

Introduction

In the Brightness of Place

This volume, as with much of my work over the last thirty years, is organized around one simple idea: that all our thinking, especially in philosophy, is fundamentally oriented towards and determined by place—*topos*. Place, it should be noted, is not the same as *space*, even though the two are connected, nor it is to be set in opposition to *time*, even though the two can be distinguished.¹ Place encompasses space and time, without being reducible to either, so that space and time can be said to be derivative of place. What *place* names is an overarching *ontological* structure or event—the bounded opening in whose brightness things first come to presence—which is to say that it names the essential origin, ground, and framework for thinking, no matter how or where it arises. It also names that structure or event as it is given in any and every ordinary place.² The equivocity that is apparent here (which necessarily carries over into an equivocity affecting space and time also) reflects the essential character of place—an equivocity that derives from the *iridescence* that belongs to place as both extraordinary and ordinary, both familiar and strange, both ontological and ontic (to use the language of early Heidegger), both transcendent and immanent. The iridescent character of place means that place resists any attempt to reduce it to a metaphysical foundation, ground, or principle in the usual sense; resists even its reduction to the extraordinary, the strange, the transcendent, the ontological alone.

That place is something ordinary, even if it is also extraordinary, means that what is at issue in talk of place is that very place that is the place of our everyday life and existence—the place, *this* place, no matter

when or where, in which we always already find ourselves, the place in and through which the world opens to us (since to be *in* the world is to be *placed*). Yet, that place is indeed ordinary in this way does not imply that place is always recognized, that it is easily understood, or that it is readily grasped. What Heraclitus says of nature or *physis*³ applies equally to place or *topos*: place loves to hide. Despite the *iridescence* of place, despite the *brightness* of place, despite the *openness* of place, place remains often obscure, overlooked, neglected, forgotten. That this is so, however, is itself a consequence of the fundamental and disclosive character of place. As it is fundamental and disclosive, so place is often hidden by that which is disclosed in and through it—place withdraws in favour of that which it discloses. The attempt to overcome the withdrawal of place as well as its forgetting, and to do so philosophically, is at the heart of what is here referred to as *topological thinking*, or just *topology*—the “thoughtful saying” of place.

These opening comments, declarative as they are, summarize an account of place that has been developed over several previous books and many previous essays. It is not the aim of this volume simply to reiterate that account, and the reader who seeks some further, more specific elaboration and clarification of the claims made above is best advised to look to some of those previous books and essays. Although the underlying character of place is touched upon at various points in the pages that follow, this volume is not intended as a treatise solely or specifically on place.

Instead, its aims are twofold. First, it aims to explore the question of place in relation to a range of different issues or problems (the chapters are arranged in a fairly loose order and are accessible largely independently of one another): poetry, landscape, origin, nature, language, metaphor, emotion, reason, technology, authenticity, releasement, place, world (these being the most salient). Only the first chapter is a little different in that it addresses place, as I note below, in terms of the way it figures in a certain path of thinking, although the relation between place and thinking is itself the overarching concern. In this, the volume’s various chapters are essays in *philosophical topology*,⁴ based in the attempt to articulate, in various domains and in relation to various topics, that single, simple thought that was referred to at the start—a single, simple thought that nevertheless leads into a complex multiplicity. Second, the volume aims to develop further the claim, made in several other works,⁵ that the idea and experience of place, and so the project of topology,

are central to the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger—a figure who, no matter the complications, failures, and limitations of his thinking, remains arguably the single most important and influential philosopher of the twentieth century. The first chapter is crucial in setting out the overall trajectory of this reading, and the epilogue, to some extent, returns us to it. The volume's two aims are bound together, since Heidegger stands out as the thinker who, more than any other, has taken up place as a key philosophical idea—the very idea of topology being taken from the way Heidegger characterizes his thinking in terms of a topology of being (*Topologie des Seyns*).⁶ The topological exploration that is undertaken in the pages that follow is thus an exploration of the way topological thinking appears *in* Heidegger, as well as an exploration of the way topological thinking appears beyond or *after* Heidegger.

Where one ends is often the same as the place one begins, and my contention has always been that Heidegger's thinking has its own end and beginning in one and the same place, no matter whether we call it the *Da* (there/here), the *Augenblick* (moment), the *Lichtung* (clearing), the *Ereignis* (event), or the *Geviert* (fourfold), and regardless of whether we read the elaboration of this place as it occurs in Richardson, Dreyfus, Sheehan, Capabianco, or Figal. Perhaps surprisingly, however, what unites many of Heidegger's contemporary readers, despite their differences over terms and modes of analysis, is a peculiar inattention to, even dismissal of, this most obvious and straightforward of points; namely, that Heidegger's thinking does indeed begin *in this one place*, and that this place is not a metaphorical origin, nor is its appearance a mere accident of language, even though it may seem obscure and enigmatic. Heidegger's thinking is thus *topological* in character in a fundamental and essential sense. Thinking is always placed, and the thinking that Heidegger enacts is not only a thinking that therefore begins *in its place* but also a thinking that attempts to thematize its own *being-placed*—which is, it should be added, the being-placed of all thinking and all presencing—and so too *the very place* of such thinking and such presencing.

The point at issue here is a simple one, even though its elaboration can become complex and sometimes difficult. It is a point already suggested earlier and one that ought to be evident as soon as we begin to reflect on the placed character of our own thinking. Thinking arises, not in some ideal realm removed from the world, but here, in the only place given to us, the place of the world in which our lives are embedded, the place in which we encounter the very things, events, and processes

that provoke us to think in the first place. Our thinking may well open up to possibilities that take us far beyond what is immediately present to us, but that does not mean that our thinking is thereby untethered or dislocated from the place in which our thinking begins. In much recent and contemporary thinking, something of this idea has been evident in the work of those many theorists, from Gaston Bachelard to Paul Virilio, who have argued from, and often provided close elaborations of, the way specific modes of thought, themselves bound to activities and practices, are tied to specific circumstances and situations.

Although Heidegger is a key figure throughout the discussions that follow, this book is not a work that belongs primarily to the field of what has become known as “Heidegger studies.” What that field might be is perhaps somewhat obscure. Thomas Sheehan seems to present it as if it were a well-defined area of intellectual inquiry, such that a new “paradigm” can be advanced in relation to it.⁷ But it is not at all clear what justifies such talk beyond the bounds of a relatively small circle of largely North American scholars whose work is focused on a certain sort of close exegetical and critical engagement with Heidegger’s texts. This field, if it is to be called such, is a relatively enclosed and highly self-referential one that makes little or no connection with the larger philosophical landscape of recent and contemporary thought. Although the claim may be too provocative, I am tempted to say that Heidegger studies, in this respect, has become largely disconnected from any broader domain of contemporary intellectual inquiry even within philosophy—and whether it remains true to the sort of fundamental thinking to which Heidegger was so committed seems at least questionable.

As I am less concerned to fit within the framework of contemporary Heidegger studies, so I am also less concerned to remain strictly bound by what might be thought of as the authority of the Heideggerian text. In his preface to *Heidegger and Sartre*—a pioneering work in the topological approach to Heidegger—Joseph Fell comments: “I take seriously Heidegger’s notion of the value of ‘violence’ in interpretation and translation, and I have often turned this dangerous technique back upon Heidegger himself . . . ”⁸ Such a strategy is one that I would acknowledge as an essential part of my own reading of Heidegger. It follows from a concern with the problems at issue rather than textual exegesis or historical interpretation alone. It means that the reading that results must be seen as a critical one, and not tied to the affirmation of every element that may appear in Heidegger’s writings. This approach

to Heidegger also has the important corollary that my engagement is not primarily with Heidegger the person, nor with the details of his life, and I would also reject the claim that there is any straightforward path from the biographical to the philosophical.

This certainly does not mean that I would, in any way, endorse Heidegger's actions in supporting Hitler, for instance, or that I would defend his anti-Semitic comments from the late 1930s and 1940s. *Both Nazism and anti-Semitism deserve an unqualified condemnation and rejection.* However, I am not convinced that the pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic comments that appear in some of Heidegger's writings represent core elements in his thinking (though they may well have been tied to aspects of his own person and character), nor do I think that those comments are tied, in any significant way, to the key questions that concern me here, or that they bear, in any crucial way, on the reading of Heidegger's response to those questions. In fact, I take Heidegger's Nazi sympathies and his anti-Semitism, both of which are also tied up with his problematic nationalism and Germano-centrism, to be indicative of the extent to which he fails adequately to follow the real direction of his own thought—fails adequately to address the topological dimensions that are there from the beginning but often remain implicit and only partially articulated. Whether I am right in this cannot, of course, be decided in advance of the actual engagement with the thinking and the questions at issue. Whatever one's prior views on this matter, there is no way around the task of working through the actual ideas and arguments along with the work itself.

This volume is an exercise in topological thinking at the same time as it also takes topological thinking as its focus. While the various chapters that follow do indeed take up a range of different topics, what nevertheless unites them is a common concern with the elaboration of a different kind of thinking—what Heidegger variously refers to as poetic or mediative thinking and, in the 1966 *der Spiegel* interview, simply as the “other thinking.”⁹ Heidegger often presents this thinking as standing completely apart from traditional philosophy and so as also standing apart from any concern with notions that belong to that tradition, most notably the transcendental and the ontological. Certainly, the terms “transcendental,” “ontology,” and “ontological” all largely disappear from Heidegger's later writing other than as they arise as a focus for critical comment.

Heidegger cannot, however, completely sever his connection to the previous tradition, and he does not attempt to do so, but neither,

for that very reason, is it possible entirely to abandon the language of that tradition. This is especially obvious when it comes to Heidegger's talk of "being." It is the persistence of the term in his thinking, even while he aims to decouple the term from its metaphysical connotations, that leads him to the technique of letting the term "being" appear but as struck through (*durchstreichen*)—what has become known as "writing under erasure," thus: ~~being~~.¹⁰ But this technique merely highlights the problem rather than providing a solution to it. Similarly, the disavowal of certain terms, although sometimes justified, can also lead to a neglect of what was genuinely at issue in the discourse in which those terms operated, and even of the underlying insight those terms were supposed to play a part in elaborating. Moreover, in Heidegger's case, it can all too readily contribute, despite his claims about the inextricability of thinking from the tradition out of which it comes, to what sometimes appears as a form of intellectual exceptionalism, as if Heidegger's thinking were indeed unique and unprecedented.

Such exceptionalism seems to me a form of philosophical hubris. But it also neglects the way in which thinking is never about some form of pure innovation—as if it were a matter of stepping into some place that we have never before encountered. The very character of thinking as topological means that it is always a turning back to the place in which we already are, and that means that thinking is always recuperative, always involves, to some extent, a task of retrieval. Again, this is only to emphasize something already present in Heidegger (as will be seen in the chapters that follow), but I also take this to imply the impossibility of any complete disavowal or abandonment of the terms of previous thinking. The real task is one of rethinking what might have been thought before, and that may well include rethinking the language that has gone before in an effort to allow what was genuinely at issue in that language to emerge. Consequently, unlike Heidegger (in at least some of his moods), I remain committed to the idea that many of the notions that figure so prominently in the philosophical tradition—especially the transcendental and the ontological—remain important and deserve to be rethought rather than abandoned. As they appear here, as well as elsewhere in my work, the aim is to rethink those notions as *topological* and, in so doing, also to show how the topological is already embedded in the philosophical tradition (and is therefore not peculiar to Heidegger alone), even if it is not always acknowledged by it.