



Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter

Vol. 13, No. 3

ISSN 1083-9194

www-personal.ksu.edu/~triad

Fall 2002

This issue completes *EAP*'s 13th year. We thank several readers who responded to our request for contributions by sending us material. We are still short essays, especially, for future issues. If you or colleagues or students have something you would like us to consider, please send it our way!

Most generally, the theme of this issue of *EAP* might said to be "seeing," whether places, things of nature, or the world in broader terms. First, systems analyst Eric Malhere explores the shifting "spirit of place" of a small pear orchard in his changing home village in France.

Next, undergraduate student Micah Issitt provides a penetrating discussion of the limitations of a conventional scientific account of nature and contrasts its approach with efforts to understand nature phenomenologically.

Last, teacher and writer Laurel Thompson presents her remarkable efforts to break free from an habitual vantage point and see the things of the world as they are in perception before representation and language have revised and reduced them.

Note this is the last *EAP* for 2002, and we include a renewal form for 2003. Please respond as soon as

possible so there will be fewer second reminders to stuff in the first 2003 issue. We thank you in advance for your loyal support. We could not continue without your interest and financial help.

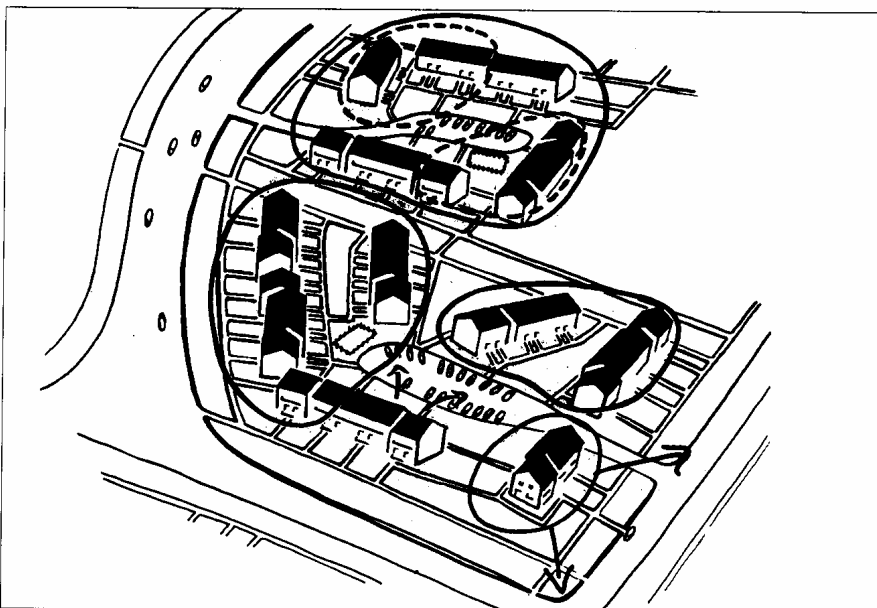
PPS REPRINTS WILLIAM WHYTE

We are happy to report that one of the most significant books on making place in the city has just been reprinted. William Whyte's invaluable *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Conservation Foundation, 1980) has been re-issued by the Project for Public Spaces, the research group on urban open space Whyte was instrumental in founding in 1975.

As we reported in the spring 2002 issue of *EAP*, there has also been published a collection of Whyte's writings (*The Essential William H. Whyte*, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), and we hope to provide in-depth coverage of these works in a future *EAP*. Whyte's work is an excellent example of understanding how the material and designable environments can contribute to human well being.

PPS is a nonprofit organization offering technical assistance, research, education, and design services. Its mission is "to create and sustain public places that build communities." Besides Whyte's book, PPS also offers many other publications including *Getting Back to Place: Using Streets to Rebuild Communities* (1996); and *How to Turn a Place Around: A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces* (2000). PPS, 153 Waverly Place, 4th floor, NY, NY 10014; 212-620-5660; www.pps.org.

Early in his writing career, William Whyte became interested in how the designed environment contributed to daily life. The drawing, left, "What Makes a Court Clique," is from a 1953 *Fortune* article in which Whyte examined socializing patterns in Park Forest, Illinois, at the time one of America's newest suburbs. From *The Essential William Whyte*, p. 37.



ITEMS OF INTEREST

Gaston Bachelard: Matter, Dream, and Thought is a symposium sponsored by the **Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture**, to be held 1-3 November 2002 in Dallas. One of the seminal thinkers of the 20th century, Bachelard, in his writings, “spanned scientific method and poetic image, architectural form and psychological space, reason and reverie, matter and memory, phenomenology and lyricism.” This symposium brings together depth psychologists, translators, philosophers, writers, artists, literary critics, and poets who have been influenced by Bachelard’s work. Speakers include J. Larry Allums, Edward Casey, James Hillman, and Robert Sardello, and Gail Thomas. Dallas Institute, 2719 Routh Street, Dallas, Texas 75201. 214-871-2440; www.dallasinstitute.org.

The **Institute for Deep Ecology** is developing week-long courses in natural settings to learn about the ecology of places. One site will be California’s Joshua Tree National Park. The institute also sponsors public programs on deep ecology, including educational initiatives. IDE, PO Box 1050, Occidental, CA 95465; ide@igc.org; www.deep-ecology.org.

Spirit of Trees is a conference about “deepening connections with trees and nature.” The event is sponsored by the Findhorn Foundation and the Scottish Forestry Commission and will be held 5-12 October 2002 at the intentional community Findhorn in northern Scotland. +44 (0) 1309-691-933; conference@findhorn.org; www.findhorn.org.

Eco News is the newsletter of the British **Ecological Design Association**. The most recent issue focuses on “Sustainable aesthetics.” EDA, The British School, Slad Road, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 1QW United Kingdom; www.10up.org.

The **Ecosa Institute** offers in-depth intensive semesters in sustainable design. “Generally Sustainable Architecture has ignored the aesthetic while concentrating on the practical. The goal of the Ecosa program is to blend the aesthetic and the environmental/social aspects of architecture together in new ways.” A. Brown, Ecosa Institute, 123 E.

Goodwin St, Prescott, AZ 86303. 928-541-1002; www.ecosainstitute.org; ecosa@mwaz.com.

The **Forum on Religion and Ecology** examines environmental questions from the perspective of the world’s major religions. The aim is a dialogue among students of religion, science, economics, ethics, education, and public policy. <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion>.

Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences is an interdisciplinary, international journal serving as a forum to explore the intersections between phenomenology, empirical science, and analytic philosophy of mind. The aim is a “bridge between continental phenomenological approaches and disciplines not always aware of or open to the phenomenological contribution to understanding cognition and peoples’ intellectual world and experience.” Prof. S. Gallagher, Philosophy Dept., Canisius College, Buffalo, NY 14208; gallaghr@canisius.edu.

The **Journal of Urban Design** is a scholarly international journal advancing theory, research, and practice in urban design. Topics of interest include urban aesthetics and townscape, sustainable development, urban regeneration, practice and implementation, urban structure and form, local and regional identity. Prof. M. Southworth, Depart. of City & Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1850; msouthw@ced.berkeley.edu.

The program in Executive Education at the Harvard Design School will offer a series of seminars on **Post-Industrial Restoration Redevelopment**, 4-8 November 2002. The focus is the restoration and redevelopment of “brown fields and gray waters”—“land and water bodies that, by virtue of their past industrial production uses, are now physically degraded, environmentally disturbed, and chemically contaminated.” Restoration development is defined as “redevelopment, reuse, or retrofit projects that improve the value and livability of the urban environment while also effectively restoring natural processes and functions.” 1033 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138 (866-GSD-EXED; execed@gsd.harvard.edu).

WEBSITE ON SPACE AND PLACE

Philosopher Bruce Janz sends word of a new website he has created on "research on space and place." He hopes it will provide a research tool for those who work on the concept of place across a broad range of disciplines. The webpage address is:

<http://www.augustana.ca/~janzb/place/>.

Philosophy Dept., Augustana University College,
4901 46 Ave., Camrose, Alberta T4V 2R3
CANADA.780-679-1524; janzb@augustana.ca.

CITATIONS RECEIVED

Charles Bergman, 2002. "Academic Animals: Making Nonhuman Creatures Matter in Universities," in *Isle*, 9 (1):141-47.

A superb essay saying much about a phenomenology of animals and their lifeworlds. Bergman writes: "In academic discourses we continue to have trouble speaking about animals in ways that are not dismissive or reductive. For many scientists, the danger is to treat them as Cartesian automatons, not autonomous creatures. Their behaviors are explained by instincts, stimulus-response mechanisms, or genetic programming.

"For humanists, the tendency is to treat animals as little more than allegories of human fear and desire. Or the animal is given up as radically unknowable beneath human representation.....

"It's not that these views are wrong....It's that they each treat animals as though they have no lives of their own. They are treated as if they live somehow outside their own lives, moved by forces over which they have no control, forces that are somehow not them. Denied mind and subjectivity and agency, they are living robots. Their lives are wholly contingent. In what ways can we begin to represent animals that responsibly place them inside their own lives?"

Paul Cloke & Owain Jones, 2001. "Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset," in *Environment and Planning A*, 33 (4):649-66.

These authors develop "the concept of dwelling as a means of theorizing place and landscape." The aim is "a more critical appreciation of dwelling in the context of an orchard in Somerset [England]...researched as a place of hybrid constructions of culture and nature."

Alain Corbin, 2000. *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*. NY: Columbia Univ. Press.

This French historian uses campanarian literature, or the tradition of writing on bells, to present a history and anthropology of the senses. The result is a mapping of the balance of the senses in 19th-century France.

John M. Hull, 1997. *On Sight & Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness*. Oxford: One World.

A personal journey of discovery and exploration into the nature of blindness by a person himself blind.

Kenneth Kolson, 2001. *Big Plans: The Allure and Folly of Urban Design*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

This political scientist is concerned with the way that large-scale plans and designs "give expression to the fantasies of their creators and fire the imaginations of those who receive, or "consume" them.... I will argue that these images tend to overstate the role of reasonability in human affairs, even as they implicitly concede... the power of forces that are profoundly subrational, even instinctual."

James C. McKusick, 2000. *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

This student of literature takes to task those "who challenge the ecological bona fides of English Romantic authors and those who trivialize their influence on American environmental writers." Wordsworth, for example, is located within "a bioregional consciousness, an attitude and ethic linked to the poet's critique of rampant industrialism and his defense of untrammeled public lands."

Lawrence J. Vale & Sam Bass Warner, Jr., eds., 2001. *Imaging the City: Continuing Struggles and New Directions*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research.

These 16 essays focus on "images that are now at work in our cities." The editors emphasize the following questions: "What images are being advanced, and who is proposing them? What happens when images come into conflict?" Contributors include Briavel Holcomb ("Place Marketing: Using Media to Promote Cities"); Henry Jenkins ("Tales of Manhattan: Mapping the Urban Imagination Through Hollywood Film"); Anne Beamish ("The City in Cyberspace"); & Lawrence J. Vale and Julia R. Dobrow ("Urban Images in Children's Television").

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Ryan Drum, phycologist and medical herbalist, writes that he continues to divide his life between an island in the Pacific northwest and a remote part of Vermont. He is running a number of workshops

and can be contacted at drum@eartheducation.com. Or Partner Earth Education Center, 1525 Danby Mountain Road, Danby, Vermont 05739.

PLACE AND EXPERIENCE

The fall 2001 issue of EAP mentioned the publication of an important philosophical discussion on place—Australian philosopher J.E. Malpas's Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Drawing on philosophical and literary sources, Malpas argues that place is a primary ontological structure of human life, drawing together self and other, space and time, subjectivity and objectivity. As a warning to the more practical among us, let it be said at once that the book is dense, difficult—philosophical.

We hope to provide a review of Malpas's book in a future EAP. For the moment, because of its importance to environmental phenomenology and to give readers a sense of style and content, we provide a few excerpts.

Malpas's definition of place: ...an open and interconnected region within which other persons, things, spaces and abstract locations, and even one's self, can appear, be recognized, identified and interacting with.

But in 'grasping' such a region, it is not a matter of the subject grasping something of which the acting, experiencing creature is independent—such a region or place does not simply stand ready for the gaze of some observing subject. Rather... the structure at issue encompasses the experiencing creature itself and so the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place.

Something similar might be said of the idea of objectivity also—at least inasmuch as the idea of objectivity is understood as referring to that which can be present to a subject, rather than to mere physical existence (p. 36).

[My interest is] not so much in place as experienced, but rather in the way in which place can be viewed as a structure *within which* experience (and action, thought and judgment) is possible" (p. 71).

...the significance of place should not be construed as just a contingent feature of human psychology or biology, but instead as rooted in the very structure that makes possible experience or thought of the sort that is exemplified in the human...

The sense, then, in which identity is tied to place (and so to a spatio-temporal realm in which persons and things can be encountered and a world

can be grasped) is not just the sense in which a sense of identity might be tied up with a certain 'emotional reminiscence', but derives from the way in which the very character of subjectivity, in the general and the particular, and the very content of our thoughts and feelings, is necessarily dependent on the place and places within which we live and act (p. 188).

...the project pursued here need not be viewed as in any way incompatible with other projects that attempt to fill out more particular, especially socio-cultural, features of our relation to place, although it may well be viewed as providing a framework within which some of those projects can be more readily defined and oriented.

This later point suggests that there is at least one respect in which this book might be seen to have significance for certain issues concerning the 'politics' of place. In such contemporary discussion, place is a notion that has been viewed with a great deal of suspicion as a romantic affectation or as arising out of some sedentary conservatism.

But, if the arguments of the preceding pages are taken seriously, then place can neither be dismissed in this way nor can it be unproblematically taken to give support to any particular form of conservatism. The complex structure of place, its resistance to any simple categorization or characterization, its encompassing of both subjective and objective elements, its necessary interconnection with agency, all suggest that the idea of place does not

so much bring a certain politics with it, as define the very frame within which the political itself must be located.

It is only from out of a grasp of that place within which the political can arise that we can

even begin to think about the possibility of a politics that would do justice to our existence as fundamentally an existence in and through place (p. 198).

THE SPIRIT OF PLACE IN *LES MONTS DE SARCELLES*

Eric Malhere

Malhere is a systems technician for the French Railways' Automatic Train Protection System. He lived the first thirty years of his life in Groslay, the changing French village he describes here. He is interested in conceptual ways to describe systems holistically, including the approach of Goethean science. He is also interested in ways whereby the lived nature of places, both natural and humanly made, can be described and understood. emalhere@free.fr. © 2002, Erik Malhere.

Each particular place is the continuously evolving expression of a highly complex set of forces—inanimate and living—which become integrated into an organic whole. [Human beings are] one of these forces, and probably the most influential; [their] interventions can be creative and lastingly successful if the changes [they] introduce are compatible with the intrinsic attributes of the natural system [they try] to shape. The reason we are now desecrating nature is not because we use it to our ends, but because we commonly manipulate it without respect for the spirit of place—René Dubos, A God Within (1972).

In the last two decades, there have been many factors that have changed the identities of living places in the periphery of French cities and towns—for example, urban development, highway construction, and agricultural lands becoming suburbs.

The example on which I focus is my childhood village of Groslay, now a suburban town of some 8,000 inhabitants, about 10 miles north of Paris. Thirty years ago Groslay was still a village surrounded by pear and apple trees and peony fields. These cultivations were the heart of the village economy and the pride of its inhabitants. Today, most of the cultivation has disappeared, replaced by suburban development. The former farmers are retired or deceased. The last bits of testimony to this place's past are street names—for example, *Pear Tree Street*—and a festival name—the annual *Feast of the Peony*.

Here, I want to describe one particular pear orchard that was for me a very important childhood place—*Les monts de Sarcelles*. From the vast local area of pear orchards composed of *Les Glaisières*, *Les champs St Denis* and *Les monts de Sarcelles*, only the last remains, still partly cultivated. *Les Glaisières* has been totally destroyed by massive building, and *Les champs St Denis* will be developed soon. I played in *Les monts de Sarcelles* as a child, and the place was a teenage refuge. Today, when I return to Groslay, this orchard is still a place where I go to ponder life.

Les monts de Sarcelles covers approximately 25 hectares and is surrounded by a railway to the north and a highway—the N1—to the west, on the other side of which is the main portion of Groslay. To the south is a local road and to the east is 1970s public housing. The geographical particularity of *Les monts de Sarcelles* is its hilltop placement, though, from inside the orchard, the pear trees hide the surrounding railway and roads.

The immediate and important thing you notice during a walk in *Les monts de Sarcelles* is the tranquility of the place in contrast to the activity of Groslay. The peace of the orchard provides a time to slow down, to take a breath, to look out toward the distant hills of La Chataigneraie in Montmorency or, in the opposite direction, to the hills of La Butte Pinçon in Montmagny. You can approach the pear trees, see the form of their branches, and touch their

bark. If you really take time to slow down and forget yourself, you feel a sense of wholeness.

One of my most pleasant experiences is to move in the orchard with my eyes closed and to feel the spatial structure of the place as an extension of my own body. The more I know the orchard, the more I can focus my feelings towards qualities of color, light, smell, and season. In these moments, I am sometimes able to feel a total and indivisible connection between the place and me.

When you enter *Les monts de Sarcelles* today, it is sad to see the orchards lying fallow. I recently met Mr. Gerard, a retired farmer; and Mr. Séguin, Groslay's deputy mayor.

Mr. Gerard is one of the witnesses from a time when the link between natural resources and the work of people was strong. The professional solidarity and the work of the soil with one's hands made this time the richest and the most shared for the local people. Mechanization, difficulties attracting farm labor, European Common Market rules, pollution from the nearby Charles De Gaulle airport, a dramatic increase in fruit stolen just before the harvest—these are some of the many factors upsetting the symbiosis between people and this place.

Mr Séguin welcomed me to explain his views about *les monts de Sarcelles*, which he hates to see lost but knows no alternative. Money, he says, is the key factor: the expansion of the economic life of the town keeps taxes down and attracts new residents.

I remember reading political arguments regarding moderate expansion during the last local political campaign, which may be true from year to year but not over the long term. What about maintaining place character? In the last fifteen years, three of the four fields around my parents' house have disappeared, replaced by one school, two supermarkets and accompanying car parks. Groslay is now a dormitory town.

Though *Les monts de Sarcelles* is far from what it used to be, I still feel a powerful sense of place there when I visit. That sense of place is dying but is still persistent. I'm sure others can feel this sense of place—some set of experienced qualities that directly emanates from the place itself and is received by us human beings. The problem is making this sense of place real for outsiders and getting more insiders, especially politicians and policy-makers,

willing to stand up for and to protect this sense of place.

Of course, Deputy Mayor Séguin is proud to speak of the idea of a park in some corner of Groslay but devoted to walking and gardening and not to the pear orchards. But this idea is part of the problem. Rather, the need is to protect living identities of places like *Les monts de Sarcelles*—places little remembered by anyone except the oldest inhabitants who know the real needs and possibilities of such places.

When I make a list of the qualities that describe *Les monts de Sarcelles*, I write: *earth, soil, mud, pear trees, path, vegetables, breath, open field, green, light, seasonal, arboriculturist, walkers, runners, painters, dreamers, poets, children, family, dogs, rabbits, flowers, colors, parcel, silence, life, part of local history, fruit, wind in the leaves, herbs...*

This list demonstrates the loss already of many of the attributes that make *Les monts de Sarcelles* what it is. The list also points to the place's complete elimination if the orchard is replaced by yet more supermarkets, car parks, and other development.

I'm not against the idea of change but somehow there must be a better way to balance what we have with what we might have. Today, we fail to convince people like the Deputy Mayor to protect *Les monts de Sarcelles* because we fail to find an alternative to the destruction of place.

It would be a wrong and impossible to relive the past, but the alternative is to maintain some potential of a place's living system. In the most predictable scenario, we would keep a small portion of the place somewhere as a kind of living conservatory, but this probably can't happen to *Les monts de Sarcelles*, which is too much a strategic location for large-scale development in the next ten years.

For sure, the global economy has a profound impact on local scale. It is pitiful to see locally the exponential increase in traffic, pollution, waste, especially with something so small scale and fragile as *Les monts de Sarcelles*. A lot of energy disappeared with the destruction of local systems, and now we fill that gap through intensifying globalization.

Last spring I left my Paris region to live in Burgundy with my girlfriend who comes from Lyon. No great homesickness in my case, partly because the pain of losing my home place had been constant

for the last ten years because of the creeping development. In a way, I had already lost my place. I still love *Les monts de Sarcelles*, which I see like a much-loved elderly person: Our relationship is rich but it is hard to admit the beloved's suffering.

Spirit of place symbolizes the living ecological relationship between a particular location and the per-

sons who have derived from it and added to it the various aspects of their humanness. No landscape, however grandiose or fertile, can express its full potential richness until it has been given its myth by the love, works and arts of [human beings]—René Dubos (1972).

TRIALS OF A NASCENT PHENOMENOLOGIST

Micah L. Issitt

Issitt is a biology major at the University of Missouri in St. Louis. He is interested in phenomenological approaches to nature and environmental issues, particularly Goethean science. In the future, we will be publishing some of his field essays dealing with real-world experiences and understandings of the natural world. To suggest the perceptive power of the kind of observation he argues for here, we include a description he wrote of a swarm of locust in a cornfield. Micah.issitt@mobot.org. © 2002, Micah Issitt.

Every time I read an *EAP* newsletter, one thing that always strikes me is the way in which each article represents the peculiar way that phenomenology has influenced the thoughts of the author. These articles are nodes on a chain of influence that flow across the pages of this publication because we all share a common bond of ideas and experiences. When I read them, I feel connected to the author through the activity of these shared ideas. At this point in my life, my own experience with phenomenology can be characterized as an illustration of incompleteness.

I am a senior biology major at the University of Missouri, in Saint Louis. Ever since I was a young child, I wanted to be out among the animals, to experience the wild life. As I got older, I felt that the best path would be to obtain an education in biology and to pursue a career as a field biologist.

At most universities, a college education in biology means learning a kind of scientific gospel, and then regurgitating it like so much half-digested pulp in the form of papers, research projects, and standardized testing. I have learned to quantify, reduce, intellectualize, and separate the world around me into sets of principles. I have learned that everything is a macroscopic product of infinitesimal calculations performed at the physical level. Nature is taught as wholly intelligible, and quantifiable, and also as wholly un-whole.

I have often felt an inchoate dissatisfaction with my scientific education and with much scientific thought in general. Somehow, the more I studied scientific principles, the further I felt from my goal of experiencing animal life. All of this changed when I was introduced to the active idea of phenomenology.

A few years ago, while doing some recreational reading in philosophy, I came across a short introduction to Husserl in one of my metaphysics books. Being curious, I decided to get a book about phenomenology. There began the chain of influence that has led me to my current state of being, and eventually to the words that I am writing now.

In phenomenology I have found a satisfying resolution to my educational dissonance. Much of my dissatisfaction with formal education stems from the science community's expository style, and from largely unstated assumptions about the nature of the interaction between the scientist and the subject.

I have come to understand that my formal education in science has been skewed toward one particular way of looking at nature. The reductive and quantitative measurements of modern science suddenly seemed to be remarkably impoverished. Just like a physical object is never wholly disclosed to the senses, the body of science cannot be fully described by any one perspective.

Ever since I became acquainted with phenomenology, my educational experience has been transformed. When I am listening to my professors' lectures or reading class material, I am now acutely aware of its incompleteness. I have learned to see how the vision of science is limited and why there is an unsatisfying aspect to "objective" claims about the universe.

As I said earlier, I have always wanted to be out among the animals and experience their world. Phenomenology has given me a way to study nature from inside of its indeterminate boundaries, rather than as an outsider, impossibly removed from its dynamic behaviors.

Young scientists are taught to doubt their senses, to dismiss their own entrance into the world. In sum, we are told that we must remove ourselves

from nature to understand it. Most students accept this—after all, the arguments seem strong, and we spend our careers attempting to control and quantify the world.

I have found that this path will not satisfy my experience. When I look at nature in this way, through the eye of the microscope, I feel alienated from its richness. The piece that is missing is nothing less than myself.

These days my teachers often have no idea what I am talking about, and many have dismissed my ideas as mere "subjectivism," but I feel a much more satisfying attachment to my future. Phenomenology has become a portal for my passage, from the cold scriptoria of my university back to the fields and forests where I first felt the desire to experience and understand.

A MOMENTARY FLASH OF WINGS

Last semester while studying animal behavior, I was watching some locust fly away from me in a cornfield. As a swarm took to the air, I was shocked to see that the underside of their wings was colored a brilliant yellow.

Again and again as I walked slowly into the cornfield I would see the momentary flash of their wings. My first thought was to ask one of my teachers why they possessed these colors or perhaps to look it up in my textbook. Then it occurred to me—why not take this opportunity to use the methods I had learned from reading Goethean phenomenology?

I attempted to suspend thought about evolutionary mechanisms and possible adaptive significance and to simply experience the phenomenon as many times as I could. I proceeded to walk slowly around the cornfield dipping into it at various places to startle the locust.

After trying this about fifty times, I went home and sat for awhile trying to picture what I had seen in my mind. Over the course of the next two weeks I repeated the experiment at least five times, each time followed by periods of meditative imagination. After a time I could picture the little aviators alighting from the stalks of the corn and flashing their golden wings, and then swiftly landing on a corn leaf.

It was in my imagination that I noticed a crucial detail of their pattern; each time one of the locust landed on a leaf it would immediately close its wings and turn sideways with respect to its line of flight. In my imagination I could picture the whole procedure, first the flashing fervent wings and then the cryptically colored insect motionless on a leaf.

Trusting my imagination and the communication of the insects' actions, I began to see a message in the pattern. The pattern was a lie. The beating fervent wings of the insect were a costume, shouting at me in movement and position and color, "This is what I look like!" This energetic signal was followed always by the silent whisper of its body on the leaf, colored as the leaf was, and turned so that its body shape fit along the contour of the plant's body.

Things Are Not Us But They Are Like Us

Laurel Thompson

Thompson is a public school teacher in Denver, Colorado and has been studying the relationship between language and perception for many years. This essay is based on material from "Where Am I? An Inquiry into the Deeper Reaches of Perception," a book manuscript in which she explores the possibility that language can be temporarily transcended. We would like to thank Aina Barten for letting us know about Thompson's work. c4181@mindspring.com. © 2002, Laurel Thompson.

All that can be seen, heard, experienced—these are what I prefer.—Heracleitus

It's been a while since anyone declared that ordinary things like cups and shoes and plastic bags or rocks have magical powers with the capacity to enlighten us about the universe. Initiates to the Eleusinian Mysteries knew that ears of grain symbolized the fertility of the earth. And religions have always had sacred objects—shrouds, masks, menorahs—that had hallowed significance for their followers.

But it wasn't until 1945, when Heidegger uncovered what he called "the fourfold"—earth and sky, divinities and mortals, the different dimensions in which things exist—that someone realized the benefits of not treating the hats and shovels and cardboard boxes around us in the usual way as "objects" but rather of perceiving them as fellow subjects, as indicators, as compasses, to the extravagant phenomenon we are in.

This awakening to the mysterious nature of the furniture of our lives was not an isolated incident. It heralded a shift in consciousness that still continues as more and more people learn to "dwell" on earth.

I didn't know anything about Heidegger when I started experimenting with perception back in 1963. I was a Science major at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, an 18-year-old intellectual hobo obsessed with "seeing" because my family had recently decamped to Jamaica and I was still recovering from the shock of moving from a quiet, well-organized, Canadian suburb to a beautiful, life-filled, tropical island.

The quiet often serious gloom of Toronto hadn't prepared me for the hot humid flowery violence of an African island in the Caribbean. Though I'd come back up to Canada to go to university de-

termined to be a scientist, not a professional musician, I was still very conscious of what I'd seen there and walked around finding similar opportunities to be amazed and startled. Like a baby slapped by doctors to get her heart going, my senses had been stung into a new state of alertness by the bold flagrancy of the island.

But while Jamaica changed the picture in my mind of what the world was like, it also made me realize that I didn't know what was going on, that the world had depths I was incapable of fathoming. I liked the "Britishness" of the island, its hints of an old established culture whose familiar authors and famous political institutions still factored in people's lives.

But I also admired the Jamaican way of life which was peopled by all kinds of characters and customs I'd never heard of. Rastafarians. Pantomime. Reggae. It was the first truly Black culture I'd ever encountered and, while I remained clearly outside it, the richness of it intrigued me.

Fat higglers carrying huge quantities of oranges, bananas, pineapple, breadfruit on their heads. Donkeys strapped down with cloth-wrapped bundles and baskets going every which way. Jump-up music coming up at night from the candle-lit tin roofed shacks and shanties at the foot of Blue Mountain. Less intimidating than the wealthy, poor people simply move the things they need to survive around them like props to create a home for themselves.

This partial awakening to what I now think of as the true reality of our situation was constant when I was seventeen. I looked everywhere, around buildings, inside coffee cups, under newspapers, between

branches, across waves, for clues about the purpose and meaning of the strange setup in which I'd suddenly found myself. It's not that I didn't "know" in Canada that the world was huge and complex and full of life; it's that I hadn't *seen* it. It hadn't hit me physically.

Life was more intellectualized in Canada. There was more order and restraint. People were always trying to do the right thing by each other. Or maybe it was just that in Jamaica there was more spilling out. There was certainly more inequality. I saw people living so close to nature it was as if they were camping, so primitive were their homes and so undeveloped their amenities. Children, donkeys, flowers, music—by flying from Toronto to Kingston, I'd moved from one part of a magnificent stage set to another, and the gorgeous showiness of Jamaica floored me like a wave.

So when I first began to think about "things," I was totally unconscious of phenomenology and, given my bent towards music and poetry, would probably have had a difficult time understanding it, in any case. But I think I found what Heidegger was talking about just the same. Maybe it was in the air. Maybe "things" started to speak up everywhere in the early 60s only to be ignored once more and told to stay put.

Though my lapsed United Church of Canada background didn't encourage me to think in terms like "divinity" and "mortal," I still knew that what I eventually uncovered by the side of a road in New Brunswick was powerful and extremely mysterious, and if I've spent a good part of my life trying to find words for what I did so that others could try it too, it's because, in contrast to Heidegger, my experience was perceptual and not intellectual, and it's hard to represent perceptual things.

I didn't conceive a new idea like "the fourfold" when I was eighteen. I actually *saw* something. What did I see? I saw that where I was, was not where I thought it was. That it's much bigger and wider and more beautiful and more awe-inspiring. And slapping a word like "divinity" on it didn't seem to me to be the point.

The difference between an intellectual and a perceptual discovery is important for what follows so maybe I should go back a bit. I first realized that I have two forms of knowledge, not just one, while playing my violin in Jamaica. After hours and hours of practice, I'd grow bored with trying to play difficult notes beautifully and somewhat shamefacedly lay down my instrument to read a book.

Though I loved the music I was working on and dreamt one day of playing in a fine symphony orchestra, those orange and blue Penguins and creaky volumes I'd get from the Jamaica Public Library by such old evolutionists as Ernst Haeckel, beckoned to me seductively and I couldn't seem to ignore them. I couldn't seem to get them out of my mind. Instead of pouring my soul into the music in front of me or learning how to do *spicatto*, my mind kept returning to questions about biology and the meaning of human evolution.

This tug of war between music and science only subsided when, with much regret I decided against going to Eastman School of Music in Rochester and enrolled in university in New Brunswick instead. The books won. I couldn't resist the power of ideas. My sensibility was so divided that even though I have strong musical instincts and showed promise as a violinist, my intellectual instincts are even stronger and the language of books kept echoing in my brain. I couldn't think musically for as long as I could think about ideas.

Now that I've lived for many years with the choice I made, I can see better what the dilemma was. I was wrestling with two parts of my brain. One part likes to explore the world perceptually. It picks up on the features of all the beautiful things that surround us, smells their life, feels their skin, listens to sounds changing, harmonizing, unfolding.

The other wants to move concepts around. It wants to substitute linguistic representations for all the ideas and luscious perceptual experiences I have had or read about. Why? So that I know better where I'm going and what I'm doing. It gives me the a map I use to see what the world is like.

Both parts are necessary, of course. “Neither taken alone knows reality in its completeness,” William James pointed out. But it’s remarkable how hard it is to keep them in balance. One always seems stronger than the other.

Though I continued to play the violin in my spare time and even went on a concert tour of the province with students at the School of Music, the intellectual eventually dominated, and I went on to get degree after degree until I now have four behind my name. What happened? I’m not sure. But mapping the world interested me and the strong linguistic slant in North American culture, especially Toronto, prevailed against that part of me which loves and enjoys music.

Shortly after moving to Sackville, I started to think a lot about “things.” What were these mute presences sitting beside me on the floor or the road? How did they get here? Were they alive? Could they think? Feel?

The absolute strangeness of a world that has both live and dead things in it revealed itself to me in New Brunswick. Perhaps because it was so old and quiet, I found the remote silence of things there fascinating. Fields, farms, wooden fences, ploughs—I felt like an intruder breaking in upon them as I walked in and out of town exploring the countryside, and I’d often stare at them for long periods of time trying to soak in their meaning.

I’d been inching closer towards “things” ever since I saw all sorts of new “things” in Jamaica. But they became even more compelling when, in the stillness of a small town in an underdeveloped province, I saw their edges and corners against the backdrop of the huge New Brunswick sky.

After class I would wander down dirt roads and let myself experience the life that was there. The skies were beautiful. There were rarely any people or signs of people. Maybe once in a while an abandoned house or car.

Under the weight of so much natural life, I began to wonder if I too wasn’t just a thing? If I too wouldn’t live and die and go back to the soil just like these fences and dilapidated farm buildings? The mystery astounded me. Why were we here if all

we did was grow up, eat a lot of food, get a job, make money, then fall apart? Surely there had to be more to it than that? When everything is so beautiful and when we feel so much?

I couldn’t figure it out. How could it be so silent and gorgeous out here where nature was slowly passing through its seasons, and so noisy and purposeful and silly back in the Women’s Residence? What was the connection between these two phenomena? How did human life get to be so different from everything else?

Maybe the answer was right in front of me but I just couldn’t see it? All I could see were individual things—rocks, twigs, clumps of grass—and they weren’t saying anything. With the exception of Loren Eiseley, the books I’d found in the Mary Melish Library didn’t say much about rocks and twigs.

So what was I to do? Since “things” were all I had, I decided to look at them more closely. They were in the same predicament I was in—upright on the surface of the earth with no hot wires to Central Office. Maybe I could use them to figure out what’s going on?

You can see where thinking perceptually prompts you to cross some boundaries. The world isn’t divided up according to subjects or owners or jobs. It’s free and whole and irrefutably there. That’s because you’re responding to what’s in front of you, not some abstract entity in your head. You’re responding to the world, not your idea of the world, or at least you’re trying to respond to the world.

Because of language, ideas get in the way of perception even when you are determined to keep them out. However, if you work at it you can slow them down, maybe even silence them altogether.

One day while walking along a road that overlooked the marshes, I decided that if I could just see where I was, I’d have a better sense of what was going on. Because things look different depending on where you are, to gain a better sense of my situation, to get a sense of the whole I was in, maybe I needed to bring my knowledge of different points within the universe to bear upon my perception of an individual thing?

I picked up a rock. If I could just imagine what it looked like from as many faraway places that I could think of, and if I could bring those points together all at once, maybe I could get a sense of the whole I was in?

These points existed—on the Moon, on the Sun, on the roof of a shanty in Kingston, in the middle of a desert in Australia. So to realize the physical extent, the grandeur and complexity of where I was, shouldn't I try to include them all in my consciousness? That way I'd "see" it whole, and if I could see it whole then maybe I'd know what it was?

Though it seemed like an impossible task, I pressed on. The silence of where I was goaded me to use my wits. I thought about all the places on the earth I'd visited, what they looked like and how they coexisted with where I was now in New Brunswick. My mind cast back to photographs and drawings I'd seen as I imagined landscapes in Europe, Asia, South America, northern Canada.

Then I imagined sun and the moon and remembered photographs I'd seen of the moon's surface. So strange and alien and yet part of my "world." Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Pluto, supernovae, black holes.

All of these "places" were dragged into my consciousness, some of them with great difficulty, because I wanted to develop a sense of universe and feel it at my back. To test my theory about how different points of view can coalesce into a picture of a whole, I needed to feel it there as I looked at a particular "thing."

Though hard to sustain for very long, and difficult to do in much detail, the effort to imagine multiple landscapes simultaneously was relatively easy and as I looked at the rock, a strange thing occurred. A door seemed to unlock and a sense of enclosure disappeared. Suddenly the world was more wide open than before. More open. More arbitrary. More beautiful.

It's difficult to put my finger on the gorgeous freedom that surrounds everything when I look at things in this way. It's as if they had a dusty yellow plastic covering I didn't even know existed removed and are now reborn into another reality.

They themselves are no different. Nothing physical has changed. The rock hadn't budged from its place in my hand. But I now saw that it existed in a space that was much bigger than I realized. Much bigger, more stunning, more actual, more aggressive, more splendid. The world was actually quite fierce, and I'd been a fool to think I could handle it.

I thought about trying to tell people what I had done but then I couldn't figure out what to say. That "things" could be used as compasses to the universe? That "things" were doorways to another dimension? I could feel the foreheads wrinkle. I decided to keep it to myself for the time being.

However, I was still a student and as soon as I returned to class, multiple currents of talk and debate on every other topic but perception soon swept me away. Within moments I'd forgotten what I saw.

And though it would return to me at night and I'd lie in bed wondering what I'd done to find the world so unencased like that, so free and gorgeous, the difficulty of finding the right words to explain it was insurmountable. I'd lose my train of thought and sleep would soon overtake me.

Many years have passed since I did my little experiment on the road near the Bay of Fundy and, having studied it and repeated it many times, I now think that the problem is language. Language is a representational system as well as a system of communication and, while it has helped us take control of the earth and turn it into a habitat for humans, it also inserts itself easily between us and the direct perception of reality, making it difficult not only to see things the way they are but to talk about it too.

This is because it's a system of representation. It's a system of analysis and control—not a system for apprehending beauty and mystery. It can be *made* to represent beauty and mystery (e.g., poetry), but its dominant use is as tool for manipulating reality for human benefit.

It's a human tool so the nonhuman aspects of the world don't do too well under its dominion. They get ignored or anthropomorphized so that their profound difference is not perceived. Representa-

tion is not equivalent to direct contact. As anyone knows who has witnessed a great event then read accounts of it afterwards, not only is there much that cannot be expressed linguistically, closer examination of what's real reveals that it's a whole different ballgame.

Switching places with the rock exposed me to something too huge for language to represent. By seeing a "thing" in the very largest context I could imagine, I freed myself from the framework through which I normally see rocks and roads, thereby letting real distances and real powers that are "out there" back into my consciousness. The yellow plastic that I saw is language. Language is necessary for me to have a self, get control over my life, and live in a human community. But out from under it, or away from it, the world is no longer divided up into rocks and trees, classes and universities, and other separate things but united in one huge phenomenon that dwarfs me and makes me feel very small.

It may seem as if I'm barking up the wrong tree attributing deceptive powers to language. What about poetry and prayer? Aren't they attempts to go deeper into reality? And what about all the good work done by scientists? Aren't many of them uncovering aspects of reality we didn't even know existed before?

These activities are rich and never-ending. But they are not direct contact. They may be *about* direct contact. They may frame in words or diagrams the truths some researcher has uncovered thereby interpreting them according to the complex system we humans have established to control the world. But they are not direct contact itself. Or at least, they don't stop with perception.

Scientists may encounter amazing phenomena in their research that no one has ever seen before, but science like poetry isn't finished until someone has written a report or poem, until someone has represented it, after which the representation becomes the focus of attention. We only let a little bit of reality into our consciousness. But then the moment it has been put into words, the words generate more words and before you know it the original observa-

tion is buried beneath a ton of paper. It's been swallowed up.

Why do we do this? Why can't we have both perception *and* representation? Why would you even need words if you could make direct contact with the amazingly beautiful phenomenon we are in? If you could perceive it for yourself? And if you could perceive it for yourself wouldn't you know the difference between that and someone's skilful representation of it in language? Isn't it only because we've *lost* contact with what's real that finding it again through words seems at all attractive? In fact, isn't it because we allowed words to take the place of direct perception in the first place that we lost contact? Why did we allow language to take over our consciousness? If we'd stayed even half-way perceptual, we'd know there's something "out there" that's way beyond us and that can't be represented.

So how do you stay perceptual? How do you keep hold of your other form of knowledge so that language doesn't take over?

Start paying attention to things. The table where you are sitting now. The chair. Your shoes. The leaf on the grass. A rock by the side of the road.

Pick out one thing from all the many things that surround you now and focus on its integrity as a separate item. Its weight. Its presence. It doesn't matter whether it's natural or man-made, though natural things are easier to work with because they don't have so many pre-scripted associations.

But any thing will do because they're all here; which is to say, they're all on the surface of the earth. They're all illuminated by the sun. It's their presence on the surface of the earth under the sun that you want to try to catch hold of because there's some information there that's important and that may release you from your coffin.

Things are not us but they're like us in that they too are in the huge phenomenon we call the universe. This means that if you could see where a "thing" is, if you could see a "thing" existing in relation to all the other places that you know exist—mountains, deserts, oceans, other planets, galaxies, supernovae, stars—then you could "read" where

you are because for all intents and purposes you are just a thing too.

Perceptually speaking you are not much different from a shovel or loaf of bread or a floppy disk. You all occupy space. You've got color, shape. You're illuminated by the sun.

You may think you're more complex than these things because you can move on your own steam and think and talk. You may think that, because you are halfway aware and know all kinds of mathematical formulas or can recite Shakespeare, you enjoy a "higher" state of consciousness than that box of cereal over there by the window.

But from the point of view of someone who is just looking, you're not all that different from the things that surround you, and if you just refuse to be insulted by the comparison, you can do something pretty amazing.

Look at your "thing" as if it were another person. Study it closely and try to appreciate it for what it is as opposed to what you could do with it.

This is hard because we're accustomed to using things and not paying them much attention until they break or are worn out or no longer suit our purposes. Except for a few things in nature or beautiful works of art, our approach to most things is pretty exploitive and we're not inclined to treat them with much respect.

But if you force yourself to take them more seriously, if you slow down your eyes so that instead of sliding quickly over the tops of "things" they scour their edges searching for the place where they meet the air or touch the surface of a table or a floor you'll see something pretty startling. You'll see that you are in something—a place, a situation—that is so real and actual and beautiful you can scarcely stand looking at it.

Once you've glimpsed that, once you've observed things raw as opposed to cooked, as it were, you may ask yourself, "What's going on?" Where are you that such gorgeous vibrant luscious things are pushing at you from all sides? Have they always been doing this your whole life and you just didn't notice? Why is everything so beautiful?

This is why Jamaica was such a powerful experience for me. This is what Jamaica felt like to me when I was seventeen. It felt as if I'd entered magic.

From here it's just a matter of following certain steps to find the universe on earth. The "universe on earth" is what I now call the largest context in which we live, as opposed to the radically foreshortened one imposed on us by language and culture.

Because things look different depending on where you are, in order to get a better sense of your situation, in order to get a sense of the whole you are in, you need to bring your knowledge of different points within the universe to bear upon your perception of a particular "thing." You need to see it in its complete context. Not just the way it looks in your living room or garage but the way it looks given the fact that the living room is part of a house which is on a street which is in a city which is in a country which is part of a continent which is part of a planet and so forth.

In this way you will use the "thing" as a mirror. If you can see the "thing" in the context of the town in which you live, the region in which the town is a hub, the country in which the region is a part, the continent, the planet, the galaxy, then you'll be able to see where you are more clearly.

You're combining your two forms of knowledge, perception and conception. On one hand, you're going to look at something carefully and try to see it for its own sake. On the other hand, you're going to stretch your imagination to conceive as many of the places that you know exist in the universe so that you can see the "thing" in its true context.

Just as we observe people within different situations—as family members, as physical specimens, as voters—depending on what we are thinking about at the moment, we can study the things around us in the same way. We can see them as objects on the ground in front of us in Denver. As objects on the ground in Colorado. As objects on the ground in the United States. On the Earth. We can try to imagine how they would look from another planet. From another galaxy. From the outer limits of the universe, wherever these are.

By holding onto your perception of something—a rock, a shell, a book—it's possible to move your inner eyes, your imagination, to take in

all these other places. It's really a question of holding several things in your consciousness at once, of remembering them all, for as you look at your "thing," all you're doing is thinking about other points that exist at the same time.

Your "thing" is one point and these are some of the other points that exist simultaneously in the amazing phenomenon we are in. The point from which you can see all of India, say. The point from which you can see all of Asia. The point from which you can see the Earth, and so forth.

But you've still got your eyes on a "thing." You're not letting yourself fly off all over the place because you're hooked onto a physical spot, a real thing. You're anchored. As your imagination encompasses all these other points that exist at the same time, the framework through which you normally perceive breaks open and you suddenly see much more than you saw before.

The old categories disappear—bed, table, tree, grass—and things start thrusting in at you from all over as if you were a small animal in the forest. You have trouble holding onto your sense of self. A light comes on that takes your breath away. The universe is here.

I've been using things to find the presence of the universe here for so long it seems as if I've always known that the space I live in is hollow and that the winds that pass through come from far, far away. It's chilling to know that you exist in such a huge dimension. It means that the distances you normally see are not the real distances.

The real distances are much greater. In fact they're overwhelming and you'd be crushed alive if you didn't have a way to keep them from entering your consciousness. It's also chilling to see the setup. The earth is a stage. But who set it up? Who's watching us? These are questions that probably won't be answered, if they ever are, until more people start looking at what's around them.

Things are not us but they are like us, and if you learn how to look at them in their actual context, they become mirrors that reflect back to you the truth about where you are. Try it. It's very simple. The universe is here. Simply by enlarging the *context* in which you perceive ordinary things, you will see signs of its presence and expand the ground of your being.