

## **‘First See the Place’: Ignatius Loyola’s ‘Composition of Place’ in the Poetry of Robert Southwell**

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The *Spiritual Exercises*, written down as a guide to his followers by the founder and first General of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola, became the main weapon of the Jesuits in their Counter Reformation campaign, during which they revolutionized the spirituality of Catholic Europe. The *Exercises* are not so much devotional reading as a handbook and guide for meditation and have not been altered since Ignatius completed them in the 1530s. Even though he was advantaged by noble birth and education, he was not particularly lettered or intellectual. Rather, he dealt in the imagination, and his own was suffused with powerful visual images, not with theology.

The *Exercises* are designed to be completed over four weeks. They are tightly structured, with explicit directions under headings, and deal with the topics of sin and Hell, the Incarnation and Nativity, the famous meditation on Two Standards, and, finally, events in the life of Christ.

The composition of place holds a specific position within the structural framework of the *Exercises*, being one of the three Preliminaries that precede each meditation. The first Preliminary is ‘The story’, which delineates the topic of the meditation. The second is ‘The picture’, or the composition of place, which has to be constructed by the exercitant in imagination, while the third is ‘Asking for what I want’, which is to be the result of the meditation.

Ignatius inserted a personal note on the composition of place:

For a visual contemplation or meditation, the picture is an imaginative representation of the physical place where the event to be contemplated occurs. By physical, I mean, e.g., a temple or mountain where Jesus Christ our Lord is, as demanded by the subject-matter. Where the subject-matter is not something visible, as in the ... case of sins, the ‘picture’ will be the idea, produced by an effort of the imagination... (30).

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One of the meditations on the Nativity in the third Week can be used as an example of the way in which Ignatius sets out the three Preliminaries to all his meditations. This allows us to see how the composition of place finds its context:

*First Preliminary.* The story. Christ Our Lord, with his eleven disciples, goes down from Mount Sion, where the supper has been held, to the valley of Jehosephat. Leaving eight of them in one part of the Valley, and three more in one part of the Garden, He betakes Himself to prayer, His sweat turning to drops of blood.

*Second Preliminary.* The picture [or composition of place]. Think about the road from Mount Sion to the Valley of Jehosephat, and then the Garden. Is it wide or long? What appearance does it have?

*Third Preliminary.* Asking for what I want. This is the gift proper to the Passion – sorrow in company with Christ, being crushed with the pain that crushed Christ, tears and a deep sense of suffering, because Christ suffered so much for me.

‘The picture’, or imaginative representation of the place, is always a simple, clear one. For instance, in the second week of the Exercises, the meditation on the ‘Call of the King...’ requires the exercitant to

[s]ee in imagination the synagogues, towns and hamlets through which Christ our Lord went preaching.

In the third week, the contemplation on the Last Supper states that one is to

[s]ee the road from Bethany to Jerusalem. Notice whether it is broad or narrow, level, and so on. So too the supper-room. Is it a big one or a small one? Is it of one style rather than of another?

In the fourth week, the scene for meditation on Christ’s apparition to Our Lady requires the Exercitant to

[s]ee how the tomb was arranged. See also the place, that is, the house where Our Lady was, studying it in detail, her room, oratory and the rest.

The composition of place, being imaginative and visual rather than abstract, contributes to the essentially practical nature of Ignatius's meditations. His visit to the Holy Land seems to have compounded this practical inclination, bringing alive for him the places where Jesus would have walked, preached or performed his miracles. The scenes to be visualised in the *Exercises* were for him, therefore, the memory of his experiences there. Of course, the ordinary exercitant who may not have visited these places has to imagine the scene.

Ignatius's own definition of the 'Second Preliminary' is that it is 'a composition, seeing the place'. The word 'composition' is twofold in implication within its context. It implies both constructing the scene in the imagination and also composing the mind for the meditation. The rest of the meditation is not necessarily imaginative in structure.

The composition of place as set out by Ignatius in the *Exercises* is seemingly prosaic, even dull. We are constantly asked to picture roads in their length and breadth or to envisage rooms with their furniture arranged in them. But Ignatius's intention is clearly to help the exercitant focus or centre down on the meditation. The composition of place if done properly, creates visual context for the meditative topic .

Henry Walpole, a Jesuit priest on the English Mission (hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in 1595), wrote an untitled poem in which he recreates Calvary as the Second Preliminary, the composition of place. In this poem, a meditation on the Passion and the Cross, the picture of Calvary eventually merges with that of London, the future scene of Walpole's own death. Walpole, possibly influenced by Ignatius's passion for the Holy Land as 'place', writes of Calvary as if he knew it intimately. 'Calvarie mount is my delight: a place I love so well', he says in the first line, and then goes on to ask:

O that I might a pilgrim goe: that sacred mount to see  
O that I might some service Doe: where Christ died once for me  
(lines 3-4)

So clear is Walpole's visualization of the place that he is transported back to the scene of Calvary and seems actually to view the crucifixion as if he were there:

Loe heere I see thee faintinge goe: with Crosse which thou hast borne  
Imbrude with blood from top to toe: lyke one that were forlorne

Like one forlorne alacke for greefe, with torments over runne  
and alle dear lord to seeke releefe: for that which man hath done  
(lines 13-16).

Here, having delineated the place, the speaker asks for 'what I want' as in the third Preliminary. The *Exercises* state that, when contemplating the Passion, having visualized and created the place, the exercitant should ask for 'suffering, grief and agony, in the company of Christ in agony' ( 30). In Reformation England, a Catholic priest would ironically have little trouble having such a request granted, so Walpole's imaginative and vivid recreation of the place of Calvary allows his anticipation of the tortures of Tyburn to merge with the suffering of Calvary in a dual composition of place:

O London let my quarters stand: upon thy gates to drye  
and let them beare the world in hand: I did for treason dye  
Let croes and kytes my carkas eate: let ravens their portion hav[e]  
least afterwards my frendes intreate: to lay my corpse in grave  
(lines 49-52).

Walpole's more famous Jesuit colleague and poet, Robert Southwell, composed a number of his poems as meditations on sin, a topic which forms the focus for the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the Counter Reformation European style, the exercitant is enjoined to contemplate the nature of his or her sins, to feel deep remorse, and to make confession. In Europe, the so-called 'great weepers', Mary Magdalen, Peter and King David were the key figures of remorse in the literature of tears. Southwell's poem on King David, 'Davids Peccavi', creates a desolate composition of place based on the lamentation for Israel in Psalm 101:

In eaves, sole Sparrowe sits not more alone,  
Nor mourning Pellican in Desert wilde ...  
(lines 11-12).

The composition of place in this poem is desolate and solitary, a place of exile, representing the spiritual wasteland of separation from God on account of sin.

Southwell creates an even more dreadful place in 'A Vale of Teares'. The title and the first line, 'A vale there is enwrapt with dreadfull shades', recall the words *hoc lacrimarum vale* from the *Salve Regina* and also find an echo in Southwell's own *Spiritual Exercises and Devotions* in the words 'I have come into this valley of tears ... arise and sin no more'. The phrase 'dreadfull shades' also reminds us of Hades.

The poem is a meditation in which Southwell uses Ignatius's technique of creating a composition of place in order to contemplate sin. The three Jesuit meditative faculties of memory, understanding and will also function in this poem. Memory provides the place, the dreadful, gloomy vale. Southwell twice crossed the Alps (Janelle 278) and, in going through the St Gothard Pass, would have noticed the 'wild, majestic and weird scenery'. Prior to the eighteenth century, the Alps inspired horror in everyone who viewed them. Southwell's reaction is to use this scene of horror, the Alps, and particularly the St Gothard pass, as the composition of place in this poetic meditation on the detestable nature of sin.

The first five stanzas delineate the desolate Alpine landscape:

A VALE there is enwrapt with dreadfull shades,  
Which thicke of mourning pines shrouds from the sunne,  
Where hanging clifts yeld short and dumpish glades,  
And snowie floud with broken streames doth runne,

Where eie-roume is from rockes to cloudie skie,  
From thence to dales with stonie ruines strow'd,  
Then to the crushed waters frothie frie,  
Which tumbleth from the tops where snow is thow'd:

Where eares of other sound can have no choice,  
But various blustering of the stubburne winde  
In trees, in caves, in straits with divers noise,  
Which now doth hisse, now howle, now roare by kinde:

Where waters wrastle with encountring stones,  
That breake their streames, and turne them into foame,  
The hollow clouds full fraught wit thundring groans,  
With hideous thumps discharge their pregnant wombe.

And in the horror of this fearful quier,  
Consists the musicke of this dolefull place:  
All pleasant birds their tunes from thence retire,  
Where none but heavy notes have any grace.

The composition of place, with its 'dreadfull shades' and 'mourning pines', the 'glades' and the verb 'shrouds', seems to equate details of the landscape with death or even Hades. Everything seems unnatural or ugly. Even the 'broken streames' represent a hindered flow of nature. The place does not in fact suggest physical death, but the spiritual death of the separated sinner existing in 'darkness of soul' (Ignatius 108). The eye and the ear are assailed by gloom, as if Southwell were bringing these two senses particularly to bear in the meditation. The sound effects of the place are all orchestrated into the 'fearfull quier', producing a cacophonous effect from the 'crushed waters', the 'blustering [of the] stubburne winde', the 'hisse', the 'howle', the 'roare' and the 'wrestle' of perturbed nature, to which are added 'thundring groans' and 'hideous thumps'. Southwell's ironic reference to the 'musicke' of this hellish place is augmented by the reference to the 'fearfull quier'.

Now the understanding probes the meaning of the place. We are asked to see the details in the way that Ignatius always required:

Resort there is of none but pilgrim wights,  
That passe with trembling foot and panting heart,  
With terror cast in cold and shivring frights,  
They judge the place to terror framde by art:

The implication is that the visual details **should** rightly invoke terror, just as Ignatius was horrified and filled with terror by the recognition of his own sin. The scene has become reflective of the inner spiritual state of penitent pilgrims as they pass by in search of remorse and forgiveness.

Southwell writes that such a place is for

...mated minds, an onely bower,  
Where every thing doth sooth a dumpish mood.  
Earth lies forlorne, the cloudie skie doth lower,  
The wind here weepes, here sighes, here cries aloude.

How could all this be soothing to a 'dumpish mood'? The answer lies ironically in the realization that the sorrowful sinner, probing with his understanding, finds his dumpishness, his sinful inner state, reflected in the physical scene before his eyes. This would increase his understanding of his own sinfulness.

Huge massie stones that hang by tickle stay,  
Still threaten fall, and seeme to hang in feare,  
Some withered trees ashambe of their decay,  
Beset with greene, are forcde gray coats to weare.

Here crystal springs crept out of secret vaine,  
Strait find some envious hole that hides their grace.  
Here seared tufts lament the want of raine,  
Here thunder wracke gives terror to the place.

This is what the contemporary Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner calls the 'existential wasteland' of the sinner (52). He further comments that this state 'signifies the decaying ... the presence of death in us right now'. The huge proportions of this physical landscape, this place, serve as signifiers of the enormity of sin, while their precarious balance, suggested by their hanging 'by tickle' or 'feare' tells us of the terrors of the state of unconfessed sin. The 'withered' landscape, patched with 'greene', the colour of hope, broken by thwarted 'christall springs' of grace, is thus representative of the sinner existing in Rahner's existential wasteland, where he dries up for want of the rain of grace, yet dares to hope without relief.

Until now the speaker has viewed the place as alien, separate, at the most horribly reflective of his state, but, as he acknowledges his sinfulness in the last part of the poem, the doleful picture and the speaker's mood merge. It seems that the more detailed and successful the composition of place, the greater the efficacy of the meditation. This makes the Second Preliminary very important.

When the speaker performs the Third Preliminary, asking for what he wants, he can fulfil this request according to Ignatius's specification:

Asking for what I want. Here a perfect sorrow and intense grief for my sins. (Ignatius 33)

Set here my souls main streames of teares afloat,  
Here all thy sinful foiles alone recount,  
Of solemn tunes make thou the dolefulst note,  
That to thy ditties dolor may amount.

When *Eccho* doth repeat thy plainfull cries,  
Think that the verie stones thy sinnes bewray,  
And now accuse thee with their sad replies,  
As heaven and earth shall in their latter day,

Let former faults be fuell of the fire,  
For grieffe in Limbecke of thy heart to still  
Thy pensive thoughts, and dumps of thy desire,  
And vapoure teares up to thy eies at will.

Let teares to tunes, and paines to plaints be prest,  
And let this be the burdon of thy song,  
Come deepe remorse, possess my sinful brest:  
Delights adue, I harbourd you too long.

In these final stanzas of the poem, the speaker brings the third requirement, the will, to bear in his decision to undergo an examination of conscience, his 'sinfull foiles [alone] to recount'. The place, the inharmonious Alpine scene, is now integrated. The 'maine streames of teares', representing the speaker's remorse, now replace the former 'broken streames', their uninterrupted flow replacing the lack of fluidity in the original picture. The reference to *Eccho* is apt, as sound would be magnified through the mountains. This actually magnifies the emotion of remorse as the understanding becomes increasingly aware of the magnitude of sin. In the picture of the 'Limbecke', the fire, representing the heart, distills the water of the speaker's thoughts and transmutes them into tears of real inner repentance.

In the final stanza, the auditory disharmony of the entire scene is transmuted into harmonious tunes, while the cacophonous 'quier' becomes a correctly synchronized composition. All this represents what the Rite of Confession calls the Satisfaction following contrition and the recounting of sins, that is, the determination to do better. The speaker's words, 'delights adue', encapsulate his determination to forgo sin and to live in a state of continual repentance.

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Southwell's poem is an example of the European Literature of Tears, inspired by the new, repentant Catholic Church in response to Luther's accusations of sinfulness and laxity. But more important here is the fact that the Counter-Reformation Church was concerned with reform, both personal and institutional, which ensured the popularity of the *Spiritual Exercises* all over the continent. In England, though, the Nativity was also a popular focus, and Southwell wrote four poems within this tradition, all of which show the influence of Ignatius's *Exercises*, including the composition of place.

The Incarnation and the Nativity are points of focus in the Second Week of the *Exercises*, and Ignatius is specific in his advice on creating the place. The Second Preliminary in one Nativity meditation reads as follows:

The picture. Represent to yourself in imagination the road from Bethlehem, in its length and breadth. Is it level or through valleys and over hillsides?

In the same way, study the place of the Nativity. Is the cave spacious or cramped, low or high? How is it furnished?

In a heading under this point, the meditator is made part of the place:

Look at the persons, our Lady, St Joseph, the servant girl, and, after He is born, the Infant Jesus. I must see myself as an impoverished attendant, not fit to be there, but watching and studying them, looking after all their wants as if I were actually present ....

Southwell's poem 'New Prince, new pompe', remains within the spirit of Ignatius's approach to the Nativity, in which the baby is born in 'utter destitution' (Ignatius 48). The composition of place the poet creates reflects the poverty implied in the word 'destitution'.

BEHOLD a silly tender Babe,  
In freesing Winter night;  
In homely manger trembling lies,  
Alas a pitteous sight:

The Innes are full, no man will yeeld  
This little Pilgrime bed;

But forc'd he is with silly beasts,  
In Crib to shrowd his head.  
(lines 1-8)

The First Preliminary, the story, is presented with the traditional view of the cave and the poverty of the holy family. Southwell mentions the 'manger' and the cold, and later in the poem he refers to other aspects of the place that show it to be poor in the earthly or material sense. Stanza 4 provides further details that augment the composition of place, and show that the poet is following Ignatius's injunction to 'look at the persons' in the place:

Waigh not his Crib, his wooden dish,  
Nor beasts that by him feede:  
Waigh not his Mothers poore attire,  
Nor Joseph's simple weede.  
(lines 13-16)

Southwell adds one imaginative detail to the otherwise traditional scene: the wooden dish. Other than this, it could be said that the composition of place in this poem is so ordinary as to be positively dull, as has been said of Ignatius's composition of place generally in the *Exercises*. But there is always a purpose in this. Southwell uses the familiar picture of material lack to make an important point about poverty:

Despise not him for lying there,  
First what he is enquire:  
An orient pearle is often found,  
In depth of dirty mire ...  
(lines 9-12).

The picture of the 'orient pearl' is startling in the context of the poor cave and its materially straitened occupants. The pearl's lustre tells us that we must look beyond the over-familiar picture to find the concealed truth:

This stable is a Princes Court,  
The Crib his chaire of state:

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The beasts are parcell of his pompe,  
The wooden dish his plate.

The persons in that poore attire,  
His royall livories weare,  
The Prince himselfe is come from heaven,  
This pompe is prized there.

In this way, Southwell uses the composition of place to undermine the general view that the Holy family was poor. In material terms they may have been, but the 'orient pearle' is the lustrous symbol of the truth that can be found beneath a superficial poverty of place, and all the other aspects of the cave are consequently reversed in value, so that they become artefacts in a 'Princes Court' and the people present become his royal courtiers. The pearl adds further dimension to the composition of place in that, like the Christ child lying in the cave in the guise of a poor baby, the pearl also lies hidden in its place of 'dirty mire'. According to *Physiologus*, the Apostle John 'shows us that the intelligible pearl is Jesus Christ our Lord' (34), so the jewel does not just represent Christ, he **is** the pearl. Further dimensions can be added to this by noting the type of Christ in the *Antiphonae Majores* in the Advent Liturgy:

*O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et Sol justitiae: veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis: O Orient, splendour of eternal light, and son of justice, come and enlighten those who sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death. (Burlin 41)*

The earthly jewel found in the dirty mud of the place is the eternal light shining in the darkness of sin. The real value of the 'pearl', then, is far from the superficial value of the place of birth of the baby.

Southwell's best-known poem, 'The Burning Babe', also a Nativity poem, opens with a clear composition of place:

As I in hoarie Winters night  
Stoode shivering in the snow,  
Surpris'd I was with sodaine heate,  
Which made my heart to glow...

The 'place' is a winter scene in the traditional European Nativity season. On the primary level of meaning, the speaker is actually standing in the snow shivering with cold. But in the wider context, which is the mystical revelation that follows, the freezing cold of the created scene represents the coldness and emptiness of humanity without Christ, in a state of separation from him. The fact that there is no fire to warm the speaker in this freezing landscape emphasises the lack of hope for unsaved humanity. But the sudden apparition of the baby surrounded by the mystical fire of *caritas*, love, alters the place with his heat:

And lifting up a fearful eye,  
To view what fire was near,  
A pretty babe all burning bright  
Did in the ayre appeare;

Who scorched with excessive heat,  
Such floods of teares did shed,  
As though his floods should quench his flames,  
Which with his teares were fed:

Alas (quoth he) but newly borne,  
In fierie heates I frie,  
Yet none approach to warm their harts,  
Or feel my fire, but I;

This mystical child who appears in the snowy scene burning with love for humankind reminds us that the Incarnation was indeed prompted by love. In contrast to the physical composition of place, which is wintry and cold, and represents humanity's barrenness without Christ, the fiery spiritual and mystical aura around the baby suggests the passion and power of his unrequited love. In this snowy, freezing scene, God is once more holding out the offer of salvation to sinful humanity:

My faultlesse breast the furnace is,  
The fuell wounding thornes:  
Love is the fire, and sighes the smoake,  
The ashes, shame and scornes;

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The fewell Justice layeth on,  
And Mercie blowes the coales,  
The metal in this furnace wrought,  
Are men's defiled soules:

The burning apparition, with its sudden infusion into the place, is typologically related to other places known also for God's generosity. His love for Israel found similar expression on the place of Mount Sinai, when Moses was confronted by the presence of God within the burning bush, giving the Commandments for the good of his people. Southwell clearly relates this type to his own apparition, seeing that the Mount Sinai experience finds place in the *Antiphonae Majores* as a climax of the Advent Liturgy:

*O Adonai, dux domus Israel, qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti, et ei in Sina legem dedisti: veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento: O Adonai, and leader of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush, and gave him the law on Sinai, come to redeem us by outstretched arm.*

So the awesome scene at the place of Sinai must be recalled in Southwell's poem. The typological issue of place cannot be left there. Christ himself said:

I came to cast fire on the earth; and what wil[I] I, but that it be kindled?  
(Luke 12: 49)<sup>i</sup>

This creates the imaginative vision of the whole earth suffused by fire. But perhaps the final reminder of the infusion of light into the physical scene is that of the field where shepherds were at work looking after their flocks on that cold night of the Nativity, and, as Luke writes, '...the Angel of the Lord stood beside them and the brightness of God did shine about them...' (Luke 1: 9). For the speaker in 'The Burning Babe', Christ has come again to announce his Nativity and to repeat the offer of salvation.

The final stanza of Southwell's poem returns the speaker to concrete reality as the mystical vision evaporates:

With this he vanisht out of sight,  
And swiftly shrunk away,

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And straight I called unto minde,  
That it was Christmasse day.

It also returns us to the original European winter scene for the meditation, the speaker's composition of place.

## **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup>Biblical quotations are from the Douay version of the New Testament (1572).