Seeing God
and the Poetry of Ursula Bethell

by

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Abstract

Mary Ursula Bethell's poems are almost exclusively celebrations of natural beauty. What, then, is the significance of the beauty within the world to the poet? This question is central to Bethell's poetry and this thesis attempts to answer it.

Beauty, for Bethell, is the invisible shining through the visible. It is the glory of God shown in the physical world. As Bethell searches for and celebrates beauty, she is in fact searching for and celebrating the face of God.

Bethell's first collection, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, introduces the role of beauty in the poet's life: a role of revealing the world as a point of connection between herself and her God. *Time and Place* continues with this theme. Here the focus is on Christ as the ultimate Being – the foundation of all things, who is revealed most perfectly through the beauty of the world. *Day and Night* holds the climax of the revelation of God. It unveils the Holy Spirit as the 'Spirit of Beauty', so creating a direct link between the poet and her God – a link which is made evident by the beauty of the world.

Introduction

‘MY URSULA BETHELL’

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land, light and darkness, day and night, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and all of the creatures that walk on the land.¹ Lastly he made man in his own image, male and female he created them. And God established a garden for them, a garden full of trees and in which was planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Being deceived by the serpent, and desiring wisdom, Adam and Eve ate the fruit of this tree which they were forbidden to eat. Because they ate the fruit which they were commanded not to eat God passed judgment over them, cursing the ground and causing it to produce thorns and thistles. He said to Adam:

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.²

¹ Genesis 1.

² Genesis 3:19.

The shared nature of people and the earth is used to point to the mortality of humanity. God essentially curses everything that has physical being – all things that are will pass away as a result of sin. But God, while being perfectly just, is also merciful. When he turns to judge the serpent, who assisted in the deception, God promises Adam and Eve a saviour. He says to the serpent:

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.³

The serpent is a symbol of evil, of destruction and death. The one who will crush the head of the serpent is Jesus Christ, who, in the gospels of the New Testament, died and rose again, and so was stung by the serpent, but ultimately defeated death.

This story about the creation of the world and the fall of humanity presents only the rudiments of Christianity, but it is the foundation upon which Mary Ursula Bethell's poetry rests. Toss Woollaston records in his memoirs, *Sage Tea*, the first time he was introduced to Ursula Bethell. She had just emerged from church wearing blue silks, 'with her head a little bent, eyes inward, evidently meditating on divine matters'.⁴

Bethell was born on October 6, 1874, in England, and died on the 15th of January, 1945. She spent her childhood in New Zealand, but left for England to attend Oxford Girls' High School in 1889, where she lived with the

³ Genesis 3:15.

⁴ Toss Woollaston, *Sage Tea: An Autobiography* (Auckland: Collins, 1980), p. 215.

Mayhew family who were instrumental in the development of her poetry. Ruth Mayhew (Lady Ruth Head) was the recipient of the verse in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*,⁵ while her brother Arthur undertook the publication of this first collection by Sidgwick & Jackson in 1929. Peter Whiteford suggests that the oldest brother, Arnold Mayhew, may have been the one time ‘sweetheart’ whom Bethell guardedly refers to in her letters.⁶

Between 1889 and 1919, when she made New Zealand a permanent home, she travelled widely, visiting Switzerland, New Zealand, the United States and even India. She was heavily involved in social work and joined the Anglican Grey Ladies for a time, although it seems their untidiness and noise became too much for her. She also gifted a house to the Anglican church as a centre for training deaconesses.

It is not surprising, given her interest in the welfare of society, that she existed at the centre of a literary circle in Christchurch and often took to spiritually supervising many of the young people she patronised. Monte Holcroft admits that

[a]lthough my respect for Ursula Bethell grew stronger as I talked to her more frequently, I found that in some ways she had to be resisted. She was generous in her desire to help young writers; but I think she liked to feel that she was influencing their work...At one time our friendship became strained, and had to be interrupted, because I felt that in the tasks I had undertaken I needed personal freedom...I feared her gentle pressure towards theology.⁷

⁵ Ursula Bethell, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, by Evelyn Hayes (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1929).

⁶ Peter Whiteford, ‘Introduction to *Vibrant with Words: The Letters of Ursula Bethell*’ (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), pp. xv-xvi.

⁷ Monte Holcroft, ‘Ursula Bethell: Some Personal Memories’, pp. 284-290, in *Landfall*, vol. 2, no. 4 (December 1948), p. 288.

But whether or not she influenced any of those artists who came to her attention, such as Toss Woollaston, Monte Holcroft, D'Arcy Cresswell, Eric McCormick, John Summers, and even Charles Brasch – whose poetry, she told him, she did not particularly admire⁸ – her own poetry holds an important place in New Zealand literature.

Most of her poetry was written while she lived at Rise Cottage on the Cashmere Hills, in Christchurch, with Effie Pollen. This period spanned a decade, from 1924-1934. The sudden death of her very dear friend essentially ended Bethell's desire to write poetry. Not only this, it spelled the end of her ability to see poetry in the world surrounding her. In each year following Effie Pollen's death, around the anniversary of her passing, Bethell wrote a memorial of her friend. In the sixth and last of these, Bethell expresses how the pain of Pollen's death has caused her lack of inspiration:

Out to the pastures, then, we went, to seek our Spring.
Now, in the city pent, Spring sudden overtakes me
As in time past my joy, hear my complaint now,
Spirit of Beauty, hear...

Match Spring with vision, Spirit of Beauty, bring
With your persuasive love to the inward eye awakening,
Lest looking on this life to count what time has taken
I cannot bear the pain. (‘Spring 1940’)⁹

The poem reveals that while joy ‘in time past’ enabled her to see the Spirit of Beauty within the world, the pain she now bears means that spring is no longer matched with the vision from which her poetry sprang. The awakening

⁸ Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 302-303.

⁹ Mary Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950), p. 103.

of her 'inward eye' is crucial to her poetry. It is this 'inward', or spiritual, eye, that my thesis investigates.

Everyone's Ursula Bethell

Janet Charman's article, 'My Ursula Bethell', written in 1998 seeks to find in Bethell's poetry a challenging of 'the patriarchal norms'.¹⁰ Charman aims to uncover the 'sexual politics which underpin Bethell's writing'. She introduces the poetry as the voice of a woman struggling to refuse the 'otherness' of femininity and homosexuality. The article is aptly named. While the relationship between Bethell and Effie Pollen has been interpreted as a lesbian relationship by other critics, such as Anne Else, in her study of the treatment of women poets in *Landfall*,¹¹ 'My Ursula Bethell' is a reflection of Charman's preoccupations with Bethell's poetry. What she presents is *her* Ursula Bethell, and as we shall see, there are many Ursula Bethells.

Charman's article is, in part, a response to the orthodox placement of Bethell's poetry in the literary history of New Zealand. Allen Curnow, Monte Holcroft, D'Arcy Cresswell, and S. A. Grave, to name a few, place Bethell at the foundations of New Zealand poetry, at the beginnings of the creation of a New Zealand voice. In his 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945*' Curnow gives a sensitive reading of Bethell's poetry. He

¹⁰ Janet Charman, 'My Ursula Bethell', pp. 91-108, in *Women's Studies Journal*, 14.2 (Spring 1998). <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/charman.asp> (accessed March 17, 2007)

¹¹ Anne Else, 'Not More Than Man Nor Less: The Treatment of Women Poets in *Landfall*, 1947-1961', pp. 431-446, in *Landfall*, vol. 39, no. 4 (December 1985), pp. 440-441.

comments on the private nature of the poetry, saying that the poems of *From a Garden in the Antipodes* ‘read almost like a published correspondence’¹² which, in fact, they were. He notes the progression of Bethell’s verse from the garden poems to the more overtly philosophical poetry in *Time and Place*¹³ and *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934*,¹⁴ the poetry ‘beginning to reveal what power the celebrant of the garden held in reserve’.¹⁵ He goes on to point out ‘the contemplative or mystic’ intertwined with ‘the nature poet and moralist’ revealed by the poetry.¹⁶ Another brief but perceptive reading is given in his ‘Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*’,¹⁷ where he writes ‘What Ursula Bethell calls (in ‘By Burke’s Pass’) “this planetary decoration” supplies her, chiefly, with a language to express the transcendent truths of her religion. It heightens and gives sensuous bulk to her vision of life’s brevity and fragility’.¹⁸

But what Curnow is primarily concerned with is the creation and documentation of New Zealand poetry, of a living language through which poets can communicate with their New Zealand audience.¹⁹ Bethell’s value, for Curnow, is to be found in the fact that he finds her verse to be ‘purposive, a real expression of what the New Zealander is and a part of what he may

¹² Allen Curnow, ‘Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945*’, pp. 42-75 in Allen Curnow, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, Peter Simpson (ed.) (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987), p. 69.

¹³ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place, poems by the Author of ‘From a Garden in the Antipodes’* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936).

¹⁴ Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934, by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939).

¹⁵ Curnow, ‘Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945*’, in *Look Back Harder*, p. 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Allen Curnow, ‘Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*’ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁹ Allen Curnow, ‘Poetry and Language’, pp. 1-5 in *Look Back Harder*.

become'.²⁰ He places her firmly at the foundation of New Zealand poetry in his introduction to both the 1945 and 1960 anthologies, and also in 'New Zealand Literature: The Case for a Working Definition'²¹ where he writes:

New Zealand's best writers of the nineteen thirties... Writers like Cresswell, Sargeson, Mason, Fairburn, Brasch, John Mulgan, Glover, Finlayson, Ursula Bethell – these were among the first who, as New Zealanders, accepted the disciplines of uncompromising fidelity to experience, of an unqualified responsibility to the truths of themselves, in this place, at that time.²²

According to Patrick Evans, Curnow turns Bethell into a 'Woman Alone' figure, moulding her poetry into his fraternal canon.²³ Bethell is the only female in Curnow's 1930s 'band of brothers'²⁴ and Stuart Murray, in *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s*, argues that as her work was pressed into a masculine culture she became 'perceived as a somewhat harsh, Anglican, almost asexual figure, combining a sense of difference developed out of both her faith and her sexuality'.²⁵

While Curnow searched for those poets who matched the New Zealand landscape with a New Zealand language intended for a New Zealand audience, Monte Holcroft saw New Zealand culture arising from the ability of writers to connect the landscape back to the primal source from which all culture arises. Monte Holcroft is concerned with the answer New Zealand society gives to 'The Great Questions', as he names a chapter in *Encircling*

²⁰ Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*', in *Look Back Harder*, p. 43.

²¹ Allen Curnow, 'New Zealand Literature: The Case for a Working Definition', pp. 191-208 in *Look Back Harder*.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²³ Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990), p. 110.

²⁴ Stuart Murray, *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998), p. 88.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Seas.²⁶ Just as Curnow defined ‘purposive’ poetry as poetry that revealed to New Zealanders what they were and what they could become, so Holcroft was determined to reveal to New Zealanders their need for the arts in order for the ‘nation’s soul’ to be discovered. Holcroft attributes to Bethell a unique vision into ‘the harmonies of our rivers and hills’,²⁷ harmonies which link New Zealand back to antiquity. The task of poets, according to Holcroft, is

to open their minds and the minds of their readers to influences that can be found in this country and nowhere else, and in so doing to reach towards that primal force which lives like a pulse in the old themes of earth and sky and human mutability.²⁸

It is no wonder that Bethell was so congenial to Holcroft when we consider ‘Forest Sleep’,²⁹ in which the poet meditates upon the forest and takes ‘root with tree in centuries of decay, / And with their leaves inbreathe the woody fume’ until ‘all particular dissolved to primal mist, / Whereof the Thinker fashions what he will’. It is Bethell’s religious faith to which Holcroft attributes her sight. ‘Much reading in the scriptures and constant habits of meditation have kept her close in spirit to the eternal landscapes of the ancient books’.³⁰ By fusing biblical associations with the hills of this country, Bethell’s poetry attained to Holcroft’s standard for true poetry and gained a position for the poet at the beginnings of ‘The Awakening of Poetry’, as Holcroft named the chapter, in New Zealand.

²⁶ M. H. Holcroft, ‘Encircling Seas’, pp. 229-244, in *Discovered Isles: A Trilogy* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950).

²⁷ M. H. Holcroft, *The Waiting Hills* (Wellington: Progressive Publishing Society, 1943), p. 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁹ *Time and Place*, p. 20.

³⁰ Holcroft, *The Waiting Hills*, p. 85.

While Holcroft pictures Bethell viewing the New Zealand scene through her scriptural spectacles, Lawrence Baigent presents the poetry as a transplantation of ‘the great English tradition in literature’ upon ‘the experience of life in this country’.³¹ He compares her poetry to ‘the oak, the ash, the poplar, the willow’;³² to an imported plant which, although not native, belongs to New Zealand because it is planted in New Zealand soil. Very firmly imbedded too, because Baigent depicts Bethell as a realist, whose poetry is concerned with fact, not fantasy. Although he states that she was interested in mysticism, a mystic she was not, for ‘a rare intellectual and emotional integrity’ held her back.³³ No, her poetry, for Baigent, reveals ‘a vision of a life of a singular strength and calmness and simplicity’.³⁴

This reading presents a stark contrast when compared to those of Helen Shaw, Holcroft, and John Summers. While Holcroft emphasises Bethell’s religious beliefs as a guiding force in her poetry, he also notes a tension in the poet’s faith, which when revealed in the poetry, gives it its strength and credibility.³⁵ Helen Shaw chose to focus on this tension in her 1951 *Arachne* article.³⁶ Shaw is not concerned with the placement of Bethell’s poetry within the context of New Zealand literature; she deals primarily with what she is presented with as she reads the poetry. What she finds is a tension between faith and doubt, between spiritual and physical, played out in the contrast

³¹ Lawrence Baigent, ‘The Poetry of Ursula Bethell’, pp. 23-30, in *Landfall*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1951), p. 24.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁵ Holcroft, *The Waiting Hills*, pp. 86-87.

³⁶ Helen Shaw, ‘‘I am the Dark’’: The Poetry of Ursula Bethell’, pp. 25-29, in *Arachne*, no. 3 (December 1951).

between light and darkness. So 'Winter 1941. Kaikoura',³⁷ in which the poet watches a seagull 'swoop and wheel and dive and dash himself / into the uproar' of the sea, is astutely interpreted by Shaw as Bethell's oscillation between the body and the soul, between death and life:

The seagull is free and compares with the released soul, ascending from the earthly body, while 'Life' in the seagull swings downwards to the poet's imagined death, to the crypt, the waiting tomb; the final swing occurring between the certainty with which the bird hovers resolved (surely) above the 'whirling water', for the poet the unfathomed uncertainty of infinity...

'What if the light go out?...

...I am the dark' – is the single and unifying theme of Ursula Bethell's subject, craft and experience.³⁸

And John Summers, in his memoir, writes about two statues on Bethell's mantelpiece; one, the Virgin and child, the other, Venus de Milo. The statues, Summers tells us, represented the 'not wholly to be achieved' synthesis of nature and art into a reflection of the teachings of Christianity.³⁹ And yet, even in Christianity Bethell struggled with the paradox of the crucifix, as we see in 'The Crucifix':⁴⁰

Oh staggering symbol of distress!
Thy paradox resolve, Enlightening Spirit:
this scatheless, soul-intoxication night of loveliness,
and hung there truthful high over my pallet,
the crucifix, the crucifix.

This, Summers points out, is the paradox of the denial of Eros by Agape, as the 'small slightly deformed Virgin on the mantelpiece denied the Venus de Milo'.⁴¹ According to this interpretation the poetry looks forward to the full

³⁷ *Collected Poems*, pp. 77-78.

³⁸ Shaw, 'I am the Dark', p. 29.

³⁹ John Summers, 'Ursula Bethell: Some Personal Memories', pp. 290-294, in *Landfall*, vol. 2, no. 4 (December 1948), p. 291.

⁴⁰ *Day and Night*, p. 35.

⁴¹ Summers, 'Memories', p. 294.

revelation of what the mystics now see only in part, when the reality of this ‘planetary decoration’ is rolled away (‘By Burke’s Pass’).⁴²

L. G. Whitehead, along with Holcroft, Shaw, and Summers, believed that Bethell ‘would have accepted as life’s motto the words of Unamuno: ‘May God deny you peace, but give you glory’.⁴³ Although her poetry reveals the trepidation with which she contemplated death, and, as Shaw points out, the oscillation between the body and the spirit, Whitehead emphasises ‘her unwavering belief in the goodness of the Power behind the universe’.⁴⁴ However, Bethell’s poetry communicates to Charlotte Elder an alternative understanding of the poet’s spiritual security. A view of the spiritual isolation of the poet and a ‘lack of firm convictions regarding the afterlife’ is given by Charlotte Elder in her discussion of Bethell’s correspondence with John Schroder.⁴⁵ Elder sees in the poetry Bethell’s feelings of displacement within New Zealand, her sense of the insignificance of humanity in comparison to the natural scene, a preoccupation with time and the transitory nature of human existence, and the ‘position of the individual as determiner of fate’.⁴⁶

The conclusion she draws from these observations is that

[u]ltimately, Bethell acknowledges that the way to achieving a tentative stability and solace was by accepting the unknown while acknowledging her inability to comprehend higher metaphysical and religious workings, even though she still struggled to accomplish this on a personal level.⁴⁷

⁴² *Time and Place*, p. 27.

⁴³ L. G. Whitehead, ‘Ursula Bethell: Some Personal Memories’, pp. 294-296, in *Landfall*, vol. 2, no. 4 (December 1948), p. 296.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁴⁵ Charlotte Margaret Elder, ‘‘Dear Mr Schroder’: An Annotated Edition of the Correspondence between Ursula Bethell and John Schroder’, unpublished M. A. thesis (Victoria University of Wellington, 1999), p. 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

For Elder, Bethell's poetry reveals her final uncertainty about the character of the God whom she served and the nature of life after death.

As Stuart Murray points out in *Never a Soul at Home*, 'a variety of pigeon-holes appear capable of containing Bethell's poetry',⁴⁸ and a proper appreciation of Bethell's poetry has to take into account this complexity and variety within her work. Bethell herself protests against being placed into one single pigeon-hole. Eric McCormick in *Letters and Art in New Zealand* labels her as an 'expatriate', and finds it difficult 'to apply the word "native" to these cultivated poems, so manifestly written, as the title [*From a Garden in the Antipodes*] implies, in the spirit of an expatriate. There is in this collection... little sense of belonging to any part of New Zealand beyond the plot of ground commemorated by the poems'.⁴⁹ Bethell responds to what she calls McCormick's 'bitter tone of *resentment* about England' by writing to him, in 1940:

You musn't take me as a *sample* of a Country (England) or a Class! I wouldn't be a good specimen – I am too variegated...That's one of the sad things about me! – I don't belong anywhere in particular – I've dodged to and fro – my friends are of all sorts of classes & countries – I'm not a fair *sample* – I have not been able to settle, always there was some event, some frustration – "no road". So please don't ticket me like that, – "*tag*" the Americans say.

⁴⁸ Murray, *Never a Soul at Home*, p. 89.

⁴⁹ E. H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940), p. 185.

My Ursula Bethell

I would like to focus on one particular aspect of Bethell's poetry, but an aspect which I believe permeates her thought and consequently moulds her poetry: her desire to see God. While Bethell's poetry is 'variegated', even full of tensions, there is a conscious attempt by critics to reach the root of the poetry – the essential beliefs held by the poet from which the poetry springs. For Holcroft that root is the 'essential beauty' within the landscape, which, when seen, ties the poet back to the primal source. Curnow also depicts the poetry as a search for transcendental truth in the landscape, her search behind the phenomena which causes her inability to rest upon the image. For Shaw, the line 'I am the dark' in 'Evening Walk in Winter',⁵⁰ 'is the single and unifying theme of Ursula Bethell's subject, craft and experience'.⁵¹ Shaw interprets the poetry as a search for connection between light and dark – ultimately the poet's desire to amalgamate the infinite with the finite, the physical and the spiritual. And Elder sees the poetry as a struggle for stability and security, which can only be found by accepting the belief that the unknown cannot be known.

The idea of the known and the unknown is clearly seen in 'Winter 1941. Kaikoura',⁵² where Bethell uses the sea as a symbol of the unknown beyond death. The surrounding fields symbolise the known realities of this world, and the seagull is used to represent her own soul:

⁵⁰ *Collected Poems*, pp. 75-76.

⁵¹ Shaw, 'I am the Dark', p. 29.

⁵² *Collected Poems*, pp. 94-95.

I have watched a seagull
swoop and wheel and dive and dash himself
into the uproar, into the vaulting spray,
rejoicing. The rage is his delight, the storm's his home,
therein he takes his pastime. . . .

But I no sea-bird! On this gradual mound,
Upon its firm and interwoven turf,
I rest and gaze, in the shelter of a bank
Of gorse in bloom and breathing scented air...

Here in this intimate Eden, this close anchorage. . . .

Yet I still hear the thunder of the waves' blind battering . . .
I fear the hunger of the undertow, the sucked stones' hiss . . .
False peace! All's peril. Here's no hold, no harbour. . . .

Oh! to ride, seagull, surely
over the abyss of whirling waters,
to plunge into the tumult
unseeing, safe, in the dark crypt of the breakers
(loosed, my soul, from earth-lust)
secured through insecurity.

I think what is being stressed here is the poet's unwillingness to relinquish what is known – the world of time and space – so that she may have a fuller knowledge of the unknown. Security does arise from the acceptance of the unknown, as Elder argues, but what I wish to reveal in this thesis is that as the poet relinquishes what is known, realising that 'this intimate Eden, this close anchorage' is 'no hold, no harbour', and plunges into the unknown, that the unknown cannot then remain unknown. Her ultimate aim is to 'change over to "eternal in the heavens"',⁵³ a change which she saw as capable of happening before death. She writes:

Dear Monte, I recognised in you a true faith, a willingness to risk all, & go out into the dark, I told you that I saw you were further on than I was about this willingness to *lose all* & plunge into the unknown. Now I am dwelling

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 5:1, quoted by Bethell in a letter to Monte Holcroft, in Ursula Bethell, *Vibrant with Words: The letters of Ursula Bethell*, Peter Whiteford (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 102.

on your thought that life is a *preparation*...& I must change over to 'eternal in the heavens'.

But first there is this desolation, & stepping off into the dark.⁵⁴

Bethell's poetry is about the relinquishment of the known and the stepping off into the unknown.

How, then, does Bethell go about 'stepping off into the dark'? Firstly, in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, she presents her reader with what Holcroft calls 'essential beauty'.⁵⁵ She then goes on to 'penetrate behind phenomena',⁵⁶ behind the surface of the physical world, in *Time and Place*, and finally in *Day and Night* we find what Shaw highlights: an attempt to see the light in the darkness, to perceive the nature of God in the paradox of the crucifix, and to see that God is also the dark.

In each of the four chapters of this thesis I will be focusing primarily on what I perceive to be the dominant theme of each of the collections published during Bethell's lifetime, beginning with *From a Garden in the Antipodes* in chapter one, dealing with *Time and Place* in chapters two and three, and finishing with *Day and Night* in chapter four.

From a Garden in the Antipodes and 'essential beauty'

The Bible begins with the story of the creation of the world, the fall of man and God's promise of a saviour. Bethell begins her first collection, *From a*

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.102.

⁵⁵ Holcroft, *Discovered Isles*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*', in *Look Back Harder*, p. 70.

Garden in the Antipodes, with a poem which reflects the first three chapters of Genesis:

I have told you, Ruth, in plain words,
The pleasures of my occupation
In the rhythms of the stout spade,
The lawn-mower and the constant hoe.
But when I listen sometimes to these persistent winds
Moaning remotely among the resonant bluegums,
Tossing their dark boughs towards this sheer sky –

I would that it had been given to me
To be the maker of a small melody
Fit to be chanted by one of Eve's daughters
Throwing her first seed into a rough furrow
Or resting in the shadow of a sycamore
Playing upon an uncouth instrument.

(‘Foreword’)⁵⁷

The poet is working to create a garden with her ‘stout spade’ and her ‘constant hoe’. The poem introduces a theme of warfare between the poet and the earth as she battles to maintain her garden, while it is constantly assaulted by ‘a host of abominable enemies’ (‘Warfare’).⁵⁸ This battling echoes the curse God placed upon the land in Genesis 3:17-19. The echo is made stronger by the reference to the wind ‘moaning’ in the ‘dark boughs’ of the bluegums. The ‘rude winds’ (‘Bulbs’) are an enemy of the garden and consequently point back to the cause of the poet’s struggles – sin. Sin is the reason that ‘Eve’s daughters’ must sow seeds in order to eat. Bethell uses her garden to reveal to the reader the fallen and imperfect nature of the world.

But ‘Foreword’ is also about music and harmony – just as the garden is. The poet wishes to be ‘the maker of a small melody’. By linking this melody to

⁵⁷ *From a Garden*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

the planting of seeds Bethell links this melody to her garden. These garden poems, she tells us in 'Alpines',⁵⁹ are echoes of the music of the garden:

Away with you, plausible rhymes, that come to me unbidden;
I listen for little sounds that are shy and hidden...
Only to echo for a moment
The rock-garden's toy-symphony.

So both the poetry and the garden are presented as 'small melodies'. But what is the significance of this desire to create a melody, whether it be through poetry, or painting, or gardening?

This melody stands in the place of beauty. The garden is a symbol of beauty, and is used to illustrate the role of beauty in the poet's life – a role which continues on throughout the following collections. *From a Garden in the Antipodes* serves as an introduction to the theological and metaphysical themes that become more evident in Bethell's later collections. This first collection introduces beauty as the invisible shining through the visible world. While modern Western society places increasing faith in the world of time and space as the only knowable reality, Bethell sees beauty as a sign that this is not the case. Beauty is intricately tied to the double nature of humanity – the body and the soul, between which Bethell oscillates. The senses of the body solidify the physical world, which is seen as the extent of reality. But the poet's spirit strives to view her religious beliefs as a fuller, more complete reality. Beauty is the key to the connection of the physical and spiritual elements of the poet, for beauty is seen by Bethell to be the product of the connection of the invisible and the visible, the spiritual and the physical. The

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

central message of *From a Garden in the Antipodes* is that beauty binds two, seemingly opposing realities – spiritual and physical – into one.

This is why the poet wishes to be the maker of a small melody. She wishes to focus upon the beauty within the world. ‘Foreword’ reiterates the story of the creation and the fall from perfection. The emphasis upon beauty in the last verse runs parallel to God’s promise of a saviour. Beauty, as discussed in chapters two and three, is linked to Christ, who is the Word, through which the world came into being.

‘Penetrating behind phenomena’ in Time and Place

Christ is shown in the poetry as the Logos, the Word, and through him the world came into being. The whole world is, according to Bethell, intended to be a physical manifestation of the thoughts of the creator.

Time and Place begins with ‘Willows in the Valley’⁶⁰ – a poem which presents the world as ‘[a] bright stuff spun of the seen and the unseen’. This reflects the central preoccupation of the collection – the conversion of the phenomenal world into an encounter with Christ. The phenomenal world is seen to be a surface of physical qualities cloaking, while disclosing, the shape of the form beneath. While the physical world of time and space can become an opaque surface through which the invisible cannot be seen (an idea dealt with in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*), *Time and Place* portrays a world

⁶⁰ *Time and Place*, p. 9.

which is intended to communicate the nature of its creator. Bethell places immense importance upon the physical world surrounding her because the world of the senses is her only source of information. She also presents the idea that the sensations received from the physical world are intended to have an impact upon the spirit of the beholder. Each sensation draws an intuitive response from the beholder, whether it is a positive or a negative response. It is through this response that the poet perceives the 'intimate and insistent voice' within the things of the world ('Autumn Roses').⁶¹ The stronger the response, the more insistent the voice of the object. Because the purpose of the world is seen by Bethell to be the communication of messages, and because those objects with the most insistent voice are the ones which are the most beautiful, Bethell draws the conclusion that those closest to their ideal form speak to her with the loudest voices (and so draw a stronger response of joy from her heart).

The world is portrayed as constantly moving toward its ideal state. While the poem 'Waves'⁶² appears in *Day and Night* I have drawn it into my discussion of *Time and Place* because of its relevance to the theme of phenomenal world as a surface intended for the communication of spiritual realities. We see the world being 'impelled to ideal form' in 'Waves'. As every singly entity within the world looks to the fulfilment of its purpose, it reveals more and more about its creator, until the cosmos will finally learn speech and reveal Christ, 'the Bridegroom'. *Time and Place* reveals that the phenomenal world

⁶¹ *Time and Place*, p. 25.

⁶² *Day and Night*, pp. 36-37.

is only a 'planetary decoration' soon to be rolled up to reveal the deeper reality beneath ('By Burke's Pass').⁶³

So the task of the physical world is to manifest its nature to the utmost perfection in order to speak about its creator in its clearest voice. Chapter three, however, deals with the other side of the coin – the role of the mind.

Time and Place reveals the importance of echoes, patterns, relations and associations to Bethell. 'Weathered Rocks'⁶⁴ deals particularly with the interrelation of all things: 'Rock, thorn, cryptogram, each has significance, / Each makes contribution to eternal parable'. Relations and unity are important because although they are presented to the intelligent mind by the world, it is the mind that must work to draw them together.

Furthermore, patterns and echoes reveal to the poet the connection between her mind and the physical world. The world is seen to be intelligible; it contains concepts which can only be recognised and appreciated by the intelligent mind, such as pattern, beauty, scientific laws. The world, then, corresponds to the logical structures of the mind. The logical structures of the mind are viewed by Bethell as instrumental to the discovery of the truth. The mind cannot accept two contradicting ideas as being simultaneously true; it has a logical structure which enables it to both weed out what it perceives to be false, while it is able to perceive connections and so draw things into unity. That which has unity, for Bethell, is true, and is a pathway toward the source

⁶³ *Time and Place*, p. 27.

⁶⁴ *Time and Place*, p. 34.

of truth. So, in 'Forest Sleep'⁶⁵ she notes the harmonious connection between the shade and the sun, the silence and the sounds of the forest, 'the linked light and darkness, laughter and grief'. She uses these harmonies to link the forest to humanity:

think you not truly, then,
The linked light and darkness, laughter and grief
Forecast the consciousness of microcosm, man,
The tuned antinomies of his mysterious life?

The unity of the forest, the connection seen even between opposites, causes her to dissolve all of her distinction, all of her individuality, her separateness, in order to share in the unity which has its foundation in Christ: 'And all particular dissolved to primal mist, / Whereof the Thinker fashions what he will'.

The unification of light and darkness in Day and Night

In a letter to Merlin and Kathleen Davies, written in 1944, Bethell writes: '[t]onight I am haunted by the words (probably misquotation) "when this mortality shall have put on immortality, THEN – —"'.⁶⁶ The passage she is referring to is 1 Corinthians 15:54, a passage in which Paul deals with the resurrection of the body. Here Paul writes:

There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour.
So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁶ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 314.

dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body...

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."⁶⁷

Day and Night is about the passing of the physical into the spiritual described by Paul. While the poems foresee death and the paradise to follow, they also attempt to re-enact the waking of the poet in an earthly heaven.

Paul's use of the splendour of the heavenly bodies to illustrate the contrast between physical and spiritual bodies is, I believe, paralleled in 'Lighting of the Lamps'.⁶⁸ Bethell focuses in the third section of the poem on the antiphony between the light of the stars and the planets, 'Greater and lesser lights / All in their measure set', and the small lights of humanity: 'Flickering human phares'.

Light is used in *Day and Night* to symbolise the enlightenment of the believer by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit both illuminates the believer and enables him to see the light and splendour of Christ in the world surrounding him. Consequently, when the poet sees the splendour of the stars in the sky echoed in the lights on the earth she is impelled to sing 'hymns of confident praise'.

⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:40-54.

⁶⁸ *Day and Night*, pp. 26-31.

I will argue in chapter two that the more beautiful an object appears to the poet, the closer she considers it to be to its ideal form, and, consequently, the more fully it displays Christ, the creator. The Holy Spirit in *Day and Night* is portrayed as illuminating the poet in order that she may see the glory and beauty of the world – so that she may see the world with spiritual, rather than physical eyes. The more the world is seen with spiritual eyes, the more the heart of the poet is purified and beautified. The Holy Spirit does not only gift the sight of the beauty of Christ in the things of the world; by enabling this sight, the Spirit causes the poet to become more like Christ – to wish for his ‘golden rays’ to be shed upon her and to see the world as it was intended to be seen:

Seeing the world rightly enables the poet to understand that God is also to be found in the dark. It is through death that she must pass in order to reach the

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life beyond, but through faith, by viewing the world spiritually, Bethell gains an understanding of the darkness within ‘the utmost negation of the abyss’ (‘Nor’-West Night’).⁷⁰ Seeing with the light of the Holy Spirit enables her to know that ‘*Baseless and soon to be dissolved is the great cosmos; / The planetary fabric endures but a short space*’ (‘Nor’-West Night’). But while it endures it offers the poet a wealth of knowledge about the nature of her God, which her poetry endeavours to reveal.

⁷⁰ *Day and Night*, pp. 54-55.

Chapter One

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: RESOLVING TENSIONS BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL IN *FROM A GARDEN IN THE ANTIPODES*

*From a Garden in the Antipodes*¹ introduces Bethell's attempt to 'recover "the whole man in the integral and indissoluble unity of his double nature", the spiritual and the carnal, as in the intricacies of his nature and supernature, his life on earth and the mystery of the operations of Heaven',² an attempt which continues in her subsequent collections, *Time and Place*,³ and *Day and Night: poems 1924-1934*.⁴

Just as the poet sees herself as both physical and spiritual, the world can be seen as both physical and spiritual. The world, according to Bethell, can be seen as an opaque screen of time and space, or as a medium for the

¹ Ursula Bethell, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, by Evelyn Hayes (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1929).

² Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, J.F. Scanlan (trans.) (New York, 1970 (1930)), p. 93.

³ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place*, by the Author of 'From a Garden in the Antipodes' (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936).

⁴ Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: poems 1924-1934*, by the Author of *TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939).

communication of the spiritual realities that lie beneath. Beauty is seen in the poetry as the key to unlocking the invisible realities communicated by the visible, tangible world. Beauty illustrates to the poet the connection between what is physical and what is spiritual, for only through the relation between the physical object and the beholder can beauty arise. This connection between object and subject is seen to be the pathway to the knowledge of the spiritual.

I am using the childhood vision of the poet, as it is recorded in *By the River Ashley*, to introduce Bethell's preoccupation with the vision of spiritual truths, and the increasing blindness to these truths as modern Western society places a growing emphasis upon the facts that can be proven by the datum of the physical world as the benchmark of truth. After presenting Bethell's theory of beauty I will show how it is reflected in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*. In this first collection Bethell uses the garden to symbolise the role of beauty in her life, a role which is foundational to understanding her determination to see God.

Beauty and the sight of the invisible within the visible

What is beauty? We know that when we feel pleasure on sight our emotions prompt us to label what we saw 'beautiful', but does the beauty belong to the object or does it belong to us, to the ones who respond emotionally? Is beauty the perfect proportions of the object? Or is beauty the joy that we feel? Beauty

escapes analysis. It relies upon both the concrete experience and the emotional response. It cannot be reduced to mere physicality, nor can it be satisfyingly considered as a solely spiritual encounter. Beauty, then, stands at the boundaries of theoretical knowledge. It is ineffable.

The effects of modernity upon beauty

The problem of beauty arose as a subject for scholarly debate in 1725, with Francis Hutcheson's essay, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*. His question, 'What causes beauty in us?' introduced the seeing subject and our 'internal sense' in relation with the concrete object.⁵ David Hume in his essay 'On the Standard of Taste' argued that beauty could not be reduced to a quality within the object. Rather, beauty is only a feeling of pleasure; therefore judgements regarding the beauty of an object have 'a reference to nothing beyond [themselves]'.⁶

Immanuel Kant acknowledged the ineffability of beauty. He explained in his *Critique of Judgement* that beauty arises from the random play of the cognitive faculties of imagination, reason, sensation and understanding.⁷ What we perceive as beauty is a tangle of the imaginative and cognitive. Kant dooms us to ignorance by tangling our subjective interpretation of the object

⁵ James Shelley, 'Empiricism', pp. 37-49 in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 37-39.

⁶ David Hume, 'On the Standard of Taste', 1985 (1757), pp. 229-230, in Shelley, 'Empiricism', pp. 43-44.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, J. C. Meredith (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 105-109, in John Milbank, 'Beauty and the Soul', pp. 1-34, in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 4-5.

with the physical reality of it. Beauty is placed solely within the hands of the subject – it no longer has any reference to the object because of our inability to separate the real from the imaginary.

Furthermore, he argues that we are totally reliant upon the categories of time and space to make sense of the physical world.⁸ Without time and space we are unable to perceive and therefore unable to make any judgement – hence, for Kant, it is impossible to understand that which may be beyond sensibility; we should focus instead on the limits of possible experience and what this tells us about ourselves as thinking beings.

This overview of the creation of modern aesthetics reveals that modern beauty rarely has any reference beyond itself. The establishment of aestheticism, the science of the beautiful, the conscious questioning of what beauty is, is parallel to the movement away from the idea that beauty is the glory of God shining through his creation.

Jacques Maritain, (1882-1973) was a French neo-Thomistic philosopher, whose work Bethell was familiar with. His book, *Art and Scholasticism*, which influenced Bethell's aesthetic theory greatly, states, 'the Renaissance was destined to drive the artist mad and make him the most miserable of men...by revealing to him his own grandeur and letting loose upon him the wild beast Beauty which Faith kept enchanted and led after it obedient, with a

⁸ Donald W. Crawford, 'Kant', pp. 55-69 in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 56.

gossamer thread for a leash'.⁹ Beauty is no longer seen to be the invisible shining through the visible. Beauty is no longer an affirmation of faith in the existence of God. Instead the invisible is acknowledged as invisible. The visible has ceased to be a point of mediation for the invisible because beauty has been reduced to an emotion caused by the random play of the faculties of the mind. Instead of standing on the boundary of theoretical knowledge and staring into 'the utmost negation of the abyss' as Bethell does ('Nor'-West Night'), Kant sees no value in the speculative, in the invisible. Time and space cannot affirm them, therefore the invisible remains invisible.

The conclusions of Kant, Hume and Hutcheson all place beauty within the eye of the beholder. Beauty does not arise from the object; it is created by the subject. This is seen by Bethell to be a symptom of the trend toward the use of the concrete elements of the physical world as the means of proof of reality. Only that which can be proven to be the truth using the data of the physical world is accepted as fact. Truth is that which has been affirmed by the datum of physical experience. Those beliefs which cannot be proven using the data of the phenomenal world are 'opinions' or 'values' – not universal truths. What we will see as we move on to examine the poetry is Bethell's belief that the invisible within beauty is lost because of the belief that only those propositions which can be proven using empirical evidence are true. Beauty has been stripped of the invisible, or the spiritual, because the invisible is no longer acknowledged, and because, according to Bethell, beauty is the invisible, she presents a society in which there is no beauty.

⁹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 18.

The problem with beauty is that if you ascribe beauty to the object, the object must necessarily refer to something beyond itself. For this reason Hume defines beauty as a feeling of pleasure only. If he had said that beauty was inherent within the object he would have been bound to say that the object existed in reference to the values of truth and goodness. An object would then be true or false, depending on whether it had beauty or not. This is absurd if your idea of reality is constructed using the data of the physical world.

For Bethell this was not so absurd. It is Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement that '[t]he world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts',¹⁰ that she disagrees with. Bethell was familiar with Wittgenstein's work and had a keen interest in philosophy, as she tells Charles Brasch in a letter written in 1941: 'philosophical considerations (tho' I might not quite grasp them – how amused Dr. Popper was the other day, to find Wittgenstein on my shelf!)...always absorbed me'.¹¹ For Bethell, beauty is a sign that the world of time and space is not all that is the case. Her poetry shows her awareness that beauty is no longer valued as the glory of the invisible within the visible.

The emphasis Bethell places on the importance of beauty over and above practicality reveals her awareness that faith is disappearing to make way for

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (trans.) (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1921 (1961)), p. 5.

¹¹ Ursula Bethell, *Vibrant with Words: The letters of Ursula Bethell*, Peter Whiteford (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 255.

fact. While the poem is light-hearted, 'Perspective'¹² highlights Bethell's concern at the devaluation of beauty:

I find vegetables fatiguing
And would rather buy them in a shop.
But to the right-minded person the soul of his holding
Is the parallel-rowed, neat, early vegetable plot.

"I hope you like the colour-pattern of this garden, –
White flowering creepers by the white painted cottage,
By the middle path red roses, purple underlings,
By the east path yellow, and pale and dark violet,
Here gentlest pink all interspersed with lilac,
And here I design blues, sapphire blues –
Rich and rejoicing, is it not, to the spectator?"

"Yes, very nice, very nice indeed . . .
How well your beans and cabbages are coming on."

While for the poet the heart of the garden is found in its beauty, the spectator has no appreciation for something as seemingly pointless as colour arrangement and pattern. Only the practical, the things which have some tangible purpose and value, are worthwhile. Bethell uses an interest in beans and cabbages to highlight an increasing preoccupation with the physical world of time and space – to the detriment of beauty, which points beyond the physical and into the spiritual.

Poems included in her later collections communicate the prominence of practicality over beauty within modern society more seriously, even harshly. To be trapped within the physical world, to think that time and space, and all that exists within them, is the totality of all things, is to deny the existence of a God. Bethell's prophecy of 'the grand triumphal felony, / the last and final

¹² *From a Garden*, p. 50. The page numbers for all subsequent references to this collection appear in the text in this chapter.

blasting of fragile-flowered life-tree' in 'Picnic'¹³ indicates her belief that faith is disappearing because modern Western society is built upon facts and laws extracted from the concrete data of the physical world. 'Picnic', we shall see, is a summary of the central preoccupations in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*.

From this clear and cloud-bedecked blue ceiling
might shortly rain down fearful and deadly fire and brimstone,
(they say) from long fore-planned and fore-damned machinations,
fruit of our most elaborate rationalisations of hatred
and justifications of terror, prepared for the hara-kiri
of earth's loftiest masterpiece, lore-drunken humanity.

But for a midge's moment, between the noble unconscious
mineral uproar, the mute half-conscious on-tending
river of bioplast, and our immense abolishings,
sapient obliterations, mutual annihilations,
before the ultimate crime, the grand triumphal felony,
the last and final blasting of fragile-flowered life-tree.

But for a brief interval, this bread broken in amity,
this notice of a goldfinch flitting among the leafage
of stripling quince, whose shell-pink decoration
sways very gently on delicate shell-blue canopy;
but for a brief moment this balm and opiate of song-lark
filling with heedless ecstasy the calm precarious sky . . .

Bethell's use of the image of the 'life-tree' is reminiscent of the 'Tree of Life' which Coventry Patmore speaks about in his book *Principles in Art, Religio Poetae, and other essays*.¹⁴ Patmore was a poet and critic whom Bethell read and whose work often coincides with Bethell's beliefs. Patmore writes that the poet must

give the world to eat only of the Tree of Life, reality; and
will not so much as touch the Tree of Knowledge, as the
writer of Genesis ironically calls the Tree of Learning that

¹³ *Day and Night*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ Patmore Coventry, *Principles in Art, Religio-Poetae, and other essays* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1913 (1889)).

leads to the denial of knowledge. He is the very reverse of a “scientist.” He is all vision and no thought, whereas the other is all thought and no vision. But “Where there is no vision the people perish”... All realities will sing, but nothing else will.¹⁵

Bethell quotes from this very passage concerning the Tree of Life in a letter to D’Arcy Cresswell saying: ‘I wonder whether you would be less severe about the subject if you were friends with the biological interpretation of the planet. “All realities will sing” says Coventry Patmore – the biological view is very vivid to me & materially real – if one use such an expression.’¹⁶ ‘Picnic’ echoes Patmore’s belief that the ‘Tree of Learning’ causes blindness to the ‘spiritual realities’ to be found within the natural world. Bethell contrasts the ‘noble unconscious mineral uproar’ of nature with the ‘sapient obliterations’ caused, by ‘earth’s loftiest masterpiece, lore-drunken humanity’. Humanity is drunk on the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and through the deification of knowledge has lost the vision that enables them to see the spiritual realities, or even the beauty, within the natural world.

By coupling the elaborate rationalisations of humanity with suicide (‘the harakiri / of earth’s loftiest masterpiece, lore-drunken humanity’) in ‘Picnic’, Bethell incorporates Patmore’s reference to Proverbs 29:18, that ‘[w]here there is no vision the people will perish’. Reliance upon the concrete facts of the world as the only truth will bring the ‘molten boulders’ of the ‘sweetly-sleeping hill-slopes’ crashing down upon humanity when God’s day of judgement arrives. The poem creates a link between those who have put their trust in the laws guiding the natural world and the scoffers in 2 Peter 3:3-10:

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁶ Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems*, Vincent O’Sullivan (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997), p. 107.

In the last days scoffers will come...They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of the water and by the water...By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Just as the scoffers do, the 'lore-drunken humanity' of Bethell's poem places its trust in what it perceives to be a reliable world, governed by universal, elementary, scientific laws, from which the meaning of life may eventually be extracted. By making the physical universe opaque they reject the message it conveys through beauty; they do not see the precariousness of their position beneath the 'delicate shell-blue canopy'.

Modernity and the separation of subject and object

The need to utilise, to put to use, to objectify and manipulate the land for the good of the 'thinking subject' illustrates for Bethell the separation between the natural world and humanity. This separation is presented in the poetry as the result of the idea that humanity, because of intellectual superiority, is the pinnacle of life on earth. Man's 'elaborate rationalisations' are the reason humanity is losing the vision of the 'life-tree'. When the world is seen as a collection of physical objects to be put to use for the achievement of some end or other it has become purely physical – it has become an opaque shell of time and space through which the spiritual cannot shine. The world has become spiritless, and there can be no relation between the physical object and the

thinking subject if there is no similarity between the two, no point of connection between them.

The 'final blasting of fragile-flowered life-tree' is the 'final blasting of beauty. When ugliness is presented in the poetry it is portrayed as the result of a lack of relation between man and the world. When the natural world is seen as an object to be put to practical use ugliness arises. Ugliness and disunity go hand in hand in Bethell's poetry.

Stand fast, old forests; until man the migrant,
The meddler come; would mend, mars; his mastery
Fire-stolen, your charcoaled stumps will witness
Where he has passed.

Where he waits the wintry vultures hover;
Deliberate death he wills, and where he passes
Waits death, deliberate. ('Autumn on the Plain')¹⁷

This utilisation of the earth is a separation from it. The natural world has no meaning for these men except for the material value they can extract from it. The need to utilise the land for the good of the 'thinking subject' illustrates the separation of humanity from nature, and therefore the inability of these people to see the ultimate reality within things. There is no connection between the beholder and the physical object when the physical world is only for the use of sapient and rational humanity. Humanity is seen in the poetry to stand in dominion over the earth rather than in relation to it.

Beauty, by contrast, is presented as the result of a connection between the mind of the subject and the physical proportions of the object. Maritain, in an essay entitled 'Art and Beauty' argues that 'Beauty is essentially the object of

¹⁷ *Day and Night*, pp. 21-23.

intelligence, for what *knows* in the full meaning of the word is the mind'.¹⁸ He goes on to say that the mind *instinctively* recognises beauty, and that it is due to this intuitive recognition of its own logical proportions within the physical world that the mind feels the pleasure that characterises beauty. It is an intuitive knowledge because when the senses perceive the object the mind is immediately delighted.¹⁹

The connection between the mind and the physical world which Maritain places at the foundation of beauty is seen in the emphasis Bethell places upon her intuitive recognition of beauty. In 'Glory' (p. 49), for instance, the poet concludes:

In such an hour the soul finds an appeasement
Not justified by reasons of commonsense.
In that hour she asks of the inscrutable
No more petulant questions.

The effect of the sunset upon her soul is not something which can be analysed or 'justified by reasons of commonsense'. Her soul finds appeasement because of her mind's instinctive recognition of beauty within the physical scene confronting her.

This intuitive knowledge of the beautiful is also emphasised in *By the River Ashley*, poem iv:²⁰

Above that gate the downs. I see them now,
I see them gentle brown and amethyst.
Our grown-up guests the landscape viewed
and commented – Lovely! Perhaps a sketch?
My eager praises added met with prompt rebuff.
Too young, too young to notice lovely views.

¹⁸ Maritain, 'Art and Beauty', pp. 19-30, in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 21.

²⁰ Mary Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950), pp. 109-110.

Wrong, Madame, wrong – dear Wordsworth was more reasonable.
Too late! The great African bishop rhetorician
cried out upon himself, too late have I sought thee,
Beauty!

Apprehension of beauty is not confined to a particular age or intellectual ability because it is instinctive. Not only does the poem emphasize the ability of children to appreciate beauty, it also highlights the false beauty of the grown-up guests. ‘Lovely! Perhaps a sketch?’ implies that the scenery is not being appreciated as the glory of the God shining through his creation. Instead it is merely a pretty scene, convenient for fuelling conversation. The grown-ups feel no presence of the invisible because they view the downs as something to be manipulated and put to use. Subsequently, when Bethell tells us they have been converted into orchards, she is emphasising the idea that beauty has been forfeited for the sake of economy and usefulness. This is contrasted with the response of the poet, who perceived the invisible within beauty, although at that time she did not understand it. She concludes the poem by using Mt Grey as a symbol of the invisible within the scene:

The guardian Mt Grey still casts a spell
of greatness, majesty that does not go with measurement...
I do not see you there,
Mt Grey, looking down at the end of our village streets,
but I was conscious. I have found you, since,
something familiar, and I salute you now, for your significance.

So recognition of beauty is intuitive and as such stands diametrically opposed to the abstraction of scientific truth. The abstraction of facts from the datum of the physical world is not intuitive. The mind has to dig the meaning from the information the physical world presents it with. While scientific truth is the property of the thinking subject and extracted from matter, the

appreciation of beauty comes naturally and without effort from the mind. For this reason children may grasp the vision of the invisible within the natural world, while the 'lore-drunken' members of humanity have been blinded to this vision. The task of the recipient of beauty is merely to maintain the ability to see the spiritual within the physical. Maintaining this ability, as we shall see, is maintaining a connection between the physical world of the senses and the mind of the beholder.

Beauty and the connection of subject and object

By the River Ashley, a collection of childhood memories, supports the idea that true beauty arises from the connection between the viewer and the object. The collection revolves around the symbol of the river. The river signifies the strength of the vision of the spiritual realities in the physical world. During childhood it is shallow and the riverbed, symbolising these spiritual realities, is easily visible. This how the collection begins:

It was the river, the river. We played there,
out, out of the house, out of the garden, out under the wide sky.
The little rivers, convenient to us, they ran apart, they conjoined.
They ran clear and bright over precious stones,
Purple and pale green and dark green, and the white pebbles too.
Take them home, the best colours, put them to dry in the sun –
Gone! out of the water of illusion, gone dull, all the same grey.

(i)²¹

We see that the 'water of illusion' carries its usual meaning – it is the flow of time and space, it is the setting of the physical world, within which the beauty of the riverbed shines. The pebbles represent the individual moments of

²¹ *Collected Poems*, 1950, p. 107.

beauty in the poet's life. These are easily seen during childhood, before 'the books to scan and sums to score' (iii),²² begin to explain away the mysteries of the world. Before the 'Practical fruit-orchards / Set out in neat rows' put the 'green birds' that bestow magic and imagination to flight (15).²³

The river deepens as a person begins to see the world of time and space as a truer reality than the spiritual reality of the riverbed. Immersion within this physical world – beginning with school and the learning that helps to solidify this world as reality, followed by the busyness of grown-up life – full of the daily tasks that blind the eyes to beauty, makes it increasingly difficult to see through to the spiritual realities. In 'Discipline' (p. 24) the poet is moaning about being 'made to sit down and scrape potatoes. / The morning's rosebuds passed by unattended, / While I sat bound to monotonous kitchen industry'. While this poem is light-hearted, the feeling of imprisonment within a 'delight dimming screen' ('Morning Walk')²⁴ is a theme which continues throughout her poetry and is indicative of the opacity of time and space. Evelyn Underhill, a Catholic mystic, writing contemporaneously with Bethell and referred to in her letters,²⁵ writes that we are 'smothered in daily life by the fretful activities of our surface mind'.²⁶ This surface mind is the water flowing over the riverbed. As soon as it becomes too deep the spiritual realities become invisible.

²² *Collected Poems*, 1950, pp. 108-109.

²³ *Collected Poems*, 1997, pp. 95-96.

²⁴ *Day and Night*, p. 3.

²⁵ The first reference is in a letter to John Summer, written in 1939, in which she recommends Underhill's teachings on worship, found on p. 191 in *Vibrant with Words*. The second is in response to a review of *Day and Night*, written by C. R. Allen, in which she defends herself against the suggestion that she is overly influenced by Underhill's style, p. 210, in *Vibrant with Words*.

²⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), p. 39.

Bethell's letters also reveal the importance of the symbol of the riverbed. She writes to Monte Holcroft after reviewing the manuscript of *The Waiting Hills*,²⁷ 'how interesting to see how the word "forest" recurs again and again! Its [sic] a symbol deep in your consciousness. (Its [sic] riverbed that haunts me...)'.²⁸ Her references to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*²⁹ reflect this haunting. She refers three times in her letters, once to Rodney Kennedy³⁰ and twice to Charles Brasch³¹, to the passage where Hopeful and Christian ford the river of death. Here Christian's faith fails him and he loses touch with the riverbed, but Hopeful's faith provides him with firm ground and he says, 'Be of good cheer, my brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good'.³² Christian sees the water of the river, the water of time and space, as a more truthful reality than that of Christ's death, which is symbolised by the riverbed. The consequence is a loss of faith and a loss of the vision of the spiritual realities underlying the things of the world. Hopeful, by keeping his eyes on Christ finds the water shallow and the riverbed firm. This emphasis upon the riverbed reveals the poet's preoccupation with remaining free to see the invisible within the visible.

By the River Ashley shows us that to see the invisible you must be ready to accept it. You must not be blinded by clinging only to those facts which have been proven by the data of the physical world. You must not be so absorbed

²⁷ Monte Holcroft, *The Waiting Hills* (Wellington: The Progressive Publishing Society, 1943).

²⁸ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 279.

²⁹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Penguin, London, 1965).

³⁰ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 117.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 240 and 257.

³² Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 198.

by the tasks of subsistence that you miss the beauty surrounding you. You should instead be like a child, delighting in the beauty of the pebbles in the riverbed. In this last collection, published after her death, Bethell's references to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*³³ show how important she considers the connection between humanity and the world to be. Bethell found a kindred spirit in the ideas of this book, for, although she first read it in 1937, after the majority of her poetry was written, the ideas in her poetry correspond with the ideas in the book.

Buber writes that there are two basic words that are spoken – 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'. These words reflect the attitude of a person to the world at any given moment. When a man experiences the world he is experiencing something. To experience something is to recognise a boundary between I and it – it is to have that something as an object. 'I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something...All of this and its like is the basis of the realm of It'.³⁴ The basic word I-It sees things as objects. The person who speaks the basic word I-Thou, however, does not have something for his object. He sees no borders, he has no object, he does not even have consciousness of himself. Instead he is a whole being, there is no separation of physical and spiritual, and he stands in relation with the 'Thou' facing him.³⁵ A person cannot maintain standing in relation with the world all the time, most often he experiences the world and so speaks the word I-It. But it is by speaking the word I-Thou that he

³³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 54-60.

experiences freedom from the confines of time and space and truly knows the world.

Poem iv of *By the River Ashley*³⁶ shows the influences of Buber's book. It describes the poet's first ownership of a room:

My room? for me! And my possessions?
Oh wide emancipation! Strange enlargement!
From 'ours' proceed to 'mine' and 'soul thou hast much goods',
and then 'I', prisoned, discovers 'you', and longing for release
comes to more joy, to 'we' again and wider freedom, and
again — — —
Old and profound story!

This is a reflection of Buber's opinions about self-consciousness and what it entails. 'The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject'.³⁷ The possessions which give the poet wide emancipation clearly portray her as a subject. By contrast the I of the basic word I-Thou is a whole person. Rather than setting oneself apart in order to experience and use, as the ego does, the person enters into relation with others, creating natural association. Bethell emphasises the shift in the poem from 'I' and 'you' (differentiation between two egos) to 'we' (two people standing in relation).

This ability to speak the word I-Thou and escape the separation of subject and object is what Bethell is striving for in her poetry. When the word I-Thou is spoken the person relates to the world as a whole person, rather than as an ego. This, we shall see, is the preoccupation of *From a Garden in the Antipodes*. The poet is struggling with the vicissitudes of her antinomous

³⁶ *Collected Poems*, 1950, pp. 109-110.

³⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 111-112.

nature. There is a tension between the physical world presented to her by her senses and the religious beliefs that her mind clings to. Her double nature, the physical and spiritual aspects of her nature must be reconciled if she is to perceive the invisible within the visible. Beauty is introduced in this first collection as the unification of spiritual and physical, of the object and the subject.

The garden – a symbol of beauty

In *From a Garden in the Antipodes* the garden is a physical symbol of the role of beauty in the poet's life. The garden is a place of beauty. We have already seen in 'Perspective' that the soul of her holding is not in the vegetable plot but in the 'rich and rejoicing' colours and patterns of the garden. The suggestion that the garden is 'homely' results in warm defence of the garden's beauty on Bethell's part. She wrote to Pat Lawlor in 1940 regarding an article about herself and her poetry, entitled 'ML's Undiscovered Poet', and included a postscript in which she writes: 'may the garden *not* be called "homely" it wasn't at all! I must have failed to convey it to you rightly!'³⁸ She views it as 'a deep glade of Eden a booth of green boughs' ('Controversy', p. 32). Over and over, in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, we see that the garden was created to be beautiful.

³⁸ *Vibrant with Words*, pp. 233-234.

Not only this, the garden clearly stands on the boundaries. Just as beauty stands at the boundary of theoretical knowledge – allowing the viewer to stand at the edge of the visible and the invisible, so does the garden. It is a hillside garden standing midway between the ‘trivial city’ on the plain, and the heights of the mountains and the heavens (‘Compensation’, p. 31).

The ‘trivial city’ symbolises the preoccupation with time and space, with advancement in this physical world, to the detriment of beauty and faith. ‘Forest Sleep’³⁹ presents the city as ‘that hot argument by human commerce bred’. ‘Compensation’ also negatively links the city to business:

I went down into the trivial city to transact business.
In the tramcar passengers argued without logic;
In the shops too costly wares;
In the bank too little money;
In the long streets too hot sun.

The city, with its commerce, is the place where utility and wealth are held high, and beauty is unimportant.

While the city symbolises the secular world, the sky and the mountains symbolise the poet’s nearness to God, and it is from her hillside garden that she views the mountains. The second verse of ‘Compensation’ contrasts the garden with the city. The garden is an oasis:

But at the Post Office they gave me your letter.
In my hill garden at sunset I read it.
A cool wind from the seawaves blew gently
And I saw that little Omi-Kin-Kan had put forth a green shoot.

From a garden bench Bethell often watches the glory of the sunset behind the mountains. ‘How favourable for beholding the heavens, / At cockcrow, at

³⁹ *Time and Place*, p. 20.

sunrise, on a cloud-adorned afternoon, / Or in the still, starry night!’ she comments in ‘Gradient’ (p. 44).

Bethell emphasises this quality to show that the garden is a place from which the invisible might be seen. In ‘Glory’ (p. 49) the brilliance of the heavens, particularly compared to the ‘dun green flatlands where a few human lights glimmered’, shows that the heavens reveal the majesty of God:

This same evening that I write I witnessed,
Resting on a garden bench and looking westward.
Sublime splendours.

Beyond the blood-red rose-engarrisoned footpath,
And the dun green flatlands where a few human lights glimmered,
Wild indigo and magenta rainstorms invested
The dark recesses of the mountains ranges.

Clouds overhead burst into cornelian flames,
Transmuting by their strange glow all the garden pigments.
Then was revealed, in a dim turquoise interstice,
A very young, remote, and slender but outshining,
But all predominant moon.

In such an hour the soul finds an appeasement
Not justified by reasons of commonsense.
In that hour she asks of the inscrutable
No more petulant questions.

The title of the poem, ‘Glory’, leaves the reader in no doubt as the direction of Bethell’s thoughts as she views the beauty of the sunset from her garden. The ‘Sublime splendours’ of the mountains and the skies are presented as the glory of God made visible to the poet through physical beauty. Consequently, when she views this glory her soul ceases to ask ‘petulant questions’ due to the awareness of how great and ‘inscrutable’ the mind that created such splendour must be.

The ‘cornelian flames’ of the clouds transmute ‘all the garden pigments’ ‘by their strange glow’. Bethell emphasises her position in the garden as she witnesses the glory of God in the skies. By portraying the beauty of the sky reflected upon the garden she indicates, once again, the role of the garden as a point of connection between herself and the invisible. The garden shares in the beauty of the heavens and enables the poet to witness this beauty. While she is in her garden she is able to look up and see the invisible which is symbolised by the height of the mountains and the sky, or look down into the ‘dun green flatlands’ of the city, which represents the world devoid of the invisible. The garden is clearly placed on the boundaries between the invisible and the visible, just as beauty is.

Vicissitude – the view of the city

For Bethell, just as beauty gives us the opportunity to look over the edge of the visible into the invisible, or to turn back from the invisible toward the visible, so does the garden. *From a Garden in the Antipodes* provides the reader with the view in both directions: out into the invisible, or back toward the visible. I would like to deal first with the view downward toward the city. This is to be caught within a tangible visible world, unable to see anything beyond. What Bethell is struggling to see, through beauty, is ‘that the facts of religion are as near & natural & undebateable [sic] as the air and the sun at Kaikoura’.⁴⁰ She wishes to see the spiritual realities within the visible world. Yet she is often bound within an opaque world of air and sun, where the only

⁴⁰ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 284.

realities seem to be the world of time and space by which she is surrounded. What *From a Garden in the Antipodes* presents us with is the battle between opposing natures, the constant circling of the true and the false within the poet's mind. At times the garden only reminds the poet that she is trapped within the physical. I would like to look at Bethell's awareness of the contradictions and conflicts in both herself and the world around her. They indicate her incompleteness to her, an incompleteness arising from the split between spiritual and physical, subject and object, and from which she longs to escape.

To see only the physical realities is to see only part of the world – it is to see the world falsely. Bethell oscillates between a false and a true understanding of the world. This is revealed through the many contrasting pairs seen in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*. The very name of the collection introduces the idea of connected opposites with the word 'antipodes'. The word refers to people who live on exact opposite sides of the globe so that their feet are planted sole to sole as it were. While referring to her correspondent, Lady Ruth Head, in England, the word also emphasises Bethell's awareness of many opposite pairs she is confronted with, the most prevalent being spiritual and physical.

This opposing but intimately connected pair of spiritual and physical is seen within the poet herself. In 'Trance' (p. 61), Bethell, when looking on the garden in the silence of the night, thinks of herself as a 'wraith, from all vicissitude abstracted.' The vicissitude that the poet experiences is the

alternation between the senses and the mind. While the senses convince her that the air and the sun in Kaikoura are real, there is nothing that the senses can communicate to the mind that will prove the existence of the facts of religion. There is a battle to make the religious beliefs of the mind as concrete as the physical information of the senses.

Another contrasting pair is that of man and nature, or sapience and ignorance. The garden is the scene in which Bethell's battle against nature is played out. It is a struggle that reminds her of her difficulty seeing the spiritual realities within the physical world and her subsequent separation from God. Nature wages war upon her beautiful garden, 'Night and day my garden now is menaced / By a host of abominable enemies' ('Warfare', p. 37). The reason for the menace is alluded to in the first poem of the collection – 'Foreword' (p. 7). Here we see the poet, while gardening, listening to the wind moaning in the bluegums. When she hears this she wishes that she would be able 'To be the maker of a small melody / Fit to be chanted by one of Eve's daughters / Throwing her first seed into a rough furrow.' The reference to Eve immediately brings to mind the story of original sin in Genesis 3. The 'persistent winds / Moaning remotely among the bluegums, / Tossing their dark boughs towards this sheer sky' give an impression of wrong within the world, prompting Bethell's wish to create the beauty that allows the spiritual realities to shine through. Her poems and her garden are the result of her desire to make a small melody to pierce the physical world that separates her from God. The moaning wind, the storms, the weeds, the pests, the diseases that afflict the garden are the result of the sin of man, for God said to Adam:

‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you’.⁴¹ The battle between Bethell and the natural world for the possession of the garden is the result of sin, and as such is a reminder to the poet of her distance from her God.

The joy of heaven can only be reached through the pain of this world. In *From a Garden in the Antipodes* we see the contrasting pairs of pain and joy, and death and immortality within the poetry. The primroses have ‘too sweet a sting’ in ‘Primavera’ (pp. 19-20) and in ‘Trance’ (p. 61) the poet, ‘the wraith, from all vicissitude abstracted...Had sown in tears and learnt the grave joys of harvest’.

The reason for this oscillation between opposites is given in ‘Homage’ (pp. 42-43). The ‘Roses on the green graves of our mortality’ are the ‘Roses by the green walks of the New Jerusalem’. Pain and joy come hand in hand because the reward of everlasting life in paradise can only be achieved through a life of transience and death on earth. The primroses have a sweet sting because, although the poet is pained at the thought of her transience, ‘the sure process of the seasons, / Our transitory springtime and the quick passing of the years’ will lead her all the more swiftly to ‘the brink of supernal Beauty’s spring’ and ‘the groves where immortal choirs sing.’ Immortality can only be achieved through mortality.

⁴¹ Genesis 3:17-18.

This oscillation within the poetry, the switching from pain to joy, from mortality to immortality, from cruelty to kindness, from sapience to ignorance is ultimately the oscillation between that which is earthly and that which is heavenly. Between that which is false and that which is true. Everything that is the result of sin is false. Pain, death, ugliness and cruelty, while being a real part of life, are false because they fall short of the perfection of the world when it was first created. ‘And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good’.⁴² The world, in its perfection reflected the goodness and glory of God. The entrance of sin led to the entrance of death and destruction. Aquinas writes: ‘for whatsoever things are imperfect, by that very fact are ugly’.⁴³ For this reason pain and ugliness are false because they in no way resemble God, who is the standard of absolute perfection. By focusing on the vicissitudes within life Bethell reveals to the reader her preoccupation with uncovering the truth. While she sees pain and destruction she is wrapped in the physical, but beauty and goodness allow her to understand the spiritual. The ‘antinomies’ within her life reveal a battle between the senses, which view this world as reality, and the mind, which desires to believe that the concepts of Christianity are the true reality.

The constant battling causes her to cry out: ‘Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden! / For I am fugitive, I am very fugitive’ (‘Time’, p. 22). Bethell is a fugitive, not only within New Zealand, away from England, but, more importantly she is a fugitive within this world of time and space. Her

⁴² Genesis 1:31.

⁴³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, i, q. 39, a. 8. in Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 25.

real home is in paradise, as 'Primavera' makes clear. The primroses give a deeper cause for pain than her mere displacement from England:

If you were nothing more, primroses, than yellow and sweet,
I would ask Time to turn back again that youth and I might meet,
That I might go looking for you in a winding English lane...
But there are reasons, primroses, there are secret reasons,
Why I shall not resent the sure process of the seasons...
The clue to your sweet look is hid in a celestial place.

The primroses are a reminder of the poet's displacement from paradise and knowledge of God. The awareness, which we have been looking at, of the dichotomies within this world, leads the poet to the knowledge of the departure from the true source of goodness and beauty. Consequently Bethell considers herself to be a pilgrim, a fugitive in this world of time and space.

The garden is on the path upwards toward God: 'for in a way he [the artist] is not of this world, being, from the moment he begins working for beauty, on the road which leads upright souls to God and makes invisible things clear to them by visible'.⁴⁴ This is reflected in Bethell's identification as a pilgrim. Her faith in her immortality leads her to treat this world as a journey which must be travelled in order to reach paradise. In a letter to Monte Holcroft, Bethell writes, 'I am dwelling on your thought that life is a *preparation*...& I must change over to 'eternal in the heavens'.⁴⁵ Here Bethell is speaking about the necessity to tear down her attachments to the physical world in preparation for the world to come. 'For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'.⁴⁶ For this reason Bethell chose as her emblem

⁴⁴ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:1.

the scallop shell worn by pilgrims journeying to the shrine of St James the Greater in Compostela. Just before her death, Effie Pollen made a birthday cake for Bethell ‘adorned with my pilgrim-shells. She made me read the Bunyan hymn “who would true valour see”’.⁴⁷ *From a Garden in the Antipodes* reveals Bethell's desire to focus on the ‘eternal in the heavens’ rather than the things held dear by the ‘trivial city’ below.

Her estrangement from the world is revealed by her awareness of her transience coupled with her acceptance of the fact that she will die. Ten poems in *From a Garden in the Antipodes* contain direct references to death or the afterlife, and even more speak of her declining years and the swiftness of time. But these are only reminders of her final destination. ‘We do not regret that we are ripe of years / We do not complain of grey hairs and infirmities / We are drowsy and very ready to fall into deep sleep’ (‘Fall’, p. 60). This acceptance of death is strengthened by the beauty of the garden. The ‘lineal poise, and purity, and peace’ of her lilies is a reminder of the life to come:

...if they grow not
Need only take patience a little while longer;
For these are the flowers we look to find blooming
In the meadows and lanes that lie beyond Jordan –
All kinds of lilies in the lanes that lead gently...
To the foothills and fields of Paradise. (‘Bulbs’, p. 14)

Yet as long as she holds to her status as a pilgrim she has not reached her goal of wholeness. She is still standing in the garden, midway between the eternal and the transient.

⁴⁷ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 102,

Establishment – the view of the heavens

The garden, at times, reminds the poet of her entrapment within time and space. The second view that the garden affords, however, is the result of beauty tamed by faith: the freedom of the poet from the confines of the physical and the subsequent ability to see the invisible within the visible. We have looked at the view down into the plains, now we turn to the view toward the heavens.

While turning back from the boundary of the invisible toward the visible resulted in an awareness of the vicissitudes and dichotomies surrounding her, looking out over the boundary of beauty into the invisible results in a vision of relation and connection. Bethell gains freedom from the opacity of the world and is able to see the invisible within the visible when spiritual and physical are connected. We saw in the first poem of *By the River Ashley* that when the river ran over the pebbles on the riverbed these pebbles looked like

precious stones,
purple and pale green and dark green, and the white pebbles too.
Take them home, the best colours, put them to dry in the sun –
Gone! out of the water of illusion, gone dull, all the same grey.

This is an illustration of the way Bethell sees beauty. Beauty ties physical sensations and spiritual encounter together. Just as the pebbles, when they are taken out of their physical context of time and space and dealt with as spiritual encounters alone lose their lustre, so does beauty. Beauty is the result of both physical sensation and spiritual response. It is the product of a relation between the physical object and the thinking subject. In beauty there cannot be one without the other.

Turning back to the garden as a symbol of beauty in *From a Garden in the Antipodes* we see that 'Time' (p. 22) presents the garden as a place of establishment because through it the poet is able to see the connection of physical with spiritual. She is able to see in the garden the visible world as a communication of what is invisible. Her cry 'Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden' is her cry for beauty to become established in order that she may see the physical world reconciled with the spiritual realities that lie beneath. In the garden she is trying to 'recover "the whole man in the integral and indissoluble unity of his double nature", the spiritual and the carnal, as in the intricacies of his nature and supernature, his life on earth and the mystery of the operations of Heaven'.⁴⁸ So the garden stands midway between the city, the carnal, and the heavens, the spiritual, and the poet belongs to both the carnal and the spiritual worlds. The garden provides the poet with a place of peace in which she feels established – both within this world and the next.

As the poet comes 'home, tired, in the evening, / Home to my hill-garden, Rose Pilgrim, / You are the first flower I find there' ('Elect', p. 47). The rose signposts the garden as a place of rest for the pilgrim. It symbolises to the poet the ability of the believer to live within this world while belonging to the next because of the difficult conditions the rose has to live in:

You have been my treasure, Rose Pilgrim,
Because of your beautiful name.
But because of your name I would not pamper you,
And I chose you to be planted in a difficult place,

⁴⁸ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 93, quoting Claudel.

In the pathway of the east wind;
Where at times, too, your roots might become thirsty,
Although I have a thirty-foot hose.

You have thriven in spite of these disadvantages.
When your first shoots were battered by the spring storms,
Others pushed forth perseveringly.

The wind and the storms represent the climate of disbelief that the poet is faced with. They represent the difficulties of seeing the invisible through the visible realities of time and space. Yet despite set-backs the rose has still flourished. The name of the poem, 'Elect', points to the significance of this Pilgrim Rose. Just as the rose is the 'elect' of the poet, so the poet is among the 'elect' of God. She has been chosen to be a pilgrim and to see the spiritual realities beyond the visible. Because of this elect status she struggles to fit into the world, yet in the garden, where she feels established, she is able to unify her double nature, for here she is at home in the physical while also being assured of her elect status.

Beauty arises when the mind recognises its proportions within the object, illustrating the connection between subject and object. We saw earlier that Maritain teaches that beauty is an 'intuitive knowledge, and a joy'.⁴⁹ It is the intuitive feeling of delight when the eyes light upon a beautiful scene. This delight is a pleasure which arises from knowledge – for 'Beauty is essentially the object of *intelligence*, for what *knows* in the full meaning of the word is the mind, which alone is open to the infinity of being'.⁵⁰ The world, in its beauty, matches the proportion and order of the intelligent mind.

⁴⁹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

I believe this is what 'Old Master' (p. 56) is intended to communicate. Here the poet is instructing the reader to picture the garden as a painting, as one of the old *Conversaziones* of the High Renaissance:

Or picture, here, some *Conversazione*
With flowers, birds, grass, and purple hills beyond,
And gilding sunlight, eloquent chiaroscuro,
And noble forms augustly grouped, and still –
Smiling and still. Initiate and aware.

And thronging on the outskirts, in the foreground,
You, and you, and you, beloved familiars,
Bearing your individual sign and coat of arms,
Surprised and still, smiling and yet expectant –
Found. Known. Secure. And reconciled.

The reference to the botanical members of the garden as 'beloved familiars', 'known' and 'secure', indicates that the garden brings peace and recognition to the mind of the poet. The garden is here referred to as a work of art and as such Bethell is emphasising the fact that its beauty corresponds to the proportions and harmonies which please the mind. The fact that the 'noble forms augustly grouped' are 'initiate and aware' also points to the connection between the poet, as observer, and the object being observed. Rather than viewing the garden as an object, Bethell sees the spiritual within it. The individual entities which make up the whole are 'initiate and aware' just as the poet herself is. Both object and subject share in this awareness of beauty as if they have both been initiated into some secret circle. The mind of the poet is delighted because it recognises in the natural world those things which are 'familiar' and 'known'.

Yet not only the mind rejoices. It is through the senses that the mind receives beauty, and the senses share in the pleasure. Therefore, according to Maritain,

beauty 'has the savour of the terrestrial paradise, because it restores for a brief moment the simultaneous peace and delight of the mind and the senses'.⁵¹

This opinion is shared by Bethell. In 'Primitive' (p. 36) the poet tries to depict the colours of the flowers to the imagination of her reader:

It is the scarlet of Crimean battle pictures;
It is the blue of illustrations of Trafalgar;
It is the yellow that in old prints stands for gold;
Sheer vermillion, ultramarine, cadmium.

I have not yet evoked an image of true loveliness!
I tell you they are the pure colours the Angelic Brother saw in
 heaven,
And would not leave us ignorant.
Their extreme brightness might well make you weep for joy.

The poet struggles to do the colours justice because imagining a place is not the equivalent of seeing it with your own eyes. Even the 'Angelic Brother' in heaven, she says, had to send the flowers down so that the poet and her reader would not remain ignorant. Bethell here emphasises that beauty is a harmony between the mind and the senses because it is necessary for the eyes to see the colours of the anchusas in order for the mind to rejoice at their loveliness.

So we see in the poetry that the senses and the mind must both be satisfied for beauty to exist. Beauty, for Bethell, is the rejoicing of the mind at the recognition of its own nature within the beautiful object. Beauty is that which is instinctively recognised and naturally loved by the mind. What the mind recognises within the beautiful object is the invisible, is the spiritual within it. Beauty is the uncovering of the essence of the object. Something is beautiful if it reveals itself with pure clarity and intelligibility. For this reason St.

⁵¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 19.

Thomas Aquinas stressed the role of brightness, or effulgence in beauty, for understanding goes hand in hand with light, while darkness is obscurity.⁵²

Bethell's poetry very clearly ties beauty to brilliance and clarity, and in making this connection the poet emphasises the connection between the intelligent mind and the physical world.

The value Bethell places upon brilliant colour and light is obvious. The flowers of the garden in particular are 'bright blooming denizens', ('Verdure', p. 53) with 'extreme brightness' ('Primitive', p. 36) 'and gradual brilliance of eye-reposing hue' ('Homage', pp. 42-43). In 'Kakemono' (p. 33) Bethell writes about her iris, her delphinium and her snapdragon:

What beautiful lines they make! what delicate patterns!
Arrowy jets of limpid hues, –
Lives there still a Japanese artist
Who, with his paint brush, could make us tremble
To see those lines, those tenuous colours
Spring again vibrant as I now see them springing
In their fugacity?

'Limpid' and 'tenuous' seem to contradict the word 'vibrant' but Bethell is stressing the idea that the brilliant colour and light, which she loves in the garden, is a sign of the transparency, the intelligibility of beauty. These flowers, in their vibrancy, point to something within, but beyond them, something in excess of the physical petals and stems of which they are made. Yet this brilliant excess cannot be reached without the physical object standing before the poet, confronting her with its beauty. For this reason she laments their fugacity and wishes for an artist to perpetuate their beauty. The

⁵² Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 124-125.

physical, sensible object is of the utmost importance if the poet is to see the intelligible, the invisible within.

Seeing the invisible through this connection between the sensation and the response of the mind leads the poet, in 'Appel', (p. 57) to show the establishment that beauty brings. In this connection she finds a momentary peace from the vicissitudes of her life, from the constant oscillation between the spiritual and physical ways of viewing the world, the oscillation between the view of the city and the view of the mountains. The joy that the poet feels when she smells the fragrances in the garden leads her to reconcile the physical world with her spiritual beliefs. In other words, beauty enables her to see her religious beliefs reinforced by the sun and the air in Kaikoura:

These insect-calling scents call me out also
Into the blazing noon or the short twilight
Or the unblemished sweetnesss of dawn;

Scents that were cloying within closed casements
Borne on the free winds are soul-reviving spices,
Lures to fill up the lungs with youth-renewing airs.

Memorial smells, summons to the unconscious,
Secret balms, restoring innocent gladness,
Calling us back to sincere gladness and joy.

Honeysuckles, thymes, jasmines, pinks, lavenders,
Aromatic trees, fragrant herbs.

So, long ago, I think, the Syrian Shepherd
Inhaled the sweet airs of his hills and valleys,
Drew in his breath and sang: Yahweh sustains me:
Lifted up his head, and went his way rejoicing.

The 'sweet air' causes David, 'the Syrian Shepherd', to rejoice and sing praise to his God. Her reference to the psalmist creates a parallel between him and herself. Her own response to the 'sweet air' of her garden is illustrated by

what she imagines David's must have been when he wrote psalms prompted by the beauty of the natural world. Beauty prompts the poet to praise God, the creator. Beauty, then, enables both senses and mind to be satisfied with one truth, to bind what seemed to be two opposing realities into one.

Because beauty brings a moment of peace between the senses and the mind, and because the garden is a symbol of beauty within the poetry, the garden is also a place of peace between the senses and the mind. It is from here that the poet can look beyond the boundaries of the physical and apprehend the invisible. The value of this freedom from dichotomy is displayed in 'Fortune' (p. 54). Here the poet is tied into the physical world, unable to escape the constructs of time and space. This is shown by the inability to sail for distant shores:

Others may sail away to the sea-coasts of Bohemia,
Cathay, and Coromandel, Malay, and Patagonia,
Hong Kong, and Halifax, Bombay, and Pernambuco,
Frisco and Singapore, and all the world's fine harbours –
Wistfully we may watch them loosed from our limitations, –
But for us, at least, roses, here.

Elsewhere in her poetry Bethell ties the image of the shore, and the harbour, to death. 'The Long Harbour'⁵³ ends with:

It would not be so hard a thing to wake one morning
to the sound of bird-song in scarce-stirring willow-trees...
to embark at dawn, following the old forefathers,
to put forth at daybreak for some lovelier, still undiscovered shore.

The fact that the forefathers have already died, along with the image of the burial-ground and 'those dauntless, tempest-braving ancestresses / who pillowed there so gladly, gnarled hand folded, / their tired, afore-translated

⁵³ *Time and Place*, pp. 12-13.

bones', indicates that putting out for a 'still undiscovered shore' is to put out for the shores of the afterlife. In 'Fortune', then, we see that to be 'loosed from our limitations' is to be loosed from time and space – which can only happen through death. Yet the roses are a consolation to the poet because they symbolise the necessary unity of mortality and immortality. While the poet is trapped in the physical, the beauty of the roses is proof that 'the green walks of New Jerusalem' will follow 'the green graves of our mortality' ('Homage', pp. 42-43). The roses, while existing in the physical world, signify the spiritual, and so bind the two together. 'But for us, at least, roses, here' signifies beauty as a point of connection between the spiritual world, to which Bethell, as a pilgrim belongs, and the physical world, which is her preparation for the next. The garden on the boundary between the visible and the invisible is a place of establishment because it binds the two together.

From a Garden in the Antipodes ends with the final preparations before death, in the faith that everlasting life will come, and the antinomies the poet experiences will end. 'Dirge' (pp. 62-63) summarises what we have seen is the main preoccupation of this collection – the reconciliation of the spiritual and physical realities with which the poet is presented:

Summer's arrow is spent,
Stored her last tribute.
So, now, we plant our bulbs
With assured vision.
And, now, we sow our seeds
Sagely for sure quickening.

So, purging our borders
We burn all rubbish up,
That all weak and waste growth,
That all canker and corrosion,
May be consumed utterly.

These universal bonfires
Have a savour of sacrifice.
See how their clean smoke,
Ruddy and white whorls,
Rises to the still heavens
In plummy spirals.

You take me – yes, I know it –
Fresh from your vernal Lent.
These ashes I will now spread
For nutriment about the roses,
Dust unto fertile dust,
And say no word more.

As the poet plants her bulbs and sows her seeds in the garden she represents her status as a pilgrim: everything done in this life is done in preparation for the next. These bulbs will eventually become beautiful flowers, or small points of beauty in the physical world, which make the invisible visible. These flowers are symbols of the reconciliation of the physical world with spiritual realities. In turn, all that hinders her faith is burnt – all that is ‘weak and waste’ within the garden, all that does not point to God, everything that convinces the mind that religion is only a fantasy.

You take me – yes, I know it –
Fresh from your vernal Lent.
These ashes I will now spread
For nutriment about the roses,
Dust unto fertile dust,
And say no word more.

We see the poet spreading the ashes of the bonfire around the rose bushes. This ash represents the sacrifice of Christ’s body, as well as the poet’s own sacrifice of all that is detrimental to her faith. All that was initially ‘dust’ – the human body, and her confidence in the reality of the physical world – is turned into ‘fertile dust’. The death of Christ’s body (and, soon, that of the

poet's) is fertile because it transforms transience into eternal life. The mortality of the body is necessary if the poet is to enter paradise. By burning those things that cause her to place her confidence in the world, Bethell is nourishing the beauty that causes her to look beyond the visible. The fertile dust of the ashes is placed beneath the roses because the roses are the most poignant symbol of beauty in the garden. They signify and aid her belief that Christ and eternity are the realities that count.

Chapter Two

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN

TIME AND PLACE:

THE ROLE OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

Ultimately, the aim of Bethell's poetry is to know God. This chapter and the next will outline the process through which Bethell perceives Christ within the phenomenal world. Here I will focus on the role of the phenomenal world as it introduces Christ to the poet, the next will look at the counterpart, the task of the mind as it unravels the phenomena of the physical world.

*Time and Place*¹ is Bethell's most carefully chosen collection. It is organised by season, beginning with spring, ending with winter. Four poems have been chosen to represent each season. The central theme of the collection is the manifestation of the invisible within the visible. While upholding the worth of the phenomenal world, *Time and Place* represents this world as a surface floating over a vast depth of meaning. Bethell concentrates on the spinning of

¹ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place, by the Author of 'From a Garden in the Antipodes'* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936).

her vision as it passes from the physical surface to the spiritual depth communicated by this surface. By no means does she de-value the physical, sensory world – on the contrary it is of utmost importance to the poet, for it is only through this pellicle of things that can be seen and touched that she gains any knowledge. Its purpose is one of communication; for that reason she immerses herself in the sensations the world has to offer.

Why are there similarities between the poetry of Bethell and Hopkins?

Bethell found Gerard Manley Hopkins to be the most congenial of poets. She refers to him in her letters more than any other poet, and almost always with words of praise. Of the modern poets, Hopkins was the most amenable to Bethell's philosophy regarding the world, man, and God. She read everything she could get her hands on – rejoicing at the arrival of the Williams edition of his poetry in 1931.² She also read Hopkins's letters to Robert Bridges and Richard Watson Dixon, referring to them often in her letters.³ She mentions them in a letter to Rodney Kennedy in 1936, only a year after they were published.⁴ House's edition of Hopkins' *Notebooks and Papers* – a collection

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Charles Williams (ed.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, Claude Collier Abbott (ed.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), and Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Letter of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, Claude Collier Abbott (ed.), (London: Oxford University Press, 1936 (1955)).

⁴ Ursula Bethell, *Vibrant with Words: The Letters of Ursula Bethell*, Peter Whiteford, (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 117.

of journal entries and sketches, published in 1937,⁵ was read very soon after it was published and she praises his drawing in a letter to Kennedy: ‘I was so much struck by the drawing in his new vol. of his diary etc. which has been lent to me’.⁶ Again to Kennedy, Bethell writes ‘when I read ‘Ash Wednesday’ I kept on asking myself “*Is this really good?*” Good enough to *tussle* with? I never ask myself this about Hopkins’.⁷ There is no other poet so admired by Bethell as Hopkins, yet the majority of the similarities between their poetry arise not from his influence upon her but from a shared way of seeing the world – a shared determination to encounter Christ in the phenomenal world, and a shared understanding of how this was to be achieved.

A review of *Day and Night* appeared in the *Otago Daily Times* on December 2, 1939, announcing that Bethell’s poetry was greatly influenced by the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, to which Bethell responded, in a letter to Rodney Kennedy:

Most of my verse was written before I knew G.M.H. except for bits in anthologies, & he does *not* influence me – One often notices his influence – but it does not have that effect – he is unique & *not* to be imitated.⁸

How then do we reconcile what is interpreted as the presence of Hopkins’ style in Bethell’s poetry with her protestations that he did not influence her – that he is ‘*not* to be imitated’? Peter Whiteford looks at this question in his

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Note-Books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Humphrey House (ed.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

⁶ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

essay, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ursula Bethell: An Antipodean Influence'.⁹ He notes that of Bethell's output of 150 poems, only twenty appear to bear the tangible influence of Hopkins.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that, as she tells us, most of her poetry had already been written before she had really encountered Hopkins. In a letter to Frank Sidgwick, dated 19 September, 1931, she wrote of her excitement upon the arrival of a long-awaited edition of Hopkin's poetry.¹¹ Up until this point she had only been acquainted with Hopkins as he was published in various anthologies. Whiteford points out that the poems chosen for these anthologies were Hopkins' simpler poems, while the more complex poems (the ones which are said to have influenced Bethell's poetry) are only to be found in the more comprehensive collections, published first in 1918 by Robert Bridges and subsequently in 1931 in the edition supervised by Charles Williams.¹² Bethell's real connection with Hopkins was established late in 1931. When we reconcile this fact with the timeline of her poetic career we see that the majority of her poetry cannot have come under Hopkins' influence.

Bethell's poems are a documentation of her life with Effie Pollen in the garden at Rise Cottage where she took up residence in 1924. In 1934 Effie Pollen died. 'Now I am a tree struck by lightning – dead', Bethell wrote to Eileen Duggan, 'I can think things, but not feel them – One must feel to write

⁹ Peter Whiteford, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ursula Bethell: An Antipodean Influence', pp. 119-134, in *The Hopkins Quarterly*, Vol. xxxiii, Nos. 3-4. (Summer-Fall, 2006). In subsequent references I will refer to this article as 'Hopkins and Bethell'.

¹⁰ Ibid., p 127.

¹¹ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 65. She calls it 'the new edition of G. M. Hopkins', which indicates that it was the edition edited by Charles Williams and published in 1930. This is the collection of Hopkins' poems which I have also used.

¹² Whiteford, 'Hopkins and Bethell', p. 127.

– All joy is lost’.¹³ Apart from six memorial poems and a handful of others written after Pollen’s death, this event effectively extinguished Bethell’s inspiration. She entreats the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ to ‘Match Spring with vision’, to bring ‘to the inward eye awakening’ in the last of her memorial poems, ‘Spring 1940’.¹⁴ Unfortunately her grief and the trials of her later life prevented her from writing more. Both *Time and Place*, published in 1936, and *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1935*, published in 1939, were ‘made up of things written about the same time as the Garden pieces – in the same burst of excitement – of joy’.¹⁵

As Bethell was properly introduced to Hopkins’s poetry in 1931, only a few years before she began to struggle for inspiration, it seems fair to acknowledge that the similarities between the poetry of Hopkins and her poetry are not the result of any conscious imitation. Trusting in Bethell’s expressed distaste for any imitation of Hopkins (‘having always wished particularly *not* to copy him. So many *have* aped him & its [sic] such a mistake’¹⁶), I believe that she had no conscious intention to replicate his style in the poems she wrote after she had become fully acquainted with his poetry.

Bethell loved Hopkins’ poetry because what Hopkins was trying to tell his reader is what Bethell is trying to tell hers. Bethell found a kindred spirit in Hopkins, and it was because of a shared interpretation of the world that Bethell, after reading Charles Williams’ edition of Hopkins’ poetry,

¹³ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 137-138.

¹⁴ Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950), p. 103.

¹⁵ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 117.

unconsciously allowed the urgent rhythms and chiming consonants of Hopkins' poetry to slip into a handful of hers. Hopkins had found a way to communicate what he saw in the world. Bethell, seeing the same thing, after being introduced to poetry which expressed so well what she saw in the world, naturally and subconsciously incorporated the same techniques into her own poetry.

Hopkins and Bethell saw the world in the same light – their philosophies regarding the natural world and the God who made it are almost identical. Whiteford and Vincent O'Sullivan have both noted the similar ways in which these two poets view the world. O'Sullivan in his introduction to his edition of Bethell's *Collected Poems*, points out that both Hopkins and Bethell celebrated the physical world. He also states that Bethell's 'temperament clearly responded to... [Hopkins'] balancing spiritual certainty against the more visible certainty of natural decay'.¹⁷ Certainly Bethell's temperament did respond to Hopkins' awareness of physical transience juxtaposed with spiritual immortality. After all, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, which was published in 1929, before her acquaintance with Hopkins, conveys as its central theme the poet's sojourn toward eternal life within a perishing world.

Whiteford notes the similarity of the agenda lying beneath the poetry of each of these two poets more closely. 'She readily, and almost unawares, took on some of his essential characteristics because she was already looking in the

¹⁷ Vincent O'Sullivan, Introduction to *Collected Poems*, by Ursula Bethell (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1985), pp xviii-xix.

same direction'.¹⁸ The underlying message that both poets strive to communicate to their readers is the same.

Both Bethell and Hopkins seek an encounter with Christ in the phenomenal world. Due to the shared philosophy held by the two poets regarding the manifestation of Christ within the physical universe, I will be using Hopkins' work to help illuminate Bethell's poetry where necessary. Hopkins' poetry is supported and, to some extent, clarified by his journals, notebooks, lectures, and correspondence, as well as by the work of those with whom he was closely associated and deeply influenced.

Bethell's letters, collected and published in *Vibrant with Words*, are invaluable for understanding the direction of the poet's thoughts, as well as the sources from which she gained inspiration, but the volume of Bethell's correspondence is small in comparison to Hopkins' additional writing. Furthermore, Bethell does not articulate her ideas to the extent that Hopkins does. While Hopkins coined the words 'instress', 'inscape', and 'selving' to capture his way of seeing the world, Bethell captures her vision of the world in her poetry. The philosophy behind this vision is left to be uncovered by the reader. For this reason I have found it beneficial while unravelling the thoughts in Bethell's poetry to pair it with Hopkins' complex but well-supported poetry.

¹⁸ Whiteford, 'Hopkins and Bethell', p. 130.

Bethell attended one of Charles Gore's Bampton Lectures on *The Incarnation of the Son of God*,¹⁹ when she was a student in London in 1891. From what she tells John Summers about the lasting influence of Gore's quotation of Matthew 5:8, 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God', we can assume that she attended the fifth of eight lectures, one entitled 'God Revealed in Christ'.²⁰ This lecture was a shaping, or at least solidifying, influence upon her ideas. Her poetry reflects a similar view of the world and Christ's presence in it. Gore concludes this lecture saying:

The world about us with its lawlessness, its disunions, its jarrings, seems sometimes as if it could attain to no great end... But there is a purpose in it. All things move on to the divine event... All things in heaven and earth and under the earth shall bow and adore Jesus, the heir of the whole world's movement and fruitfulness.

As we look at Bethell's poetry, while comparing it with Hopkins' work for clarity, we will see that *Time and Place* reflects what Gore has to say about the purpose of the world, and Christ as the fulfilment of this purpose. *Time and Place* is about the path to encountering Christ while living within a tangible, visible, sonorous world of time and space. It is about seeing the invisible in the visible, the infinite in the finite.

The phenomenal world is the only source of truth

Our focus in this chapter is the task of the phenomenal world in bringing to the poet the knowledge of Christ. Bethell understands the world to be her sole

¹⁹ Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*, Bampton Lectures, 1891 (London: John Murray, 1898).

²⁰ *Vibrant with Words*, pp. 191-192.

source of information. She can only know that which is presented to her through the medium of the senses. The poet is bound into a world of time and space and must rely upon the evidence that world gives for her knowledge of the truth. *Time and Place* is based upon the belief that Christ is intelligible within the world, for if he was not humanity would have no concept of his existence. The poet relies upon the physical world surrounding her for her knowledge of God. She trusts that the physical world is charged with the task of communicating to the best of its ability the truth about reality.

Bethell understood the essential role of the phenomenal world to be the communication of information to the mind. John Henry Newman, in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, published in 1870, argued that ‘all truth is ultimately from the senses’; we only know that which we perceive.²¹ Newman was a strong influence on Hopkins’ thought. He was received by Newman into the Catholic Church in 1866, and from September 1867 to April 1868 had a position in Newman’s Oratory School before he decided to join the Jesuit priesthood. Hopkins was deeply interested in the ideas of the *Grammar of Assent*, he even wanted to write a commentary on it.²² Newman’s belief that our experience of the phenomenal world is the only way to form an opinion of the truth was shared by Hopkins (and, as we shall see, by Bethell).

Newman believed that our existence centres on trust. We have no proof that anything is true or that anything we see really exists because our experience of

²¹ John Henry Newman, *The Philosophical Notebook*, Edward Sillem (ed.) (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), in Bernadette Waterman Ward, *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 105.

²² Ward, *World as Word*, p. 124.

the world is ultimately personal and can only be shared through a medium of communication. I cannot know that my idea of green is the same green as everyone else's because they cannot see my image of green, and I cannot see theirs. We can only look at the same patch of grass and agree that it is green and trust that what we see is the same thing. Newman argues that faith is the basis of our existence because of this very personal nature of our knowledge. We must have faith in what our senses tell us about existence and reality. We assume that what we experience is the truth and this allows us to go about our daily lives with a faith that the world works in certain, predictable ways that we can trust. Accordingly, Newman eschews the belief that the existence of things as yet unverified should be doubted until logically proven.²³ We doubt things when our perceptions have not yet received enough evidence to convince us to act in accordance with our perceptions. For Newman, the phenomenal world is the surface, or the medium, through which unknown realities, both physical and non-physical, are communicated. He states "Two things are implied by what I have been saying: 1 that the senses convey truths or realities, 2 only partially & to a certain point".²⁴

The belief that the physical world is a medium for the communication of unknown realities is an opinion shared by Gore. He argues in his lecture 'God Revealed in Christ' that the Christian 'sees God in all things and all things in God'.²⁵ Seen things represent 'unapparent and eternal realities'.²⁶ The impact of Gore's quotation of Matthew 5:8 upon Bethell reveals her desire to see

²³ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of the Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 138-139, in Ward, *World as Word*, p. 105.

²⁴ Newman, *The Philosophical Notebook*, p. 210, in Ward, *World as Word*, p. 106.

²⁵ Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*, p. 139.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 139.

God. She writes to Summers: ‘I shall never forget the hush, the rapt attention, & the impression of those words when he paused & said: – “Blessed are the pure in heart, the, for they shall *see* God”’.²⁷ She attended this lecture at the age of twenty-two. Only three years before her death in 1945, she wrote to Charles Brasch about her continuing efforts to see God:

My task in the years that may remain to me is I think so to resign myself to these convictions that the facts of religion are as near & natural & undebateable [sic] as the air and the sun at Kaikoura. I live, I think, increasingly in this spirit – *and* increasingly aware of my own dreadful failures!

The ever present desire of her life was to see God in the things of the world, to amalgamate the ‘facts of religion’ with the ‘air and the sun at Kaikoura’. This is what *Time and Place* is preoccupied with, the conversion of the sensations received from the phenomenal world into an encounter with Christ – the most eternal reality.

The phenomenal world is a surface covering a depth of meaning

Hopkins’ translation of and commentary on some of Parmenides’ philosophical writings reflects the major preoccupation of his poetry. A brief commentary on Parmenides is found in one of his early notebooks, written in February 1868, and is published in House’s edition of Hopkins’ Notebooks and Papers (the edition Bethell read in 1937).²⁸ It is here that the first reference to ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’ is found. These are the terms coined by Hopkins to name his very dynamic and complex way of understanding the

²⁷ *Vibrant with Words*, pp. 191-192.

²⁸ Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, pp. 98-102.

world. ‘The inscape’, Hopkins tells us, ‘is the proportion of the mixture’ between Being and Not-being.²⁹ Just as Parmenides focused on the knowledge of the things that are, or the truth, so does Hopkins. He separates the ‘inscape’ – ‘the truth itself’ from the ‘husks and scapes’ of the truth. We gather that the ‘inscape’ of a thing is the meaning to be found within it, while to grasp only the husk of an object is to merely pass over it with your senses – it is like receiving the sounds that construct a word without grasping the meaning of these sounds. ‘Instress’ is intimately connected to ‘inscape’. While the ‘inscape’ is the ‘*is*’ within an object, ‘instress’ is the ‘*yes*’ of the mind as it perceives the ‘inscape’.³⁰ The two must work together. It is ‘inscape’ seen in Bethell’s poetry that is the focus of this chapter while ‘instress’ will be dealt with in the next.

My very brief definition of inscape is, of course, extremely simplistic and in no way encompasses the complexity of the idea. The aim here is to pinpoint the search for ‘what is’ at the heart of Hopkins’ poetry because the same issue is at the heart of Bethell’s.

Just as Hopkins is preoccupied with the idea that ‘*things are or there is truth*’,³¹ Bethell is also determined to uncover ‘what is’. And just as Hopkins turns to the natural world to find truth, so does Bethell. What I wish to reveal in the following discussion is the way Bethell’s poetry uncovers reality. Just as Hopkins rejects the husk of the world as ‘Not-being’, so Bethell sees the tangible concrete world as a mere surface, a surface which only gains

²⁹ Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, p. 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

importance through its manifestation of the truth. Bethell pictures the world striving to communicate the fullest and most perfect truth it has to impart: Christ.

Bethell understands the sensory world to be her sole source of information. The poems almost unexceptionally spring from observations of the natural world. 'November',³² is typical in its attention to the surrounding sights and sounds:

The gorse is rusting; dust on wayside verdure lies;
Hedge hawthorns heavily hang down snow festoons;
On purple mountains steadily melt those other snows;
Ever the noonday sky in darkening azure burns;
The airy willows muffled now in wadded robes,
A deeper sigh of wind resounds through denser boughs.

In *Time and Place* every poem springs from the poet's perception of the natural world. Bethell accentuates the fact in the title of the collection. Denis Glover protested saying, '*Time and Place*, will not do. You aren't writing a treatise on the Fourth Dimension'.³³ Despite Glover's humorous objections and Bethell's deference to his opinion in other matters (including dropping 'Limitation'³⁴ from the collection), she persisted with *Time and Place*. This reflects its significance. Bethell is expressing in this collection the importance of the phenomenal world of time and place as the only source of truth. It accentuates the immediacy of each poem as a record of a specific time and place, and in doing so communicates to the reader how essential the phenomenal world is as a source of information.

³² *Time and Place*, p. 17. The page numbers for all subsequent references to this collection appear in the text in chapters two and three.

³³ O'Sullivan, *Collected Poems*, p. 105.

³⁴ Due to type-setting difficulties, 'Limitation' became the last poem in *Day and Night*, p. 57.

The first poem in the collection, 'Willows in the Valley' (p. 9), introduces a theme that runs throughout the collection; the necessity of the seen to communicate that which is unseen. Bethell presents the reader with 'the ghosts of willow-trees waiting embodiment', 'thoughts of young willows not imprisoned yet, / Impalpable boughs and incorporeal green'. Despite her insistence that these 'tree-spirits' are intangible and as yet essentially nonexistent, she is aware that without some sort of communication with her senses she would remain oblivious to their existence. Consequently they are clothed in 'a distillation / Of purest green and golden mist and rosy haze / Their fabric'. Even tree-spirits must be clothed in some fabric tangible to the senses and Bethell chooses to present them as a distillation of colour.

The poem goes on to link the spirits of the willow trees with spring. Once again Bethell emphasises that without the sensory experience that the physical world gives through the body (which is also part of the phenomenal world and acts as a medium) we would know nothing:

It was a vision of willows in magical young green . . .
Spring-time is vision; come, gone, imperishable;
Spring is dim cloudland of new bliss, impenetrable;
Spring is a sunbreathed veil on what shall be, has, been,
A bright stuff spun of the seen and the unseen.

Here Bethell is setting up her subsequent treatment of the visible as the communication of what is invisible. The seasons are the joining of time and place in Bethell's poetry. Spring is 'A bright stuff spun of the seen and the unseen'. Not only is the spinning of time and place together into spring or summer a spinning together of invisible time with visible place, each season

also has meaning for the poet – a character, which is communicated through the visible signs of the season upon the world. In this case the character of spring is one of birth and sunshine and ‘magical young green’. Spring is pastoral, as is seen in the reference to the ‘oaten pipe that once by legendary shepherd / Was played in far green European meadow, / Telling old sylvan pleasures, pastoral complaint’. The use of the word ‘pastoral’ implies not only the care of livestock but the care and guidance in spiritual matters. Over and over ‘Willows in the Valley’ spins the seen and the unseen together, revealing Bethell’s belief that the seen is the necessary medium for the communication of the unseen.

The natural world is Bethell’s most important source of information. The fact that her poetry is based upon her observations of the world around her reveals this fact. Part of the reason that nature is so important to Bethell is because it creates an instinctive response within her. ‘Levavi Oculos’³⁵ reveals the poet’s attention to the sensations she receives from the world and the connection between these sensations and the responses of her mind:

The delicate lines of the hill of this country,
 Rain-swept and sun-tanned, naked to the four winds,
 Console our tired eyes as the high-lineaged kine do,
 With their fine-chiselled flanks in a near field reclined,
 Bring solace, calm as the quiet hills are,
 Composed of the same lineaments in one design...

These lines, at night-fall, melting into the arable,
 Enclosing wine-tawny and grape-violet shades,
 Affect us as a faint air might, played upon a virginal,
 So long ago that all pain it held then is allayed...

³⁵ *Time and Place*, p. 21.

What Bethell is showing the reader is the instinctive response of her mind to the lines of the hills. The sight of the hills brings a feeling of comfort. In the wine-coloured air of the evening Bethell creates a type of synaesthesia, blending two senses into one. 'Wine-tawny' and 'grape-violet' shades invoke the taste of wine as well as impressing upon the reader the visual quality of the air. Bethell then introduces sound. The colour of the air and the lines of the hills affect her 'as a faint air might'. She is emphasising the impact that sound has upon the emotions. The poem brings to mind the role of major and minor notes. While a song played in a major key will most often result in a cheerful melody, a song played in a minor key sounds like a lament. In 'Levavi Oculos' Bethell is emphasising the connection between the sensations we receive from the sensible world and the sentient mind. Mournful music makes us feel sad, and music is made mournful by the use of mournful sounding notes. Bethell focuses on the fact that the world has an impact upon her emotions and her mind. Certain sensations evoke certain responses within her.

Hopkins was, likewise, acutely aware of the impact of sensations upon the beholder. It is for this reason that his poetry is so aural. He relies first and foremost upon the beauty of the sounds in his poetry to capture the attention of the reader. In a series of lectures on rhetoric, given at Roehampton in 1873-1874, Hopkins wrote, 'Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and

interest even over and above its interest of meaning'.³⁶ Consequently, we see his theory reflected in his poetry:

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,
His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinèd score
In crisp curls off wild winch whirl, and pour
And pelt music, till none's to spill nor spend.

This is the second verse of 'The Sea and the Skylark',³⁷ a poem which Robert Bridges found unintelligible. Hopkins was forced to explain 'in cold blood'³⁸ what he is talking about:

The skein and the coil are the lark's song, which from his height gives the impression (not to me only) of something falling to the earth and not vertically quite but tricklingly or wavingly, something as a skein of silk ribbed by having been tightly wound.

Although the verse is describing the lark's song the reader is first struck by the beauty of the sounds as they are spoken. Hopkins is pelting verbal music upon the reader. He tells Bridges that while writing the poem he was 'fascinated with *cynghannedd* or consonant-chime'.³⁹ His primary concern while writing the poem was its sound as it was spoken. The senses of the reader are placed in accord with the poem – the reader is impelled to delight first and foremost in the harmonious sounds of the poem – meaning follows after.

Hopkins' theory that poetry is a mode of speech formed to reach the mind of the reader primarily through the sound of the words is reflected by Bethell's awareness of the impact of sensation upon her mind and emotions. Hopkins' concentration upon the aural quality of the sounds he uses in his poetry

³⁶ House, *Notebooks and Papers*, p. 249.

³⁷ Hopkins, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1931, pp. 28-29.

³⁸ Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, pp 163-164, (26 Nov. 1882), in Ward, *World as Word*, p. 174.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

indicates his awareness that sensations can either grip or repel. By using beautiful sounds and rhythms Hopkins is able to capture the emotions of the reader, and so he creates a bridge, a relation, between the reader and the poem.

Bethell's recognition of the pleasure or distaste instinctively provoked by sensations is not as studied as Hopkins' recognition, yet the awareness is most certainly there. 'Shrubs is an ugly word', she writes in 'Catalogue',⁴⁰ a poem belonging to *From a Garden in the Antipodes* and therefore written prior to her knowledge of Hopkins' poetry. While highlighting words which sound unpleasing, Bethell then celebrates the beauty of the Latin shrub names, and effectively makes a poem out of them:

Come, let me read this catalogue of shrubs,
And choose out those with lovely-sounding names.
 Adenandra uniflora, *Aloysia Citriodora*,
 Iochroma Tubulosa, *Podalyria Grandiflora*,
 Melaleuca, *Santolina*, *Lasiandra*,
 Cantua, *Cassia*, *Felecia*, *Luculia*,
 Daphne . . .

Less formal than Hopkins' scholarly theories about rhetoric, Bethell nevertheless shared a keen understanding of the influence the qualities of the phenomenal world held over her.

Furthermore, Bethell recognises that the sensations her body receives from the world must necessarily have an impact upon her, this is their purpose. The purpose of the phenomenal world is to draw an instinctive response from the beholder. There is no such thing as a neutral sensation, according to Bethell.

⁴⁰ *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, p. 12.

Each and every sensation draws a response from her, whether it is a feeling of pain, or happiness, or aversion. While the poetry focuses upon those sensations which create a strong reaction within the poet, such as in 'Autumn Afternoon', which is about 'how a red sallow, and two sorts of poplar, / Upsprung in a valley, had wrought me such joy!' Bethell acknowledges in 'Weathered Rocks' that everything in the universe has the capacity to create an instinctive response within the viewer:

Rock, thorn, cryptogram, each has significance,
Each makes contribution to eternal parable;
And we are kin, compounded of the same elements,
Alike proceeding to an unknown goal;
And they are secret to themselves as I am secret to myself,
And I think they have no part in my dole;

And shall another estimate the influence
Of mass, form, colour, on individual soul...

The poem is about the unity the poet perceives in the world. Her perception of a 'cosmic diastole' reflects an awareness of the kinship between herself and everything in the world, each 'rock, thorn, cryptogram'. Because she is 'compounded of the same elements', in other words, is tangible and visible just as the world is tangible and visible, Bethell is able to receive the information of 'mass, form, colour'. The sensations given to her by the world have an impact upon her soul – the physical qualities of the things of the world affect her soul. The word 'dole' originally meant separation or division, a meaning from which the common definition, portion or share, springs. Its use here highlights the physical separation of the poet from the rocks in order to emphasize the spiritual impact the physical surface of the rocks, their 'tattoo'd and stained, silvered, denigrated, / Rusted and empurpled'

surface qualities have upon the poet. The purpose of every sensation that the poet encounters in the world is to create a response within her soul.

Some things have a stronger impact on a person than others. Some of the poet's encounters with the world evoke pleasure, while others produce outright joy. This is seen in 'Autumn Roses' (p. 25), the first poem in the 'autumn' section. Here Bethell claims that the roses of autumn are far more beautiful than the roses of spring, therefore they have a much stronger impact upon the poet's emotions:

The roses of Autumn are less numerous
Than the accoutrement of valiant Spring,
But they are more beautiful, and far more precious

Bethell is drawing a connection between the joy that the roses give and their physical beauty. Because they are beautiful, because they have a more pungent perfume and a more lustrous colouring they create more joy within the poet. Furthermore, Bethell equates this joy with the 'voice' of the roses: 'With a more intimate and insistent voice / Their pungent scent speaks'. This voice is closely tied to their physicality – to the sensations the poet receives. This is emphasised by a reference to the deaf and blind. It is our ability to sense, to hear and see and smell, says Bethell, which brings us knowledge in this world. Sensations are our key to knowledge, because, as we have seen in this poem about the autumn roses, it is the physical surface of things that causes a response within the person. Furthermore, Bethell tells us that the stronger the reaction within the soul to the sensations received, the more insistent the voice of the object. Is Bethell telling us that our instinctive

responses to the sensations we receive from the world are indicative of the truth?

I believe so. Those things which have the greatest impact upon the poet – whether her response is one of joy, or agony, or disgust – these things are the things that communicate the truth with the most strength. Bethell links truth to perfection. Those things which are most perfect are seen to be the most truthful. *Time and Place* is a collection about the beauty of the world. Here we see the poet rejoicing in those things within the natural world that cause her the greatest joy. Bethell insists that the things which cause her the most joy fulfil their purpose better. The purpose of sensation, we saw, is to evoke a response within the heart of the beholder. In ‘Autumn Roses’, the flowers, by being more lustrous and beautiful create joy in the heart of the poet – in so doing they speak with a more insistent voice than the less beautiful roses of spring. Bethell intertwines the physical surface with the sensations given to the beholder; these sensations are then intertwined with the emotional and mental response of the beholder. Finally this response is taken to be an indication of the wholeness, or perfection of the object. Those things which speak the most intimately and insistently to the poet are taken to be the most beautiful. We see that Bethell connects the clarity of the voice of the roses with their perfection. By being most perfectly what they are the roses fulfil their purpose most fully. Their beauty creates an intense emotional response within the poet, and this response is seen to be the fulfilment of the purpose of sensation. And the purpose of sensation is the reaction within the beholder – it is a message. Bethell gauges her instinctive responses to the phenomena

she encounters in order to ascertain the perfection and the wholeness of the things she sees.

‘Limitation’⁴¹ illustrates Bethell’s conception of the role of sensation. ‘Limitation’ was initially intended to be part of *Time and Place*; due to type-setting difficulties, however, Bethell agreed to drop it from the collection and included it as the last poem of *Day and Night* instead.⁴² The poem fits within the ideas revealed in *Time and Place* because it speaks about the interaction between the seen and the unseen. Here we find Bethell’s understanding of the purpose of the world spelt out. Time speaks ‘no word ever of wider fields’ than ‘our earthly paradise’:

But the birds are commissioned to remit messages;
But every tree a whispering, mysterious harp holds;
The sea has a voice, rivers are everywhere melodious,
And there are certain earth-mounds,
There are old mountain hollows charged with oracles . . .
Sometimes, while the wind changes, we may hear sounds
We have waited for, our hearts being tuned secretly
To ultramundane stave.

The purpose of the world, according to this poem, is to ‘remit messages’ of things beyond ‘our earthly paradise’. Yet Bethell clearly ties the communication of these messages to the medium of the senses. The whispering sound of the wind in their leaves is the medium of communication for the trees. Rivers are melodious due to the movement of water. The things of the world remit messages because they are physical and when the poet’s physical body comes into contact with them sensation arises. Bethell tells us that she accepts these sensations, her ‘heart being tuned secretly / To

⁴¹ *Day and Night*, p. 57.

⁴² O’Sullivan, *Collected Poems*, p. 105.

ultramundane stave' in order that in her instinctive response to these sensations she may derive knowledge of the metaphysical. To know the unseen, Bethell relies upon what the seen is able to communicate to her.

When we combine 'Autumn Roses' and 'Limitation' we understand that Bethell believes that the communication of the knowledge of the invisible, that the visible world has to impart, relies upon the connection between the sensations given and her response to those sensations. The more beautiful the object the stronger her feeling of joy and, consequently, the stronger the metaphysical voice of the object. On the other hand, the more repulsive an object is, the more marred and scarred is its face, the more distorted its message is. Those things within the world which are the most perfect and consequently the most beautiful are those things which fulfil their purpose to remit messages most fully. The autumn roses are more perfect than the roses of spring. Surely this must indicate that they are more perfectly what they are – they are being most perfectly themselves, while flawed and faded roses fall short of their potential, they communicate their nature, the nature of a rose, less. Those things which are perfect fulfil their purpose of being most fully themselves. In doing so they fulfil their purpose of remitting messages in the most comprehensible voices of all.

Of course, if the purpose of the phenomenal world is seen to be the communication of messages then the world is only a surface – a surface both hiding and imparting a far deeper meaning. This deeper meaning is communicated by the things of the world manifesting most perfectly their

nature. Consequently, the most beautiful of the roses declare ‘the ineffable vision to be nearer’ to the poet. Through their beauty the roses speak to the poet about the metaphysical world – the depth beneath the surface of their phenomenal qualities.

Bethell equates this depth with the truth. It is not the surface world that is true. Although the phenomenal world is real, it is only fully real to the poet in its communication of the meaning within it. If the physical world is understood to be the extent of reality, or the extent of knowable reality, it is false. Bethell believes that to think that the concrete universe is the extent of what can be known is to be blinded to the truth. It is to see things wrongly, and therefore render the world false despite its inherent truthfulness.

‘Autumn Afternoon’ (pp. 28-30) portrays the connection Bethell makes between beauty, depth and truth. The poem is about the sudden beauty that unexpectedly confronts the poet in a group of trees in the valley. She presents the beauty of the world in moments such as these and clearly tells us that these moments are small glimpses of the depth beneath the surface:

The shining surprises, the rose in the desert,
Oh, naught but the mercy, the turning again,
Naught but remembrance of kindness and mercy
Supplying fresh manna the soul to sustain,

New wine distilled, yea, filling the cup full,
Secret bread, hid manna, my thoughts did employ –
And how a red sallow, and two sorts of poplar,
Upsprung in a valley, had wrought me such joy!

Bethell points out to her reader that the world is full of things which shine out from among the rest, the world is full of ‘shining surprises’, and in these

shining surprises, which are moments of beauty, truth is to be found. She is ‘conning life’s lesson, to fathom the meaning’ within ‘The exquisite pleasures adorning the way’. *Time and Place* is Bethell’s illustration of a world which is spun of the visible and the invisible. The truth is to be found in its depth.

Christ – the depth beneath the surface of the phenomenal world

According to Bethell the whole world is striving for perfection. Although ‘Waves’⁴³ belongs to *Day and Night* it illustrates the natural conclusion of what Bethell was communicating in *Time and Place*. ‘Waves’ clearly presents the earth in a state of potentiality, and looking for the fulfilment of this potential. The physical, phenomenal world is now only revealing glimpses of the truth hidden within it, but it is striving to reveal much more. The world is depicted in this poem groaning for the fulfilment of its purpose – and as we have seen, this purpose is the communication of the truth enabled by the physical perfection of the object. Truth, according to Bethell, is found in those things which manifest their nature most fully. Consequently ‘Waves’ is about ‘Deep calling to deep’:

It is the surge of unplumbed seas
Of being, from before time was;
Fundamental urge of atoms;
Slime-emergent, vegetable armies,
Phytoplankton, mosses, grasses;
Dirge of vast massy forests
Passing away fulfilled.

Incessant protoplasmic swell
Of life impelled to ideal form;

⁴³ *Day and Night*, pp. 36-37.

Cell to fellow-cell murmuring
In dark arteries of supreme organisms
Marine memories; the old oceans
Curled shells record; salt streams
Wherein all life was laved.

By beginning with an image of the time when the world was ‘formless and empty’ and ‘darkness was over the surface of the deep’,⁴⁴ and depicting the emergence of the universe and all things in it from this depth, Bethell is emphasising the movement of all things toward perfection. She is confronting her reader with an image of all things being held within an ‘Incessant protoplasmic swell / Of life impelled to ideal form’. Everything is marching, or struggling, towards perfection, for in perfection, or ‘ideal form’ fulfilment is to be found. This is supported by Bethell’s image, in the seventh verse, of the Earth, ruined and burdened, still striving for perfection:

Hear again . . . deep under
Earth’s unease, immutable doom
Thundering; appeasing the pain, the expectancy
Of the prisoned, the burdened, looking for entelechy.

Bethell has married the earth and the depth within it together in ‘Waves’ for the purpose of showing the world striving for perfection. This perfection is the manifestation of all that the visible world has been intended to communicate.

The connection Bethell makes between Christ and the earth in ‘Waves’ points to the fact that once the world has attained the fulfilment of its purpose, namely to display the depth within it, Christ will be revealed. The call from within the earth is the voice of Christ:

Listen, as it were the sound of many waters:

⁴⁴ Genesis 1:2.

I, the Slain, am the Meaning, the Guerdon;
I am the Ground, the Meed.

This a clear reference to Christ, who was crucified in order that the poet could receive the guerdon, the reward, of eternal life. The following, and final stanza, outlines the fulfilment of the complete revelation of Christ, which is the fulfilment of the purpose of the universe:

Listen again . . . it is the Spirit
Come, saying, come. The dumb
Cosmos learning speech. Come Lord!
It is the Beautiful Shepherd piping
Unwearied in the eternal meadows;
The Bridegroom, ready Bride summoning
With dominant: Behold I come.

What we see is Christ linked to the earth, for he calls from the depth of the earth that 'I am the Ground'. Furthermore he says that he is 'the Meaning' of all things. Just as the earth is seen to have depth, so Christ is portrayed by Bethell as the earth, as well as the meaning of the earth. When the earth is perfected it will manifest this depth to the fullest extent: 'The dumb / Cosmos learning speech'. When this happens Christ, 'the Beautiful Bridegroom', will be seen and will give his reward of eternal life to his Bride; those who believe in him. By placing Christ within the world Bethell is displaying Christ as the entelechy of the world – the fullness of the message the world is charged to remit.

To fully understand Bethell's presentation of Christ as the fullness of the message that the Cosmos must communicate, we need to look at the word 'entelechy' and Aristotle's theory of motion. Bethell's use of 'entelechy', in the line 'the prisoned, the burdened, looking for entelechy' indicates her understanding of the term as the complete expression of some function.

Bethell portrays the universe in ‘Waves’ growing, straining toward the state in which it will fulfil its purpose. We saw that the purpose of the phenomenal world was to communicate the reality of Christ’s presence, but how does the physical world do this? The world strives toward its purpose, Bethell tells us, by ‘looking for entelechy’, and by being ‘impelled to ideal form’. The world does its best to manifest its ideal form. By showing itself purely for what it is the world displays most clearly the presence of Christ. This manifestation, as we shall see, is found in the motion, or the activity, of an entity.

Aristotle wrote in the *Physics* that motion is not the mysterious departure from things at rest; instead it is the joint presence of potentiality and actuality within a thing. St Thomas Aquinas recognised that motion is the actuality of any potentiality insofar as it is still a potentiality.⁴⁵ Of course, we can only understand this if we understand what the words ‘potentiality’ and ‘actuality’ mean. Potentiality is not difficult; it is the capacity for development or change. Actuality is more complex. Actuality is linked to the word *entelechia*, a word coined by Aristotle. It comes from the root word *telos*, meaning ‘completeness’, or ‘perfection’. But Aristotle added the verb ‘*exein*’, which has several meanings but is likely to have been used by Aristotle as the verb ‘to be’ in the sense of remaining as is.⁴⁶ *Entelechia*, then, means to remain in a state of completeness, it is for a thing to be what it is.

Entelechy, or actuality, therefore, is brought about only by the actions of a thing which makes it what it is – because in being wholly what it is an entity

⁴⁵ Joe Sachs, ‘Aristotle: Motion and its Place in Nature’, *The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/aris-mot.html> (accessed on September 3, 2007).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

gains actuality. Kosman, in his interpretation of Aristotle's theory of motion emphasises that it is not to be found in process. It is not to be understood as the entity changing from one thing to another, and through this change achieving entelechy. No, actuality and entelechy is found in the entity merely being completely or wholly what it is. Completeness only comes through the enduring activity that makes a thing what it is. It is not a shift from this to that. Even when I stand completely still, I am still myself and am actively using my potential to stand still, while also holding the potential to move, to sing, to see, and all of these potentialities are always encompassed within actuality.⁴⁷

If we return to St Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of motion as the actuality of any potentiality insofar as it is still a potentiality we come to understand that completeness only comes through the activity that characterises a certain thing as what it is. And this activity illustrates an amount of potentiality within the thing. For change to occur there must be room for change, yet in this very activity of change the entity is given actuality. John Milbank in his discussion of *entelechia* uses the example of an eye. We know the eye through its activity – seeing. Of course there is the physical material that makes up the eye, which contains the potentiality for seeing, but it is in its activity that the eye is given actuality. We see because the eye constantly moves about, is in constant motion and that motion indicates the potential for more activity, for more vision.⁴⁸ So actuality arises from potentiality, and potentiality arises

⁴⁷ L. A. Kosman, 'Aristotle's definition of motion', pp. 40-62, in *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy*, vol. xiv, (1969).

⁴⁸ John Milbank, 'Beauty and the Soul', pp. 1-34, in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 13.

from actuality. The two must be joined for a being to be completely what it is.

Every motion is a manifestation of the character of that being. Things have being because they are, or are part of, determinate wholes, so that to be means to be something. Motion is the manifestation of being because it always is or is part of some determinate potentiality at work and manifest in the world as change.

How is this theory of motion connected to Bethell's poem 'Waves'? We saw that entelechy is the complete expression of a being. Entelechy is the spinning of actuality and potentiality that is motion, and in that motion a person is able to express who and what they are. We saw that in each stage of life – whether a person is child or an adult, they are still being what they are. Just because the child has not reached adulthood does not make him less of a person – it does not decrease his actuality. Each step of each motion is as important as every other and must be seen as distinct parts within a complex unity – for this is the only way in which actuality is accomplished.⁴⁹ What, then, does Bethell mean when she speaks of the universe 'looking for entelechy'?

The 'entelechy' that the poet sees the world looking for is to be found in the revelation of Christ. The universe and everything in it is searching for entelechy, because only in being what it truly is can it communicate 'the

⁴⁹ Kosman, 'Aristotle's definition of motion', pp. 44-45.

Meaning' deep within it. Every single entity within the world is looking for entelechy, for a complete expression of itself through its motions, which show what it is. By simply being exactly what it was made to be the world communicates Christ at its centre, and so achieves 'entelechy'.

Bethell believes that nothing can be known except what is revealed through the senses; subsequently she looks for the invisible within the world in the motion and change of the visible. Aristotle taught that we know the eye in its seeing and we know the soul in its moving of things. Therefore, the spirit at the centre of the universe, the sustainer of the cosmos, must be shown through the movement and change in the phenomenal world. There is an energy, a quickening, which the poet reflects upon in the natural world, and this motion, this energy and potential is linked to Christ.

Bethell's use of the seasons and months in *Time and Place* reflects the continual movement and energy within the world. Bethell depicts the seasons in *Time and Place* as the combination of invisible time and the visible world. 'Drive to North Canterbury' (pp. 18-19) shows that the collection takes this idea further, using the seasons to emphasis the presence of an invisible source of life and energy:

All Summer's heat burned in that grain,
Embered upon the cloudy veil;
All Spring's quick energy reborn
In those green leaves . . . The old refrain:
Seed-time and harvest shall not fail
Is news the centuries cannot stale!
Painted upon an evening grey
We keep for memory of that day
The willows and the standing corn.

Be thankful, travellers, who greet
The tawny harvest-fields unrolled,
That bread for body's need is given
And likewise spiritual meat:
For, 'tis the lustre on the gold,
The grace wherewith in green is stoled,
Mid solitude of misty grey,
The careless willow by the way,
That lure the soul from earth to heaven.

The poem abounds with descriptions of the life seen in the landscape surrounding the poet. 'Summer's heat' is burning in the grain, and 'Spring's quick energy' is reborn in the leaves. The wheat sucks its growth 'from source unseen' and the willows are refreshed by a 'hidden watercourse'. Bethell emphasises the unseen source of life. She then tells the reader that '*Seed-time and harvest shall not fail*'. She makes a clear link between the seed-time and harvest and the creator who sustains them. This italicised phrase is a direct reference to God's promise to sustain the world, found in Genesis 8:22:

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
will never cease.

From this promise the poet derives assurance that the one who sustains the seasons and provides 'bread for body's need' will eventually 'lure the soul from earth to heaven'. The golden wheat is not only for physical nourishment, she finds within it spiritual nourishment. In the 'lustre on the gold' Bethell sees her saviour. Jesus is described repeatedly in the bible as the light. In John 8:12 he tells his listeners, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'.

Throughout her poetry Bethell is aware of this association and articulates it in 'Lighting of the Lamps',⁵⁰ telling the reader that the:

Father of Lights, in whom there is no shadow of turning,
Has laid the foundations of all universes secure....

Praise, praise to thee, Almighty Artificer, Architect,
Poet, whose pure inexhaustible spring eternally flows,
Artist, whose marvellous works eternally are made manifest,
Eternally making, in making, eternally finding repose.
Praise to the All; the One; Ineffable; and Intimate;
Calling thy stars, thy souls, thy least electrons by name...

The link between Christ as light and Christ as the creator is inescapable. So we see in 'Drive to North Canterbury' that the golden lustre of the wheat is indicative of Christ, who is also the source of the growth and life within the scene.

Finally, if Christ's presence is what the world is intended to communicate, then to reject the information of the senses is to reject Christ, and subsequently to incur damnation. Bethell, we know, is strongly opposed to the destruction of natural beauty. In a letter to Charles Brasch, written in 1942, she says, 'what makes me sad in the country is the useless destruction of mountain bush...that's what is at the root of our troubles – greed and impiety. It wd be the burden of my verse now "the earth is the Lords" and not to be exploited'.⁵¹ This theme is revealed in *Time and Place* in the poem 'By Burke's Pass' (p. 27), which stands in opposition to the rest of the collection as a poem about blindness toward the invisible, rather than sight. Bethell reveals man as oblivious to the glory seen in the magnificent alps and rivers of

⁵⁰ *Day and Night*, pp. 26-31.

⁵¹ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 259.

nature. He is so busy wresting his bread from Nature that he mistakes her for a friend, 'Now, vainglorious, / he calls the expanse a home and awful Nature, friend'. This displays a complete lack of understanding as to the true meaning of the world. To find a home on this earth is, as we saw in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, to lose sight of the fact that we are pilgrims and that this life is merely a preparation for the next. To accept this life on earth as the purpose of existence is to be blinded to message of Christ which the world conveys. Subsequently these men place no value in beauty: 'Lo, man to the assault! In part victorious, / His pretty trophies sets he up to amend / The natural scene'. They cannot see that nature publishes man's condition – a condition of shared mortality and immortality. This life will end and the next will come. The natural world will be rolled up like a cloth which has been used to veil an object. The phenomenal world is described as 'this planetary decoration', just as if it was the wrapping on a gift, beautifully presented and hinting, through the shape, size and feel, what might be inside. Careful attention to what the world has to communicate leads to the knowledge of Christ. And the knowledge that when the 'planetary decoration' is stripped off to reveal Christ in his fullness those who had already guessed at his presence will receive the gift of eternal life in paradise.

Just as Bethell's poetry is about the discovery of Christ within the things of the phenomenal world, so is Hopkins'. 'Hurrahing in Harvest'⁵² illustrates the close similarity between the two poets in the way they view the world as a

⁵² Hopkins, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1931, pp. 30-31.

surface intended for the communication of a deeper meaning. Both poets find that that deeper meaning is Christ, their Saviour.

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise
Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across the skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And, éyes, héart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet! –
These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Just as Bethell finds in the natural world the beauty that speaks to her with an intimate and insistent voice, so Hopkins gleans the glory of the heavens and the hills the image of his Saviour. 'These things, these things were here and but the beholder wanting' – this line is linked to Hopkins' term inscape, for the infinite inscapes within the world are continually manifesting themselves through the phenomena that confront the beholder. Hopkins draws attention to the connection between the beholder and the physical world ('which two when they once meet'), just as Bethell does by emphasising the instinctive response drawn from the viewer upon the encounter with the world. Hopkins' heart is influenced by the barbarous beauty of the world, just as Bethell's is. His joy 'half hurls earth for him off under his feet', just as Bethell, in 'May Night' (p. 35), when looking upon the night sky is 'Sense-apprised but unshackled, but free, in heaven-bound flight'.

Time and Place concentrates on making the reader think about where they get their truth from. It is about the revelation of truth through the phenomenal world. While we are all individual beings and are unable to prove that what we perceive is what others perceive, yet we trust that what our senses perceive is the truth. We rely upon the phenomenal world for our information and therefore Bethell hunts for the truth in the natural world. She believes that the world is given for this precise reason – to communicate the truth of Christ. But while the world is the only source of information it remains undiscovered without the intelligent mind to unravel and piece together the sensations the world has to offer. We have looked at what the world has to offer us, but are still left, ‘the beholder / Wanting’. The mind’s task as it unravels the information given by the phenomenal world is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN *TIME AND PLACE*:

THE ROLE OF THE MIND

What does Bethell see as the central function of the mind? Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) was a historian of philosophy, a neo-Thomistic philosopher, and a contemporary of Jacques Maritain. In his book *Being and Some Philosophers*,¹ first published in 1949, Gilson outlines what he sees as the central function of the mind: the discovery of the truth. He writes that the most fundamental need of the mind is to be able to see the connections between things: '[t]o understand something is for us to conceive it as identical in nature with something else that we already know'.² He goes on to say that '[t]o know the nature of reality at large is therefore for us to understand that each and every one of the innumerable things which make up the universe is, at bottom, identical in nature with each and every other thing'.³ For this reason when the ancient Greeks engaged in philosophical investigations, the

¹ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2nd ed., 1952).

² Ibid., p. 6.

³ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, p. 6.

first question they asked was '[w]hat stuff is reality made of?'⁴ The answer Parmenides came up with was 'being', because although all things take different forms and shapes, they share in one fundamental aspect, and that is that they are, they exist. 'Being, then, is the fundamental and ultimate element of reality'⁵ was the conclusion arrived at.

*Time and Place*⁶ shows us a similar preoccupation with being – in this collection Bethell portrays the mind as being responsible for the perception of being, a perception which arises from a recognition of patterns and relations. Each being is made clear to the poet through the unity of its parts; each being also lends that internal unity to the unity of all things. Each individual being, according to Bethell, is linked to every other, so creating a network of things; and all things in that network are unique reflections of the Ultimate Being who gives them existence. Gilson is in harmony with Bethell in *Time and Place* when he contends that being 'is the fundamental and ultimate element of reality'. *Time and Place* tells us that it is through being that the truth about reality may be known.

For Bethell the truth about reality is found at its foundation and that foundation is Christ. She writes in 'Lighting of the Lamps' in *Day and Night*,⁷ that Christ is the:

Almighty Artificer, Architect,
Poet, whose pure inexhaustible spring eternally flows,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place, poems by the Author of 'From a Garden in the Antipodes'* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936).

⁷ Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934, by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939), pp. 26-31.

Artist, whose marvellous works eternally are made manifest,
Eternally making, in making, eternally finding repose.

Christ is at the foundation of existence – the artist who created the things of the world, and consequently the things of the world reflect his mind. Every being is, as Maritain, after Aquinas, writes ‘a remnant or a ray of the creative Mind impressed upon the heart of the being created’.⁸ Bethell recognises that all things are related and she draws this relation back to its beginnings in Christ. All things that have existence, that have being, share in the nature of the Ultimate Being who gives all things their unique manifestation of existence.

The mind's task, then, is to perceive being, because each being is part of reality and contributes to the poet's knowledge of the creator. The first illustration of the mind's task is in Bethell's presentation of an intelligible world. It is clear that, for Bethell, the world is intended to communicate messages which are only able to be comprehended by the mind. If the world is intended to communicate to the mind, the mind must be intended to decipher these messages. Secondly, the logical structure of the mind is seen by Bethell to be the tool through which the truth can be known. While the things of the world manifest themselves, it is the task of the mind to ascertain the being within things. It is the logical structure of the mind that enables the poet to comprehend the truth within things. This chapter investigates the role of the mind in the discovery of truth in *Time and Place*.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1930 (1971)), p. 20.

The intelligible world

Intelligibility arises from a connection between the mind and the world

We have already seen in the previous chapter that the poems in *Time and Place* present a world designed for the communication of meaning. Bethell presents the phenomenal world as a medium for the communication of realities beyond the physical world of time and space. If this is the case, then the physical world is also an intelligible world, it holds within it concepts which can only be discovered by the intelligent mind. The word ‘intelligible’ used in its philosophical sense is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘capable of being apprehended only by the understanding (not by the senses)’. The physical world is intelligible, but without the intelligent mind its communication of things beyond time and space would remain undiscovered. It is the task of the mind to decipher the meaning held within the sensible world.

Bethell takes this a step further; if the world is an intelligible world then it must correspond to the human mind. If the world is intended for the communication of a deeper reality, and the understanding mind is the only thing capable of discerning this communication, then the world is, if not intended for the mind, at least connected to it. Bethell’s poetry presents to the reader a world which is intelligible, a world which is designed to communicate a deeper meaning and consequently there is a connection

between the intelligent mind and the sensible world. The world is sensible and the mind is able to recognise its own nature within it.

This connection between the mind and the world can be seen most clearly in Bethell's treatment of beauty. We saw earlier that *From a Garden in the Antipodes* reveals the connection that beauty illuminates for the poet between the object and the subject. For Bethell beauty illustrates the connection between her mind and the physical world. She understands beauty to be an intelligible concept because although it is found in the things of the world, it is the mind which ultimately delights in beauty. Bethell finds 'mind-liberty' in the beauty of the hills in 'Levavi Oculos' (pp. 21-22); in 'Grey Day'⁹ it is beauty that sets 'free a morose prisoner', and it is her spirit that soars into 'heaven-bound flight' when confronted with the radiance of the sky in 'May Night' (p. 35). What we see in these three poems is that beauty transforms the sensible world into a pathway toward the knowledge of things which are not sensible. The physical world, in other words, is intelligible and beauty is a sign to the poet of this intelligibility.

A closer look at 'May Night' reveals the intelligibility that beauty gifts to the poet. Beauty is seen as a key to the revelation of the spiritual, or the intelligible, within the physical world. Bethell writes:

The long nights of late May repose to the soul afford;
First snows are fallen to the base of sentinel mountains,
Lost now by fusion of earth and heaven in northern dusk...

Glassy-cold, crystal-cold and still-fast, the quickened air

⁹ Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934, by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939), pp. 10-11.

Smites like musical clang of a bell on exulting spirit,
Sense-appriſed but unſhackled, but free, in heaven-bound flight...

O radiant night! Here is renewal. Herein is vitality.
Clear from the well of life ſhall ſpring the ſparkling waters.
Bright, bright are the glittering ſyllables: *Peace*, and *Perpetual Light*.

The poem is about the amalgamation of the ſpiritual and the physical within the things of the world. This theme is ſet up in the firſt verſe with the fusion of heaven and earth at the baſe of the mountains. Mountains are ſymbols of union with God in the poetry, conſequently when Bethell portrays the baſe of the mountains blending with the plains ſhe is portraying the fusion of the things that are earthly with the things that are heavenly. While the peaks of the mountains represent nearneſs to God, the lack of differentiation between the plains and the mountains ſhows that even though the plains are further from the top, the poet is ſtill ſomewhere on the continuum between the two poles of earth and heaven.

Furthermore, ſhe is thrown into ‘heaven-bound flight’ by the radiance of the night – ſhe travels further up that continuum toward heavenly things. She is ſtill ‘ſenſe-appriſed’ but ſhe is alſo ‘unſhackled’ by her ſenſes. The beauty of the physical world is the pathway through which ſhe gains the freedom of her ſpirit. It is the ſenſible world that tells her of ſpiritual things, for the things of the world are mediums for the communication of ſpiritual things. Conſequently the poem ends with her viſion of ‘*Peace*, and *Perpetual Light*’ within the things of the world. The physical radiance of the night has been transformed into a meſſage about heaven. That which is ſenſible has been transformed into an intelligible communication about the life to come.

The mind and the world are connected in 'May Night'. The mind gains liberty when the world is intelligible. When the mind through its 'tacit work' is able to recognise the meaning within the physical world the spirit of the poet is set free into 'heaven-bound flight'. Bethell makes it clear that this freedom of the spirit, or 'mind-liberty', as she names it in 'Levavi Oculos', is set into motion by the physical world. The 'quickened air / Smites like musical clang of a bell on exulting spirit' and sends it 'sense-apprised but unshackled, but free, in heaven-bound flight'. The conversion of the sensible into the conceptual is what gives her freedom. When the poet sees that the world is designed to convey an intelligible message, a message which her mind is designed to decipher, she gains freedom, renewal and vitality. The sensible world clearly corresponds to her intelligent mind, for when the world is intelligible her spirit rejoices.

Maritain wrote that in beauty the mind finds 'its very own light'.¹⁰ In 'May Night', as in each of her poems, Bethell is recording a moment of clarity and brilliance and light – a moment in which the world becomes intelligible to her and reveals a deeper meaning beneath the phenomenal surface. She contrasts the radiance and silence of the night with the 'intricate drama' of daily life, which veils her eyes to the spiritual truth to be found within the world. The moment of intelligibility recorded by 'May Night' is clearly portrayed as a moment of brilliance or clarity. Bethell contrasts this very temporary glimpse of paradise with the '*Perpetual Light*' of heaven. What she sees in the radiance of the night is a very fleeting understanding of the truth. She sees a

¹⁰ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 20.

flash of the perpetual light which will come after death. While living on earth Bethell only has a partial understanding of the intelligible within the physical; in the life to come, however, she will live in perpetual light, in perpetual clarity and intelligibility.

Beauty is the epitome of intelligibility for Bethell. The word ‘intelligible’ is, on the face of it at odds with the word ‘sensible’ because those things which are intelligible are comprehensible to the intellect alone. But for Bethell all truth is received via the sensible world. The world must, therefore, be intelligible for her. There must be meaning within the physical world which only the mind can decipher. Beauty is one of these intelligible concepts because it is imbedded within the sensible world, yet it is the mind that finds delight in it.

Intelligibility and relation

The mind’s connection with the world naturally leads us to the role of relations, patterns and associations in the creation of an intelligible concept – a role which is very prominent in Bethell’s poetry.

We have seen that intelligibility is linked to meaning – that is obvious; if something is intelligible it can be understood, it makes sense to our minds. This was the central point of the connection between the mind and the world – the world makes sense to our minds because it shares in the intelligible nature of the mind. While the world communicates it is the mind that deciphers

meaning. If Bethell sees an intelligible world she sees a world with meaning, a world which corresponds to her mind. This is necessary because we cannot understand that which has no correspondence, no relation to us. Intelligibility requires relation.

‘What’, asks Tolstoy, ‘can be more intelligible than the words, the dog has pain, the calf is gentle, it loves me, the bird is glad, the horse is afraid, a good man, a bad animal?’¹¹ The point he is trying to make is that we understand the world because the world reflects us. As Bethell says, those things which are most intelligible, which hold the most meaning are those things which reflect our own values – our own ‘ecstasies’, our own ‘anguish and fervour’ (‘Weathered Rocks’, p. 34). ‘Weathered Rocks’ aims to confront the reader with the interrelation between all things. While the rocks are initially seen to have ‘no equivalent’ with anything else in the poet’s experience, in the end she acknowledges that they are linked to herself. In their very individuality Bethell finds that the rocks resemble herself – ‘they are secret to themselves as I am secret to myself’. She goes on to observe ‘the influence / Of mass, form, colour, on individual soul’. The fact that the physical qualities of the rocks have an influence upon her makes the poet aware of the internal ‘significance’ of each ‘Rock, thorn, cryptogram’ in the physical world. Because each thing has the task of communicating meaning to the poet she becomes aware of the connection between all things. Her own ‘smitten heart-throb’ is related to the ‘cosmic diastole’ that she hears around her. The rocks are ‘informed particulars’ just as she is an ‘informed particular’. Through

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, *On Life*, in Wilbur M. Urban, ‘The Intelligible World’, pp. 1-29, in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (January 1924), p. 3.

their individuality and differentiation Bethell is able to associate the rocks with herself. Relation is vital to the communication of meaning. The world holds no significance if it is not related to the 'individual soul' of the poet. Only those things which are linked to humanity, and the 'anguish and fervour' of humanity, 'Weathered Rocks' tells us, have meaning.

Relation is a crucial aspect of Bethell's poetry, perhaps because of its role in the creation of beauty, which, we saw earlier, is the transformation of the physical world into an intelligible communication of what is beyond. In 'Grey Day',¹² Bethell describes the grey light above the sea as it links the scene together and creates a picture of beauty. The sky is 'steel-grey' and the sea is the colour of 'gun-metal'. This leads her memory to the 'grey of silver and slate' in 'Clement's Inn Hall' and finally to the green and gold magnolia leaves 'giving back silver gleam / from grey-muffled sky'. The pattern that she finds even in the greyness of a dreary day results in beauty and sets her free from the 'shackles of needs-must' – sets her free from her blindness to the intelligibility of the world.

It is interesting to see that Hopkins' theory of beauty as it is outlined in House's edition of his *Notebooks and Papers* involves the same attention to relation.¹³ Hopkins argues that beauty is found in 'the comparison we make of things with themselves, seeing their likeness and difference'.¹⁴ Beauty is the apprehension of a relation between the likenesses and differences that make

¹² *Day and Night*, pp. 10-11.

¹³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue', in *The Notebooks and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, House, Humphrey (ed.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 54-91.

¹⁴ Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, p. 60.

up a whole. It is not found in perfect symmetry, nor in a lack of symmetry; it is the mixture of both within an object or a work of art that leads to beauty. The parts of the poem, or the tree, while not displaying perfect symmetry, will create a whole due to their orderly relations to each other. In this relation beauty is found. Bethell cannot have known Hopkins' thoughts on beauty until 1937 when she read *Notebooks and Papers*, well after her poetry was written. However, just as Hopkins sees beauty as the result of the similarities and differences to be found between all things so Bethell in her poetry emphasises the similarities and echoes that she finds between all things.

In 'Grey Day' beauty is the result of the patterns created by the similarities between the sea and the sky and the magnolia leaves. And Bethell sees beauty as the clearest sign of the intelligible nature of the world. Beauty is seen as the clearest communication of the meaning within things – the most perfect roses are the roses that speak with the most 'intimate and insistent voice' in 'Autumn Roses' (p. 25). Both Bethell and Hopkins draw a very clear link between beauty and pattern. In the patterns and associations Bethell sees in the world she sees the intelligible quality of the world. By pointing out the similarities that are to be found within all things, Bethell is emphasising the identical nature at the foundation of all things.

In 'Weathered Rocks' Bethell stresses the unity which arises from the relation between all things. This unity appears first within the 'informed particular' – within the individual rocks. Bethell describes the physical qualities that construct the boulders. They are

Tattoo'd and stained, silvered, denigrated,
Rusted and empurpled...
Fretted by Aurelian and grey moulds,
Encrusted with frilled lichens, pale, glaucous;
Giving pittance to lissom tussock grasses
And twisted brambles, from invisible crevasses.

It is the interconnection of all of these individual qualities that creates the rock. The rock is characterised by the unity of its parts within one entity.

This is linked to Aristotle's theory of motion. Aristotle argued that each and every individual motion of an object was connected to all of the other motions of that object in the past and the future. Motion, as the actuality of any of the potentialities of an entity, when taken collectively like this, is the manifestation of the nature of that being. When Bethell goes on to say that the rocks are 'compounded of the same elements' as herself, and that they are 'Alike proceeding to an unknown goal' she is giving expression to the idea of entelechy, that things are impelled toward their ideal. She is saying that these rocks, when they have unity within themselves, manifest their most ideal nature. Those things which articulate their natures most clearly, which are the most intelligible to the poet are those things that through their own internal unity contribute to the unity of the whole: 'But deep is the given peace, when informed particular / Has respect unto the dignity of the whole'.

Hopkins' theory of inscape as it is interpreted by Bernadette Waterman Ward further illuminates Bethell's conception of the unity within the informed particulars which she then sees contributed to the unity of the whole. Ward remarks on the connection between Hopkins' inscape and Duns Scotus'

philosophy of *formalitas*.¹⁵ This was a word coined by Duns Scotus but derived from the Scholastic word ‘form’. ‘Form’ is the determinant principle of a thing; it is what makes something belong to a particular species or category of being, it is what makes a thing what it is. To link it back to Aristotle’s understanding of motion, the motions of a thing manifest the form of the object. The actualisation of the potential of an entity is what enables us to recognise what that entity is. While Bethell notes that the rocks are her ‘kin, compounded of the same elements’, the elements of which the rocks are made take a different form to the elements of which the poet is made. Consequently the potential within the poet, potential which is constructed by her form, is different to the potential actualised by the rocks. They share being but the manifestation of that being is distinct according to the form into which their physical being is shaped.

Formalitates, or ‘little forms’, refers to the individual qualities that make up the form of the object. The weathered rocks are ‘tattoo’d and stained, silvered, denigrated, / Rusted and empurpled...pale, glaucous’. These are the *formalitates* that, once connected into a whole, enable the poet to recognise the rocks as rocks. *Formalitates* are the individual physical qualities that, when considered in relation, communicate the form of the whole. ‘Glaucous’ itself has a form; it is matter which is pale green-grey in colour. This form lends itself to the form of the rocks, becoming a minor form when placed beside the form of the rocks. It connects itself with other forms, other physical qualities, to construct a form greater than itself – a rock. According

¹⁵ Ward, ‘*Formalitas* and Inscape’, in *World as Word*, pp. 158-197.

to Ward, Hopkins believed that the infinite inscapes to be found within an object are the infinite relations to be discovered between each individual *formalitates* within that object.¹⁶ While Bethell cannot have been familiar with ‘inscape’ ‘Weathered Rocks’ reveals a similar awareness of the unity within the object – a unity between its many qualities which, as they work together, create the whole and so manifest the nature of that whole.

In manifesting their nature, the weathered rocks allow themselves to be recognised, to be categorised and to be added to the poet’s understanding of the world as a whole. By manifesting its nature each object communicates its existence, its being to the poet. Each ‘informed particular’ is seen to be ‘kin, composed of the same elements’ as everything else which has being. The unity within the informed particular is recognised by the poet and consequently is placed within its species and place, so existing in ‘respect unto the dignity of the whole’. Each particular adds to the unity of the whole because the poet recognises its relation to the whole.

The mind’s recognition of the intelligibility of the world

The mind and the interrelation between the things of the world

Etienne Gilson, with whom I began this chapter, points out that:

... to understand something is for us to conceive it as identical in nature with something else that we already know. To know the nature of reality at large is therefore for us to understand that each

¹⁶ Ward, *World as Word*, p. 190.

and every one of the innumerable things which make up the universe is, at bottom, identical in nature with each and every other thing.¹⁷

Patterns and relations are central to Bethell's poetry. It is through pattern and association, through similarity within difference that Bethell is able to perceive the being within each object. The unity of the parts of an entity results in the revelation of the nature of that entity. Once the nature, or the form, of an entity has been disclosed the poet is able to place that 'informed particular' in relation to the whole. Once an object, through its motion has revealed its nature, it can be established as belonging to a particular species of being. It is like this and unlike that and so has a place within the universe and is added to the infinity of things which are different but the same because they belong to the list of things that exist, that are, and make up all that is.

Patterns, associations, echoes and relations are crucial to Bethell because it is through the recognition of connections that she can know that the world is. It is through the ability to draw connections and see the shared nature underlying all things that the poet can make sense of the world. And it is the mind which enables these connections to be seen. The mind draws the world into a cohesive whole, pinpointing the similarities and differences between things. It is the mind that perceives the unity between the physical qualities, or *formalitates* to use Duns Scotus' term, which combine to create an object, and by perceiving these relations the mind is able to see the being within that object. By reaching the being of an object the mind is essentially affirming the existence of that object. This is what Bethell believes is the task of the mind – judgement concerning the reality of the things of the world. So, in

¹⁷ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, pp. 6-7.

‘May Night’ (p. 35) it is the ‘tacit work of the mind’ that enables the poet to see ‘the glittering syllables: *Peace*, and *Perpetual Light*’ within the radiance of the night.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard’s exploration of the intelligibility of the natural world,¹⁸ she talks about a book by Marius von Senden, called *Space and Sight*.¹⁹ This book recounts the experience of sight given to those who have been blind since birth. These people are initially unable to see the depth of the things surrounding them, they have no understanding of space. Instead the world appears to be a flat screen of patches of colour. ‘For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning: “The girl went through the experience that we all go through and forget, the moment we are born. She saw, but it did not mean anything but a lot of different kinds of brightness”’.²⁰ Dillard continues to say that she saw colour-patches for weeks after reading von Senden’s book, ‘But I couldn’t sustain the illusion of flatness. I’ve been around for too long. Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn’t unpeach the peaches’.²¹

Dillard is trying to ‘unpeach the peaches’; Bethell is trying to do the opposite – to get beyond the surface meaning of a form. Bethell draws the connections between the physical qualities that make up a peach – its colour, texture, shape etc. – but she is not *only* interested in peaching the peaches. Her mind

¹⁸ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (London: Picador, 1975).

¹⁹ Marius von Senden, *Space and Sight: the perception of space and shape with congenitally blind before and after operation*, Peter Heath (trans.) (London: Methuen, 1960), in Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, pp. 35-39.

²⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

affirms the existence of each object as it recognises the unity of the *formalitates* within it, but Bethell is interested in a different sort of reality. While the phenomenal qualities of the peach affirm its existence in her mind, she is interested in the significance of that existence. She writes in 'Weathered Rocks' that 'Rock, thorn, cryptogram, each has significance, / Each makes contribution to eternal parable'. Hopkins was not interested in the 'husks and scapes' of the truth, he wrote that '[...the truth itself, the burl,] the fullness is the thought'.²² Bethell sees the mind and its ability to draw things into connection as key to the perception of reality. That which can be drawn by the mind into 'the dignity of the whole' ('Weathered Rocks') has significance, for it belongs to the Being that unifies everything. Anything without being, however, adds nothing to the whole and is only a 'husk' of the truth.

The very purpose of the mind in the poetry is this perception of the truth – while the world is designed to manifest itself, the mind is designed to judge and ascertain what is. According to Bethell the purpose of the mind is fundamentally the apprehension of the ultimate Being within the things of the world. For this reason Bethell presents herself in *Time and Place*, 'conning life's lesson, to fathom the meaning' within 'The exquisite pleasures adorning the way' ('Autumn Afternoon', pp. 28-30). The poet is studying the natural world and in 'the exquisite pleasures' she is best able to fathom the meaning. Those things which are most beautiful are those things which have the greatest unity. Unity, we have seen, is the key to intelligibility – to

²² Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, p. 101.

comprehend the meaning of a communication is to be connected to it. It is the fundamental task of the mind to perceive the relations between all things because Christ is to be found at the foundation of those relations.

‘Warning of Winter’ (p. 33) tells us that the clarity and light within the world is the gift of ‘Divine *Agape*’ – Christ:

But one, in dead of winter,
Divine *Agape*, kindles
Morning suns, new moons, light’s starry trophies;
Says to the waste: Rejoice, and bring forth roses;
To the ice-fields: Let here spring thick bright lilies.

Here she clearly tells her reader that it is Christ who causes all clarity and intelligibility within the world – it is from him that all light and beauty comes and it is back to him that all light and beauty lead.

The mind and the return to the ultimate Being

While patterns are linked to beauty in the poetry, and beauty is seen to be a point of clarity in the physical world, enabling the poet to comprehend the spiritual within the physical, patterns and relations also indicate to Bethell that the logical workings of the mind are essential for knowledge of the truth. The poetry illustrates that the mind, and its logical structure, is seen as key to unlocking the presence of Christ, the foundation of being, in the world.

Aristotle observed that it is impossible for the human mind to acknowledge that the same thing can both be and not be. This is the argument that the

logical structure of the mind establishes the first principles from which the world is to be known.²³ First principles are those beliefs which the mind instinctively accepts as truth because they correspond to the logical composition of the mind. They are the fundamental assumptions that are independent of all other beliefs and from which all other beliefs are deduced. Accordingly, the judgement of the mind concerning the truth is a crucial counterpart to the task of the phenomenal world as it communicates itself to the mind.

In 'May Night' (p. 35) we see that vision is a result of the 'tacit work of the mind'. The conversion of the physical world into a message about Christ, the conversion of time and space into the '*Perpetual Light*' of the knowledge of the truth is reliant upon the poet's intelligent mind:

Here is richness of solitude for tacit work of the mind,
But as singular treasure, prize, soul, this silence,
Lest haply unfulfilled the hour from thee be taken away.

(Even now up-beats the muffled tug of a freight-train
In travail beside the hidden sea; its repercussion
Taps and taps on fragile bowl of mountain quiet. . . .)

Too soon shall be shown on eastern horizon an urgent sign;
Too soon shall the veil be raised on intricate drama
Wherein to every man is daily allotted his transient part.

Solitude and silence are needed in order to apprehend within the radiance of the night 'the glittering syllables: *Peace*, and *Perpetual Light*'. The intricate drama of her daily life is often bemoaned as a distraction from the deeper reality held within the world. Obviously 'the tacit work of the mind' is

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, iv, cap iii (1005, 23-24), in John Duns Scotus, 'Concerning Human Knowledge', pp. 96-132, in *Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings*, Allan Wolter (ed. and trans.) (Nelson: Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 106-109.

needed for the poet to comprehend the message communicated by the intelligible world.

‘Forest Sleep’ (p. 20) presents the same need for solitude and silence as the poet abstracts herself from the distractions of the city, ‘that hot argument by human commerce bred’. The city represents the ‘intricate drama’ that she speaks about in ‘May Night’ – the intricate drama of her daily life which is portrayed as a distraction from the intelligibility of the world. Just as Bethell needs the solitude and silence of the night in order to attain ‘heaven-bound flight’ in ‘May Night’, in ‘Forest Sleep’ the forest is a place of refuge from the business of the city, a place of solitude and silence: ‘The forest solitudes’ and ‘forest silence’.

‘Forest Sleep’ corresponds with Hopkins’ concept of ‘instress’. Instress encompasses both the way the mind gives attention to the physical world and the product of this attention; the recognition of being. ‘Forest Sleep’ shows the way the poet directs her attention toward the things of the world, as well as the product of this attention.

Instress is the bridge that the mind creates between the object and the beholder – for the mind directs its attention toward the world and in so doing creates a mental representation of the world. The world dwells within the mind. In ‘Forest Sleep’ the poet extracts herself from the city, ‘that hot argument by human commerce bred’ in order to focus on the forest. ‘Forest

Sleep' clearly depicts the bending of the will toward the beautiful, toward the intelligible:

Think you, lone wanderer, for an hour withdrawn
From that hot argument by human commerce bred,
Think you not the innermost forest hath foreknown
The whole narrative of the heart's competence and need?

The poet removes herself from distractions in order to focus upon that which is intelligible. Bethell emphasises this by writing that the forest is directly related to 'the heart's competence and need'. The physical world is intelligible, it is linked to the poet's spirit – to that which is not physical and tangible within her.

Hopkins writes: 'nothing is more straightforward to the truth as simple *yes* and *is*'.²⁴ While the physical world proclaims what *is* the mind must say *yes* in response. Hopkins named this affirmative response 'instress'. Instress points to the necessity of the mind in the discovery of truth – although the world can shout about what is, the beholding mind must respond with a yes for truth to be known. 'Forest Sleep' is an illustration of the forest proclaiming that it *is*, and the mind responding *yes*. The direct correlation between the poet and the forest ('Think you not the innermost forest hath foreknown / The whole narrative of the heart's competence and need?') is a clear statement of the intelligibility of the natural world. The physical world reflects 'the consciousness of microcosm, man' – Bethell finds her own nature reflected in the forest. Because her mind recognises itself in the forest she is able to say *yes* to it – she is able to affirm the existence of truth within it. The forest is presented as 'harmonious', as 'melodious', 'in liquid shadow plashes

²⁴ Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, p. 98.

a pure note'. This harmony and purity is a clear sign of the forest's intelligibility, of its clarity when presenting the poet with spiritual realities beyond the physical. The forest, through its harmonies and relations, proclaims that it is, and the mind of the poet, recognising these harmonies, affirms the truth she sees, the glimpse of the ultimate Being within the being of the forest.

Bernadette Ward writes in reference to Hopkins' notion of instress that 'it is by grasping or understanding other things that a rational creature actualises itself'.²⁵ Just as the things of the world act in accordance with their natures and so manifest themselves, the mind, by acting in accordance with its nature enables the recognition of the inscapes within the world. 'Grasping or understanding' the things of the world is the natural function of the rational mind. The natural function of the things of the world is to manifest their nature. The world and the mind correspond – the world provides the information – the inscapes, the mind recognises, or intresses, these inscapes. This is reflected in Bethell's poetry; the forest 'hath foreknown / The whole narrative of the heart's competence and need'. It is the forest which presents the poet with the truth, and the role of the poet is to acknowledge the interrelated nature of all things, to ask:

think you not truly, then,
The linked light and darkness, laughter and grief
Forecast the consciousness of microcosm, man,
The tuned antinomies of his mysterious life?

Remember that intelligibility is the effective communication of meaning and that intelligibility is seen to arise from patterns and associations in Bethell's

²⁵ Ward, *World as Word*, p. 200.

poetry. By saying that the forest ‘forecast[s]’ and ‘foreknow[s]’ everything about the heart and consciousness of humanity is to say that everything about the being of man is seen in the natural world, and to recognise this is to actualise the rationality of the mind. This is the purpose of the mind – to see that all things are interrelated and that the consciousness of man is evident also within the physical world.

There is an intricate connection between the mind and the world, as ‘Forest Sleep’ reveals. Once Bethell has established the connection between ‘microcosm, man’ and the forest by emphasising the reflection between the two, she moves to a complete amalgamation:

Howbeit, wanderer, having slaked your drought
In forest silence, eyes in greenness steeped,
To mossy stature with the knotted creepers stooped
Cede separateness, and disarm observant thought;
Take root with tree in centuries of decay,
And with their leaves inbreathe the woody fume,
From leafy drowse let individual dream
Drop with those bird-notes in a falling joy,
(Like jewels dropping into a dark well
Dug long ago amid the ligneous dust,)
And all particular dissolves to primal mist,
Whereof the Thinker fashions what he will.

Whereas earlier in the poem the ‘wanderer’ is observing ‘the linked light and darkness, laughter and grief’ in the shade and sunshine, and silence and sounds of the forest, the poet now urges him to ‘cede separateness, and disarm observant thought’. This is a reflection of the way the mind sees and constructs the world surrounding it, but is also constructed by what it sees. The world resides in the mind, because the mind is needed for the world to fulfil its task of communication – it is the mind that takes and uses the information of the world. But the mind also resides in the world. Here in

‘Forest Sleep’ while the mind has the task of recognition, it is the forest that first presents the mind with its foreknowledge. The forest gives itself for the enlightenment of the mind, and the poem says that the mind must consequently give itself to the forest in order for the truth within it to be fully revealed. It is only when ‘all particular’ has been ‘dissolved to primal mist’ that the ‘Thinker’, the ultimate Being, can be known.

Hopkins' concept of instress also incorporates this idea of the mind existing within the world and the world existing within the mind. The outcome of this connection is the discovery of the truth, of the ‘one selfsame thing’ at the root of everything. Ward observes that the way Hopkins uses the word instress indicates that it has a parallel meaning to the Scholastic term *intentio*.²⁶ She cites Bernard Wuellner's *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*,²⁷ which outlines two meanings attached to the Scholastics' ‘intention’. The first is linked to the modern meaning of the word: the movement or volition of the will towards some purpose. But rather than focusing on the movement, the Scholastics focused on the end. *Intentio* subsequently meant ‘the purpose of an act’.²⁸ The second group of meanings arises from a focus on the act of the mind in its knowing, more like the modern word ‘intent’. Just as we can intently study a painting, so *intentio* is linked to the image of that painting within the mind of the knower. It means ‘the mental representation of a thing’.²⁹ Instress, therefore, implies the stretching of the mind toward the object (as is seen in the first three verses of ‘Forest Sleep’) as well as the way

²⁶ Ward, *World as Word*, p. 200.

²⁷ Bernard Wuellner, S. J., *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), p. 63, in Ward, *World as Word*, pp. 200-201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

the object dwells within the mind of the beholder (seen in the last verse – the amalgamation of the forest and the beholder). The word ‘instress’ implicates Hopkins’ deep perception of the connection between himself and the world surrounding him. They are intertwined, the mind existing in the world and the world existing in the mind.

So instress not only emphasises the relation between the object and the beholder, it points to the role of the mind in constructing what is. The mind must make a judgement about the things it sees and this judgement is called instress. When the mind applies itself – extends itself in attention toward the things of the world it creates the bridge of instress between itself and the objects. In doing so it unlocks the inscapes within the world. The determination of the mind to apply itself to searching out the truth within the world is to find these truths. It is the mind saying *yes* to the *is* of the world because Hopkins believes that to uncover truth in the physical world is merely a matter of applying the mind. If we turn to his fragment on Parmenides we find a translation of Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle:

(‘According to the matching of his members / with the thousand turns they take / so for each man is the thought the man will think, for the *sense* that lives in this frame man wears is only the seeing of one selfsame thing – one thing for all men and for every man: [there are ten thousand men to think and ten thousand things for them to think of but they are but names given and taken, eye and lip service to the truth, husks and scapes of it: the truth itself, the burl,] the fullness is the thought’).³⁰

The passage is concerned with the judgement between Being and Not-being. It points to the differing abilities of men to see ‘the burl’, the ‘one selfsame

³⁰ Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, p. 101.

thing', within the ten thousand things to think about. This 'burl' is to be found in thought. It is obvious, therefore, that the mind is absolutely necessary in binding the individual things of the world into one unified whole.

'Forest Sleep' was written before Bethell had read Hopkins' notes on instress, first published in 1937, but it reveals a similar philosophy about the role of the mind as it works to decipher the spiritual truths within the physical world. Just as Hopkins is searching for the 'burl' or the truth in the ability of the mind to draw the world together into a cohesive whole, so is Bethell. In 'Forest Sleep' we see the mind working first to see the connections within the forest:

Though every verdurous depth deny the sun,
And shaft of sun but deepen the cool shade,
And every smallest sound the stillness to adorn
With contradiction stir, harmonious abide
The forest solitudes...

The harmony found, even within the antinomies of the forest, makes the forest intelligible to the poet. This intelligibility is what causes the poet to connect the forest to 'the consciousness of microcosm, man' – the world reflects the logical structures of the intelligent mind. This corresponds with instress in its reference to the mind stretching toward the object.

But instress also points to the mental representation of the image within the mind, and in this way the world exists within the mind. This is what 'Forest Sleep' alludes to in the last verse. This is the final step towards the discovery of the unity at the foundation of all things – the 'one selfsame thing' at the root of all of the diverse things that make up the world. When the mind

affirms the unity of an object it accepts the existence of that object and is able to place that object within its species and so in a place of relation to all of the other things that the mind knows. This placement of the 'informed particular' within its place in relation to the universe is dealt with in 'Weathered Rocks'. But here in 'Forest Sleep' the same idea is seen. As the poet recognises the unity and harmony within the forest, she recognises its intelligibility – its connection to humanity, and essentially the shared nature of the forest and humanity. The more this is realised, the less the poet feels that she is an 'informed particular'. Individuality is replaced with relation. The more the poet sees that all things are connected the closer she comes to the foundation of this world which manifests so much diversity while still revealing a 'cosmic diastole' ('Weathered Rocks'). Consequently she wishes to relinquish all particularity, all separation, to be dissolved into 'primal mist', because this 'primal mist' signifies the mind of the creator – the thoughts from which all substance came into being. *Time and Place* records the search for the foundation of all being. The poet, in 'Forest Sleep', wishes to be completely absorbed into the forest because by sacrificing individuality and connecting herself to the truth she finds in the forest, she is essentially joining herself to the Being from whom all other beings arise.

Chapter Four

WAKING IN HEAVEN:

DAY AND NIGHT

The previous chapter discussed how *Time and Place*¹ is about the discovery of Christ's presence in the phenomenal world. The last poem examined was 'Forest Sleep', because in this poem we see the full extent of Bethell's attempts to know Christ: the amalgamation of her being with the ultimate Being seen in the world. She relinquishes her will to the will of her creator, that she may be transformed into that which her creator wishes her to be.

*Day and Night: Poems 1924-1935*² is the logical next step from *Time and Place*, because belief in the reality of Christ must lead to the belief that he is the Son of God. According to the fifth Bampton lecture, which Bethell attended in 1891, those who believed Jesus Christ when he claimed that he was the Son of God were 'attaining union with God through his Son by the

¹ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place, poems by the Author of 'From a Garden in the Antipodes'* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936).

² Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934, by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939).

Spirit which he has given us'.³ While *Time and Place* reveals the poet reaching for union with Christ, *Day and Night* reveals the triune nature of Bethell's God. 'The Trinity is God, and God is the Trinity...' writes Julian of Norwich. 'The Trinity is our endless Joy and our Bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ...For where Jesus appeareth, the Blessed Trinity is understood, as I see it'.⁴ Bethell quotes from Julian of Norwich's *The Revelations of Divine Love* numerous times in her letters. Just as Julian of Norwich follows her encounter with Christ with her knowledge of the Trinity, so does Bethell. *Time and Place* is about the connection of the poet with the ultimate Being at the foundation of the physical world. This is followed, in *Day and Night*, with a consciousness of the role of the Holy Spirit. This third collection, published in 1939, documents the role of the Holy Spirit in awakening the poet to an awareness of her direct union with not only Jesus Christ, but with God the Father.

In Bethell's thought the Holy Spirit gives sight to the believer. *Day and Night* is an investigation into the mystery of the next world as seen through the screen of the Holy Spirit. While *Time and Place* reveals the link between the visible and the invisible through Christ, *Day and Night* is more intent upon bringing the unknown into the light. As Bethell sees the world more and more with her spiritual, rather than physical, sight, the closer the world comes to introducing the next, as yet unknown world – paradise. Paradise is the place in which the poet will have complete union with God. The more paradise is

³ Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*, Bampton Lectures, 1981 (London: John Murray, 1898), p. 15.

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, James Walsh (trans.) (St. Meinrad: Abbey Press, 1974), p. 51.

opened up to her vision, the closer her knowledge and proximity to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit becomes.

I am going to begin by looking at the connection Bethell draws between the Holy Spirit and the ‘Spirit of Beauty’. This, and the role of the Holy Spirit as it is presented in the Scriptures, needs to be understood before I begin to look closely at the poetry of *Day and Night*.

The Holy Spirit and enlightenment

It is in *Day and Night* that we are first introduced to ‘The Spirit of Beauty’. ‘Rainy Morning’ (p. 2) speaks of a ‘Spirit of Beauty, here, hovering, informing, prevalent, / To thee, to thee, to thee, we sing reconnaissant!’ ‘The Spirit of Beauty’ is Bethell’s name for the presence of the Holy Spirit within the world. We know this not only because the Spirit of Beauty fits the role of the Holy Spirit as it is described in the Bible, but Bethell herself confirms the identification when she writes to Toss Woollaston in response to his appreciation of the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ in her poems: ‘Some people havn’t [sic] liked “The Spirit of Beauty” but surely its [sic] true – The Holy Spirit *must* be the Spirit of Beauty? Perhaps it doesn’t express well what I meant, but I did not think of any other way of expressing the joy (“adoration”) I felt’.⁵

⁵ Ursula Bethell, *Vibrant with Words: The Letters of Ursula Bethell*, Peter Whiteford (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 272.

Bethell's reference to 'the joy ("adoration")' that she feels when she encounters natural beauty is, I believe, linked to Thomas Traherne's interpretation of God as love. Traherne (1636? - 1674) was an English poet and mystical writer. Bethell was acquainted with his poetry and his work *Centuries of Meditations*,⁶ first published in 1908. In a letter to Monte Holcroft written in 1934 she mentions 'a lovely sentence somewhere in T. about angels & acorns'.⁷ The passage to which she is referring reads:

The services of things and their excellencies are spiritual: being objects not of the eye, but of the mind: and you more spiritual by how much more you esteem them. Pigs eat acorns, but neither consider the sun that gave them life, not the influences of the heavens by which they were nourished, not the very root of the tree from whence they came. This being the work of Angels, who in a wide and clear light see even the sea that gave them moisture: And feed upon that acorn spiritually while they know the ends for which it was created, and feast upon all these as upon a World of Joys within it; while to ignorant swine that eat the shell, it is an empty husk of no taste nor delightful savour.⁸

This passage captures the central theme of *Centuries of Meditations*. Traherne is concerned with seeing things spiritually just as Bethell is. The husk has no savour without the apprehension of the spiritual depth contained within it. It is only by perceiving the world spiritually that it can be fully enjoyed – and enjoyment is what it is made for. 'Your enjoyment of the world' he writes, 'is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven...having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the angels'.⁹ When the world is loved and esteemed, as it necessarily must be when it is seen spiritually, then the beholder finds himself in heaven.

⁶ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations* (London: P. J. & A. E. Dobell, 1927).

⁷ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 85.

⁸ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 26, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, i. 28, p. 19.

The only way that such esteem and love for the things of the world can be attained is through the Holy Spirit. Bethell writes, '[t]he Holy Spirit *must* be the Spirit of Beauty? Perhaps it doesn't express well what I meant, but I did not think of any other way of expressing the joy ("adoration") I felt'. This illustrates her belief that her feelings of adoration and joy are the work of the Holy Spirit. Bethell views beauty as a point of connection between the physical surface and the spiritual depth hidden beneath. Beauty is clarity and intelligibility within the physical world. It is in the beauty of the world that the poet is able to perceive the spiritual meaning which the phenomenal world is intended to communicate. By naming the Holy Spirit 'The Spirit of Beauty' Bethell emphasises her belief that beauty is the invisible communicated through the visible, and attributing her sight of the invisible to the Holy Spirit.

Traherne links the spiritual meaning within the world to a 'reverend esteem' and 'enjoyment' of the world. So does Bethell. The name 'Spirit of Beauty' attributes the very existence of beauty to the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who cultivates the joy and 'adoration' of the poet. This joy is the feeling of pleasure that is beauty – recall that in the first chapter we saw that St. Thomas Aquinas 'defined the beautiful as what gives pleasure on sight'.¹⁰ Bethell attributes the knowledge of beauty to the joy, the sensation of pleasure that she feels. This is very clear in the poetry; beauty is 'This glitter, this glory,

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism: With Other Essays*, J. F. Scanlan (trans.) (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1930), p. 19.

this morning jubilee' ('Out on a Spring Morning').¹¹ If the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Beauty, the Holy Spirit causes this joy within the poet. The Holy Spirit allows the poet to see the world rightly and so to see the beauty of the things of the world. When this beauty is seen the response is 'joy ("adoration")'.

The response of adoration that Bethell feels when she sees the world rightly is, furthermore, a response that reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit within her. When the beauty of the world is seen, the poet feels joy and adoration, and the only way she is able to express this feeling is to link it to the Holy Spirit. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is God's love dwelling within the spirit of the poet.

Traherne outlines the nature of the Trinity as a relationship of love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He writes that 'God is Love',¹² and that God the Father, as Love, causes his love to stream from himself and so exist in another person – the Son, who is the love of the Father.

Love loving is the Producer, and that is the Father: Love produced is the Means, and that is the Son: For Love is the means by which a lover loveth. The End of these Means is Love: for it is love by loving: and that is the Holy Ghost. The End and the Producer being both the same, by the Means attained.¹³

¹¹ Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: poems 1924-1934 by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939), p. 6. The page numbers for all subsequent references to this collection appear in the text in this chapter.

¹² Traherne, *Centuries*, ii. 39, p. 106

¹³ *Ibid.*, ii. 44, pp. 109-110.

In the Bampton lecture attended by Bethell on 'God Revealed in Christ',¹⁴ Charles Gore also discussed the nature of God as love. This was a reflection of 1 John 4:7-8: '[e]veryone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love'. Gore contends that 'the quality of the divine personality is love'.¹⁵ Bethell considered love to be the implication of God's nature; she writes in 1937 to Rodney Kennedy: 'people think "God is Love" such a simple little text – whereas its [sic] really the most difficult & profound doctrine of theology – Got at through Christianity'.¹⁶

If Bethell agrees that God is love, and the Holy Spirit causes her to adore the world surrounding her, then the Holy Spirit is the love of God residing within her. This idea is found in Traherne also, for he writes:

Love is the Spirit of God. In Himself it is the Father, or else the Son...In us it is the Holy Ghost. The Love of God being seen, being God in us: purifying, illumination, strengthening, and comforting the soul of the seer. For God by shewing communicateth Himself to men and angels. And when He dwelleth in the soul, dwelleth in the sight. And when He dwelleth in the sight achieving all that love can do for such a soul. And thus the world serveth you as it is a mirror wherein you contemplate the Blessed Trinity. For it plainly sheweth that God is Love, and in His being Love you see the unity of the Blessed Trinity.¹⁷

Traherne links the love that the seer feels for the beauty of the world with the residence of the Holy Spirit within the heart. The love that characterises the Holy Spirit is what gives a person sight, for to love the world is to see it rightly, to see it spiritually, and consequently to see its beauty.

¹⁴ Gore, 'God Revealed in Christ', pp. 114-140, in *The Incarnation*.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁶ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 146.

¹⁷ Traherne, *Centuries*, ii. 45, p. 109.

Bethell's poetry is primarily concerned with the ways God communicates himself to humanity, and *Day and Night*, as we shall see, deals with the role of the Holy Spirit in the revelation of God to the poet. The poet herself is an 'initiate seer' in need of a 'taught interpreter, / To translate the quality, the excellence' found in the physical world ('October Morning', p. 50). It is the Holy Spirit who opens the poet's eyes to the spiritual realities communicated through the clarity and beauty of the phenomenal world. In doing so the poet is exposed to the beauty of the creation and so compelled to joy, adoration and love. This love is the manifestation of God's Spirit within her heart. The presence of the Holy Spirit is seen, then, primarily through the sight.

Bethell's conviction that the Spirit of Beauty she sees within the world *must* be the Holy Spirit is reinforced by the portrayal of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. *Day and Night*, in keeping with the rest of her poetry, is about insight into spiritual truths, and this, according to the Bible, is the role of the Holy Spirit: the gifting of insight. In the Old Testament Daniel's ability to interpret dreams is attributed by the Babylonian king to the fact that the spirit of the holy gods lives within him. In Daniel 4:9, King Nebuchadnezzar says to Daniel, 'Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me'.

Just as Nebuchadnezzar recognised the presence of the Holy Spirit in Daniel – and attributed to that Spirit Daniel's ability to interpret mysteries – the New

Testament also reveals the Holy Spirit as the gift of understanding. The New Testament indicates the absolute necessity of the presence of the Holy Spirit for a person to see the reality of the salvation that Jesus Christ brings. The words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 are often repeated, 'I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. John baptised with water because he could only convict people of their need for repentance and give them the promise of a saviour. Jesus Christ, being that saviour, baptises those who have been convicted of their need for salvation with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Bible teaches, works to open their eyes so that they may see Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Bethell would have considered it to be unforgivable to reject the gift of the Holy Spirit once he has been received, for the Holy Spirit enlightens a person to the reality of Jesus Christ as their saviour. Hebrews 6:4-6 states that to know the truth and refuse it is the only sin that may not be forgiven:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.¹⁸

The Holy Spirit is clearly God's gift of enlightenment. It is only through the Holy Spirit that God may be known. To reject the Holy Spirit, the writer of Hebrews is saying, is to see and know the reality of God and refuse him.

¹⁸ Hebrews 6:4-6.

The Holy Spirit, then, is presented in the Bible as the enlightenment of the believer to spiritual truths – to the mysteries hidden beneath the phenomenal world. For Bethell, beauty is the transformation of the physical world into the medium for the communication of spiritual truth. The connection of beauty with the Holy Spirit in the name ‘Spirit of Beauty’ emphasises her determination to uncover the invisible and the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in this uncovering. The Holy Spirit within her enables her to see the world rightly and consequently to love the world. Beauty is intimately tied to this enlightenment and love. The Holy Spirit reveals the world spiritually to the poet and so reveals the beauty of the world, causing joy and adoration within the poet. Simultaneously the love of the Holy Spirit within the heart of the poet causes her to love the world, and this adoration pouring from the poet causes the object of adoration to be seen spiritually and so to be seen as intelligible and beautiful.

Bethell uses light and darkness in *Day and Night* to illustrate, respectively, the enlightenment of the Spirit of Beauty and the consequences of that enlightenment.

Enlightenment and the morning sunshine

Bethell uses light in *Day and Night* to represent the enlightenment that the Holy Spirit gifts to her. The poems of *Day and Night* loosely trace the course

of a day, beginning with the dawn. The first poem presents the dawning of the new sight that the Holy Spirit bestows upon the believer:

Plenipotentiary Dawn, unwrapping royal gift,
Black-overcloaked, red-robed, stern, transitory,
A day confers. Death-dusty, knees I bend, hands lift
The awful dowry to accept: arbitrament, doom, glory.
(‘Today’, p. 1)

The use of the word ‘plenipotentiary’ points to the alignment of the dawn with the Holy Spirit – to be ‘plenipotentiary’ means to be invested with full and sovereign power or to belong to one who has full and sovereign power. In John 16:13-15 Jesus tells his disciples:

when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

In doing so the Holy Spirit works as a plenipotentiary; he brings glory to Christ through the free revelation of all that belongs to Christ, and all that belongs to God the Father belongs to Christ. The ‘Plenipotentiary Dawn’ is the Holy Spirit as he brings to the poet the ‘royal gift’ of daylight. During the ‘black-cloaked’ night without the knowledge of God, but with the knowledge of sin, the poet has been kneeling. She is ‘death-dusty’ because the conviction of sin brings the awareness of death. But this darkness is transferred from death into the glory of light as the Holy Spirit brings to her sight the knowledge of Christ’s death in her place. Emerging from her conviction of impending judgement and death is the dowry that is eternal glory.

In the following poem, 'Rainy Morning' (p.2), the Spirit of Beauty is clearly credited with Bethell's ability to see the brilliance and beauty of the world. It is the Holy Spirit who gifts the poet with a true appreciation of the scene:

Spirit of Beauty, here, hovering, informing prevalent,
To thee, to thee, to thee, we sing reconnaissant!
Here, where still solitude unseals thy casket
Of sovran wealth, we secretly salute thee!

It is the Holy Spirit who opens the poet's eyes to the 'casket / Of sovran wealth' within the beauty of the world and unlocks the meaning it holds. In 'Grey Day' (pp. 10-11) she bursts from her grey environs – from her blindness to the light and beauty within the scene, to a sudden awareness of the 'glory and beauty' of God surrounding her. All recognition is given to the Spirit of Beauty for she ends the poem with

(The Spirit of Beauty thus
circumstance will outwit,
thus in a flash set free
a morose prisoner.)

Without the Holy Spirit to inform her, the poet would remain 'Under leaden sky prisoned'.

Following the dawn Bethell presents the reader with the brilliance of the day. The first handful of poems in the collection present the importance of the brilliance of the morning light to the poet. 'Morning Walk' (p. 3), 'Out on a Spring Morning' (p. 6), 'Spring on the Plain' (pp. 7-8), and 'Southerly Sunday' (p. 9), all emphasise the shining light of the day. In 'Out on a Spring Morning' Bethell shows that light is the most valued quality of the scene, for while she can bear to forget the smells and sounds of the morning, she is loath

to forget 'this scintillant early sunshine', 'Shining to diamonds the far mountain-snows':

I may forget the bee's insistent bourdon
In the willow-flower by the river, the earthy smell,
Alien lark's carol, little native's sweet de-capo,
Joyous scents of clover, wattle, furze;
But let me not forget, but lifelong be recorded
Upon my registering eyes' memorial screen
This brilliancy of green, blue, white, and again blue,
The Spring-purged sky's dazzle,
The first sun's brightness, the golden lightness,
This glitter, this glory, this morning jubilee.

This poem treasures the sunshine so highly because it represents the clarity of sight that the Holy Spirit bestows upon the poet. 'Candour' (p. 5) represents her surety of salvation expressed by the natural world. Suddenly, after waking from the night of blindness, the poet is able to see with perfect clarity the candour of the world. What the landscape presents in its clearness, purity and brilliance is the poet's absolute surety of redemption through Christ:

Everything was white this morning.
White mists wandered all about the river-bed,
Grey clouds, light-infused, conveyed the morning,
Covering with whiteness the wide sky overhead.

White, past belief, the high and snowy mountains,
Phantom-like, visionary; whiteness upon whiteness
Of frozen foam from far celestial fountains
Suffused with soft and universal brightness.

Everything was white, this morning,
Untroubled, luminous and tranquil pure;
Bright as an affianced bride, adorning
Herself with white upon the plighted morning;
Past all debate, all hazard, still, and sure.

Just as the world is like a bride, still and sure on her wedding morning, so the poet, due to the perfection of the morning is able to feel still and sure in her expectation that she will one day be accepted into heaven, as part of the bride

of Christ. The final verse in particular is an implicit reference to Revelation 19:7-8, where John sees the marriage of Christ to the saints. 'Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints'. The candour of the landscape is a reminder to Bethell of Christ's promise to redeem his followers. Such assurance is the result of her enlightenment through the Holy Spirit.

'Candour' presents Bethell's determination to see the world spiritually. 'Truly there are two worlds' writes Traherne in his *Centuries of Meditations*, 'One was made by God, the other by men. That one made by God was great and beautiful...That made by men is a Babel of Confusions'.¹⁹ Bethell has woken from the world of confusion and darkness – represented by the night – to the world of God, which, in its clarity and brilliance, stands in opposition to the world of men. Therefore the morning after her enlightenment through the Holy Spirit is a morning of whiteness, of purity; the Holy Spirit is enabling her to see the world as God sees it, 'suffused with soft and universal brightness'.

Blindness and the lengthening shadows of the afternoon

Although Bethell has received the ability to see the world as intelligible and brilliant she is still, at times, overcome by the world made by men. *Day and*

¹⁹ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 7, p. 6.

Night shows that as the day wears on, the shadows of the afternoon lengthen and deepen, signifying that the poet often feels trapped within the confusion of the surface world, the world that 'is an empty husk of no taste nor delightful savour'.²⁰

'Grey Day' (p. 10) is the first poem to illustrate the poet's inability to see the world rightly:

Under grey sky prisoned,
on dull errand bent,
by shackles of needs-must
chafed and obstructed,
clanking my manacles
I plod stubbornly
in stony dust.

To remain imprisoned under leaden sky is to be separated from the sunshine that represents spiritual insight. It is to be busy, according to Traherne, 'with pots and cups and things at home, or shops and trades and things in the street'.²¹ The poet needs the Holy Spirit to free her from what she calls in 'Morning Walk' (p. 3) 'the fret of the fetters of down-tending detail', 'diurnal subsistence' and the 'delight-dimming screen'. And the Holy Spirit is recognised as her liberator. The Spirit of Beauty converts the grey scene into an echoing pattern, through which '*glory and beauty*' can be seen. It is 'The Spirit of Beauty' who 'circumstance will outwit' and set free the 'morose prisoner'.

Traherne states that 'men do mightily wrong themselves when they refuse to be present in all ages' busying themselves with the trivialities of their daily

²⁰ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 26, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, i. 85, p. 62.

lives, but do not care to see 'God manifesting Himself in all the world'.²² This is another way of interpreting the shadows of the afternoon as Bethell presents them to the reader. While these shadows represent her own partial blindness, they also point to the darkness of the world surrounding her. In 'Picnic' (pp. 12-13) she highlights the confused and shadowy character of the world of men – a world which spreads its darkness and will ultimately end in darkness because of the refusal to 'be present in all ages'. Bethell contemplates the original formation of the hills: 'And that from this clear and cloud-bedecked blue ceiling / might shortly rain down fearful and deadly fire and brimstone'. She moves from the beginning of time to the end of time and writes that the final destruction of the earth is the

fruit of our most elaborate rationalisations of hatred
and justifications of terror, prepared for the hara-kiri
of earth's loftiest masterpiece, lore-drunken humanity.

The use of the word 'armageddon' ('the last and vastest of our vaunted armageddons') in reference to World War I, combined with reference to the end of the world, ties the poem to the book of Revelation, chapters 16-19, in which the time before the end of the world is described. The word 'armageddon' is linked to 16:16 in which the last battle, named Armageddon, between good and evil is predicted. What we see in this passage is the destruction of the woman called 'Babylon the Great, The Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth'.²³ This woman represents the seductions of the world – her greatest sin is the deception of the men of the world with her immorality, wealth and luxury. Standing in opposition to the

²² Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 85, p. 62.

²³ Revelation 17:5.

city of Babylon is the virgin bride of Jerusalem, the church of the purified saints. What we see in this is the two ways of seeing the world – the one of being deceived into holding the wealth and luxuries of Babylon in importance, the other of seeing the beauty in a goldfinch sitting on:

...the leafage
of stripling quince, whose shell-pink decoration
sways very gently on delicate shell-blue canopy;
but for a brief moment this balm and opiate of song-lark
filling with heedless ecstasy the calm precarious sky . . .

Bethell highlights the ability of the world to blind men to the beauty and goodness of the world that reveals the truth about reality.

Placed among these afternoon poems, 'Rose-wreath' (pp. 18-19) introduces death as the sting of beauty, just as the thorn is the sting of a rose. This poem is a reminder of 'earth's dear mummery' – the reminder that even the most beautiful things of the world are clouded and imperfect. By using the word mummery 'Rose-wreath' suggests that the world is a masquerade, a disguise. As much as it may look at times like the real thing, it is only a mirage. This is revealed in the connection between roses, which are the ultimate symbol of beauty in the poetry, and death. Although the beauty of the world may transform it into a temporary paradise, the poet is always drawn back into the dark world of men by some thorn – the greatest of which is death. The fact that she must die is a constant reminder of her inability to attain perfection, of her failure to be perfect. Death is the necessary pathway to perfection. She writes:

Beauty, now in Death's disguise,
silencing these stammering lips,
sealing these astonished eyes,
that our sight closes

on earth's dear mummery,
 to wake upon your counterpart,
 mirage roses,
 where new-born lovely in the unveiled morn
 is hailed by the clear eye for true,
 peace wears no rue
 for past enchantment, and prepares no treachery,
 and pleasure bears no sting, no spiky thorn,
 not like these my roses.

The shadows of the afternoon represent the way many people of the world see it— a world lacking the brilliance that Bethell perceives in it. How else could anyone bring destruction upon it? In 'Autumn on the Plain' (pp. 21-23) Bethell depicts the 'deliberate death' that men will upon the earth when they are blind to the glory of God hidden within it. Not only does their blindness cause them to destroy beauty ('man the migrant, / The meddler come; would mend, mars') but the death they bring upon the earth heralds their own impending death:

Where he has passed the wintry vultures hover;
 Deliberate death he wills, and where he passes
 Waits death, deliberate. But to dissolution
 All moves in general march.

The music of the seasons beats in soft suspension
 To immemorial mode, till there is writ: *finale*
 Upon the score. Then shall the furious trumpets
 Sound their decisive blast.

To be unable to see the brilliance and intelligibility of the world is to be within the grasp of death. Death and darkness are intricately connected in *Day and Night*. Bethell uses darkness and shadow to represent the lack of enlightenment that the Holy Spirit bestows. Darkness represents a life of sin, a life blinded by allure of Babylon and all that is earthly. The message of the poetry is that such a life ultimately leads to death. Where there is darkness

there is death because the inability to see the brilliance and clarity of the world is the inability to see promise of salvation which Bethell sees in the landscape. To live in darkness is to live without the Holy Spirit – who opens the eyes to the spiritual truths communicated by the world and, as we shall see, holds out the promise of life after death.

The Holy Spirit and purification

Bethell uses the shadows of the afternoon to signify both the inability to see the world spiritually and death, which is the result of blindness. As the darkness of night falls, however, the sting of death, the poet's fear of death, which we saw in 'Rose-wreath', is not present. Instead the darkness of night is used to reflect the poet's increasing ability to see spiritually, to see that the Lord is her 'everlasting light'. Rather than viewing the sun and air in Kaikoura as her reality, God's glory is seen to have a deeper reality. What she writes to Charles Brasch is reflected in this portion of *Day and Night*: 'My task in the years that may remain to me is I think so to resign myself to these convictions that the facts of religion are as near and natural and undebateable as the air and the sun at Kaikoura. I live, I think, increasingly in this spirit'.²⁴

Her ability to live 'increasingly in this spirit' is due to the Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit is to give sight; Bethell now moves on to the righteousness imparted by that sight. Titus 3:5-7 tells us that God saves us

²⁴ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 284.

‘through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life’. Bethell examines the work of the Holy Spirit from within the poet to renew and cleanse her spirit, so that she has the hope of eternal life. It is in the juxtaposition of light and darkness that Bethell is able to illustrate the righteousness the Holy Spirit cultivates within her.

Purification and the darkness of the night

The ‘washing of rebirth and renewal’ begins with the enlightenment that the Holy Spirit affords to the poet. But as we have seen, the Holy Spirit is God’s love manifest within the poet. The Spirit of Beauty is the ‘Love of God being seen, being God in us: purifying, illumination, strengthening, and comforting the soul of the seer. For God by shewing communicateth Himself to men and angels. And when He dwelleth in the soul, dwelleth in the sight’.²⁵ Bethell has already communicated the effects of the Holy Spirit upon her sight; now, in the darkness of night, she reveals the effects of the Holy Spirit upon her soul – for what dwelleth in the sight, dwelleth in the soul. Jesus Christ often uses light and darkness as symbols for good and evil and in Luke 11:34-36 speaks about the sight as an indication of the state of the soul:

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be

²⁵ Traherne, *Centuries*, ii. 45, p. 109.

completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.

In other words, what is in your heart will be reflected by what your eyes see – if your eyes see goodness then your heart is full of light. What is seen in the world is a reflection of what the heart desires to see. The world is not communicated to the heart of the person, rather the heart transposes itself upon the world – whatever is in the heart will be found also in the world.

Bethell presents the soul of the believer as a light or a candle that has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit. In ‘At the Lighting of the Lamps’ (pp. 26-31) she refers to the ‘early illumined Christians’ and requests that Christ, the ‘Father of Lights, in whom there is no shadow of turning’ send his ‘golden rays’ upon her. These rays represent the Holy Spirit, the enlightenment of the believer. When the believer is given sight his candle is lit – when Bethell asks Christ to send forth his golden rays, she is asking him to send his Spirit, who, we saw in John 16:14, brings glory to Christ by taking from what is his and making it known to the believer.

Christ is the source of all light – a point emphasised by Bethell in ‘Cloudy Night’ (p. 32) where she imagines the ‘Lord’s House’ and writes:

(No night there, spake the rapt visionary,
No need of sun, neither of moon to lighten it;
The glory of God, he said, did lighten it;
And the Lamb, the Lamb of God, is the light thereof.)

If Christ is the source of all light, and the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of this light in the heart of the believer, then the poet has a vestige of Christ within her. In *Day and Night* we see once again Bethell’s preoccupation with

relation and connection, for the fact that she has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit and has been lit by the light of Christ means that she is able to see other lights in the world. Christ within her enables her to see the light of Christ within the world. This is made clear in 'At the Lighting of the Lamps'. As the stars begin to shine in the sky and the lamps are lit on the ground Bethell sees an echoing relationship between the lights of the world:

Calm antiphonal stars
Now from on high respond;
And the music of the spheres
Out of the depths and heights
Hails, to vigilant ears,
Flickering human phares;
Greater and lesser lights
All in their measure set,
Proud imperial orbs
Answering by name,
By note in the vast accord;
Stars that moon beget,
Planets of magnitude
Earth's murmurings amplify;
In fiery celsitude
Suns to suns reply;
Flame to ordered flame,
Light to stedfast light,
Stars to serene star.

The stars are antiphonal and the lights on the earth are amplified by the radiance of the sky. To further emphasise her point Bethell asks 'Were you not wont, early illumined Christians, / To sing, at the time of lamp-lighting, hymns of confident praise?' The light of the Holy Spirit within the Christian causes a response when they are confronted with that light in the world surrounding them. Because the light of Christ is given to the believer through the Holy Spirit, the believer is then able to recognise that light in the things of the world surrounding them.

Thy likeness, thy likeness, I considered,
wakened wide by this saying,
dimly might it not be mirrored
on such a night as this,
in a glass darkly, not plain.

This night, epitome of thy handiwork:
garment, not of darkness but deep indigo light;
bodyguard of vast dazzling worlds;
this rounded and immense silence
tell of truth, beauty, might.

This is essentially a reiteration of the message of 1 Corinthians 13. Here Paul writes to the Corinthians about the importance of love in revealing the fullness of truth. Love is seen to be the ultimate quality of a Christian, for Paul says in verse 2, ‘If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing’. It is love which leads to the knowledge of the God, and love cannot be known if it is not felt. Accordingly, to know love is to know God. After listing the qualities of love Paul makes his central point, which is that while all other things will pass away, ‘Love never fails’:²⁶

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.²⁷

Paul makes a clear link between love and the knowledge of God. He is telling his readers that it is only through love that the believer can comprehend even a glimpse of perfection, of wholeness. In parallel with this is Traherne’s belief that to see the world rightly is to love the world, and that to love the world is to feel the presence of God within your soul. ‘To conceive aright and

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:8

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

to enjoy the world, is to conceive the Holy Ghost, and to see His Love: which is the Mind of the Father'.²⁸

Turning back to 'The Crucifix' we see that Bethell links her desire to be like Christ with her love for the world. In order to become like Christ she searches for his likeness in 'this night, epitome of thy handiwork'. The shadows of the night are not conceived of as darkness but as 'deep indigo light'. If we link this back to light as a symbol of Christ and the poet's ability to see light as proof of the Holy Spirit within her we see again that the spark of Christ's light within her enables her to see Christ and his 'truth, beauty, might' in the world – even in the darkness. In the last verse she attributes her sight of 'this scatheless, soul-intoxicating night of loveliness' to the 'Enlightening Spirit'. We see here the process of her perfection. Her desire to become like Christ is fulfilled in her ability to love the world. Traherne sums up the process of perfection displayed in this poem. He writes:

Can you be Holy without accomplishing the end for which
you are created? Can you be Divine unless you are Holy?
Can you accomplish the end for which you were created,
unless you be Righteous? Can you then be Righteous,
unless you be just in rendering to Things their due esteem?
All things were made to be yours, and you were made to
prize them according to their value.²⁹

The pathway to perfection, according to Bethell, is to fulfil the end for which she was created. This end is to love and enjoy the things of the world, for in loving the things of the world she is both loving the creator and manifesting the love that is the nature of that creator. By loving the things of the world, Bethell strives to become an echo of Christ.

²⁸ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 10, p. 7.

²⁹ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 12, p. 8.

In 'The Crucifix' we find a direct reference to 1 Corinthians 13:12, which reads, 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'. Bethell hopes to see Christ's likeness mirrored 'on such a night as this, / in a glass darkly, not plain'. She is aware that this world enables her to know God only in part. The last two verses of 'The Crucifix' serve to emphasis the ultimate example of God's love:

But now, by wide phosphorescence,
down by the riverside,
of myriad street cressets
lit dim, I descry
a stark carven gibbet.

Oh staggering symbol of distress!
Thy paradox resolve, Enlightening Spirit:
this scatheless, soul-intoxicating night of loveliness,
and hung there truthful high over my pallet,
the crucifix, the crucifix.

In John 10:30 Jesus Christ proclaimed: 'I and the Father are one'. When this is coupled with possibly the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16 which says 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' we see the extent of the love of both Father and Son. The crucifix juxtaposed against the 'soul-intoxicating night of loveliness', the epitome of Christ's handiwork emphasises God's love to the poet. That the Son of God who could create such beauty and might could become a human being, and die a humiliating death on a cross reveals the extent of God's love. It also reveals the blindness of humanity, both in creating the need for salvation, and in murdering the creator of the world. The destruction of the beauty of the natural world

against which Bethell is vehement is merely a faint shadow of the crucifixion, which can be seen as 'the grand triumphal felony, / the last and final blasting of fragile-flowered life-tree' ('Picnic').

Christ is the tree of life for it is through his death that the poet is assured of resurrection. But while the tree of life mentioned in Genesis 3 gives everlasting life to those who eat its fruit, faith in Christ's death and resurrection promises both everlasting life and purification. The poet's washing and renewal through the Holy Spirit leads to everlasting life. In 'Winter Night' Bethell links the beauty the Holy Spirit discloses firstly to the poet's purification and secondly to life after death.

At bird-embroidered dawn, on incredible pale blue hast
Thou laddering, slender, rosy cloud-bars laid;
And all this prodigality in my small casement compassed,
All this melodious wealth before my sight displayed.

All night long thy pure music, beautiful Spirit.
Disciplined my spirit, these keen, deep hours of June,
And I lie quiet, offering my heart to be a wintry wind-harp,
Whereby thou mightest, peradventure, breathe a heavenly tune.

The Spirit's role of purification is clear. But Bethell hints at the reason for it: heaven. Her 'small casement', which can be taken as a reference to her room or to her physical body, in either case to a place which is finite and restricted, is contrasted with the 'prodigality' and the 'melodious wealth' of the Spirit of Beauty. The poet is hoping that the Spirit will use her to 'breathe a heavenly tune'. Finite and earthly is contrasted with infinite and heavenly. The result of the purification of the Spirit, the echoing of Christ's nature within the believer, is eternal life in paradise.

Enlightenment and purification lead to heaven

Traherne writes, '[t]he Laws of God command you to live in His image: and to do so is to live in Heaven'.³⁰ While Bethell uses the night to investigate her purification through the Spirit of Beauty and her growing likeness to Christ, the second dawn of the collection is the dawning of paradise.

Traherne argues that the purpose of man is to enjoy and love the world, for the world is most perfectly enjoyed when it reveals God's image. We have seen that when God's image is seen in the world it is not only a manifestation of God's Spirit within the beholder, but that seeing God's goodness in the world magnifies that goodness within the heart of the observer. So both the beauty of the world and the beauty within the heart grow together, each stimulates the growth of the other. Because there is nothing more beautiful than the image of God, and because 'God's bounty is so perfect that *He giveth all Things in the best of manners*',³¹ the world is most perfectly enjoyed when the heart of the beholder enjoys and loves the nature of God. In this way a man fulfils his purpose and so fulfils God's commandment '*to live in His image: and to do so is to live in Heaven*'.

As the second day dawns in *Day and Night* Bethell presents the world converted into a paradise. '6th July, 1930' (p. 25) introduces the morning by reflecting on the poet attempting to live according to the image of Christ –

³⁰ Traherne, *Centuries*, i. 39, p. 26

³¹ *Ibid.*, i. 38, p. 25.

which is an extension of the theme of purification which we saw in the night.

The poem begins with her waking from sleep:

Morning bells now weave their notes through muffling mist-trails;
My waking thought, impetuous, threads with restless shuttle
In and out the warp of factual detail.

This provides a bridge between the purification of the night and the new day.

The poem ends with the poet's intentions as she prepares for the day:

Responsive to thy rhythms, energising Spirit,
Let now my torpid soul awake and gird herself
With garments of goodwill, sandals of service,
With the stout armament of sustained praises.

The poet is determined to fulfil the commandment to live in God's image and consequently to find cause for 'sustained praise'. This is essentially what her entire collection of poetry is comprised of – praise and adoration of the beauty of the natural world.

We have seen that the Holy Spirit purifies the heart of the poet. Bethell takes this further and illustrates the conversion of the world into a paradise as a result of this purification. In '23rd July, 1930' she writes:

Search well, spiritual winds, the recesses of my heart
For the ways of wickedness in me,

Before the concealing casket of darkness opens wide
To display its enamelled jewels,

Coral and amber clouds in turquoise blue sky
And opaline snowy mountains.

While the 'concealing casket of darkness' can be seen as a reference to death and the jewels within the casket to heaven, it can also be interpreted as the darkness of night, dawning to present the beautiful landscape of the morning. This is particularly true within the context of the poem, for 'With secret touch

the Spirit of Beauty summons my soul / To conscious from unconscious being'. The Holy Spirit is here seen waking the poet from sleep – an idea which Bethell repeats in the surrounding poems. As she wakes from sleep she is presented with the 'enamelled jewels' of the morning, which include the 'Coral and amber clouds in turquoise blue sky / And opaline snowy mountains'. As the collection moves into its second dawn we see the dawning of an earthly paradise, produced by the purification the Holy Spirit has been working in the believer. What we are seeing is the idea that 'Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven'.³² This theme of waking in heaven is continued in 'Dark Morning', (pp. 47-48) 'Lever de Rideau' (p. 49) and 'Summer Daybreak' (pp. 52-53). Each of these poems portrays the poet waking from her sleep and finding herself in a world that is a foretaste of heaven.

Just as the poet often depicts the Spirit of Beauty summoning her from unconsciousness to consciousness, she also portrays the morning birdsong waking her from sleep. Both of these themes are connected, for the Holy Spirit is depicted in Luke 3:22 as a dove descending from heaven. Birds are also commonly seen as symbols of the spirit. Bethell makes this connection between the human soul and birds in 'Dark Morning':

When, although dull and heavy earth be mute
 Their jubilant salute
 Alert birds flute,

Each chorister with clear and confident hymn
 Calling the seraphim
 To warrant him,

³² Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, p. 19.

Ah, then we know that with delighted zest
Shall rightly be expressed
All we have guessed;

And know that we, when ultimate sunrise
Hath outranged our surmise
With strange surprise,

Like homing birds, out of this darkling dream
Flown to the Supreme,
Shall find our theme

Fast knit in the tissue of the symphony
Sustained everlastingly
By the glassy sea;

For these enthusiast passages do secretly belong
To the redeemed throng
Their new song.

Just as the Holy Spirit wakes the poet from unconsciousness regarding the spiritual depth within the world to consciousness, so the song of the birds wakes the poet to the knowledge of spiritual messages. Once the spiritual meaning within the world has been apprehended the poet is seeing the world rightly – consequently the birds are seen to herald the coming of paradise. They allow the poet to fly ‘out of this darkling dream’ that was her old way of understanding the world, and into paradise.

‘Summer Daybreak’ expresses most clearly the connection Bethell makes between daybreak and her introduction into heaven. Once again the birds herald the coming morning:

“Daybreak!” the tenuous bugling ventures,
“Wake! wake! Joy! joy! Not yet! Very quiet, very quiet!”
Drop, drop, sweet notes, upon the attendant silence,
Into a heart advised, alert, accorded,
Waiting the eternal edict: Let there be light!

(Will it be thus, thus, that quickening dawn?
so still, so tearless, so composed, so gentle...

will native and colloquial notes prevent
with gradual song the peerless jubilation?
tincture of immortality be meted
in mercy, drop by drop? Lustration measured
of these poor orbs, lest instant vision dazzle?
and will the scene, unveiled, appear like this,
loved and long-known, and beautiful, and new?)

The poem reveals Bethell's preoccupation with her introduction to heaven. Her heart is described as 'advised, alert, accorded, / Waiting the eternal edict'. She is eagerly waiting for paradise, and each beautiful morning serves as an allusion of what it is like to wake in heaven.

What is the significance of this desire to wake in heaven? I believe that Bethell views this as the closest she is able to come to knowing God. The conversion of the world into an earthly paradise is an attempt to love the world and everything in it as well as she can – for this feeling of love is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit within her heart. She is concerned with a true relation with the things of the world, with a true comprehension of the message they have to convey about the God who made them. Consequently the last poem of the collection, 'Limitation' (p. 57), calls the world an 'earthly paradise' because it speaks of 'wider fields' than itself. 'The birds are commissioned to remit messages' and 'every tree a whispering, mysterious harp holds'. When the poet's heart is tuned to 'ultramundane stave' she is able to perceive the spiritual depth within the things of the world. Seeing the world rightly allows her to love the world. Loving the world is portrayed in the poetry as the nearest the poet can get to knowing God, for God is love. 'God is not a compound Being' writes Traherne, 'so that His Love is one thing and Himself another: but the most pure and simple of all Beings, all Act,

and pure Love in the abstract'.³³ It is love which is the relation between the three persons of the Trinity. If Bethell's love for the world is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit within her heart, then she is sharing in the nature of the Triune God, in the nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Day and Night ends with a poignant awareness of the world as a preparation for the afterlife. There is a growing urgency revealed in the poetry to 'change over to 'eternal in the heavens', as Bethell wrote in a letter to Monte Holcroft in 1935 a few months after Effie Pollen's death, 'to *lose all* and plunge into the unknown'.³⁴ In this letter Bethell sees her feeling of pain and desolation at the death of her dear friend as a connection with Christ, who was 'A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'.³⁵ In her suffering Bethell comforts herself by reciting the beginning of John 17:3: 'This is eternal life to know God *and—*'.³⁶ Twice she deliberately leaves off the end of the verse – 'and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent'. In doing so she emphasises the relationship between the Father and the Son. Her pain at Effie's death is seen reflected in the pain of Christ at his absolute separation from God the Father on the cross. Bethell says of the connection between the Father and the Son: 'There was evidently a perfect relationship of Love – could one not say a perfect human relationship – and then 'Why hast Thou forsaken me?' It is very deep'. Bethell connects the love between the Father and the Son to the love that she felt for Effie Pollen, although she stresses the perfection of the

³³ Traherne, *Centuries*, ii. 39, p. 106.

³⁴ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 102.

³⁵ Isaiah 53:3.

³⁶ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 102.

love between the members of the Trinity. By combining this attention to love and desolation with the passage 'this is eternal life, to know God' we see that Bethell holds to the belief that love is the essential nature of God and that her own love is a reflection of her knowledge of God.

In 'Nor'-West Night' (pp. 54-55), a poem which seems out of place surrounded by her visions of paradise on earth, Bethell combines love and desolation. She writes:

Wail of wind takes words in burden of dark menace:
Baseless and soon to be dissolved is the great cosmos;
The planetary fabric endures but a short space.

This lethal dirge drugs me, melting my limitations;
I lean upon the liberation, yet do not lose myself;
I look into the utmost negation of the abyss.

This poem reflects the desolation, the willingness to give up all, in order to gain the knowledge of God and the eternal life that this knowledge brings. Rather than opposing the message of the rest of the poetry within the collection, 'Nor'-West Night' reinforces the necessity to love the world rightly. It is only by relinquishing everything, all possessions and treasures, by realising that the world is '*Baseless and soon to be dissolved*', that the poet can see the world rightly. This is what Bethell means when she writes:

Dear Monte, I recognised in you a true faith, a willingness to risk all, and go out into the dark. I told you that I saw you were further on than I was about this willingness to *lose all* and plunge into the unknown. Now I am dwelling on your thought that life is *preparation* (I've held that as a *theory*!) Perhaps those ten years in our cottage were too happy – too *earthly* – true – and I must change over to 'eternal in the heavens'.³⁷

³⁷ *Vibrant with Words*, p 102.

We see that faith is to ‘go out into the dark’, it is to reject everything that seems real, everything tangible and visible, and grasp for the invisible reality beyond. It is to grasp for the divine mind in which all things existed before they came into being. Bethell’s change to ‘eternal in the heavens’ is a reference to 2 Corinthians 5:1: ‘For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’. Paul speaks to the Corinthians in this chapter about the death of the physical body. Death, he says, leads to eternal life as long as the believer is led by faith, rather than sight. Because, ‘whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight)’.³⁸

Day and Night is about immortality and love. God is known when love is felt, because God is love. Love transforms the world into a paradise because the person who loves has the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and so sees all things rightly. The person who loves, then, shares in the nature of God, because love is the Holy Spirit manifest within the believer. Sharing in the nature of God is to know God, ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’.³⁹

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:6-7.

³⁹ John 17:3.

Conclusion

In his introduction to *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry*, Vincent O'Sullivan writes, 'Ursula Bethell is at her weakest when her voice is raised for public or traditional statement. When her poems begin at her fingertips, among her plants and shrubs, they ring most true'.¹

This is what first struck me about Bethell's poetry. The poems in *From a Garden in the Antipodes* are wonderful in their simplicity. But, often when the poet consciously attempted to incorporate her theological and philosophical beliefs in later poems, they lost the charm of the earlier poems. Take 'Waves',² for example. The earth is the product of 'Slime-emergent, vegetable armies'. Words like 'Phytoplankton' and 'protoplasmic' justify Curnow's opinion that she spoils some poems with 'recondite words, ill-places, or perverse phrasing'.³ However, 'Waves' is possibly the most revealing of Bethell's poems in terms of uncovering her thoughts. It is full of scriptural references, the first of which is 'Deep calling to deep', found in

¹ Vincent O'Sullivan, 'Introduction to *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry*' (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed., 1987), p. xix.

² Ursula Bethell, *Day and Night: Poems 1924-1934, by the Author of TIME AND PLACE* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939), pp. 36-37.

³ Allen Curnow, 'Introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-1945*', in *Look Back Harder*, Peter Simpson (ed.) (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987), p. 70.

Psalm 42, a rather astoundingly beautiful song in which David, the psalmist, asks:

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”...

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.
My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.
By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.⁴

It is striking how this psalm resonates with the rest of Bethell’s poetry. First of all there are the questions ‘when can I go and meet with God?’ and ‘where is your God?’ God does not always seem immediately present within the world to the psalmist, or to Bethell. He must be sought in ‘the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar’, even in the roar of the waterfalls and the waves and the breaker which represent the trials and difficulties of life. Just as Bethell seeks the presence of God in the darkness, so the psalmist acknowledges that God is present even in times of desolation.

⁴ Psalm 42:2-8.

‘Waves’ continues to build upon the theme of finding God in this life on earth. The reader is taken right back to Genesis 1:2 when the Spirit of God hovered over ‘the surface of the deep’, to a time before anything in this world had come into being – when all things still existed in the mind of God and had no physical being by which they could be known or recognised. Bethell then imagines the process of creation. ‘Deep calling to deep’ is:

...the surge of unplumbed seas
Of being, from before time was;
Fundamental urge of atoms;
Slime-emergent, vegetable armies,
Phytoplankton, mosses, grasses;
Dirge of vast massy forests
Passing away fulfilled.

Incessant protoplasmic swell
Of life impelled to ideal form;
Cell to fellow-cell murmuring
In dark arteries of supreme organisms
Marine memories; the old oceans
Curled shells record; salt streams
Wherein all life was laved.

While Bethell’s poetry generally creates a vision of natural beauty in the mind of the reader, ‘Waves’ makes me think of green mud and birth pains. The poem does, however, present us with the important image of the world being moulded into its ‘ideal form’. By dwelling on the surge of all things into the form that they have today, Bethell highlights the idea that all things are travelling toward perfection. The whole world is looking for the fulfilment of its ‘ideal form’ – the earth is striving for perfection despite the burden of humanity that it carries. It is ‘the prisoned, the burdened, looking for entelechy’.

‘Waves’ goes on to create a link between Christ and the earth. The voice of Christ is heard from beneath the depths of the earth: ‘I, the Slain, am the Meaning, the Guerdon; / I am the Ground, the Meed’. Christ himself proclaims that he is ‘the Ground’. Furthermore, as the soul of the poet cries from ‘the deep bosom of time’ (much as the psalmist cries from within the ‘waves and breakers’ of life) there comes:

Out of the abysm ever resounding
Diapasonal answer: Alpha, Omega,
I am the Beginning and the End.

Bethell has emphasised the beginning of the world in the second and third verses of the poem because being, or existence, is a manifestation of Christ. Everything in the world that has being is a manifestation of the creator, and presents a unique glimpse of Christ. Christ is the beginning from whom all being springs – he is, in ‘Lighting of the Lamps’,⁵ the ‘pure inexhaustible spring... whose marvellous works eternally are made manifest, / eternally making, in making, eternally finding repose’.

But he is also the end. ‘Waves’ implies that when all things have reached their ideal form they will manifest the face of their creator perfectly. The world is looking for ‘entelechy’, for the fulfilment of its purpose. This purpose is to speak about the creator. ‘The dumb / Cosmos learning speech’ is another representation of the world being ‘impelled to ideal form’. As the cosmos learns speech it comes closer to revealing Christ, who is the pinnacle of perfection. For this reason the poem ends with the complete unveiling of ‘the Beautiful Bridegroom piping / Unwearied in the eternal meadows’. The

⁵ *Day and Night*, pp. 26-31.

poet is striving to see in this world the face of her creator. The more prominent this face becomes the more she is assured that this world of time and space is not the extent of reality. The more she believes that the world is only a surface for the manifestation of spiritual truths, the more she is able to see the nature of her life beyond death.

‘Waves’ is an exceptional poem because it reveals the central preoccupations of Bethell’s poetry in a fairly transparent way. But when it is compared to a poem like ‘Compensation’,⁶ the contrast in quality is glaring:

I went down into the trivial city to transact business.
In the tramcar passengers argued without logic;
In the shops too costly wares;
In the Bank too little money;
In the long streets too hot sun.

But at the Post Office they gave me your letter.
In my hill garden at sunset I read it.
A cool wind from the seawaves blew gently
And I saw that little Omi-Kin-Kan had put forth a green shoot.

I find this poem irresistible. The stark sentences present the world exactly as the poet perceives it; the city is dusty and hot and loud. The way the city is described makes the reader share in the feeling of tightness in the chest when you find yourself confined and harried. And then the poet relieves us; ‘But at the Post Office...’ and we can breathe again. The contrast between the city and the cool green ‘hill garden’ is what gives the poem its success. Once again Bethell uses the simplest sentences and a few lines to create the entire scene: the sunset, the sea breeze and a green shoot from a little orange tree are

⁶ Ursula Bethell, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, by Evelyn Hayes (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1929), p. 31.

captured in three short lines. There is nothing contrived, only an accurate representation of a profoundly sensuous experience.

‘Waves’ is unnatural in comparison. While the poem may be an accurate description of the spiritual experience of the poet, without the physical experience which is at the root of ‘Compensation’, the poem cannot succeed in convincing the reader of its sincerity. Perhaps this is because while Bethell was striving to see ‘that the facts of religion are as near & natural & undebateable as the air and the sun at Kaikoura’,⁷ she had still not attained this vision when the poetry was written. ‘Waves’ reveals a real desire to hear ‘Deep calling to deep’ and to see ‘the Beautiful Bridegroom’, but the poem acknowledges that the world is still searching for fulfilment, that it has not yet reached its ‘ideal form’ and neither has the poet. Bethell wrote to Toss Woollaston in 1942: ‘About D & N. I must tell you that many things in it are much *truer* for me now, than when I wrote them. They were notions then – now experiences’.⁸ ‘Waves’ is more ‘notion’ than experience. I think experience is key to the success of her poems. ‘Waves’ certainly reveals a lot about the way the poet perceives the world (or wishes to perceive the world), but she actually went to the city, sat on the garden bench and read her letter, and wrote ‘Compensation’. ‘Compensation’ is a direct description of the poet’s physical vision and her spiritual responses to that vision.

It is fortunate, then, that nearly all of the poems are a celebration of the beauty of the natural world. It is through the beauty that Bethell sees in the world

⁷ Ursula Bethell, *Vibrant with Words: The Letters of Ursula Bethell*, Peter Whiteford (ed.) (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 284.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

around her that she gains knowledge of the nature of her God. So a poem like ‘Compensation’, which seems so simple, is, in actual fact a statement about what is of central importance to the poet – the revelation of God within the beauty of the world. Just as the garden places the poet on the boundary between the ‘trivial city’ and the sky, beauty places the poet on the boundary between the visible world of time and space and the invisible world of spiritual realities. Because it relies upon the physical object for its manifestation, but inexplicably causes a response of joy within the mind of the beholder, Bethell sees beauty as a connection between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Beauty arises when the invisible shines through the visible.

Beauty reveals to the poet that the world is only a surface intended to communicate spiritual truths. ‘Autumn Roses’⁹ makes this point clear:

The roses of Autumn are less numerous
Than the accoutrement of valiant Spring,
But they are far more beautiful, and far more precious,
Each flower presents itself a perfect thing.
They are more lasting, their colour is more lustrous,
With a more intimate and insistent voice
Their pungent scent speaks . . . What is meant to us
By these perfect, departing roses? The joys
Adorning the declension of life’s afternoon,
Infrequent, rarer, to be remitted soon, are so much the dearer to us,
Declaring the ineffable vision to be nearer to us.

To Bethell ‘these perfect, departing roses’ speak of the reality of God. The poetry creates an intimate connection between beauty and perfection. These roses are beautiful because they are perfect. If they are perfect they must reveal their nature, the nature of a rose better than other roses. Consequently,

⁹ Ursula Bethell, *Time and Place, by the Author of ‘From a Garden in the Antipodes’* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1936), p. 25.

they speak with a 'more intimate and insistent voice' about the 'ineffable vision' or the spiritual realities which lie beneath the physical surface.

So beauty reveals that the task of the phenomenal world is to communicate spiritual truths. But Bethell acknowledges that beauty arises from the connection of the object and the subject – the object is fulfilling its role by being most perfectly what it is, and the subject's role is to draw inferences from the beauty of the world. Consequently the poetry reveals beauty as an instance of intelligibility – it shows the poet that the world is designed to be understood by the mind and to communicate to the mind. The poetry tells us that beauty results from patterns and connections: 'Pattern! that echoing word...*for glory and beauty* shown' ('Grey Day').¹⁰ Those things which are beautiful are unified within themselves. The poet is able to see 'the dignity of the whole' through the similarities that the intelligent mind sees in each of the 'informed particulars' that make up the world surrounding her ('Weathered Rocks').¹¹ This unity illustrates to the poet that all things ultimately share in the nature of existence. All things have being and this unites the world into a whole. To delve down to the source of all being, then, is to encounter Christ, the ultimate Being.

And, finally, the poetry tells us that to encounter Christ is to encounter the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In *Day and Night*, to see true beauty – that is, to see the invisible shining through the visible – is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of Beauty',

¹⁰ *Day and Night*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Time and Place*, p. 34.

within the heart of the believer. In ‘At the Lighting of the Lamps’¹² light is antiphonal. Lights reflect and, consequently, amplify one another. Light and beauty are linked, for beauty is clarity and brilliance, so when the poet sees beauty within the world she knows that the Holy Spirit has illuminated her spirit, enabling her to see the world spiritually. When the poet is illuminated, the world is illuminated, and when the poet sees the light of the world she desires to become more enlightened herself, asking Christ:

Light of lights, Lamp of the City, Orient blaze
Of glorious splendour, on us shed forth thy golden rays!
In thy light our lights are consumed, and yet not utterly,
Night after night, in peace, amen, we hymn thy praise.

The Holy Spirit proceeds from Christ and enlightens the believer to the invisible realities to be seen within the visible world. The ‘golden rays’ that the poet requests be sent down upon her represent the Holy Spirit.

But *Day and Night* not only introduces the Holy Spirit, it introduces the very essence of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit causes the poet to see the beauty of the world, that is, to see the world spiritually. To see the beauty of the world the poet must love the world. Bethell quotes from the French Jesuit writer, Jean-Pierre de Caussade’s, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* in a letter to Merlin and Kathleen Davies:

“It is love which entering into a soul to make it happily die to itself alive to God, bereaves it of all human desires”. “To detach ourselves from creatures & abandon ourselves entirely to God”. I have perhaps a *notion* of this – but those saints *chose* it as their way. Perhaps they had a much stronger love of creatures to start with – I had to discover love of creatures as individuals – always loved *creation* I think!¹³

¹² *Day and Night*, pp. 26-31.

¹³ *Vibrant with Words*, p. 310.

At first glance this seems paradoxical; Bethell implies that to love creatures is to be bereaved 'of all human desires'. But what Bethell is referring to is the idea that love is the essence of God's nature. To love the creation and the individual elements of creation is to see the beauty within them – and as we have seen, seeing beauty is the result of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the poet's heart. To love the world is essentially to wake in heaven on earth, because love not only converts the things of the world into a manifestation of the beauty of God, it communicates the presence of the Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer. To love is to share in the nature of God, for 'God is love'.¹⁴

In a letter sent to John Schroder in 1932, Bethell included an unpublished poem which light-heartedly protested against the 'beautification' of Cashmere:¹⁵

They are elbowing beauty out of our borders here,
 Not rudely, but artistically, and by degrees.
 (Between ourselves she's not really quite, quite –
 For instance, she is far too fond of trees.)
 Not Beauty, but the By-us-beautified
 That's the correct idea, that's what will look right;
 Not alders, but shrubs planted by aldermen,
 Tidily lined up by the waterside,
 Something that will look nice leading to the trams
 When our visitors go out for a ride;
 And we want a really good background for prams
 That you can *see* has been properly beautified,
 A parade, a reserve, a domain, – – but certainly not,
 Not Beauty; no, what we ask for is a Beauty-spot.
 Yes, we are out to cater for civic pride.
 "Natural grace", do you say? No, most unsuitable;
 If you want Nature, then go for a Sunday hike...
 What we want here is an up-to-date lay-out,

¹⁴ 1 John 4:8.

¹⁵ Charlotte Elder, "'Dear Mr Schroder': an annotated edition of the correspondence between Ursula Bethell and John Schroder" (Unpublished M. A. thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1999), p. 123.

Concrete paths, bedders, and an expert border of rocks,
So that if one of our citizens should decide on a day out
To look round the town, then wherever he may roam –
(To quote poetry) his eyes will meet no shocks,
But he will find everything just like at home,
With smart painted seats provided on which to take his ease
And be sure to find (poetry again) every prospect to please,
All neat like fire-stations, hospital-grounds, the Police, and
cemeteries,
So that our good voters, right from their cradle to their end,
May note nothing strange, surprising, or at all likely to offend.

(‘Improvements. By a Conservative’)

Immanuel Kant, the founder of the modern aesthetic, also separated the sublime from the beautiful in an attempt to tame beauty, to bring it back into the realm of the fact.¹⁶ Modernity does not acknowledge the invisible within the visible; it prefers a ‘Beauty-spot’. Bethell reincorporates the sublime, the ineffable. In her poetry beauty is the invisible shining through the visible and, for that very reason, is astounding.

¹⁶ John Milbank, ‘Beauty and the Soul’, in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003), pp. 2-6.

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