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LAWRENCE KIMMEL

JOURNEYS HOME: THE PATHOS OF PLACE

I

The *pathos of place* is elemental in grounding the risk of life, the source of confidence requisite to the human quest whether it is conceived as *arche* or *telos*, whether it is where one begins, or the end toward which one's journey is directed. The project of living is such that one's journey is always toward a homeland, however it be conceived: dreams of homecoming, the recovery of innocence, the joyful receiving of the retrieved prodigal, the triumphal march of the heroic legions, the quiet return of the native – all hopeful to appear once again in the light of recognition, of acceptance, of victory, to the acknowledged communion of belonging. The perceived cycle of life, a full and human life, is such that one always returns home, whatever its name. If one cannot go home again, one always looks homeward. With luck, effort, intelligence and imagination – features without which Greek philosophy found no life human – one finds a way home, to the *arche* and *telos* of place, and discovers those boundaries within which the passion of human achievement is realized.

I do not offer these remarks in place of, or as backed by, statistical summary or empirical claim. There are those, of course, who never look back (or for that matter ahead), those who have neither memory and longing, nor dreams, and more tragically, those for whom the very idea of place is a recurring or permanent nightmare or anathema. There is, further, a danger in the philosophical employment of a ubiquitous and vague concept like “home” that one may be drawn into the sentimental sludge of popular misuse, where “home” is a greeting card catalogue of homilies for feelings that never were – improbably Sunday school slogans for sainthood. One can be sensitive to this danger without conceding that a grounding place is, for that reason, beyond philosophical reach, or beneath philosophical interest and inquiry. The categories of “home” and “homeland”, in the variations of their meaningful use, are such fundamental references to place, and so crucial to cultural community and individual identity, that we ought not to abandon the topic, despite its popular dispersion and hyperbolic abuse.

In this paper, I will give a short account of the tension between time and place as defining structures of human life. The fundamental intuition, familiar in Greek philosophy, is that human life is achievement of place, not merely birthing in time.

There are problems with any attempt to put conditions on human life beyond “born of woman”, with seeking to define human life in terms of quality and character, in terms of moral excellence rather than biological commonality. For example, if an individual fails to achieve some level of life deemed to be human, is it permissible to regard her as not due the rights, privileges, considerations of that station? Is such a creature to be treated then as ... what –an animal, an object, subject only to the efficiency of use? May we inflict experimentation procedures on her body, mind control trials on her spirit? The answer is, of course not. But this, in fact, is still a matter of negotiating guaranteed rights; it can hardly depend on natural disposition, as we well know from 20th century episodes in uncivilized history.

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I will hold such concerns as *prima facie* legitimate, but set them in the background for the present paper. The worry is, of course, that any definition of the human not bound by the imperative of natural boundaries is an offense not easily corrected by laws of ascribed rights, is pre-judicial against the sympathy of species kinship and not recoverable through reasoned judgment. But that is part of the ordeal of human civility itself. Even so, in the present essay I will proceed to set out conditions of *place* resonant with *time*, requisite to an understanding of the human. It may be that ours is a time well served by a moral redescription and reaffirmation of human life as an achievement requiring effort. Human life, the Greeks well understood (and in this understanding began the history of moral philosophy), requires a human world. HuMan is not merely a creature and plaything of *time*, but an agent and creator of *place*.

II

Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt come to mind immediately as contemporary philosophers who consider the category of *place* elemental in the constitution of both the human condition and the human project. This may at first seem odd in the case of Heidegger, for his own major interest in Being centers in the category and phenomenon of time. But the point to be understood is just here. The essential way in which we are human is being-*in-the-world*; human-being defines *place* in the world in a way uniquely different from other kinds of beings. The human being is in the world in the manifold senses of being in Europe, – *en route*, in prison, in mind, in memory, in ill repute, in love, in doubt, in error, in want of, indicted under, involved with, incapacitated by.... These are all ways of being in the world, place markings different in kind, but framed within language, which itself houses human sensibility and keeps open, through metaphor and imagination, a place for possibility. So conceived, philosophical inquiry brings into focus once again the concept and context of Being, an account founded in the self-presencing of human-being as reflective inquiry into its place in the complex order of things.

Heidegger's now familiar key words for this human way of being are "dwelling" and "concern". HuMan discovers and creates a defining place through the labor of her body and the work of her hands – labor which sustains life, work which builds worlds. The kinds of works which frame the human place are manifold: houses, gardens, gaols, courts, temples, but also books, plays, war, law, dreams, recollection, and hope; projects of making and doing, of practice and theory. Arendt, following the work of her teacher, Heidegger, performs an analytic of "place" in *The Human Condition*, locating her analysis in the conceptual *polis* of Periclean Athens. Her work, directed at the *arche* of western intellectual history, provides a fundamental politics of place compatible with and in the spirit of Heidegger's ontology of place. Heidegger's *Being and Time* gathers the categories of *time* and *place* into correlative features of human existence. If *life* (*bios*) in its most primitive character is *being* in time (movement), certainly the history of culture, following the Greeks, has defined *human* life (as *bios politikos*) in the additional terms of *being in place*.

III

In the United States there currently exists a social category at crisis point: "the homeless", a designation which seemingly describes alien creatures dispossessed of place; a deprivation which not only functionally erodes their participation in public life as citizens, but excludes them from

the simple amenities of human community. In a land of plenty this is typically presented as a social misfortune or political outrage, but for our purposes this estrangement marks a loss of something more essential, an estrangement from fundamental elements of human identity as well as community. Whatever the reasons, which are manifold and complex – economic and personal, biological and social, elective and enforced – it is philosophically significant that we use “without home” as an entitlement of alienation and exclusion, a category below or beyond that of mere poverty, signifying persons cut off from human community, who lack the basic conditions under which “human” is defined and defended.

The dispossession of *place* is an ontological as well as a social problem. This idea is as old as Greek philosophy, where Aristotle defined “Man” as a political animal, a creature in need for his very being of the *polis* or human community. The shared language and form of life of the human is bounded by the walls of this place, which provides for disclosure of unique individual identity in a space of appearance, the public realm of one’s community. The broader concept of one’s homeland (Greek: “*kome*”, village; “*homoios*”, same; Latin: “*Homo*”, Man) appears in a definitive way in the familiar long journey home of Odysseus. Similarly, in the Hebraic tribal conception of home, the homeless exile, Ishmael, is the “unwanted of God”, destined to wander apart from the spiritual community of God and Man.

It is difficult to imagine a category more fundamental than “home” to house the biologically nurtured, socially emergent sense of the human. The collateral analogues of home are inclusive of the phenomenology of place: of body, womb; of world, mother earth; of action and event, encompassing horizons and embracing sky; of hope and transcendence, the domain of the possible, of night and stars and gods, shoring up in space the sustaining sea which gives forth its primal issue – all carry the primal force and spiritual weight of “home”. The myriad fictive and real, metaphorical and factual locations, in time and place, of home, are found in cloister and hearth, in the heart or the mind. Home may be lost in childhood, in settlements east of Eden, constituted in kinship, restored in friendship, decided in marriage, discovered in children, temporarily secured in family, invested in community, realized in the sovereignty of a people. “Home” is a primary category of an essential place in time, isolated or integrated, whether remembered in tears amid alien fields of corn, in the shattered ruins of a city laid waste by war, in memory ravaged by age, in fantasy invited by desire, in faith restored by love.

As we have pictured it here, the human is a convergence of *time* and *place*. The former is defined by and constitutes the root of the natural; the latter signals the emergence of culture, the convening of civilization. The long ordeal of civility is made possible only on condition of an escape from cycles of life under the weight of natural necessity, an escape from the immanent imperative of survival. The first-order activity of animal life in response to the conditions under which life is given is the *labor* of survival. The primal life cycle, still under the yoke of necessity was, according to the forming thought of Greek philosophy, not yet human. Where *Homo* is subject to the fundamental condition of contingency, the cycle of life in nature is that one must labor/to get food/to eat/to gain strength/to labor/to get food/to eat ... *ad infinitum*. Under the most primitive conditions of the natural life cycle, the total energy and activity of being must be committed to sheer survival, to sustaining life in time, life not yet at rest, secure, or empowered with freedom in place.

Only when the natural cycle of necessity has been broken to create leisure, at least for a few, when labor is sufficiently coordinated to meet and overcome the ubiquitous burden of survival through development of surplus, and so allows for some privileged members to escape the

binding cycle of “labor to live/live to labor”, is there a possibility of moving from process to product, of creating through work the identity and permanence of place. *Work* is thus a second category of fundamental activity in response to the human condition, a movement from the natural metabolism of the *bios* of labor, “the labor of our bodies”, to the productive activity of the *poiesis* and *techne* of work, “the work of our hands”. The activity and result of work, issuing in works, creates world, the place in which human action becomes possible in its disclosure.

Arendt, following Aristotle, frames the form of fully human life as requiring the place of human community, the *polis*. Not in the boundless time of labor, but in the place of work, can there be a production of world, and with it security, permanence and freedom – the boundaries of meaning within which civilization develops. Arendt’s third category of definitive activity in response to the human conditions of natality, plurality, contingency and scarcity is *action*. Only when individuals are free from the necessity of labor and the utility of work is virtue or excellence possible. The *telos* of action (*praxis*) is self-disclosure through great words and deeds among a community of equals, who in their freedom enshrine such action in the remembrance of history. The identity of individual and community are transformed in a moment or a life. Such deeds and words remembered become history, achieve immortality. Thus public place, through the endurance of works and the remembrance of acts, shapes the identity of a people, and forms the substance of civilized existence that we call human life: Ilium and Athens.

IV

There remained, in the complete Greek description of human life, a further transcendent concept of place which was unchanging, and a way of human life and activity of mind which gave access to this place of the timeless, of eternity. This way of life – not open to everyone – the life of the mind, was philosophy: *noesis* for Plato, *theoria* for Aristotle. Aristotle’s contemplative life, critically mirroring Plato’s notion of transcendence without the notion of the *Eides* or Forms, develops the notion of “home” in transcendence to eternity. If *praxis* (action) can achieve immortality through words and deeds of lasting memory, the discourse of philosophy is one of eternity. Plato and Aristotle share the idea of transcendence, but with a very different sense of the continuing importance of place. Plato is clearly committed to the idea of a transcendent place, an ideal realm of enlightenment, a place in the sun where the *Eides* appear intelligibly visible to the mind which has made the dialectical journey. Aristotle seems to hold to the idea of the public realm as definitive of place. The *vita contemplativa*, the life of the mind, while no longer in an essential or necessary way dependent on shared place, requires no separate place or realm of the Forms. For Aristotle, presumably, the mind is its own place, although not in the sense of Milton’s Satan. The latter would introduce an entirely different realm of meta-phorical place which we have no time to pursue in this paper. In the classical Greek life of the mind, one discourses with the gods themselves, or at least joins the eternal conversation pitched in the language of the gods. The transcendental difference is that the idealist Plato speaks of the timeless in the idiom and metaphors of place, and Aristotle, paradoxically perhaps, of the timeless in the idiom of time. Differently stated, for the realism of Aristotle there is but one world, one grounding place, and no reflection removes one from it.

V

Even before the formal grounding of philosophy in the *logos* of place, the *mythos* of Greek culture had formed the ground of place in the primal emergence of meaningful life. Prior to its philosophical appropriation, one can read the text of Greek mythology (e.g., Hesiod) in such a dually interpretive way that its “task” portrays the struggle of both the cultural and cosmogonic overcoming of *chaos*. The lesson is not merely the ontic ordering of the cosmos, but a modelling constitution for human community. In the primal stuff, gathering forces move ponderously toward the intelligibility of place. In the mythic development of language (of place, things, permanence, of the works of mind and hand), the domain of the human strives to overcome the devouring primal conditions of change (time). So seen, human civilization is the overcoming of *time* with *place*, the securing of a realm free of the destructive first conditions of life.

In the mythic story of time beginning, there emerges from the primal conditions of *Chaos* and *Moirai* (Destiny), the grounding possibility of the privileged First Ones of *Place* (and so of meaningful life); the feminine *Gaia* (Mother Earth), from whom, in yearning (*Eros*, desire and need of completion, space between), is born the masculine embracing boundary of *Uranos* (Father Sky). We can, herein, tell only the first few words of this long story: His-story and Her-story – the tense yearning of conflict and completion, of human time and place, of world and life – the fabric of immortality which shrouds the mortal animal HuMan. As the *mythos* develops, the ensuing union of *Gaia* and *Uranos* produces *Kronos* (Time) who – with the fertile urging of Earth, caught in the passion of her nature to birth life – wields the Scythe, weapon of his calling, and prevails against the rule of the father. Time thus ascends to hold male dominion, but in betrayal of Earth, swallows the offspring of the resourceful Mother. A final battle definitively frames the constituting values of Greek and Western civilization. The new generation, Zeus and the Olympians, Earthborn of Time, through an exercise of political rationality faithful to the Earth, join forces to subdue and diminish devouring Time, thus establishing for themselves an Olympian community above time and change, one removed from the cyclical destruction of the natural and temporal. It is from this life form of the gods that the race of men descends.

These are mere beginning words in the continuing conversation of literature and culture, stories through which we try to come to an understanding of ourselves, in which Being articulates its own meaning, becomes conscious through *poiesis*, the genius of poetry and language.

This story – both *mythos* and *logos* – can be read in many ways, of course. I am suggesting that it presents and represents a primal expression of the *pathos* of place. It is through the overcoming of *time* primal enemy of the God in Man – and the creation of *place*, that the shape and space of human community, immortality, and eternity are opened into civilized life. Thus wrought, the City of Men and the City of Gods, the highest form of human life and community in action (*praxis*) and also the highest form of human life and transcendence in thought (*theoria*), find expression in philosophy, mythology, history, and literature.

VI

Once upon a place in time: the journey home.

The modern temper is arguably one of radical dislocation – not time “out of joint”, but time out of place. So being, it is not difficult to accept the poetic vision of the human situation as tragic. The burden of intelligent, reflective life is the consciousness of time, grains of sand flowing away, fragmented dreams blowing in the wind. HuMan is thus a creature caught between the boundaries of natality/fatality; the brief journey of her life is womb to grave, the prospect

only of earth to earth. We rise up and fall, strive to mark our brief passing in the flickering space of life. Though heavens open up to imagination and aspiration, mandarins only brush the fading portrait of genius upon a failing wind.

From the epic journey of Odysseus to the ironic journey of Bloom, the voices of the blind poets merge, the heroic and pathetic meet and endure in a human space wrought by memory and language. Two images of place, of hope and dread, press upon contemporary consciousness. The first, an image of hope, the open beckoning of place: E.T., left behind, pointing a long crooking finger toward a cold if promising infinity of space, speaking plaintively to strangeling earth children who, nevertheless, understand very well the word “Home!” The second, an image of dread, the closed beckoning of place: two hapless creatures waiting for Godot, who sum up the dislocation of their lives in a throw away line “They give birth astride a grave”.

Hope and dread mark the space of human time between the two definite and defining structures of place. The deep ambivalence of the journey home – aspiring to freedom, fraught with anxiety, remembering the familiar securing foundations of structure, forgetting the complaining constraints of place – is always with us. The civilizing ordeal continues. To what end? Only to the beginning. If human life has meaning, it is in the reconciliation of time and place, the convergence of *arche* and *telos*. If wisdom is that which we properly seek, the *ergon* or characteristic activity of HuMan, then it consists in closing the circle of the journey home. On the matter of wandering and recognition, the many otherwise divergent texts which inform our lives agree: philosophy and mythology, politics and art, history and psychology, religion and science.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

– T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

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