

THE COMPOSITION OF PLACE

Creating Space for an Encounter

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EXPERIENCE OF GOD IS AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT of Christian life. Even if it may be difficult to explain or illustrate such an experience, nevertheless many people can point to such occasions: before a landscape, on the birth of a child, in the sudden silence of a prayer, in the intensity of love, and so on. But while another essential experience is the encounter with Jesus Christ, for many people the latter seems to occur with greater difficulty. They can certainly recognise Jesus as a historical figure who speaks to them from the gospel stories and stands as an exemplar for a way of life modelled on the Gospels. Above all, many can find Jesus by analogy in the neighbour whom one meets (as indicated in Matthew 25). But how are we to represent to ourselves a real encounter with Jesus Christ? Part of the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is precisely to bring us to a personal encounter with Jesus. The aim of this article is to show that the composition of place (*compositio loci*) is a special occasion for facilitating this encounter.

Being Present

At the start of the first meditation in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius advises that one should 'see the place', and he calls this 'prelude' or preliminary the 'composition'. He describes the process as follows:

It should be noted here that for contemplation or meditation about visible things, for example a contemplation on Christ our Lord (who is visible), the 'composition' will consist in seeing through the gaze of the imagination the material place where the object I want to contemplate is situated. By 'material place' I mean for example a temple or a mountain where Jesus Christ or our Lady is to be found—according to what I want to contemplate. Where the object is an invisible one, as is the case in the present meditation on sins, the composition will be to see with the gaze of the

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imagination, and to consider, that my soul is imprisoned in this body which will one day disintegrate, and also my whole composite self (by this I mean the soul joined with the body), as if exiled in this valley among brute beasts. (Exx 47)¹

In their analysis of this passage most commentators have focused their attention on the imaginative gaze (*con la vista de la imaginación*), in order to warn that one is not involved here in pure imagining or fantasizing, but rather that the aim is to contemplate within oneself something real.² Few commentators concentrate on the meaning of the actual 'composition' and the 'place', and on the how and the wherefore. After all, would it not be much easier when one is praying with Scripture to go straight to the text, without following the roundabout route of composition of place? Ignatius is clear that we should make this preliminary composition, but he does not explain why.

The older Directories are particularly laconic in their remarks on the composition of place. Indeed the earliest do not seem to know what to say about it, and tend rather to play down its importance. This attitude may well stem from a certain distrust with regard to the visual in prayer. Thus Antonio Valentino, in his report on the formation of novices, summarily notes:

It is true that in these preludes we should not dwell too much on physical images, as do children or animals, but like rational human beings pass from visible things to invisible. (Dir 16: 16)³

Even when the composition is described as something positive it tends to be considered of secondary importance. The line taken by Diego Miró (about 1581) in his second Directory is characteristic:

¹ This article uses the translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* by Michael Ivens (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004).

² The Flemish translation of the Exercises used by the author—*Ignatius van Loyola Geestelijke Oefeningen*, translated and annotated by Mark Rotsaert and others (Averbode: Altiora, 1994)—has a note to this effect.

³ Translations from the Directories are based on *On Giving the Spiritual Exercises: The Early Jesuit Manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599*, edited by Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996). They are cited by the document and paragraph numbering deriving from the 1955 MHSJ edition.

In the composition of place, a person makes himself present, as it were, to the place where the event occurred, or to some other place. With the eyes of the imagination he beholds everything which is found, said, or done there, or is thought to be done there. He can also imagine that all these things are similarly present to him in the place where he is. This latter procedure is normally preferable. But he should not spend too much time on this kind of composition of place, so as not to tire his head, but should go on to meditate the event proposed. (Dir 23:66)

This text sets a tone. On the one hand, some of the advantages of the composition are recognised, namely the making oneself 'present, as it were to the place' (*como presente en el lugar*); on the other hand a word of warning is given. Both these elements will recur in other texts.

According to Gil González Dávila, the most important feature of the *compositio loci* is that the exercitant 'should make him- or herself present' (*hacerse como presente*) in relation to the event contemplated. In this context he invokes classical writers: for example, he quotes Pseudo-Bonaventure, an anonymous Franciscan (c.1300-1330), author of *Meditations on the Life of Jesus*, a work that was frequently quoted among the early Jesuits:

In the composition of place the exercitant should remember that he is present to the entire event, as St Bonaventure says in the prologue to his life of Christ.⁴

González also draws a parallel with Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (probably c.500), who points to the unique character of this presence, creating as it does in the one who meditates a special relation with a person:

In the composition of place, the one meditating should make himself present in the mystery as though it were being done for him alone, as St Paul says speaking of Christ our Lord: 'He loved me and gave himself up for me' (Galatians 2:20); and as Dionysius the Areopagite relates at the end of his eighth letter, at the conclusion of the vision of the apostle's disciple Carpus: 'I am ready to die for them again'—which shows the infinite charity of the Lord. (Dir 31:161)

⁴ Dir 31:93, translation altered.

González touches here on the heart of the matter: one can see that *being present* is two-sided. The person who contemplates makes him- or herself present with respect to the mystery—but that mystery is of a person already present, here and now, and indeed in a unique way, to the person contemplating. The mystery thus contains not so much an event from the life of Christ that might reveal the working of God, but the person of Jesus Christ himself, present in a fixed geographical and temporal context.

Visual Obstacles

In his analysis González also mentions some of the practical advantages that the composition of place can bring to prayer. It is, he says, a help for bringing one back to the right path when distractions occur. The correct use of the composition of place can serve,

... to prevent the mind from wandering aimlessly by giving it something to focus its scattered faculties upon so that the prayer will be attentive—and so that if the mind later wanders off, it has a base to which it can easily return.

But then the tone changes:

However, many persons spend a lot of time uselessly dwelling on this, and the violent effort damages their head and renders them unfit to go on to the other things for which the composition of place was devised. (Dir 31:71)

All too quickly the account of the benefits gives way to a word of warning: the composition of place can be a hindrance! This notion that the composition can cause harm to body and spirit is to be found in various commentaries. A helping hand is also offered to anyone who is less imaginatively gifted: pictures can be called to mind. Thus in the words of the *Short Directory*:

Many people find it quite hard to make the composition of place, straining their heads in the attempt. Those who have difficulty with it should be told to recall a painting of the history they have seen on an altar or elsewhere, e.g. a painting of the judgment or of hell, or of Christ's Passion. (Dir 26:41)

This is one of the few occasions when the use of visual aids is explicitly mentioned—more precisely a painting, or rather the ‘history’ that is painted. And this is seen as a method for those ‘who have difficulty’ in just imagining.

In the 1599 Directory, these various points are brought together, and clearly the views of Gil González Dávila have been influential. On the one hand, the advantages and benefits are mentioned, both for meditating and for making oneself present:

This composition of place is a great help toward concentrating and moving the soul. With the imagination tied down to some definite matter, the soul itself is tied down and prevented from straying. If it does stray, it has a ready means of refocusing and calling itself back to the spot where it originally imagined itself. Hence, St Bonaventure writes in the preface to his life of Christ: ‘If you wish to gather fruit from these matters, make yourself as present to what is recounted about the sayings and actions of the Lord Jesus Christ as if you were seeing them with your own eyes and hearing them with your own ears; do this with all the affection of your spirit, carefully, lovingly, and slowly, leaving aside all your other concerns and cares.’ (Dir 43:122)

Towards the end of this quotation explicit reference is made to different sense organs that can be brought into play by the composition of place. Thus the process of composition is not limited to ‘seeing’. However, a difficulty arises at this very point for those who are not very gifted in this way, and therefore a paragraph is added:

Dangers to be avoided: lastly, care should be taken not to dwell excessively on constructing this representation of the place and not to strain the head. The composition of place is not the primary fruit of the meditation but only a way and an instrument toward it. There is no denying that some have greater facility in this, viz., persons with a more vivid imagination. Others who find it harder should not labour at it to the point of dulling their minds and becoming unable to make the meditation itself. (Dir 43:124)

One finds that modern commentators also tend to be reserved with regard to the composition of place. The entry entitled ‘Composition de lieu’ in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* clearly reflects this tendency. It refers specifically to commentators who warn those engaged in meditation not to tire themselves over the composition of

place, and mentions spiritual writers such as Jean-Joseph Surin (1600-1665), who thought that in the case of experienced souls this preliminary was dispensable. The author of the entry supports the opinion of Luis de la Puente, and quotes from his *Spiritual Guide*, which in its turn is drawing on St Thomas:

... although there is great benefit to be had from contemplating with the representation of sensory images, such prayer is much less perfect than one where the imagination plays no part and which is a purely spiritual operation.⁵

Thus there seem to be two grades of prayer: one that is 'lower' and accompanies the use of composition of place, and another that is 'higher' and needs no such use.

In general the accepted line is that making the composition of place is of secondary importance. It does have certain benefits, but one should be cautious about spending too much time over it. For those who are less capable it can be helpful to use visual aids, but others pass on to a higher form of prayer.

The 'Changes of Place', Mental and Personal

Jerónimo Nadal (1507-1580) was not in agreement with this narrow vision. In his *magnum opus* entitled *Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels*⁶ he devotes much attention to composition and visualisation. Now Juan Polanco, the secretary of St Ignatius, believed, as is well known, that Nadal had been blessed with a true understanding of what Ignatius intended his new religious order to be. For that reason Nadal was sent out to explain the *Constitutions*. One may thus assume that his *Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels* are an appropriate elucidation to accompany the *Spiritual Exercises*. They serve to open out the vision that Ignatius had of liturgical and meditative prayer. Nadal put them together at the instigation of Ignatius, and their main purpose was to teach student members of the Society of Jesus how to

⁵ Michel Olphe-Galliard, 'Composition de lieu', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, volume 2 (1953), cols. 1321-1326, here 1325—see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II. 181. 2.

⁶ In Latin, *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia*, first published in Antwerp in 1595; a modern edition with English translation (*Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels*) is being published in a three-volume series by Saint Joseph's UP, Philadelphia, translated and edited by Frederick A. Homann; volumes 1 and 2 have already appeared in 2003 and 2005.

pray. The work was well received and soon reached as far afield as South America and the Far East.

The same pattern or structure is found throughout the work. Each section consists of four parts, and the person meditating is expected to make use of all four:

1. In the first place comes the *gospel text*, the passages arranged to follow the order of the liturgical year;
2. next come the *annotations* that serve to clarify exegetical or historical elements in the text; the different points are marked by letters;
3. the *meditation* proper follows, often taking dialogue form;
4. finally there is an *engraving* to illustrate the chosen gospel passage.

It is these engravings that are the most distinctive aspect of the book. A history of their planning and of the vicissitudes of their conception would take us too far from our purpose; enough to say here that originally Nadal had foreseen a series and then rejected them. Finally a complete set was nevertheless printed, drawn by the best etchers of Antwerp.

Nadal was well aware of the problem that such prints would raise. When making the composition of place it is important to be 'present' to what is happening, and for this those who are meditating have to place themselves in the scene. In this process a visual aid, such as a painting or a sketch, can be a help. But it can also be an obstacle: it can hinder the imagination of one's being present at the scene. This can happen because the picture is simply a (historical) re-presentation of the gospel scene and lacks all relation to what the person meditating is feeling. Again, the picture may only serve to provoke aesthetic appreciation.

The engravings that appear in the *Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels* provide both the opportunity to pray with the use of a visual representation, and a unique response to the problems that might arise in connection with such contemplation. However, this requires time, and for this reason the Preface of 1607 advises one to spend 'one or more days' in silent attention if one is to draw the fruit from such meditation.

The overall composition of each engraving is so arranged as to provide space for a series of mental moves, which can then also lead to 'changes of place' that affect one as a person. This is brought about through a distinctive feature of these engravings: the combination of lettering actually on the print and text below. Beneath each print there is always a number of 'points' that refer to elements in the gospel narrative. Each point is preceded by a letter, and these letters can be found also in areas of the picture itself. By following the order of these letters in the engraving, the person meditating performs a sort of pilgrimage following a route marked in the picture. The person praying always begins by identifying the different elements in the gospel passage, and then takes up a 'place' in the middle of the scene, before traversing the different stages in meditation or contemplation. As the person is constantly moving from picture to text, from annotation to meditation, he or she assimilates the picture interiorly, and makes it personal *ex libera meditatione* (through free meditation).

This process is not primarily a 'bibliodrama', in which one is using a bible scene to allow one's own psychological and subjective drama to come to the surface. Nor, therefore, is it the purpose of retreat direction to use the composition as a way of better understanding the retreatant's psychological make-up. The goal of the composition of place is rather a dialogue between the persons involved in the gospel passage and the person contemplating. It is for this reason that one 'composes' a 'place', a place that makes room for another, room for somebody different from oneself. And it is from this starting point that one can arrive at encounter. It is through the interaction between myself and what is offered to me that the possibility arises for two narratives, that of the gospel and that of my own life, to interact with one another.

The engraving of the Annunciation can serve as a first example of what is meant here. If asked what first catches their attention in this picture, most people would answer: the stream of light, or the meeting between the Angel and Mary. This is also the central theme of the meditation. Once that point is established, the person meditating is required to place him- or herself at different points of time and space. The letter A indicates the council of angels called by God in order to choose Gabriel to go and announce the incarnation (a positioning in the past and in heaven). For the next stage Gabriel acquires a human form and journeys down to Mary (B and C). But then, instead of



immediately moving to the central scene (E), one is required to go first to letter D. Here there is a representation of the actual room in which the event is taking place: Mary's house, which, according to tradition,

was 're-placed' in Loreto (in Italy) and became one of the most popular pilgrim sites in the early years of the Society. It serves as a symbol both of the concrete reality in every meditation, and of the changes of 'place' that can 'take place' within the meditation itself. In the meditation on the central gospel events, these events are given a sort of contemporary historical context, and thus 'placed' in a historical framework for which, as Nadal is clearly aware, there is no scriptural basis. In F it is indicated that the day of Christ's incarnation coincided with that of the human race's creation. With G the message is that the feast day of the Annunciation was the same as that of Christ's death on the cross (and in fact in the year 2005, March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, coincided with Good Friday); and H suggests that one may think of this same day as that on which the saints of the Old Covenant in Limbo heard their redemption announced to them.

The presence of these elements probably does not coincide with present-day theological insights on the Annunciation, but they certainly show how this engraving encourages those meditating to reflect on times and levels that originally would not have occurred to them, and which give a universal dimension to the

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Incarnation. In this way the representation formed by the person meditating is no longer confined to an individual's experience. He or she does not simply project a personal account upon the gospel story; rather, the story itself begins to conduct the person, and displaces the self. This is what it is all about: by quietly standing alongside 'the places, the persons, the objects and the events' we are invited to place ourselves in a certain situation, and then to be moved by it, and to undertake pilgrimage. By a mental adoption of place we are thus 'relocated' as persons.

This interpretation is confirmed by the meditation that Nadal has added after the annotations. As is well known, Ignatius suggests that at the end of each exercise of prayer one should make a 'colloquy':

A colloquy, properly so-called, means speaking as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master, at times asking for some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or sharing personal concerns and asking for advice about them. And then I will say an Our Father. (Exx 54)

Even though Ignatius says that this is a ‘conversation’, the actual words and examples he gives are more truly a monologue directed to Christ by the person meditating. Nadal, however, makes it into a real dialogue, and in many of the meditations he presents Jesus Christ himself as one of the partners in the conversation. In the case of the Annunciation, the person meditating asks for an explanation of the mystery, and Nadal presents this with Jesus taking the main role: ‘Rouse first your faith, hope and love for me, and a spirit of simplicity and deep humility. Then hear ...’. There follows a long exposition.⁷

Encounter and Relocation

The composition of place, then, can create the space for an encounter: an encounter that is personal, an encounter above all with the person in whom God gives Himself—Jesus of Nazareth. The encounter is not simply the product of my imagining or the projection of a personal emotion; it is a coming up against an irreducible other, a definite historical person. One encounters in a concrete way the person of Jesus by stepping into the scene and becoming a sharer in what those who were there really saw, heard, smelt and so on.

It is indeed significant that Ignatius refers to the composition of *place* (alone), and not to that of the persons; but they must come of their own accord. Such meetings are not something that I can arrange. Moreover, such meetings are not to do with the past. Thanks to the dynamic narrative of the text itself, the *compositio loci* allows us to knit together the context in which we move and that of the text. Jesus is present for us here and now, and it is this meeting with him which establishes our own personhood, the second dimension of the personal encounter that is our concern here. Precisely in this direct contact with the reality in which God reveals Himself (just as He revealed Himself for the human race in Jesus of Nazareth), we come to know ourselves recognised as persons, and feel ourselves to be loved.

This very encounter, too, may lead on to a further ‘relocation’: not merely the mental or personal repositioning found in the scene of the Annunciation, but a ‘relocation-become-flesh’ in the personal life of those who, through the composition, allow themselves to be set in motion. To understand this better it will be helpful to consider how

⁷ *Annotations and Meditations*, 1.108.

Nadal presents the encounter between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalen. The engraving is structured in such a way that it says all that can be said about meeting, conversation and real 'change of place'. The first scene is set in the background of the print: the meeting between Mary (A) and the gardener (C), between whom a



first dialogue takes place (as is made quite clear by the alternation of A and C in the explanations under the picture—here the ‘colloquy’ forms part of the contemplation itself). But as soon as the recognition and the exchange of names takes place, as soon as the revelation and the loving mutual recognition occurs, with the gardener becoming ‘Rabboni’ and the woman becoming ‘Mary’, both figures are moved to the foreground. In his Annotation, Nadal points out that Mary directs not only her gaze but her whole self towards Jesus. And the whole declaration of love is conveyed in two words: each of the partners expresses everything in a single word.

Mary is then sent, upon her pilgrim way, to announce the news to the apostles (F). She goes to the city, and therefore steps out of the picture, so to speak, just as the person meditating steps once more into real life after the exercise. Finally, the engraving points to the soldiers: they have not taken part in the encounter; they have not got up from the ground; they have therefore not taken a new position (G). By this contrast between those who change place and those who will not let themselves be relocated, the engraving conveys the dynamic force of the encounter, one that can have a bearing on, cause a relocation within, the real life of the person meditating. In this composition of place, therefore, we find resurrection faith taken seriously as something to be made flesh. But at the same time it is the revelation of a way of human living rooted in reality.

Little is known about the opinions Ignatius may have had concerning visual aids in prayer, but there is certainly no indication that he was in any way opposed to them. According to Bartolomeo Ricci, who followed Nadal by publishing an illustrated life of Jesus (1607), Ignatius himself was in the habit of using such aids:

Occasionally when he was on the point of meditating on the mysteries of our Redeemer, he would look, just before he began to pray, at the prints that he had gathered and had displayed around his room for this purpose.

At any rate, the work of Nadal makes it quite clear that to pray ‘with open eyes’ need not be a ‘lower’ form of prayer in the way that the predominant interpretation of the composition of place within the Jesuit tradition—shaped as this is by Luis de la Puente—suggests. Rather this ‘prelude’ appears as an essential component of personal encounter with Jesus. By creating a space where this encounter can

take place, the composition of place also opens up the way for the *repositioning* of oneself that such an encounter can have as its consequence.⁸

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⁸ In writing this article I have drawn freely from, among others, the following: Michel de Certeau, 'L'espace du désir ou le "fondement" des Exercices spirituels', *Christus*, 77 (1973), pp. 118-128; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1989); Pierre-Antoine Fabre, *Ignace de Loyola: Le lieu de l'image—Le problème de la composition de lieu dans les pratiques spirituelles et artistiques jésuites de la seconde moitié du XVIe siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1992); Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Sensuous Worship: Jesuits and the Art of the Early Catholic Reformation in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002); and Walter S. Melion's introductory studies in the two volumes so far produced of *Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels*. My thanks go to Jacques Haers SJ and Hugo Roeffaers SJ, who helped me to clarify my own thoughts, and contributed several suggestions adopted by me here.