Max Deutscher

Posing Place in Time

BIOGRAPHY

Max Deutscher is an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Macquarie University, and an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, The University of Queensland
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REALITIES OF PLACE

reassurances

To speak of place imposes a feeling like that of Seinfeld and George who dared, in the field of big hot money, to promote a T.V. show about nothing. Their show of nothing, held in air above an Abyss, which the show itself makes, and of which the show makes itself. From *mise en abîme* to *relève sur l'abîme*. About nothing? About *Nothing*? They’ve got plenty of nothing, and nothing’s plenty for them? Things do have their place, though. They’re in place, they’re ready to go, they’re ready to stay. They’re posed, poised, deposed, indisposed, in repose. All things, simply in having their being? Does the moon, do the sun and stars, have a place? *In position! Ready! Set! Go! In the cosmic racecourse*? Those ‘heavenly bodies’, once divinely deposed on errands of earthly urgency, then objects within a cosmic container whose positions are designated by Cartesian coordinates. Now framed in curved space according to the title-words of our conference, *topologically* located by trajectories from one to the next. The objects in a room, like the people who arrange them, still are placed in Aristotle’s *common place*. The objects? Someone has placed them there, thence to be removed and replaced. Us? We take our place or, tense in our disposition we find our elves out of place, displaced. Indisposed, between a rock and a hard place. We would fall back in relief to our own position, our natural place. (Relaxed in bigotry?) We maintain philosophical positions in bodily alignment with the others in the commonplaces of their ideas. Always already posed as thinkers, disposed in elegance or inelegance, disported in games, importing, exporting words.

**topology**

Topology a *logos* of *topoi* - a story of place and a reasoned account of place and places. Some standard definitions give this sort of account:

**Topology:** a study of the properties that do not change when figures are deformed by bending, stretching or moulding. A cube can be moulded into a sphere; a sphere cannot be moulded into a torus (a doughnut shape).

**Topology:** ignores (Euclidean or Cartesian) straightness, parallelism and distance, because deformations can alter them.

**Topology:** studies the number of intersections made by a curve with itself, whether a surface is closed or has boundaries, and whether or not one surface is connected with another.

Here, now, our speeches are guided by a definition - the ‘relating of points and places without appeal to a neutral enclosing space’. Is topology such a novelty? Does it effect a transformation of a space that a Cartesian system of coordinates confined or held in check? The Cartesian geometry, itself a liberating transformation of Euclidean space, permitted depiction and tracking of trajectories by means of an algebra of asymptotes, parabolas, hyperbolas. If ‘topology’ suggests to us new wonders about space, we should recall that geometry is always on the verge of hyperbole, approaching the limit of impossible ideas never matched by observable facts. The perfection of a geometry suggests the Ideal as what is ultimately Real. Pythagoreans made a cosmology of numbers. Euclid’s system seemed to offer an insight into the essence of any possible space. Is geometry about the Real, or an idealised map of a rough reality? The Cartesian mapping of hyperbolas transformed Euclidean space even before the full frontal attacks (by Riemann, for instance) on its status as necessary and universal. Or shall we say that it transformed our ways of dealing with space? Can one ask whether *space* is a Real thing, as if a thing in itself? (Some mathematicians are ready to declare themselves as ‘realists’, ‘constructivists’ or ‘idealists’.) So now, how are we to read the phrase ‘topological space’? Hyperbole about hyperbolas? A kind of space, or a kind of technique for studying relationships in space?

Topologically, one finds ways to plot trajectories and relative positions on surfaces not assumed to be flat or curved, nor to keep any regular flat or curved formation, and where it is either not feasible or not possible or perhaps, undesirable, to locate things on a surface by working from a position outside it from which to subtend points upon it. One might think that architects at least would swear by Cartesian geometry until one recalls the Sydney opera house, and constructions like those of Frank Gehry.

That relationships in space can be considered ‘topologically’ need not exclude the idea that at any moment there is a determinate order and positioning in space of all things. It seems that this point of view is assumed when topology speaks of ‘deformations’ of surfaces and of ‘ignoring’ distance. The determinacy of location of things
in space has to be defined in relation to a moment in time. Relativity theory has disturbing implications for the traditional linear conception of a ‘given’ order of events, of ‘earlier and later’ that uniquely identifies all events along one unequivocal time line. Are there real implications for large-scale everyday orderings of events in all of this? Disturbances in the measurement of time by clocks that travel at velocities approaching that of light occur because mass increases with velocity. At least those disturbances are irrelevant in our world of velocities whose modification of mass is immeasurably minute. We need not apprehend a ‘topological transformation’ of one’s having breakfasted at eight, four hours before one lunched at midday. (To use a flourish in the style of G.E. Moore).

Whatever we make of the idea of an essential givenness of time and space as fixed in themselves, we still need to observe what frames our identification of an event. What makes for an event in time? To observe something as an event is like picking out a significant wave in a surface of indiscernible ripples. As an organiser (bringing about events) or an historian, biographer (narrating events) knows, an event needs a venue. Events need significant places and the study of places is the literal translation of ‘topology’. Our study of places, then, goes hand in hand with some study of time and times at a level of concepts that makes sense of the kinds of times and places that we have in mind. For a rock concert an amphitheatre. For a lecture, a ‘room’ or ‘hall’. An athletics contest asks for a ‘track’, a ‘field’, a stadium. For a war a battlefield; the ‘News of the World’ politician’s affair requires a ‘love-nest’; an open liaison simply their dwelling place; a conference wants a well-connected series of rooms in a building of some chosen character; a solar flare is lost without its solar system or at least its position vis-à-vis other stars. (You call that a flare’ smorts Alpha Centauri at our upstart sun.) If an event needs a venue, then an event is not just ‘given’ by ‘being itself’; it must be staged. They come in stages. Our chariot on the road of time is a stagecoach? Subject to thieves of time?

Narrative reconstruction

It is sometimes alleged that theories of relativity in physics would radically disturb the traditional conception of a unique ordering of events according to ‘earlier and later’. Augustine’s collapse of the present as a continuous period of time to the ‘now’ of an instant (represented on a time line as a mathematical ‘cut’ rather than a ‘slice’) does not disturb the sense of a unique ordering of events. Rather, his reconstruction of a ‘long’ past and ‘long’ future as a long retention and long protention is like topology in replacing a focus on distances between points to the accessibility of one point to another according to a variety of trajectories. Even as a fixed order of events, time is made ‘topological’ since the events that are ordered become elastic in duration depending upon one’s manner of retention or protention. Events vary in duration and continuity depending upon how they are ‘eventified’. The event in which we are now (!) involved cannot be located unequivocally, in itself, as before or after another event whose own extent has also to be eventified according to some criterion or other. Certainly, as an experiential moment the period of an event must vary upon the extended phase of which it is projected as taking part. Thus the ‘moment of readying oneself to deliver a precise remark’ might seem to occupy a few seconds. Equally it may be the outermost boundary of a phase of months of spasmodic mulling over, rehearsing, resenting and dreading. It may be the latest boundary of an event of years of a mode of work.

Decisions about the extent of a period of time are not therefore idle or arbitrary. Elasticity of extent of an event is like that of place. One must localise a reply to ‘Where are you?’ The localisation is not arbitrary, however. ‘Where are you’, someone asks me on my mobile phone. ‘In the Botanical Gardens’ I answer (‘Sydney’ being understood). In fact I am standing just within the restaurant in the Gardens, but since my intent was to be in the Gardens to walk and take in the botany, and only stepped into the restaurant for a moment for convenience, it would be misleading rather than precise to answer ‘Inside the restaurant’, rather than ‘Inside the Gardens’). In the same fashion, if I had gone to the Gardens only not to be interrupted in a line of thought, and were asked ‘What are you doing now?’ it would be more true to say ‘Still trying to formulate a way to write about the Mabo judgment’ than to say ‘Walking in the Gardens’. Furthermore, it is liable to be less than true to the event to describe it as if ‘precisely’ by using terms that are limited to the five-second stage of thought that had just occurred when the phone rang.

History and biography need notions of place and time that operate at a corresponding level of sophistication. Fictional narratives have the same requirement, and are topological in the precise sense that distances of space and of time may be stretched and bent to any degree short of rupture. One cannot stretch and twist a linear narrative into a Möbius strip. The twist (that allows one to travel from one face of the strip to the other without leaving the surface, must be made before the narrative journey begins). Then space and time may be ‘transformed’ by narrative reconstruction so that we can understand hitherto untransformed space-times. Socrates has now been made to hear echoes from the future ‘Rylos’, ‘Foulkon’ and ‘Husserlides’. It was arranged that Heidegger and Quine should have talked on ham radio, their bizarre conversations picked up by
someone in the Murray Mallee in the mid ‘fifties, while snatches of airs from Deleuze and Irigaray were refracted from the ionic layers back into their mutual incomprehension.ii

These transformations were ‘topological’, inasmuch as distance was of consequence only to the extent that it was registered in the textual effort of stretching and compressing it. The question became whether you can fold or mould the space-time surface so that these speakers were adjacent – whether one could fold the surface so that the characters could have been able easily to talk across the interval. The work of transformation was to locate the points of declaration and expression of each of the philosophical characters from within each to within each, rather than from some framework outside them – an outside of time assumed by the pretender to the throne of ‘objective commentator upon philosophical texts.’

IRIGARAY WITH ARISTOTLE

Luce Irigaray effects transformations of time and space upon the worlds represented in philosophical texts. She evokes Aristotle from ancient times; she breaks the pronouncements out of his encyclopaedic tomb. And, writing as if the eighteenth century were placed within the second last decade of the twentieth, she makes Spinoza speak directly to her and to us – and to us from them as a couple. In yet another transformation the nineteenth century is brought to us now even as she turns us back towards it. She invites us to overhear her telephone conversations with Nietzscheiv – words not easy to decipher when we gain access only to the transcript of the recording at her end of the line. And, latest in the series of these transformations, we are given an extensive transcript of her conversations with the various Heideggers who have given voice to their times from the twenties to the sixties of the twentieth century. Various Heideggers to whom she extends all contemporary citizens rights to participate in discourse with her, even as she steps back to reason with them.vi

Irigaray’s transformations of time and space would secure immediacy of contact within an operative consciousness of historical and cultural difference. This transformation admits neither of co-option nor of detachment. They are made in order; they stretch, fold and mould a surface to achieve a text in virtual time. They create a narrator who speaks to some reader - neither ‘then’ nor now’ nor ‘transcendent’ of time. They achieve an escape from a dilemma in philosophical history of philosophy. How to escape being driven back either to anachronistic judgement upon the ‘evident fallacies and confusions’ in these previous philosophers, or to an infinite ‘respect for the classical greats in their times’ whose elevation of them is only the flip side of infinite condescension? The cost lies in the demands placed upon writer and reader to hold all these things together. Such works require such attention that they can be read only in our times of utter recreation. These works are the luggage we take along when ‘language goes on holiday’, as Wittgenstein puts it. (It is a special kind work that is involved in gaining rest and enjoying a holiday).

In the style of objectivist metaphysics Aristotle goes,

Further, too, if (place) is an existent, it will be somewhere: for if everything that exists has a place, place too will have a place and so on ad infinitum.’

There is nostalgia here, says Irigaray. We are nostalgic in our ‘quest for the unique in the downshift of places’. There is another theme in the offing here also, Irigaray apprehends:

The belief in a … God [that would] stop [us] falling or expanding immediately to infinity through the suppression of all platforms of duration, of space-time.vii

What has endured since Aristotle, despite sporadic complaints, is an objectivism in metaphysics that denies its own investment in what it says, referring responsibility to the world itself for what it says about the world. In the face of that evasion Irigaray could retort, ‘Who feels the uncertainty about place? If one were immediately in a primary place then why the insecurity?’ The ‘common place’ is a space large enough to contain more than the one who is being placed. Why resist the call to accept this commonplace as the primary sense of being posed, poised, and disposed in place – in a place? Irigaray’s original place is our being corps à corps avec la mère - a state we attempt to restore for ourselves, symbolically, in adult life. The puzzle of how two can be in the same place as one of the two (precisely what happens in pregnancy and parturition) emerges in Aristotle’s critique of a ‘common’ place in which more than one thing has the same place:

The form and the matter are not separate from the thing, whereas the place can be separated. Where air was, water in turn comes to be. Hence the place of a thing is neither a part nor a state of itviii [But we must distinguish] place which is common and in which all bodies are [from that] which is the proper and primary location of each body.
This follows hard upon a declaration that Newton’s physics would come to mock – that place has power, that things revert to their ‘natural’ places. Air rises to its natural place, clods return to their natural home of earth.

**to place place itself**

Irigaray uses, neatly, the metaphor from changing gears a ‘downshift’. There is a ‘double downshift’ in the imagination as we look ahead down the road of this threatening infinite regression of places. In this desire that every place is something, and that (as such) it must itself have a place there is a ‘quest to infinity for the mother’, she says. This becomes a quest for ‘Woman’ as a category to represent security and finality of place. To terminate the regress (a metaphysical pregnancy of place) a ‘unique’ mother would be required. ‘Why not refer directly to one’s mother?’ one asks in the spirit of commonsense. Or why not find finality within the space that Aristotle suspects as too loosely defined the “common place”?

We resist these ‘commonplace’ finalities, Irigaray speculates, because when the reality of our actual origin is overtly a bodily mother then we see what is not an absolutely secure place. An actual mother needs her own place as well as her common place with her child or partner. This place is something she cannot guarantee for herself. Traditionally, consumed with *being* a place, she is deprived of the power to secure one. The position in which ‘she’ is placed by traditional masculinity means she cannot supply the secure place upon which that same masculinity depends. Thus the nostalgia for a past that never was, a fantasy that elides the past of her actual provision of partial place and security.

Irigaray writes of a ‘double downshift’ – the ‘quest to infinity’ (the regress of the place of the place) that pauses to consider the ‘mother in women’ and results in a ‘quest to infinity in God’. Irigaray suggests that these solutions to mother as place, and God as place, might ‘intersect ceaselessly’ so that *place [might] indefinitely switch from the one to the other*. (In our thought we might switch sides from the ‘quest’ for a ‘mothering’ place to an invisible ‘God’ without any bump in the road.) Irigaray is alive to the fact that Aristotle is concerned, not only with how place is maintained as one thing leaves and another replaces it, but with the way place itself may move. Irigaray is concerned with how the figure that provides place moves between an impossible maternal figure and a paternal one whose abstract character makes it seem possible. One sees what is being asked, giddily, of the maternal and then of the paternal origin when one diagnoses the nostalgia. The childishness of the desire that place itself should have a secure place.

Irigaray would disturb an obsession with the boy child’s preoccupation, in becoming a man, with securing his place in the world. *As for woman, she is place. Does she too have to locate herself in bigger and bigger places?* In the imaginary that Irigaray imputes to Aristotle, the innermost surface of what immediately surrounds a man supplies his strict, proper and unique place. Irigaray observes that the maternal body supplied this. In his adult sexual life, seeking a return to this secure place, he reduces the woman’s body to an envelope for his sex. The need for reciprocity – for him to create a place for woman – can remain in the background. Trouble arises when that issue is made explicit. What supplies his place as he tries to find his masculine separate existence to emerge from a primordial enclosing safe place? Whether in fantasy or in symbolism he seizes upon almost anything to play the role. He is ‘immersed in’ work or sport. Or, physically, he might find water to be such an envelope and dedicate himself to swimming. It is only air that fills Aristotle’s demand for a universally present physical ‘proper place’. But that universal element guarantees his existence only in making him absolutely dependent upon something whose presence and quality lie beyond his control.

Aristotle has a horror of a void – of what ‘nature’ is supposed to shun. If one were in a region of empty space, a place that contained no substance, there would be no ‘innermost surface’ of what immediately surrounded him. He would not have a place to exist; that his body occupies a finite volume of space guarantees no real innermost surface meeting his outermost surface. His ‘common place’ is not secure enough to contain him. Its business is to admit the co-existence of others. After Aristotle and with Irigaray we might challenge this alleged inadequacy of the common place. The others may help one secure one’s place even if they may also jostle to supplant the one who, in his primary place, would like to think of their self as precisely and perfectly enclosed by an envelope distinguished only in substance but not by distance beyond from their own outermost surface.

Irigaray probes this idea further: If the (fantasised form of) woman can supply the sense of primary or strict emplacement to the (fantasised form of) man, what can supply the sense of primary or strict emplacement to the woman? A woman’s own mother cannot supply this primary emplacement if she has the same ambiguously placed status. She may hope that her child might guarantee place to her – the very being she emplaced in gestating and bearing it might give *her* a place in establishing a place that would surround her. Irigaray writes,
‘she passes ceaselessly through the child in order to return to herself. She turns around an object in order to return to herself.’ There is a price for this hectic oscillation in search of emplacement. Inevitably, ‘this [circuit] captures the other in her interiority’. The child would not be allowed its own identity. It would be made to play the (fantasised) role of the innermost layer of the outside world within which the mother projects this vision.

Hence, this demand for an imaginary of a secure place makes impossible requirements upon woman as a category. It is as a category that she has to supply place. In order thus to envelop, she must have her own envelope. But how can she have the very thing that she must be? For Aristotle, in being a place she must have a strict and primary place an inner surface against her outer surface, an inner surface of surrounding matter. But what use is this to her? As Irigaray sums it up, she must lack neither body nor extension within nor extension without. Since she is given the logical role of forestalling an infinite regress of placing of places she must, impossibly, be a self-placing place. Otherwise ‘she will plummet down and take the other with her.’

Aristotle insists that place is not purely relative or arbitrary. Whether something seems to be ‘up’ or ‘down’ depends on your orientation but ‘in nature’ the distinction is given; fire will go up, and clods of earth will come down. For the objects studied in mathematics, ‘right’ and ‘left’, and ‘up’ and ‘down’ are given arbitrarily. It is not arbitrary, however, which is one’s left and which one’s right hand. Nor, for the body, is it arbitrary which direction is up and which down. Certainly we require a context here (of gravity) for ‘up’ and ‘down’, and of the placing of one’s eyes and face in determining when one is facing ‘to the front’. Similarly, context is built into the determination of something’s place when this place is a common place. Aloft, you are in the heavens because you are in the air and the air ‘reaches up’ to the heavens. Aristotle would diminish the common place on account of its contextuality. In contrast, Irigaray re-examines this common place in order to retrieve some of its possibilities.

restoring a common place

What is this imagination of us as if ‘aloft’ (because in the air) before the times of assisted flight? In free fall from a high mountain? Soaring like the birds? We are brought to earth. We are ‘in the heavens’ because we are ‘in the air’ and it is in the heavens. We are ‘in the air’ even while we are on the earth because it is fully covered by air. Aristotle wants to expose a sense of absurdity about the common place here. He would like to deny that we are ‘in the heavens’ though we are in the air that extends from the heavens ‘down’ to interface with the earth on which we move. Aristotle would resist the ‘absurdity’ implicit in the commonplace. He would supplant it with the strict and proper place that each thing has, and then let a wider emplacement work out from there. But, for ourselves, as we recover from the delighted shock to find that, merely by standing on the earth we are in the heavens, we can see how to resist Aristotle’s argumentative blandishments.

Consider. Wading into the shallows in Jervis Bay, we are indeed wading into the great Pacific Ocean. Though we are in that very mass of water containing those deeps, to be in the depths of the ocean would require us to have gone beyond our first immersion. Similarly, when standing again on the sandy bottom of a pocket of the bay, gasping in relief at being in the air again as you break surface after a sudden fall into a hole in the bay floor, still you are not ‘in the heavens’. Not airborne! Heavenly though, to breathe.

We can resist Aristotle’s pressure to make the commonplace absurd, and then check a tendency to make it trivial by grandiose extension. Location in terms of a common place can lead to an empty sense of a location of unlimited extent. We become children of infinite space when we whiled away a hot afternoon at school in The Solar System, The Universe.’ In his insistence on place as ‘primary place’, Aristotle has the role of the schoolteacher who brought us back to earth. ‘You are’ he bores in, ‘in the air because you are on the earth’ and (you little vermin) you are on the earth because you are in this place that contains you.’

Though she stirs us beyond Aristotle’s imagination, Irigaray’s is captured by his observation of the difference between the commonplace and the proper and primary place. In her terms:

The sky, the air, the earth are containers that are not specific to each of us (male or female). But each of us (male or female) has a place - this place that envelops only his or her body, the first envelope of our bodies, the corporeal identity, the boundary, that which delineates us from other bodies. It is in terms of this ‘proper’ place that ‘one body (is) unsubstitutable by another’.

This might be called a surveying of the body, she says…

In following Aristotle’s analysis of the relation between form, configuration, matter and place, Irigaray remarks,
he ‘follows Plato’, who claimed that a (strict and proper) place is container and extension. There is a difference, however. Aristotle takes himself to have demonstrated that a thing’s ‘proper’ place cannot simply be its own form, or its matter with that form – for the simple reason that the object can leave its proper place and be replaced by a different body. Aristotle refutes the suggestion that the (strict and proper) place of something simply is its form, in its specific extension. The ‘proper’ place is more than its three-dimensional shape. Things of exactly the same shape may come in an infinity of different sizes. No shape, though exactly like mine, could be ‘my (proper) place’ (at some given time) unless it had exactly the dimensions of my shape at that time. Yet, because of replaceability, even one’s strict and proper place is not intrinsically one’s own. A person may come to fill someone’s previous physical place, or (more significantly) may fill a certain social place previously held by another. Someone occupies the position of lecturer in metallurgy in a certain institution. They retire and another may occupy just that place.

complications at the interface

If modelled according to a mathematical continuum one’s own ‘form’, the outermost boundary of one’s material being cannot be distinguished uniquely from the innermost boundary of that (matter, or, pure space?) in which one is enveloped. But, *grosso modo*, the outermost boundary of one’s skin and hair is other than the innermost boundary of the air in which one moves and breathes. To take that interface between skin and air finely, with physical precision, would propel an entire study. Air molecules cross the ever so rough and porous semi-permeable membrane of the skin. That skin can absorb from its environment is no less vital to the life of the organism than the power of the skin to repel aspects of that environment. (‘Life as a window of vulnerability’ as Donna Haraway puts it). Not only semi-permeable throughout its surface, but, more obviously, tunnelled in from lips to throat, trachea and lungs; from the outer limit of the urethra branching back to bladder and to seminal sac; from labia to cervix, from cervix to ovaries. These are, as it were, ‘simple anatomical facts’ but also part of an imaginary of the body as multiple: open to the worlds of taste, smell, the bodies of others, bacteria, sounds. Bereft of this inviolated imaginary of the body its ‘orifices’ are liable to be thought of nervously as if only ‘after-matter’. It is lucky the body does not have Aristotle’s unambiguously defined outer surface, or it would have to be ruptured in order that air enter the lungs. And the particles of matter - food but also dust and various kinds of air and water-borne solids swarm in past the lips, into the throat, down the oesophagus, some to be absorbed, others excreted more or less unaltered from the form and state in which they entered. The body is the object whose outermost surfaces define our ‘strict and proper’ place. Disconcertingly, the ‘proper’ functioning of one’s bodily self could not permit of that perfectly intact body envisaged by Aristotle in his attempts to define a strict place for it. To put it another way, if the limits of the body are the outermost surfaces of the skin then large areas of the ‘outer’ limits of the body are internal to it. One’s proper place is partly interior to itself. In topological terms, the body is a torus. No conceivable set of deformations of its surface, short of rupturing them, could turn it into a sphere, for instance.

**LOCOMOTIVES, AUTOMOBILES AND AEROPLANES**

Irigaray is fascinated by an image Aristotle has conjured up, of the place of a thing being itself carried from place to place. Though Aristotle raises this spectre as a *reductio ad absurdum* of certain views, he himself is led to speak of *locomotion* - there is change in the place of something – not only is there motion of a *thing* from place to place. So what is a *locomotive*? Why, in contrast, is an automobile conceptualised as what moves itself? Does the automobile represent narcissism of movement? And what of aeroplanes? Is a locomotive debarred from taking to the sky?

A locomotive moves a place; it does not simply move. An automobile moves itself, but does not move a place. Could one’s car become a kind of locomotive? A series of illegal meetings might have their place in the interior of a certain automobile. It may be vital that the car is on the move. But the meetings are always held in the same place, in the car, as it travels. The place where one enters the meeting may move, but not the place of the meeting. The place is within the car, though you might say, mobility being of the essence, that the place is always ‘*within-the-moving-car*.’

What conventionally we call a locomotive is the moving power-source (steam, diesel, electric motor) that hauls a line of carriages on a railway. The advent of the locomotive train was the end of a certain dream of the countryside and the installation of another dream – the world as seen from within a railway carriage. In the same act as the locomotive destroyed the places it traversed (gone utterly, the peaceful clean English landscape and all that), the locomotive created a place for a way of being. The very place of one's *being* was on the move from London to Glasgow. The grand railway station at each end created a new place to stage our stepping off, then finally back onto, a stationary street. The ‘station’ as also a ‘stop’, away and up off the street, readied us for
the long haul of place, from place to place.

Contemporary railway enthusiasts regret, in nostalgia, that contemporary trains now fail to establish, to the same degree of intensity, a *place* that is moved. The railway compartment, leather and polished wood, mirrors, engravings or photo-gravures of sights the traveller might be travelling to gain, the exclusion of outsiders from that compartment once the initial group has formed itself, no matter how haphazardly, is the setting for a kind of movie, adventure story, sexual fantasy. Books one read on a train journey might gain an intensity of meaning and feeling that lay beyond what could be recaptured after the journey; the landscape gained a new extension, coupled with the presentation of striking, flashing detail. Trains in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, bereft of separate compartments seem more like buses towed on rails. There are those new luxury trains, yes. What they offer (or guarantee) is anonymity rather than the contrivance of a new sense by constructing a place for a new way of being, of who you are.

There are those fabulously expensive recreations of that former train travel that transported a *place* from place to place. One is not supposed to believe that they succeed. Those re-creations offer only recreation – a stage-setting of such transport. To take part in their journey is as if to play-act at being amongst characters in Agatha Christie’s *The Orient Express*. The re-creation hints at a ‘past that never was’, as Derrida would have it. One has only to pay the money and act or look the part within the setting. What is established in these reconstructions of ‘the grand days of train travel’ by the installation of space-travel within a believable place is a virtual reality of time travel.

And the automobile? It scarcely establishes a place that is moved along from one place to another. Rather, it is a cocoon of privacy – an escape from an excess of active publicity – an extension of one’s ego in terms of an outward projection of the inner mind so that the ‘external world’ now impinges not upon the body but upon the windscreens and tyres *within which* is a thinking feeling being. The dualist myth of the mind as ghost that controls the machine of the body has morphed into the human body of sensibility that controls the vehicle. The automobile/driver is on the way to becoming a cyborg – a fused functioning unity of the human and electro-mechanical.

The ‘roadster’ (now an antiquated concept) was a vehicle designed not to meet the primary need to get from one place to another, but to give you a new kind of being – that of *being-on-the-road*. It did this by not enclosing the driver. It did not offer itself as a place, but offered to make of the road the driver’s place. But nowadays it is a rare road that you would wish to be on, as such. Those whose desire is still for the speed and thrills of driving rather than only to have a means to a destination, buy a ‘sports car’. (That concept, too, is now crying with age.) As more than the standard functional device to get you to a destination a ‘sports car’ is designed to enable you to get and give thrills. A sports car, as in the literal reading of the phrase, is built to place you on a racetrack at events during an open-day for enthusiasts. (Otherwise you must supply your fantasised track).

The four-wheel drive, however, is the contemporary phenomenon of the automobile that spells freedom beyond the elements of conveyance. Where the sports car had to give the fantasy of one’s having the freedom of the road, the fantasy for freedom that we now demand is to get *beyond the road*. For the roadster driver, the road was a figure of freedom. But now, for those who hanker after automobiles for purposes beyond the utilitarian, the road is a figure of restriction and punishment. So, being *off-road* rather than *out on the road* is the image of driving freedom. It was the ‘roadster’ that promised to place you on the road rather than within the vehicle as if that were a place in its own right. In contrast, the ‘off-roader’ offers you a place for *being off the road within a vehicle* – emphatically contained, surrounded and protected by heavy armour.

As to the aeroplane as providing a new place of freedom, one had better think of the one or two-seater plane. In parallel with the roadster that established its driver as *on the road*, these planes that look anachronistic while yet highly developed, establish the pilot who can fly such technology *in the sky*. Such a flying machine is not constructed or fitted out as a travelling *place*. Not the plane that takes you up there, but the heavens are your place to be.

And what of the aeroplane as experienced by almost everyone who now flies? Does it establish a *place* that moves? Does the jet-liner have a venue? Is its flight an event? (The flight of the Concorde affected to be.) Even after five or six decades of plane travel as the normal means of interstate and international travel, still we have scarcely begun yet to cope, conceptually, with what happens during and as a result of travelling inside this narrow tube where use of an exit door would be fatal.

As our principal means of transporting hundreds of people at a time from one city to another, the large passenger
plane is neither a place to be nor a way of being aloft. It is experienced as a hiatus in existence to be endured by mean of as many distractions as you can afford to pay for. One has to be distracted from the discomfort, radical constriction of movement and seemingly endless hours of waiting, before and during flight, that is intrinsic to being transported. If one were to force a concept of place upon the use of large long-distance aircraft it might be that of a high altitude waiting room. And yet … there are contexts of travel and connected frames of mind that permit one, lucidly, to look forward to travelling on that sort of plane not only in order to get as swiftly as possible to the destination. Because of the constriction of movement and the impossibility of getting off mid-flight, one can partially enjoy a phase of ‘time out of existence’. The passivity is enforced, so guilt at one’s state of non-responsibility is out of the question. The fuselage is hermetically sealed. There is no more question of ‘getting off’ the plane once hurtled within it towards the stratosphere than there is of getting out of one’s skin.

As a by-product of this hermetic quality and the dense packing of closely interacting and competing sets of human needs, the large passenger aeroplane might, by some metaphor, gain the status of a moving site. For instance, as ‘slums of the skies’, jumbo-jets are marked as akin to the great hulks that feature in science-fiction movies – those space ships that are decaying cities, which travel for years in ‘deep space.’

And place, in and after all this? Since we are placed in time and by time, place is always already charged with possibilities, obstructions, entanglements and empowerment. At least we can agree with Aristotle that place is what we can think of entering and leaving, and which others can occupy in our place as we vacate it. Still, Aristotle may have been too sanguine about the resilience of our identity in this coming and going. Regarding our most precious sites it is hard to think of them as quite the same when occupied by another. And so we cannot regard ourselves, either, as untouched by the displacement.

REFERENCES

i Max Deutscher, “Forms, Qualities and Resemblance” Philosophy 67 (1992): 525
vi Ibid.
viii Ibid. IV, 209a.
ix Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference 36-37.