writing on the subject of *Innocence and Memory*, the Italian poet Ungaretti noted that if memory referred only to the past, it would lead to despair.²⁰ Instead, he called memory a word "charged with presentiments," which opens forwards as well as backwards in time and thereby contains seeds of renewal—echoing the myth of Mnemosyne who gave birth to the muses who tell of what is and what will be as well as what was.

Words have this range, Ungaretti observed, because of the imprecise personal associations that they evoke. What lifts a word from the pages of a dictionary to make it a living force with the potential of approaching truth is not its denotation but its connotations: "this margin of infinite allusions through which imagination and emotion can wander." This margin of connotations derives from experience with particular people, places, and things, and their related words. Through these imprecise associations, Ungaretti argued, words most accurately articulate experience, as their indeterminacy lives actually within ourselves. We ourselves are compounds of error, ambiguity, and possibility which overflow bare denotation. Poetry, said Ungaretti, has always used this allusive quality of memory in order to approximate reality. He welcomed twentieth-century physicists' interest in probability and uncertainty for the reason that science too approaches truth to the degree that it accepts "our inability to know, except in indeterminacy, reality."²¹

As chapter 2 reviews, Wordsworth believed that primary words for primary things are poets' main material, because their allusiveness draws upon the animated perceptions of childhood when these words were first learned. "Water," "fire," "door," "blue," "sweet," "sky": such words, Wordsworth claimed, work upon us because they refer to the basic elements of the natural and built world that we first encounter and name with childhood's strong emotions. Thus primary nouns and adjectives join sensation and emotion to thought, creating a potent vocabulary for poets' use.

In Wordsworth's defense, it can be argued that when it comes to familiarity with the true grit of the earth, as a physical fact, childhood is irreplaceable. For most of us, it is the only time when

we get down into mud puddles and up into trees. Unsupervised, childhood play is a variety of contact sport: "bruised, scratched, and mud-caked," as William Carlos Williams described childhood abandon, to a degree that few adults, even in their worst moments, ever manage to recapture.²² Beyond their lexical definitions, the mountains, rivers, trees, and city walls that cast their presence across poems ancient and modern must have their margin of indeterminacy filled in by personal experience; and by body to body contact with the real thing, childhood prepares for a vivid, well-fleshed symbolic life.

This book's title alludes to an essay of the same name by the poet Howard Nemerov.²³ Its phrase originated in his five-year-old son's assertion that, "In the first country of places, there are no requests." (I have dropped the predicate, or I could have done no interviewing.) In agreement with Wordsworth, Nemerov noted that young children are in a quandary because they combine strong emotion and intense sensory experience with a limited vocabulary: they have more to say than they have words to say it with. Therefore they must use verbal flexibility and ingenuity. When Nemerov was writing down his son's pronouncements, his wife looked over his shoulder and observed that, equipped with a limited vocabulary, young children are forced to use what little language they do have *hard*. Inventive metaphors and overextensions of words result.

Poets, Nemerov noted, despite vaster equipage, find themselves in the same situation as children in that they too must use language "hard." Often no single word captures a complex of insight and feeling. Then, like children, they must extend their language; and the world of objects comes to their aid. Being wordless but fluent with sensual texture and human associations, objects amplify language, lending their names and qualities when standard denotations lag. Through myth, metaphor, symbol, and simile, objects extend meaning. They also tantalize poets to find full expression when simple words like "river" or "flower" fail to adequately convey the sensual fact.

According to Nemerov, the connections that poetry draws between human thought and feeling and the world are real insights, not poetic fancy. Therefore the first country of places combines the animated world of physical discovery in childhood and the allusive world of language, laying a foundation for the discovery of meaning through poetry. How different poets relate these childhood and adult worlds is what this book explores.

The Language of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

If empiricist psychology were the only means available to study memory, I could not have written this book, which turns to poetry from the discipline of environmental psychology. Its turn to literature has been made possible by the methods of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, shared the empiricist faith that there is a concrete external world to which we are related. In contrast to the empiricists, however, Husserl rejected the possibility that we can know objective facts about this world through unmediated sensation. All that we can know, said Husserl, is how we constitute our consciousness of the world and, simultaneously, consciousness of ourselves through relations with the world.²⁴ Building on the work of Franz Brentano, Husserl's fundamental insight was that consciousness is always consciousness of something. The consequence is that the world derives its meaning from consciousness, and consciousness derives its meaning from the world.

In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, Husserl outlined a radically different conception of memory than that of either empiricism or linguistic analysis.²⁵ In contrast to the position that time consists of recurring mental points of the present in which words are thought or sensations are registered, Husserl observed that time is experienced as an unbroken flow. The present is connected to a sense of the past reaching behind us and to a sense of the future coming to meet us. Like Williams, Husserl described memory as a current in which consciousness of past, present, and future converge. In this way, Husserl prepared phenomenology to describe how people use the past in meeting the present and the future.

Husserl also stressed that consciousness is embodied. Thus he laid a foundation for the study of human relatedness to a physical world that carries the marks of time within itself: a world in which the body changes dimension and ages, shadows move, the seasons cycle, moss grows on trees, and treasured objects and places contain histories. Husserl directed attention to the concreteness of lived experience in the original sense of the Latin verb *concreescere*, to grow together. Our consciousness of the world and the world of which we are conscious coalesce in an intimate, taken-for-granted whole, which he termed the *lifeworld*. For phenomenology, there is all the difference in the world between reinstating a laboratory room or a childhood room.

Husserl also took exception to the empiricist position that memory is a mere representation of past sensation—"decaying sense," in the words of Hobbes.²⁶ Rather, he argued that memory is an independent activity of consciousness. Therefore it is not to be judged according to its accuracy in terms of objective measures of the external world. It is to be studied in terms of its own functions, which are to constitute the permanence and meaning of objects and people, and the permanence and meaning of individual consciousness through its relations with people and things. Thus this book's questions about how people constitute the meaning of childhood memory are phenomenology's domain.

Living and working as he did during the First World War and the build-up to the Second World War, Husserl dedicated himself to articulating what is universal and unitive in human experience. In writing this book, I have been indebted to his concern with the life-world, with the self- and world-constituting activities of consciousness, with the importance of memory as an activity in its own right rather than a mere representation of sensation, and with qualities of embodied experience that overflow any single expression in words. To examine how people interpret memory differently from different perspectives, however, I have drawn upon the work of Heidegger.

Heidegger, who briefly collaborated with Husserl, was profoundly influenced by his mentor's analysis of the lifeworld and his observation that human experience occurs within horizons of time and place. More than Husserl, Heidegger emphasized that human existence is subject to historical fate. Therefore Heidegger gradually moved away from Husserlian phenomenology to create a philosophical hermeneutics that explored how people interpret the world and their place in it under different historical conditions.²⁷

As Heidegger moved away from Husserl's goal of articulating essential universal truths of human experience, he developed an alternative concept of truth as *aletheia*—a pre-Socratic term meaning the "unforgotten" or "unhidden." Truth, Heidegger argued, is not a fixed characteristic to which intellectual assertions conform. It is an occurrence, when a person and something perceived come together in a "clearing" in which the thing (another person, an object, a place) is given freedom to reveal itself. In his later work, Heidegger maintained that we create a clearing and approach the truth of things most closely through the receptive language of poetry.²⁸

This book draws upon Heidegger's application of hermeneutics to the interpretation of human understanding as it unfolds

within historical time and place. Without rejecting Husserl's position that there are some human universals, it takes from Heidegger's concept of truth as *aletheia* a belief that truths must be repeatedly reenacted in time through attentiveness to how things show themselves and a search for language that reveals rather than distorts. As Heidegger recommended, it turns to poetry as a revelatory expression of experience.

As a social scientist, however, I could not have written this book without the mediating work of Gadamer, Heidegger's student and lifelong friend. Heidegger rejected both physical and social science as naive instruments of technological control, which force things into distorting, exploitive frames of reference.²⁹ Gadamer sought to heal this rift between the human sciences and literature by applying Heidegger's insights to science.

In doing so, Gadamer extended the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which states that the meaning of a whole can only be known by reference to its parts, the meaning of a part by reference to the whole.³⁰ One consequence of this circle, Gadamer noted, is that every answer is an answer to a question: a principle that sounds straightforward enough, but as Gadamer developed it, it implies that all understanding is historical. The past impels the questions that we frame in the present, which direct the movement of knowledge into the future. It also follows, Gadamer argued, that the arts, the humanities, the human sciences, and individual understanding develop like conversations, and that every conversation is a conversation with tradition.

In addition to seeking to clarify how this conversation progresses, Gadamer sought to reanimate the ancient Greek ideal of dialogue, in which a question is taken up and turned about by speakers for different perspectives of understanding within a society.³¹ Truth, in Gadamer's work, combines the contributions of Husserl and Heidegger. As Husserl sought to freely vary perspectives in order to discover the essence of a phenomenon that remains constant across variations, Gadamer's dialogic truth explores a subject through the diverse perspectives of different participants in a conversation.³² Similar to Heidegger's *aletheia*, this form of truth requires receptive openness to what each participant has to say, as well as to the phenomenon under discussion. With an interest all his own in how people seek truth in society, Gadamer illuminated the play of revelations that results as thought circles around a subject with growing understanding, as people engage in conversation with each other and with their tradition. Gadamer's model of conversation has been the model for this book.

A Conversation with Tradition

The different chapters of this book represent different steps in Gadamer's hermeneutic method. This opening chapter describes the boundaries of this book's subject—its circle. Chapter 2 reviews major Western traditions of thought that anyone pondering the significance of childhood memories of nature must negotiate. As this chapter shows, it is a paradoxical, divided tradition that is due for reassessment. In chapters 3 through 5, five contemporary poets engage in conversations with this tradition as they muse upon how well customary conceptions of childhood and nature fit the circumstances of their lives. Each poet presents a distinct perspective, which chapter 6 constitutes into a revised understanding of adult relations to childhood, qualifying existing traditions to reflect how memory works according to gender and philosophy of nature. Because developmental psychology has elaborated a major modern tradition of thought about the meaning of childhood and nature, chapter 7 proposes how its theory can be made more receptive to the diverse meanings of memory that these five poets reveal.

Chapters 3 through 5, which present each poet's life and work in turn, evolved through my personal "conversation" with each poet's writing and the face-to-face conversations of the interviews. At the same time, these chapters are clearings in the Heideggerian sense, as I concentrated on hearing each poet's position as openly and accurately as possible, and the poets in turn shared their experiences and thoughts. In the course of these exchanges, I vividly felt the principles of the hermeneutic circle apply. Approaching each poet's books with questions, I formed provisional "answers" or interpretations. These "answers" determined the questions that I brought to the interviews. In each question-and-answer sequence, the poet's responses called my thinking up to that point into question, enlarging or revising it and lifting my succeeding question to a new level of understanding. As Gadamer has observed, when the dialectic of knowledge is effective, the expanding dimensions of the hermeneutic circle are most accurately described as a spiral.³³

Following the reading and interviews, I shared a written synthesis of each poet's position for his or her review. All five poets confirmed my interpretation of their life and work as valid, and some observed that it gave them new insight into themselves. Incorporating any corrections or clarifications that they suggested, I composed the final interpretations presented here.

As each poet's words follow in turn in this book, I hope that readers will hear these five people in conversation with each other

as they concur or take exception to each other's position, and that through this dialogue in which the subject of environmental memory is viewed through multiple perspectives, readers will find some of their own processes of self-understanding challenged or clarified.

The positions that these poets have taken are not theirs alone. In other studies, I have interviewed a broad spectrum of people regarding their relations with nature: lawyers, engineers, biologists, architects, teachers, farmers, local officials, citizen activists, people with advanced degrees and people who never advanced beyond grade school.³⁴ Sensitized to the relations to tradition and personal experience that these poets describe, I have often heard their words echoed by more "prosaic" people. The different traditions regarding childhood and nature that these poets confront are not just artifacts of the written word, analyzable by scholars and known to men and women of letters, but otherwise separate from human experience. They form persisting, conflicting ways of understanding human relations with nature.

It was the insight of Husserl that, for the most part, people go about life immersed in the natural attitude of pre-given assumptions, including the assumptions that we have a self, that nature has order, and that we are related to nature: what self, what order, and what relationship we usually do not bother to ask.³⁵ It was the observation of Heidegger that poets are distinguished from most people precisely because they think long and hard about such issues. In every human life, however, there are times when pre-given assumptions break down, when the quandaries of life press upon us and we are forced to think for ourselves.³⁶ At these times, it can be expected, memory no longer floats through our lives as an unexamined element, but becomes a necessary instrument in confronting issues that this book has raised. The poets chosen here are exemplary because they have combined the uncommon activity of poetry with this common activity of trying to make sense of life, whatever that life may be.