

# Knowledge of God, Knowledge of Place, and the Aesthetic Dimension of Religious Understanding

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## Abstract:

The paper considers some of the ways in which contemporary philosophy of place may be brought into conversation with some questions in philosophical theology, especially the question of the aesthetic dimension of religious understanding. It was prepared for an interdisciplinary conference on 'The turn to aesthetics', held at Liverpool Hope University, 5-7 June, 2007. So the discussion is cast in terms that are intended to be accessible to a general readership. On a personal note, my aim in the paper is to provide a philosophical and theological framework for understanding a poem of my friend, Edmund Cusick, who died in January 2007.

## A. Some problems for the idea of a theological aesthetic

It is easy to imagine aestheticians and theologians alike resisting the thought that their disciplines might have much to say to one another. The aesthetician might reason, for example, that aesthetic value is after all different from moral and religious value, and that to appreciate something in strictly aesthetic terms it is necessary to abstract from any question concerning the thing's usefulness for moral or religious instruction or as an illustration of moral or religious ideas. As Nicholas Wolterstorff comments, 'being true to reality [we might add: being morally true or religiously true] will not be an aesthetic quality of a story or anything else; for things do not and cannot sound or look true to reality.'<sup>1</sup> On the other side, a theologian might reason that because God is incorporeal, our understanding of God cannot rest finally upon images or, in general,

upon the material forms that are the object of aesthetic contemplation. As Thomas Merton observes, speaking of poetry in particular (here echoing the work of John of the Cross of course): 'these human and symbolic helps to prayer lose their usefulness in the higher forms of contemplative union with God.'<sup>2</sup> We could label these two difficulties for the possibility of conversation between theology and aesthetics i. the problem of the autonomy of aesthetic value, and ii. the problem of divine incorporeality.

Recent philosophy of religion has been much concerned with exploring various secular analogies for knowledge of God (or some kindred epistemic state; for ease of reference, I shall continue to talk of religious 'knowledge'.) Writers such as Richard Swinburne have argued that knowledge of God can be seen as analogous in various ways to knowledge of unobserved entities in science – in each case we have good reason to explain the data of observation by reference to an entity which we do not observe, providing that the proposed explanation satisfies criteria such as simplicity and predictive power.<sup>3</sup> A second model which has proved to be popular maintains that knowledge of God is akin to ordinary perceptual belief. William Alston has argued for example that various objections to the epistemic worth of religious experience (understood as a kind of nonsensory encounter with God) rest upon double standards – since these same objections if applied consistently would also discredit sense experience as a source of knowledge of the material world.<sup>4</sup>

These two approaches, whatever their merits in other respects, both have a tendency to throw into further doubt the idea that religious understanding might have an aesthetic dimension: if God is known by way of some inference to the best explanation of certain phenomena, in rather the way that an electron might be known, or

if God is encountered as a particular item in our nonsensory experience, then it is at best unclear how aesthetic contemplation might be connected to knowledge of God: rather, on these accounts, religious knowledge will involve not so much aesthetic encounter as a scientific kind of inference (one which actually carries the mind away from the data of sense experience) or a nonsensory intuition that simply bypasses the material world. So here we find a third difficulty for the idea that theology and aesthetics might have much to say to one another. Or perhaps we could see these epistemological considerations as an elaboration of our second difficulty: given God's incorporeality, we might suppose that knowledge of God must take one of these forms (of an inference away from the data of sense experience, or a nonsensory encounter), and in either case the kind of knowledge we associate with for example the contemplation of works of art will seem to be disconnected from religious knowledge.

In this paper I want to suggest one way of re-forging this connection, and to do this by proposing a rather different analogy for religious knowledge. The argument will have three steps: i. knowledge of God is analogous to (indeed it is itself in part an instance of) knowledge of place; ii. knowledge of place has an aesthetic dimension; so that iii. knowledge of God should also be understood to have an aesthetic dimension. I shall close with a poem which is intended to exemplify some of these connections.

## **B. The relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of place**

I want to approach this question by considering some of the ways in which the concept of God is akin to the concept of place. I am going to pick out 3 points of comparison in particular.

It is a commonplace of philosophical theology that God's reality has a supra-individual character. Hence John Paul II can remark that: 'In the incarnation of the Son of God ... the Whole lies hidden in the part.'<sup>5</sup> And Rowan Williams observes similarly that talk of God 'is structurally more like talking about some "grid" for the understanding of particular objects than talking about particular objects in themselves.'<sup>6</sup> It would take some work to establish more exactly how the idea of divine supra-individuality is to be understood, but in these comments, made by figures who can evidently speak with authority for two central strands of the Christian tradition, there appears to be a consensus that God is not best (or at any rate is not solely to be) conceived by analogy with particular individuals – since God's reality corresponds to the sum of things, or is to be considered as a kind of framework of reference for understanding the significance of material individuals.<sup>7</sup>

This observation might seem simply to reinstate our difficulty concerning God's incorporeality and distinction from material things. But it is striking that places too have a supra-individual character. A place is not an individual entity, but neither is it simply a collection of individual entities – for to speak of a place in normal usage is to indicate that a particular region of space constitutes a genuine unity, rather than just comprising an arbitrarily demarcated conglomeration of things. As Edward Casey remarks place 'is situated between the Charybdis of sheer singularity and the Scylla of contingent commonality'<sup>8</sup> – in other words, places are supra-individual, yet not mere collections of things. And this kind of supra-individuality seems analogous to the divine supra-individuality in the respects distinguished by John Paul and Rowan Williams: often enough, to determine the significance of a material entity we need to locate it in a relevant spatial frame of reference, or to set it in

place (this is a theme to which I shall return); moreover, places are best imaged we might suppose not by any individual entity that falls within them, but by the 'whole' or the integrated sum of their parts.

Moreover, divine agency and placial agency also seem to be alike – in so far as both are (in part) narratively mediated. For instance a Christian ethicist (when handling their sources with a degree of sophistication) is likely to ground a Christian sexual ethic, or environmental ethic, or whatever it might be, not so much in isolated biblical verses (taking these verses to provide a kind of 'proof text' for a given conviction), but rather in the broader sweep of the biblical narrative: given the story of what God has done in creation, reconciliation and redemption, we can ask ourselves what kind of human life (and what kind of sexual, environmental or other practices) would prove to be consonant with this divinely established, narratively constituted context.<sup>9</sup>

Places too, we might suppose, exercise a narratively mediated agency. When we ask how we should comport ourselves at a certain place we need to know, among other things, about the history of the place, or the stories (whether they have a basis in history or not) that are associated with the place. Think for example of the debate which has arisen in the United States concerning the question of what sort of building for what sort of purpose it would be appropriate to erect on the site of the 9/11 attacks, or on a smaller scale, consider how we place flowers at the site of a roadside accident, as a way of acknowledging the storied identity of the site. So places shape our behaviour by way of the stories with which they are associated; and God shapes our behaviour, theologians will affirm, by way of the stories that are associated with the place which is the world (considered as the object of God's creative, reconciling and redeeming activity).

So we can think of reference to God and to place as providing a storied context for human behaviour – and in this sense both God and places have a supra-individual character, and act narratively. Moreover, the concepts of God and place both seem to be integrally connected to that of human identity. It is a common enough view that who we are, both individually and as a community, cannot be spelt out with any existential depth except by reference to our individual and collective story. And from this view it follows that who we are can only be specified by reference to place. This is not fundamentally because places are as it were the containers of the various doings and happenings that constitute our stories. Rather, those doings and happenings are the particular doings and happenings that they are only by virtue of their placial context – for a particular stretch of behaviour can be assigned a determinate sense, and therefore a determinate place in my life story, only when set in such a context. To put the point crudely, the behaviour of applying paint to a wall will bear one meaning, or count as one kind of action, when I am at home and decorating and another when I am at a school which I am defacing. So it's not just that reference to particular places can help, for instance, to jog my memory of past deeds and the happenings that occurred there; rather, reference to place will normally be required if I am to specify at all fully what it is that I have done or undergone. (And this is the reason of course why we can speak of some forms of behaviour rather than others as being true to the storied identity of a place: whether my behaviour counts as 'decoration' – in the normal case, a fitting response to context – or 'vandalism' will depend upon the place.)

Theologians have supposed similarly that it is only by reference to God that our life stories acquire a determinate sense, or exhibit the

kind of narratological coherence that helps to reveal and to constitute our identity. Saint Augustine remarks:

You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.<sup>10</sup>

On this account, my life story lacks a coherent thread, or a determinate sense, until it is brought into relationship to God. So here is a third point of analogy between the concept of God and that of place: God and place provide a supra-individual, storied context for our doings; and thereby they shape our behaviour, and help to fix the meaning of our own storied identity.

While I have only really gestured at three points of connection between the concepts of place and of God, without pausing to think more closely about what these points of connection might involve, or how they might be connected to one another, I hope I have said enough to give some basis for the thought that knowledge of God will be, in some respects, analogous to knowledge of place – this connection holds, fundamentally, because in knowing God and place we have knowledge of our context (a supra-individual, storied, agency-eliciting and identity-defining context), rather than knowledge simply of another individual thing.

We can extend some of these thoughts using the ancient idiom of the genius loci. In general, to know a place, we might suppose, is to know the correlative genius loci – that is, it is to know the range of storied and other meanings which are embodied in the place. And what we have said of places we can also say of these meanings which fix the identity of places: they will be supra-individual,

storied, agency-eliciting and identity-defining. We have seen already that the stories which are relevant to the narratively-mediated agency of God are stories which concern the created order in its entirety (since they concern the events of creation and redemption). And we might suppose more exactly therefore that knowledge of God is not just analogous to knowledge of place but is, in part at least, knowledge of the place which is the world, or knowledge of the sum of the created order. And rather than saying simply that in knowing God we know the place which is the world (a formulation which might seem to invite pantheism), we might prefer to say that in knowing God we have knowledge of a genius loci, where the relevant locus is the world or the created order in its entirety.<sup>11</sup>

### **C. The practical and aesthetic dimension of knowledge of place**

I have suggested already that knowledge of place, of the kind that is relevant here, is communicated in story, rather than in, for example, geometrical or abstractly quantitative terms. Knowledge of place is then the existentially resonant appreciation of the correlative region of space. This is already to suggest that knowledge of place has an aesthetic dimension – in so far as such knowledge depends upon acquaintance with relevant stories, rather than upon scientific theory or some nonsensory intuition. I want now to think a little more about the nature of knowledge of place by way of a brief excursus into some recent French writing on this theme.

In his sometimes rather quirky text The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard draws a sharp distinction between the knowledge of place which can be communicated in prosaic description and the poetic



knowledge of place. Let me try to draw out three of the ways in which he seeks to ground this distinction.

Bachelard is interested especially in the places of childhood, and specifically the childhood home, and in the question of how these places are recalled. Mere description he suggests is not enough to give us access to this realm of 'intimacy', where as he puts it 'psychic weight is dominant':<sup>12</sup>

the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams [or 'daydreams' – which is his more characteristic emphasis] ... do not readily lend themselves to description. To describe them would be like showing them to visitors. ... The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. For it belongs to the literature of depth, that is, to poetry, and not to the fluent type of literature that ... needs other people's stories. ... All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. ... What would be the use, for instance, in giving the plan of the room that was really my room...<sup>13</sup>

So it is the dream-infused character of these childhood places that presents a difficulty for the idea that their nature might be communicated simply by means of prosaic description. To understand the childhood home is to understand its significance for the child – which requires more than simply having knowledge of its physical dimensions, or its character in other quantifiable respects. Such knowledge is we might say affectively toned – because it is given shape and resonance by what Bachelard calls the 'dreams' or 'daydreams' (or what we what we might think of as the desires and aspirations) of the child.

A further, related reason for acknowledging the limits of prosaic description is that the recollection of these childhood places needs to evoke their singular sensory character. Bachelard continues:

I alone ... can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell.<sup>14</sup>

So prosaic description proves inadequate to the character of these childhood places not only because it cannot record their affective resonance, but also because it cannot give us access to their phenomenology from a purely sensory point of view.<sup>15</sup> (We might prefer to see these points as connected: the affective response to the scene enters into its sensory phenomenology, rather than simply constituting a separate tier of awareness.)<sup>16</sup>

Developing these thoughts, Bachelard supposes that our knowledge of the places of childhood is not so much verbal as 'physically inscribed in us'. This sort of memory is, he suggests, 'a group of organic habits':

In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme. The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house.<sup>17</sup>

So my recollection of the childhood home is then not so much verbal as a knowledge of appropriate bodily movement, rather as my knowledge of a computer keyboard (if I can touch-type) is we might suppose not so much visual or verbalisable, but rather a knowledge in my fingers.<sup>18</sup>

The embodied character of our knowledge of place is a recurring theme in more recent French literature. Henri Lefebvre, for instance, distinguishes between representations of space (here he includes space as conceptualised by means of maps, or as described prosaically) and spatial representations. The latter is 'space as directly lived, through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"...' <sup>19</sup> Rather like Bachelard, Lefebvre insists on the embodied and enacted (or 'inhabited' and 'used') character of our understanding of spatial representations. He remarks for instance upon how: 'Architectural volumes ensure a correlation between the rhythms that they entertain (gaits, ritual gestures, processions, parades, etc.,) and their musical resonance. It is in this way, and at this level, in the non-visible, that bodies find one another.' <sup>20</sup> So we could take Lefebvre's spatial representations to provide a generalisation of the space of Bachelard's childhood home: in each case, we are concerned with humanly meaningful space, where the relevant meanings are made known in our kinaesthetic and other embodied responses, rather than in the language of prosaic or 'cartographical' description.

In general, Bachelard's text maintains i. that our sense of the significance of things (our dream-infused appropriation of the world) is rooted in early childhood experience, ii. that our memory of such experiences is spatially organised and mediated above all (for some of us anyway) by our recollection of the childhood home, and iii. in so far as these recollections are communicated verbally, we should have recourse to 'poetry'. So to this extent, Bachelard is supposing that the childhood home presents a kind of feeling for the world as a whole. As he puts it: 'the house's situation in the world ... gives us, quite concretely, a variation of the metaphysically summarized

situation of man in the world.<sup>21</sup> Lefebvre is also interested in the ways in which spatial representations can communicate non-discursively some larger cosmological or metaphysical sense of things. He comments: 'When a gestural space [or what we might call following Lefebvre's usage a spatial representation] comes into conjunction with a conception of the world [a representation of space] possessed of its own symbolic system, a grand creation may result. Cloisters are a case in point. What has happened here is that, happily, a gestural space has succeeded in mooring a mental space ... to the earth, thus allowing itself to express itself symbolically and to become part of a practice, the practice of a well-defined group within a well-defined society.'<sup>22</sup> So participation in a place- (or to take this particular case, a cloister-) based religious practice can involve an embodied rather than verbal acknowledgement of, and participation in, a correlative metaphysical scheme.

Turning to more recent work, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus can be read as another way into the idea that there is a knowledge of the human meaning of space that is embodied rather than explicitly articulated, and that can be extended in the direction of a verbally tacit metaphysic. The habitus is roughly a set of dispositions to behave which exhibits its own kind of intelligence or appropriate practical responsiveness independently of discursive thought (comparable for example to having a 'feel' for a game).<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu comments:

Practical belief [which will include the kind of practical sense that is implied when we orient ourselves appropriately in a given place] is not a 'state of mind', still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines ('beliefs'), but rather a state of the body. Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in

practice between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from the practical sense.<sup>24</sup>

This kind of embodied, non-discursive knowledge of place involves once again, potentially, a sense of the human significance not just of individual places but of the place which is the world. (Although there is no space to explore the point here, the language of 'doxa' is of course for other reasons too immediately reminiscent of 'belief' in the religious context.) As Bourdieu remarks: 'One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, made body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can instil a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as "sit up straight" or "don't hold your knife in your left hand", and inscribe the most fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of a culture in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, so putting them beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement.'<sup>25</sup>

So following Bachelard, and drawing upon Lefebvre and Bourdieu, we might suppose that there is a knowledge of space that is not readily communicated in the language of discursive prose – on account of its affective resonance, its phenomenological distinctiveness, and its practical, embodied rather than theoretical character. And following these authors again, we might suppose that this sort of knowledge can extend to an understanding of the humanly intelligible meaning of the place which is the world. And if we agree with Bachelard, we will add that this kind of knowledge, so far as it can be cast in verbal form, is best communicated by means of what he terms 'poetry'.

#### **D. The aesthetic dimension of religious knowledge**

It is time to put the main theses of this paper together. I have argued first that knowledge of God is akin to knowledge of place, and more exactly that knowledge of the genius of the place which is the world is at least in part constitutive of knowledge of God. And secondly I have suggested that there is a kind of knowledge of place that is not straightforwardly communicable in geometric or quantitative or other terms which lack affective resonance or fail to engage with our specifically human mode of sensory experience, or our specifically human embodied and practical appropriation of, or reckoning with, space. Putting these two claims together, we might wonder whether there is a knowledge of the place which is the world (and hence a knowledge of God) which is not communicable in straightforwardly prosaic terms because it concerns the human significance of this place, rather than, say, its character from a scientific point of view; and if there is such knowledge, we might wonder whether it has an aesthetic dimension, and whether (following Bachelard) it can find particularly apt expression in the language of poetry.

Of course, the drift of my paper is that these questions can be answered affirmatively: the kind of embodied knowledge of place that we have been considering can extend to a knowledge of the place which is the world; such knowledge will count as knowledge of God, for the reasons we have been considering, but will not be scientific in character, or dependent upon some nonsensory intuition; and so far as this kind of knowledge can be cast in words, we might suppose that these words will need to incarnate for us the correlative practical and affectively resonant engagement with the world. In the words Frank Burch Brown, we will need words that can offer 'something like a resemblance of lived experience, or the world imagined freshly and uniquely by means of fictions and sensuously

embodied ideas: organic wholes whose meanings are felt more than thought'.<sup>26</sup>

If this knowledge of place is to count as Christian, then we might suppose that it will need to recognise, as Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, that this world:

represents a success on the part of God – God who is love – not a failure. In contemplation of what he had made God found delight. But also God knew that what He had made would serve well his human creatures. So God pronounced His 'Yes' upon it all, a 'Yes' of delight and of love. You and I must do no less.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, a properly Christian appreciation of the place which is the world will imply a correlative set of affective responses (broadly affirmative in character) and a correlative phenomenology (one which is open to taking delight in the world and recognising its intrinsic goodness). And perhaps such an appreciation of place will also imply, or at any rate will prove to be especially consonant with, certain gestural and other embodied responses.

A more persuasive account of these matters would no doubt require close examination of particular poems or other art works – to show how these works body forth the kind of knowledge whose possibility we have identified only abstractly. As a step in that direction, I would like to close with a poem of Edmund Cusick. Until his untimely death in January of this year, Edmund taught imaginative writing at John Moores University, so he was a Liverpudlian of sorts. In his life and in his work, he brought together a rather distinctive, somewhat syncretistic Christian faith with a keen sense of place. In the poem I have chosen, he is talking about a region of Wales, near his home in the Berwyns. As I read, I'll allude to (rather than

attempt to expound) some of the ways in which the poem exemplifies the themes we have been examining. In general terms my suggestion is that the poem constitutes one line of response to the problem of the possibility of a theological aesthetic with which we began.

To see the poem's sense, we have to contemplate it as a poem: while it certainly has reference to a world beyond the poem, and offers indeed a perspective on a particular place, what the poem communicates about that place is, arguably, not fully paraphrasable in prose or in any other terms. To this extent, the poem conforms to the ideal of aesthetic autonomy. At the same time, the poem is able to speak religiously – and it does this not by speaking of God abstractly, but by reference to a particular place, whose meaning or genius is taken to provide a clue to the meaning embodied in creation as a whole. So, putting these thoughts together, the poem does not depend upon any denial of the doctrine of divine incorporeality (the poem does not after all affirm or in some way presuppose pantheism), and yet its religious import is communicated in terms which are irreducibly aesthetic. Hence the poem constitutes one response – a place-based response – to the question of how a theological aesthetic is possible, notwithstanding the autonomy of aesthetic values and the incorporeality of God. It is also true of course that the poem implies a different epistemology from the one which has dominated recent discussion in analytic philosophy of religion – here God is known not by way of scientific inference, nor by means of some supra-sensory encounter with a non-material entity, but in the embodied apprehension and enacted appropriation of a particular place.

**Coed y Farden**



# I

Coed y Farden: three square miles where no one comes  
by foot, or land-rover, for days on end:  
bounded by crumbling dykes and rusting wire,  
the river choked with flashflood branches;  
lines of pines and spruce broken, thinned  
by fifty years of storm, their fallen trunks  
opening ragged glades to ash and rowan  
seedlings of oak and holly: no longer  
forestry plantation, not yet wild wood.

[To this point we have been given a 'cartographical' account of the  
place, or in Lefebvre's terms a representation of the space. But the  
poem moves now to offer another kind of appreciation of this  
place.]

A place where silence holds  
within it the surf-surge of the spruce, the mutter of water,

yet rests unbroken, its stillness  
not absence of sound  
but strands of quiet through which the place itself listens:

the soft pad  
as drifts of needles yield under my boots;

the changing in the river's voice  
as I cross its current, the way it closes back again;

the flat chime of barbed wire springing back  
vibrating from post to post into the soil.

[Here the place is personified, and treated as itself a kind of subject  
of experience, which 'listens' – which is to say that the poem is  
taking the place to have a genius. And this genius is made known  
via a description of the phenomenology of the author's embodied,  
engaged encounter with the place: a particular enacted

appropriation of the place is being described, and a correlative set of affective responses are implied.]

## II

It's only here I know  
this cleanness of the air, of pine and peat

Here under the rain, a cold stone at my back,  
there whispers at the edge of thought a sense

of subtle territories of blood and scent  
a cigarette smoked half a mile away,

the taint of diesel and exhaust  
lingering on the track for hours  
after the foresters have gone

a stillness that has me turning, sometimes  
to the crow's flight before I hear it  
sometimes to see nothing visible.

Lives which compass mine  
the way the buzzard's circles hold  
the lesser worlds of rook and heron;

which intersect with mine only the way  
the mud at dawn unites the tracks  
of fox and polecat, their hunger hours apart.<sup>28</sup>

[Here again we are given a picture of the author's bodily stance in relation to the place, when he stands with the stone at his back – in Lefebvre's terms, it is as though the author is describing a gestural space, which carries within it a larger but verbally tacit sense of the nature of things.<sup>29</sup> In this passage the author's attention also begins to broaden out – away from what lies within the immediate reach of his senses, and towards 'lives which compass mine'. This paves the way for the closing section of the poem, where the sense of place

that has been described so far is taken as a clue to the character of the genius of the locus which is the world.]

### III

It's only here that I acknowledge  
that this is my religion,  
underpinning everything, this bond  
I've made with you and never spoken,  
that you understand runs deeper  
than any marriage, a kind of parenthood,

in which your spirit finds no rest  
but still a place to venture from  
and to return. A faith  
whose confirmations are all ambiguous:  
voices in the wind;  
an empty bed: mud on the stairs;  
the grit your tongue discovers  
between your teeth.

It's here, in Coed y Farden, that I believe  
this love, patient, unforeseen, may redeem  
all that is merely human, its proof  
absolute discretion; the tenderness  
of ordinary things: to wait  
in the tired dawn and watch

for your eyes opening; to dress  
the scratches on your limbs;

return you to your name.

[Here the poet speaks of trust and faith, and so in Bachelard's terms he is using the language of 'dream' or of desire and aspiration. And the genius of this particular place is seen here to fix the sense of the poet's activities – since its love offers redemption in the midst of 'ordinary things'. And casting himself in the role of a

lover of this place, the poet imagines being able to name the place – so discovering its identity and at the same time his own. The precise feeling for the world which this poem communicates is we might suppose not otherwise expressible. But it gives particular shape, I suggest, to the possibility which is recorded in these words of Teilhard de Chardin:

Now, Lord, through the consecration of the world the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face – in you.]<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> These comments are cited in Frank Burch Brown, Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 224. In fact, the full quotation reads: ‘even if’ these helps lose their usefulness, ‘they still have their place in the ordinary everyday life even of the contemplative’. So the text is actually a plea for the enduring value of poetry, but one that acknowledges that this value may in the end have nothing to do with the vision of God. Compare the problem that Patrick Sherry poses for the idea that the beauty of creation reflects that of God: ‘how can a corporeal being be like God, who has no body or matter?’: Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (Oxford: Clarendon Press, second edition 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See William Alston, Perceiving God: the Epistemology of Religious Experience (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Fides et Ratio (Sydney NSW: St Paul’s Publications, 1998), section 12.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘“Religious realism”: on not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt’, Modern Theology 1 (1984), p. 15. In this remark, he is expounding a comment of Wittgenstein.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Aquinas’s comment that ‘the whole universe shares and expresses [God’s] goodness better than any individual creature’: Summa Theologiae 1. 47. 1, in T. McDermott, ed., Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation (London: Methuen, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Edward S. Casey, ‘How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: phenomenological prolegomena’, in Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, (eds), Senses of Place (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1996), p. 32.

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<sup>9</sup> For an attempt to construct a Christian sexual ethic along these lines, see for example Michael Banner, Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 21-26.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: University Press, 1991), XI, xxix, 39.

<sup>11</sup> I take it that this formulation holds open in principle the possibility that the existence of the genius may be independent of that of the locus, even if the genii of localised places are typically logically dependent upon the associated place.

<sup>12</sup> Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, tr. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) (first published in French in 1958), p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Poetics, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Poetics, p. 13. Bachelard adds that even if the poet could communicate the particular sensory quality of various childhood scenes, this would not serve his purpose, which is to provoke in the reader a recollection off the 'unique smell, which is the signature of intimacy' in their own lives (p. 14).

<sup>15</sup> Compare these words of the poet Andrew Rumsey in his essay 'Through Poetry: Particularity and the Call to Attention': 'For the poet confronted by reality, ordinary phrasing is insufficient to capture the impression that things make – for Keats, bubbles must be "beaded bubbles winking at the brim"; for Eliot, fog must be "yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes". In a manner doubtless maddening to the non-poet, each flavour and colour of a scene is enhanced to convey the pulsing reality therein': in Jeremy Begbie (ed.) Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 2000), Chapter 3, pp. 53-54.

<sup>16</sup> This is a theme familiar from recent philosophical writing on emotional experience. See for example Peter Goldie, The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 59-60. Given this connection, we can see why it is not enough for the poet simply to recall the phenomenology, for human beings in general, of say the smell of raisins (see footnote 14): what matters is the larger affective-phenomenological complex of this particular child.

<sup>17</sup> Poetics, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Merleau-Ponty's observation that: 'Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of [intellectual or conceptual] knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object ... which has to be recognised as original and perhaps as primary ... [To know how to type] is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort': cited by John Haldane in John Haldane (ed.) Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), p. 57 (bracketed phrases in Haldane).

<sup>19</sup> Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, tr. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) (first French edition 1974), p. 39. Or again: 'Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre... It embraces the loci of passion, of action, and of lived situations...' (p. 42).

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<sup>20</sup> Production, p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> Poetics, pp. 27-28.

<sup>22</sup> Production, p. 217. See also his comment: 'Representational spaces ... determined the foci of a vicinity: the village church, graveyard, hall and fields, or the square and the belfry. Such spaces were interpretations, sometimes marvellously successful ones, of cosmological representations': p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu gives a fuller definition in his The Logic of Practice tr. R. Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) (first published in French in 1980), p. 53. He notes the game analogy on p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Logic, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Logic, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Good Taste, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Art in Action, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund Cusick, Ice Maidens (West Kirkby: Headland Publications, 2006), pp. 74-76.

<sup>29</sup> The idea that there is a non-theoretical, non-'rational', embodied understanding of the natural world that is humanly more authentic and more revealing of its true character than are more abstractly cerebral kinds of response is a recurring theme in twentieth century British and Irish landscape poetry. The development of this theme in writers such as Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas and Seamus Heaney is plotted in Edward Picot, Outcasts from Eden: Ideas of Landscape in British Poetry Since 1945 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> From 'Mass on the Earth' in Teilhard de Chardin, Hymn of the Universe, cited in Burch Brown, Good Taste, p. 224. I am grateful to my colleague Tim Gorringer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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