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The Poetics of Place

--Lawrence Kimmel

Prefatory Remarks

Paul Ricoeur, at a Hannah Arendt retrospective some 15 years ago, spoke of the controlling metaphor of Arendt's work as that of **Place**, and said that he offered in his own work, instead, an enabling metaphor of **Time**. To bring together the work of these two exceptional thinkers, to bridge the divide and to map out the complementarity of engaging metaphors would be a worthy task of scholarship, however I will not try to do so even in outline here. Still, the contrast and convergence of the two metaphors of **time** and **place** is one I want to at least sketch in this paper.

The conference itself, at New York University, was a tenuous and difficult gathering of scholars who, for years, had been deeply divided over the import and response of Arendt's "report" for the New Yorker, in a series of articles that later was published as a book entitled *Eichman in Jerusalem*. Arendt's report covered the trial of the Nazi war criminal, a trial which itself engaged a present political and judicial temperament with a spiritual and moral retrospective of heinous policy acts within a bound time of terror and horror. That trial, among other things, was an occasion for the remembrance of a time now revisited from a profound and terminal place, the ancient and new homeland of Israel.

Whatever in Arendt's work divided us, (the key to the fury in that division, especially for the survivors, is captured in her subtitle "The banality of evil"), the *pathos* of time, place and people, the critical importance of the references of **Time**--the Holocaust, and of **Place** -- Dachau, Belsen, Auschwitz -- was lost on no one. Not on survivor and witness, not on student, historian,

philosopher, or poet. Neither Place nor Time was a welcome one to be shared-- horror, however witnessable, is perhaps not shareable-- but these were extraordinary times and places which, whether or not we claim them, have a claim on us. They have become indelible places in the time of history which resettled the boundary lines of the inconceivable in human action.

The history of the Jews leading up to this moment had been the story of a people without a place, a people trying to survive, compete, achieve, or prevail only in time, in transit. The proposal of the "final solution" was to further deprive a people already without a place-- they were to be denied a time as well, they were to disappear from the face of the earth. It is of course arguable that there is nothing singular or new in this, that many peoples have been and continue to be subjected to oppression, dispersion, extermination. The argument, then, is that only the systematic efficiency of scale is new: a modern industrial nation state whose leaders were committed to a political policy of genocide. Arendt herself argued the existence of something else: a new and insidious form of evil in the institutionalized thoughtlessness of bureaucratic order, in which the systematic and wholesale murder of human beings becomes an assigned task just like any other. "Banality" for Arendt did not lessen but deepened the terrible force and face of evil. Also arguably, this policy and its effect could not have taken place, at least in the way of ease and efficiency it did, if the Jews had been a sovereign people of place. When Hitler argued for only "a place in the sun" for Germany, it was important to ask, at whose expense of place, as well as at what price of appropriation.

My interest here is not to trace the particulars of this, or of any time and place. It is rather to see the essential human import of these two fundamental and often conflicting categories of **Time** and **Place**.

There is, in the life of a person and in the history of a people, a convergence and integration of time and place, however tenuous, such that the significance of meaningful time and place are requisite to the human character of life. The denial of either diminishes or eliminates, fully or marginally, human life and community.

We are familiar with the category of Place primarily through the discourse of politics and economics. There, most often the accompanying analysis proceeds under a negative rubric of displacement. The dispersion and encroachment of political rhetoric on every form of discourse is now common and often regrettable. That public political discourse, in turn, mimics the popular rhetoric of placement in competitive sports and entertainment is no less regrettable. Everything becomes a contest for place: laurels to the winner, oblivion to the rest. It would be instructive here to trace the devolution of Place in such cultural conversation, which, in becoming Fame degenerates into a commodity for consumption on the evening news--a sound bite of time.

Ours is a time in culture-- especially in academic culture and the arts-- when politics and poetics converge, for better or worse, e.g. in eristic and logocentric disputes over logocentricity, gender disputes over gender, poetics, and place, traditional squabbles over the displacement of the feminine and of ethnic minorities from the tradition of "the canon". Hopefully, the positive political and poetic intention beneath the disputation is to make space and find place for ethnic and engendered voices whose expression will provide genuine and singularly different human perception and aspiration.

In an untimely fashion, however, I want to shift from the politics of place to the poetics of place in traditional literature with no additional apology.

Certainly among the categories of human placement is gender and ethnic identity and the preclusion of those voices from continuing discourse is a form of cultural genocide that is harmful to the whole of humanity, not just to the victims. But just as in passing on the specifics of time and place of the Jewish holocaust, neither will my focus here be on gender or ethnicity. For our limited purposes the basic unit of analysis and concern for Place is still human being.

In an earlier companion essay, I cited Beckett's remark from *Waiting For Godot*, "She gives birth astride a grave" as a contemporary index of the *pathos* of place, a stark expression of radical compression if not despairing constriction of human time and place. Human life, conceived in terms of Beckett's distracting glimpse, is a sudden cry snuffed out, a brief fall from womb to grave, cradle to coffin. This is a throw-away line (about throw-away life) in a play about time waiting. The two principal characters are creatures born of woman, presumably, caught between something: womb and grave will do. Being born or dying, it comes to the same thing. This play is marginally and literally just that, play--a deadly expression of a sometime frantic *divertissement*, a pathetic delay comically echoing Addie's weary judgment in *As I Lay Dying*, that living is just getting ready to stay dead a long time. The limbic snare in which the lost are momentarily caught in Beckett's works may be placenta or shroud for all it matters; Tweedledum and Tweedledee, twins in time, only in time, going nowhere, coming from nowhere, doing nothing, marking without filling time. There is no anguish or suffering in this oblivion, no absurd or tormenting task which characterized the pathos of absent border souls in the mythos of classic literature. One can, for example, as easily imagine Estragon and Vladimir casually and intermittently, without any conviction but complaining nonetheless, filling a sieve with water. It is surely significant in this most contemporary of dramas of the human spirit or lack thereof, that there is no defining place, nor

even the memory of an insubstantial pageant faded, only a minimal prop a useless rack left aside. On the suggestion of the text remark quoted, this drama might be staged in a graveyard, a paupers-field, but even then, the hint of sacred ground, or even wasted plots and overturned stones would lend gravity and ground, and so betray the sense of Beckett's drama as the complete absence of Place.

Counterpoint and complementary to the visions of human life as transitory being in time, is the traditional discourse of place, of human beings grounded in the securing work and space of their own making. Arendt drew on Aristotelian distinctions between the natural metabolism of life in Time as the labor of our bodies,--*Animal Laborans*, only sustaining life, in contrast with the cultural achievement of Place through the work of our hands --*Homo Faber*, maker of works and world. So conceived, Place becomes the essential defining limit and bid for permanence of however brief sojourn of the human. Often in fictive literature, apart from practical affairs, the sense of place is plaintive, a melancholy remembrance of "home" that never was, of a promised land of milk and honey, of acceptance, of rest. In that literature Place becomes anthologized as a remembered arcade, a longed for asylum, a sacred cloister, a familiar hearth, a cherished fatherland, a ruined shrine, a killing field, a *camposantos* ... distant places of birthing and growing, loving and warring, learning and praying, resting and dying --all activities which, if only considered in and as time, evaporate into the air, traces only, which blow in the wind. Human activity is only given presence and permanence in those places set aside to constitute, enable, consecrate and commemorate the journey.

Ever against or in tension with the sculpted Place of works is unrelenting metabolism of Time, of motion, change, decay, death. On an exclusive poetics of Time, in which Time is the constituting value of human life--time as life, life as

time-- history and culture as well become only time, not remembrance, blowing dust, vacant images draining into an empty eternity. It is the tension created in these two visions, in the collision and collusion of metaphors of Time and Place, which accounts for the felt depth of tragic drama. Nietzsche's early analysis of the birth and death of Greek tragic drama in terms of the conflicting but complementary forces of the Dionysian and Apollinian is a parallel distinction to what we are here calling Place and Time. Apollo represents and reflects an Olympian Place, a projected permanence and possession of form which can reflect and re-present; Dionysos, in contrast, is the dying god, caught in the devouring turn of seasons, who spiritually embodies Time, who can only find significance in the flux of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's point, of course, was that tragic drama can work, is possible, only when reflection becomes embodied, time re-presented within place. An art, a culture, can only flourish worshipping at the temple of both gods.

In Greek tragedy *hybris* both creates and destroys the hero, who in greatness of spirit aspires to a place reserved for the gods, comes to rival the gods, and so must learn the painful lesson of that difference as an example to human beings to keep their place in time. Even though, in the Greek conception of things, men and gods are as one race, it is only the gods who are immortal, whose place is outside of time. The *denouement* of tragic vision is the inevitable fate of Dionysos. Tragic drama creates, stages, gives place to the time of the dying god, who embodies the aspirations and destiny of man. The shared ritual of this celebration marks the height and breadth of human reach, the sacrificial celebration of the man-god, the lesser god whose place is in time and who must die--condemned finally, for all her beauty and wit, as sacrificial flesh to the devouring maw of time.

In the contemporary world, in the continued absence of cultural conviction --what Nietzsche called myth-- that would produce tragic vision and tragic drama, there is a residual literature of existence, constrained to the self-constituting metaphor of time, which proclaims a tragic vision and aspires to a portrayal of the human condition. "Existentialism", in many of its articulations, views human life as without essence, deprived of place, in which the whole project of living is a crisis of the individual in time confronting nothingness. The references are familiar enough. Sartre, who defines (authentic) existence as a continual projection and pursuit of possibilities (the realization of a provisional self in freedom) pictures suicide as the failure of a conception of a possible project. With nothing to draw one through time into the future-- and in the absence of grounding place-- then there is no will, no life, no motion.

Similarly, Camus, sad prophet of the absurd, in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, places the question of the meaning of life in the context of the question of suicide: in his view, this is what it means to take seriously the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. He regards the metaphysics of place, anything which would ground human thought or being, as simply alternative forms of suicide. Camus' variable depictions of the human condition mirrors Beckett's spare images, their occasions most often are vacuous, a series of interactive happenings which depict (not define) the half lives of characters, who are more ciphers for passing events than characters. Indeed, in portraying Meursault, the anti-hero of *L'Etranger*, Camus seems intent on a moral experiment, of exercising a fictional absurdity commensurate with the absurdity of living. In Meursault we are given a character sketch of a being without character-- a transient, a tourist, an alien, indeed a stranger most strange to himself, except he has not much interest in the passing affair of his own life.

This literary vision of the human condition common to Beckett, Sartre, Camus, and many others is, as I want to put it here, the attempt to do without place, without ground. In Camus' work this is specified as life without meaning, which, he argues is not the same as life without value. To conclude that life is meaningless is simply to declare no explanation is appropriate, and no place determinate of the human in the flux of time. As a resolute *moraliste*, Camus pleads that one still take up the worthy if thankless and unheroic tasks of crisis as they emerge from the transient sewers of human settlement. (*La Pest*) The vision and imperative of the human condition in time is apparent: confront crisis. Equally apparent is the irony of that confrontation, as Marlowe reminds us in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* -- it is an unexciting contest, wrestling with death, which takes place in an impalpable grayness, nothing under foot, no spectators or glory, no great belief in one's own cause and still less in that of the other-- as well be a timely snickering footman, holding a hero's coat.

It is perhaps only the ironic sense of crisis which characterizes this literature of displacement as modern. The sometimes concerted effort to set out a space in which human life, for the moment of its expression, attains to meaning, to a sense not of immortality but humanity, is itself not new.

World literature is full of memorable and well known poignant reference to the brief transience of place, to the furtive and insecure impermanence of hopeful stops along the way. It would be difficult to find better or more troubling expressions for the human interstices of Time and Place than two familiar literary indices of Hebraic and Hellenic cultures:

“As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.” (*Old Testament*, Psalm 103)

“As is the life of the leaves, so is that of men. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground: the vigorous forest puts forth others, and they grow in the spring season. Soon one generation of men comes and another ceases.”
(*Iliad* , Book VI)

Perhaps typically, one is a lament, the other an implicit solution, neither is an expression of despair or spiritual nihilism. They clearly picture human life in the flow of time and nature-- whether warrior or sage, in battle or in prayer-- as without place of permanence, and ultimately without singular meaning or significant identity except tenuous celebration and remembrance.

The literature which aspires to or has achieved historical remembrance in the popular mind is similarly full of the recognition of the crucial if painful conflict and convergence of these two central facts of human life and consciousness: we are creatures of Place in Time, and that is the he and the she of it. Consider any tragic soliloquy of Time in the work of Shakespeare-- in which Tomorrows creep in petty pace to last syllables, brief candles blow, its hour upon the stage, spirits melt into air, are such stuff as dreams are made of..; but, at the same time and place in the genre of Shakespeare's work are hymns to Place, to this Sceptred Isle, this Blessed Plot, this Turf, this Realm... One can start and stop anywhere along the way ; “The Canon” is everywhere dense with such convergence, where even the mind is its own place, where if a clod be washed away, as it must and will, humankind is diminished.

I will end this essay on the time of place, the place of time in human life, literature, and consciousness with two citations from Hemingway . His much anthologized short story “A Clean Well Lighted Place” crystallizes a very modern sense of individual vulnerability and fragile dignity, in some ways parallel and in a counterpoint of irony to our citations from the *Iliad* and *Psalms*.

In this familiar story the older bartender senses and defends the need of a solitary, drinking old man for a public place, a clean place where one can appear with some dignity, a place well lighted against the consuming darkness which lurks beyond. This public place is no longer the *polis* where, in the exuberance of morning light the youthful culture of the Greeks strove for excellence and competed for honors, but neither is it rats alley, where the dead men lost their bones. Less is expected here, less is required, less is needed. Somewhere along the road of spiritual history there occurred a wrenching loose of the individual from a sense of wholeness in community. In time of need we seek the light of a minor sun, and a clean lighted place will do. In the force of this portrait of Place, there is surely a reminder of the depth to which culture and consciousness has fallen, and it is met with acknowledgment and the parody of a prayer to *nada y mas nada* .

The final reference is to a passage in *A Farewell to Arms* , where again, in time of raw need, the question is one of simple dignity, in which the imperative of Place is not a calling to honor or immortality, nor is it saving, but still essential, for all that:

“There were many words you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity...Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages..”

I expect it would be possible not only to mark cultural stages of consciousness by reference to the conceptual resonance of time and place in discourse, but also to trace a spiritual devolution of culture from the literature of myth to religion to history to document to media. However we choose to tell the story, what remains constant is the **convergence of time and place**. Finally it is in the presence and products of sculpted space-- works of buildings, works of art,

of law, of literature and science-- that time becomes more than process, it becomes culture, it becomes world, it becomes human.