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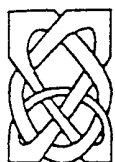
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Knowing (Aesthetically) Where I Am

by

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KNOWING (AESTHETICALLY) WHERE I AM

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1 A Sense of Place

‘A sense of place’ – how very familiar a phrase, but also how very elusive its range of meanings! Though it is not a uniquely aesthetic notion, we certainly do use it predominantly to express our aesthetic perception of place, and I shall start this essay with some informal reminders of the roles we give to that phrase. ‘Sense of place’ comes to our lips most frequently in *positive* appraisals – to mean a satisfying, fulfilling, or congenial experience of place. But it is also used for less happy situations, where we have an unwelcome or painfully uncongenial (*negative*) experience of place. Either the various components of a place refuse, as it were, to make up any unified, expressive whole. They amount to no more than a jumble of items, which we seek in vain to unify or synthesize. Or else, although they undoubtedly do make an expressive whole, it is a thoroughly unpleasant one, one that repels us rather than inviting us to make an appreciative home there. An easy parallel suggests itself with a human face: not every face shows strong and distinctive character; and of those that do, some show it beautifully, nobly, charmingly, and others with ugliness, vindictiveness or degradation. When we exercise a sense of place, we are not simply contemplating a locality as an aesthetic object, savouring its qualities to perception. For instance, the locality is welcomed or loathed as a place-to-inhabit, whether for the briefest visit or as a dwelling. ‘Sense of place’ marks a set of complex and distinctive human *interactions* with our large or small scale environment: we are by no means mere objective observers; our sense of self and subjectivity are involved.

The elements that go to make up the synthesis – my sense of place in respect of a particular locality, say a village – are open-ended and diverse. In quest of it, I make long-shots and close-ups: viewing the village from higher ground, its roof-tops, church spire or tower, the landscape beyond it, the curving of roads leading into it, then the modest (or strident) self-presentation of its shops and amenities, its way of cherishing (or its indifference to) its own environmental

setting, its rocks and its soils and its chosen building-materials (homogeneous or conflicting), the sounds of its activities (human sounds or machine-sounds dominant); the impression it gives of being seriously centred upon itself, aware of and treasuring its own life, or as being merely on the way to places more important, the world of Elsewhere.

When a sense of place is most satisfying, I shall *feel at home* in the setting – my aims not thwarted or belittled, but enhanced and furthered. In his book, *Living in the Landscape*, Arnold Berleant wrote of ‘the deep awareness, so rare in the contemporary world, of living in a house and place to which we belong intimately both in living experience and in memory’.¹

A strong sense of place need not of course be of a house, village, town or city. It may equally be centred on a hill-path, a canal lock or an entire landscape. And as I said, a sense of place can also attach to thoroughly unpleasant places as well as to loved and nostalgically recalled places. Think, for instance, of a post-industrial waste-land, ruined factory-buildings, skeletons only, toppling walls, abandoned vehicles, wrecked, pillaged and rusting. Or the shell of a huge disused power-station, grimly eerie in the half-dark. A person sensitive to place may well shudder, feel oppressed, wish to hurry away. Their impact is life-diminishing. It is impossible to linger with any calm of mind.

2 Towards understanding ‘sense of place’.

Dual Focus: Persons and Places What might be called a dual focus is needed for the understanding of ‘sense of place’. First there is the person who ‘senses’, and second the place that he or she ‘has a sense of’. People vary in sensitivity and in attentiveness to places. Places themselves vary in the degree to which they have the distinctiveness, the individual character, the coherence and homogeneity which makes some of them memorable – whether congenial, lovable, or grimly sublime. Obviously, these two factors are linked: without accessible places of character to experience over time, it is unlikely that a person will develop the sensitivity and give the attention.

‘...give the attention...’ For it is one thing to have a sensitivity to, or vivid sense of, place:

¹ Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape, Towards an Aesthetics of Environment* (University Press of Kansas, 1997), p.13.

another thing to exercise it, to deem it worthwhile to pay attention (aesthetically) to where one is. A person may 'have more to do' – walking with her head down, thinking how best to revise his investment portfolio, or how to get rid of his wife, or thinking up the plot of her next novel.

At the other extreme, sensitive and exercising his sensitivity, here is D. H. Lawrence in Australia:

To feel his way into the landscape, he walks out alone, at night, into the bush. After a while, his scalp 'went icy cold with terror'. Nothing is there, yet he senses 'a presence'. 'It must be the spirit of the place ... It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men'. (No writer can evoke the spirit of a place like Lawrence, ...) [with] those extraordinary antennae of his.²

Florid writing, indeed; but helpful in expressing what sensitivity to place can be like – at the limit.

Of course, examples of such sensitivity abound also in visual art. In the 1990s, a Royal Scottish Academy exhibition in Edinburgh of paintings by William Gillies was appropriately titled 'A Sense of Place'.

Particularity, character and unity Typically, then, two elements interact – a sensitive person becomes strongly aware of the particularity or individuality of a place, from attentiveness to the features of that place itself. For instance, a room's proportions are sensed as horribly wrong; or, seen from the train, the industrial desolation is unremitting and inescapably depressing. Or, the calm of the landscape at night is fashioned and sustained by every visible component: silhouettes of still trees, glimpsed river-bends, moon and moonlight.

It is possible, however, to exaggerate particularity, and so ignore complexities. A work of visual art may express an acute sense of place and may nevertheless avoid being literal – avoid being a topographical drawing or painting of an actual locality. Or a novelist with great sensitivity to place may convey his vivid sense of a district, without precisely and faithfully describing the topography of any one spot on the map. For an example of the first, Nicholas Usherwood in *Modern Painters* (Spring 1996) wrote about landscapes by Christopher P. Wood: 'his painting only very rarely takes on a topographical character. It is full of the spirit of the

² From a review by Tony Tanner (TLS Jan 1998) of David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence, Dying Game, 1922-1930*.

Yorkshire moorland landscape of hills, rivers and dales, but always avoids specific descriptions'. For the second: Thomas Hardy, in *The Woodlanders*, evokes a very distinctive sense of place, without the book describing any single geographically identifiable hamlet and piece of woodland. In his prefatory note of 1912, he describes how he and a friend went bicycling allegedly to find the hamlet of the novel, but (alas!) without success.

Among fundamentals in experience of place must feature the traditional aesthetic categories of diversity and unity. To prize or cherish a sense of place is necessarily to abhor the obliterating of diversity and difference, any moves towards the homogenizing of our experience of places: and unity is sought as we maximize awareness of individual character.

How, next and more exactly, is the word 'sense' being used in 'sense of place'? It is one of many familiar uses of 'sense' which are a challenge to analysis, being neither a matter of the report of any of the 'five senses' nor the deliverances of a mysterious sixth. So let us remind ourselves of this linguistic environment: we speak of 'sense of humour', 'sense of the absurd', 'sense of dignity' (and of decency), 'sense of shame', 'moral sense', 'business sense', and of course – 'aesthetic sense'.

It might be unwise to expect more than 'family resemblances' between these, and many other, forms of sensitivity (for that is what they basically are): yet I think they have at least the following in common. They are not reducible to the algorithmic; they elude systematic presentation. Without sensory input, they would not function; but equally they involve more than that – interpretation, the grasping of *Gestalten*, appraisal, memory and comparison of cases, and 'judgement' over how to cope with new cases. All can involve creativity, fashioning responses to the unprecedented.

That sort of account, however, will not do for all contexts in which we use the phrase, 'sense of place'. Some uses of 'sense of...' make much more emphatic reference to the object perceived than to the sensitivity of the person perceiving. I may say of an empty, abandoned house, for instance, that it has, or carries or exudes a 'sense of decay and neglect'. Here 'sense' means something like 'perceptible quality'. The same is true of some uses of 'sense of place', particularly in such locutions as '...evokes a strong sense of place'.

For many people in childhood an intense, indescribably individual feeling-quality attaches to

many places, a home, a room, the district of a city at a particular season or time of day, craftsmen's workshops with their tools and materials, familiar coves and harbours ... (Individuals' lists will rarely coincide.) These experiences may seldom be recoverable in later life; but one recalls clearly enough that in those days they played a crucial part in the experience of being at a particular place. Enough remains of them to sustain a love and protective concern for the locally distinctive and individual, and a hatred of what callously (and often greedily) destroys it.

That was certainly true in my own early experience of loved places. As a young boy, I enjoyed a strong sense of place whenever I visited relatives in a small North East Scottish village: my uncle was the saddler, his brother the village blacksmith; the working-place of each was strongly redolent of their crafts. In the evenings my father and uncle strolled (with me in attendance) to the bowling-green. Every day, milk was delivered – to the householder's individual jug – from a pony cart, which then clattered up the narrow lane past the sitting room window. There I discovered hill-pleasures, enjoying my first solitary upland walk on a modest hill near the village, and the vast exhilaration of a wide hill-top view. All these components 'gelled' for me and acquired their distinctive emotional tone, a fusion or 'resultant' of numerous sensuous surfaces, smells, scenes, friendly persons, and the pleasures strongly associated with all of them – given my age, circum-stances and character. Doubtless there were elements of the village life that, to an adult, might well have been discordant, and of which I knew (and know) nothing at all. My data were highly selective, personally bounded. I learned also, by stages, the *vulnerability* of every aspect of what then was a tightly integrated experience of place: it dismayed me years later to learn that my hill was now dominated by aërials. By then (needless to say) the saddler's had gone.

After gathering together and listing some main components of a sense of place, these are turning out to have some resemblance to the components of certain philosophical accounts of *emotion*. For these accounts understood emotion to be a synthesis of data, interpretation, and appraisal of situations confronted, plus arousal of feeling. But by 'feeling' was (often) intended a non-specific, generalized excitation, not itself able to be the basis of discrimination of one emotion from another. I have myself long wanted to modify that analysis, to restore to the phenomenology of emotion – the component that philosophers who were behaviouristically-orientated, and opposed to talk of 'inwardness' had been thoroughly *unhappy* about: that is to

say, highly specific, individualized feeling-quality.³

Now, I have been urging that this factor is surely highly relevant, and again highly liable to be left out, in an analysis of *sense of place*; for many of us can testify that just such individualized feeling quality attached to places of childhood and (I might add) to some dreams, although in both cases they are hard or impossible now fully to recover with their element of the indescribable or unconceptualizable. We can recall *that* they were, but scarcely at all *what* they were.

Scale is one important variable in relation to sense of place. If we ask ourselves, Where am I? Where (aesthetically) am I? – we could answer in terms of a room, a campus, a city, a continent, or a planet nearer the sun than Mars and further away from it than Venus, and so on. But, again, since we are talking not just about knowing where we are, that is to say, being able to answer correctly if asked (as in a dispositional account), but about an aesthetic sense of place, the knowledge has to impinge more immediately and episodically upon our consciousness. In this, boundaries to our abilities cannot be set confidently, nor set identically for all.

For a terrestrial example: many of us regret those changes in agricultural practice that have vastly expanded the fields, broken up the once easily-grasped, easily-characterized farm spaces with their limiting, space-defining hedges, fences and walls. Surely a positive sense of place must wither here. It may be that some necessary ratio, some proportion of human size to environmental size, has been violated, and the synthesizing task lies beyond us.

Or do we lament too soon? With effort and resolution, can we learn to grasp perceptually and to characterize those much larger spaces? One can imagine a person, looking up at a clear night sky – and grasping, suddenly, that the Earth is *a part* of that Milky Way galaxy, that *we belong* there. I leave these as questions, rather than dogmatize that a sense of belonging *must* be based on the small-scale context. If we *can* come to have a sense of belonging to those wider contexts, it may be only through such imaginative expansion that we could ever recover something of that sense of being ‘at home *in the universe*’ that current science and the loss of theistic religious belief have, for many of us, totally undermined.

³ Cf. my ‘Emotions and Emotional Qualities’, *Collected Papers on Aesthetics*, ed. C. Barrett (Blackwell 1966), first published in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1961.

Sense of place as (aesthetically) *knowing* a place In exploring the logic of ‘sense of place’, our emphasis has been now on the emotive, now on the cognitive, on ‘aesthetically knowing’ or ‘grasping’ a place. I do not see these emphases as conflicting. We can *feel* oppressed, or revitalized, calmed or sadly nostalgic – *in the grasping, cognizing* of house or coppice, hill-path or re-aligned roadway. I think that ‘knowing’ is a relevant word, despite the presence of feeling and emotion and the important role played by the subjectivity of the person who exercises his or her sense of place. We are working here on the level of the ‘life-world’, not the level of scientific objectivity. But the life-world is a part of reality, to us an intimately real and basic part. Judgements made within and about it are potentially true and potentially false; perceptions within it can be veridical and illusory. Bona fide knowledge is possible not only of the objective layer that the scientist explores, but at the life-world level also. To emphasize and to speak the language of cognition is to deny that (with sense of place) the subject is wholly ‘in charge’, in charge of a fantasy, or reverie, that is nowhere based upon a common perceptible world. Of course we filter drastically in our perception of that world. And certainly the individual subject imparts some of the determinate shape, coherence and unity to the data selected, collaborating with the indeterminable ground of our perceived world to achieve that. The outcome is a determinateness that belongs to the human level, and a ‘cognizing’ of the environment at that level. Not only, then, are the on-goings and experiences of the life-world (sense of place included) experiences in which we cognize ‘real’ elements of that world, but – without detracting from that cognitive aspect – they are among those features of the universe that would not have been there at all if we had not been there – to be their bearers and their appraisers. (I can see a dignity in that role rather than a supposed dethronement to dealing with only shadows and images.)

There are similarities, in this, with the knowing of a person. A friendship is itself an activity that in some measure works upon, through interacting with, the other, the friend. What I know and appreciate, in knowing my friend, is in part the outcome of that interaction, not something wholly independent of my coming to be in relation with the friend. It is through my interacting with, and understanding of, my friend, that the indeterminate in him or her becomes to some extent determinate. A friend can let me down, though: I become vulnerable to that in offering friendship. So with a place: I perceptually explore it, and so expose myself to it. It may reward me or disappoint me (it is tempting to say, betray me!).

We can find further and different help in an analogy with the appreciation of art. I can speak, familiarly, of knowing where I am (aesthetically) in a piece of music: it is sonata first movement form, let us say, and I know that I am at this moment in the build-up to the recapitulation.

Familiarly too, I may confess to myself, hearing another piece, that I am lost – do *not* know (aesthetically) where I am in the piece. In a word, if we are to grasp and so fully experience the musical events that are happening, we have to synthesize, schematically, what has gone before, and hear the music that is now sounding in the light of that. Again, it is cognitive, a knowing: one that involves feeling; and also seeks orientation within a complex, and a sense of being at home there, or suffers the anxiety and discomfort of lost bearings.

What it is relevant to *bring in* (*think in*) to the aesthetic cognition of place is, obviously, broad, and no less obviously problematic. In some cases, information from science is highly relevant – for instance, aesthetically knowing that we are standing on a raised beach, or on what was once a tropical sea, or once an active volcano, or on peat from an ancient Finnish forest, or that we are standing on a straight line from sun through earth and extrapolated to an eclipsed moon. And in each case, once again, we enjoy, in our sense of place, not simply dispositional knowledge (being able to reply correctly if asked) but aesthetic realization in some of its forms.

But there are tensions and limitations here too. Clearly the science most relevant to us aesthetically is the science that has not yet moved far from concern with concrete particulars: visible geological structures, organisms, astronomical features, and so on. The characteristic development of science itself, however, is away from exclusive concentration on particular times and places and the events happening at these, towards ‘conditions for ...’, or ‘causal factors which ...’, a movement in the direction away from concrete particularity towards abstractions and general law, and causal-conditional statements and explanations. And that, for us now, must mean away from well-focused sense of place.⁴

3 *Failures in Places and in Persons*

It happens today all too often that testimonies to highly cherished sense of place are given insufficient weight in decisions over environmental change, and that places of strongly life-affirming character are threatened and destroyed. Moreover, certain general cultural conditions can lead to loss of sensitivity to place and the character of place. So we need what could be called a pathology of sense of place, an understanding of factors that reduce or obliterate sense of place.

⁴ Historical knowledge can be similarly relevant, though that deserves an essay to itself.

Failures in the places Such failures are signalled by the familiar, sad remark: ‘You might be anywhere!’ - For instance, we may be lamenting the effect of the loss of locally individualized shops, cafés and building-styles. Or the loss of a real link between place and product. Or again: excessively conspicuous (necessarily featureless!) car-parks and caravan sites, whose occupants may come from anywhere at all.

It is particularly disappointing when the distinctive character which was once amply possessed by a locality is obliterated or nearly so: as where its shops sell souvenirs of a district whose distinctive character they each do something, by simply being there, to reduce or erase. We can generalize to the familiar paradox of tourism whereby the means chosen to experience a sense of place may become the prime agent in destroying it.

A congenial sense of place can be lost if there is imposed an exaggerated awareness of *connection*; it is as if arrows constantly pointed one away from the place, thereby making its own character harder to appreciate. To return to my earlier example: perhaps a main village street functions as a through-route as well as a shopping-centre: *this* place is primarily perceived as *on the way to* – as connecting with – those *other* places. (That is not to deny the real and different problems often attending the construction of by-passes!).

Even buildings themselves can seem not to belong, not to be rooted: sometimes to have more in common with vehicles than with homes. Roger Scruton wrote in an article in *The Times*:

‘...Heidegger ... touched on a deep truth about architecture... – building and dwelling are the same idea. [In strong contrast are] suburbs dropped from nowhere ...[sensed as] apart from the landscape, shelters for nomads who are not dwelling but passing through. Forms, materials and orientation all contradict the surrounding order, [hiding] from the seasons and the rhythm of life...’⁵

To mention a much more specific issue: as I write, there are current vigorous debates and public enquiries about the aesthetic impact on land-scape of wind generators proposed for sites on hills. One of many disturbing features of these generators (granting fully their attractiveness as sources of renewable energy) is that they, once again, evoke an excessive awareness of connection – the distributing of electric power in the national grid, an awareness that may

weaken our sense of place in the immediate locality. Worse still, in visual terms, they can destroy individual character and sense of individual place also by annulling the landscape's diversity, imposing identical towers (some of them now 200 feet high) and identical revolving blades on hill after hill.

It cannot be said that awareness of connection is invariably a threat to sense of place. We have a familiar exception to this, when 'changing places' is precisely the function of a place (and its 'sense'), as is the case with a busy main railway station or an airport.

I mentioned a 'grid'. A grid of an kind even more obviously hostile to individual character of place is the town or city laid out on a 'grid plan'. A writer on Australian cities, in a book called *The Road to Botany Bay: an Essay in Spatial History*, describes how 'the rational principle of the grid' was used to produce what he calls the grid-plan town', a town that was 'paradoxically placeless and directionless'. Also: the effect of a 'geometric-al tendency' is 'to iron out spatial differences, that nullify the strangeness of here and there' ⁶

I cannot omit a word against contrived attempts to create, recreate or invent a sense of place; in my own habitat, for instance, over-emphasizing for visitors the place of the Scottish bagpipe and clan tartans (granting that these have their proper place in military and highland dancing contexts). In slightly different vein, Arnold Berleant writes about 'false vernacular'. 'The most egregious cases of false vernacular occur in theme parks, themed hotels, restaurants, and housing developments, where historical and national styles are chosen with blithe indifference to time, place and context.'⁷

Failures in persons Although, in childhood particularly, sensitivity to place may operate without deliberate inner prompting, and sometimes with great intensity, the busy, preoccupied or fatigued adult may often (as I hinted near the start) miss occasions for its exercise. This can happen for very different reasons.

I may feel deprived, denied an experience I would have valued, if I find I have slept while my train took me through the Alps or across a historically memorable frontier, or my ship took me

⁵ *The Times*, 14/01/98: 'Blots on the Landscape of the Mind'.

⁶ Not only cities, but wetlands also. P. Carter (London: Faber, 1987), p.220, quoted by Rodney Giblett in his book *Postmodern Wetlands* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 71.

⁷ Arnold Berleant, *op. cit.*, p.72.

across the equator – even though all of these happened at night and there would have been little or nothing to see.

Again, technology often does not help. One may pursue a personal ideal of self-sufficiency, working ‘anywhere’ with the facilities of desk-top and lap-top computers. Fine: but that ‘anywhere’ again may militate against sensitive awareness of where one (or one’s correspondent) actually is. And on the Internet, a single mouse-click can switch the source of the page on the computer screen by the breadth of a continent. Another sort of problem of scale occurs with very rapid travel, which may present to our gaze so many changes of scene, over so short a time, as to over-challenge our ability to synthesize them and grasp their character. Not surprisingly, some (air-borne) give up altogether and read *The Financial Times* or prepare their meeting-papers from take-off to touch-down.

4 Why do we value a sense of place?

Attempting to read character in a face new to us challenges and so enlivens perception: so does alertness to highly characterized places, artefactual or natural or a bit of both.

I say ‘enlivens’, and that reminds me, relevantly I think, of Kant on the ‘quickening’ or enlivening of our cognitive powers in aesthetic experience whether of art or of nature. Beauty as ‘life-enhancing’ has not enjoyed recent popularity in aesthetic theory, and I am sure it cannot stand on its own; but when the elements of a congenial place are experienced as a strong and expressive unity, oneself being incorporated within that unity, the effect is certainly exhilarating; and the converse experience of recalcitrant or oppressive place is equally surely depressing and life-diminishing. If life-enhancement is not a concept you are happy with, perhaps we could speak more acceptably of heightened, intensified consciousness, in which, for some writers, lies the principal value of aesthetic experience.⁸

Value, yes, but also cost. Sense of place can be so highly valued, and so often disappointed, that we may find that the distressing is coming to predominate over the fulfilling, in much of our experience today. We could become understandably reluctant to develop an acute, sensitive sense of place, in the knowledge that it will make us all the more vulnerable to disappointment and hurt. Being so hurt, we might conclude that it is not prudent to anchor our identity,

⁸ I attempt a new appraisal of ‘life-enhancement’ in chapter five of *The Reach of the Aesthetic* (forthcoming, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

potentiality for fulfilling experience, on individual plots of ground, since that is to make ourselves excessively vulnerable.

And yet ... maybe that is to contemplate offending against our aesthetic humanity: a craven abandoning, we might bravely say, of a necessary struggle on behalf of the aesthetic. So hardening ourselves, making ourselves less vulnerable to environmental damage done to places with character, sounds ominously like trying to get rid of our bad conscience by having our conscience as such surgically removed.