Lost in Place? On the Virtues and Vices of Edward Casey's Anti-Modernism

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1. Introductory

1.0   To raise the question of place today is to return to the issue of *modernity*.[1] While one can certainly *imagine* all sorts of reasons why philosophers have traditionally busied themselves with investigation of place and its cognates (locality, site, etc.), in the past two centuries to embrace place has meant to resist the "abstract" character of modern life. Investigation of the place world almost invariably derives from a certain kind of advocacy: that is, the philosopher, sociologist, anthropologist or geographer reflects in order to ally herself *with* place—as opposed to space or time. Under the banner of *topos*, a battle is fought, the battle against the leveling and universalizing tendencies of modern life. And this makes sense given that historical development in the early modern arts and sciences which led to the positing of infinite and homogeneous space/time as axes for natural events and human experience. To be modern is to give up the "sense of place" associated with the late medieval hierarchical world in favor of a space and

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[1] This essay developed from a conference paper delivered at a session devoted to Edward Casey's work on place, a session for which Casey himself served as commentator. I owe him deep thanks for his thoughtful and thorough response to my criticisms both in the session and after it. The following reflections attempt to incorporate and respond to Casey's own comments and self-interpretation. While, as critical of his phenomenological approach to place, they hardly reflect *his* viewpoint, any merit they may possess is entirely due to the honing process forced by his rigorous observations.

time conceived to be populated by infinite numbers of entirely exchangeable *loci*. Defending the concrete and particular as opposed to the abstract and general of this Newtonian universe, the place-thinker becomes a foot soldier in the army of the anti-modern.

But why should *place* in particular provide an emblem for this struggle? After all, the history of thought has suggested a number of alternative philosophical "sites" for resistance to the leveling effects of modernization—particularity, the sensuous, "the thing," the person and the *id* to name but a few. Place, however, plays a bit differently than do the other candidates; for it uniquely engages the problematics of knowledge and critique. Place has something about it of a universal *precondition* for human experience. The pre-Socratic philosopher Archytas captured this sense when (as Simplicius reports it) he said that place "is the first of all things, since all existing things are either in place or not without place."[2] While place*s* may indeed be particular, *place itself*, the concept of place, retains something of the universal, something of that which invites knowing.

This relationship between place and its concept explains the peculiar attraction of place for anti-modern philosophers: it presents a phenomenon of enticing concreteness, but one that also promises philosophical access through its conceptual organization—an access markedly clearer than that offered by such philosophically recalcitrant entries as the "sensuous particular." But just for this reason, such access demands inquiry into that relationship between individual and concept assumed with "place," and with this imperative there appears on the horizon a set of themes which will be seen to profoundly trouble phenomenological inquiry into place. The very virtue of place for philosophical investigation of the concrete—that it mediates between concepts and instances or universals and particulars—also means that it opens the *question* as to the nature of this mediation.

The question of mediation.

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[2] Simplicius, in *Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium,* as translated (in part) in Shmuel Sambursky, ed., *The Concept of Place in Late Neoplatonism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 37. My thanks to Edward Casey for this reference.

2. Reading Casey on Place

2.0   The recent work of Edward S. Casey, two magisterial volumes of phenomenologically oriented observation of the "place world" and history of the *concept* of place, certainly is intended to belong within the tradition of place studies as rejection of modernity. Situating himself within this "science"—a tradition that includes investigations within geography, sociology and architecture as well as academic philosophy—Casey writes of the context for his own work:

> In the past three centuries in the West—the period of 'modernity'—place has come to be not only neglected but actively suppressed. Owing to the triumph of the natural and social sciences in this same period, any serious talk of place has been regarded as regressive or trivial.[3]

Incompatible concepts of place?

In *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place,*[4] Casey attempts to reverse this long trend, hoping that a deepened understanding of the role played in our lives by place might renew attention to place and the care of places. Trusting to the recovery of concreteness promised by phenomenological method, Casey's two books provide a remarkable scholarly *tour de force* of multiple aspects of our interactions with the "place world." Nonetheless, what is most remarkable here is something that emerges contrary to the author's intentions: he offers us not *one* but *two* accounts, necessarily and symmetrically linked, but also, as will be seen, ultimately incompatible. Let me trace these stories and their relationship.

What is place? That question, central to Casey's phenomenological topo-project, receives competing answers in his two books: while in both texts the urgency of returning to and understanding the place-world is projected against the dominance of "space and time" in modern Western societies, each of the texts depends upon *one* of these two coordinates for its defining opposition. Thus, whereas *Getting Back into Place* primarily defines place against time, *The Fate of Place* defines place against space. The result is

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[3] Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), xiv. Hereafter, Back.

[4] Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Hereafter, Fate.

twofold: first, the dimension opposed in each of the texts is left strangely unaltered. "Time" in the earlier text and "space" in the later one mark scenes of struggle, since each in turn is taken to be the *dominant* field within modernity, but, in each case, *place* turns out to be heterogeneous to this battlefield.

Having gained priority as the field for place conception, however, the *other* dimension under discussion—the dimension of space in *Getting Back into Place* and of time in *The Fate of Place*— becomes the subject of a transformed understanding, one that yields the text's idea of place. Place emerges as, in the first case (that of *Getting Back into Place*) strangely spatial while in the other book (*The Fate of Place*) it becomes peculiarly time-like. In other words, Casey's analyses follow an identical strategy, though with opposing materials, in his two books.

One book spacializes while the other temporalizes place.

2.1   In the earlier text, *Getting Back into Place*, it is time and modern temporo-centrism that provide the polemical foil for our understanding of place and space that undergoes a strange appropriation in the positive characterization of the place world.[5] Here, you might say, the negation of time takes the form of a subsumption of it under a spatialized sense of place. Thus, in the opening chapter of *Getting Back into Place* Casey demonstrates that what we usually take to be independent characteristics of linear time (its coordinates of "before," "after," etc.) are really primordially place qualities, dependent upon an embodied set of spatial relations like "in front" and "behind" (Back, 9-13). Thus, also, movement, throughout this book, is conceived of not (as it will be in *The Fate of Place*) as a form of being in place but rather as *displacement* or, at the very least, movement "between" places. (See Back, Chapter 2, 22-39.) Place, therefore, is somehow fixed in space, so that in *Getting Back into Place* the process of translating oneself is conceived of as "change of place." In this way, Casey wins an alternative theoretical language to that of modern science, with its emphasis upon causal sequence.

Consistent with this understanding in *Getting Back* is the treatment of metaphysical and ontological questions: in *Getting Back*

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5 "The crux of the problem is that [in the modern world, *tb*] time is conceived in such a way that everything else is made subjacent to it, beginning with place and ending with space" (Back, 8).

into Place Aristotle's place definition as "container" for things is accepted enthusiastically. As Casey puts it, "the boundary or limit of a thing determines its place" (Back, 16). *Getting Back,* indeed, embraces the *ontological* understanding of place still possible from an Aristotelian viewpoint: place is a kind of *being*, just not as *a* being or thing (Back, 31).

This compatibility of ontology and place alerts us to the peculiar understanding of *non-place* here. We'll see that the rejection of "non-place" is a consistent theme in both of Casey's books; but this rejection comes for different reasons and has different significance in each volume. In *Getting Back*, non-place or "no place" is validated as a genuine threat to experience. Within *this* text the problem with non-place is that it is (at least psychologically) real— as a kind of *threat* or anxiety which motivates a whole history of what Freud would call "reaction formations" (Back, xi). In particular, this fear of the void explains the object obsession (or obsession with objectivity) so important to the development of Western science and technology. As Casey writes:

> In philosophy the threat of atopia calls forth a veritable ontomania, an irrational desire to have and to know as much determinate presence as possible; in short, put Being *before* Place. Whether the philosopher is Parmenides or Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus, Descartes or Spinoza, Hegel or Whitehead, the aim remains the same: to fill up, to populate, the empty field with as much determinate Being as possible. (Back, xi.)

Space as subset of place.

If we follow out the implications of this narrative, we begin to see the peculiar transformation Casey is working on our "space prejudiced" understandings: space implicitly emerges in this version of Western thought as a subset of place, that subset which accompanies the obsessional production of beings as objects. Space must be that kind of place *in which* objects, objectified beings, can reside. Notice that, while this move gives appropriate priority to place over space, it also allows us to understand place in more or less "spatial" terms: space in *Getting Back* is simply a derivative or modified place, thus we can take place to suggest something like space, space *with a difference*. No doubt place is space conceived prior or alternatively to objectification or reification and thus in a manner that calls for a radical re-understanding of what we take for granted about space; but this fact doesn't affect the basic rhetorical structure here.

The spatialized understanding of place which, to borrow a topo-metaphor, allows us to orient ourselves in the argument of *Getting Back into Place* confirms the projection of the traditional philosophical distinction between universal and particular, place and places.[6] In other words, my argument is that the polemical project of *Getting Back into Place*, its imperative to oppose modernity, colors the entire argumentative structure of the text, determining what Casey *does not* say as well as what he does. This structure, in my opinion, keeps him from articulating, within the

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[6] In his response to me, Casey challenges this assertion, claiming that my assertion about *Getting Back into Place* that, in it, "place is the universal form of places" mistakes his position (Comments, 26). Thus, he indirectly accuses me of misreading his first place book. And I can certainly affirm that Casey has never consciously embraced platonism. My assertion here, however, is rather different: it is that the rhetorical structure of his anti-modern polemic about place implicitly reinforces such a metaphysics, not that the text consciously embraces that position.

To understand this structure, reflect upon the difference between place and other objects of knowledge, a difference stemming from the inclusion of place in our fundamental metaphors for knowing. What I take to be the irreducible beginning point of every later philosophical discussion of place is the Platonic "discovery" of the way that the theory of forms already involves place (*Timaeus*, 48e). We are strongly inclined to "spatialize" the relationship between particulars and universals, to see that relationship as one wherein the universal provides the *place* for the particulars. So strongly inclined, in fact, that unless this view is explicitly challenged at the level of investigative method, it is simply *assumed*.

Furthermore, it is on the basis of this prejudice that we take place itself, as concept or essence of places, to be a kind of literal space within which individual places are gathered. *If* the space in which particulars "participate" within the universal is *place*, *then* place itself must be the space containing all places. To shake this last conclusion also demands explicit argumentation, and anything which tends to reinforce it as metaphor just guarantees the hidden assumption of place as universal space for places.

Take, then, the text of *Getting Back into Place*. While I am aware that Casey would never have embraced *either* of the two assumptions I've outlined above (the spatial metaphor governing the relationship between concepts and instances and the literalization of that metaphor when it comes to place itself), his earlier text not only fails to challenge these deep prejudices, but it reinforces both. To begin with the more "general" problem, the very radical phenomenological concreteness of Casey's approach to the "place world" here paradoxically reinforces that most Platonic metaphysics: Casey is, indeed, at great pains to insist upon the *specificity* of place experience, its irreducible concreteness, but, in the absence of reflection upon the issue of metaphysics, this simply registers as an understanding of the overriding *general* characteristics of place itself: a key quality of place—so it seems—is its concreteness and specificity. When coupled with a rigorous phenomenological analysis of the *structure* of such specificity (it has to do

first of his place books, his actual anti-platonism—an anti-platonism I know to have predated either of these projects. Only insofar as the spatial *assumption* of platonism is unchallenged and, indeed, rhetorically reinforced can the void play the role of substantial motivator for the modern flight from place. Only here, in *Getting Back into Place*, this projection serves to reinforce a traditional universalism: place becomes that "in which" all being can be found—an argument that Casey pushes to its extreme in pointing to the Hebrew use of "*Makom*" ("place") as a name for God (Back, 17). If places are always particular, then place itself is the place of places, that site which contains all possible places (Back, 15). Place is the universal form of places.

2.2   All of this adds up to a view of place that is difficult to discern from various pre-modern European positions; Casey himself admits this when he calls for "a belated postmodern

with body, concerns certain directional qualities, etc.) in the text's rhetorical structure, we find our Platonism reinforced rather than questioned.

This reinforcement is much strengthened by the specific treatment of place in its relationship to places. The key figure for the entire discussion is Archytas, whose (apparent) words define the approach of *Getting Back* as a whole: "It is peculiar to place that while other things are in it, place is in nothing" (cited, Back, 14-15). This not only seems to mean that places provide the "space" (if I can use that term) for things, but that place itself does the same with regard to places. That is, place, equated with the cosmos itself, is conceived as the "outermost place," beyond which there is nothing—no non-place or "empty" space (Casey, 15). Places are *in* place.

Admittedly, Archytas' introduction of the "nothing" beyond place is ambiguous. It *could* mean—in *The Fate of Place*, as we'll see, it *does* mean—that place (which is *in nothing*) is rigorously incommensurable with, heterogeneous to, places (which *are* in place); place *could be* something which cannot be conceived as "in." But without the introduction of a dimension heterogeneous to space (such as time), such incommensurability is not asserted. Besides, a key gesture in *Getting Back into Place* precisely defies such an interpretation of the Archytean "nothing." This is the analysis I've already mentioned of "no place" or the void. While, consistent with *The Fate of Place*, *Getting Back into Place* denies the existence of non-place, the framing of this denial with the psychoanalytic language of *fear of the void*, delimits the *mode* of this non-existence as *simple non-being* as opposed to *conceptual incoherence*: in order to be able to inspire anxiety and repression, the idea of this void must *make sense*, enough sense to explain the entire history of modernity. Thus, we read *Getting Back into Place*: it just turns out that there isn't anything "out there," that there isn't any "out there" beyond place itself, but *there could be* such a place. It isn't *nonsense* to speak of an "outside" to place and thus, because both are *potentially* "in," we still imagine a *between*—a spatial relationship—of places and place.

reconnection with a genuinely premodern sense of place" (Back, 39). Since, however, Casey's personal anti-modernism is hardly of the "regressive" sort, since he has no desire to let place return us to the kind of world in which we might be forced to "stay in our place," this neo-Aristotelianism of *Getting Back into Place* proves to be a less than comfortable position.

Thus (or so I imagine it), *The Fate of Place*, the second of Casey's place-books, owes a great deal to the author's efforts to deflect the accusation of backwardness or conservatism. For the Casey of *Fate*, place, correctly understood, does not imply revelational hierarchy or an ethical determinism. Indeed, the last division of *The Fate of Place*—the division devoted to contemporary efforts to re-valorize and re-think place—is marked throughout by the contrast between what Casey calls the "exclusive" nature of the late-medieval vision and the comparatively "inclusive" senses of place suggested by such figures as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Bachelard, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Irigaray (Fate, 335). One might even say that what provides the common thread in these various (more or less) contemporary projects is precisely the idea of "an expansion of the range of place beyond its (Aristotelian, tb) role as strict container or simple locator. . ." (Fate, 335)—precisely a rejection of Casey's own earlier conception of place. The return to place here is not a return to a pre-modern vision in which each person had better "know their place." Thus, the analysis of *embodiement* so central to both of Casey's books in this case reaches its highpoint in Luce Irigaray's rejection of the Aristotelian container model in favor of one based upon the female body: place has no fixed boundary but is, like that body, self-transcending and dynamic—enclosed and enclosing.

What, then, is place as it emerges *here*, in *The Fate of Place*, from these contemporary accounts? To answer that question, I must turn for a moment to the way that, for the Casey of *Fate*, the language of philosophy, the language of theory, itself stands in the way of genuine recognition of place. If Western universalism prejudices us against place itself, favoring as it does precisely that which is "everywhere" true, then the problem that this raises for Casey concerns *how* it is that place may enter theoretical discourse at all. That is, the standard distinction between universal (category, class, essence) and particular threatens to block our access to the genuine relationship between place and places and thereby

Ahistorical universalism carries built-in prejudice against place.

to a proper understanding of the place-world. Given that place is always, in some sense, *singular*—that it is always *a place* that is at issue in every discussion of place—how can we gain a theoretical access to place itself?

This question, as it turns out, brings Casey right back to the question of non-place. For example, Casey will dispute the Augustinian reading of Genesis, the reading which conceives the original divine creative act as an *ex nihilo* operation upon an utter void. According to *The Fate of Place*, the fact that the Earth is referred to as "without form and void" (*toho v' vohu*) refers not to nonexistence but rather to relative formlessness. "God," then, "is not creating from a preexisting abyss of nothingness. Things are already around when He begins to create—things in the guise of elemental masses, the watery Deep, darkness upon the face of that Deep, the predeterminate earth. . ." (Fate, 13). This re-interpretation of the Hebrew bible is typical of Casey's impulse in the opening chapter of *The Fate of Place*: investigation shows that place is never entirely absent, that it is always already there, at least in a primordial and potential way. As Casey writes, "In the context of cosmogony, *there is no place for no-place*" (Fate, 19).

This incoherence of non-place, its absence from human experience except as the kind of abstraction Whitehead identifies with "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," is a persistent sub-theme of *The Fate of Place*—from the early discussions of cosmogony through its critique of modernist space-obsession. Indeed, the chapter which Casey himself accords primacy in his account of his book,[7] the chapter on place in phenomenological accounts of the body, seems in part intended, by filling out the argument I already have indicated, to explain this rejection of placelessness.[8] Here both the similarity and difference between Casey's two books emerge most tellingly; for while *Getting Back* stakes a similar re-

Non-place absent from human experience except as an abstraction.

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[7] "The most effective way to appreciate the importance of place again is not to approach it as a total phenomenon, to compare its virtues *en bloc* to those of space in a single systematic treatment. Such a totalizing treatment would lead to nothing but vacant generalities. What is needed is a new and quite particular *way into* place, a means of reconnecting with it in its very idiosyncrasy. Given the crushing monolith of space in the modern era, the best return to place is through what Freud calls a 'narrow defile'—not, however, the defile of the dream (which is what Freud had in mind) but that of *body*" (Fate, 202-203).

[8] See, for example, the discussion of Whitehead in Fate, 212.

jection of placelessness in a fashion that even validates the presence of such non-place within human experience, *The Fate of Place* does so, as we've seen, on the basis of abstraction and incoherence. Here, there simply *is no* "no place." The assumption of non-place is an *error*, the error by which philosophy displaces the language of myth.

Why should such a vacuum open up in the place of the placeless? Why does cosmogony so studiously avoid the utterly void? To answer this question, Casey momentarily considers a "reverse" of the mythological discourse evident within cosmogonic texts—the language of modern transcendental philosophy. When we make the entirely modern gesture of the transcendental philosopher, when we try to imagine the *precondition* of knowledge or experience, we necessarily reduce place to an *objectified* or substantial condition, the one that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* names "presence-at-hand." Thus,

> It is important to retain this context in the face of the temptation to offer a transcendental deduction of place as that which *has to be* presupposed if experience or knowledge of certain kinds is to be possible. This temptation must be resisted. The only thing that can be deduced from a transcendental argument—of a Kantian sort—is the presupposition of *empty space*. (Fate, 20)

To substantialize place, to reduce it to an essence or form of places is, then, to transform it (*à la Kant*, or Casey himself in *Getting Back*) into space and, in so doing, to lose its particularity. Not only, then, does the calibration of method and result demand an alternative approach in analyzing place to that suggested by transcendental philosophy, it also lets us understand more deeply the reason for the domination of space over place in Western thought: the prejudice in favor of universality turns out also to be a prejudice in favor of *ontology*, of the substantial over the ephemeral and event-like. Genuine access to place demands that we suspend precisely the vision suggested by the priority of the ontological, that we divide off the relationship between place and places from the general way that we conceive of the relationship between the universal and the particular. It's not *simply* that place always carries with itself the specificity and concreteness of places and so demands a language of particularity; it's also that the standard way in which we understand the relationship between particular and universal is always already shot through with prejudice against place—al-

To transform place into space is to lose its particularity.

ways already shaded to substitute space for place. More radically, we might even suggest that place opens a different model of the general relationship between essence and particular than the one we usually assume.

Clearly, then, an adequate approach to place demands a re-thinking of the relationship between place and places—a re-thinking suggested by the form of creation stories like the one in Genesis: thus the fact that the earth is "without form and void" in Genesis 1 refers it to the text at 1.9, where God divides the waters from the earth, thus giving definite form to it. In other words, the text suggests that place itself is differentiated from places (the later earth and water) by its *shapelessness* or *formlessness* (Fate, 12).

Place as the event of "taking place."

It is from the pre-place which thus replaces non-place in our understanding of cosmogonic accounts that Casey first derives his central interpretive idea about place in *The Fate of Place*—the notion of place as event. That is, place can precede itself only insofar as its occurrence or action must, in some sense, precede its substantial existence. On this basis, Casey suggests that place relates to places not as one thing to another (since all things have form) but rather as an *event* relates to that which it eventuates. Indeed, this philosophical idea of place resounds from the very first pages of *The Fate of Place* and, despite numerous twists, remains consistent to its end: to avoid the Platonic trap, the trap of conceiving place as the substantial form of places, follow an alternative metaphor for this relationship, the metaphor of *event* and result. Thus, here for Casey the answer to the question of place is, *place is the event of "taking place," an event which happens in ever-different ways and leaves behind itself the residue of unique places.*

The Fate of Place offers us an interpretation of place which wrests its fundamental understanding of the place-world from time—albeit from a time divorced from the "present-at-hand" structuration of linear time. Place takes place, and, in so doing, it coordinates itself with the timeless time of the event. In this way *The Fate of Place* presents a distinctly *post*modern view of its subject as opposed to the universalizing and *pre*modern understanding offered in *Getting Back into Place*. Nonetheless, this postmodernism is perfectly symmetrical with the premodernism of Casey's earlier text: there the critique of modernity latched onto modernist tempo-centrism with the result that the legitimate concept of place was conceived as a modification of modern space. Here the

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effort to push away from the pre-modern—away from platonism—underwrites a rejection of modern space. The result is a conception of place (present in theorists from Bergson and Walter Benjamin through Deleuze and Andrew Benjamin today) as modified modern time.

3. Place and Modernity Reconsidered

3.0   But the "book ends" of Casey's analysis do more than indicate a certain poverty of phenomenology for escaping the limits of modern conceptuality. Treated together as *themselves* a phenomenon—the phenomenon of place as *aporia* of the modern—they offer us a real and important knowledge about what modernity *does* to thought about place. Having followed the arguments of both *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place* separately, let's try to consider what conception of place emerges *between* Casey's two accounts.

Consider for a moment the possibility of a *synthesis* of the positions developed in *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place*. Place would, then, be conceived as *both* primordial space *and* the primordial time of the event. The attractiveness of such a solution is obvious. It would allow a genuine alternative to modernity—or, at least, to modernity traditionally understood—by giving place precedence over *both* modern space and time.

To see the impossibility of synthesis, however, it is only necessary to recall the metaphysical and ontological implications of the choices represented in each of Casey's place-books. Remember that the pre-modern, Aristotelian approach of *Getting Back into Place* demands that place be conceived as a kind of "being"—the pre-objective being of the universal ("place") itself. On the other hand, the post-modern turn of *The Fate of Place* entirely hinges upon resisting any treatment of place as such a universal being. Instead place is a non-being or non-thing, the non-being of the event. To "synthesize" pre-modern and post-modern ideas of place, then, would be to imply that place *is* (as essence of places) and that it *is not* (as event-like non-essence of places)—a flat contradiction.

No more could one rest content with an endlessly repeated *choice* between the theses of each of Casey's books. Here, as with the synthetic possibility, one must admit a definite temptation: the

great joy in reading both *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place* comes from Casey's ability to provide specific and concrete analyses of elements of experiences and histories of place. In this sense, both of the books are masterpieces of phenomenology. It's tempting to just accept the ontologically/metaphysically generated possibilities for conceptualizing place itself in order to oscillate between them, enjoying the harvest of the place-world's fruits. *Either* place is the essence of places, in which case we will bring in a particular bounty of place-notes, *or* it is the event of places, in which case we'll an enjoy an alternative group of delicacies.

Alas, the very realization that each metaphysical framework generates different observations confirms Hegel's insight about the inevitable entanglement of empiricism and metaphysics once observation is placed within the context of philosophical investigation. If, say, the view of places in terms of a primordial and pretemporal relationality (e.g., "in front of" and "behind") depends upon a metaphysical concept of place itself, then the insights about the mythical character of place dependent upon the pre- or non-metaphysical view must be false. In the end, it boils down to a one-time *choice*, either of whose options sacrifices half of what Casey has to say. And, of course, the very fact of this choice would amount to a failure of Casey's project at a philosophical level—which claimed, after all, to *generate* knowledge of place from phenomenological observation. All that's left, if we treat Casey's place-work in this way, is a kind of derivative game, wherein pregiven philosophical positions are bound to particular concrete phenomena.

Place as an undecidable "between" space and time.
It's in this context that I'd suggest that place in the pair of *Getting Back into Place* and the *Fate of Place* rigorously provides what Jacques Derrida calls an "undecideable"—that it is itself a kind of philosophical insight, though one that must be presented in an aporetic language resisting either synthesis or choice. *Place is located as a strict undecidable "between" space and time. As such it is radically under/overdetermined at an* ONTOLOGICAL *level.* It is both/either true that place (as opposed to places) *is* and/or true that it *is not*. In other words, place is both/either the universal form containing every place (being itself in one form) and/or the *event* of places (something that doesn't independently *exist*, strictly speaking). As the former, it precisely instantiates a Platonic structure; as

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the latter, it calls into question every platonism, every attempt to establish a reality of the universal.[9]

3.1   Why should knowledge of place take this strange and distorted non-form? Let me essay a response by way of the thesis with which I began my discussion: the investigation of place today responds to the issue of the modern. As we've seen, both of Casey's books articulate arguments against modernity, but the key is that they're *different*, though related, arguments. *Getting Back into Place* treats the limits of place as (psychologically) real, so real that they form a convincing explanation for the onset of modernity, eliciting a kind of "return of the repressed." The *strength* of Casey's approach here is that it is clear how the fear of "no place" calls forth the "reaction formation" of "ontomania," the desire to fill up any possible void with objects. The *limit* of this argument comes in its metaphysical implication—in the way that it performatively "spatializes" place itself (in relationship to places) as a traditional essence or "form." "Places" are "in place."

Wishing to avoid the conservative, not to say reactionary, implications of such a way of seeing things, Casey reverses strategy in *The Fate of Place*, insisting upon place's resistance to metaphysics. The *strength* of the approach in Casey's second book is that the uniqueness of place in its relationship to individual instantiations of itself is allowed to emerge in the *temporality* of the "event." The *problem* with the argument here, from Casey's viewpoint, must be that it fails to be effectively *anti-modern*. The *heterogeneity* of an event's temporality to homogeneous and placeless space (as to individual places) leaves such space *unchallenged*. As radically insubstantial, place is, indeed, "other" to space but in a way that does not, and cannot, "take its place."

Symptomatic of this failure to *oppose* modernity is the weak-

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[9] My assertion here that place is best understood as the undecidability of Casey's two conceptions marks the key point of my continuing disagreement with him. In his response to this assertion, Casey writes, "it is . . . not true that 'place is either/both a temporalized non-space or/and a spatialized non-time'" (Unpublished Comments, 21). He bases this assertion on what he takes to be the priority of place over *either* space or time, a priority which, for him, explains the *apparent* coordination of his accounts with spatial/temporal coordinates. "The royal power is that of the child—it is that of place, the supposed child of space and time but in fact their progenitor" (Comments, 21). My reasons for questioning this priority will become clear in the next section of this article.

ness of the anti-modernist narrative in *The Fate of Place* when compared to that of *Getting Back into Place*. In Casey's second text it seems as though, at some moment (its historical position unclear), "mistakes were made," and no doubt they were the mistakes of philosophers. One imagines the whole thing (from Augustine's *creatio ex nihilo* onwards) as a simple error of thought, a kind of miscalculation of monstrous proportion. No more is said about *why* these mistakes happened because no more *can be said* without treating that which in itself is *nothing* (place itself, the event of place) as *something*. Place must be *heterogeneous to*, rather than *opposed to* places. Only by repressing the actual *motivation* for anti-modernism can the ontological status (or *non-status*) of place be performatively preserved. Any understanding of place that ascribes definite limits to it already contradicts the vision of place as radically concrete (as event of places), but *only* such limitation can make the modern "loss of place" compelling.

In other words, the doubling, reflexive structure of philosophical thought imposes an impossible demand upon the philosopher when it comes to place and modernity. Place must be a kind of spatial non-space, so that, within the confines of understanding imposed by modernity, it can be helpful in the *resistance to* modernity. But it must also be a temporalized event, heterogeneous to space as to substantiality, so as to escape precisely those confines of modern thought—so as to be genuinely critical as *postmodern*. The undecidability of place—what Casey unconsciously articulates *between* his two place books—is the price and, paradoxically, also the yield of this impossible double demand.[10]

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[10] Casey is able to maintain the priority of place over time/space on the basis of the following double gesture: (1) He argues that I have misread *Getting Back into Place* insofar as I impute to it a different conceptual structure than *The Fate of Place*. On Casey's reading, both volumes assume a relationship between place and places like the (postmodern) one I have found in *Fate*. (2) He challenges my understanding of that later position to the extent that I take it to depend upon a purely *temporal* understanding of place.

As I've already responded to the first assertion (see note 6), let me begin here with the second one. With the idea of "intermittency" (Comments, 19, 25), Casey's comments suggest an understanding of place as "event" that avoids the either/or that my ontological reduction suggests. Place as "essence of places" is not forced into the choice of being (platonism) or non-being. Rather, claims Casey, the relationship between place and places demands a distinction between the "subsistence" and the "existence" of an essence—a distinction reminiscent, no doubt, of Aristotle. Thus, Casey writes, "my choice of event, though influ-

What does all of this mean for the relative priority of space/time and place? While I can certainly see the theoretical possibility of alternate "fields" than these two for discussing issues of place, given the history of Western thought, space and time's re-

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enced by Deleuze and Guattari as well as by Lyotard and (ultimately) by Heidegger, was not meant to exclude subsistence—the *Bestand* which Husserl makes crucial to a pure phenomenon in the *Logical Investigations*—but only to excise . . . 'stability,' that is the sitification of place" (Comments, 20). That is, place only *exists* insofar as it is embodied in places, but it *subsists* as the potential for the concrete and specific event of a place to occur.

This is a rich and thought-provoking response on two counts. It questions, as does Casey at several points in his comments, the necessity of aporia so central to my approach, suggesting some kind of possible mediation between views I take to be unmediatable. Second, on the basis of this, Casey is much concerned, as I noted above, to challenge my specific assertion about the priority of space and time over place.

In response, let me first point out that what is at stake is *not* the stability (or spatiality) of place*s*—these may be as stable or unstable (spatial or unspatial) as they are—but rather of place *itself*. That is, the important question, as I understand it, is whether place itself has a stable and predicable nature. The issue is epistemological and concerns the knowability of place itself: To what extent are there stable qualities structurally present in every experience of place? To what extent is there a *space* of places?

Here I am not convinced by Casey's idea about the subsistent non-existence of place. It sounds like Aristotle/Thomas' "substantial form" without its determinant nature. That is, whereas, for example, (for Aristotle) the acorn may contain the essence of the oak *in nuce*, as *potential*, here the potentiality of place does not determine the specific nature of places. That's just a way of restating what Casey insists upon in the irreducible specificity of places. Having thus distinguished Casey's "place" from earlier ideas about substantial form, the immediately proximate question must be, "well, are there *any* qualities of places predetermined by place? Can we indirectly (as potential) attribute any qualities to place?"

The answer to that question, such is my claim, will depend upon the importance, within a given discourse, of challenging the apparent spatial homogeneity of universal and particular. If, as in *The Fate of Place*, the goal is to preserve the heterogeneity of place and places, then the text will be at pains to avoid any allusion to common properties. It will, in effect, assert the ontological incommensurability of universal and particular. Universals *won't exist*.

Here my response is a mirror image of my earlier response to Casey on *Getting Back into Place* (note 6). Just as I was aware that Casey would never actually embrace platonism (yet I was convinced that the discursive structure of *Getting Back* nonetheless favored such a position), here I know full well that Casey wouldn't support an equally reductive postmodernism of the event. But the *appearance* of such a reductivism, an appearance that Casey himself admits in his comments (comments, 20), is symptomatic of the spin imparted to Casey's narrative here by the demands of heterogeneity.

spective priority in Casey's two books strikes me as anything but coincidental. Space asserts itself precisely *through* the Platonic metaphor; time through the need for an "axis" heterogeneous to it. In other words, I would stop short of denying Casey's phenomenological point, but I would question our possible access to this theoretical "beyond" of modern conceptuality. In fact, within today's modern world, arguments about place will be forced either into choice or into aporia. Synthesis will evade them.

A unique opportunity for reinterpreting modernity?

3.2   I say "yield" because it may be that the aporetic structure of place revealed between Casey's two studies ironically offers us a unique opportunity today for reinterpreting *modernity*. In effect, my suggestion here will be that the leading thread for an understanding of the modern should not be modern science (as Casey takes it to be) but rather modern social and political life. Take, for example, the analysis of modern democracy introduced by the contemporary French philosopher Claude Lefort. In a number of essays written since the 1960s,[11] Lefort has raised the question of what allows modern democratic societies to function, and the answer that he's suggested in numerous venues—that there is an "empty place" at the center of every modern democracy—could well translate into precisely the idea of place as undecidable that we've arrived at in analyzing Ed Casey's work on place.

What makes modern democratic power *legitimate*? First, Lefort's "empty place" argument suggests one rather traditional answer. One essential reason for asking this question is the threat to democratic societies posed by capitalism, by the development of *private* interests. Democratic legitimacy clearly depends, on the contrary, upon a certain *universality*.[12] It depends upon the opera-

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[11] These essays are gathered in two volumes in English: *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism,* edited and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: MIT, 1986), hereafter, Forms; and *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), hereafter, Democracy.

[12] "If the place of power appears, no longer as symbolically, but as really empty, then those who exercise it are perceived as mere ordinary individuals, as forming a faction at the service of private interests and, by the same token, legitimacy collapses throughout society. The privatization of groups, of individuals and of each sector of activity increases; each strives to make its individual or corporatist interest prevail. Carried to an extreme, there is no longer a civil society" (Forms, 279-80).

tion of an idealized popular will *as* the place organizing social life, as a kind of non-place or even "no place" for the (no doubt, totalizing) overviewing of society as a whole. It is the place from which the nature and "interest" of "everybody" appears, the place of a "universal" interest as opposed to the private interests that permeate everyday life. Here, the "emptiness" of the democratic location in Lefort's locution indicates historicity or, if you like, the impossibility that anybody or any institution could actually "occupy" it. There is no *inhabitable* viewpoint for anybody (or any thing, any institution) corresponding to the place symbolically projected by democratic power. The projection of the democratic place only makes sense epistemologically as long as it remains empty—a symbolic construction rather than a real one. Nonetheless, this place is not nothing. Just as in *Getting Back into Place* we are forced to view place as the universal form of places, Lefort seems to suggest that democracy demands something like a genuine "public space" wherein legitimate political decisions are reached.

It is tempting, following this interpretation, to suggest that democracy is just a matter of reading-off and following the "will of the people." The problem with such an approach, suggests Lefort, is that it leads all too easily to totalitarianism rather than democracy. The totalitarian abridgement of democratic sovereignty takes such a form, since it consists in an imaginary effort to substantialize "the people"—to substitute an actual identity (the party, the leader) for the indeterminate desires of the *demos*.[13] Once identified *with* the leader or party (vanguard of the proletariat or protector of the nation's heritage), legitimate political power becomes the very opposite of democratic. What counts for legitimate "democratic" decisions is what the privileged ones think.

Thus, the second resonance of Lefort's idea that democracy depends upon an "empty place" at its center: Lefort follows a modern tradition of social and political analyses based upon asserting the *insubstantial* nature of democratic power, its evasion

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[13] Lefort's analysis of modern totalitarianism as imaginary perversion of democracy is developed most clearly in a pair of essays, "The Logic of Totalitarianism," in Forms, 273-91, and "The Image of the Body in Totalitarianism," in Forms, 292-306.

of any naturalizing or essentializing treatment of it.[14] In this interpretation, the language of "place" is precisely meant to pull us away from the view that power is a *thing* beyond its social formation, or, more precisely, that the legitimacy of power has any *ground* beyond the social world that determines it. There are, one might say, no *absolutes* within politics, no "natural" concepts— whether we think of reason, equality, or truth in that category. To say that democracy depends upon "place" is to insist that it doesn't depend upon any substantial ground but is worked out "in the event" in every case. With regard to the problem of democratic legitimacy and popular sovereignty, Lefort tells us that democratic power always both "emanates from the people" and yet does not treat "the people" as real; it remains "the power of nobody" (Forms, 279-80). Here the emptiness of the "the empty place" entirely *desubstantializes* it, privileging event and eruption, just as place itself is desubstantialized in *The Fate of Place*.

No absolutes within politics.

Substantial (but empty) and/or insubstantial (*as* empty), the "empty place" of democracy follows precisely the logic of undecidability that we've discovered with regard to place itself in Casey's topoanalyses. What characterizes a genuinely modern political life (as Lefort takes modern democracy to be) is both a certain spatiality allowing it to defend against the fragmenting forces of techno/economic modernity and a heterogeneity to space preventing it from marking a form of imaginary social regression. Only as both/either the public space determinant of the "public good" and/or the creative eruption of that in the social refusing totalization can modern democratic space operate. But, and here's the point, despite the aporetic nature of these demands, they do operate. We all recognize to one degree or another the necessity and legitimacy of *both* something like a "public" or a "people" and the necessary insufficiency and even unreality of such a construct. And we all live with the *tension* or even *contradiction* suggested between these "truths." Modern political life, to the extent that

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[14] See Rosalind Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 1998). See, also, the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, especially *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), and that of Slavoj Zizek, especially *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989). Both of these texts, like Deutsche's *Evictions*, explicitly interpret Lefort's work in the light of a post-structuralist view of identity.

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Lefort has correctly described it, is something we would wish to embrace precisely *insofar as* it is undecidable.

Now, of course, describing the modern—whether modernity in general or modern social/political life in particular—in this way certainly leads to a different conception of it than the ones we inherit from the Enlightenment. That's obvious here as soon as you think about the implications of Lefort's analysis for the very idea of a "utopia" or "ideal (non)place" against which present society is measured. What's new is the sense that critique might grow from the rigorously insubstantial "terrain" of the aporetic. Not, that is to say, from a tension awaiting utopian resolution but rather from an irresolvable contradiction at the very level of experience. We can know that "something's missing," something's wrong, to paraphrase Bloch and Adorno, but this gives us no access to any alternative world. To displace the political from the imaginary to the undecidable "between" of ideal and event is necessarily to dampen the inspirational force of the modern. No longer the *project* of the modern but its complex *task* faces us in our political life—an endless and difficult negotiation requiring both vision and a talent for the concrete. And this describes, as well, the larger transformation of modernity that has been emerging in recent years. It is a transformation calling for a care and subtlety of approach for which Ed Casey's research on place serves as exemplary *despite* its anti-modern intentions.

Task of politics requires both vision and a talent for the concrete.