

What is this place called place?

(Surrealism & Geography 2: Exteriority)



Exteriority and the shape of the experience of spatial phenomenology (introductory note)

Launched in the anthology *The Exteriority Crisis – from the city limit and beyond* (edited by Eric Bragg, Bruno Jacobs & Eugenio Castro, Oyster Moon Press 2009), the obscure concept of "exteriority" was then debated in some polemics between the Madrid and Stockholm surrealist groups, and explained in Eric Bragg's "The experience of exteriority around the Salton Sea" (*Hydrolith*, Oyster Moon Press 2010). This collection is not about that concept, but about the experience of spatial phenomenology that we have found more interesting and which the concept might possibly be about. The illustrations are photographs of Malaise traps on different sites in Sweden.

**Soluble locus –
What is this place called place**
(Icecrawler march 2008)

Some places are more places than others. But sometimes more is less. Places have tons of determinations. Global coordinate systems, positions assumed in our networks of associations and perceptions, its social productivity, biological productivity, monetary productivity; what it is used for, what it has been shaped by being used for, what it could possibly be used for if we want; what situated it in relation to surrounding topography, what created its soil layer, what plants and fungi colonised it when, what animals use it when and how, what are the optical and meteorological conditions, who died there and who wrote a poem there and who tried to seduce whom there, and so on. These and other aspects difficultly measured will give them particular presences or absences, particular suggestivenesses and expectancies. I am not using the terms atmosphere or ambiance here, just because I sometimes suspect them to be just euphemisms for soul, which I might have said too, but which will often stand in the way of a real investigation of the factors actually involved.



Many intellectuals of conservative leanings tend to mythologise place hierarchically, primarily in terms of *patria*. Others, more liberal, tend to oligolectically associate places with more or less exotic anecdotes to fit a cosmopolitan image, involving either a globalisation nivellation, or good old tourist exoticism, or both intermixed. But, it cannot be emphasised enough, the biographical self is just one epistemological organ among others. An important one, providing much of the emotional reverberations, a good deal of the stories, a good deal of all the irrational associations and psychological overdeterminations. But real mythology, which might be described as acknowledging the ghosts we have intercourse with, presupposes availability more than anything, just like poetry, and thus all the biographical material is just a wagonload of suggestions, which might selectively be grabbed and put to use by the meaning in formation, or not. The notion of

a *patria* is a strictly regressive one on the mythological and psychological levels, and of course one usually associated with reactionary political purposes. To see place as a setting for anecdotes is a slightly more dynamic position, but exotism and lack of exotism are equally powerful in potentially hiding specificity and particular possibilities from view. The more interesting a place is, the more it has qualities of *terra incognita*, something we may have rumors, dreams and prejudices about, but which primarily in itself encourages us to an active investigation of its possibilities. Consider the place a playground, yourself having gotten the task of inventing the game appropriate to it.

In the mid-90s the surrealist group in Stockholm focused much of its geographical investigations in the concept of worthless places (or atoposes), all the corners and borderzones falling between chairs, falling out of use, getting invaded by unintended usages. It could be emphasised that the criterion is largely an economic one and the setting more or less necessarily urban: only in cities is the population dense enough and the land prices high enough for any disused space to be so strongly singled out, to acquire the quality of a focus of resistance and dreaming. Other environments are organised in other ways.

Some other groups picked up the concept, particularly the Leeds group which had already from its beginnings a geographical focus paralleling ours (and preferring the probably more grammatically correct plural form *atopoi*). In later investigations other aspects have taken the lead, particularly in Madrid, developing concepts largely opaque to us, or in Eric Bragg's inexhaustible documentation of abandoned environments in northern California, or in Bruno Jacobs' concept of "poetic places", or in SLAG's "urban rockpooling" etc. The interface visavis popular "urban exploring" more or less based in live role playing games and situationist theory, is not yet specified. The many scattered surrealist experiments in natural, rural or suburban environments have been fruitful but perhaps not offered similar methodological conclusions.



In Stockholm we have also focused particularly on dream geography (recently the Cormorant Council blog has appeared specifically for this); both the question of how space is constructed in the dream and how dreams affect our geographical orientation in general.

Together with a sense of nature geography which is perhaps more of my own personal interest, this was investigated in my novel "Dream Geography Nature Geo-

graphy". This sense of "nature geography" is about how our observations of animals, plants, stones, landforms and weathers are crucial in establishing our sense of space, our psychogeography. In this sense, it is obviously depending on the degree of selective attention and of background knowledge. But there is of course also a sense in which these aspects give places their position objectively.

Psychogeography was a slightly different concept when the lettrists developed it and later used it as situationists, focusing particularly on the ideological and counter-ideological manipulation of mental structures through city planning and experimental urban drifting, and we have, in parallel with an academic discipline which we don't know if it exists or not, deliberately generalised it into a phenomenology of space and strategies of orientation in general.



Birds, which like humans are obsessed with large-scale spatial orientation, rely mostly on visual *gestalt* but also seem to have a keen sense of magnetism facilitating navigation. The *gestalt* sense of humans is on the other hand exceedingly complex, usually resulting in quite conflicting signals which are finally resolved in a rational analysis. Here we are. We have no memory of how we might have ended up in this place where we feel we might be. Spatial recognition, if not a pastime among others, will start approaching that beautiful and profane description of mystical knowledge as the instantaneous recollection of the sum of associations to an object (where was it? Joseph Jablonski, "Surrealist implications of chance" 1976, I think). A good guess as to where one is includes all the motionless summer evenings there, all the puns and etymological speculations around its name, the taste of the soil, the ambiguous hopes of dawn, the noise of birds, the land use history, the public transport system leading there, the dream syntheses it will become part of. The notion of home does not make sense. The only adequate identification with place is an experimental and playful one, regardless of whether it lasts for just the duration of an instantaneous practical-joke-type kiss or a moment which lasts for centuries, turning us to stone, and whether we are ultimately capable of distinguishing between the two.

The out there

(Icecrawler december 2008)

There is something going on there. Which we want to take part in. Something independent, ragingly chaotic still supremely ordered, something which simply does not await legitimation. With a combination of elusiveness, shapeshifting and omnipresence, it is indeed even difficult to address it: many of us try to escape those difficulties by choosing examples and talking about getting out "in the streets" or "in the forest", others talk about "nature" or "wilderness", some matter-of-factly of "outdoors" and recently some about "exteriority".

Due to illness I've spent a series of days indoors, just after I got in the mail two publications which I contributed to and which happened to coincide in time; one surrealist anthology about *The Crisis of Exteriority* (I don't know what this crisis is and I'm not sure what the editors (Eric Bragg, Eugenio Castro and Bruno Jacobs) mean by exteriority in the first place, my contribution was an old text about worthless places, serving as a background for their more advanced theories) and one literary journal (*Lyriskoännen*) with a "nature" theme (the editor (Jonas Ellerström) even cited my initial whining about the vagueness and problematical character of the theme, and while agreeing with my concerns, he refrained from sharing them by suggesting it to be consciously a vague catchphrase roughly corresponding to the more concrete category of "outdoors").



(Quick note: What is nature? Nature obviously means at least three related but different things; 1) nature as the "ways of the universe", the all-encompassing fundamental patterns, 2) nature as the given "raw world" as opposed to culture, both outside and inside ourselves, which works in accordance with a spontaneous order, and 3) nature as the natural environments and biological systems inhabiting it, imagined independent from the human sphere but attractive for us to visit. In different languages, "nature" and its equivalents may be more strongly associated with one or the other, but the ambiguity is usually there, and the sinister gliding between descriptive and

normative meanings of the "natural". Ah, I remember, and I can't decide if proudly or ashamedly, how the Stockholm surrealist group tried to hold a taped "round-table-discussion" about "nature" ten years ago and I pretty much obstructed the discussion by demanding to know what the others were talking about.)

The problem is that it is really not a problem. Dualisms may be spontaneous figures of human reason, but the point with them is to get a quick overview of the field in order to proceed to understand the constellation of transgressions and mutuality. All those dualisms of inner-outer, self-others, subjective-objective, culture-nature, artificial-ecological, civilisation-wilderness, have some basic phenomenological reality and are acceptable as provisional tools. The history of western thinking has seen the development of arguments of the impossibility of holding on to them in some stricter sense; in biology, psychoanalysis, marxism, structuralism, dialectics, etc etc; and it seems like those still holding on them as a basic division at any price are openly reactionary efforts like fascism and some unsophisticated applications of formal logics, or regressive such as unsophisticated applications of philosophical phenomenology or structuralism. So let's just repeat: the domain of the self is not homogenous-unitarian, not sharply delineated from other beings or the external environment, and the human sphere cannot be separated from the rest of the world, indeed human culture (just like other species' cultures) is indeed in a fundamental sense but one mere aspect of our biology, one which has in turn reshaped the planet in our small- and large-scale interactions. Both the others and nature are certainly not just out there but in here just as much, and nothing out there has remained untouched.

There are two small points I have to make as a biologist, that the concepts of wilderness and ecological balance are highly dubious empirically and rather corresponds to certain people's projectional fantasies.



That alleged virgin aspect of nature is fantasised by all kinds of primitivists, be they of pacifist or aggressive leanings. Often this is based on mere ignorance, on having no idea to what extent human land use has shaped and differentiated the natural habitats of the world for centuries. It's probably only in recent times that human impact has become, facilitated by technical development but even more necessitated by demands of the economical system, largescale homogenizing enough to be severely detrimental for biological diversity. Most open lands were indeed created by human husbandry (except in very dry or very cold climates) and most natural-looking forests are shaped by some

level of human harvesting of wood, animal forage, game, and other resources. The few places that could be regarded as entirely "wild", the few most inaccessible forests, the glacial landscapes, large parts of the deserts, the tundra and the oceans, are part in global circulation and therefore in complex interactions with human outtake, reshaping and littering elsewhere (littering both in terms of spreading both major junk and small civilisation souvenirs, pollution and overnourishment in general). The "wilderness" hailed in the typically american brand of primitivism (which is very significant for some of the religious and utopian movements populating north america in earlier centuries, as well as for certain ecologists and even some of the surrealists in modern times) has indeed been demonstrated to fulfill the function of an ideological construct denying the extent to which the "virginal" north american landscape was indeed shaped by the land use of the native peoples. In fact, much of nature conservation in north america is still only about keeping people out, resting on the same fundamental misanthropy idealising fantasies of a "natural way" in the absence of humans, which is one of the reasons this particular american primitivism is often characterised as "ecofascism". (Let's just be clear here: misanthropy in itself is not necessarily fascist at all, though most of its political implementations are.)



And then for the harmony of "ecological balance", putting in quasiscientific terms this fantasy of the soundness of the state of things in the absence of man. Any stability in nature is in fact a dynamical equilibrium of competing forces; what we see is there because it is the contemporary constellation of each population's "evolutionary stable strategies" visavis each other and other parts of their environment. It will occasionally go off in dynamic developments, sometimes triggered by human involvement and sometimes other factors. Not too often though, if it was highly unstable it simply wouldn't be there for us to see; but as biological systems it cannot be static. Such a sense of dynamic a posteriori order is probably one of the few useful concepts of order anyway. What would it be else? Entropy of course, the only conceivable universal order, when everything moves out of reach for everything else so that nothing should ever happen anymore... But then, on a fundamental level, biological life is specifically a uniquely powerful system of combatting entropy, both on the smallest scale (sorting substances by means of metabolism) and on the largest scales (reshaping the global

environments by means of actions of populations, and thereby creating history). And then there is the neurotic sense of order; the denial of everything but the few things in control.

And here, as it lies at heart of the concept of nature, we shouldn't consider ourselves too good to repeating the analogies between the mental and geographical aspects here; the sheltering obsession is similar in so-called rational thinking and in housing. Proclaim a little space reserved for the well-known and controllable; in one area "sound reason" or closed rationalism, in the other indoors or home. Sheltering a fraction of space is not just the political and moral fall of grace that Rousseau was talking about, it also creates a uniquely predictable environment. The space is filled with familiar objects only, with familiar people only or with no other people at all, temperature, light, humidity, any exchange between in and out is regulated, everything regarded as "nature" is kept out.



This creates the sphere of outdoors as something to project desires on simply because it obeys the normal workings of reality: it is where the wind blows, where other species live, where strangers go, and where unexpected encounters occur; the domain of freedom. And at some points we will need to distinguish between the often maddeningly banal, repetitive and petty concerns structuring the larger parts of our social structures and the inspiringly banal, repetitive and petty concerns which seem to dictate the lives of other lifeforms and their interactions, and which indeed seems to speak directly to us when we visit so-called natural environments. In both types of environments, the point is to make oneself available to the flow of regularities and irregularities which has things to teach us, challenge us and bathe us in the concrete sensory perceptions of all that which is images of freedom and reality - Which is perhaps, perhaps, another appearance form of the same domain of flow that opens up from a point which phenomenologically seems to reside within us whenever we open up ourselves to poetry, through automatism, alchemical labor, falling in love, disorder in the senses, aggressive inspiration, seances and rituals, or whatever. Is it?

MF

The Small Marvellous

(icecrawler september 2009)

Old discussions stretch out and intervene in recent discussions. In a couple of passages of our (transcribed and published) extensive discussion "On the Marvellous" 1998 (in *Lucifer* 2000, in the original swedish of course), there emerged a distinction between "The Marvellous with a capital M" and another, less grandiose phenomenon; the distinction could perhaps be described as on the one hand, "convulsive things" "which are usually being talked about in surrealism", and on the other hand an everyday overcoming presence. The latter, the "small marvellous", which might coincide with "exteriority", was first brought up by Carl-Michael Edenborg:

Carl-Michael Edenborg: I'm going by bicycle to and from work, some parts of the forest when biking through, there comes a scent or a the sensation of the marvellous where it is like coming to one's senses somewhere and feeling some kind of presence in the world.

Mattias Forshage: Indeed, sensory presence.

Carl-Michael: Thereby also a kind of magic experience in a way then. The marvellous was there and for me that is every day, but I am trying, when I am talking about the marvellous, then it is, the Marvellous with a capital M, that is, these convulsive events.



After having established the distinction between the big and the small marvellous, several participants express their doubt as to how interesting it is to speak about the small marvellous:

Riyota Kasamatsu: For me these small marvellous events, they feel, the marvellous is somehow more subversive than that. Not just small things happening. That is small everyday experiences, you may think it would be nice if there were more of them, but these big, big things, you don't get that often, and the desire to get them is very subversive.

Or:

Niklas Nenzén: One runs the risk of inventing one's life for other things that perhaps would be better described as comfort, or wellbeing.

Jonas Enander: So is that the marvellous?

Niklas: No I mean one may be concocting all the things in life that makes one feel at home on this planet, in spite of everything.

Further comments to the same problematic:

Bruno Jacobs: Yes it is unconscious stuff, it is quite possible, but it is maybe just a, in that case it is a wish that, the pleasure principle almost partly. Partly the pleasure principle indeed, the lack of conflict and it creates, there emerges a zone, where things simply are. Calm rather than stormy.

Niklas: That's good.

Bruno: And not only that, but in the first place that like, a harmony perhaps some kind of what, a small zone.

Johannes Bergmark: Not stormy?

Bruno: No.

Jonas: Is stormy then a word for describing...

Bruno: It could be a stormy environment, a stormy period, but specifically the marvellous comes into existence when it emerges a stillness like in the middle of all that.

Niklas: So should we take the next question?

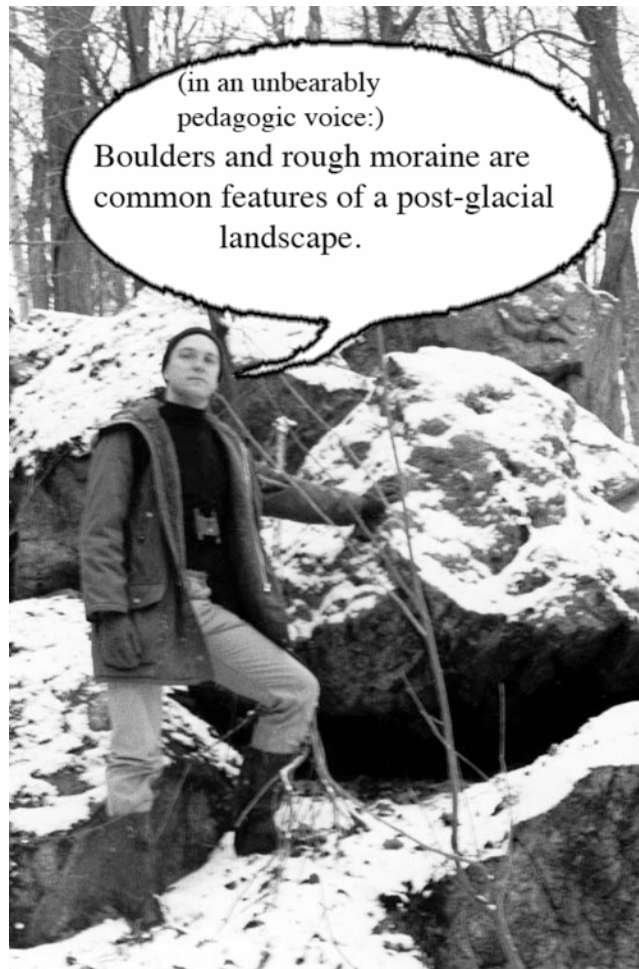
Jonas: Are you a classicist?



And:

Mattias: Of course I prefer, from the viewpoint of life quality, those periods with more frequent experiences of the marvellous before those periods with less frequent experiences of the marvellous.
Niklas: Goodday axehandle.

The Pilgrim Surrealist



(M Forshage & B Jacobs 1999)

The Exterior is popular (Icecrawler september 2009)

There is an important class of poetry available in the sensory-mental abandonment-presence in the physical environment that is extending beyond that which is structured for commercial or other disciplinary purposes. There is an important type of vigilance that will establish communication over the elusive membranes of conscious and unconscious, inside and outside. The exterior is a relative concept. It does not start somewhere. It does not require any leap. The inner or outer void reverbrates at the strange friction and the strange lack of friction. Nevertheless, if possibly privileged for being poetic, this is not unusual or reserved for a minority of *connoisseurs*. Instead, it is probably one of the (several) truly popular manifestations of poetic sense. And anyone who hunts for exteriority kicks can easily make a few efforts to widen its apertures, to make it a field of systematic poetic enquiry (and therefore of poetic living) more than just an occasional source of kicks. These are some advice:

1. Rediscover poetry. Poetry is a set of phenomena responding to vigilance, seriousness, clarity, playfulness, discipline, methodic disorder, etc; Poetry may require an effort, poetry will benefit from preparations, method and evaluation. Poetry is not a rest category for musings which don't obviously fall under another category, it is not a passively received grace, it is not an excuse for personal lack of method, or laziness.

2. Acquire some analytical tools for describing the physical environment and the long-term historical processes shaping it. This is easy. Just go to your library or university bookshop and pick up a copy of a standard textbook of physical geography (sometimes called "earth science" or "natural geography"), and read it. You will find explanations, and models for finding explanations, for a large amount of your discoveries, and tips about loads of other exciting stuff to go look for. If you have rediscovered poetry, you will know that explaining is not necessarily in conflict with experiencing, that background information and clarity might spur rather than suffocate poetry.



3. Acquire some analytical tools for understanding shortterm historical processes and social interactions shaping the physical environment. This is a bit more difficult. Try to

grasp the historical-materialist method of Marx, look out for what is going on in cultural geography, urban sociology, economic history, human ecology, and city planning. This field is indeed hard to survey, but much of it is bullshit anyway, and so you only need to pick up some basic models and concepts. You will find explanations, and models for finding explanations, for a large amount of your discoveries. If you have rediscovered poetry, you will know that explaining is not necessarily in conflict with experiencing, that background information and clarity might spur rather than suffocate poetry.



4. Acquire some basic skills in floristics and faunistics. Pick up a flower book, an insect book, download some bird songs from the Internet, or pick up basics from some old friends who were educated according to some now obsolete standards or grew up in the countryside. Several large cities have guidebooks for the local species assemblies and hotspots (corresponding to Lindberg's *Stockholmsfloran*, Staav's *Stadens fåglar* and Sjöberg's *Naturens nollåttor* about Stockholm). Combined with some concepts learned from ecology and from physical geography, this will allow you to enhance your senses, discover and describe daily global- and local-scale high drama, daily encounters with unusual beings, cross-specific communication, daily hidden aspects of environments that seemed all-too-well-known or minutely-controlled.

5. Look around yourself and realise that "the marvellous is popular" (as Péret said), that some large parts of the population are busy with rediscovering the physical environment too. If we disconsider the distinctly bad company connected with its commercialisation in the experience industry (adventure tourism etc, which still provides many opportunities for certain exteriority experiences, which may for the individual transgress their qualities of commodities) or its conservative ideologisation in the movements of regional romanticism with its focus on old agricultural methods and local environmental sightseeing; there is still a vast field of outdoors/naturalist amateurs and hobby enthusiasts organising excursions and popular education making possible and deepening a largely conventional but nevertheless rich class of exteriority experiences. If you are an antisocial person or just despise conventional exchange with other people, you could join the Cloud Appreciation Society via Internet, and you could go to a library and take a look at traditional poetry as well as popular essayistics – much

of it is about this experience of exteriority. I'm not saying that a lot of this is objectively allied with surrealism nor necessarily interesting, only that the discovery of exteriority isn't very exclusive or very new and there is no need of inventing a new vocabulary for it, nor for circling around it in only vague and tentative terms.

/The Pilgrim Surrealist

Diary from a journal in my chamber (soluble locus 2)

(Icecrawler january 2010)

There has been some travelling going on in my apartment lately. A remarkable apparent chance chain of distinct little forest glades, hills, parks and squares. When writing this, I just noticed that Breton referred to surrealism as a new way of travelling in "Lettre aux voyantes" 1925. The story is, I've been digitizing a few longer texts (more or less mindless keyboard work) and so had an occasion to notice not just how but where my thoughts are straying when in an extended absentminded state. In such work, focusing on some actual lines of explicit thoughts would make the smooth execution of the work difficult; following the text mass that should be copied is in fact rather close to hypnotic suggestion; one is supposed to let the present text flow through oneself and out in one's fingerwork without reflection. I suppose a lot of what people are getting paid for doing is such systematised mindlessness and it is one of the standard modes of wage labor... There is a certain interval of intensity of associations where work goes smooth and chain of associations is entertaining - whenever it becomes more subjectively involving than just entertaining (practical worries and neuroses just as much as exciting stories or sexual fantasies or new solutions or poetic momentum) it slows work; and the opposite, the actual focusing on the task at hand or the actual extinguishing of thought seem just too boring, seem like voluntary death. To me, at least this time, basically three lines of "neutral" enough imagery presented themselves, images of some past periods in life, images from comic books (actually read or similar to those actually read), and more interestingly, images of places.

I have been travelling some, at least in recent years. Thus, there is a selection of views and ambiances from at least some hundreds of cities and towns that has been fed into my memory. Even more importantly, as I have been systematically checking out biological habitats as well as wandering environments within public transport distance of wherever I have been staying, as well as in many places where educational and explorative interests have taken me, producing is a plethora of several thousands of forest views, thickets and glades, ponds and beaches, etc etc. All fed into the system of memory and there left to associate with each other according to whatever internal associations might be established while being preconsciously "treated".



An obvious trivial application is the associative cascade every new place triggers: - Oh, I've never been here before. It reminds me of this, and this, and this, like a twisted version of this, has a similar ambiance to this, has identical vegetation to this, the light is similar to this... etc. However, an even more common application (every night) is the synthesis of dream geography. All dreams take place somewhere. Often in a significant sequence of different places, spatially distributed according to the narrative of the dream, ordered and in fact often overlaid in significant patterns that merit analytical response, both in the poetically realist (surrealist) way of mapping this landscape, and in the psychoanalytical study of the origin of the images.

I have been having, through the years, a recurring, paranoid, very interesting compulsory thought. Just because there are so overwhelmingly many similar "natural sites" that I am acquainted with and feel just as home in as the city streets I'm walking down - but significantly differing in the sense that they have no street signs, no other people, and almost no other obvious artifacts whatsoever that could provide quick information of location; I keep imagining what would happen if I suddenly lost short-term memory. I'd know all the places I know, all the techniques of reading the landscape I know, I'd only not know where the hell I was and how the hell I got there. Would I be able to deduce the location or are there just too many places that are too similar? Would I want to deduce the location and return to my life or would I grab this handy opportunity to "disappear from the world" and keep hiding under spruces from the searching helicopters?



I have been trained in available methods for reading landscapes: geomorphology, soil, vegetation types, species assemblies, small-scale climate, agricultural history etc, so that landscapes are objectively classifiable. Not that I do keep consciously sorting geographical images. It just helps me orient when I'm there, and to interpret the image when it resurfaces. In fact, it seems impossible to make a comprehensive and user-friendly classification of places, because so many of them are objectively and subjectively equivalent, differing only in that part of the "spirit of the place" which is the surrounding associations, the musings over the name of the place, its purely geographical relationships to other places, the particularities of the way there and the way back, previous experiences and expectancies. In fact, such associations that involve all previous knowledge can easily be argued to be a major part of the "spirit of the place". I'm not denying that there are places which are objectively depressing, exciting, enthusing, calming etc, (remember the beach episode in Breton's *L'Amour fou* , I had a similar experience on the island in Budapest) but this is a very crude spectrum of basic emotional responses and all the subtleties of geography are dependent on the interaction between the totalities of associations and observations and thus dependent on conscious knowledge of location.

Of course I didn't write down the actual chain of places; I was busy. I could pick a few examples and start interpreting them, but for now I'm happy with having written this introduction.

MF