Remembering Place

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Review of *The Fate of Place*, by Edward S. Casey.
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The idea of a 'philosophical history' of place from early times to the present may appear rather curious to some. While place, in the form of *topis*, *chora* or *locus*, appears as an almost technical term in Greek and medieval thought (and there are a number of works that deal with the concept in this context), it seems largely to disappear from view, at least as a philosophically significant notion, in the period from the sixteenth or seventeenth century onwards. One might expect, then, that any 'history of place' would, at best, be a fairly narrow study restricted to pre-modern philosophy. Yet Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place* has no such restriction. An almost encyclopaedic work that spans the entire history of Western thought, it not only sets out what will surely prove to be the definitive account of the philosophical history of place, but also provides a clear demonstration of the continuing philosophical importance of the concept. More than just a history, then, this volume also stands as a major work of philosophical critique. In writing *The Fate of Place*, Casey has thus done an enormous service, not only to those of us 'topophiles' who are already obsessed with the uncovering and articulation of the nature and significance of place, but to the wider philosophical community also.

The first part of *The Fate of Place* deals with the concept of place from its appearance in early cosmological and mythical thinking to its philosophical development in Greek thought—from *mythos* to *logos*, as Casey puts it. Here Casey focuses on the role of place—and of concepts of void and 'no-place'—in creation narratives from early Mediterranean cultures to those of Asia and Africa. North America and the Pacific. The Platonic account of creation in the *Timaeus*, and particularly the famous passage on the 'Receptacle' (*chora*), is a central focus for Casey's discussion, providing something of a bridge between the mythological and cosmogonic accounts that preceded it and the more analytical treatment that is to be found in Aristotle's well-known discussion of *topos* in *Physics* IV. A major theme of these initial chapters is the metaphysical indispensability of place and the problematic character of ideas of the empty and the placeless. It is, nevertheless, just these latter ideas that provide the basis for the concept of space that has

come increasingly to prominence in Western thinking over the two thousand years. And as space comes to dominate over place, so too does the idea of the universe, with its infinite expansiveness, comes to dominate over the idea of the finite, localized cosmos.

The transition from place to space, and so from ' the closed world to the infinite universe', as Koyré's phrase has it, is the focus for the second part of Casey's history. Here the emphasis is on the development of concepts of space and place from the Hellenistic and Neoplatonic period through medieval times to the Renaissance. This is essentially the story of the development from a pre-modern to a modern way of thinking about space and place; from a view in which space and place remain held together- as they are, for instance, in the Greek notions of *chora* and *topis*—to a view in which, not only are they treated as distinct, but place is viewed as an almost entirely derivative notion. The ideas of extension (*diastema*), infinity and void (*kenon*) that play a central role in this story have their origins in atomistic and Stoic thought—in the work of Leucippus and Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius. Yet the concept of place remained an important element in the thinking of the atomists and Stoics, just as it also remained important for Neoplatonists such as Chrysippus and Proclus. It is with Renaissance thinkers—most dramatically with Nikolas Cusanus and Giordano Bruno—that the idea of space, understood as infinite, homogeneous extension, comes into its own, setting the stage for the 'supremacy' of space over place that characterizes the period of modern thought from the seventeenth century onwards.

Casey's discussion of the modern idea of space, together with the diminished idea of place that accompanies it, focuses on the vacillation in modern thought between absolutist and relativist conceptions of space—from Gassendi and Newton, to Descartes, to Locke and Leibniz. What is common to all these approaches, however, is a tendency to reduce place to position or simple location—even to a mere 'point'—or else to understand it as a levelled down and emptied 'site'. While ancient and medieval writers treated place as having, in Aristotle's words, a 'power of its own', for modern thinkers, place is little more than a term that is used to designate some more or less arbitrarily delineated area or point in physical space. Casey's discussion of the modern history of place ends with Kant. Yet while he views Kant, on the one hand, as completing the shift towards the priority of space over an increasingly rarefied and abstract conception of place that is characteristic of modern thought, he also sees Kant as pointing the way towards the reappearance of place as a significant concept in its own right. The final part of Casey's history—also the longest part of the book—tells the story of the re-

emergence of place in Western thinking from Kant onwards. Yet the story of that re-emergence is not the story of a single, systematic rethinking of place as against space, but instead takes a variety of different forms. Indeed, Casey argues that the recovery of place is something that could not be accomplished by means of any systematic attempt to rethink place as such, for that would lead 'to nothing but empty generalities'. What is needed 'is a new and quite particular *way into* place, a means of re-connecting with it in its very idiosyncrasy'.[1] Although Casey talks of 'way' in the singular rather than the plural here, he also explicitly talks of the possibility of a number of different ways into place, and it is the investigation of these ways that is undertaken in the chapters that make up the fourth and final part of *The Fate of Place*.

The first way into place that Casey explores, and the way that seems most significant in his account (using Freud's metaphor, he talks of it as providing a 'royal road' for an understanding of place), begins with Kant and proceeds via the body. The role of the body is something that has often been ignored or overlooked in the tendency to focus only on Kant as representative of a certain rationalist approach. In fact, the structure of experience that Kant delineates in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and elsewhere, would seem to give a central role to reason as active, embodied, and so as oriented and placed and this is something that has become increasingly clear in a number of commentaries on Kant's project in recent years. To do justice to this aspect of Kant's thought would have required much more space than Casey has at his disposal here, however, and his account is thus only indicative of what is to be found in Kant's work in relation to the ideas at issue. The main point, in any case, is to establish the pathway that Kant's work opens up as indeed a way that leads us to the reappearance of place—a pathway that takes us on through Husserl, Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty.

The second way into place is presented by Casey as 'indirect'. He calls it a 'middle way' that proceeds 'between mind and body, both of which are set aside in order to concentrate on what happens *between* them',[2] and it is the way adopted by Martin Heidegger. The discussion of Heidegger's thinking as it relates to place is the most sustained discussion of a single thinker in the entire book. It is also the most comprehensive as it attempts to trace out some of the complex story of the development of Heidegger's way of thinking. That Casey treats it as providing an indirect mode of access to place is perhaps somewhat revealing, since it seems indicative more of Casey's own prioritizing of the body in relation to place (or perhaps of a certain *phenomenology* of the body) than of any indirectness intrinsic to Heidegger's approach. Indeed, it may well be argued that what we find in Heidegger is precisely an attempt to think

place itself—and so to attempt what Casey seems initially to rule out (though Heidegger's approach is certainly not 'systematic'). At one point, Casey talks of Heidegger's pathway as a 'middle way' between mind and body, but of course the 'between' that Heidegger himself so often refers to is not that which relates to mind and body, but rather to us and the thing—it is this that Heidegger refers to as 'the Open' (*Das Offene*). For my own part, I see this reference to the between, and to the Open (along with a range of other ideas and images such as region, path and clearing), as indicative of the way in which Heidegger's life-long preoccupation with the question of being has to be understood as also a preoccupation with the question of place. Indeed, Heidegger's own characterization of his thinking, as 'a saying of the place of being' (*Topologie des Seyns*),[3] strongly suggests a primacy to the concept of place in his work that marks him out from almost every other thinker. As Joseph Fell has written, 'The entirety of Heidegger's thinking turned out to be a protracted effort at remembering the place in which all human experience—practical or theoretical, willed or reasoned, poetic or technical—has always come to pass',[4] and Casey's own discussion would seem to confirm this view. But in that case, and in spite of some of Casey's own comments, Heidegger must indeed be seen as providing us with an example, not of a way to place 'by indirection', but a way that directly and often explicitly thematizes place as such. Whether this way into place succeeds or not is, of course, another matter—although Casey's exposition would seem to indicate that, far from 'empty generalities', Heidegger provides us with one of the most important and sustained inquiries into place to be found in the entire history of Western thought. In this respect, although constrained by space, Casey actually provides an extremely good introduction to the way in which place figures as a central concept in Heidegger's thought—perhaps its only major flaw is the lack of any discussion of the crucial role in Heidegger's thinking in relation to place and dwelling of his reading of Holderlin. Indeed, given the paucity of work on place in Heidegger (Joseph Fell is one of the very few besides Casey who have given it attention), Casey's work here is all the more important.

The final chapter of Casey's discussion, and so of Part 4, covers the reappearance of place in contemporary thought in the work of six specific thinkers: Bachelard, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, and Irigaray. Here, and in the concluding 'Postface', place appears in something of a kaleidoscope of forms and faces. Indeed, one of the main themes of these final pages is to reinforce the idea of the need for multiple ways into place and of the multifaceted character of place itself. The body also reappears as a central focus, and in this respect the

discussion of Irigaray that brings the final chapter to an end also neatly reconnects with the original reappearance of place by way of the body in the work of Kant and others.

There is certainly no doubt that place has re-emerged in contemporary thought in a proliferation of forms and in multiple locations. Yet one might be led to wonder whether this constitutes so much of retrieval of place as another form of concealment. The forms of place that Casey describes are so many and so heterogeneous that one is led to wonder in virtue of what all of them should be viewed as indeed forms of *place,* rather than merely a cluster of juxtaposed but otherwise only loosely related and heterogeneous ideas and images. Perhaps place has simply disappeared under a profusion of new concepts, new modes of thought, new metaphors , and Casey himself acknowledges that 'we may have difficulty recognising place *as place* as it comes out of the concealment in which it has been kept for over two millennia'.[5] There can be no doubting the complexity of place or its multifaceted character. But this need not commit us to denying the possibility of saying anything about what makes those multiple forms of place all faces of a single phenomenon. Indeed, coming to some understanding of place, in its complexity and multiplicity, may be essential if place is not to be lost in its own heterogeneity. It is precisely in this respect that Heidegger's work seems to be so important, for it does indeed attempt to retrieve some sense of what place itself might be and to indicate why, in spite of the history of concealment that surrounds it, place might nevertheless be a philosophically central concept—a concept central to our grasp of ourselves and of our world.

For this reason, and somewhat in contrast to Casey, I take the way into place that proceeds via the body to be itself an indirect way to place that sometimes serves to conceal place more than to reveal it. For body to be revealing of place, body must already be understood in terms of its own active emplacement—otherwise it becomes itself a mere 'site' for an introverted and obsessive subjectivity. This is not, of course, to deny the importance of the body in any adequate understanding of place—very often the obscuring of place has in fact gone hand-in-hand with an obscuring of the body (indeed, to some extent, I think that this is true even of early Heidegger)—but it is to deny that body provides quite the 'royal road' to place that Casey presents it as being. The body provides a way into place precisely because, as Casey emphasizes early in *The Fate of Place*, place appears only inasmuch as we attend to our own concrete, oriented engagement in the world. When we lose sight of that engagement (whether through a turn away from our own embodied agency or from the concrete particularity of what lies around us), then we lose sight of place as well as of ourselves—instead of a world, we see

only a universe; instead of the fleshiness of the body, we see only the functionality of an organism; instead of a place, we see only a location in space. The focus on the body can provide a way of maintaining attention on such engagement, but it is not the only way of doing so, nor does it guarantee that such attention will be maintained.

Yet whatever view we adopt on the importance of the body, the apparent proliferation in the forms of place to which Casey gives such emphasis may itself be indicative, not of the impossibility of providing any account of place as such (though any such account must find a way of doing justice to such multiplicity), but of the fundamental and critical role of place, and of that which place connotes, in relation to the dominant ideas and images in contemporary Western thought and society. If place does indeed occupy so fundamental a position as Casey's work seems rightly to suggest, then we can expect to find it implicated in a variety of different critical and discursive strategies or projects. And as each such strategy or project involves its own particular rhetorical or polemical positioning, so the way in which place emerges as a critical or strategic device will differ accordingly. Yet this means that to focus simply on the way place *appears* within such rhetorical or polemical positionings may mean that the only sight we have of place will be in the multiple forms that correlate with those multiple positionings. There is surely a difference between the deployment of place for particular rhetorical or polemical ends, and the way place appears in such deployment, and the attempt to investigate place in its own terms. This is not to say that every contemporary reappearance of place is, in this way, rhetorical or polemical in character (nor should it be taken to imply that one can ever be removed from rhetorical or polemical considerations altogether), but only that we should be careful not to let the heterogeneity of place that results from its deployment in various critical or strategic positionings obscure the possibility of a more unitary and integral approach to the concept at issue.

Moreover, while Casey is right to point to the multiple reappearance of place in contemporary thought, it is also true that the concealment and forgetting of place that has characterized the last two millennia, and especially the last five hundred years, has by no means simply been brushed aside with the work of such as Bachelard or Irigaray. Heidegger's own critique of the technological character of modernity can itself be viewed as directing attention to the way in which the technological involves a fundamental concealment of place and placedness. Thus, if the Heideggerian diagnosis of modernity is given any weight at all (and many of the elements of that diagnosis are not peculiar to Heidegger alone), then we cannot afford to neglect

the way in which the modern and the 'post-modern' (if we wish to employ that concept) remain deeply inimical to place and all that it connotes. The rise of new communications and information technologies, and the wave of new 'digital' philosophies that have accompanied them (philosophies that often seem intoxicated with ideas of escape from both body and place), can be viewed as one powerful indication of the apparently increasing obliteration and forgetting of place in favour of the infinite possibilities of the spatial, the informational and the virtual. This is one aspect of the contemporary 'reappearance' of place to which *The Fate of Place* gives little or no attention (although it is, as we know from his work elsewhere, something of which Casey is certainly well aware). It is an aspect of that 'reappearance' (perhaps a form of 'disappearance') that is, however, no less important than the rearticulation of place to be found in the work of philosophers such as Bachelard. But if new technologies and modes of thought tend to conceal place anew, so does the obscuring of place that comes with the modern supremacy of the spatial remain strong in many contemporary philosophical circles. The continued dominance of reductivist and broadly 'empiricist' approaches within the philosophy of mind—approaches that generally can find no real 'place' for place at all—stands as one example of the continuing priority of the spatial over the 'topographic' (although it should be noted that there are also approaches that suggest some reversal of this priority[6]). In these respects, then, there may well be a little more still to be told regarding the fate of place in the present than Casey's work, excellent though it is, actually provides.

The Fate of Place comes as the culmination of many years of writing on the subject of place,[7] and it follows directly on from Casey's *Getting Back into Place* (published by Indiana University Press in 1994), as well as from his *Remembering* (published in 1989 also by Indiana), in which place appeared as a central notion. The earlier works explore the significance of place in relation to a wide range of issues concerning memory, identity and experience, and while there is much of value and significance in these pioneering inquiries into the character of what Casey calls the 'place-world', it nevertheless seems to me that it is with *The Fate of Place* that Casey has developed his thinking about place most fully and articulately. Perhaps this is indicative of the critical importance to any rethinking of place of a rethinking of the philosophical tradition and of the role of place within that tradition—it is also indicative of the importance of philosophical history as such as a mode of critical articulation and reflection. 'A Philosophical History' is the description *The Fate of Place* bears as its subtitle, and Casey dedicates the book to three of his mentors who, in Casey's words, 'taught me the Force and

Value of Taking Philosophical History Seriously'. The idea of such a history must consist of more than just the idea of a recounting of past ideas and taking philosophical history seriously (as writers such as Nietzsche, and more recently Gadamer, have taught us) cannot mean merely giving time to such a recounting. Instead, it involves a remembering of the past in such a way that not only do we gain an insight into that past, but we are also led to rethink our intellectual present and thereby re-envision our intellectual future. In this respect, Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place* lives up to its dedication, for it not only narrates the history of a concept that has for too long been obscured and forgotten, but it does so in a way that also provides a critique of the present and a vision for the future. In this respect, the few points of criticism that I have made here should not be seen as detracting from the importance or the value of this work. *The Fate of Place* is an exceptional book that deserves to be widely read—not only by philosophers, but by any who have an interest in place and all that it encompasses. Moreover, if place is indeed as fundamental a notion as Casey's work (along with that of a growing number of other writers) would suggest, then this ought to include us all.

Notes

[1] Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 202-3.
[2] Ibid., pp. 243-4.
[3] See Martin Heidegger, *Seminare, Gesamtausgabe* 15 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1986), p. 344.
[4] Fell,'Heidegger's Mortals and Gods', *Research in Phenomenology* 15 (1985), p. 29.
[5] Casey, *The Fate of Place*, p. 339.
[6] I am thinking particularly of a certain strain of contemporary Kantianism (via Strawson and Evans) that appears in the work of philosophers such as John Campbell and Quassim Cassam as well as the development of approaches in cognitive science that draw on ecological and situationist conceptions. It is worth noting, however, that even here there is a tendency to talk, not of place, but of space.
[7] See, for instance, Casey's early approach to some of the issues covered in more detail in *The Fate of Place* in 'Getting Placed: Soul in Space', delivered at the Second Archetypal Psychology Institute, San Francisco, 1981 and reprinted in *Casey, Spirit and Soul* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1991), pp. 290-309.