

From Extremity to Releasement: Place, Authenticity, and the Self

... / Not in Utopia, – subterranean fields, – / Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where! / But in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us, -- the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all!, –
William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book X

1. Oprah Winfrey does not figure in many works of philosophy. But along with 'Dr Phil', she is an important starting point for Charles Guignon's definitive investigation of authenticity in his *On Being Authentic*. That work begins with a popular conception of authenticity – one to be found on TV shows such as Winfrey's as well as in magazines and self-help books – that is tied to notions of self-discovery and self-empowerment. On this conception, which is not restricted to the realm of pop psychology alone, authentic people, those who are 'true to themselves' as the phrase has it, are also those who 'take control of their own lives through self-inspection, self-surveillance and self-assertion.'¹ Guignon ends the book, however, with an emphasis on a very different notion, that of *releasement* (a translation of the German term *Gelassenheit*),² understood in terms of 'a heightened sensitivity to what is called for by the entire situation... [it is] a kind of situational awareness of what should be done'.³

To some extent, Guignon's use of the notion of releasement, initially presented as a contrastive notion to that of authenticity,⁴ seems to figure as part of the rethought and 'expanded' conception of authenticity that is the culmination of Guignon's account.⁵ The concept of releasement itself, however, is left by Guignon as a relatively undeveloped concept. It is illustrated by reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of conversational engagement in which interlocutors give themselves over to the subject matter that jointly concerns them, and Guignon also explicitly invokes Martin Heidegger's use of the term (undoubtedly Guignon's primary source here), but there is little in the way of additional elaboration of the concept. Nevertheless, Guignon's characterization of releasement as 'a kind of situational awareness' not only stands in opposition to the narrow idea of authenticity as inwardly focussed on the individual, autonomous self of which Guignon is critical, but also brings into view the notion of *situation*, and so too, the idea of being 'in place' – for what is it to be situated but to be placed (*situ*, in the original Latin, meaning 'site' or 'place')? Indeed, the idea of situation, and so of place, is already implicated in the Gadamerian understanding of conversation on which Guignon draws, even though this is

not something noted by Guignon himself (situation, and with it, place, must be a key concept for hermeneutics generally⁶). Place, and releasement as tied to place, is where my discussion will find its end, but it is also where it will properly begin. Let me turn, then, to that beginning, and to the place that will be its focus, Grasmere Vale in the English Lake District, and the poem in which that place appears, William Wordsworth's 'Michael'.

2. The concluding poem in volume two of the *Lyrical Ballads*, where it figures as one of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places', 'Michael' is a tale of misplaced trust, betrayed love, lost hope, and grief. Quite apart from its significance in other respects – and it is one of Wordsworth's best-known works – the poem articulates a strong sense of the interconnection of human life with the place in which that life is lived. The shepherd, Michael, after whom the poem is named, and whose story it tells, is a man bound to his own stretch of country – the landscape of Grasmere Vale in Westmoreland. Of the fields and hills that belong to that landscape, Wordsworth writes that they were to Michael, 'his living Being, even more/Than his own Blood – what could they less?'⁷ The very relationship between Michael and his son Luke, which stands at the heart of the poem and is the source of Michael's grief, takes on material expression in the 'stragging heap of unhewn stones'⁸ that mark the place to which the poem belongs. Wordsworth's poem is notable for its position within Wordsworth's own literary *oeuvre*, and as a key text in the thinking of place – especially in Seamus Heaney's elaboration of the idea of a 'sense of place'.⁹ Yet the poem also has significance for the thinking of authenticity.

Wordsworth's 'Michael' has a central role in Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*. The latter is a work on which almost every philosophical examination of authenticity draws, including Guignon's. Trilling's focus on 'Michael' has, perhaps not surprisingly, little to do with the poem's topographical orientation or significance. Instead, the figure of Michael appears in Trilling's discussion at just that point at which Trilling moves from the concept of sincerity to focus squarely on the idea of authenticity as such. Trilling writes:

Michael says nothing; he expresses nothing. It is not the case with him as it is with Hamlet that he has 'that within which passeth show'. There is no within and without: he and his grief are one. We may not, then, speak of sincerity. But our sense of Michael's being, of – so to speak – his being-in-grief, comes to us as a surprise, as

if it were exceptional in its actuality, and valuable. And we are impelled to use some word which denotes the nature of this being and which accounts for the high value we put upon it. The word we employ for this purpose is 'authenticity'.¹⁰

As Trilling presents matters, the concern with authenticity arises in the context of what he refers to as an 'ontological concern ... [a] preoccupation with the sentiment of being'.¹¹ It is primarily a matter of a certain mode of the self in which the self is entirely encompassed by the passion, feeling, or commitment that belongs to it. In Michael's case, this 'being authentic' takes the form, extreme though it may seem, of his own being as a 'being-in-grief'. Trilling's focus is thus on authenticity as an *exceptional* mode of being of the self – singular and extreme – in which the self is completely and utterly given over to that which it is and as which it also appears. It is this that Trilling finds exemplified in an especially clear form in Wordsworth's 'Michael'.

Contrasting the sense of authenticity that appears in Wordsworth with that in Rousseau, Trilling writes that 'our sense of what authenticity means involves a degree of rough concreteness or of extremity which Rousseau, with his abiding commitment to an ideal of patrician civility, does not give us but which Wordsworth does. Michael is as actual, as hard, as dense, weighty, perdurable as any stone he lifts up or lets lie'.¹² Here authenticity seems to mean an actuality of being that may be so extreme as even to offend against our normal sensibilities. As a result, Trilling concludes that authenticity is 'a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion'.¹³ But even more than this, and for contemporary readers of 'Michael' this may seem surprising, the authenticity that Trilling takes to be present in Wordsworth's poem, and that is given concrete form in the figure of the old and grieving shepherd, is so extreme as to carry a potential violence within it – a violence that is given explicit and paradigmatic expression, according to Trilling, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (a work that stands along with the poem 'Michael' as one of the key texts in Trilling's account).

It is this violence that appears, in relation to authenticity, in terms of the aggressive, and in Trilling's terms 'polemical', assertion of the individual self and its autonomy against the existing social order and its settled conventionalities, even, should it come to it, against the very order of nature and of the world. What drives it is the demand for a reality, an actuality, a truth, that goes beyond the ordinary truths of everyday life and appearance –

and if this demand should be such as to result in the destruction of that which is less than real in this sense, or that stands in the way of such real, authentic being, then so be it. It is thus that Trilling reminds us of the Greek origins from which 'authentic' and 'authenticity' derive: '*Authenteo*: to have full power over; also, to commit a murder. *Authentes*: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide.'¹⁴ Here Conrad's Kurtz, who is indeed master, doer, perpetrator, murderer (perhaps even, in a sense, a self-murderer, certainly a self-destroyer) appears as the authentic hero (the hero *in extremis*) facing up to the reality of his own self and those around him – a reality that also turns out to be a horror. It is a long way from Westmoreland to the Congo, and yet it would seem, if we follow Trilling's account, that the gap between Kurtz and the old shepherd Michael, unlikely companions though they may be, is not so great. Although differing in manner of expression and mode of realization, both, it would seem, are joined by the ideal of authenticity, and by the extremity of being and of the self that the commitment to authenticity apparently brings with it.

3. Guignon tells us that his aim in *On Being Authentic* is 'not to sing the praises of authenticity, but to put in question some of the unstated assumptions that surround it and prop it up'.¹⁵ One might suppose that one of those 'unstated assumptions' is the idea that there is an *exceptionality* and *extremity* of being that can be found in the individual self, and that such exceptionality and extremity is something valuable. To some extent this is indeed something that Guignon contests, but only inasmuch as the ideal of authenticity, as expressed specifically through an emphasis on the self, seems capable of legitimating the cruel and violent impulses of our inner lives just as much as it does those tendencies that are decent and kind.¹⁶ Rather than focussing on the exceptionality or extremity that might seem to go with authenticity, Guignon is more concerned with the understanding of the self that apparently underpins some forms of authenticity – including those that seem to licence individual excess, but also those that might appear, on the face of it, to be more responsible and reflective – forms of authenticity that are really founded in an emphasis on the individual self as autonomous and independent, and as capable of standing apart from its social and interpersonal context.¹⁷

Guignon devotes considerable attention to a critical examination of the way in which the ideal of authenticity has developed and the ideas with which it seems to be associated.

A significant part of Guignon's account, however, most notably the final chapter 'Authenticity in Context', is indeed given over to a rethinking or retrieval of authenticity in terms of the social context in which the self is located and defined. Authenticity becomes, on this account, 'essentially a social virtue'.¹⁸ In this, Guignon draws heavily on Charles Taylor,¹⁹ who argues in similar fashion, as well as Bernard Williams.²⁰ What Guignon offers is thus not a complete rejection of the idea of authenticity – an idea about which he says 'there is obviously something clearly right'²¹ – but rather a rejection of a certain conception of authenticity, and an argument in favour of an expanded version of what authenticity might mean: 'What is problematic, as I see it, is not the goal of being authentic, but the predominance of any one perspective on the rich and dense weave of undertaking and responsibilities that make up our lives'.²² Against this background, the way Guignon would seem to intend the idea of releasement is as a mode of giving oneself over to a world of shared involvement with others – a mode, literally, of *self-release* in contrast to the more usual emphasis in authenticity on *self-possession* and independent self-realization.

Like Trilling, Guignon also draws on Wordsworth as an important reference point in charting of the development of the modern idea of authenticity. Unlike Trilling, however, but implicitly in keeping with his own approach to authenticity, Guignon looks not to the early poems, not to 'Michael' or any of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places', but rather cites the later works, and especially the *Prelude* (a work begun in 1798, but worked on continuously by Wordsworth throughout his life, and published just after Wordsworth's death in 1850²³). Adopting elements from the reading of Wordsworth advanced by Geoffrey Hartmann (a reading that itself seems, as Jonathan Bate points out, to derive from the work of Paul de Man),²⁴ Guignon treats Wordsworth as holding to a set of views that Guignon takes as characteristic of Romanticism, namely: that there is a need 'to recover a sense of oneness and wholeness that appears to have been lost with the rise of modernity'; that this can only be done through 'a total immersion in one's own deepest and most intense feelings'; and that 'the self is the highest and most all-encompassing of all that is found in reality'.²⁵

The ideas at issue here are seen by Guignon to underpin the focus on the self that is also a characteristic feature of authenticity, and that sees the retrieval of reality as a matter of the retrieval of the self, understood as requiring a turn inward, and in Guignon's account, a turn away from the world, or, at least, towards an internalisation of the world:

Romanticism, far from providing an alternative to scientific objectification, simply turns reality over to the sciences once and for all and rests content with creating its own reality in imagination. Romanticism's final story is that we can let science have reality, because *we* have another reality – a special reality that is in here, within the self. Given this view of things, however, the self is not just the centre of the universe. It *is* the universe. For the sort of Romanticism found in *The Prelude*, there is simply no place for anything outside the self.²⁶

As a picture of Romanticism, or, indeed, of the German Idealist tradition with which it is connected, this account is perhaps a little too simple. Not only does Romanticism contain various strands within it, not all of which are consistent with the account Guignon offers here, but one can as much argue that Romanticism proposes a rethought understanding of the self that, in contemporary parlance, is itself *externalised*, as one can view it as tending towards an internalized conception of the world. In relation to the story of the development of authenticity, and especially as it relates to Wordsworth's role within that story, this picture also raises some questions, particularly when set against Trilling's account. In Trilling's discussion of authenticity the focus is not at all on *The Prelude*, but rather on that earlier poem set in Grasmere Vale (the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads* in which 'Michael' appeared was published in 1800). Moreover, even though this is something ignored by Trilling himself, that earlier poem is most definitely *not* a work that sets the self off *against* nature or the world, but does exactly the opposite – Michael is, as we have seen, a poem that has its origins in a sense of the deep interconnection between place and self, and between place and the human.²⁷

One might argue that if there is a problem here, then it is a problem for Trilling rather than Guignon. The view of the self that Guignon finds in Wordsworth is something Guignon acknowledges is discovered by Wordsworth 'slowly in the course of his life's journey'.²⁸ One might say, then, that Trilling is misled in taking 'Michael' as the exemplary work for the discussion of authenticity, whereas Guignon rightly focuses on the later poetry because it is there, on some readings at least, that Wordsworth comes fully to articulate the romantic prioritisation of the self – something that is not present in the earlier work. Undoubtedly, there are issues surrounding Trilling's approach to 'Michael'. Yet so far as its place in Trilling's discussion of authenticity is concerned, to say that Trilling uses the wrong poem would be to miss the point of Trilling's analysis. What Trilling takes Michael to exhibit

is precisely that exceptionality and extremity of being that Trilling sees as at the heart of the ideal of authenticity and that reaches its full literary realisation in Conrad.

4. There can be no doubt that the ideal of authenticity does develop in tandem with the modern preoccupation with the individual self. But if we follow Trilling's account, then the real problem with authenticity is not merely the focus on the individual self, but rather the tendency towards the exceptional and the extreme – a tendency that is expressed in terms of the desire for a reality that, to rework Trilling's words, will be 'as actual, as hard, as dense, weighty, perdurable as ... stone'. Understood in relation to the self, authenticity thus names something *metaphysical* – an exceptional or superlative quality of being. It names a mode of the being of the self in which the self appears as more true, more real, more actual – more *being* – than anything that might lie outside of it. Often such exceptionality will take the form of an extremity, if not an *excess*, of feeling, of willing, of acting – even of *power*. If this is not the sense of authenticity that is the primary focus for Guignon, it is that which seems to take centre stage in Trilling. Indeed, one might argue that it is what founds the contrast Trilling draws between authenticity and *sincerity*. Thus Trilling writes of 'authenticity' that it suggests 'a more strenuous moral experience than "sincerity" does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life'.²⁹ Sincerity belongs with the idea of a settled and civilised life, authenticity, on this view, with the possibility of its overthrow and even destruction.

One might object, however, that this idea of authenticity as given over to exceptionality and extremity is itself too extreme. Authenticity, it may be argued, can be associated with exceptionality, but that need not always be so, nor need any such association be taken as indicating anything essential about authenticity as such. Authenticity can be understood in much more moderate terms, and such an understanding, it might be argued, is also more adequate to the real character of authenticity. This, is of course, the position Guignon adopts – at least in the retrieved conception of authenticity he offers towards the end of his account - even though the explicit focus for Guignon is not the rejection of exceptionality or extremity as such (in fact, it is not something to which he gives much attention³⁰), but rather the rejection of the focus on the individual self. Thus although Guignon is himself quite clear that his position diverges from Trilling's, this is because

'Trilling's way of contrasting sincerity and authenticity makes authenticity look like a purely personal matter',³¹ and not because Guignon directly contests Trilling's focus on the exceptional character of the authentic. Guignon offers a very different account of authenticity, one that renders authenticity as a more positive and *more moderate* notion than it is in Trilling. Moreover, Guignon also argues that the idea of authenticity that one might take to be the focus for much of Trilling's analysis – which Guignon takes to be characterised by an emphasis the individual self, but which seems better understood in terms of the focus on exceptionality – is itself incoherent. It is so, claims Guignon, just in virtue of the fact that it supposedly gives an incomplete picture of authenticity through leaving out its essentially social character.³² This seems no reason, however, for rejecting the idea found in Trilling as inadequate to the notion of authenticity, and holding that authenticity must therefore be understood differently, unless one is already committed to viewing authenticity as indeed a valuable and coherent notion from the first. Yet that is precisely what is in question, and certainly can be taken to be part of what is contested in Trilling's account.

In support of his own analysis, Guignon asks us to imagine individuals who are genuinely and deeply committed to ideals that are empty, trivial or lacking in worth. Guignon's claim is that, no matter the fervour or intensity of their commitment,³³ we would not regard these individuals as living authentic lives. Authenticity is thus supposed to carry a content that goes beyond just the requirement of self-possession – to be authentic is not only to live a life that is *one's own* but also to live a life that is *worthwhile*, and that satisfies a criterion of worth that is socially as well as personally oriented. Whether one finds this argument convincing will depend on whether one agrees with the readings of the examples that Guignon offers – and whether or not one does so will almost certainly depend on whether or not one takes authenticity to involve the sort of exceptionality and extremity identified by Trilling. In fact, part of the problem with Guignon's developed account is that it seems already to rule out as instances of authenticity just those forms of authenticity, of the sort identified by Trilling, that seem paradigmatically associated with the concept, and that also seem to epitomise what is most problematic about it.

Guignon's rethinking of authenticity as a 'social virtue' thus immediately transforms authenticity from a dangerous and extreme ideal to a moderate, civil, and benign one. At the same time, the issue of exceptionality and extremity itself appears to be effectively

overstepped – indeed, although it is not omitted from Guignon's account, it might be viewed as simply subsumed under the problematic focus on the individual. The question is: which of the accounts of authenticity that we find here is correct? Is it the account of authenticity as given over to exceptionality and extremity that is evident in Trilling or the moderate conception that seems to underlie Guignon's account to reach its full realization at the end of *On Being Authentic*? In fact, there is one sense in which both accounts are correct, and what makes this possible is an oscillation or equivocation that operates within the idea of authenticity itself – an oscillation that allows authenticity to shift between the moderate and the extreme, between the benign and the dangerous. The very fact of this oscillation or equivocation can also be seen, however, as lending support to Trilling's more negative construal of authenticity and its dangerous character.

5. On the face of it, it may seem that the concept of authenticity is not only familiar and widespread, but also relatively clear and well-understood. The most common characterisation of the notion, in a moral or ethical sense, is that which is given in the injunction from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, spoken by Polonius to Laertes, 'to thine own self be true' (a characterization reflected in my own use of a similar phrase near the very start of this discussion).³⁴ In fact, Trilling treats the line from *Hamlet* in terms of sincerity rather than authenticity, although he nevertheless sees it as standing within the history of the development of the latter notion. Both sincerity and authenticity can indeed be said to involve a basic notion of *truthfulness*,³⁵ and of truthfulness *to self*, but it is not the identical notion in both cases (although this fact is often overlooked), and the difference does not lie merely in the idea of sincerity as social and authenticity as personal.

Trilling points out that the origins of the modern sense of authenticity as a moral notion lie 'in the museum, where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be'.³⁶ One can see how a notion of truthfulness is indeed at work here, and also how it operates in many ordinary uses of the notion of the 'authentic', as, for instance, when we say of a meal that it was 'authentically' Italian, of a hand woven carpet that it is an 'authentic' Persian rug, or of a painting purported to be by Rembrandt that it is an 'authentic' work by the Dutch master. Significantly, however, the particular sense of truthfulness at issue here is one very much tied to the idea of a *determining origin or authority* that gives that whose authenticity is in question its character

as authentic. Thus the authenticity of meal, the carpet, or the painting is typically ascertained by going back to something that determines the character of each in just that respect that is at issue. In the museum case cited by Trilling this process of going back to some original and authoritative determination is clearly evident in his reference to the idea of the expert who can 'test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be'. The process of 'authentication' that Trilling invokes here is one in which the aim is indeed to establish a link back to a specific determining origin whether in a historical period, a geographical location, or an individual artist, craftsman, or workshop. Not just a matter of truthfulness to self alone, authenticity is that particular form of truthfulness to self that looks to a connection back to a determining origin or authority. Moreover, it is this that underpins any distinction between sincerity and authenticity in terms of a social or personal orientation. As should also be clear, it is the connection back to a determining authority or origin that grounds Trilling's association between authenticity and exceptionality. In the case of Wordsworth's 'Michael', and following Trilling's account of the poem, that determining origin or ground is the self-evident character of Michael's grief as belonging to his very being.

If we take authenticity just in terms of some general notion of truthfulness to self, then not only will we find it difficult to distinguish authenticity from sincerity, but we will also find it hard to dispel the ambiguity that allows that notion of truthfulness to self to slide over into the stronger notion of a grounding in some determining origin – in some exceptional or superlative mode of the self or of existence. This is part of what makes discussion of authenticity so awkward: on the one hand authenticity calls up a set of notions, especially that of truthfulness, that seem to be part of our normal moral discourse and as such can be seen to belong with notions of moderation and civility; on the other hand the character of authenticity as connected with the idea of a determining authority, and the exceptionality that goes with it, tends us towards an extremity that is sometimes anti-social, but also violent and dangerous. The result is indeed an oscillation within the very concept of authenticity, and because one of the poles of that oscillation is that of exceptionality and extremity, so the oscillation is itself a dangerous one.³⁷

The danger here is made all the greater in virtue of the fact that, when intended in relation to the self, the very constraints that normally obtain in other ordinary uses of authenticity no longer apply. The self is itself a contested concept and the domain that

belongs to it has no clear or definable boundaries – unlike, for instance, the domains of regional cuisine, handicraft production, or art collecting.³⁸ This is another aspect of the ambiguity or instability that seems to be part of the problem that authenticity presents. Indeed, it is an instability that one might argue is already present in Shakespeare's use of the idea of 'truthfulness to self' in *Hamlet*. What is at issue here may well belong, in its literary and historical content, more to sincerity than to authenticity, but part of what Shakespeare seems to be doing is playing with, and perhaps even casting doubt upon, the very idea of 'truthfulness to self' on which both sincerity and authenticity seem to draw.

As is often pointed out, the line in *Hamlet* that expresses this idea of truthfulness to self is put in the mouth of a character who himself exhibits little in the way of the commitment he impresses on his son – Polonius is presented as something of a scheming, pompous, self-interested windbag. But Polonius' exhortation to Laertes to be true to himself also carries with it a deep ambiguity that does not derive only from the lack of truthfulness evident in Polonius' own character. Part of the focus of Shakespeare's play is Hamlet's own uncertain sense of self, his own uncertainty about what is true in the world around him as well as in his own soul. In a context in which the self is thereby put into question, what is to be made of the injunction to be true to one self – especially when that injunction is put by a schemer and a fool? The ambiguity surrounding Polonius' advice to Laertes becomes all the greater when we realise that Laertes is himself the one who, at the end of the play, is so consumed by grief, animosity, and the desire for revenge that he is opened to the manipulative wiles of Claudius, precipitating the final duel that brings the whole sequence of events to its bloody and extreme conclusion. Put in the context of the concern with authenticity, *Hamlet* may be seen as indicating a new uncertainty about the self that puts into question the very ideal of truthfulness to self, but that can also be seen to carry something of a foreshadowing of the horror and extremity that is to come.

Shakespeare aside, one may well ask what the self can be anyway such that one can indeed be true to it? How does authenticity operate here – what are the criteria to which one would look to determine whether a self is authentic *as a self*? This question is not answered by interrogating authenticity understood merely in some general sense of truthfulness, even of truthfulness to self. That sense of authenticity actually carries little determinate content beyond the idea of a distinction between the truthful and the false, the real and fake – and it no more tells us what is to count as authentic than the related

concept of truth as applied to sentences provides us with a list of truths or a rule for identifying the true as opposed to the false. Indeed, it is significant that, as we saw in the discussion above, when Guignon argues for a more substantive account of authenticity that is consistent with what we might think of as a more properly consistent moral outlook, he does so in a way that seems already to depend on treating authenticity as associated with what is morally worthwhile and valuable (the darker account of authenticity offered by Trilling is thus a misunderstanding of authenticity rather than a diagnosis of something problematic that lies within it). There are not the resources within the notion of authenticity to delimit its application to the self, but neither can one look to an account of the self to fill out the notion of the authentic. Such an account will tell us about the self, but it will shed little light on *authenticity* as such (at best it will fill out the context in which the idea of the authentic might be applied). Thus the sort of account that Guignon advances, and that is adumbrated in Taylor, in favour of a rehabilitated concept of authenticity that looks beyond the personal, is really based in an argument for an expanded concept of the self which is then used to reinterpret authenticity in accordance with that expanded conception. The only way in which an analysis of the self can illuminate authenticity is if it is already assumed that authenticity provides a legitimate way of thinking about the self, but that assumption itself requires legitimation. Only when we look to some stronger sense of what authenticity may be, a sense that goes beyond notions of mere truthfulness, can we begin to see a sense in which authenticity might stand in a stronger relation to a substantive conception of the self – except that any such stronger sense of authenticity is likely to be filled out in terms of just that exceptionality and extremity of being that remains largely in the background of Guignon's account, but which is so central to Trilling's.

6. It is surely no accident that Guignon's account does indeed end, not with authenticity, but rather with *releasement*. Moreover, Guignon himself suggests that he intends the notion of releasement as a counter to 'the dangerous one-sidedness built into the concentration on authenticity in certain areas of the self-help movement'.³⁹ Releasement also stands in stark contrast to the exceptionality and extremity that is evident in Trilling's account of authenticity. Guignon's characterisation of releasement, as I noted at the very beginning of my discussion, treats releasement in terms of 'a heightened sensitivity to what is called for by the entire situation... [it is] a kind of situational awareness of what should be done'.⁴⁰

This does not mean, of course, that releasement involves a turn away from the self – the very idea of situation presupposes a 'body', or, we might say, a 'subject', that is situated, and to be aware of the situation in its entirety is to be aware of both that which is situated as well as that within which it is situated. The point is well-illustrated with a well-known example used in relation to the understanding of spatiality: to grasp one's spatial situation one must be able to relate the parts of space to the parts of one's own body. Analogously, in order to grasp one's situation one must be able to relate aspects of that wherein one is situated to aspects of oneself. If releasement is indeed a form of *self-release* it is so not in the sense that it involves a complete abandonment of the self, but rather inasmuch as it means a releasing of the self *into the situation*, and so also a releasing *of the situation* in the direction of the self.

Guignon's own explication of releasement draws on Gadamer's model of conversation in which we are indeed given over *to the conversation* and so allow the conversation *to take us along within it*, as well as on Heidegger's explicit use of releasement as an alternative way of relating to modern technology. Releasement in the latter context is specifically a matter of 'letting be' (something clearer in the German *Gelassenheit* than in the English 'releasement'),⁴¹ and so of taking an attitude to technology, and to the world, that refuses the attempt at control or mastery. Moreover, Heidegger's own account of technology is one that sees technology, not as something wielded by human beings, but rather as an all-encompassing ordering of things that extends even to the human. On this basis, releasement in the Heideggerian context, must mean a refusal also of those forms of dominating control or mastery that are directed at the self – forms of control or mastery that one might argue are paradigmatically at work in many contemporary versions of the ideal of authenticity.⁴² It means recognition of the self as characterised not by its exceptionality or extremity – and certainly not in the sense of mastery, resoluteness, or strength – but by its openness to the world, by its dependence on the world, by its vulnerability to the world.

Releasement must involve a freeing up of one's attitude towards the self no less than a freeing up of one's relation towards the world. In this respect, releasement can be understood as more than just a mood or attitude, but as rather based in a different understanding of the very nature of the self and of the self in its relation to the world. Guignon makes no direct connection between the idea of releasement and the 'dialogical'

conception of the self that he also explores, and that plays an important role in the argument he advances for authenticity as a 'social virtue'. Yet such a dialogical account of the self, which can itself be seen to connect with ideas in Gadamer and in Heidegger, involves a different *ontology* of the self, one that treats the self as essentially relational and dynamic, and that also, although there is not the space properly to argue for the point here, as embedded in and shaped *by its situation, by its being in place*.

7. It is at this point that we are returned once more to the figure of the shepherd Michael, and to that 'straggling heap of unhewn stones' in Grasmere Vale. Trilling takes 'Michael', as we have seen, to be a poem that provides a picture of authenticity as exceptionality and extremity. There can be no doubt that it does just that. Yet, as we have also seen, it does something more as well. When Trilling tells us that, for Michael, 'there is no within and without', he echoes Wordsworth's own description of the way the seeming externality of the Westmoreland landscape has become internalised in Michael – it is his "living Being" – even as his grief is given material embodiment in the heaped stones before us. Although it exemplifies a mode of authenticity, as well as telling a story of individual grief and loss, 'Michael' is primarily a poem about *place* – as is made clear by Wordsworth himself when he writes of the tale of Michael:

It was the first,
The earliest of those tales that spake to me
Of Shepherds, dwellers in the vallies, men
Whom I already lov'd, not verily
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills
Where was their occupation and abode.⁴³

The tale of Michael is a tale etched into a landscape. It is the story *both* of an individual man and of a certain place in Westmoreland – the one being inseparable from the other. Moreover, as a landscape bears the marks of human stories – stories that belong to that landscape, even though the landscape also goes beyond those stories – so every landscape always bears the marks of what is lost, of what is past, of remembrance and forgetting. Place and loss, and with it sadness, mourning, even grief, are always linked. This is perhaps the real meaning of *nostalgia*, understood, not in terms of the desire for the return of a past

time (as is so often assumed), but rather of the experience of place as also, and inevitably, an experience of loss and the pain of loss.⁴⁴

Set against the background of the inquiry into authenticity, 'Michael' presents a complex set of ideas, since it can be seen as encompassing notions of both extremity and of releasement – or at least of that 'released' conception of the self that understands it as standing in an essential relation to its situatedness, to its being in place. One might object, of course, that the situation, the place, that appears in Wordsworth is simply the situation as physical location, and so does not carry the sense of social situatedness that is actually at issue in Guignon's discussion – whether as it might be implied in his idea of releasement or in the dialogical conception of the self that he takes from Williams, Taylor and others. There is a longer argument that could be put here, but in brief, there can be no social situation that is not also physically embedded and embodied, and even the physical landscape carries with it a depth of social significance. The social is itself etched into the materiality of physical situation, into the materiality of place, just as the materiality of place is itself saturated with the structures and significations of the social.⁴⁵

The sense of releasement towards place, or interdependence with it, that is evident in Wordsworth's 'Michael' is also not restricted to that poem alone. Although it is true that Wordsworth's poetry increasingly comes under the influence of ideas from the German idealist tradition that gives particular emphasis to the self, it is also true that Wordsworth retains a clear focus on the connection to nature and landscape as central to his work (something demonstrated, as Jonathan Bate emphasises, by the fact that it is *The Excursion*, a work in which nature and landscape are no less important than in 'Michael', that was considered the 'summation' of his work by Wordsworth himself as well as by his nineteenth century readers⁴⁶). Yet although Wordsworth does not forsake a commitment to the idea of the intimacy of the relation between self and place, and so to the idea that it is indeed only *in the world* that we can find ourselves, there is nevertheless also a tendency in Wordsworth towards a thinking of authenticity that is itself tied to place.

Trilling identifies the figure of Michael as exemplifying an ideal of authenticity as exceptionality. One might suppose that such authenticity belongs to Michael alone, and yet if we take into account the way Wordsworth's poem also emphasises the interdependence of Michael with the place in which his life is embedded, then we surely cannot but see the authenticity at issue here as attaching both to Michael *and* the landscape to which he

himself belongs.⁴⁷ Moreover, there seems no doubt that there is in Wordsworth a clear sense in which authenticity can attach to places, and that part of what is at issue in a poem like Michael is actually the extolling of certain places as sometimes morally more valuable or significant than others. Thus, the pastoral landscape of Grasmere is set in contrast, in the course of two lines toward the end of the poem, to 'the dissolute city' in which Luke gives himself 'to evil courses'. Grasmere Vale is a place that Wordsworth loves, and his love for that place does indeed take on an almost metaphysical character, so that the place, and the broader countryside of which it is a part, appears as exceptional – as making possible a mode of being-in-place that to be found perhaps nowhere else. In that case, we would have to say that Wordsworth presents a curious mixture that combines a sense of authenticity, and the exceptionality and extremity that goes with it, as well as a sense of release, and both of these are tied closely to the Wordsworthian concern with place, and the interdependence of self with place. There is an instability here that reflects the instability that is part of the concept of authenticity itself. It is an instability that seems to lie at the heart of Wordsworth's thinking, but that may also be part of the very attempt to think place in terms of authenticity.

There is certainly a common tendency for authenticity to be applied to place no less than to the self. Sometimes this is in a fairly mundane sense that is more or less the same as the museum sense identified by Trilling and is most obviously at work in heritage contexts. Yet it is also used in ways that seem to carry a stronger moral connotation – much as seems to be implicit in Wordsworth. In such cases, the idea of authentic place often connotes something almost *utopic* – a realisation of the enchanted garden, to use Guignon's phrase, from which modernity seems otherwise to have debarred us; a place that will ground and secure our existence; a place that will allow us to be what we essentially are. The architect Christian Norberg-Schulz, who was largely responsible for making the Heideggerian concept of 'dwelling' well-known in architectural circles, is sometimes read in a way that suggests his commitment to such an idea of authentic place.⁴⁸ Within environmental thinking, one can argue that there is also a tendency, even stronger than in Norberg-Schulz, to think of certain places, most often wilderness places, as 'authentic' and also as exceptional – sometimes so much so that their exceptionality is taken to be such as to warrant the exclusion of humanity from those places.⁴⁹ There can be no doubt that there is an ethical dimension that properly belongs to the thinking of place, and also to the human

intervention in place – whether in relation to architecture, the environment, urban planning or elsewhere. Moreover, that ethical dimension may well be seen to be critically determined by the interdependence between place and self, as much as by the interdependence that obtains between self and other (indeed, I would argue that these two sets of dependencies are themselves interdependent⁵⁰). Yet if place is thought through the notion of authenticity, then it is likely to give rise to the same instability as arises when authenticity is deployed as a way of thinking about the self – and to the same exceptionality and extremity. Moreover, just as there is no need to make appeal to authenticity in thinking ethically about the self, neither is there any such need in thinking about place. In every case, as I argued above, the ethical content that is supposedly taken up in the idea of authenticity is actually derived from, and articulated by means of, concepts that are not themselves dependent upon that idea.

Place, along with the self, must be thought through the concept of releasement rather than by means of authenticity. Moreover, the very idea of place should already lead us in that direction. There no exceptional or superlative places, *at least not in the sense demanded by authenticity*. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, place is never encountered as some determinate, immediately present entity or structure – although we may often imagine places as if they were identical with what is presented on the travel poster or postcard, places always resist any such reduction or encapsulation. Even the place of Wordsworth's 'Michael' – Grasmere Vale – is not exhausted by any 'romantic' image of rocky hillside and quaint cottage. Places entangle other places, are entangled in those places, they entangle us within them – places draw us in, allowing a releasing of the self into the place and a releasing of the place into the self (so much so that we may find our own identities inseparably bound up with the places we inhabit). Moreover, although we may come to view some places as more important to us individually than others, this is merely a function, not of any exceptionality that pertains to just those places, but of our own very placedness – which means only that we find ourselves *here* rather than there, in *this place* rather than some other. Our being given over to place – our being released to it – is not a being given over to the exceptional, to the utopic, to the secret, or to the subterranean, but to the ordinary and everyday world that is, as Wordsworth puts it, 'the world / Of all of us'.

For all that 'Michael' also contains within it an expression of the problematic idea of authentic exceptionality, I would argue that even there one can discern this ordinary world

and our releasement into it. Releasement is present in Wordsworth's poem not only in Michael's intimate connectedness to the landscape in which he lives, but also in the fact that it is *in grief* that his being is taken up. Although that grief is indeed exceptional and extreme, it is also, as grief, indicative of the dependent and vulnerable character of the self – of the self as incapable of any complete self-sufficiency or self-determination. It is thus, as I noted above, that grief and place – and so now, perhaps, grief and releasement also – can be seen as themselves linked. Michael's grief is exceptional as it is authentic as it is also extreme, but at the same time it runs counter to some of the key elements in the ideal of authenticity, directing *us* as readers (even though it does not and cannot direct Michael himself), not in towards a separate and enclosed self, but out towards a more encompassing place, towards a more encompassing world.

¹ This summary characterisation appears towards the end of the book – see Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.166 – but clearly echoes ideas set out earlier.

² The term is famously used by Heidegger but is originally found in the mystical tradition best exemplified by Meister Eckhart.

³ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.167. The notion is already introduced (as '*self-loss or releasement*') in the first chapter of Guignon's discussion – *On Being Authentic*, p.5 – in which it is set against authenticity characterised as 'enownment', *On Being Authentic*, p.7.

⁴ See *On Being Authentic*, pp.5-6. Later the contrast becomes less clear-cut, with Guignon arguing that 'the opposition between ... enownment and releasement is an oversimplification', *On Being Authentic*, p.164.

⁵ See *On Being Authentic*, pp.5-6.

⁶ See my 'The Beginning of Understanding: Event, Place, Truth', in Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (eds), *Consequences of Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2010), pp.261-280; and also 'The Beckoning of Language'.

⁷ 'Michael', *Lyrical Ballads* Vol II (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), p.203.

⁸ 'Michael', *Lyrical Ballads*, p.200.

⁹ Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984). I have also referred to the poem in my own work, sometimes in conjunction with Heaney's comments – see *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.2. See also Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁰ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.93.

¹¹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.92.

¹² Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.94.

¹³ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.94.

¹⁴ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 131.

¹⁵ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.ix.

¹⁶ See Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, especially pp.104-106.

¹⁷ As Guignon writes 'The basic assumption built into the idea of authenticity is that, lying within each individual, there is a deep, "true self" – the "Real Me" – in distinction from all that is not really me', *On Being Authentic*, p.6. Notice how this notion already carries with it a sense of the exceptionality of being that appears in Trilling.

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- ¹⁸ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.161.
- ¹⁹ See Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (New Haven: Harvard, 1991).
- ²⁰ Williams, 'From Sincerity to Authenticity', in *Truth and Truthfulness: An essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.172-205.
- ²¹ *On Being Authentic*, p.ix. Taylor also asserts, as a key premise of his account in *The Ethics of Authenticity* that 'authenticity is a valid ideal', *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p.23.
- ²² *On Being Authentic*, p.167
- ²³ *The Prelude* (named as such by Wordsworth's wife, Mary) was intended as the introduction to Wordsworth's great unfinished work, *The Recluse*.
- ²⁴ See esp Hartmann, 'A Poet's Progress: Wordsworth and the *Via Naturaliter Negativa*', originally published in *Modern Philology* 59 (1962): 214-224, and later forming a central part of Hartmann's, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). Guignon himself refers (*On Being Authentic*, Chapt 4, n.12) to Hartmann's essay 'The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way' in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York, Norton, 1979), pp.287-305. Jonathan Bate points to the connection to De Man – specifically to De Man, 'Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image', first published in French in 1960 and reprinted in De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) – see Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.7-8. Hartman's reading, in conjunction with that of Harold Bloom, is one that aimed, as Jonathan Bate puts it, 'to bring philosophy, and in particular that philosophical tradition which ran from Kantian idealism to Husserlian phenomenology, to the centre of Romantic studies', Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* , p.7
- ²⁵ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.51.
- ²⁶ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.65.
- ²⁷ In Heaney's words, the Westmoreland landscape that appears here is 'both humanised and humanizing'. It should be noted, however, that even the later Wordsworth cannot be read as wholly committed to a turn away from the focus on
- ²⁸ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.63.
- ²⁹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.00
- ³⁰ Although Guignon does say that what is crucial about authenticity 'is not just the intensity or fervour of the expression it carries with it', *On Being Authentic*, p.158.
- ³¹ *On Being Authentic*, p.156-157.
- ³² Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, pp.157-163.
- ³³ *On Being Authentic*, p.158.
- ³⁴ *Hamlet*, Act 1 Scene 3
- ³⁵ Hence the appearance of the discussion of authenticity in William's *Truth and Truthfulness*.
- ³⁶ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p.93.
- ³⁷ It is worth noting that Williams also acknowledges a danger that attaches to authenticity writing that 'The search for an authentic life is always questionable, and it is not a secret that it can lead to ethical and social disaster', 'From Sincerity to Authenticity', p.205. Williams, however, diagnoses the danger differently from the way it is done here, and I would argue one reason for this is that he tends, as does Guignon as well as many other authors, not to give sufficient recognition either to the way in which authenticity tends to go beyond mere truthfulness or to the instability that this implies. In this respect, it is perhaps also worth noting that Williams' account focuses on Rousseau, who, as we have already seen, is viewed by Trilling as exemplifying a rather more moderated version of authenticity than is to be found, as Trilling would have it, in Wordsworth's 'Michael'.
- ³⁸ Or, one might add, the social practices that provide the usual setting for truthfulness in the sense associated with sincerity.
- ³⁹ *On Being Authentic*, p.167.
- ⁴⁰ Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, p.167.
- ⁴¹ The notion also connects with Heidegger's earlier use of the idea of 'to let-be', *seinlassen*, in the 1930 XXXX
- ⁴² Although Heidegger's discussion of releasement is most explicit in relation to the question of technology and the response to it, one can argue that it is actually a mood or attitude that permeates much of his later thinking – and in this respect one might say that there is a shift in Heidegger from a way of thinking in which something like the ideal of authenticity predominates, and with it, a sense of exceptionality and extremity, to a focus instead on releasement, and so a refusal of such exceptionality – a refusal of extremity. One might then also say that Heidegger's thinking itself describes a move from extremity to releasement, and that move

is also one that is associated directly with the increasingly explicit shift in Heidegger's thinking towards place and topology – see my *Heidegger's Topology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006). Notice that such a reading might be possible while also acknowledging the continuities between the emphasis on 'ownness' in the early Heidegger that is at work in his use of terms such as *Eigenlichkeit* (the term usually, but not entirely accurately, translated as 'authenticity'), and the notion of 'ownness' that is also at work in the later thinking, most obviously in the notion of *Ereignis*. On the basis of the account offered here, Heidegger's use of 'ownness' can itself be seen as characterised by the shift from a use that emphasises exceptionality and another that emphasises releasement.

⁴³ 'Michael', *Lyrical Ballads*, p.200.

⁴⁴ For more on the understanding of nostalgia that is at issue here, see my 'Philosophy's Nostalgia', in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ For one version of the longer argument, see my *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ See Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p.8; see also chapt. 3.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that the pastoral landscape of Grasmere is set in stark contrast, in the course of two lines toward the end of the poem, to 'the dissolute city' in which Luke gives himself 'to evil courses'.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: on the way to figurative architecture* (Electa/Rizzoli, New York 1985). Massimo Cacciari has been one of Norberg-Schulz's strongest critics – see his "Eupalinos or Architecture", *Oppositions*, 21 (1980): pp.106–116. Cacciari sees Norberg-Schulz as committed to a 'nostalgic' attempt (I would argue that it is better characterized as utopic) to recapture a pure relation to place that is impossible, and that Cacciari argues Heidegger himself rejects.

⁴⁹ See J. B. Jackson's analysis and critique of the idea of wilderness in his 'Beyond Wilderness', in *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1994), pp.71-92.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in my *Place and Experience*, pp.138ff.