

PLATO'S FOOTBALL

A 60th birthday essay.

THE "TRUE EARTH"

Shortly before he drank the fatal hemlock old Socrates asked Simmias if he would like to know what the things on the earth and under the heaven were really like.

"Yes," said Simmias, "we'd be glad to hear that story."

The true earth, the philosopher explained, is said (I am not sure by whom) to resemble one of those balls made of twelve pieces of leather, each of a different colour, stitched together. The world is a multi-coloured football, purple, golden white – many colours, but all these colours are far more wonderful than the colours we see. This ball floats in the heavens, perfectly balanced.

It's hard to find many ancient people who thought the earth was flat. Socrates seems to have known it was a sphere. Anyone in the last two millennia who had read Plato's 'Phaedo' will have had this image in mind. In western Europe most of the works of Plato were lost until the Renaissance, but his theories of nature and creation were handed down at second and third hand. So Socrates (or was it Plato, his biographer?) had a good clear idea of what the earth looked like from above.

But this isn't at all what Socrates was trying to explain. He was not describing a planet, such as we would imagine, swimming in a space of infinite distances and an unimaginably wide scattering of galaxies. He was describing, in a poetic fantasy, what the "true earth" was like, not this planet we actually know.

He goes on to explain that this wonderfully beautiful and highly coloured world is, indeed, the "true earth" but we live in a hollow, a depression. Everything we see and know is only a world of duller colours and shadow. His "true earth" is not this material globe but the ideal world, the whole, harmonious and radiant world which we are unable to see. It might be within our powers to see this reality – if we are pure enough and can climb high enough to look into the heavens and down at the harlequin football.

This surprising image of the football, which is recognisable today (though it would be nice if they were so gaily coloured) can be recognised as something much more profound than it appears. Elsewhere, Plato described the fundamental harmonies of creation in their geometric forms, and this football, made of 12 five sided pieces of leather, is a sort of rounded dodecahedron. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, says that this geometric solid was used by "the god" to arrange the constellations in the heavens.

This parable of the football tells us about a world that exists but within which we are not fully living. There are links between this idea and the classical tradition of the Golden Age. Perhaps in a distant time, in the age of Saturn, or in an ideal Arcadia, people lived in harmony with nature. This Nature, though, was something more inclusive and magical than our concept of nature. Nature, until modern times, meant everything that existed in this "sublunary" world, the world of Creation over which the planets had an influence. I feel our modern idea that "nature" gets in the way of seeing the "true earth." People tend to see "nature" as somehow more real than other parts of what we may or may not call Creation. Many people, when asked to think of the things God made say "flowers" or "trees". Why not "my bowl of cornflakes", or "my unexpectedly wet walk to the shops", or "LNER express locomotives", or a particular conversation, a feeling, a memory? Christians in the Creed say they believe that God made "all things visible and invisible" and that there is nothing that he

did not make. If this is true we can't think of some things being more real or closer to God than others. Nothing is less real because it is in the past or future. Nothing is less real because it is "man-made".

As the Franciscan writer Ilia Delio has pointed out in "The Franciscan View of Creation", Creation as a whole includes not just flowers and birds, not just stones, but also stories. I am afraid there are Franciscans who fall into the trap of seeing only those things in that modern version of "nature" as of value. It's a kind of heresy and is not how Francis's medieval mind could have seen the world. In the medieval mind there was a single complex organism, infinitely varied. Running through every kind of thing were harmonies, which were pictured as the planets. The ancient image of the heavens derived from the discovery of the laws of harmony. Everything was made of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. As C S Lewis would strongly agree, that vision is still true. When St Francis wrote and sang his "Canticle of the Creatures" he carefully included the sun, moon and stars and the realms of the four elements. He was not thinking, as he could not have done, of the sun, moon and stars as we do, but as the visible signs of fundamental qualities in everything. He is encouraging us to see everything, and that means EVERYTHING, as our brothers and sisters.

The 17th Anglican Thomas Traherne could hardly have been more Franciscan in his often-quoted meditation:

"You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are crowned with the stars, and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you." (Traherne, Centuries 1:29)

The "true earth", then, is the total of all the things, from the physical to the imaginary, mountains, poetry, music, and, most of all, people living in harmony with all things.

The legends of Arcadia and the Golden Age are of something that is lost and possibly irrecoverable. However, Plato is not writing about something lost. His "true earth" is eternal. It is the real world. It exists but just beyond reach.

Though this seems to conflict with the quality of loss and nostalgia of Arcadia it does seem that there is always an inescapable sense, in the poetry and in the search for such a locus amoenus in the landscape, that this more true and more real world is, somehow, still there. It is not lost. It is not, even, quite out of sight.

The Judaeo-Christian parallel is the multi-layered story of Eden, Jerusalem and the Heavenly Jerusalem. Eden is, perhaps, the "true earth" where everything is as it should be. Eden is lost but there is a real or a heavenly Jerusalem which stands in its place, literally in some stories. From Jerusalem, real or heavenly, the waters of life flow. The New Testament version closely follows Old Testament prophecy. Though the prophetic descriptions of the New Jerusalem tend to speak of squareness, of cubicness, as a sign of its unity, it is very curious that the City's jewels are a close echo of the wonderful gems Plato mentions in his "true earth." Platonism was an influence on Jewish and Christian thought from before the beginning of the new Era. Or, as I am sure Socrates would have said, both derived from common, more ancient, sources.

In Christian tradition the story seems to be one of an Ideal City, which is a model of the perfectly harmonised world (Jerusalem is a city in unity with itself) and which is a promised destination after our journey through this false and damaged world. At the same time, though, there is always an alternative belief that this Heavenly Kingdom is here and present. I suspect that this "realised eschatology", the belief that this Heavenly City is already here, might be stronger when Platonic influence is at its strongest. Anyone with a platonic leaning

might have remembered that this ideal world is out of reach because of our own blindness and can be, and should be recovered.

The phrase "Kingdom of God" is usually interpreted as meaning "God's reign", the world under God's guidance, rather than a place. This does seem to be the implied meaning in the gospels, but there is an attractive possibility that it can also refer to the "true earth", a reality that we can see once again with God's grace. In the apocryphal "Gospel of Thomas", which is later than the New Testament canon and has gnostic influences which were not compatible with the orthodox church, Christ speaks of a Kingdom of God which is "spread over the world but you do not see it."

This seem to be a very clear reference to Plato's Football, a reality which is just under, or over, the surface of the world but which we do not see because we live in a shadowy depression on the surface of the football.

"....For the new task

Of any poet who pretends to be visioned

Is to stand here in a real wind, and fix in his labour

Myths, as absolute truths, to a common world.

As if to construct great windows in the hills

That show dim purple vistas of unexpected lands." (Baker, The Third Tower, 1980)

THE SANCTUARY

Plato's vision is of a sphere, but the form of a perfect cosmos could easily be imagined in two dimensions. From very ancient times there seems to have been a desire to find that pattern on earth, or to establish such a pattern to enchant (or could it be to control?) the landscape.

A long time ago, around 1980, I was interested in the idea of sacred centres, the omphalos points that lay at the centre of a realm to act as a navel, joining the earth to the heavens and defining the surrounding geography. Delphi is the most famous of such places but there seems to have been a tradition in many ancient societies of finding a point which might touch the centre of the "true earth". There are suggestions of this in Celtic mythology. In the Mabinogion Oxford appears to be such a place, defined by the flights of two dragons.

I was exploring my own local patch of ground in North Bedfordshire. It's a little known part of England with a quality of its own. The skies are wide and clear. Though it is a long way from the sea there is no high land between the Ouse valley and the East Coast. The distinctive geographical feature is the river valley. Between Turvey and Bromham, near Bedford, the River Ouse traces serpentine meanders, folding back on itself and defining an area of land which it embraces, almost as an island. The limestone villages that lie along its curves have fine churches, several with spires. From some points it is possible to see as many as five churches marking the turnings of the river.

I liked to imagine that there was a point at the centre of this serpent-guarded land which might have been a sanctuary in some imaginary period. I would not claim there was anything remotely historical about this, or suggest that anyone looks for archaeological evidence of any ancient sacred occupancy. As it happens, there are traces of "Celtic" or Romano-British settlement in the area. Some fine bronze work has been found along the valley, including a mirror, and there were ritual wells, with votive deposits at Felmersham and Bromham.

The river's pattern could not help but make me think of the Python, the serpent that lay beneath Delphi. It might also remind us of the serpentine avenue at Avebury.

One of my fundamental principles, which I have had in mind as far back as my school days, is, that if there are places which are intrinsically sacred their effect, if they can be considered to have an effect on people or the world around them, must be always present. They can be associated with, or even perhaps attract, ideas or events or objects in the present day as much as in the ancient past.

I would always hold as a principle that antiquity does not make something sacred or meaningful. Something modern in that location, or something associated with it, can have a value and a meaning.

One thread of meaning associated with this Ouse Valley area which has nothing to do with ancient Britons but which might have something to do with the place itself, its Genius Loci, is Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Bunyan walked the riverside paths and baptised in the osier beds at Pavenham. There are local traditions that he imagined his dream journey in the real landscape. This might seem very fanciful but it is an idea that has had an enormously powerful effect on me since I read of it in Vera Brittain's "In the footsteps of John Bunyan".

I had known that the ruined Houghton House, near Ampthill, was known as "The House Beautiful" for much longer. This idea, that Bunyan's story could be imagined in a real geography, was, I think, the first inspiration which drew me to search for meaning in the landscape.

Bunyan is said to have dreamed his original dream in Stevington church. This is the most extraordinary place in my sacred landscape of the Ouse Valley. Below the church, at the foot of a high stone retaining wall holding the church and churchyard above the river, is a holy well. It may or may not be a "Celtic" well but it was certainly a place of pilgrimage in the middle ages. Its water cures eye ailments. I have tried. Symbols and ideas collide in this dark place where the water flows out through middy beds of rhubarb-like weed. I forget their name. The story runs, so says Vera Brittain, that this is the place to which Christian's burden rolls, having been freed from Christian's back at the village cross up the lane.



Bunyan is clearly thinking of Christ's tomb, but the connection has been made. A further layer of this imagery, for me, is Vaughan Williams' 5th symphony. The composer specifically

refers to this passage in *The Pilgrims Progress* as a key to the meaning of the “Romanza” slow movement. The music of the symphony is partly derived from his opera of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

So, the place itself, Bunyan, his story, and the music all come together. This is, to me, a perfect example of the “true earth” at work. It is a living thing. That dodecahedron of colour would be sparkling with dancing lights and golden threads if we could see it from above and weaving all kinds of images into its music. Stevington, in the “true earth”, is not a patch of ground in Bedfordshire but a multi-layered location in which all these aspects, as well as my own personal experience, are equally valid and true. This is what the world is like.

Does a place attract meaning?

Bunyan’s pilgrim is, of course, travelling to his version of the Holy City. The New Jerusalem cannot be far away, though, to Bunyan, travelling there entails the crossing of the great river. It is, in contrast, possible to walk from Stevington to the centre of this area, this island defined by the river, without crossing water.

As there is no visible ancient sanctuary at the centre it is impossible to define exactly where the omphalos point may be. I like to think of it as close to the road between Stevington and Carlton. This is the highest point in the landscape. There is a curious sunken track leading up to it from the river at Harrold. This might be an ancient trackway or it might be fairly modern alternative route for farm traffic. At the high point there is a trig point, always a good sign, and, more excitingly, an underground Royal Observer Corps bunker from which observers would be able to look out at the effects of nuclear war should such an event occur. It’s abandoned now.

But this is, of course, the Sanctuary. This has as much value as an ancient Celtic grove in this game of the “true earth.” It is, indeed, a sanctuary, but one on which those observers would sleep in military iron beds, eat tinned fruit and Spam and occasionally look out to see if anything was alive in the razed landscape. Yes, this is exactly what I am trying to explain.

Another enormous influence on me, and on this ongoing adventure, was David Rudkin’s 1975 TV film “Penda’s Fen”. This was a story of a teenage boy, with various anxieties, who is obsessed with the visionary nature of Elgar’s “Dream of Gerontius.” The music is woven into strange pagan goings-on in the Malvern Hills and hints of sinister military activities underground. In spite of the dottiness and simply wrong elements of the story this is an important work and reflected so accurately my own interests at that time. I had first got to know the Elgar in a summer music school in 1973 and Elgar, who is always stranger than we think, had already dug deep in my imagination. But here, too, is this contemporary element. Modern things, good or evil, serious or simply fun, can be equally mythic.



In 1981/2 I discovered that this Sanctuary did, in fact, make a reasonable centre point for England. A circle drawn from it can contain all of what is now England east of Offa's Dyke, or the Welsh Border, and south of the Humber. Even in the time of King Offa, who claimed lordship of all England, this region north of the Humber was somewhere other - Brigantia and, later, Yorkshire.

All these ideas in my mind become embedded in poetry, stories, and even a 60 minute home movie, in the next few years. In 1991 I looked again at the location of this omphalos and wrote to the doyen of ancient mysteries and metrology John Michell. I sent him a map of my location showing its central position in this part of the island. He replied in October 1991 and I visited him soon after to talk about these curiosities. He was a very affable character. We had honey and tea.

John Michell had been investigating the siting of these ancient sanctuaries. They were, he discovered, not placed at random but in places which were geometrically central. This may seem a difficult calculation for a very irregular island like ours, but Michell found that these sites were defined by lines drawn between significant headlands, extremities of the island or country that they served. I am not clear how this could have been surveyed in the distant past, but I suspect there were perfectly accurate and effective methods of inland navigation a thousand or two thousand years ago. People did travel great distances. The major sacred sites, such as Avebury and Stonehenge, may have been centres for people from very far away. How did people know where they lay? The civilisation of the Bronze Age depended on the transport of the raw metal s from mines very far apart, Cornwall and Great Orme. Did they use the stars to find their way or to lay their roads?

Michell tested his theory on the Isle of Man and found that lines from extreme headlands intersected at the site of the first Tynwald parliament. Such places could have both a symbolic and a practical administrative significance.

He showed, on my own map, that the centre point in the Ouse valley area was defined, just as the Isle of Man site was, by lines from headlands. One ran from Spurn Head to St Catherine's point on the Isle of Wight and one linked North Foreland in Kent to the exceptionally important Great Orme in North Wales, whose copper mines made it absolutely vital to the bronze age civilisation. In fact, this placing is more precise than that of Avebury and Stonehenge, both positioned on only one accurate line. The Roman Centre at High Cross on the A5 is also defined by two lines. The Roman site is the centre of Roman Britain, including Wales. My Bedfordshire site encloses England alone. There is a suggestion that, if these centres are historically true, they can move according to changing political situations. There is also a fascinating possibility that a realm could have a public, official, centre and another that was more authentic and kept secret because of its symbolic, or actual, power. This doubling of centres can be seen in Ireland, with Tara as the political centre and Uisneach as the sacred focus.

Whether or not there is any historical reality to this theory the idea exists and my omphalos is as valid as any.

This placing of an omphalos is the key factor of a more complex system of sacred geography investigated by Jean Richier in his "The Sacred Geometry of the Ancient Greeks." (Translated by Christine Rhone, whom I briefly met at John Michell's house.)

Richier provides extremely complex and detailed evidence that the omphalos point, most famously Delphi, with its temple of Apollo (and of Dionysus) and its buried serpent, was the centre of an amphictyony, a complete symbolic geography based on the 12 signs of the zodiac, which set the shrine at the centre of the lands of 12 tribes who came together for ritual purposes at this focal point. There is very strong biblical parallel with the tradition of the twelve tribes of Israel. An exceptional feature of the amphictyony in Exodus is that the sanctuary is moving. It centred on the Ark of the Covenant as it journeys to its resting place at the temple of Jerusalem. Once in its sacred home, on that symbolically central hill, the symbolism of Jerusalem, and the New Jerusalem in both its old and New Testament versions becomes a clear parallel.

This pattern of the twelve tribes radiating from a centre is, very directly I think, a two dimensional model of Plato's dodecahedron football. The 12 faces of the solid become the twelve divisions of a disc.

Perhaps my central point might be the focus of 12 divisions of a circle across England. Of course I drew a map, which set off all kinds of other ideas. Is there a peculiar quality to the places on the borders of the surrounding circle?

John Michell's method of establishing the position is very straightforward and rational and the mythological background is very strong. If so, these central points could be considered as symbols of the central point of the whole "true earth" and the amphictyony could be seen as an attempt to outline the ideal world on the geography of the earth.

But are these omphaloi more than just symbols? Do they have a life of their own? Do they do something? Delphi, with its complex mythology and prophetic tradition, certainly had a life. Was there something about the place itself that touched the life within the "true earth"? Everything comes together at such a place. A centre is also everywhere. A place of knowledge.

It is significant that the motto at the entrance to Delphi's sanctuary was "Know thyself". Knowing thyself is also knowing all...

HELIOPOLIS

In 1981 I wrote a book for my own amusement about a "true kingdom" in which all these different symbols and myths had their place in the villages of the Ouse Valley.

At that point I had never heard of Thomas Wright of Durham, though a long bicycle ride following clues for the book took me to the Northamptonshire village of Horton where I came across a temple folly and also a fascinating secret military depot hidden in the woods of Yardley Chase, with its own railway link. This appeared on no maps at the time but now it has been decommissioned you can see the tracks of the railway network and the many moated munitions stores.

Horton was, I discovered a few years later, one of Wright's landscapes and the Menagerie, originally just that, a home for exotic animals, is the only surviving habitable dwelling from his designs. I had tea there in the '80s with its then owner Gervase Jackson-Stops. "Worth a guinea a minute", as Lucinda Lambton said of him in her TV film about architecture for animals.

At the end of my 1981 book I imagined a tower from which a poet could watch over the many dimensions of this true kingdom/true earth with a camera obscura. The inspiration of the tower itself was Lord Berners' folly at Faringdon, which was midway between my Ouse Valley sanctuary and Glastonbury. I saw the tower's proprietor in Victorian guise rather than 18th century, complete with smoking cap. I probably remembered this from the 1968 Doctor Who story "The Mind Robber" in which a writer, based on Frank Richards of the Billy Bunter stories, controls a land of the imagination. This story must have been a major influence on me.

"The lens focuses through every station of the temple, through every time, through the clear order of the stars to mythological scenes of nymphs and magic."

The observing poet makes it clear that this vision is not an escape from the world or an excuse for unworldly detachment. He says:

"We must make others feel the magic everywhere, whether beautiful or terrible, to go into places where the world's nerves are bare and let that life inspire us through love or terror. We must rediscover the true world" (I really knew nothing about Plato's football at the time) "and awaken the magic. The master of the Grand Art should 'know the threads that hold the universe together and mend them when they break.'"

It is dangerous to look for too many coincidental connections but these last words are a quote from a 1980 Doctor Who story, "Meglos" which features a sacred dodecahedron as an object of worship and power. Oh dear!

Thomas Wright of Durham was a tower builder. His tower at Byer's Green, Durham, was intended, I believe, as a terrestrial and celestial observatory.



There are copies of manuscript charts in Durham University library which show what he calls "region rhombs" radiating, like the amphictyonies, from his tower, though these divide Europe into 16 areas based on compass points rather than the 12 zodiacal signs.

I first came across Wright when I moved to Staffordshire and lived in a cottage that had belonged to the Shugborough Estate. Shugborough opened up a whole world of symbolic geography and mythology. It is, as much as anywhere, a mirror of Arcadia, and would be even without the follies which Thomas Wright and his successor James "Athenian" Stuart built. There is something about the place itself.

Wright worked at Shugborough in 1748 at the same time as he was completing his treatise "An Original Theory of the Universe." Wright was a cosmologist before he became a garden designer and architect. His cosmology saw the entire universe as a centred on a supernatural central focus, "The Eye of Providence". He struggled to explain his vision in several versions throughout his life. In "An Original Theory", which incidentally gives the first explanation of the Milky Way as being the effect of our view through a galaxy, he describes, and illustrates, an infinity of universes which somehow all share a common centre. In his later "Second Thoughts" he imagines all these worlds as literally being inside each other. This is a far less credible concept to the version in "An Original Theory." Wright suggests these many worlds are better or worse depending on their nearness to the divine centre, and that we may be reborn in a better or worse world instead of suffering eternal punishment.

Wright is an eccentric and an original but he was clearly a very likable man, spending his summers as tutor to aristocratic young ladies and being a long term close friend of the very platonic and witty poet Elizabeth Carter. In his early days in London he met supporters of William Stukely who believed that the Druids had been the all-wise priests who had built the ancient stone circles and who also managed to be precursors of Anglican Christianity. Wright surveyed Avebury and Stonehenge with friends of Stukely and so his personal mythology becomes filled with wise druids and a dream of ancient British antiquity. (Wright may have been deluded by Stukely's imaginary history but in Ireland he made the first accurate surveys of ancient monuments.)

All Wright's interests come together in a description of an ideal city, Heliopolis, in an unpublished manuscript in Newcastle Library. Though I have known this for nearly forty years I can find no trace of it having been read or referred to at any time, even though interest in Wright as a gardener has grown in recent years.

Wright covered many pages with his description of The Fortunate Islands in his almost illegible script. The chapter index shows that this fairly incoherent text is fragment of an impossibly large project. His islands are undoubtedly Britain, peopled by the descendants of Hercules Ogmios, the inventor of writing.

"In the centre of the island upon a spacious hill, sheltered from the south by green mountains rising above each other like a natural theatre and overlooking the rest of the island is the City of Heliopolis to which a double serpentine approach leads through the woods and over the neighbouring mountains."

This is very clearly inspired by Avebury's avenues.

"The palace of Heliopolis is placed at the centre of the city, upon a rising hill in the middle of a spacious plain, whose area is about five miles diameter. The crown of this spherical mount is nearly one mile over and connected in a circle, like a corona, are 12 superb palaces, answering to the twelve seasons or subdivisions of the year, which the Emperor alternately inhabits according to the sign of the zodiac or month of the year, annually revolving in some degree with the great celestial luminary."

"In this circular concatenation of apartments there is one general communication or circumambient, of about three miles in compass, but divided by the rich triumphal arches leading to all the several apartments, in which all the production of nature are represented, and on the outside of the palace fronting this way is a most magnificent terrace of 100 feet wide which overlooks the garden, and likewise the whole city."

(This representation of the products of nature is reminiscent of Renaissance Memory Theatres.)

"Upon the outward verge of this walk, upon proper pedestals sculpted with the natural produce of the year are 360 statues, all of Panean marble, and dedicated to the phases of the year, and without them, in their proper places other pedestals for the 12 signs of the zodiac, all in Corinthian brass and set with gems to represent the stars which form the constellations."

"Below them, on the declivity of the hill, are many winding walks, little lawns and grottoes, with several promontorial projections on which are erected elegant temples of various constructions peculiar to the most distinguished attributes of the Deity."

(In other words, a very Wrightian landscape garden.)

"Below all these and circumscribing the whole hill is a circular river of limpid water, which rises out of an alabaster rock at about three eighths of the ascent, and from thence winding in a spiral manner and forming many and various cascades it leaves the imperial garden and enters the city at a great cataract, little inferior to the lesser ones of the Nile. I forgot to say that the spring head rushes out of a golden urn at the upper end of a natural grotto or cave, richly adorned with shells, 100 feet long and above fifty feet wide, in which are compartments of exquisite design and invention, with the river genius in reclining posture resting upon the urn which is supported by a bed of amethyst. The waters of this fountain make their first appearance in a cascade about thirty feet high, rushing over and through the rocks."

"At the bottom of the hill is a beautiful circular lawn, planted with open groves and impenetrable thickets in a most enchanting taste, in which every kind of tree, shrub and

flower, natural to the whole world, and all species of plant cultivated to the utmost perfection, for the climate here is so mild no artificial aids are wanted.

“In the centre of the palace area is the Temple of the Sun, or Solarium, with lodgements for the priests, and grand apartments for their Thearcons of which there are three, who are alternatively obliged to be upon their sacred duty four moons of the year.

“Round this most sacred building are groves and thickets of various covering shrubs, and with a serpent of flowers that blows according to the year and season of every flower, and is a sort of perpetual coronal chaplet or wreath dedicated to Time and Nature.”

This a spectacularly ornate version of the amphityony scheme. The Palace is heliocentric, with the sun at the focus, but this represents, I am sure, Wright's Spiritual sun at the centre of all his multiple universes. The serpent of flowers around the central Solarium forms an Ouroboros, the circular serpent with its tail in its mouth, which Wright used on several designs. In this unread and unpublished text Thomas Wright brings together the full range of traditions of the sacred centre and merges it with his cosmology and his love of garden design.

As I have said, I knew nothing of Wright until 1983, and yet here he is, a key figure in the development of my other personal locus amoenus, Shugborough, stepping into the shoes of my poet/observer in his tower. It seems odder now, looking back, than it did then. I really don't believe there is any value in coincidences – but...is this the half-joking dance of the “true earth” threading beads of meaning together and dangling them before our dazzled eyes?

THE HOUSES OF THE VISITATION

The Panacea Society used to be known for their advertising campaigns about Joanna Southcott's Box. Southcott was a prophet at the end of the 18th century who believed she was going to give birth to the second coming. Her final prophecies are said to be sealed in a box which can only be opened in the presence of an assembly of 24 bishops. The Panacea Society was a Southcottian group originally and it claimed to own the original box. Indeed the trustees of the Panacea Trust which looks after the property of the Society still claim to have the box in a safe place somewhere in Bedford. The Society itself faded with the death of its last member only a few years ago.

The Society's beliefs were complicated. It began with a prophet, Mabel Barltrop, known as Octavia, the eighth and last of a series of English prophets, one of which was Southcott, and inheritor of their tradition. Octavia attracted a following in the early years of the 20th century and this grew during and after the First World War. It particularly attracted women affected by the war, though there were a few loyal men. As Octavia was a living prophet the society developed and became increasingly complex in its beliefs as her automatic writings poured out.

In 1920 Octavia began to speak, or write, on behalf of “Jerusalem”, the feminine aspect of God. From this point all kinds of symbolism and mythology connected with the idea of the Holy City and of Sacred Centres began to be absorbed by the Society.

A series of properties were bought close to the middle of Bedford. These were originally known as “The Houses of the Visitation” but after the advent of the Divine Mother the community was referred to simply as “The Centre”. There was, and is, a house set aside for the

second coming, an enclosed garden and a small chapel where, occasionally, the ladies would perform sacred dances.

The Panacea itself, a cure for all ills, was sacred water, distributed in the form of small pieces of cloth that had been dipped in the water as a tincture. In some way this water was also the water of the River of Life which flowed from the New Jerusalem.

Their knowledge of the mythology of Jerusalem was wide and eclectic. They inevitably drew in William Blake. One of Octavia's closest allies, Rachel Fox, wrote a series of very detailed histories of the development of the society one of which, not surprisingly, is called "How we built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." It's a pity they did know the more fantastic visions of Blake and his feminine Jerusalem. They did know the Sophianic feminine visions of Jane Leade, the 17th century mystic.

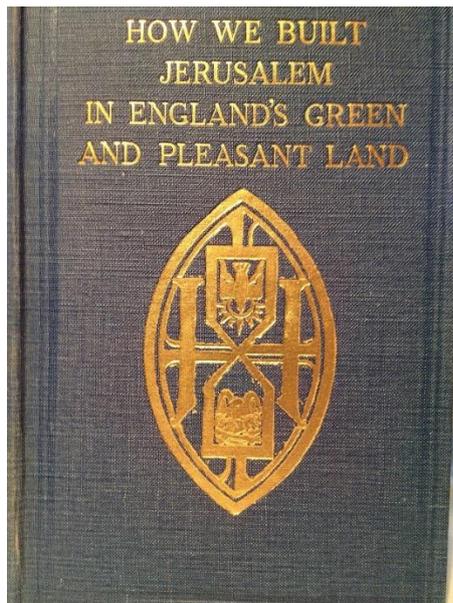
My great aunt was a member of the Panacea Society and in her later years lived in one of the "Houses of the Visitation" in Albany Road. I grew up knowing that these old ladies, living in houses with uniform dark green doors and windows, believed in a second coming. I knew about Joanna Southcott, but it was only in 1990, thinking about an idea for a novel in which a girl would find herself living in these secret houses and looked after by old ladies who believed her to be a new prophet, that I wrote to the society and ordered copies of Rachel Fox's books. They came wrapped in ancient brown paper and string.

It was only then, ten years after my interest in the omphalos and my own poetic fancies, that I discovered how much the Panacea Society had shared this symbolism.

They knew their Glastonbury. Rachel Fox's books, bound in blue with gold lettering, show the society symbol of a vesica piscis, a lenticular shape which may be copied from the cover of Chalice Well. They had offshoots of the Glastonbury thorn in their garden, as well as an ash tree known as Yggdrasil, the tree that stands at the centre of the world in Norse mythology.

Rachel Fox described an expedition to sprinkle and bless the churches which lay around The Centre.

"On Nov. 1 (1925), well do I remember a little group of five of us setting out to the churches allotted to us, taking the Blessed Water to sprinkle on the gates, the porches and the doors. There was a dense, wet fog, and we felt like conspirators, glad that we could hardly be seen by each other or by the public." (Fox, HWBJ, p 220)



This sounds like a kind of magical act to cleanse the sacred centre, but the full significance of the location of the Houses did not emerge until April 23rd 1927.

"On April 23rd, St George's Day, Octavia was studying a map of Great Britain containing important towns but no county boundaries. She wondered whether our headquarters were as central to the Kingdom as it would seem they should be, being the pivot from which news of the Second Coming was going to be spread to the world. She began to measure and to her surprise she found that her town was practically equidistant from the river Humber on the north, from the sea on the East, and from the Welsh border on the West. She then found that the 26 Sees or Bishoprics of the Province of Canterbury lay in this District, and she saw that this would provide the 24 Bishops required for the opening of Joanna Southcott's Box." (Fox, HWBJ, pp.384-5)

That evening the Script from the Divine Mother, Octavia's second-in-command, confirmed the significance of this.

"I have set before you your Kingdom of England proper, reduced in size but more easy for you to visualise and to understand as a wheel of which you now have the circumference." (Fox, HWBJ, p. 385)

The Centre is only about 8 miles from the high point in the Ouse Valley and it may, though these things are never very accurate to my eyes, lie on a line connecting High Cross, the Ouse Valley Centre and more than one other traditional centre point.

This is all disturbingly similar to the kind of things I was thinking about around 1980. I do tend to feel that such coincidences are not meaningful at all, but are jokes thrown up by the dance of the cosmos. Oddly enough I had another attempt at the Panacea novel a few years later (1998) and set the beginning in Sidmouth, as I was going there on holiday. The heroine, who would be mistaken for a prophet, was to be an artist exhibiting in that old fashioned sea-side town. When I got to Sidmouth I was surprised to find a plaque commemorating Joanna Southcott, who, unknown to me, had been born there. I thought I better abandon the book.

It's so easy to be drawn into a suffocating web of delusion, though I did enjoy, while sitting by the radiantly blue sea near Ravello, a very well argued academic book that suggested there might be something in it after all. But, then, I also remember reading Strindberg's autobiography in which he wraps himself up in a suffocating cloak of coincidental obsessions as he wanders the nocturnal streets. I flinch when I hear the word "God-incidences." No, it's safer for sanity to say that things are significant if they are significant, not just because the same number appears on a tram and a front door.

Today, looking up these references in the series of volumes by Rachel Fox I have found another detail which brings the Panacea Society even closer to the symbolism of the sacred centre.

In the garden at the Haven, the house set aside for the Second Coming, was a curved seat, built of bricks reclaimed from building work on the house, but with stone "facings and elbows" of 160 year old Portland stone. They found there was exactly one brick too few to complete the seat. Octavia found a single brick under a flower pot to complete the bench.

Octavia decided there should be a Round Table to go with the seat. This would have to be a stone table to suit the garden setting. Believing this would be impossible to find, one of the members went to a stone works where, miraculously, he found just such a table. But this table was more than simply round, it was an ideal addition to the garden's symbolism.

"There was a hole in the centre for a fountain and there was a groove to hold the water in its outward circumference, while it was divided into twelve sections on each of which a small lion's head was carved. Out of the mouths of the twelve lions water was intended to percolate." (Fox, HWBJ, pp388-9)

They met, on June 2nd 1927, twelve Panacea apostles, standing around the table, each with a hand on a lion's head.

The "Word of the Lord" wrote:

"This table is the most symbolical thing possible – a fountain, a table, in a garden, with the twelve divisions...."

Sadly this remarkable table is no longer in the garden, though there are seats which may have originally formed part of the bench. The houses and garden are now a museum. In spite of the more bizarre aspects of Octavia's teaching there is a spiritual quality in the chapel, with its window image of Jerusalem, the Mother of Us All. Why should it not be a holy place

HEAVEN ON EARTH

True sacred centres are not places from which one can lay out regions to allocate to the twelve tribes, or from which one can describe a circle around a smaller and more convenient England. A true sacred centre is a place which actually is, due to some undefinable effect of

geography or psychology, or acts as, a representation or symbol of, a point which is the centre of "the true earth."

I do not intend to devalue any historical or "invented" sacred centres. Even my personal centre, the Ouse Valley and the stone table in the Panacea garden have a "truth", and their stories may even be signs that "something is going on", the inescapable feeling that they are part of a Dance rather than a static pattern.

I do not believe in the supernatural. I don't think it's necessary to bring in anything from outside Nature to explain what the world is like. I keep Occam's Razor in mind. To me, the meaning of Plato's parable is not that there are other worlds, but that we do not see the world as it really is. We tend to see only a narrow part of it.

This narrow view can be the modern idea of nature – living things, green things. The "true earth", I feel, is the world seen as it really is, in which past, present and future are all part of a whole, and in which stories, art, imagination are equally a part, and in which everyone's individual interpretation or vision is equally real. This "true earth", then, is not a material object like the planet we live on. It's far more than that. As a map is to the landscape we walk in, so is this landscape to the "true earth". As a score of a symphony is to the performance, so is that performance to the music, the "work", itself, as it lives in its hearers' imaginations and draws in their feelings and memories.

Within this more complex Nature there may well be "works", patterns, forms which have an existence on levels or dimensions that are far more complex than world we walk in. They may connect things in ways we are not usually able to see. Imagine, if you will, that the "true earth" is a sphere and that beautiful patterns or works are threaded through it in all manner of ways. Even if we have climbed out of Plato's hollows we are still living on a world which is just a thin slice of that sphere. What are really golden threads appear to us as tiny flashes of gold. Or, perhaps, imagine an excellent terrine in which vegetables are laid. Our slice reveals a pattern of many sections of multi-coloured carrots and beans from which we may not be able to imagine the form of the whole vegetable. Or think of a slice of Pork and Egg gala pie – with, to me, its associated dimension of peaches and evaporated milk.

And we are aware of "works" that form a meaning by the association and linking of many individual things, whether objects, events, words or images. Just as a poem is a thread on which many different objects hang, sounds, words, images and our own memory and feelings, so we might think in terms of "works" that thread many individual symbols, words, objects together through times and places – and which we, moving about in one dimension, may only rarely glimpse as a diagonal flash of meaning through the world.

This seem, to me, common experience. It really does.

If we could look down on the "true earth" with all its times, memories, relationships, meanings, dances, we would see something brilliantly coloured and beautiful, a patchwork of every colour. This might be imagined as a dodecahedron football, or as the pre-Copernican universe of the sphere of 12 fixed signs and the moving planets. Amphicytonies and round tables can only ever be unsatisfactory ways of representing this in two dimensions.

The modern world knows that the cosmos is not, physically, that shape. The ancient vision of the cosmos is not a scientific diagram. It is a vision of harmony. The spheres of the planets are mirrors of the harmonic relationships of the musical tones or modes. Now we have settled on equal temperament, at least in some musical traditions, we can also see the circle of fifths as a parallel to the circle of the zodiac.

Renaissance representations of the harmonious structure of the cosmos assign muses (and angels) to the musical scale as well as planets. The musical scale rises from earth (the root, G, of the Gamut). Earth must not be thought of as the planet, which, we know, is not literally at the centre of the cosmos. This Earth is the realm of Nature as a whole. Earth has no music of its own. Its muse is Thalia, muse of comedy. We should never forget her! (She appears, with my other muses, as a character in my "Ravello Dialogues".) This is "true" to me, as the whole system is "true", because our earth is not actually silent, quite the reverse. Earth is influenced by all the muses and all the planets. The music of Earth is infinitely varied. The "true earth" is a wonderful "divine comedy" in which dance, sacred and earthly song, poetry and learning of history or astronomy all have a part.

These are lovely patterns and images but it is so easy to draw them on the earth and impose designs rather than freeing ourselves to see the far more vibrant and unpredictable reality. How can we, with our desire to impose order, stop ourselves digging deeper into Plato's depressions?

To me, one of the defining beginnings of Christianity is the discovery of a new vision of the meaning of the Temple and of Jerusalem. The Temple had been a physical centre to which the tribes came and which stood in the place of Eden. At the heart of this centre was the Holy of Holies, and within its curtain or veil the Ark of the Covenant (which had once been the mobile centre of the amphictyony of the 12 tribes in their wandering). At each side of the Ark were carved golden cherubim.

This Holy of Holies is mirrored in Christ's tomb. Mary Magdalen finds an empty tomb and two angels, one at the head and one at the foot of the place where the body had lain. These angels, very clearly, are the two cherubim of the Holy of Holies. But "the veil of the temple had been rent in twain". Christ, the incarnation of the word, was not there but was risen. Mary finds him in the garden.

With the symbolism of the Centre in mind this story becomes as clear as day.

In Christian tradition the centre can be anywhere, is anywhere. In a church we come to the centre in the Eucharist. A church may be a spectacular representation of all creation, focussed on the altar and the communion, but the church is a device that brings us to this point of union and then sends us out into a new world.

Jerusalem has all the qualities of a sacred centre, but such a centre could only find its full meaning if all the tribes of the world could have a place there. This desire is present in the Old Testament but the vision of inclusiveness that a sacred centre demands has never been satisfied. We have a long way to climb to be able to see that jewel-bedecked city as it is.

Christian tradition has never quite decided whether the true earth or New Jerusalem is within our grasp (if we can climb out of our depression in the football), or whether it is only to be arrived at the end of time. Both states can equally be true.

I feel a more positive view of our world came about with the rediscovery of the value of nature in the 12th century. In spite of some people placing the blame on Plato for dividing matter from spirit and demonising the material world, it was the revival of Platonism, in the Christian and Islamic worlds, that led to a revaluing of Nature in the middle-ages.

Franciscan tradition, in particular, saw Nature (as a whole) as having value and meaning and as a revelation of God. To Bonaventure, Nature is part of Scripture, God's message, and is to be read in all the ways written scripture should be read. (Our idea of what literal means doesn't seem to have been part of the medieval mind-set). In other words our reading of the

Book of Nature, with mind and imagination, is a way of seeing the true earth through the surface of Nature. This does not devalue nature. We must see the sacred in the natural. This affirmative spirituality, finding God in the world, does not replace the older negative way in the Franciscan tradition. The negative way asks us to strip away all thought of the world and see only God in the "cloud of unknowing". Both paths are equally difficult and equally valid. Perhaps they are, ultimately, equally affirming. The contemplative who reaches that moment of knowing God will then return to everyday life with clearer sight, seeing Creation as it truly is.

In his "Tree of Life" Bonaventure writes:

*"If only I could find this book
Whose origin is eternal,
Whose essence is incorruptible,
Whose knowledge is life...
Whose words are ineffable,
Yet all are a single Word!"*

This reading of the world is closely paralleled in Islam in the concept of Ta'wil in which the divine writings and the Book of Creation are read as a metaphor, or a window into a truer world. (See Tom Cheetham: "All the World an Icon")

But in order to read this Book, in whatever tradition we follow, we have to be able to see the Book as a whole, not just the cover, or the nice pictures, or the bits that affirm our own prejudices.

We need tough disciplines, hard work, or very clear souls, to discover this real world. People have a liking for Pilgrimage and it is useful to have a structure for a Journey. It can be a long and hard climb through this earthly depression to an ultimate arrival at a sacred place which opens as a door into the colourful patches and jewels of the true earth.

Maybe St Francis had another way. Once, when travelling with his brothers, he came to a crossroads and didn't know which way to turn. Francis suggested they spun him round to make him giddy and whichever way he fell that way they should go.

Francis was already there

My object in life seems to be to explore this "true kingdom" and to do a few small things to reveal any glimpses I find to others.

There is no need of a map. The diagram of the "true earth" is the fundamental pattern of music, of harmony, which is reflected in the traditional structure of the cosmos. This structure runs through every dimension of Creation, through music, and through our psychology. (At least I like to think, following the American writer Thomas Moore, that the musical modes are also rather like Jungian archetypes. Are these archetypes in everything? Are the qualities in the various archetypal places, Arcadia, Forest, the same fundamental harmonies that live in our souls and in music?)

I can't predict what the meaning of a place or an experience will be. I hope I can wander about with a certain randomness like Francis, and find what I find. The "places" I visit may include stories, art, people, all of which are loci in the Dance of the "true earth." I feel I should not use a map of any sacred geography. The only valid map is the diagram of harmonic relationships, the diagram of the ideal cosmos. This the map of everything, seen

from any angle. The same harmonies pass through every aspect of Nature, or so I can believe, as a working hypothesis at least.

It's worth remembering the often quoted definition which is found in Bonaventure's "Journey of the Mind into God", an absolutely essential manual for this philosophy):

"God is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere."

(This phrase actually dates back to the 4th century AD and an anonymous text, "The Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers.")

In the context of this story this has a very strong message. These sacred centres and geographies are a powerful symbol but, in order to read the book aright, we have to keep in mind that God's Centre is everywhere. Wherever we stand we have to be centred, and to be aware that all these harmonies and meanings are present everywhere.



I can study this diagram of musical latitude and longitude and learn more of the modes and that I have avoided and need to know better. To be able to travel with your own soul attuned to the music of the spheres you need to explore all these harmonies in yourself. I can follow this course of study, led by the muses, by exploring this world, or my small part of it, and trying to find music to match it. This music might try to express the Spirit of Place, or be a counterpoint to it, or to even contradict the Genius Loci to discover a new point of view. It might be a prayer where a prayer is needed, or the music might try to heal. We are, we have to remember, not just observers, but healers and makers. We are part of the world. And I must make no judgment of which place, or story, or encounter, is sacred - everything is, and especially, we have to remember, the comic.

I have a neat format for this. I like the idea of pieces of music which are four minutes long – one side of a 12" 78. It makes a frame and encourages interesting forms. As for the style, though I have learned from the various modes and manners the muses sing, I must use whatever music I have. My music is Thalia's mixed music, whatever I have, imperfect, confused, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic – my own poor reflection of the music of earth.

So, exploring with a camera, and words perhaps, and then searching for music to go with the pictures - the views from my personal Camera Obscura. And so many places to explore.

There is a rich tradition of Psychogeography. This tends to be a post-modern exercise of wandering, usually in a city, following the wrong map, or at random and creating an individual alternative reality. I would have to say that such realities are of value. But what if the wanderer believes there really is a meaning to be read in the forgotten backstreets? I am sure this how Arthur Machen saw it in his wanderings through London. He meant it when he said that there were genuine visions to be found. London was a genuine theophany to him. If this view of the world has any reality it must follow that any wanderer may have valid visions, regardless of their beliefs or post-modern world-view

Simply by being here and observing, standing or walking we can re-unite the earth which we think we live in with the harmonies of the cosmos. We can climb out of our Platonic depressions with the aid of whatever religious, spiritual, or artistic disciple we have, and even more with love, by far the toughest discipline to learn. We can walk in the "true earth".

Christine Rhone wrote of the visionary act of walking in an article "Footseps on the Threshold" in the journal "Alexandria 5".

"When we walk in admiration, we walk in measure with foundation, and thus we make our footsteps steps of light upon the threshold of a place where the whole universe shines, undivided and unbroken."

ANDREW BAKER

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