

Place, Goethe and Phenomenology: A Theoretic Journey

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This essay is a journey into the phenomenology of place and Goethe's science of nature by an Australian lecturer on the philosophies and practices of place-based education. It takes the form of a series of encounters with leading figures in the field – David Seamon, Henri Bortoft and Isis Brook, as well as an application of Goethean science to some granite outcroppings on the Cornish coast of England. The profundity of the phenomenological concepts of 'natural attitude' and 'lifeworld' is discussed together with ideas behind Goethe's participative and intuitive practices. Goethean science and phenomenology have enormous potential to deepen the experience, understanding and expression of place relationships, but they put challenging demands upon students and lecturers within the structure of a university subject.

Introduction

How can students be encouraged to pay closer attention to the subtleties of the places in which they live and work and to consider it an important activity? How can the qualities of a place, as a nested and inter-related assemblage of different entities, be intuited as a whole? What is the pedagogical value and limitation of narratives of place in this process? How can one impart to modern students the depth and scope of the worldview of a reciprocal encounter with place in a participative universe, which is inherent in the phenomenology of place and Goethean science?

My interest in these questions is both practical and theoretical and strongly influenced by the context within which I work. As a university lecturer in the philosophy and practice of place-based education, I am particularly concerned with engendering greater responsiveness to place amongst my students. I recently had the opportunity of an extended visit with colleagues in universities in the U.S and the U.K. exploring our understandings of the theories and practices of place. I was keen to take my experiences of place responsiveness work in Australia into the international arena. The range of people I visited – geographers, environmental philosophers, phenomenologists, ethnobotanists, scholars of Goethean science, architects and human systems theorists – offers some indication of the breadth of disciplines that an interest in 'place' can span.

Over the past twelve years, I have designed and taught university courses on Sense of Place, run five experientially-oriented colloquia on the subject, interviewed Australian place scholars and writers, and conducted research on

local expressions of place responsiveness (Cameron, 2001, 2003a; Cameron, Mulligan & Wheatley, 2004). The work has been very much shaped by the qualities of the Australian land within which it has occurred. The sandstone overhangs in lush yet intimate canyons in the Blue Mountains that have been the setting for many student field trips and the first colloquium ensure that participants are protected and dry in a supportive environment. The students are predisposed to a receptive and intuitive response to place through their surroundings. Thus, I wondered, to what extent are our place education practices a product of particular places in which we develop them?

The larger physical context for place responsiveness work in Australia is the slowly dawning awareness that the Australian continent, like all distinct land masses, imposes a way of thinking and acting on its human inhabitants by virtue of its particular combination of climate, landscape and ecology. It is perhaps best illustrated by Tim Flannery's book, *The Future Eaters* (1994), which popularised the views of a growing number of ecologists that the country could no longer afford to ignore the ecological limits to human activity on this fragile and dry continent. Our largest river is being turned into a saline drain. Much of the thin, easily erodable topsoil of the country's interior has been washed and blown away. Place responsiveness is not just a valuable human quality to develop, it is part of the attitude shift that is urgently necessary for us to live within our ecological means on this continent.

The work has also been shaped by the political and cultural milieu of Australia. The existence of the oldest and still partially intact land-based culture in the world of the Australian Aboriginal peoples is an essential part of any discussion of place relations. They hold a remarkable depth of understanding of the sentience of the land through totemic relationships between people, animals, landforms and plants, and complex traditional rituals and practices that sustain the land and its peoples (Rose, 1996). Debate over the political, social and environmental significance of traditional Aboriginal wisdom for contemporary Australian society has been intense and features strongly in my classes (see Read, 2000; Plumwood, 2000; & Cameron, 2001).

The development of my ideas on place responsiveness has not been devoid of international influences; indeed the work of David Seamon and Doreen Massey in particular has been pivotal. Reading Seamon's works (particularly Seamon and Mugerauer, 2000, and Seamon, 1993) convinced me of the centrality of the phenomenological approach to place, both as a philosophical basis and a way of encountering the experience of place freshly

and deeply. Seamon established the relevance of this approach to the built environment, through design and architecture, and to the experience of the natural environment, thus breaking down some of the barriers between the study of city and country, culture and nature, and refocussing attention on the everyday places we inhabit. Massey's (1994) work first alerted me to the dangers of place attachment, those parochial, gendered and essentialist attitudes that excluded others. She proposed an antidote to such attitudes through the development of a 'global sense of place,' one composed of a network of social relationships mediated by place.

I originally thought of my overseas research as a theoretic journey in the sense used by Bernd Jager (1983).¹ He used Plato's reference to a traditional *theoria*, an arduous voyage to a distant shrine followed by return and re-integration into the mundane. Jager emphasised two elements – the difficult movement out of the domestic realm and the 'welcoming of distance' back into the home base. Failure to complete the second element, according to Jager, leaves theoretical effort in the 'wilderness' of abstractions and generalisations. In my case, I presented my place responsiveness work to colleagues in foreign universities and then entered into an exchange of ideas and experience of local places and distant ones and embraced new perspectives on what I do.

The second stage of the journey was to bring the 'view from a distance' back to Australia and my place responsiveness endeavours here. Making sense of it is part of the work of this paper. I want to write in a fashion appropriate to the task to convey something of the experience itself. What was the physical and theoretic journey like? What is it that characterises a philosophical and pedagogical orientation towards place, in theory and in practice, in the context in which I find myself? This is neither a chronological nor a complete account of the whole trip, but an exploration of what I have discovered and brought into my understanding.

A phenomenological pedagogy of place

At most of the overseas universities where I spoke, it was regarded as unusual and sufficiently valuable in itself that I have been able to take students 'into the bush' on overnight field trips, engage them in sensory awareness and attunement practices and set up a semester of deepening into relationships with a place of the student's choosing.² Courses within a university setting that have a primary focus on the experience of place are not that common, it appears, and I encountered very little critique. I met

a different reaction, though, when I met with David Seamon for the first time in upstate New York. While not unappreciative of my efforts, David looked genially at me and asked whether I was perhaps simply reinforcing the ‘natural attitude’ in my students. The question caused me to reflect deeply on my teaching method. In teaching the Sense of Place subject, I give the students an immediate experience of the bush and the ways of attending to place and provide readings and discussions of the philosophy of place, especially phenomenology, to aid their reflection and preparation for their ongoing place experiences.³ Implicitly I rely upon the power of the place experience itself, approached openly, attentively and regularly, to break down the habitual mental patterns that cause us to take our everyday world for granted. Miriam Hill described natural attitude as follows:

Human experience abounds in unifying conditions and forces which are disguised by an aura of obviousness and implicitness. This situation of normal unawareness is called by the phenomenologist the *natural attitude* - a pre-philosophic dimension of consciousness which conceals the world and prevents close scrutiny. The phenomenologist works to circumvent the natural attitude and to undertake a fresh exhaustive examination of consciousness and experience. One result of this exercise is a clear sighting of the communion between body and world (Hill, 2000, p. 99, italics in original).

Was the structure of weekly solitary place visits and readings sufficient for them to question their ‘normal unawareness’ and really experience the ‘communion between body and world’? Certainly many students immerse themselves deeply into their place experiences, and some write enthusiastically in their required essays at the end of the semester of the transformative effect it has had on their lives – returning to childhood place relationships, re-evaluating their environmental and professional work, looking upon their lives in a new light. Surely this counted as progress? David’s wry response was that students often mistake enthusiasm for genuine experience. Rather than report on close observation and insight into a phenomenon, they talk about their general enthusiasm for the subject, the latter being much easier to convey. We went on to discuss the strength of the natural attitude and its twin concept, the ‘lifeworld,’ the “inner and outer dimensions of the essential phenomenological fact *that people are immersed in a world that normally unfolds automatically*” (Seamon, 2000 p. 162, italics in original)

What had always seemed a fairly innocuous concept about inattention to everyday life when I explained it to students came to life as I looked around the café in which David and I were sitting. Waiters were bustling, people talking animatedly, arriving, greeting, leaving – all part of the lifeworld, a vast organism of complex activity, reproducing itself without conscious intention or apparent awareness by any of the elements of the organism that their daily lives were part of it. Was my cherished Sense of Place subject simply part of the same large unreflective process? Did it only reproduce the natural attitude of the students as they visited their chosen places and wrote about their enthusiasm and how they had changed? And what *was* change anyway in the face of the lifeworld organism that constantly generated change as it reproduced itself? As the French expression goes, *plus la change, plus la meme chose* (the more things change, the more things stay the same). I'd presented the concepts and readings in phenomenology, but maybe I hadn't really given the ideas life, maybe I hadn't equipped the students with a sophisticated enough understanding of the lifeworld to begin to question the natural attitude and move into a 'truer' encounter with the phenomenon of place. As the café activity whirred on, I realised the depth of experience and wisdom inherent in the concepts of lifeworld and natural attitude and the complexities of attempting to convey that depth to my students.

The notion of a storied sense of place was the next cherished ideal to be exposed to scrutiny. After I introduce students to the physical and intuitive senses of place, I talk of the stories that each place has to tell, if we are willing to discover them – the geological and biological stories of how the rocks, soil, plants and animals came into being and into ecological relationship, the story of Aboriginal inhabitation and their Dreamtime creation myths, of European settlement and development, and the personal stories of current inhabitants. When I told David of this approach, he commented that stories of place, and particularly stories of encounter with place, conceal as much as they reveal. They impose a narrative structure of character, development and continuity that might not actually be there if one paid closer attention to what actually happened in the process of getting to know a place and was less concerned with finding a story in it. Perhaps the *discontinuities*, the abrupt shifting from one fleeting impression to another, give a more revealing account of how we come into a place than a story or even a set of interpenetrating narratives such as those to which I introduce students.

I had never before heard the value of a storied sense of place being questioned. The doyen of place writers, Barry Lopez, has argued for the importance of a storied relationship with place rather than a purely sensory

awareness of it. Its value is as much for our relationships with each other as for our place relationships. Lopez wrote, ‘We keep each other alive with stories. We need to share these patterns as much as we need to share food’ (1997, p. 25). More generally, van Manen argued for the significance of narrative in phenomenological research and writing because of its power to compel our attention, to lead us to reflect, to involve us personally, to move us and teach us, and to deepen our ability to make interpretive sense (1990, p. 121). He upheld their importance as a counterweight to abstract theoretical thought and a link to lived experience. How, then, could I understand David’s critique? Were there occasions when a narrative revealed qualities of a place and others when it obscured them? Were certain types of narratives more likely to impose a structure upon experience than others? Is it sufficient to impart to students a critical awareness of the structuring effect of stories, or is it better to refrain from them altogether?

By extension, the narrative of the trip I was engaged upon was open to question as well. Maybe the whole idea of the ‘theoretic journey’ itself was an unwarranted imposition upon my encounters with people and places overseas.

I began to understand just how much phenomenology demands of the teacher and student if it is to be taken seriously. David Seamon’s comments provided me with a dilemma – the subjects I taught were entitled *Sense of Place*, not *Phenomenology of Place*, but phenomenological concepts and approaches are needed to get any depth of experience or understanding of place. Merely introducing the approach, however, would not enable most of the students to get to that depth. This was illustrated by another observation by David in our next conversation, that having students work on their own in their own places was only ever going to be the first step, even if they were assisted to go beyond their natural attitude. Progress was best made, he said, by a collective effort – a number of students investigating a phenomenon of place, bringing their own experiences back to the group and working through them via phenomenological reduction, intuiting and disclosure (see Seamon, 2000). These processes require a great deal of patience, open-ness and discrimination. As Max van Manen described it, there are

...many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back onto

taxonomic concepts or abstracting theories (van Manen, 1990, p. 33).

There are numerous phenomenological accounts by researchers working alone, but David's point was that without the discipline of collective effort most students taking my subject and working alone in their places would fall into one or other of the difficulties outlined by van Manen. Because my postgraduate Sense of Place subject is taken by distance students who only gather on campus twice during the semester, I have the double challenge of facilitating group discussion of these matters on-line. Again, I had the disconcerting experience of having my enthusiasm for phenomenology used as a light to shine on the limitations of my pedagogical practices and the structure of the subjects within which I had to work. None of this was to deny the value of the courses for other purposes – to develop environmental awareness, ecological literacy, self-understanding, and the skills of human responsiveness to place, that is, an enhanced capacity to listen and observe, to be more aware of one's sensory and bodily responses, and to engage more empathetically with the more-than-human world. But if the focus was to remain on the *experience* of place, then I had to come to terms with my use of phenomenology.

This stage of my 'theoretic journey' (if indeed there was still any point in thinking of it in these terms) was indeed arduous, just as Jager described. Removing myself from the familiarity and comforts of teaching subjects that are highly regarded by students in a place that I know intimately and love, I had subjected my work to the critical albeit supportive gaze of one of the leading place phenomenologists in the world. As the power of the phenomenological approach was revealed, I experienced the all-encompassing and mechanical nature of the lifeworld and natural attitude. I had a fresh view of the restricted way I had employed phenomenology, and the unquestioning approach I had to stories of place and the generating of enthusiasm. Shaken out of my own natural attitude and comforts, I proceeded across the Atlantic Ocean.

Encountering Goethe

David Seamon gave me a copy of Henri Bortoft's *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Towards a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (1996) as a parting gift and recommended that I read it and meet with Henri, if it was possible, to discuss its implications for my work. He also gave me

a copy of Isis Brook's paper describing the experiences of a group of people actually engaging in Goethean science on a site in Scotland (Brook, 1998). Although I was aware of Goethe and Steiner's approaches to the natural sciences and regarded them as interesting, if rather inaccessible, I had previously been unable to discern their relevance for the general place-based teaching and research I had been doing. As I travelled to campuses across England, the significance of Goethe's science and its connection with place responsiveness revealed itself to me as I was drawn deeper and deeper into Henri's book and Isis's practical example.

The Wholeness of Nature distinguishes between an intellectual approach to wholeness taken by analytical science, in which natural phenomena are explained through generalisation and abstraction by underlying mathematical laws, and an intuitive approach to wholeness taken by Goethe, in which wholeness is experienced by allowing the phenomena to reveal themselves through the trained intuition. Mainstream science often overlooks the participation of the mind in perception – for example, in the case of vision, pure sensory experience only gives rise to a set of blotches and shadings. It is the coalescing of the idea of, say, chair-ness or dog-ness with the senses that enables us to 'see' a chair or a dog. In Goethean science, the participation is much more evident. It commences with active looking at a phenomenon, for example, the different stages of a dandelion's growth, followed by visualising what has been observed in as much detail as possible entirely in the imagination (Bortoft, 1996, p. 42). Goethe called this pivotal stage 'exact sensorial imagination,' which I will abbreviate to ESI. With discipline and practice, moving back and forth between sensory contact and ESI, the Goethean scientist develops a sufficiently receptive and intuitive space within themselves to allow, in this case, the dandelion to reveal its essential nature, its 'ur-phenomenon' (Seamon, 1998, p. 4).

Bortoft is at pains to point out that it is not being poetic or metaphorical to talk of the phenomenon revealing itself through the intuitive awareness of the 'observer.' It requires a shift in the *mode* of consciousness of the observer, not simply the *contents* of consciousness, in order for the observer's intuition to be the 'apparatus' through which the phenomenon reveals itself as 'ur-phenomenon.' It is a view of a truly participative universe, not in some vague sense of quantum theory in which the act of observing a particle changes it, but in the active engagement of the Goethean scientist developing his or her imaginative and intuitive capacities to the point where scientist and phenomenon, knower and known, become part of the wholeness of nature (Bortoft, 1996, p. 109).

By failing to take account of the active function of the mind in perception, the analytical scientist can only be an onlooker onto the world and regard imagination and intuition as entirely subjective. Bortoft presents Goethe's work as a new way of doing science altogether:

The science [of Goethe] which belongs to the intuitive mind and the holistic mode of consciousness can reveal aspects of the phenomena of nature which *must* be invisible to the verbal-intellectual mind and the analytical mode of consciousness... To be able to see the other aspects there would need to be a transformation of science itself. But this needs a transformation of the scientist. The result of such a transformation would be a radical change in our awareness of the relationship between nature and ourselves (Bortoft, 1996, p. 115, italics in original).

Therefore, *bildung*, the schooling of intuitive faculties in the scientist, becomes paramount. New perceptual capacities, starting with ESI, must be developed, but the words 'transformation of consciousness' should not be taken to imply a mysterious or inaccessible process – it is a systematic schooling that does not require any particular ability other than perseverance and the willingness to question old modes of consciousness such as the 'perception' that the world is made up of separate objects independent of the observer. The connection with the concept of natural attitude immediately becomes apparent – the natural attitude prevents the scientist from developing the capacities needed to undertake Goethe's way of science. In fact, Goethe can be described as a 'proto-phenomenologist,' even though he predates the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, by over a century (Seamon 1998, p. 9).⁴

I was greatly stimulated by the scope of Henri's work. It presented a whole new way to approach science as well as a challenging way of understanding fundamental life issues. 'Meaning' is not that which is disclosed by stepping back from a situation or text for an answer, but by immersion in the parts, each of which contains the whole, indistinctly like a hologram. An idea is not a kind of entity that forms the contents of the mind, but an active organising principle, such as the idea of 'chair' that makes it possible to gather sensory data and recognise a chair – in some ways the opposite of Locke's 'idea' that there is such a thing as an abstracted ideal chair. Language is not primarily the labelling or representation of things, but that which discloses meaning, in which the world itself can be understood as literally

being a nonverbal language to be read intuitively.

I was very grateful to David for providing me with Isis' vivid account of applying Goethean science to accompany Henri's theoretical excursions. She begins her paper with a clear outline of the four stages of sensing and intuiting a phenomenon that proceed from close sensed perception to imagining the phenomenon in flux to allowing it to reveal its essential nature to finally being of service. Importantly, she characterises this description as 'the ideal situation' (Brook 1998, p. 51) and contrasts it with the difficulties of applying it in practice. The example she provides is a group workshop that commences a Goethean study of landscape over a weekend on some land in the Lammermuir Hills in Scotland. As she tells the story of the workshop, it becomes clear that the four stages are not so separable in practice, and it is not easy to tell to what extent the perceptions and intuited expressions of the phenomenon come from the place itself or the preconceptions of the observer. This is hard to resolve in a group context and has implications for the vexed question of intervention or preservation of a particular feature of the landscape on the basis of the Goethean study.

The potentialities and the difficulties of using Goethe's way of science in my place-based teaching presented themselves at the same time. What if I could get students to the point where they saw themselves as the means by which their chosen place discloses itself? That they were participating in the further co-evolution of the life of the place and of themselves? These possibilities took place responsiveness into another realm of experience and understanding. First I needed to learn these abilities myself. Then could I possibly equip students with the necessary capacities to undertake ESI on their own within the structure of a one-semester subject? What if I merely conveyed the enthusiasm for such possibilities and received back at the end of the semester the students' written enthusiasm ungrounded in patient observation and experience?

Although my head was buzzing with questions, I was unable to see Henri or Isis for another month. Inspired by Henri's vision and encouraged by Isis' example and her 'user-friendly' descriptions of the methods of Goethean science, I attempted to apply them at Lamorna, a place on the Cornish coast where I was staying. Each day for a week, I travelled down to a heather-covered slope rising up from the sea and looking out towards The Lizard, a long promontory finger parallel to Lands End, pointing south. Clutching my copy of Henri's book, Isis' paper and a collection of other writings on Goethean science,⁵ I felt myself to be embarking on the next

stage of my theoretic journey. David Seamon, having put me through the rigours of the first 'station' on my journey, pointed the way to the next station, but before I could enter, I had to wait 'at the entrance' and develop my own understanding of what I had been given. I was acutely conscious that I was making a first small step into Goethean science without a guide and without the structure of a series of intensive workshops normally attended by beginners. Still, I could only use the means available to me at the time.

I settled onto a heather-covered granite ledge and recorded my first impressions, the beginning of the first stage of exact sensate perception, noting in my journal that I had surrounded myself with rocks:

Spaciousness, a distant shimmer, continuous movement in the heather because of the wind. Well proportioned granite tor in front of me, neither one monolith nor several separate rocks piled on top of each other...

Embarking upon a 'detailed observation of all of the bare facts of the phenomenon that are available to our ordinary senses' (Brook 1998, p. 53), I spent hours describing the scene as it presented itself to my eyes. It dawned on me that I couldn't really apply the Goethean approach to this entire place. 'Place' is not so much a phenomenon as an infinitely nested set of phenomena – granite, heather, clouds, waves, ravens, tussock grass and so on, each of which could be the subject of the sort of painstaking observations that Goethe undertook. So, I turned my attention to the fifteen-foot high spire of granite closest to me.

Ten minutes taking in every detail of the rock, turn away and draw it from memory. Turn back and compare. I've made the spire pointier than it is, put a clearer seaward face than there actually is. Do it again. And again. Approach the rock, eyes closed, feeling slightly self-conscious, feel the rock with my hands. It doesn't feel like a rock at all, more like a mini-forest of lichen, thick and rough to the touch. Fractures surprisingly deep and warm....

With closed eyes after another sketch, I started to get a feeling for this rock, of its life and presence. Before leaving that afternoon, as I leaned back into the heather, I felt a strange affinity with 'my' rock, exposed and buffeted by the wind. I noticed a Celtic cross carved out of granite facing out to sea, perhaps a memorial to a sailor's passing.

The next stage, exact sensorial fantasy in Isis Brook's terms or ESI in Henri Bortoft's, involves 'perceiving the time-life of the phenomenon,' seeing it as a being with a past and a future and imagining, visualising what these are (Brook 1998, p. 54). Back at my rock in what I now called 'Watcher's Cove,' I quickly found that I could not look at the rock in isolation – clues about its past and future were all around me. When I projected backwards in time, the fractures became shallower, the lichen receded, the slope became steeper and sharper – just like the cliffs that plunged straight down into the cove on my far right. When I moved forward in time, the fissures broke the rock into blocks that fell away, the lichen completely covered them, this then in turn gave way to grassy slopes with patches of heather and bracken, just like the ground in the curved centre of the cove. Back and then forward, the cliff became my rocky place, then became a small heather-covered undulation. The movement from the right-hand edge of the cove eastwards to the centre was a movement in time, maybe millions of years, as well as in space, several hundred yards.

I began to attune to the constant movement of things instead of freezing them into solidity (as this stage invited) (Brook, *ibid*). And what is the quality of this movement? From cliff to undulation, a falling, a folding, a *gentling*. Again, I could not keep my attention on the single rock. To ask about the time-life of the rock as phenomenon is to ask about the movement from west to east in the cove and to bring all of the movements of this place into play. The gulls swooped and settled, the water swelled and stippled, the heather extended and burst forth, the slope in front of me folded and became gentle. All in motion and in different timescapes.

Attending to this interplay of movement all around me, I felt strongly moved myself. I was included in this movement, drawn in, into swooping, swelling and folding. A pair of low-swerving swifts burst around the rock, startling me. The wind picked up speed as I sat with pounding heart, feeling a part of and yet apart from this place.

I realised as I consulted my notes later that I had accidentally moved into an aspect of the third stage, 'seeing in beholding,' in which active perceiving is stilled and the thing is allowed to express itself through, or I would say *within*, the observer (Brook 1998, p. 56). The phenomenon reveals its 'gesture,' that expression of its essential nature, through receptivity on the part of the observer rather than the active perception of the previous stages. This is the key shift in the mode of consciousness, the transformation into intuitive consciousness that Bortoft (1996) referred to. The 'gesture' is towards the quintessential nature of the thing, the 'ur-phenomenon.'

As I walked down the narrow dark declivity of the path to Watcher's Cove the next morning, my mind whirled as I reviewed my field notes and the texts. Whatever had happened yesterday had been unintentional, not the result of attending to one entity or another, though it had started with the rock tor. How could a place have a single gesture as it is inhabited by a host of beings – heather, moss, rock, cliff, sea, grass, swifts, gulls and so on, all of which have their own gesture? And yet focusing on the time-life of one thing, the rock tor (which itself is not one thing, but a composite of minerals, lichen, moss and innumerable insects) took me ineluctably out into the movement across the slope and across time and into the inter-relationships of all things.

Did I now empty myself and sit with receptive awareness attuned to my rock or to the place at large? And just how is this done? My notes for the morning record the following passage:

*The rock has a ... gesture. The place itself has a ... gesture?
Cannot be directly sought – comes through inspiration, through the felt sense. Definitely feeling an affinity with the Cove now that's different.
The morning is the stillest it's been. The sun off the sea is blinding. I feel welcomed ...*

*Sit with me
Just sit*

Yes...

I felt moved in a strange way. I noticed the brilliance of the sea; it was metallic, like mercury, shining and elusive. Suddenly, it *became* mercury, no longer water at all, something viscous and thick. And then the dark brown rock at the base of the cliff became something else as well. No longer solid, but flowing back and forth, breathing. Giving and receiving. Dazed, not quite understanding what I was seeing, I watched as the ocean waves congealed and the rock began moving, breathing, inside me as well as 'out there.' Was this gesture or hallucination? There was no denying the power of the experience or that a shift in perception had occurred, but was this a shift in consciousness? How could I tell?

After lunch I settled down again, holding the rounded, lichen-covered mass of my rock in the foreground and the shore of the cove in the

background. The sun was lower now, burning a path of molten metal from the horizon to the shore. I tried to shift my focus back to the rock, but the force of the sun was insistent. There was a line of waves pulsing in towards shore, crested with light.

Suddenly, there was a reversal in flow and I saw little arrowheads of light streaming out to sea from the shoreline rocks, in rapid fashion like the neon lights of Times Square where I had been the previous month, flashing in sequence as along Broadway.

Hundreds of streaming, blinking lights, flashing out to sea. It's a shock, I don't know what I'm seeing. All this light, all this energy is streaming out from the rocky point below in ever-increasing arcs. The rock isn't passive, simply receiving the water, it's giving light...

I told myself to get a grip on the situation. I reasoned that when a wave hits a rocky promontory, it is reflected back out to sea. However, I wasn't seeing reflected water, only flashing separate arrowheads of light. They were not strictly arrowhead in shape, but more like two convex curved lines converging to a point. Watching this blinking procession of rounded points proceeding out to the horizon, it came to me that there was something important in this breathing motion, the receiving and giving back. The rocks were apparently inert, receiving the waves that the sea brought in. But I was watching them give back light. The rocks were receiving wind and rain, and over time they were giving themselves back as soil. They received me, sheltered me, made me welcome. Breathing in and out, solid to liquid, liquid to light, rock to soil to life, on a time scale of seconds as well as over millions of years. The important aspect of what the rock gave was that it was not immediately apparent, the gift was hidden, not outwardly visible, requiring a shift in perception.

By the end of the day, I felt confused and yet strangely touched. I needed someone to advise me, and I had only the written descriptions of the process to guide me. What had I 'seen' and what had I imagined? Did the 'gesture' occur within my intuition, or was it a hallucination from enthusiasm and exposure to too much sun and wind? Did this hidden 'giving back' bear any resemblance to 'gesture' in the Goethean sense? Perhaps only loosely, although it was interesting that when my attention moved from the rock out to sea, I was eventually brought back to the qualities of rock.

The final day's journey into the fourth stage was less spectacular. In this

stage, 'being one with the object,' the previous three stages are combined (perception to see the form, imagination to perceive its mutability and inspiration to reveal the gesture) to arrive at how one could be of service to the phenomenon (Brook 1998, p. 56). Sometimes called 'seeing with the heart,' it involves intuiting the responsibility that accompanies coming to know another being from the inside.

That afternoon was still, the air and sea calm after yesterday's tumult. I had a quiet sense of return, coming back at the end of the week to my first perceptions of the shape and touch of the rock, my sketches of it and Watcher's Cove. My understanding of connections between rock, soil and plant across the cove that were also movements in time, the flash of seeing the sea converted into mercury and the rock giving out arcing light were still strongly alive in me. Sitting quietly with the memory of the 'hidden giving back' from the rock, I resisted the temptation to try and recreate the molten metal and streaming lights. I softened my gaze to include 'my' rock in the foreground and the view across the bay to the distant Lizard prone on the horizon. As I relaxed, I felt that 'slight shift,' that drop into a relational space that brought back the feeling of being strangely touched that had come with yesterday's transformation. Visually, there was only a suggestion of what had been so dramatically apparent before, a shimmer of mutability, that the rocks were not simply granite, the sea not simply water. The felt sense of participation in the invisible 'giving back' was there, the sense of how the rocks gave back to the sea, the air, the soil and the plants. And I was not just witnessing it, I was part of that gift myself. Quite simply and unspectacularly, it was evident what my responsibility in this matter was. Having received the 'hidden gift' from the rocks, I must pass it on to others in the best way I could.

It was done. Time to leave Watchers Cove and Cornwall. I paid my last respects to the spire of rock that had been my companion, to the Celtic cross and the unknown mariner, to the sweep of the cove out across to The Lizard, and I wound my way for the last time back up through the dark ravine and the circling ravens.

Attention of the Heart

The next stage of the theoretic journey led me through flat, forested country towards The Wash for the long-awaited meeting with Henri Bortoft. My experiences in Cornwall had added strength to the questions I had for

Henri after reading his book – not only did I see the potential and difficulties of the science of conscious participation in nature, but I felt a responsibility to pass on the gift of my understanding. Months of anticipation was mixed with enthusiasm for his book, the desire to talk of the practicalities of engaging others in this work, and the sobering recognition that one didn't disturb his privacy lightly.

Henri warmed to the subject of how he works with students in introducing the practices of exact sensate imagination. “There are three things that Goethe said really mattered when it came to these practices,” he said with a wry smile. ‘And these are attention, attention, attention.’”

He went on to elaborate the importance of attention to what one is really seeing, attention to presence, attention to exact sensorial imagination itself. He encourages students to talk *from* their experience of a phenomenon rather than *about* the phenomenon. As a teacher, he said, one needed to be able to tell the difference. He offered the general observation that a good teacher develops the intuitive understanding of where a student is speaking from, in a similar manner to the schooling of the intuitive capacity (*bildung*) needed for ESI. If a student says “when I saw the spectrum,” one could tell that they were talking *about* the phenomenon of light using a dualistic concept of spectrum. One doesn't see spectra, only patterns of light. It's often a hesitantly offered feeling, such as “it's probably nothing, but I feel...” that needs to be drawn out, as this is more likely to be coming from the phenomenon itself.

Henri explained the internal movements within the body that accompany the stages of Goethean science. At the beginning, one is recording observations, closing one's eyes and visualising the phenomenon as it appears and as it may evolve over time. This process uses the space *behind the eyes* to draw pictures in the mind and convey them to the page. In taking students through these stages, he encourages a movement down into the space in the chest, the solar plexus, the ‘heart space’. To feel the phenomenon, to be receptive to it expressing itself, requires the development of capacities for felt attention that are accompanied by a shift in bodily attention downwards from head to heart, to an opening in the heart space.

He sympathised with my dilemma of only having several days with students for a process that Goethean scientists take several weeks to introduce, but was not concerned. “Work with the time you have,” he advised, “I do. And don't underestimate the power of beginner's luck. Students can sometimes get hold of it intuitively in a short period of time.”

Hesitantly, I mentioned my experiences with the rocks of Watchers Cove and my concern that they might not be *bona fide* candidates for applying Goethean science. After all, the applications of Goethean science discussed in Seamon and Zajonc (1998) were of growth patterns and developmental forms in plants and animals, not rocks. “Not at all,” he replied. “Goethe himself was very interested in geology – you should read his account of different rock formations he encountered.” Henri went on to describe how he himself had worked very successfully with stones and exact sensorial imagination in his teaching. He had found, in fact, that using stones had an advantage over the leaf forms that are the traditional objects for this type of Goethean science. He said that it was always a surprise, sometimes a shock, for students to find the presence of a rock manifesting within themselves as subject-object boundaries fell away. The power of this recognition was far less for leaves, which, because they are alive and grow, might be supposed to have some form of living presence. For supposedly non-living, inert stones to reveal themselves through ESI was an entirely different matter.

I had been intrigued by Henri’s mention in his book that in Goethean science, the phenomenon itself can be considered to be theory. Invited to elaborate on this notion, he explained that when you make a receptive space for the phenomenon to express itself through you, it “coins itself in thought.” That is, the phenomenon is the source of the idea that expresses itself in human consciousness. The theory, of which this idea is part, therefore originates from the phenomenon, not from mental abstraction, as occurs in mainstream science. What is normally thought of as a scientific theory comes from abstraction from the world of phenomena, generalisation and expression in mathematical form. There is another type of theory that comes from an equally rigorous and systematic process that is participative rather than objective.

I realised that ‘phenomenon as idea’ resonated with something that had previously caught my attention. A colleague of mine who had spent a decade in the Central Australian desert commented that Aboriginal elders with whom he worked thought it strange that ‘whitefellas’ believed that thoughts and ideas came from within peoples’ heads.⁶ As far as they were concerned, thoughts and ideas came from the land itself. This made sense if one considered that the years of initiation and training that a traditional Aboriginal person undergoes to ‘become’ their totem of, for example, wallaby or yam or lightning. The training, done for survival, custodianship and ceremonial purposes, enables them to be in the state where the phenomenon

expresses itself directly within and through them.

Henri's comment on this comparison and one I had made earlier in our conversation about relationships that I saw with Buddhist visualisation practices, was that Goethe's methods had the great advantage of coming from within Western culture. "These techniques are very powerful," he warned, "and if you import them from another culture, there are myriad barriers to overcome and opportunities for misunderstanding, and even pathology." We ended with a discussion of the centrality of inter-cultural dialogue about place relations in Australia and how to engage with the practices of other cultures while being aware of the pitfalls. I left this stage of the journey feeling that the conversation with Henri had opened up that same receptive 'heart-mind space' that the Goethean scientist seeks to have with nature. I'd received invaluable practical guidance, encouragement to follow my own intuition, and a greater understanding and interpretation of the depth and significance of Goethean science.

I also had a jolt to my thinking about what the 'theory' in my theoretic journey was about. If the traditional *theoria* was an arduous journey to a distant shrine followed by return and re-integration into the mundane, then it carried the connotation of an exotic, out-of-the-ordinary experience to be gained at the shrine. While the events at Watchers Cove and the meeting with Henri could conceivably meet this description in one sense, Henri strongly pointed me away from the exotic, the supra-mundane or the lure of another culture. If the phenomenon itself, properly attended to and participated in, *is* the theory, then *any* phenomenon, here, now, is part of the theoretic journey. Even while I was still at the 'distant shrine,' I was being firmly brought back to the phenomena of the mundane everyday world.

Reconsidering the practices

I had one last stage in my overseas journey, to Isis Brook, whose clear descriptions of the Goethean methods had been my guide in Cornwall. The occasion was a 'place week' hosted by Isis at Lancaster University – a gathering of researchers from philosophy, geography, cultural studies, drama, art, and environmental studies, all of whom were interested in the question of place. It was a rich interweaving of presentations and ongoing conversations about the philosophy and practice of place relations and views from the Antipodes.⁷

In between times, relaxing in her welcoming kitchen in central Preston,

Isis quietly elaborated some of the central features of Goethean science as she had been taught it. She confirmed my concerns about the commitment of time to engage properly with the material. The basic course she undertook involved a full three weeks of study and practice, followed by a number of other courses and workshops to develop her capacities further. The practice involved a tremendous amount of time drawing both directly and from memory the same plant over and over again for days at a time. Isis described the commitment involved, how repetitive and at times frustrating it could be to spend days under the guidance of an instructor, drawing the plant form again and again, seeking that simple gesture. “Eventually,” she said, “you do feel the impulse. You do feel something that comes out of your intuition that you need to express.”

I began to understand the word ‘gesture’ differently. Although it reveals itself through the intuition, it is through the very active physical participation of the observer, as the arm and hand repeatedly move the charcoal or pencil, that the gesture slowly appears on the worked and reworked page. It is an embodied process of enactment, moving the hand in initial mimicry of the plant form, then progressively ‘drawing out’ the impulse – an active receptivity rather than a passive one. Isis explained that many different creative vehicles may be used in this stage – clay or sculpture or poetry as well as drawn images.

The importance of plants in Goethean science training became clearer when Isis put me through the beginning exercise of recognising patterns of growth. She gave me a packet of two dozen randomly shuffled images of an annual plant in its various stages of growth and decline and asked me to put them in order. It quickly became apparent that the pattern of leaf development on the stem is not a simple linear one and that one has to get a feeling for an underlying pattern of development of leaf form along the stem in order to put the images in the correct growth order. This was the point of the second stage, she noted, not the passage of time per se, but developing a fluidity of consciousness to be able to see how all forms are in a constant state of flux in a complex way.

I raised my questions about what the gesture of a place might be and how it might be arrived at. She confirmed that it was indeed a very difficult matter. With time and patience, one can arrive at the gesture of a particular plant, and it is true that the same species expresses itself quite differently in different places, which presumably says something about the nature of that place. So is the gesture of the place, if there is such a thing, some sort of composite or essentialisation of the gestures of all beings inhabiting the

place? Is the variation in gesture in, say, a bracken from Place A to Place B necessarily similar to the variation in gesture of a moss between the two places? Is it a worthwhile project to try and find out, given the years of field work it would take to do this thoroughly? I found myself wondering about how similar rock strata express themselves differently in different places. Local conditions of slope, aspect and vegetation affect how the rock outcrops, but is there a more subtle influence of place in the 'gesture' of a particular rock?

I left Lancaster more aware of the complexities, difficulties and subtleties of incorporating Goethean philosophies and practices into place-based education. Clearly, what I had been doing at Watcher's Cove bore only passing resemblance to formal Goethean science. I had done it without an instructor over one week instead of three, had not stayed simply with the one object, had attempted it with rocks that are more difficult to work with than plants, and, most problematically, had arrived at the 'gesture' of the rocks through an involuntary shift in my visual awareness rather than through patient repeated 'drawing out' of the impulse. *Something* had moved me, something had been revealed to me, but whether it could be described as the 'gesture' of the rock, or rocks, in the Goethean sense of 'gesture,' was questionable.

Return

I returned to Australia resolved to do three things – undertake training in Goethean science, introduce some aspects of Goethean science into my classes and personal place relationships, and to teach phenomenology in a more challenging way. These are long-term resolutions; my teaching this year confirmed the contention by Henri and Isis that only a limited introduction to Goethe's way of science is possible within the structure of a normal university subject unless one is very fortunate. I introduced a lecture and a field trip based on Goethean science and received a wide range of responses. Some people clearly didn't get it, found it 'too weird for words' or produced 'gestures' that were obviously preconceived. Others came up with novel and surprising images, and others were so moved by the process that they could barely speak. Yet very few students went beyond generalised expressions of enthusiasm for the process in their written work or carried it through systematically in their weekly place visits.

One of the effects of the overseas visit was to heighten my awareness

of the pitfalls of this sort of experiential work. I became more aware that many students' verbal and written reports contained more enthusiasm than careful observation, more talking *about* the phenomenon than talking *from* the experience of the phenomenon. There were numerous examples of van Manen's 'many temptations' (1990, p.33), such as students settling for 'preconceived opinions and conceptions' and 'self-indulgent preoccupations.' There was also strikingly original, detailed work, but it was the exception.

I have previously written about the tension in place-based education between creating the conditions under which students can open themselves to deeper place experiences and fostering critical social and ecological awareness (Cameron, 2003b). Perhaps another critical awareness needs to be developed in parallel – the self-awareness to be able to critique one's response to place in words and images, to recognise one's own natural attitude at work. David Seamon commented that progress on the natural attitude is best made by collective effort, but this has its tensions and complications as well, as Isis Brook has discovered (Brook, 1998).

Each week in the undergraduate class this year, the students laid out their drawings and journal entries in the middle of the circle, and together we explored the different ways of responding to place and conveying those responses. Once the fear of judgement and unfavourable comparison had been allayed, students learned from their peers' work, guided by my questions and encouragement. It is a delicate matter to handle from a pedagogical point of view. One can carefully point out particular work that demonstrates that the student is engaging with the phenomenon so that other students might indirectly understand that there are 'better' ways of looking and seeing than they are employing. I aim to convey a judicious blend of challenge and positive critique. This is done, however, in an environment in which most students come heavily laden with self-criticism about their capacity to represent what they are seeing. At the other end of the scale, there are those who have great artistic facility and that can be a barrier to representing 'what is there' rather than what looks good on the page as 'art.' These students have a different sort of unlearning to do.

The return to my own dwelling place has been enriched by the encounter with Goethean science. On walks from our home on the edge of the Blue Mountains National Park, I began to notice a low piece of sandstone bedrock rising no more than 15 centimetres above the ground; physically unremarkable, it kept catching my attention. Some mornings it seemed as if it had temporarily halted in the act of flowing down the ridge. In the interim before I could sign up for a formal course in Goethean science, I

decided to go through the stages of the Goethean process with this rock. Since I was introducing my students to this way of working with place, I wanted to be practising it along with them.

This experience has been completely different in feeling from that intense week in Cornwall, more extended and leisurely with none of the dramatic revelation that occurred at Watcher's Cove. The low sandstone blocks in open eucalypt woodland in a confined valley are utterly different from the granite tors jutting out from the expansive windblown Cornish shoreline. Yet there are resonances. In the second session, I suddenly recalled the experience of being at the Cove while I was sketching the rock, turning away and drawing from memory, turning back. I felt the same deep appreciation for these unassuming sandstone bones of the dry Australian landscape that I felt for the sentinel granites of the Cornish coast, for their 'hidden giving-back' in physical and non-physical ways. Whatever the validity of the 'gesture' that was revealed to me in Cornwall, it has changed my attitude towards rocks and their place in nature. Their form of participation in the world is unspectacular, patient and long-lasting. They give constantly – nutrients for plants, shelter for plants and animals, structure to the land, and less obviously, in subtle energetic ways.

The Theoretic Journey

The voyage overseas was indeed arduous, involving challenges to some of my cherished ideals and practices, encountering new and strange ways of relating to the natural world and teaching my students. What of the second element of the theoretic journey, the welcoming of understanding from distant realms back into the home base (Jager, 1983)? Has it been left uncompleted, a theory adrift in abstractions and generalisations? In the obvious sense it has not – I have been able to welcome these understandings back into my own local place practices, and despite the limitations of course structures, have introduced them into my teaching practice. In another sense, though, the depth of the worldview imparted to me by Henri, David and Isis, the sharp challenges of the natural attitude and experienced accuracy, and the rigorous following-through of Goethean practice and *bildung*, remain 'adrift.' These are ways of understanding and experiencing the world that can only partially be brought into the modern university and indeed into most modern lives. To what extent can I create the sort of learning environment where people feel safe enough to acknowledge feelings of placelessness

and inadequacy of place response, while stimulating them to critical self-awareness of the limits of their perception, and also to foster critical social and ecological awareness? These remain open questions for me.

The whole notion of the theoretic journey itself was not left untouched, either. While with David Seamon, I questioned its validity as an imposed narrative, Henri imparted to me that the phenomenon attentively engaged *is* the theory, and one need not travel to distant places, with the inherent dangers of exoticism, to encounter the phenomenon-as-theory. Indeed, fine work applying Goethean science to understanding Australian plants has been done quite locally (Hoffman, 1998). Yet it was only by travelling overseas that I was able to return to a new way of participating with nature that was available locally. The theoretic journey became the journey into the phenomenon itself, into the nature of rocks and my participation with them and how I might convey that to others. That is a lifetime's journey.

Acknowledgements

This story is but one layer of the richly interwoven journey that I shared with my partner Victoria King. It was through her that I met David and Henri, and her interests in displacement continue to intersect with my passion for place.

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Notes

¹ I am indebted to Stephen Segal for bringing this view of theory and Jager's work to my attention.

² For a more detailed description of my teaching practices, see Cameron (2001 & 2003b).

³ Students are required to select a place within walking distance of their home that accords with their original purpose in taking the subject, and to spend half a day per week in that place.

⁴ There are some differences of method and approach between Goethe and the leading

phenomenologists, but these are not of significance for this paper (see Seamon 1998).

⁵ Seamon and Zajonc (1998).

⁶ Craig San Roque (personal communication). For an elaboration of some of the concepts and practices arising from this experience, see Cameron and San Roque (2003).

⁷ Also present from Australia were eco-philosopher Val Plumwood and artist Victoria King.

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