

Restful Waters Couldn't sleep the other night.

Somehow the many places or waterways of my home state of Pennsylvania, still bearing the Native American names of how many thousands of years of pre-Columbian habitation, crept into my brain? You would expect such names to fade away if only due to the complexity of their pronunciation as European settlers spread far and wide. Yet they remain, like:

Passyunk and Manayunk and Kingsessing, Catasauqua, Conschocken, Susquehanna,
Monongahela, Allegheny, Pennypack, Punxsutawney, Shenandoah, Tinicum, Wissahickon,
Wissanoming, Shamokin, to say nothing of Shackamaxon or
Tulpehocken Creek.

They give a quality to the landscape – musical like running water, like the granddaddy of all such Native American place names, the mighty Mississippi farther west, upon which Huckleberry Finn and his runaway mate Jim fled their way to freedom – until one foggy night they became separated, Huck in the canoe and Jim on the raft, lost to each other.

And it is here that their author Mark Twain makes of the river a metaphor of life in the flow of which we are caught up from day to day, moment to moment as if always summoned by the call of tomorrow and tomorrow . . . as if time were itself a river summoning us into new ways of thinking, learning, being. [Seems a better figure of speech than life amounting to our being called by a shepherd out of a sheepfold – since no one wants to be treated like a sheep nowadays.]

So life, indeed Time as a river, fluid with turns and twists, bends, rapids . . . a river at night during which Huck hears calls from this direction and that, behind him (as warnings?), from the shoreline (as enticements?), out of the darkness ahead (as into an estuary that mingles with the wide open Sea?). Isn't that what we experience? Often we only know we have heard an authentic call after it has happened, after we look back and say: Hey, that's when I changed! But the river never stops flowing; one change will lead to another, one call will amplify to another until the voice that calls becomes ever more recognizable. (as a good shepherd's does to a sheep in a sheepfold).

Why did I lie awake almost all night thinking of those strange, melodious, multisyllabic Native American place and river names? I consider myself lucky to have grown up with them. There is something elusive about them in the sense that they summon us to a less industrialized, strife-ridden environment, to a more original, more oceanic destiny awaiting us round the bend as in Johnny Mercer's treasurable lyric:

*Moon river, wider than a mile / I'm crossing you in style someday / Oh, dream maker, you heart
breaker / Wherever you're going, I'm going your way // Two drifters, off to see the world / There's
such a lot of world to see / We're after that same rainbow's end / Waiting round the bend / My
huckleberry friend / Moon river, and me.*

Geoff Wood