

BEING AT THE EDGE OF PLACE: MODERN, ANCIENT, AND POSTMODERN
REFLECTIONS

Preface

In this seminar talk, I will attempt to put together for the first time my previous work on place and my new work on edges. The challenge is to imagine how these two directions fit, or fail to fit, together.

At first glance, they would seem to have little to do with one another:

-- places, we presume, exist under foot; they act to locate and stabilize us; to give us (literal) grounding; to be what we can rely on; to situate us in the world; to be terra firma underneath our distracted lives, providing anchor to the dispersion, a basis for the oblivion that continually acts to undermine our more or less secure being in the world; to provide center to our decentered worlds;

-- edges, on the other hand, would appear to be a decentering force par excellence; they exist at the extremities of things, to be their outer limit, their containing force; after all, don't we measure the size and shape of

things by their outer edges?; and edges need not be strictly spatial to play this role: temporal edges delimit events, large and small, including the event of our life: death, says, Hamlet, is “the bourn [an Elizabethan term for edge] from which no traveler returns”; in their very extremity, however, they act as much to destabilize as to contain human (and other animal) lives; surely this is why we say (in English, but I trust in other European languages as well) that we are “on edge” when referring to an upsetting or nervous-making event; if a place draws us in and down, an edge draws us out – out to the limits of our energies and patience, our very life finally.

On further reflection, however, we realize that places and edges are more convergent than we first imagined. Consider only these basic points:

- (1) every place is finite – in contrast with space, which can be infinite in extent; and to be finite is to have, it is to have to have, an edge – where “edge” here signifies ‘end’, as is connoted in finis, the Latin root of “finite”; for a place to be unending is for it to cease to be a place and to bid fair as a candidate for space; moreover, edge-as-end can be spatial or temporal, or both; in either case, it is where something, or some event, runs out, ceases to be;

(2) edges can be of many things == of “things” themselves (whatever they may be), of events, of whole landscapes, of stories, of words, of thoughts; but among these are certainly places: think of almost any extended edge and you will find it to circumscribe a place per se, or at least something set in a place such that the edge of the thing or event has an internal relationship with that place: say, the edge of an apple on a table that is located in a room, in short a prototypical place; the edges of the apple and the table are situated within the edges of the room, placed there, as we say almost irresistibly;

In this way, then, edge and place show themselves to be deeply affine with each other, each calling to the other, indeed each requiring the other. Despite all their manifest differences, they form an indissociable dyad.

I

But we do not yet know the answer to two very basic questions, which are preliminary to everything I have so far said: What is an edge? What is a place?

An Edge. Formally (in topological geometry), an edge is a convex dihedral angle: that is, where two more or less straight lines come together to form a single figure of conjunction: this figure as viewed from the outside of the lines,

not from the inside (in which case, we have to do with a corner).¹ Materially, an edge is typically where two entire sides (not just lines) meet; or, viewed from the point of conjunction, where these same sides diverge, each going its own way; the two-wayness of the implicit visual vector is part of being an edge, which in effect both attracts and repells attention: attracts it as we “come to the edge” (which is akin to “coming to the point”), repells it by sending it away from the edge itself – where “the edge itself” is the salient structure, the focus of an edge-consciousness.

Whether considered formally or materially, an edge always delimits; and in this capacity, it determines volume (size, mass, weight) as well as shape (contour, outline). As delimiting, an edge also serves to specify whether something presents itself as sharp, rounded, umbelliform, doughnut-saped, etc.

A sailing ship is passing before me on the deck where I write these words in Maine. The edges of its sails configure them as three triangular structures, differing somewhat in size and shape, but all are active in propelling the ship forward by means of the wind that is caught up in the sails, pressing itself against their cloth surfaces. At the same time, the contour of the hull shows itself through its edges, curving in certain ways and not others. This simple example, taken from current perception, shows how crucial edges are: they act to specify the kind of vessel I see as well as its individual peculiarities, and they present its

¹ For these formal approaches to edge and corner, see J.J. Gibson, An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, glossary.

forward movement as a coherent action that is intimately related to the character of its sails and the form of its hull. All these edge qualities are material in my nomenclature, being manifest in the very matter from which the ship is built; but tacitly present as well are the formal properties of the sails regarded as triangles and of the hull seen as a modified cylinder.

In addition, edges have both epistemic and metaphysical powers which we don't usually consider upon encountering ordinary edges. Epistemically, edges are essential in identifying – recognizing and perceiving – something as of a certain type: say, a middle-sized sailing ship that is moving across Stonington Cove. We often know something by the edges it presents, its “profile,” as when we recognize someone who walks toward us in the near distance: that must be “Dick,” we say, upon spotting a figure with whom we are familiar (or were once familiar: the exact configuration of the edges of a person or thing remain remarkably constant over time, even as that person and we ourselves have aged in the meanwhile). The same is true of the most ordinary objects: a hammer, a table, a fork. It holds as well for literary characters, whose major outlines we recognize through the verbal descriptions given of them by an author: no more than we need a complete presentation of the edges of a physical object do we need the full description of a literary character: such a character remains known to the reader even if his or her description is shot through with indeterminacies and opacities, rendering the depiction “opalescent” in Roman Ingarden's telling term. Even the dimmest descriptions – such as the otherwise unidentified

character in Joyce's Ulysees about whom we are only told that he wears "a MacIntosh" – contain edges by which to identify her or him: in this case, the tailored edges of a certain kind of overcoat that was prominent in the first two decades of the last century in western Europe.

Metaphysically, edges are very curious entities – or perhaps we should say non-entities. An edge is where something still is, still exists materially, yet at the same time is about not to be. At the edge, a thing is thinning out, its material substance is beginning to vanish; and by the time we get to the edge itself – to the outermost part of an edge – the same thing has ceased to be at the level of such substance. What Wallace Stevens said of a sky is true of an edge as well: "the sky is acutest at its vanishing." The more we come to the end of an edge the less is it there as an object: it is petering or running out, rapidly becoming nothing: literally, "no thing." Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, was reported to have sharpened the edge of a knife in his youth so assiduously that it finally disappeared altogether: that is what every edge does, sooner or later. When Hamlet says in his celebrated soliloquy, "To be or not to be, that is the question," he could well have been speaking of edges.

An edge, then, is at once something quite definitive (a word in which we cannot help but notice the finis root) and yet also quite ambiguous. It is crucial to identifying something as that something, but it does so in a manner that is strikingly two-sided in its description. No matter how clearly presented or perceived it may be, an edge is something that both comes and goes, starts and

finishes, closes and opens – and this list could continue indefinitely. The truth is that edges have a genius for combining manifest contraries or contradictories; yet they (acting as the outer mark of that for which they serve as delimitations) are for the most part easily grasped and readily identifiable. They are very strange beings that are equally non-beings: beings on the way to non-being, thereby providing the deepest ambiguity of all.

A place, by contrast, is nothing so strange, at least not at first glance. It is reassuring in its very presence, being solidly here. (When Rilke said in the Duino Elegies that “hiersein ist herrlich,” he might well have been talking of everyday places, which are felicitous in their very accessibility, present in their comparative transparency.) Contributing to the reliability of place are a number of its major traits: for example, its deeply orientational powers, which allow it to give direction when we are otherwise lost, to provide for dwelling (hence the expression “home-place”), and to hold personal and collective history. Perhaps most impressively, place is often the basis for personal identity: “our place is part of what we are,” as Gary Snyder remarks.² The link between self and place is profound; they compenetrates each other extensively. In meeting a stranger for the first time, we often ask “Where are you from?” Our assumption is that the place of origin will give us a crucial clue as to the character and proclivity of someone whom we do not otherwise know. Even if place and identity are distinguishable, they remain inseparable in many respects. One concrete reason

² Gary Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, p. 29.

for this is that our body is often the lived link between them: just as there is no body without place – no unimplaced body: angels, which have no material bodies, also lack places: thus the medieval conundrum about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin – so there is no place without the animating force of a living body in its midst: bodies energize places, as is so evident in animal dens and lairs -- that is, places made expressly to fit animals' bodies closely.

Nevertheless, what the Romans called stabilitas loci (“stability of place”) proves to be quite vulnerable, as we can see from the rapidly changing fortunes of Roman history itself. Even if places are deeply situating, they can also be quite fragile. In the end, places have their own ambiguity. They are expansive insofar as they provide room for much that we would like to put into them; yet they are also contractive in their delimitative and containing powers. A given place presents itself as directly underfoot, part of terra firma, but it can also surround us, being all around us; a place is at once a locus and a landscape, here for sure but also there (though not “over there,” that is, located outside the periphery of place). Places are both determinate (as this place, with its own idiolocality) and indeterminate, as we can see from the difficulty of specifying exactly where a given place begins or ends. A major ambiguity is found in the fact that places are not only spatial, as we often presume; they also bear history and narrative: but this means that they are themselves temporal, as when a given event in effect offers a location for certain actions: “in the French Revolution,” we say confidently, “the rights of man were first formulated.” Here, the event of the

French Revolution serves as a historical place, a scene of happening. (Strictly speaking, “event” is a spatio-temporal term, possessing both dimensions. But I would maintain that, ultimately, a place is an event.)

Despite these ambiguities, places subtend our (and other animals’) being in the world. This is why I like to speak of entire “place-worlds” that given places make possible. Nothing of comparable ontological importance can be said of edges, which are in effect the extremities of places and events just as they delimit things and people: rendering all four finite in extent.

II

This brings us to border and boundary. Strictly speaking, these are kinds of edge. In that perspective, they are merely two among at least fifteen by my current count. But in fact they are very special sorts of edge: primae inter pares, so to speak. Their prominence has emerged for me in the last few years, especially in my recent work on La Frontera, the U.S.-Mexico border: a political hot-spot but also a complex edge that raises important spatial issues of the very sort have come to preoccupy me in recent times. And in this particular case, we have a situation in which what is called a “border” – an international border, at that – shows itself to be at the same time a boundary. Let me say more about what I have in mind here by the following comments on basic differences between “border” and “boundary”:

border: a border is an edge that aims at being definitive by virtue of being closed and continuous. On my construal, it is an artefact of a prior agreement reached by human beings who have decided on the wisdom (often pitched as “necessity”) of a definite division between nations, counties, or provinces. It is very often a “compromise formation” (in Freud’s term) that, despite its contingent origins, is taken to be fixed once it is set in place – a phrase that is far from idle, since places that are established at certain historical moments, often in the wake of war (e.g., the U.S.-Mexican War of 1848), call for definitive demarcations of their agreed-upon limits: “this far and no further,” “on this side France, on that German,” as we say in telling phrases.

In my view, there are two main forms of border, regarded as an actual entity, a distinctive kind of edge:

- (a) cartographic: this assumes the form of a drawn or printed line that is at once ideal and imposed (since it doesn’t exist on the earth, or on the sea, itself). Most often, borders in this inscriptive format are represented on maps, particularly those maps that stake out territories – typically, those that set forth the claims of national sovereignty.
- (b) material: in contrast with the ideal (I would prefer to say, after Husserl, “irreal”) status of cartographically instilled borders, there are those that are literally built. In this avatar, borders often assume the form of walls or comparable barriers that are constructed from materials that are heavy, opaque, and impassable. Paradigmatic here are such instances as the

Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall – and the currently active Separation Wall between Israel and Palestine, and La Frontera. In these latter instances, the contemporary technology of wall construction combines with the same will to exclude and separate. (Sometimes, in fact, the same international construction companies are involved in the building of such walls: Bechtel in the latter two instances. [check this out].)

Only in those instances in which there is already a massive natural feature of the local landscape can such construction be avoided – a feature that itself acts as an effective impediment to the easy flow of human traffic: say, rugged mountain terrain or a raging river. In that case, the border is literally realized by such a feature, which on its own acts to close off in a continuous and definitive manner. Thus, for fully two-thirds of its entire length, La Frontera consists in the Río Grande River – just as the Alps acts as a border between Switzerland and Italy. But the factor of artifice remains indispensable, since it is not the mountain chain as such or the whole river that is the effective border but an imagined line that is projected onto the chain or the river. Such a line has to possess precise specifications – ultimately, those of latitude and longitude – that determine it was a matter of “simple location” in Whitehead’s term for any position that is marked in a homogeneous world-space or world-time. And this requirement in turn leads to certain complications presenting their own challenge: for example, just where in the midst of the Río

Grande is La Frontera to be located? Conventionally, it is projected into the middle of the river; but the breadth of the river changes its extent in different seasons – with spring rains it is quite broad; in summer, it is a bare trickle, if that. Clearly, the exact location of the summer of the Río Grande is not that “simple.” That middle will change places from April to August: it will be a different edge in a differently configured natural place. Thus the complications that artificial imposition brings with it are visited upon the natural landscape – with the results that the international border is a distinctly hybrid entity.

Boundary. Boundaries are porous, passable, and informally created and often discontinuous edges. They arise characteristically from spontaneously generated processes – and are, for this reason, paradigmatically located in the natural world. Examples are trails that are laid down by animals and humans – “laid down” by the very motion of their bodies, not intentionally created by these creatures. Ridges on mountains, outcroppings of stone that constitute a coherent edge: these are other instances of boundaries that are encountered in the course of human and animal experience. Animals are especially adept in the creation and discernment of boundaries: as when certain species leave recognizable scents to mark their “territories.” These are semiotic rather than symbolic in status: they signify to the effect that ‘our territorial claims extend to here’, where the ‘here’ is not formally or precisely designated

but (quite literally) sensed – hence subject to variations in keeping with vegetative growth, climatic change, seasons, etc. These markings are meaningful, but they do not constitute a symbolic system with its own separate code whose content could be translated into verbal statements. (This is why animals here join forces with human beings in the making and detecting of naturally generated boundaries: for example, in animal migration patterns whose counterpart is nomadic circulation between known places.)

Boundaries of this quintessential sort are comparatively abundant and easily identified. But the plot thickens when we consider an edge circumstance such as that of La Frontera. There, birds fly freely over the wall that otherwise impedes humans and certain land animals. But determined and ingenious migrants, to prevent whose movement the wall was constructed in the first place (along with drug traffickers), nevertheless manage to make it past the wall (by scaling it, tunneling under it, etc.) or else go around it (though often to great peril awaiting them in the desert). In deliberate parody of this situation, a human being was shot from a canon over the wall at Tijuana several years ago. Those migrants who get beyond the wall are in effect making a boundary out of a border, puncturing holes in a presumably impenetrable barrier. They turn something literally aporetic ('without opening') into something porotic, filled with gaps or holes, allowing the wall to breathe, albeit

furtively and momentarily. This indicates that what begins as a strict border is subject to transformation into something boundary-like. Indeed, I would say that every strictly established and policed border, no matter how arduously maintained, ends by becoming a boundary. Witness the Great Wall of China, which has now become a major site for tourists, who clamber on and over it freely and at their leisure.

In a free variation on Robert Frost's famous line - "something there is that doesn't love a wall" - I would say that "there is something in a wall that doesn't love itself, that wants to come down." At least this is so for walls that purport to be impenetrable borders - to keep human and animal traffic to a strict minimum, allowing only those with the proper papers, or other legitimizing marks, to traverse it. Despite the sternest effort to enforce this minimum, the wall (or any other artificial border), even if continually reinforced in its materiality, always has a limited future in the context of social and political vicissitudes that were not foreseen at the time of its construction. This indicates an intrinsic fragility of borders that is the flip side of their ideal and imposed character. While they are up and running, they can be quite effective, and can separate whole peoples and cultures, as we see in the case of the DMZ between North and South Korea. But they are not perduring; their course is contingent; they will dissolve, or will at least diminish in their appointed powers.

Thus, despite the deeply wrought differences between borders and boundaries, they overlap in their inherent finitude – both being subject to the vagaries of fate and fortune. And despite their being such disparate kinds of edges, both are, in the end, features of places. For a given border, just like a certain boundary, constitutes the edge of some particular place. Each is an edge of a region, a territory, or a nation: all of which I consider species of place. These two leading and highly contrastive sorts of edges, rejoin in constituting (or at least marking) the limits of a given place, being the outermost extremity of that place. (I here leave aside internal edges, which have their own function and logic.) Both bring a place to a close, whether the closure is itself tightly sealed or open-ended. At this point, and in this way, they converge across their manifest divergences.

III

Postmodernism and place – another odd couple, even odder than place and edge taken together. Let us only juxtapose them in a preliminary way: Postmodernism, if it means anything, presumes globalization: depends on it and contributes to it. And globalization in turn signifies space: neutral, homogeneous, spread-out space. “The world is my oyster”: an old saying in English that takes on new force with the advent of electronic technologies of communication. Thanks to these technologies, we can get anywhere – at least virtually – almost anytime (assuming we are awake and alert). For globalized

space lends it to the kind of grids and other planiform spaces that lend themselves to exact mapping –to “cartography” in the strict sense that I distinguish from “chorography,” which is the mapping of particular places and regions. In these spaces, anything that might count as a place has become a position, a position in world-space. And each such position belongs to a site, which is at once abstract and functional (and one because the other). Every such site is (more or less) equal and (mostly) indifferent. If nothing is real in world-space – a space of representation, a space in which nothing can be touched – everything is possible in that space: hence its powerful allure but equally its superficiality. But it is possible only within the pre-established parameters of global space, and these are strictly delimited: not just by their definitions but by what they can do, which is to operate in accordance with prevailing technologies – and behind them the regnant forces of global capitalism, colluding with nation states and multinational corporations. How could there be room for place in a circumstance in which everything smacking of place is leveled down by motives of domination, efficiency, and profit?

Place, in contrast, is always and only particular; it thrives on an intense locality that is the very converse of the globalized space that subtends postmodernism. Where such space is thinned out and empty of anything real – there, being is virtual – place is dense and thick: dense and thick with history and with body. What matters here, above all, is where you are, not what role you have in a late capitalist economy (that is, how productive you are). For place is the ultimate

wherein (Heidegger calls it das Worin) that gives direction and identity to the lives of those inhabiting that place. Rather than being juxtaposed with another space indifferently, places are enclosed by horizons, which adumbrate what is to come (in time) and the elsewhere (in space). In between a place and the horizon is a landscape, which can be neither owned nor mapped: which is unpossessable in these modalities. Thanks to its horizons – themselves special forms of edges – places are enclosed but not contained. (In other words, horizons count as boundaries in my nomenclature: they are thoroughly poretic. Underlying all this basic triad of place, landscape, and horizon, is the lived body, which as we've seen animates the whole scene from within, breathing continual life in them from below.

Despite these divisive and decisive differences, place and the postmodern (which I here construe in the form of globalized space) show themselves to counterparts: incongruous ones, to be sure, but counterparts nonetheless. Each calls to the other for support and completion, however indirectly and remotely. Even if from across these differences, each provides what the other lacks: it gives a certain subtle substance to the postmodern sense of space, while this same space offers leeway to places that might otherwise be quite confined. Other counterpart aspects include the fact that place encloses while space opens out. Where place fosters a settled (but not fixed) identity and orientation, postmodern spatiality favors the search for new identity when one is willing to be subjected to at least momentary disorientation. And while the virtual vacuum induced by

global communicational matrices renders history superfluous (or at least secondary), place engenders and preserves history at a personal and collective level.

I do not mean to suggest that these complementary relations are always symmetrical, much less that they are always present. They are dependent on circumstances, but when they do occur they reveal the deep potential for collaboration between two otherwise disparate vectors of human experience. We see this collaboration in a dramatic form when in the wake of McLuhan we speak of “the global village” or after Deleuze and Guattari of “the local absolute”: here the parochial joins forces with what is universal in scope, each benefitting from such intimacy. Here place gains scope while the global finds focus. A single example of this is found in “google mapping” whereby virtually anywhere on earth (hence on a global scale) can be shown in a close-up format: the very image of your own house and street here appears.

Still others have pointed to this incongruous relationship. Thus Robert Smithson, the earth artist, liked to say that the postmodern has an unlikely ally in the premodern; both leap over the modern as if it were an immense aberration. His celebrated “Spiral Jetty,” for example – the helix created from stones in the Great Salt Lake – has a Neolithic feeling to it even though its conception was born from Smithson’s postmodern deconstruction of modern art:

[SHOW SLIDE OF “SPIRAL JETTY”?]

Let us say that the postmodern and place conjoin insofar as (a) the postmodern not only looks forward in its innovative proclivity but actively harks back to earlier moments of history; and (b) place, for its part, leaps forward every bit as much as it looks back: it does so by its inherent synergies, which are released when its edges are boundary-like. Only a border attempts to foreclose an open future – to reduce its risk by eliminating chance as much as possible. In this double-sided way, place and the postmodern meet in the middle where ostensible opposites converge: especially the past and the future, but also (as I emphasized earlier) open space and enclosed locus. Thus they mix in a composite spatio-temporal shared zone that has the character of “transitional space” in Winnicott’s sense of a play area where creative action is engendered.

In view of these claims, two caveats must be made: first, I am not construing “postmodern” in the senses of pastiche, citational parody, or textual irony – senses that sometimes dominate in popular discussions. I am interpreting the postmodern as a matter of a newly emerging idea of space: the global virtual space that is made possible by electronic communications. Second, I am not taking “place” to mean something backward-looking – that is nothing but a repository for personal or collective identity, much less a mere trigger for nostalgia. Quite to the contrary, on my view place has an ingredient futurity that belongs to it intrinsically: a futurity that is the temporal equivalent of the horizons that ring about a given place. Just as space has to be re-thought as place, so the temporality of place itself must be conceived anew if it is to collude with

the postmodern in the various ways that I consider are as urgent as they are timely.

IV

Implicitly – and sometimes quite explicitly – structuring this talk of mine today has been the ancient model of the “indefinite dyad” as Plato called it. This is the conjunction of two pairs of terms such as odd and even, same and different, one and many. (I also note in passing that if this is true we have.) I’ve now in effect identified three such dyads: place and edge, border and boundary, and the postmodern and place. Despite their internal differences, each member of each pair belongs together with the other member, however imperfect may be their fit. (Perfect fit is exactly what they are not about. If their fit was truly perfect – flawless, with no loose ends left over – they would be no longer be counter-parts; indeed, they would no longer be a dyad but a monad, one thing with two precisely contiguous parts. There might be a discernible fissure line between them -- as when two blocks fit exactly together -- but such such a line would not undermine their oneness. They would be like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that, once brought together, forms an image of a single undivided object.)

If the terms I’ve been comparing form indefinite dyads, we’d have another instance before us of the bond between the premodern and the postmodern. My suspicion is that such a bond is much more widespread than we assume when

we regard the postmodern world as “progress” of some sort – in any case, as beckoning toward the future, or as being our future.

Notice that in the series of six terms that divide into three such dyads – namely, place/edge/border/boundary/postmodern/place – place is located at each end of the series as I have constructed it. This seems to indicate not just that place is especially marked in such a series but that it opens and closes the series itself as a whole. (As a whole, we can call the series “the game of space”; but we can do so only if we admit that it is equally a game of time, given that place qua event is both spatial and temporal: both at once.) Place, we might say, stands at the two portals of the series – like a silent sentinel that inaugurates it and then ends it, thereby reminding us of place’s unique power to initiate the new and to encompass what is now happening as well as about to happen (again, the horizon is the best instance of this dual potential). Despite its finitude, its modest if not literally diminutive dimensions – which lead us to refer to it as a “mere place,” “where I happen to be now”: as if this locus does not matter much, that it is gratuitous – place has a remarkably extensive outreach, a generous and hospitable nature as it were. Enclosed within itself by means of such distinctive edges as borders and boundaries (and other types of edge like rims and peripheries), it is also enclosive of much else: people and animals, things and occurrences. This is part of the deep paradoxicality of place, and it doubtless what makes it such an effective partner of the postmodern – which thrives on

paradoxes, including the manifest paradox that it, the postmodern in its errant motions and offbeat thematics, flourishes in place.

But what does it mean for the postmodern to flourish in place? Lyotard gives one concrete example in The Postmodern Condition: the social or political enclave that nourishes creative thought and action despite its comparative isolation. “Enclave” here is not an instance of the local absolute as discussed earlier: there, the absolute inhabits the local itself: the universal space at stake in globalization is to be found in a local circumstance itself – right there, fully there. Now, in contrast, the local sidesteps the global: it is truly set apart, on the side, in the margins. There is no elegant (or impossible: depending on how one views the global absolute) compromise or compression, but instead a setting aside of an alternative space, a given place that stands apart from the juggernaut of contemporary and future technologies, offering a zone of its own in which life can be lived experimentally and vibrantly. (Copenhagen offered such an enclave, for example, in the evolution of jazz, being a creative locus that was all the more effective and impressive for being off-center in the world jazz scene. I suspect that it has served in a similar capacity at other moments of its history: think only of Kierkegaard in the wake of Hegel and Schelling in their ascendancy in the more widely recognized university centers of his time such as Berlin.)

Such a zone of creative action as an enclave offers is akin to D.W. Winnicott’s idea of a “transitional space” in which the child – and the adult in a later phase – first comes to a deeper sense of personal identity. As creatively

transitional, the postmodern enclave is a matter of place that prospers precisely in it being situated away from the dominant centers of global culture. The very idea of the “avant garde” in literature and the fine arts embodies much the same sense of being a harbor for innovative thought and action in a “scene” (another place term that is tinged with the improvisational and provisional) that is often far from the hegemonic cultural centers: Zurich and Paris, Harlem and Black Mountain early in the twentieth century; today, among others: Prague in Europe, Portland in the U.S. Part of being an avant-garde place is, precisely, to be transitional: not to last long enough to become institutionalized (which is equivalent to the avant-garde’s demise). The survival of such enclaves may be foreshortened, their longevity short-lived; but the shadow they cast is long in terms of influences and effects.

V

In bringing this lecture to a close – coming to its very edge – I would like to return to my major theme of the edges of places, this time briefly exploring one final aspect: the considerable outreach of such edges.

As I have underlined at several points, edges not only close off place but connect them with what is beyond, or other than, the place in question. For one thing, through their edges places themselves link up with other places. For instance, the edges of a given neighborhood are where that neighborhood is in

touch with nearby neighborhoods: not only geographically and physically but in other, much less visible ways – legally, through demographic patterns, or by economic flows of various sorts. Moreover, such edges are continually shifting as the character and occupants of a certain neighborhood alter. They are also indefinite: if one knows where the south edge of Harlem is found (i.e., 110th St.), who knows just where this part of New York City ends as one moves out from this southernmost edge? When the edge is definite and known, its connection with another place and its edge are more determinate in character, but since the exact location of the edges of many places (and regions) is not known Harlem’s tie with these other loci is often quite amorphous. (Here what C.S. Peirce called “the logic of the vague” comes into concrete play.)

The edges of places also give access to places whose scale exceeds that of a given original place: say, the way that the Lower East Side of New York City gives out onto the whole of this borough and, beyond it (and through its edges) with the entire unit called “Manhattan.” Operative here is a kind of transitivity of placial edges that allows them to connect up with ever more capacious entities: not only entire cities but (moving to the natural world) bioregions via watersheds, landforms, and a complete bioclimate – eventually, the earth as a whole.

The foregoing examples are cases of what I like to call “external edges,” those that surround a given place. But some edges of a given place are also “internal.” I refer to the inner differentiations of a given place – ridges and rills in

its surface; but I also refer to being a body in that place: here the outer edges of my body are intimately bound up with the inner edges of a built or natural environment. To adapt a sentence of Merleau-Ponty's: a lived body is in a place as the heart is in the organism.³ Here the emphasis is on the way in which the very skin of our lived bodies enables us to be active in certain particular circumstances such as sports events, talking with others, or simply walking with them: "I was the world in which I walked," says Wallace Stevens; but this world is accessible to me through a concerted bodily motion that has its own edges. Also, insofar as we live in a particular place or region, we in that locus: we reside there, act there, live there.

The plot thickens further when we realize that through the edges of certain places we are in touch with various cultural and linguistic traditions that would not be otherwise accessible to us. These traditions – a "mother tongue," a way of construing political or religious events, etc. – are reached from the very peripheries of the places where we are now situated. In such cases, the access is not physical or geographic, or demographic or economic, but occurs through a form of diffusion of interest or energy that moves outward from particular personal or collective centers (whether in the form of selves or groups) and then back again into these same centers. The same is true for belonging to certain histories of a people, a race, a nation: here as well there is radiation outward through the edges of the places occupy – and also an absorption from without. In

³ [Cite M-P in PP, probably from ch. 5 or 6.]

all the aforementioned cases, we have to do with another form of dyad, that realized by a two-way movement of culture, language, and history in and out of the several intentionalities that compose human beings alone and together.

Here two particular observations, one bearing on other cultures and the second on literature:

(a) When we attempt to understand what is happening – in action or in text – that stems from a distinctly different culture than our own, we must exercise our interpretive powers in a very concerted way (otherwise, we remain smugly ensconced in our own cultural presuppositions). In order to make the interpretive leap, we have to open the edges of our own paradigms of understanding so as to reach out to those of another time or culture, society or race. We do so precisely by what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons” (Horizontverschmelzung) where by the otherwise hardened edges of our own cultural premises and prejudices become sufficiently porous to receive and grasp what others, from a very different circumstance, mean to say. In other words, these edges, instead of acting as fiercely guarded borders, must become boundarylike – that is, open to the radically different and to the exchange of ideas at a deep level: one group of edges, those of our own cultural place, reaches out to rejoin, chevron-style, the edges of a very different cultural location.

(b) In literature, we have set before us intense and often paradigmatic cases of this same dyad, that is, through the verbal description of

intentional actors as they form part of events that are ineluctably cultural and historical. Here, too, the edges of places remain critical: now in the form of the perimeters of states of affairs as narrated by the author (and as voiced or thought by the characters of a novel or play or poem). Every such state of affairs – I borrow this term from Ingarden, who refers to them as “Sachverhalten” in his Literary Work of Art – has its own peculiar edge in and through which the many strands of action and plot are absorbed or reflected. But (as Ingarden and others have shown) the matter is very complex, and I here only allude to a first level of analysis – trusting that we might pursue other levels in our discussion later today or tomorrow.

Underlying all this and making it possible is a primal model of human beings as organic entities – not just as living creatures but at every level of experience that their physiologically organic being makes possible. Instead of the social (and other kinds of) atomism that would keep humans tightly contained within themselves, beings of borders rather than boundaries (as on Aristotle’s notion of place as a rigidly delimited container), my analysis today points toward a very different view of the relationship between edge and place. On this view, both are organic in character, and that which makes this possible is the body as their mediatrix, their common bond. The body is the archetypally organismic, and from its exemplary status as a living organism it establishes what it is like for edges to operate in the manner of shared joints and tissues: that is to say, as forming a dense and continuous integumentation. Just as something happening

in one part of the body affects what is happening everywhere in that same body – thanks to the interpolation of edges that link disparate places in and of the organism. Just as John Milton said that “the mind is its own place” (adding that this place is, all too often, a hell from which we cannot escape), so we can say that the body is its own place too: or better yet it is place’s close sibling.

With the body/place pair I designate a final indefinite dyad, about which I like to say this: no body without place, no place without body. They are inseparable if distinguishable brother and sister. One is integral to the other, necessary to it arising and continued existing. But this can happen only if the edges of the body and those of place interdigitate intimately.

More completely considered, we have a situation that can be analogized to a triangle whose two lower corners are occupied by edges and places while the apex is body regarded as the supreme (or, as Wallace Stevens might say: as its “supreme fiction”). But this requires us to take a step beyond an indefinite dyad by moving to an indefinite triad: edge/place/body. In view of this trio – a far cry from Hegel’s dialectic of ternary terms progressively advancing – we can glimpse the enormous complication of the relationship between edges and places at every level while also marvelling at their beautifully articulated relationships as modeled on the bodily life of all living organisms.

* * * * *

This is a life like that of human beings -- like you and me. Or, for that matter, like characters in a novel or short story. Or like the character of local culture -- or like another quite different culture. And like my language -- like yours. Like being American -- like being Danish. Like being all these things, and many more, in one infinitely complex yet still organismic entity. This entity is situated in place, and it is enlivened and expressed through the edges it proffers and to which it gives rise. For place, like body, engenders edges; edges describe and distinguish place and body alike. The bond between all three goes deep -- deeper than we can know (objectively) but not deeper than we can intuit or infer as natural subjects. Into this multiply determined depth -- a depth that manifests itself on the scalloped surfaces (that is, the edges) of bodies and places -- I invite you to enter and to join with me in open discussion.

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