A resonant architecture: Liam McCormick and the sonorities of place

This paper discusses the work of Liam McCormick, an architect whose buildings are principally found in the landscapes of the North-West of Ireland. Primarily known for designing church buildings in the Post-War period, his work is memorable for its translation of aspects of Modernist architecture within the specificities of the towns, country and coastlines of Derry and Donegal. This paper uses several of his buildings as the means to bring traditions of phenomenological approaches towards landscape into dialogue with each other. It does so in order to make connections with Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of subjectivity, where the aim is to move from notions of the phenomenological subject to the resonant subject. In this paper, I work with this vein of theory and transpose it into thinking about architecture, its apprehension and its enactment within its surrounding spaces.

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One morning towards the end of last August… [I] took my family from the sea level at Greencastle, where we live on the shores of Lough Foyle, to the summit of our highest hill, Crockaulin, where my father first took me… Looking towards the southwest… I saw the spires and the vague outline of Derry City, where my parents and I were born, and some 50 miles or so on the same compass bearing, the twin peaks of Barnesmore Gap. Beyond Barnesmore lies Donegal town, where much of my childhood holidays were spent… I saw, away to the east, the River Bann. Like the Foyle, it appears and reappears as it sweeps inland and upwards towards distant Slemish… Roughly within this arc, joining Crockaulin, where we sat, to Barnesmore and to Slemish, I have spent most of my life and done most of my professional work. This arc of land holds nearly all my personal history. It has provided me with all of my inspiration. It has moulded my personality and my outlook, as it has moulded so much of my design and of my work. It is not possible – adequately – to put into words how I feel towards it. Music… expresses better than words, my emotions.

(McCormick, 1977, in Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.10-11)

The above words were spoken by Liam McCormick, an architect whose buildings are principally found in the landscapes of the North-West of Ireland, nested within its cities, towns and villages. Primarily known for his post-war ecclesiastical architecture, McCormick’s work is memorable for its translation of Modernist approaches to design and building within the specificities of the countryside and coastal areas of Derry and Donegal. Underpinned by a non-doctrinaire and site-specific approach, his architecture presents a deeply designed or configured sense of place, which itself draws from the biographical, embodied and embedded knowledge of the architect (Pallasmaa, 2009).

This paper will use several of McCormick’s church buildings as the means to bring various phenomenological approaches towards landscape into dialogue with each other. It will shift from understandings of “landscape-as-dwelling” (Ingold, 1993), often underscored by what has been termed the “dreams of presence” informing traditions of landscape enquiry (Rose, 2006), towards understandings of landscape infused instead with ideas of absence, distance and dislocation (Wylie, 2009), and where connections between self and homeland are unsettled (Wylie, 2016). This will help to advance philosophically informed debates about the built environment on from the well-established literature on the phenomenology of architecture (Rasmussen, 1962; Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Relph, 1976) towards a post-phenomenological approach. To do so I make connections with Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of subjectivity, which moves from notions of the phenomenological subject, composed within visual ways of knowing, to the resonant subject, understood in terms of its sonorities (2007). In this paper, I will work with this vein of theory and transpose it into thinking about architecture, its apprehension and its enactment within its surrounding spaces, as well as using it to re-visit Le Corbusier’s concept of ‘visual acoustics’ (1945). Using these examples of churches of the North of Ireland, the paper seeks to understand buildings in terms of their tonal properties, and their reverberations within their wider landscape. It aims to configure architecture as a medium sounding out the relations, tensed and open, between the embodied self and the material world.

**Fig 1 about here**

McCormick once suggested that churches “are important buildings, and not just religiously. Often a church is the only real architecture people will experience” (1978, in Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.64). And so it felt to me as a child, where my primary school, the Nazareth House in Derry, shared a chapel designed by McCormick with its neighbouring care home. This small chapel was connected with my primary school’s corridors, and thus a place my class-mates and I often visited throughout our seven years there. The chapel is now disused, fallen silent with the closing of the care home (fig.1). McCormick designed other churches in Derry, and throughout its neighbouring county of Donegal, where my parents were born and where many of my family relations still live. I visited some of the churches discussed in this paper for the first time only in 2014, having been aware of them primarily through Henk Snoek’s photography; some of these churches I have known for many years, either well or not so well. I have a lived experience of McCormick’s churches that combines academic knowledge with embodied memory, and drawing on this biographical knowledge will make the telling of this “small story” challenging within the boundaries of a research paper (Lorimer, 2003). Telling geographically specific stories that connect collective memories and family histories can be fraught with difficulties (Lorimer, 2014); this is especially so when this paper deals with intimate memories, their spatial remains and landscapes that may be regarded as geographies of love and loss (Wylie, 2009). Nonetheless, the role of individual memory can be methodologically valuable as a way of rounding out our understanding of contemporary geographies (Jones, 2011), not least when approaching the spaces of childhood, whether those of others (Philo, 2003) or our own (Jones, 2015). Drawing on such an approach, alongside a reflection on Nancy’s theories of subjectivity, and the role of the bodily senses in forming this, will be helpful in making this architecture meaningful, and tracing its resonances through my own sense of self and sense of place.

1. Architectural reforms, and reforming architectures

As his reflection on the landscapes of Derry and Donegal introduced earlier indicates, McCormick’s early life was spent between these two counties, with his secondary education undertaken at St Columb’s College, on the opposite side of the road to the Nazareth House chapel (I am indebted to Larmour and O’Toole, 2008 for the following biographical account). His professional training was carried out at the University of Liverpool’s School of Architecture in the 1930s-1940s, where he was exposed to the wider currents and figures in international architecture of the day. Vacations to Switzerland in the early 1950s would prove formative on his church designs (Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.87). With Germany, Switzerland was perhaps the key site of innovative ecclesiastical architecture in the inter-war period, with changes in church design taking place alongside Modernist movements in secular architecture, and in tandem with liturgical reform movements in the Catholic Church (Heathcote and Spens, 1997).

Although the pressure for liturgical reform took longer to reach Ireland, when it did arrive, McCormick was in a strong professional position to advocate for a new architecture facilitating a less hierarchical form of worship. In his 1955 paper ‘The Case for the Contemporary’ (in Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, pp.172-77), McCormick made his argument for Modern church art and architecture using rhetorical devices that echoed those of Le Corbusier. Why, McCormick argued, would we want new buildings to resemble buildings from previous centuries, when we wouldn’t wish contemporary boats to look like Spanish galleons, or travelling by car to feel like travelling by stage-coach (ibid., p.173). In making such arguments, McCormick was arguing for a Modern *approach* to church architecture rather than a Modern *aesthetic* per se. This distinction is important; as architectural writers at that time observed, the early decades of the post-war period saw rapid church building across the Christian world, but often these buildings adopted Modern stylistic flourishes superficially and pretentiously (Hammond, 1962, p.15). The result was a wave of buildings lacking architectural seriousness, because their architects tended to neglect function in their desire for ever more flamboyant form. Wright at that time argued for architecture that worked against notions of monumentality; simplicity, asceticism and value for money in design; and a less ostentatious presence in the landscape, “so as to make the Church one with the secular environment and to give the church building some measure of openness to the outside” (1962, p.237). By these measures, McCormick’s churches can be seen to be serious in purpose and execution: so, his St Conal’s Church in Glenties was designed purposely to blend into the townscape and not compete against other public buildings (Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.14); many of his churches used recycled and salvaged local materials (ibid., p.86), and his buildings were judged to show empathy with their surrounding environment, “seem[ing] almost to grow out of their landscapes” (O’Toole, 2011, in Pollard, 2011d, p.43).

McCormick worked on several of his most celebrated designs in Donegal with John Hegarty’s local building firm, whose skills and knowledge helped to construct the new churches using old craft customs and local materials (Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.65). This type of indigenous craft-work places McCormick within the architectural tradition of critical regionalism. Critical regionalism is most closely associated with Frampton’s articulation of design principles that resist the homogenisation of architectural form internationally (1983), and avoid a loss of geographically specific cultural identity (see also Relph, 1976). Frampton’s arguments for a more progressive practice of design bases its understanding of place, in part at least, on Heidegger’s notion of a bounded spatial domain offering “an *expressive density and resonance* in an architecture of resistance” (1983, p.25). Heidegger’s influence on thinking about the place of buildings within their surroundings has an established place within philosophically-informed accounts of architecture (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Pallasmaa, 2005) and, moreover, points us to an engagement with a phenomenological mode of landscape enquiry which can help to illuminate the quiet pull of McCormick’s buildings.

1. Building sights and selves: phenomenological landscapes

The development of phenomenological thought and landscape study are deeply entwined, deriving as they do from common intellectual roots in ideas of subjectivity found in Romantic thought from the eighteenth century onwards (Wylie, 2013). Dubow identifies in prevalent cultural constructions of landscape the idea of “a reciprocity, a kind of mutual entwinement” between self and object which invites a phenomenological approach to its research (in DuLue and Elkins, 2008, p.104). For Rose, valued landscapes are imbued with “dreams of a stable, knowable life” that “constitute the affective cabling that connects self to world” (2006, p.545). Elsewhere, Rose characterises landscape in terms of its centripetal effect, pulling its occupants into a common ground from which subjectivity can be articulated (2009). This implies a thinking of the relationship between self and landscape in terms of “contact, immersion and immediacy” (Wylie, 2009, p.278), with the experience of subjectivity coming into being alongside our knowledge of the physical world around us.

The connections between self and landscape within current phenomenological thinking has been heavily influenced by Tim Ingold’s work. In ‘The temporality of the landscape’, Ingold argues for “a 'dwelling perspective', according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves” (1993, p.152). This is landscape as an act of remembering, where places are understood to be saturated with the social histories of all its inhabitants, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. Landscape is a “congealed form of the taskscape” (Ingold 1993, p.162), where taskscape is understood as the accretion of embodied practices by those occupying and shaping the material environment. It is an apprehension of landscape which complicates conventional representations of fixity and the capacity to fix its occupants; rather, Ingold suggests that:

in dwelling in the world, we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it… What appear to us as the fixed forms of the landscape, passive and unchanging unless acted upon from outside, are themselves in motion, albeit on a scale immeasurably slower and more majestic than that on which our own activities are conducted.

(1993, p.164)

In this dynamic account, Ingold’s account of landscape includes a consideration of how architecture may be situated in physical worlds characterised by mobility rather than boundedness. He uses Breughel the Elder’s painting, ‘The Harvesters’, to reflect on the place of the various figures and elements in this pastoral scene, from farm labourers to the corn they are gathering, and from found objects such as trees to cultural artefacts, such as the church in the background. Ingold reads the presence of the church alongside that of the tree as exemplifying similar qualities of mutability:

[the church is] a place charged with temporality, one in which temporality takes on palpable form. Like the tree, the church by its very presence constitutes a place, which owes its character to the unique way in which it draws in the surrounding landscape. Again like the tree, the church spans human generations, yet its temporality is not inconsonant with that of human dwelling… The 'final' form of the church may indeed have been prefigured in the human imagination, but it no more issued from the image than did the form of the tree issue from its genes. In both cases, the form is the embodiment of a developmental or historical process, and is rooted in the context of human dwelling in the world.

 (1993, p.169-170)

The understanding of architecture as so implicated in its site, and Ingold’s merging of the notions of landscape and taskscape as characteristic of its host environment, provides a foil for thinking about a church such as Our Lady Star of the Sea, in Desertegney, along the Inishowen peninsula in North Donegal (fig.2). This church was one of the earliest of McCormick’s sequence of Donegal churches, opened in 1964 and the first to be built by John Hegarty’s company (Pollard 2011a). The eventual site was not the first offered to McCormick, who insisted on the more prominent location facing Lough Swilly, with the Atlantic to the North. This location shaped the design of the building, whose main body resembles the form of an upturned boat. The nautical theme continues in the interior of the church, with its small and richly coloured porthole stained-glass windows, which Pollard suggests as amplifying the sense of an underwater cave in natural light (ibid., p.17), as it was lit on the Sunday afternoon in late September 2014 when I visited.

Once inside, my eyes took a little time to adjust to the dimness of the nave, but the most immediate corporeal impression was how the building sounded – there was not quite silence, but close to it. Here the contrast was stark between the sounds of the wind and the sea outside – the immediacy of the weather in which I moved (Ingold, 2007) – and the stillness of the grotto-like interior (fig.3). Inside I experienced a disarming space, blending distinct visual elements (the heaviness of the wooden seating amidst the uniform white walls) and the somewhat dissonant qualities of an elegant visual regularity when viewed from afar (the curved altar wall and repeated lines of stalactite-like columns down the nave) and the texture of the finish (their roughcast render). The church feels like a space of sanctuary, with the detached bell tower evoking a lighthouse form. It is informed by its proximity to the sea that has shaped the taskscapes of the communities living along its shore. McCormick once remarked approvingly of the custom in Danish churches of hanging folk art (such as ship models) to resonate with local ways of life and livelihood (in Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.103), and he intimated the importance of the sea in Creeslough through the commissioning of stained-glass windows which illustrate biblical passages set at sea. This is especially so in the case of the windows designed by Helen Moloney (Pollard 2011a). All this might connote a heavy-handed symbolism were it not for the luminosity of the refracted light, in relation with the subdued lighting elsewhere in the building which prompts us to encounter its spaces in mutable ways that engage all the senses (Zumthor, 2006), and moves us beyond a purely visual register of apprehending architecture (Pallasmaa, 2005).

**Fig.3 about here**

Although key to shaping debates in landscape studies, Ingold’s arguments have been subject to critique. For Wylie, Ingold’s work shares the tendency of much classical phenomenological philosophy in its tacit reproduction of an intentional human subjectivity with an inherent capacity to “organise the perceptual field” (2006, p.521). This serves to compound the “dreams of presence” Rose identifies as bound up in our culturally prevalent sense of place (2006). Whilst for Rose these serve an important purpose in maintaining underlying propensities for care, for our physical and social worlds (2006; 2009), for Wylie these may inhibit other ways of understanding our relations with landscape. As he argues in recent work, “it *must* be possible to speak about the close, deeply felt and time-rich connections between peoples and landscapes… without necessarily succumbing to essentialism” (2016, p.8). Rather, Wylie argues for an “account of landscape, matter and perception couched more explicitly in terms of absence, distance, displacement and the *non-coincidence* of self and world” (2009, p.279). This leads to an approach to landscape that is aporetic (Wylie, 2012, p.375), an interest in geographies that are spectral in their affects (Wylie, 2007), and an alignment with other researchers who understand questions of landscape in terms of experiences of absence and haunting, sensed through embodied practices (Frers, 2013) and material cultures (Edensor, 2013). Overall, Wylie advances an idea of selfhood that resonates with a wider post-phenomenological position beyond the intentional subject (Ash and Simpson, 2016, p.6). Following Derrida, Wylie stresses the importance of thinking in register which is premised on the lack of a “unitary gaze and no unity of viewer and viewed either. The field of vision is instead constituted and traversed in its entirety by absences, blind-spots, lost horizons” (2009, p.282).

Wylie’s argument touches on visual metaphors, and this is significant, pointing as it does to importance of the gaze in tying together phenomenological approaches to architecture and landscape, and the counter-arguments against ocular-centrism established within these streams of thought (Janus, 2011). To sure, there are qualifications to an overly assured characterisation of sight as a distancing method of perception (Ingold, 2011, p.128), and there have been attempts to add nuance to how we understand the complexity of the visual register, such as Pallasmaa’s call for a fuller appreciation of peripheral vision: “Focused vision confronts us with the world whereas peripheral vision envelops us in the flesh of the world” (2005, p.10). However, Wylie’s argument goes further and arrives at an awareness that “landscape is a sort of blindness” (2009, p.287). His position is derived in part from an engagement with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose theories offer different means for articulating the relations between self and world. For Simpson,

Nancy's critical engagement with phenomenology offers an original understanding of the subject distinct from the humanist subject of traditional identity politics... In their place, Nancy suggests a posthumanist subject that is… found, and refound, in bodily resonance with ambient environments.

(2009, p.2572)

It is to the work of Nancy that this paper now turns, in order to reflect on new ways of understanding the place of architecture in the world, where it may be felt as a medium sounding out the relations between self and landscape, however tensed that relationship may be.

1. The resonant subject, a resonant architecture.

Nancy begins his short book ‘Listening’ with a proposition: namely, that philosophers have, in their drive towards theoretical understanding, subjugated the skill of listening to the exercise of hearing, to the extent that the neutralisation of listening is a premise for philosophical practice itself (2007, p.1). To make this distinction, Nancy meditates on the differing senses between the verbs “écouter” and “entendre”, marking the latter as driving established philosophical practice and the former as his model for a renewed post-phenomenological approach to subjectivity, whereby “to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible” (2007, p.6).

Thus, when Nancy asks “What secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?” and “What does to be listening, to be all ears, as one would say “to be in the world,” mean?” (2007, p.5), the answer to both questions is meaning itself, as found in a renewed sense of subjectivity, “inside of the human form” (Hudson, 2014). We should be wary of the multiplicity of ways in which meaning can be interpreted in Nancy’s work (Janus, 2011) and, outwith any specific discussion of Nancy, researchers remind us of the need for caution in too readily equating practices of listening with practices of meaning-making (Gallagher, 2013). These qualifications notwithstanding, there is something energising in Nancy’s arguments in this work for the primacy of a sonorous sense of self, conceived of as “the ricochet, the repercussion, the reverberation: the echo in a given body” (2007, p.40). This promotes a rhythmic conception of the self (Simpson, 2009, p.2565), with the body figured as an echo or reverberation chamber (Nancy, 2007, p.17). Nancy’s is a social ontology, rather than a Heideggerian ontology based on fusion and wholeness (Simpson, 2009, p.2560).

Whilst musical and dance metaphors predominate throughout ‘Listening’, Nancy also positions architecture as the third art form alongside these from which can be derived “the propagation of a subjectivity” (2007, p.51). Given the ostensibly visual register within which architecture is conventionally thought, this emphasis on the aural might seem counter-intuitive. And yet, there are good empirical and methodological reasons for encouraging sonic understandings of place, given wider arguments to engage with geographies that are experienced in intangible and fleeting ways (Gallagher and Prior, 2014, p.277). Where Nancy writes that although “it seems simple enough to evoke a *form* – even a *vision* – that is sonorous, under what conditions, by contrast, can one talk about a *visual sound*?”, he poses an interesting question that strikes to the heart of this paper; how can we articulate the qualities of a resonant architecture, and its relationship with landscape? To help with this task, I turn to one of McCormick’s formative influences, Le Corbusier, and outline his arguments for “visual acoustics” in understanding architectural form at its most affecting and ineffable (1945).

Pearson notes the genesis of these arguments in Le Corbusier’s visit to the Parthenon, in which he recollected “a certain kind of resonance” between the built and physical environment (1997, p.169). Following on from this experience was Le Corbusier’s attribution to works of architecture and art “a certain kind of human presence”, shaping the atmospheric qualities of place (ibid., p.170). Never knowingly understated, Le Corbusier was to write that in the visually sonorous work “a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, *accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space*” (1945, p.66). This metaphorical collapse of internal and external space, a rupture of sculptural form and radiating out of architectural form to the outside environment was decisive in Le Corbusier’s design for the pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp (Pearson, 1997). Writing about the design process, Le Corbusier suggested the landscape itself as the starting point: “One begins with the acoustic of the landscape taking as a starting point the four horizons… The design is conceived in conformity with these horizons – in acceptance of them” (1953, in Stoller, 1999, p.4). The subsequent artistic intervention, through line drawings, “unlocked, architecturally, the echo, the visual echo in the realm of shape” (Le Corbusier, 1957, p.89). Translating his experience at Ronchamp within his wider guidance for architectural thinking and practice, he wrote of the landscape as “a presence” or host to which “the Chapel addresses itself by the effect ‘of an acoustic phenomenon introduced into the realm of forms’. It is an intimacy which must penetrate into everything, capable of causing the radiation of [ineffable] space” (1955/2000, p.252-3).

We know that McCormick was influenced by the Ronchamp chapel, most especially in his design for St Michael’s at Creeslough, Co. Donegal, from his on-site discussions with architectural technicians at the time of its construction (Pollard, 2011c, p.24). We see it today in detailing such as the positioning of multiple small stained glass windows designed by Helen Moloney in an irregular pattern on the façade of the church (fig.4). Such a deliberate citation of Le Corbusier’s design might appear derivative - and perhaps understandably so, given the unparalleled significance of Ronchamp to Modernist architecture, let alone church design. However, comparing the two buildings demonstrate interesting differences when thinking about how architecture might resonate within its surrounding environment; in Creeslough, the church does not sit on top of the landscape in a commanding way, as at Ronchamp, but rather lies at ground level as a visual echo of the nearby Muckish mountain (fig.5). McCormick’s design does not indicate deference to landscape as such, but rather a modesty in approach that was not typically associated with the high Modernism of Le Corbusier. Within the Creeslough church, McCormick incorporated a side chapel that further sustained the association with the external environment, with a plate glass wall framing an unimpeded view of the mountain (weather permitting) and internal landscaping which acted as a threshold space connecting the outside ground with the internal flooring (fig.6). Over time, these features have been altered, so that by the time of my own visits (in 2014 and in 2015), the picture window remains, but with carpeted flooring and uPVC windows. Whilst such changes concern architectural historians (Pollard, 2011c, p.26), they illustrate the provisional nature of all architecture: buildings, even in their constructed states are incomplete entities, subject to be used in ways that depart from the intentions of their designers (Gieryn, 2002). In my own visits I have observed a building which has been, and continues to be, maintained by the local population – the alterations to the church by previous priests notwithstanding (Pollard, 2011c, p.26), the current building is obviously cared for. On both visits, I have met women there to clean the church, with the air less heavy with incense than furniture polish. One may not sense now the novelty in design recalled by those who remember its opening in 1971 (discussing my trip to the church, my aunt recollected the interest amongst people in such an unusual building throughout the county); however, that sense of novelty has been supplemented by the traces and routines of care taken, over time and in their own time, by the men and (mostly) women of Creeslough who have looked after this place.

**Figs. 4-6 about here**

McCormick used a similar situating strategy as used in Creeslough in his most celebrated church, St Aengus at Burt in Co. Donegal (Pollard, 2011b), where the church is nestled into the base of a hill at whose summit stands the ancient stone fort, Grianán an Aileach (fig.7). Opened in 1967, St Aengus’s circular form is a clear echo of the fort, with the asymmetrical copper roof a sweeping response to the nearby Lough Swilly (fig.8). McCormick admitted to feeling uneasy about using such a pronounced design, worrying if “it would lie in comfortable companionship with the Grianán? Or would it look like a gimmick?” (in Larmour and O’Toole, 2008, p.80). The result is far from it. Approaching St Aengus from the coastal road that passes from Desertegney down to Buncrana and through Fahan, one takes a 90 degree turn in the road that results in an unimpeded view of the church (weather permitting) that is breath-taking. And yet, this is not a building that is imposing, either externally or internally. The external form holds an internal space that is calm, in spite of the speed and noise of the cars using the N13 just outside – the cambered stone walls, using stone quarried in County Derry, are thickset and keep the peace inside. The lack of corners, high disc of stained glass (again by Helen Moloney) and sculpted skylight inside the church appear distracting when written down, but make an interior that is never obtrusive, always discreet. In the award of their highest architectural achievement in 1971, the Irish Architectural Association’s panel noted that:

The romantic relationships of form and material to the great prehistoric fort overhead, the delicate reflection of the spiky silhouette of the nearby Presbyterian and the spire of the Church of Ireland churches, and the echo of the swaying curves of the hills and the sea might easily have degenerated into a sentimental and false stage setting. In fact, the design has been conceived and executed with such sensitivity, imagination and skill that this weakness has been completely avoided.

(in Pollard, 2011b, p.30)

**Figs. 7-8 about here**

In Burt, we can find a highly effective and affecting sensitivity to site, with architectural form acting as a medium through which the landscape resounds. The fort at the top of the hill is so distant that I could not see it standing at the base. The church at the bottom of the hill is visible from the fort’s car park, but the copper colouring of the roof mutes its impact on the earth. McCormick’s church evokes a strong sense of place despite the subtlety of its impression on and within the landscape, because of the relations it enacts between the different elements of the environment. For Nancy, where the sense of place is discussed, it is “place *as* relation to self, as the taking-place of a self, a vibrant place as the diaspon of a subject or, better, as a diaspon-subject” (Nancy, 2007, p.16). Or, in my case, a diasporic subject, thinking of my recent experiences of McCormick’s chapel at Burt, a building I have known for many years. It is to my own relationship with McCormick’s churches that I turn to in the concluding discussion, in order to reflect on the sense of self that may sit alongside a sense of place familiar but now also distant.

1. Conclusion: small steps towards small stories

To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: *not*, it should be emphasized, a relationship to “me” (the supposedly given subject), or to the “self” of the other… but to a *relationship in self*.

(Nancy, 2007, p.12)

For Nancy, listening is a surer way of recognising the limits to subjectivity that a post-phenomenology should cultivate. He suggests that to listen “opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such… opening that a “self” can take place” (Nancy, 2007, p.14), offering a sensually attuned ontology to complement his earlier ontologies of sociality and philosophies of being-in-common (2000). He offers a model of subjectivity that is modest in its way, passing over imperatives to wholeness and rootedness in our orientation to the world, and operating with the understanding that “worlding does not constitute a *stable ground* upon which people can rest assured in safe belonging or cling to their own understanding of a self” (Simpson, 2009, p.2560). His philosophy of sense, and ultimately subjectivity, is “ungraspable, shared, and irreducible to any closed signification or meaning” (James, 2006, p.106). This brings us close to Wylie’s reflections on the imbricated understandings of both self and landscape, which although commonly thought of as “matters of involvement and immersion” could instead be posited “more in terms of a slipping-away, a letting-go, a failing to grasp or even to touch” (2009, p.279). It calls to mind Wylie’s characterisation of Tim Robinson’s writings on the West of Ireland as haunted by a sense of displacement “in which land and life are *untied* rather than *united*” (2007, p.375-6).

Owain Jones has written persuasively about the role of memory in our sense of space, place and landscape (2011). He writes that we are “conglomerations of past everyday experiences, including their *spatial textures and affective registers*” (2011, p.875), and thus argues for a greater openness to academic work on landscapes known not through a “pure” encounter with place as one might expect in spaces new to the researcher (ibid., p.879), but rather through the multiple registers of memory that might comprise places known to the authors through habit and biographical experience. He holds up the example of work by Hayden Lorimer, who has written that “biographical connections represent something of the fluxes, feelings, affinities, and serendipities of subjective encounter that scramble established codes for dispassionate… modes of landscape enquiry” (Lorimer, 2006, p.516), not to mention academic tone more generally. Lorimer points up the potential anxiety for incorporating other forms of writing within the context of academic work, especially where they hold open the tensions between collective memories and family histories (2014), and the hesitant, partial disclosures of my own past in this paper confirms this.

And yet, I agree with Jones where he writes that “[m]emory (of one kind or another) is then a fundamental aspect of becoming, intimately entwined with space, affect, emotion, imagination and identity” (2011, p.880). I agree with Chris Philo where he argues for the importance of allowing the “dynamics of reverie” into academic practice, in order to encourage “hermeneutic exchange between [the researcher’s] adult reveries rooted in the here-and-now and recollections of his or her childhood… spearing from the there-and-then” (2003, p.16). No matter that the images we carry with us from childhood may be subject to some level of distortion: their collage can serve as a “local method” in thinking through the affective and imaginative dimensions of place (Jones, 2015, p.5). Faulty memories included and notwithstanding, individual acts of remembering are important in rounding out or knowledge of landscapes, and the “small stories” and minor events they have hosted (Lorimer, 2003). Wylie has advanced the field of landscape thinking with accounts of long distances walked; my opening for this essay was suggestive of trace memories of small steps travelled across tiny distances – the short regular trips between the classrooms and McCormick’s chapel at the Nazareth House or, after these early years of education, the walks past the chapel as I went to the secondary school on the other side of the road (fig.9). The distance between house and school, private life and public, was not far in footsteps but, as a routine task carried out habitually, the miles and experience of place accumulated over time. Other than the primary school chapel, I remember McCormick’s church at Steelstown, just up the road from my father’s work-place in Derry, and the impressions that its internal space, with such warm tonal qualities, made on me on occasional visits for Christmas Eve vigils (fig.10). And other than the architecture itself are the memories of objects associated with these churches: in a church that I have never visited until preparing for this essay, St Conal’s in Glenties, I came upon Nell Pollen’s statues (fig.11); the central figure of the Madonna and child had been known to me all through my childhood through a smaller reproduction owned by my mother and kept in the places we lived as a family.

Figs.9-11 about here

Travelling around the churches mentioned here with my father and mother recently, my experience of the landscape felt close to that recounted by Wylie in his essay on the memorial benches of Mullion Cove, where he felt an entwining of “*landscape* with *absence*” (2009, p.280). There are clearly differences between experiencing a unfamiliar landscape and places (and buildings) already known, but I agree with Wylie’s argument that “the absencing fracture of landscape is simultaneously a sort of openness, and can be thought anew in terms of *love*” (Wylie, 2009, p.280). My experience was not one of a collapse of current identity with previously (and still) dear landscapes; and there was too much distance (temporal and spatial) with where I am now to expect the “dreams of presence” between self and place that Rose considers important (2006), for I did not experience these feelings exactly. But that is not to say that there was not an inclination to care, for people or place; more so than being anchored, “maybe it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder” (Wylie, 2009, p.284) and that can keep our commitment to places we love open, emergent and resonant.

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