Everyday Phenomenology

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To Gilda

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to entitle this book *Everyday Phenomenology* because I am interested in how the world appears, not in its immediate and obvious manifestation but in the philosophical sense of how it comes to appear. I will be using the term phenomenology in the way suggested by Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* when he describes phenomenology as "consideration of the onset of the image in an individual consciousness".[1] I will try to approach this bringing forth of the image into perception in a number of different ways, but my aim will remain an examination of how we can come to experience what is there, or that which can appear. In this way I will combine a study of how consciousness works in the world and how the world fits in with consciousness.

I have chosen the work of four very different thinkers to facilitate this enterprise, these are: Gaston Bachelard, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and W.G. Sebald. I have settled mainly on these four because I think that they all represent oblique approaches to the acquisition of knowledge and provide a means by which the world can be approached and understood, and one which can help us to avoid the distortion and reduction that more direct approaches necessarily bring. I think that the fact that these four thinkers offer very different routes to the same end point gives strength to the argument in ways that would not be possible if I had chosen a group of writers more traditionally thought of as philosophers and who took similar approaches. By using the work of these four, I hope to be able to approach the subject from a number of different angles and, by doing so, preserve the fragility of the enterprise. It has been suggested to me that the work of other thinkers, for example, Fouccault, Rorty, Wittgenstein and Derrida,[2] may have been equally appropriate in helping me to achieve my aim. This may well be so and I am happy to defer to the familiarity that others may have with the works of such writers. To some extent it does not matter that we might come to the same conclusion by other means, in fact my conclusions in this work will only be strengthened if this is true. For my own part, the understanding that I

have gained of the works of Bachelard, Heidegger, Gadamer and Sebald revealed resonances between their very different approaches which, to me, seemed to deserve further elucidation. This book is my attempt to elucidate a strand of thinking which they all share. I was also pleased to be able to use the somewhat more accessible works of W.G.Sebald and (to a lesser extent) Gaston Bachelard alongside the more inaccessible works of Heidegger and Gadamer, as it is at least a part of my intention to show that philosophy, and in particular epistemology and phenomenology, are perhaps not quite so difficult to explain and communicate as we might think. I hope that I have used some of the kinds of books that people might read for pleasure and that this will make my message more easily understood. This will also mean that the method of approach that I have chosen will make this book sometimes seem most unlike a work of academic philosophy. I trust that my more academically inclined readers will bear with me through these parts of the book and be able to allow the argument to appear where I have chosen not to state it explicitly. It is my intention that the kind of thinking that I will be advocating will emerge gradually as the work progresses. This will require a delicacy of touch in the writing and an equal patience in the reading if we are to be successful.

Before setting out the course of the argument in this book I want to say some things about the two terms which make up its title, both as a means of beginning to pose the questions that I will be addressing and in order to indicate the direction of travel that the argument will take as we proceed. I will also define what I mean by a couple of key words which will figure prominently in this book.

Everyday

The use of the term ‘the everyday’ is well known to anyone with even a passing familiarity with Heidegger’s work; it is also a familiar term in everyday speech. It is largely because of this dual aspect that I have chosen ‘everyday’ in that it will enable me to use the philosophical insights provided by Heidegger and those like him, while at the same time providing a constant reminder of the sheer ordinariness of the kinds of things that I am going to talk about.

The everyday is everything, including that which goes unnoticed. It is the totality of that which can be revealed as phenomena, that is, all that can appear. It forms the background to the whole world which can be accessible to us through appearances; it is both ubiquitous and unexamined. In its everyday state the everyday is therefore not ‘understood’ to any extent nor is it appropriated or critically appraised by our consciousness, it

is merely there. The everyday is inescapable, it is everything that there is, it is all around us all the time. The everyday is thus not only everything that is there but also everything that can be there. It is the whole world, it is just everyday.

Only when we notice it does the everyday stand out and become something meaningful for us, that is, it appears in our world. This development of an everyday phenomenology is an attempt to see how we come by this world; that is, to show how it can appear. To this extent it is an attempt to give an account of the world not as a collection of things that accumulate but as a whole world. Moreover it is an attempt to understand how consciousness comes by this world through appearances, and to understand something of the nature of the world before it comes to the notice of consciousness. This will be undertaken through an examination of the process of its becoming noticed, or appearing, in a wide variety of ways. From this examination we should be able to understand what is happening when the everyday is noticed and appears, and to thereby give some kind of an account of the process of appearing. We will, however, be attempting to understand something which usually lies just beyond the reach of consciousness and herein lies the paradox of the everyday. It is that which is all around us and to which we seem to have no unmediated access, that is; it is there but our encounter with it is always through our noticing. If the everyday is just beyond our reach, or out of appearance, it seems that we should never be able to know it for what it really is at all. This is because whenever we engage with an entity we bring it forth out of the everyday background and put it to use, we interfere with it and make it into something else, something relevant or useful to us. To circumvent this problem it will be necessary to make our attempt on the everyday indirectly and to allow answers to emerge. If we try to stick pins in the butterfly of the everyday will we miss it altogether.

Heidegger describes how entities from the everyday are used by conscious beings but only come fully to notice when they fail to meet their expected performance or when they obstruct rather than facilitate the work.[3] This calling forth (appearing) also occurs when we first come to learn a task and the tools that we need to use are unfamiliar to us. Typically, as the task becomes familiar, these entities, the tools, recede once more into the inconspicuous everyday. In the normal course of events in which the work proceeds smoothly, the entities which make up the everyday remain inconspicuous, we do not notice them and they do not stand out. The everyday is noticed as it intersects with the projects of conscious beings because in this way it gains significance. While we do not use all of the everyday in each of our projects, each instance in which

an entity emerges from the everyday, as equipment, also gives us notice of the manifold from which it has emerged, this manifold is the everyday. We are seeking here the nature of that, which for the most part, remains inconspicuous, that which has yet to appear. Only if we solve this conundrum can we begin to understand what it is to appear.

The key difficulty is that our very act of recognition, description, discussion, and differentiation seems to remove us from the possible access to the everyday as it is in itself. This does not mean that the everyday is not there before we are conscious of it; we do not dispute the existence of the world in a skeptical fashion. We do not live in a kind of subject centered world in which the existence of objects comes to depend on their being perceived. Even though concealed, before they are noticed by consciousness, the elements of the everyday must have some kind of being however 'mere'. To discover what this might be we must find ways that take note without noticing. To put it another way we must find a way of remembering before we have forgotten, that is to gain an access to the everyday which does not depend on any kind of fore-knowledge or fore-having. On the other hand we must endeavour to preserve the utmost philosophical rigour and avoid any descent into vague mysticism. This is one reason why phenomenology is the method of approach that I have chosen.

Phenomenology

Heidegger says,

> We shall maintain that phenomenology is not just one philosophical science among others, nor is it the science preparatory to the rest of them; rather the expression "*phenomenology*" is the name for the *method* of *scientific philosophy in general.* (Heidegger, 1988, p.3)

This places phenomenology at the centre of this kind of enquiry with its dual emphasis on the entities that appear, and on scientific methodology. At least for Heidegger phenomenology is pre-eminent as a mode of investigation and, for the purposes of this work, I will follow his lead. Phenomenology is simply the study of appearances and this makes it the appropriate method to use in approaching the appearing of the everyday. Phenomenology also offers a quiet and gradual means of approach to the subject of our enquiry while at the same time providing a methodology which is robust and yet which accords with many of our common experiences of the way the world appears. By using the method of phenomenology we can concentrate exclusively on appearances and the

answers to our questions can be allowed to appear. To this extent this book is itself an exercise in the kind of phenomenology that I will be describing. It is my intention that the way that this book is written will itself be an example of the ways of thinking that I am trying to elucidate. This deliberate ploy is based on the assumption that, that which appears cannot necessarily be made to appear, and in some cases the very attempt to make it appear forestalls appearance. This work is a discussion of appearances and of their appearing. The very fragility of these notions demands a method of approach which will not only illuminate these ideas but preserve them. A more strictly empirical or analytic philosophical method would obscure or change the nature of, rather than illuminate, what is there. When we begin to describe, analyze, dissect and categorize, as philosophers will, we tend to lose sight of what we are looking at.

Our problem here is one of naming; the activity of discussion is a species of description and therefore of differentiation. If our awareness of the everyday is to remain undifferentiated then we must find other ways of talking about our engagement with the everyday, other ways of allowing it to appear, for example through silent observation or a kind of reverie. We may hope to make some progress in this direction by these more indirect methods of approach which may then give us some understanding of the everyday without calling forth. As I have said, to achieve my aim I will use the writing of some thinkers who do not think like philosophers, this is because the assumption of the fragility of appearances underlies most of what I am going to say and they have been chosen because the style of their work protects this fragility. I hope that their less than philosophically orthodox approach will show that, sometimes at least, appearances need to be taken as it were by surprise

My aim then will be to pursue phenomenology, and therefore appearances obliquely, in a number of areas. Predominantly these will be the appearances of; houses, landscapes, places, people and history, but it is my intention that these individual studies will eventually coalesce into a more general theory about appearances, place and time and thereby provide a phenomenology of the everyday. In this pursuit I will not only use philosophical methods and devices but also examples and work from the fields of literature and art (mainly painting) in order to circumvent the apparent paradox of the ubiquity and inaccessibility of the everyday. This will make my work wide ranging and extensive but I hope that by the end a coherence and unity will have emerged from the bringing together of these different avenues of approach to appearances.

Spaces and Events

Finally, before setting out the course of the argument, I will make two important distinctions. I have deliberately used the term ‘place’ rather than ‘space’ because my intention is to address the questions with regard to the former rather than the latter. By ‘place’ I will take to mean a space which is in some way imbued with meaning for the individual consciousness. While it will be necessary at some points of the argument to use and explore theories of the more abstract notions of space and spatiality my main focus will remain spaces which have meaning, or ‘places’. I see phenomenology as an essentially human activity and, while more abstract musing on the nature of endless space is interesting in its own right it is not what I am concerned with here. In some ways the same also goes for the notion of time. My use of this word will also include the human dimension, in the sense that I might have subtitled this work ‘The Phenomenology of Places and Events’. I will take ‘events’ to mean times which have meaning in the same way that places are spaces which have meaning. Once again theories of time and temporality will have their place in the following arguments and discussions but they will be there to support less abstract discussions and arguments about the nature of places and events. In short I am interested in the relationship between the phenomenal world and consciousness, the nexus where the onset of the image, or appearing, takes place. The rest of this book will be divided in to eight further chapters as follows.

Summary of Contents

The next chapter will look at houses, their appearance and their meaning. For this I will primarily use the work of Dennis Severs and Gaston Bachelard who have both written beautifully and enigmatically about houses. I will pay particular attention to Sever’s idea of ‘the space between’ and Bachelard’s use of the terms ‘psychogeography’ and ‘transcendental geometry’ and his idea of dreaming.

Dennis Severs’ book *18 Folgate Street – The Tale of House in Spitalfields* is an evocation of a time and place that fascinated the author. This remarkable work is a striking attempt to facilitate appearing and reveals some of the way in which this takes place.

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard is conducting an explicit examination of the working of poetic imagery but his work has much in common with Severs as is witnessed when he say, “One must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears”[4] and when he speaks of,

"the very ecstasy of the newness of the image".[5] In particular in this chapter I will address what Bachelard calls, "the problem of description".[6] Severs would recognise this kind of language and it is clearly it is a language that speaks of appearances of all kinds, the manifestation of all the stuff of the world.

Chapter Three will present further examples of descriptions of the kind that Severs has given and which appear to fit the analysis given by Bachelard. The first three are in Rainer Maria Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* which pre-dates Bachelard's work. The others are in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and are later than Bachelard. In the course of setting out these descriptions of encounters with houses and places it will become clear that Rilke and Sebald are in the same phenomenological territory as Severs and Bachelard and that the descriptions of places in all four has much of significance in common. In this section it will also begin to emerge that the work of all four of these very different writers rests on the philosophical and phenomenological ground set out by Heidegger.

I will then look at some of Heidegger's work in *Being and Time*, and *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* which will underpin these earlier discussions and begin to provide a sound philosophical basis for understanding Severs, Bachelard, Rilke and Sebald's work on the nature of place. In particular I will look at his discussion of Rilke in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* along with some parts of *Being and Time* which stress our involvement or engagement with the world.

In Chapter Four I will look at the appearance of landscapes through the work of Dutch painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century and some more of the writing of W.G. Sebald. I have chosen here to consider paintings because they involve the creation of an appearance or an image, and they themselves appear as what they are, that is as images of images. In a number of ways they can provide useful metaphors about appearances which will inform the discussion.

As well as illustrating what is going on when we perceive a landscape (or to put it another way when a landscape appears) this will centre on a discussion of the nexus between seeing and knowing, a distinction which is essential to the entire project. I this chapter I will show how the work of the painters of the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century provides a demonstration of the Being-in-the-world of Dasein as set out by Heidegger in his work of 1926-1929. I will seek to describe a few of the paintings in Heidegger's terms and to show how the enterprise of painting itself illustrates Being-in-the-world. In this I will use specific landscape paintings and Sebald's descriptions of the landscapes he experiences. In

particular I will begin to open up the idea of the uncanniness of what we perceive and the idea of reverberation which will continue in the next section

In Chapter Five my aim will be to demonstrate that truths about certain kinds of places (houses and landscapes) are also true of all of the places we can find ourselves in and therefore say something about the more abstract notion of a place as a space with meaning. This will extend the discussion of uncanniness and reverberation and begin to place consciousness somewhere in the world that appears.

This will extend and deepen the ways of thinking presented by both Bachelard and Sebald and try to see which way their thinking really points, not only in terms of specific houses and landscapes but in terms of spaces in general and, in particular, places. I will also look at some of Gadamer's work, specifically on the nature and role of play. This will take us closer to the mystery of "the onset of the image".

Chapter Six is concerned with the notion of memory and the ways that it contributes to the construction of our experience of the world. The complementary notions of remembering and unforgetting are closely associated with the idea of memory and some preliminary definitions and clarification of these terms will be given. Once again in this part of the work I will use Sebald's evocative works but now with reference to more explicit philosophical texts, in particular Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and his idea of Bildung or culture, as it is sometimes translated.

I will also discuss two specific items through which memory is apparently recovered, these are photographs and gravestones. Discussion of these examples will further illuminate the way that memory supports present experience.

In Chapter Seven I will move on from the idea of personal memory to history. This move is essentially a move from personal past experience to collective or group memory. For this I will make use of the work of Sebald (again) and the more recently rediscovered work of Irene Nemirovsky (*Suite Francaise*) in an attempt to explore the idea of historical witness. I will also consider some more of Gadamer's work, specifically on tradition and on the festival. This will bring out the key concepts of memory, reverberation and the recovery of past times; it will also complete the earlier discussion of uncanniness and throw some light on the ways in which we understand the intersection of places and times in our lives.

The notion of personal identity is prominent in Sebald's work and there are many instances in all of the works which seek to address this notion. In Chapter Eight I will select and describe a few which I think summarise his thoughts on identity and which point towards some

interesting and difficult problems with this most personal of notions. I will discuss the appearance of our own selves to others and to our own selves in a discussion of faces which will embrace not only portraiture and self portraiture, but also some recent controversies about face transplants and the covering of faces. This will amount to a phenomenology of faces and lead into a discussion of the phenomenon of personal identity. I will be fundamentally concerned with the self that appears and I will attempt to understand how that appearance is possible. I will link this discussion with Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Descartes *cogito*, Sartre's demonstration of the existence of Others in *Being and Nothingness* and Heidegger's notion of Mitsein or being-with.

In the concluding chapter I will be able to show that I have built up a picture of connected discussions, commentaries, and theories which add up to a phenomenology of place, time and consciousness and, in addition I will have shown by my method of approach that the fragility of appearances can both be illuminated and preserved. The value of this approach will be reinforced by a worked practical example, as far as is possible in a work if this kind, of a specific branch of knowledge. I will consider the ways that clinical knowledge and understanding, in its practical aspect of application to patients, can benefit from this kind of thinking. This example will show how the kind of thinking that I have been setting out has practical implications and applications beyond the rather esoteric thinking of academic philosophy, and how it can have meaning in our everyday lives.

Finally I will have shown that Heidegger's ideas of the emergence and reticence, Sebald's spectral materialism, Bachelard's oneirism, and Gadamer's notions of tact and inescapable Bildung represent oblique approaches to the everyday and provide a means by which the everyday can be approached and understood in its everydayness. Gadamer's tact, Heidegger's reticence, Bachelard's oneirism and Sebald's oblique approach to his subjects, all these tell us about ways of encountering the world which may appear to be unnecessarily laboured, superficial or even pretentious. By the end of this book it will be clear that if we want to see what is important about the world, and in particular to see the structures which enmesh us all in the world, then these avenues of approach will prove much more fruitful, rather than deficient, in allowing us to see and to understand the richness and complexity of the world.

As I have said, philosophically speaking my main guides through all of this will be W.G. Sebald, Gaston Bachelard, Martin Heidegger and his sometime pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer. I will also gain lesser assistance from a few others, notably Descartes, Hume, Hegel, Rilke, Nemirovsky,

Sartre, and Severs, although I will endeavour to add some insights of my own as we go along. To begin with, houses.

Notes

[1] Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xix.
[2] Upshur, R, 2011, p.905.
[3] Heidegger, 1962, H.73-75.
[4] Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xv.
[5] Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xv.
[6] Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.6.

CHAPTER TWO

PHENOMENAL HOUSES: YOU EITHER GET IT OR YOU DON'T

Dennis Severs' book *18 Folgate Street – The Tale of a House in Spitalfields* is an attempt to set down in words the tours of his house which Severs conducted for his visitors; in effect it is an evocation of an evocation. Severs' whole exercise is an attempt to make the house appear, or more accurately to allow the house to appear, in ways it might have been in the past. Even the way that the book is presented is extraordinary and goes beyond the conventional devices used by writers to illuminate meaning. Severs uses illustrations, some in colour some in black and white, some are no more than diagrams others are collages, many of them are framed in unusual shapes like circles and as though seen through a keyhole. He uses different font sizes within the text to create emphasis and a sense of space, and both text and illustrations blend together to form a seamless stream of evocation. The book is less an account of what Severs has done with his house and more like an example of the kind of thing that he has done; it is as much something to look at as it is something to read and it is certainly something to think about. All in all this remarkable work is a striking attempt to facilitate appearing and reveals some of the ways in which this takes place.

Peter Ackroyd[1] in his introduction to this book describes Severs as conducting "his own experiment in recovering past time".[2] He describes Severs' intentions as to have the house "recover its origins"[3] and says that; "The house became a living story with each of its rooms as a separate chapter".[4] Ackroyd's careful use of language begins to show us what he thinks Severs is trying to do (or at least what he is not trying to do or trying not to do). The essence of Severs' enterprise is a *living* recovery and not the presentation of an ossified assemblage of historical artefacts. The house is not intended as a museum or mere collection of objects from the past; it is intended as an evocation, complete in itself and immediately available to us as such. Severs' visitors were presented immediately with the house as a living entity and were, so to speak, injected into the life of

the house and the family that Severs has contrived to inhabit it. In this way the house is allowed to appear. To paraphrase Bachelard when he describes phenomenology as consideration of the onset of the image, Severs is facilitating the onset of the image of the house through his enterprise at 18 Folgate Street. Severs himself says;

> Pigeonhole intelligence is not going to win by ruining the picture I paint in the space between us. You will not return what I create in your mind by reducing it to a palette of paint with a name and number for each ingredient. (Severs, 2001, p.64)

Severs insists that we resist the temptation to disassemble his creation as a means of understanding it; we are urged to take it as it appears and as a whole. It is interesting and revealing that Severs is already using the artistic metaphor of painting a picture rather than simply presenting an entity; pictures are completed with the last brush stroke, their power is not in the accumulation of paint on paper or canvas but in the way that all the elements combine to give us meaning. We will see more of this later in the specific consideration of painting as a phenomenological event, but Severs' use begins to point to the necessity for this kind of approach when looking at appearances.

Severs had much more in mind than the creation of an eighteenth century replica; in fact this is exactly what he says he is not doing. He was trying to provide the visitor (or reader) with an immediate impression (appearance) of what it was like to live in this house during the mid-eighteenth century; simply by being there, you will either get it or you won't. You must not try to understand the house through the usual intellectual processes of description, definition and interpretation; in this context the notions of description, definition and interpretation are the archenemies. The appearance is fragile and must be allowed to appear rather than be forced. Severs understands this danger only too well and asked his visitors not to talk during their visit; he knew that even this level of articulation would have destroyed the immediacy which was central to his enterprise. He says,

> To be smart, no fancy must get in the way of what our mind's eye can plainly see. Our success at physical and mental co-ordination depends on a lack of any slack between our self and what we see. To admit to seeing the invisible – the space between – is to the gang, at least weird, infantile or retarded. (Severs, 2001, pp.53-54)

So, simply, "You must close your eyes to help you to see".[5] Appearance is not just about simple seeing and Severs was trying to allow the visitors to experience the house in its immediacy without the conventional interactions we might have in a museum or a visit to a stately home. In this way the visitors notice the space between as that which separates them from the house and in which it can be apprehended without comprehension, thus drawing to attention, in an indirect manner, the everydayness of the house. It is as if we begin to notice the everyday almost by not noticing. We will see, as the argument in this book develops, that this notion of immediacy and its counter notion of mediation will form a crucial nexus in the understanding not only of Severs' project at 18 Folgate Street, but throughout the discussion of place and time; it is part of the story of our access to the everyday.

Severs is clearly interested in much more than the appearance of individual objects which make up the house, and he wants to use the idea of the 'space between us' as the space in which this appearing happens. Consequently he has some interesting and thought provoking ideas about the scenes which he had created. Ackroyd captures this when he says,

> This book is also about 'the space between', the air between objects which becomes charged with their presence, that intangible and ineffable 'aura' which holds being together in it capacious embrace. (Severs, 2001, p.ix)

And Severs himself explains further about this "space between" when he says,

> The Space Between is the invisible, shared third element that lies between any two sides. It contains all we have in common with anyone else. Good or bad it is the place where sharing being alive happens… Like the varnish over the painting a healthy space between brings together, bonds and then protects the whole picture. (Severs, 2001, p.100)

Appearing takes place in the space between. It is as if that which apparently separates us from the entities and from each other is that which unites us to these same entities and to others. It ties us into the reality in which we exist, a reality in which all we have of the entities is their appearance. The entities are, it seems, less important in themselves, while the space (relationship) between them creates the aura or context which Severs finds so rich in meaning. Without wishing to pre-empt later parts of this discussion we might already begin to infer Heideggerian insights from this kind of talk, but for the moment we may let it lie simply as a means of rejecting an empirical or essentialist approach to the house as an approach

which will fail to reveal the origins of the house, and which fails to recover past time. Severs was providing his visitors with a phenomenology of his house by allowing it to appear. By using phenomenology, he was able evoke responses to the house, and the situations he created, which go beyond the kind of responses which might have been provoked by a simple description or tour of the house. In enabling the house to appear he is positioning the visitor within the world of the house rather than providing them with a spectatorial position from which to view the house. He was trying to avoid a representational model of the world and of perception and instead conducting an experiment in existential phenomenology, that is, he was seeing what happened when the house appeared, and when people experienced it.

Severs' interest and indeed fascination with appearance and context begins to reveal a deeper understanding of the nature of his enterprise and an appreciation of the more fundamental notions of place and time of which I think he was only instinctually aware. He begins to describe his relationship to these entities and to really clarify his central enterprise when he says,

> As time went on I began to see the shape of a bottle or a milk jug of a particular period as having the same general outline as that age's fashion and design. And by its similarities to other objects – including architecture and music – I could eventually work out what the *mood* was that once related them all: the spell which once constituted an 'age'. From there I would assimilate what I had heard of real history: politics, legislation, battles, dates and so on. Again for me everything had to be related, and what little I do know about English history, I know this way. I can only dig into the air for the core of a subject and then work outwards from there. Human nature first, history later, as proof. I call it working *inside out*. (Severs, 2001, p.6)

Severs' use of the words "mood" and "spell" indicates once again how we need to approach these phenomena obliquely and through a more imaginative and less empirical route, a route which will lead us not to a crude factual understanding of the history of the house but to a rich experience of the past of the house. This experience, he hopes, will take us beyond where a simple description of the historical past of the house would take us and will allow something else to appear, that is, the house itself. It is important to note here and onwards that Severs is not propelling us towards some kind of mystical appreciation of the house. Although the language he is forced to use might suggest mysticism we will gain more purchase on the method that Severs, and the other thinkers like him that I will discuss use, if we take their aim positively as one which moves us

away from crude empiricism and towards a more imaginative conception of our experience of the world.

What we have here from Severs is much more than a simple statement that each historical era has a style that we can read through the artefacts that remain. Although this is undoubtedly true, the more interesting and deeper point is surely that there has to be a more fundamental relationship between the entities and their time. In effect these entities help to constitute 'their time', so that their appearance to us makes this 'time' reverberate in our time. This further implies that the entities themselves are temporal, that is, they exist not simply in time but with time as part of their existing. There is a specific historical context in which these entities feature, they come to us like flies in amber and they can evoke this time and place, by their appearing together. In this case it is a house in East London in the middle of the eighteenth century, but we will see many other examples of the same kind of thing in the chapters that follow. This constituting of an age, or temporalizing, is a product of the temporality of these entities and denotes something which is central to their being. At this early stage we should also note that there is a further context in which these artefacts are set, a context of more generic notions of place and time which Severs notices and which he acknowledges gives them their power. Severs calls this context 'the space between' while others, like Sartre, have referred to the nothingness which separates us all from each other.[6]

We shall see as the discussion moves forward that this is the level at which the meaning of these entities is revealed, the space between is the ground of their appearing. The key to Severs' work, and his attempt to evoke a place and a time, is his understanding of the nature and importance of context, the space between in which things can appear. This includes all of the entities and structures, indeed the whole house, including the space it occupies and encompasses. We, and his visitors, are set into this context in such a way that we cannot stand back and watch what is going on but are straight away and forever mixed up in it. Our experience and the appearing of the entities, including the house, are simultaneous and unmediated to the extent that we can only come to understand the house, and the situation that Severs is creating, through this unmediated immersal. Once we have been immersed our later rationalization, description, understanding, and application of historical and other frames of reference, comes to seem less, not more, real than our unmediated first impression. We become enmeshed in the appearance of the house and it seems that this is the only way in which the house can appear to us. In his book Severs gives us one example of this kind of engagement with the world; that is

with a single house; however I think that it is already becoming apparent that the kind of thinking that Severs is illustrating can be extended.

From my own experience I have found visits to battle sites particularly illuminating. It is immediately striking, for example, to stand on Senlac Hill from which the Saxons fought the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and to see the space they saw and out of which came the Norman army. Our present day immediate (unmediated) perception transcends the knowledge we have of events before, during, and after the battle and gives us another insight into what happened there. This new insight is not available to us from factual history alone. It is as if, by occupying the same space, we partake of some of the experiences of those who stood there before. We stand where the Saxons stood and we look out across the ground over which the Normans advanced. A similar feeling is evoked at the now disused paper mill in Verla, Finland.[7] This mill is preserved as it was on the day it closed in 1964 with its everyday artefacts complete. We can see the marks left by those who occupied the space while working in the mill, including a deep groove in the wooden floor created by one single woman who worked in the same place in the mill for fifty-two years. Verla gives us a powerful evocation of the lives of all of the people who worked there. This original, unmediated evocation and appearance retains its power by providing us with the ground upon which later mediation fits the experience into our consciousness, our memory, and our everyday patterns of understanding. We synthesize what we learn from the guide about the facts of the history of the mill with our unmediated first impressions and through this synthesis we fashion a rich understanding of our experience of Verla. We leave Verla with the words of the guide almost forgotten in the intensity of the sheer experience of the place and its times. These three, Severs' house, Senlac Hill, and the paper mill at Verla, are all examples of the same kind of imaginative evocation, and our encounters with them reveal more than merely factual reality and knowledge, they provoke a kind of imaginative understanding.

Severs' work is limited in that it is specifically confined to his house in Spitalfields and to the middle of the eighteenth century, and Senlac Hill and the mill at Verla are similarly isolated examples. However, I think that all three provoke a discussion about time and place which can be taken further. I will now look at the work of Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* to see particularly how the points raised by Severs can be taken deeper and applied not simply to the evocative appearance of an individual historical house but to houses in general.

However, before embarking on this it is necessary to admit that the enterprise is fraught with difficulty. How far the approach taken by Severs

and Bachelard can be preserved is in some doubt when we begin to describe, analyze, dissect and categorize. One way, perhaps the only way, in which to express what is being said and unsaid would be to respond to poetry and art with another piece of poetry or art. I have chosen not to take this route partly because I am no poet or artist and partly because I think that the attempt to interpret, in philosophical terms, the ways in which places and times appear is worthwhile. So, to this…

The Phenomenology of the Image

I shall begin with a warning. By using the words "the phenomenology of the image"[8] Bachelard seems to mean that the image comes before the thought so that, "the image has touched the depths before it has stirred the surface".[9] This is of course a poetic image in itself, but one which conveys the difference between a descriptive or analytical (mediated) process and the sheer immediacy of what we like to call real life. We will see as we go further and deeper into Bachelard's work that his words have a multiplicity of meanings; this multiplicity reflects the complexity of the world of experience and it is his intention to reveal, or to allow this richness to appear. At the outset we should be clear that Bachelard is no mystic and any attempt to interpret his work in such a way will miss the point entirely. We must remain aware of the complexity of experience through all our consideration of Bachelard's work over the next few chapters. Bachelard uses poetic imagery and appeals to our own imaginative impulses to suggest a different way of seeing and understanding the world and in this he has much in common with both Severs and W.G. Sebald. This makes his approach fragile and we should be careful to preserve this fragility. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that any attempt, including this one, to discuss the kind of work that Bachelard gives us runs the risk of destroying the poetry of the image and with it the almost ethereal substance of Bachelard's method. I hope that by acknowledging the danger I might be spared the criticism.

Right at the beginning of his beautifully written book *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard echoes Severs when he says,

> it is not a question of describing houses or enumerating their picturesque features and analysing for which reason they are comfortable. On the contrary, we must go beyond the problems of description … in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting. (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.4)

For Bachelard the house is going to be more than just bricks and mortar; it will not be the geometry or the materiality of the house which will interest Bachelard, and it will not be this physical manifestation which will give us the reality of the house. Bachelard is explicitly moving beyond simple description and simple appearance in a way that Severs only hinted at. It is clear by now, from both Severs and Bachelard, that there is more to it than just empirical appearance, or perhaps more accurately, appearance is no longer simple. In accord with Severs, Bachelard recognizes that the appearance must be preserved, and, in common with Severs, this is going to be more than a simple visual appearance and much more like an unmediated impression so that,

> by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination we may hope to make others feel all the elasticity of an image that moves us at unimaginable depth. (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.6)

Memory and imagination are central to this impression and if they are preserved we may have some hope of communicating our experience of the house to someone else, a kind of communication that would be impossible were we to confine ourselves to facts about the dimensions of the rooms and the colour of the brickwork. Bachelard is conducting an explicit examination of the working of poetic imagery and he speaks of, "the very ecstasy of the newness of the image".[10] Severs would recognise this kind of language and it is clearly a language that speaks of appearances of all kinds, the manifestation to consciousness of all of the stuff of the world.

Coming from the perspective of the philosophy of science Bachelard admits that it is difficult to shed the kind of reasoning he has always used, but in turning to poetic images he recognises that the methodology he has previously espoused, a methodology of description and categorization, masks what he now calls, "the primitivity of the imagination".[11] Along with Severs, Bachelard is now interested in immediacy and we may consider Severs, in providing his tours of his own house, to be indulging in the kind of 'poetry' that Bachelard is trying to get to the bottom of, but while Severs' evocation is confined to one house in one place, and can merely hint at the power of evocation, Bachelard's more generic approach means that he can explore the nature of evocation itself.

Bachelard hopes that by developing a poetic phenomenology he can help us to recapture what we have lost and to regain specific realities so that;

> the reader of poems is asked to consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xix)

It is in poetry that we are asked both to seize the immediacy of our impression and to allow the often multiple meanings of the words to appear. We are specifically asked not to simply attend to the words as they might appear in a works manual or instruction booklet, or for that matter in a work of academic philosophy. In essence Bachelard is showing us what Severs was doing, or more accurately what he was trying to do. In attempting to show the house in Spitalfields in an evocative manner Severs was creating a phenomenology of his house by presenting it in such a way and with such restrictions (no talking), that the immediacy of the phenomena (their appearing) was preserved. Bachelard is showing how this method is not simply the trick or gimmick of a good tour guide but is a way of capturing something fundamental about how we relate to the spaces around us and how both places and times are evoked. It is as if our perception, which describes, discusses and analyzes, drowns out something of what we are seeing and obscures the process though which it comes to appear. He resorts to phenomenology because;

> Only phenomenology—that is to say, consideration of the *onset of the image* in an individual consciousness—can help us to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their strength and their transsubjectivity. (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xix)

So that,

> For a phenomenologist the attempt to attribute antecedents to an image when we are in the very existence of the image is a sign of inveterate psychologism. (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.xxix)

Bachelard wants us to get back to the beginning in our experience of phenomena, back to this event (the onset of the image) which is ours and ours alone, and which immediately reveals our connection to the world by its appearing. In this respect he once again reaffirms Severs' project when he says, "Imaginary reality is evoked before being described".[12] The equation of phenomenology and immediacy is vital. The appearance of the things makes them what they are and what they can become for us. By dealing in the immediacy of their appearance we capture, or re-capture, a specific and unmediated reality which is prior to all understanding and which in fact provides the ground on which this understanding rests.

For Bachelard psychologism and psychoanalysis represent an approach which both masks and supersedes the primitive or primordial nature of phenomena, that of appearing. It is this appearing which gives us our initial access to reality, rather than the dissecting, de-contextualising and descriptive processes of science; in fact these processes are only possible on the basis of this access. We are driven back towards the images that are created by the poet in a way that leaves us open to the phenomena, but open in a way that it is difficult if not impossible to speak of.

Images of Intimacy – The Poetics of the House

Bachelard uses the house for his specific examination of our experience and understanding of space because he thinks that it "is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space"[13] and because, "A house constitutes a body of images that gives mankind proofs of illusions of stability."[14] Bachelard takes the house to be the first place of significance for us, that most intimate and primary of spaces imbued with all of the meaning we have given it and which it has accrued, meanings that go far beyond notions of geometric space and which can make such notions seem irrelevant. For Bachelard the house seems to provide a primordial nexus for the relationship between the individual consciousness and the notions of place and time. The house thus constitutes a psychological diagram for Bachelard, which can then be read and understood to the extent that,

> In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe we are far removed from any reference to simple geometric form. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space. (Bachelard, 1958, 1994, p.47)

In *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard takes us on a tour of the house in a pre-echo of the way that Severs has done, but Bachelard's tour requires no specific house except the one that we can each imagine as our own. Bachelard has no geometric plan of this house but a phenomenological map with which he guides us around the space and time of the house. This method of transcendental geography, or psychogeography, takes us beyond the simple appearance of the house and into a world of imagination and memory in which are revealed the real meanings of the house. This transcendence envelopes not only place, but also time, because;

> beyond all the positive values of protection, the house we were born in becomes imbued with dream values, which remain after the house is gone.