

Foreword to Strangers at Home

Jeff Malpas

The lives we live are inextricably bound up with the stories we tell ourselves – stories that we tell about the world around us, stories that we inherit, stories we create, stories that are given to us by others, stories that are always, to some extent, also stories about ourselves. It is not that lives are first lived before they are told, but rather that the living of a life is already bound up with the telling of it – even if the telling is not always explicit, even if it often appears in the form of memories, dreams, hopes, desires, plan, anxieties, and fears. It is in and through story that we give shape and structure to the world around us, to the past from which we come and the future that opens before us, and to the relations we have to ourselves and to others. Moreover, story, and so also story-telling, is itself bound to place and locale, so much so that the archetypal model for the story is the journey. The stories that make up a life are thus stories that bind together a set of places as much as they bind together events, thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In *Strangers at Home*, Jack Bowers explores the intimate connections of story, place, self and life – and so also of being, identity, and belonging – through the self-reflective engagement with self that is made explicit in autobiography. Inasmuch as every story involves the teller, so autobiography provides a special instance of the self-formation that occurs in story, but in autobiography that self-formation, and so the connection between self and story, comes immediately to the fore. Autobiography arises through our self-conscious reflection on our lives and the manner in which those lives have unfolded. We know from our own experience, as well the results of psychological studies, that reflection on one's life and one's self, including the access one has to memories of one's life (what are called 'autobiographical memories'), becomes more

prominent as one grows older. Autobiography is thus something that tends to emerge later in our lives when not only is there more of a story to tell, but when our lives have also taken on a more determinate shape such that we can indeed more readily reflect up the character of those lives.

The connection between self, story, and place is itself reflected in the fact that in autobiographical self-reflection we almost invariably turn to reflection on and remembrance of the places in which our lives have been lived and which have themselves contributed to those lives. It is often through re-engaging with places that we re-engage with our past as well as with our selves (most people would be familiar with the resurgence of memory that occurs with the return to a place from which we have long departed), but equally, when we re-engage with the past through memory that re-engagement is most often a re-engagement with places (so that to return to the past is often to return to a place). This is partly why nostalgia, which is frequently thought of as a purely temporal phenomenon, is actually a phenomenon of place, and relates directly to the character of places as already encompassing time in an essential way – every place is an unfolding from a past and into a future in a movement from which we can never extricate ourselves.

Both stories and places also have an essential relationality: the telling of a story is precisely a weaving of connections, and places themselves appear as dense webs of interconnection – as bounded but dynamic spaces in which things are brought together and opened to one another as well as to other spaces and other places. Since our own being is tied to story and to place, so this relationality is also a feature of our own lives, our own selves. Such relationality appears in Bowers' work in several ways, but not least through his explorations of the connections between mothers, fathers, and their children, and between ourselves and the places that belong to our childhoods. These intimate connections – connections that are closest to us even when they are sometimes the most difficult – are fundamental to our self-formation and foundational, not only to the relations we have with others, but also foundational to the relation we have to the world. In the exploration of these connections, Bowers also opens up an exploration of that most familiar and yet uncanny place that is called 'home' and that is itself a form of the self.

Strangers at Home is a rich and absorbing work. It is relevant not only to the sense of self at a personal and autobiographical level, but also opens up towards broader questions of collective identity as these are worked out in relation to ideas of landscape, country, and even nationhood – though more in the sense connected with what the French would call *patrie* (a term that appears significantly in Proust), rather than any mere ‘nationalism’. As will be evident from the pages that follow, Bowers draws upon some of my own work here, as well as from the work of seminal twentieth century thinkers such as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The latter is a difficult figure to approach at the best of times, and many of the ideas with which Bowers engages here (my own as well as those of Heidegger and others) can be philosophically demanding. *Strangers at Home* nevertheless remains a very accessible and readable volume, as well as intriguing and original in its approach. Bowers has achieved something here that is quite unique, and that should appeal to anyone who has given any thought to the character of their life, to the stories through which their life is shaped, to the places with which their life is inextricably entangled. It is a book that should appeal, in other words, to almost anyone and everyone.

Jeff Malpas – Hobart, July 2016