

ON THE MOUNTAINS, OR THE ARISTOCRACIES OF SPACE

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...they were being scattered over the plain
In sudden flight, turning towards the mountain
On which human beings are ransacked by reason.
—Dante, *Divine Comedy*, “Purgatorio,” Canto III, 1-3

ABSTRACT: Mountain peaks, like all uninhabitable and barely accessible environments, stand in the way of a clear-cut distinction between “place” and “space.” Building on the environmental thought of Aldo Leopold, as well as the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and twentieth-century phenomenology, I draw attention to this obscure in-between region and argue that the conceptual distinction must be subject to careful adumbration, depending on the concrete place where it is employed. Subsequently, mountains are theorized as the sites of friction between earth and world, where sovereign authority and objectivizing thinking are equally suspended.

Between Space and Place

Contemporary phenomenology prides itself on the finesse with which it describes the structures of lived experience, down to their minutiae. Rather than suppose the transcendental primacy of abstract spatiality and an equally vacuous notion of the temporal continuum, it focuses on a rich tapestry of places and an uneven sense of time that changes along with shifts in our affective relation to the world. In contrast to the axioms of modern scientific rationality, reflected most faithfully in the philosophy of

Immanuel Kant, today's leading phenomenologists—such as Edward S. Casey (1997) postulate the irreducibility of the sense of place to the idea of space. For them, space is not a pre-existing abstraction that holds *in potentia* an infinite number of concrete places as so many of its instantiations. It is, rather, the initial diversity of lived places that gets abstracted into space, conceived as a kind of placeless place and, in any event, an unlivable totality. The scientific paradigm shared by Newton, Descartes, and Kant disowns its rootedness in concrete experience and ascribes to space the qualities of an *a priori* infinite and non-striated field, a transparent playground for the unfolding of all possible experiences.

Of course, the relation of space to place (hence, of Kantianism to Husserlian philosophy)¹ is not as simple as this black-and-white conceptual snapshot implies. Those who have sworn their allegiance to phenomenology must commit to an ongoing refinement of its doctrinaire conclusions, no matter how destructive vis-à-vis the outcomes of previous phenomenological investigations their inquiries may prove to be.

In this spirit of criticism, consider the following two rejoinders to the privileging of place:

1) Place as a concept is virtually indistinguishable from space, first and foremost in the effect of its conceptual unity on a multiplicity of places. Unless it is specified as the place *of* and *for* something or someone, “place” remains self-contradictory, in that, despite accommodating concrete experience, it seems to veer on the side of abstraction. It is, therefore, necessary to de-conceptualize or, as Heidegger put it, de-formalize the idea of place, so as to liberate the heterogeneous places presupposed by it.

2) Since Plato's variations on the theme of *khōra*, place has been a figure of hospitality, a receptacle for those who inhabit it. But what about those places that are inhospitable, that is to say, places that are either barely accessible or completely inaccessible and where, in any case, it is impossible to linger, let alone to survive? Are places that forbid human habitation still places? I am thinking here of mountain peaks in the Alps or the Himalayas, the Andes or the Karakorum Range. No longer conceptually but experientially uninhabitable, these places seem to foreshadow the concept of space that is equally unfit for habitation, due to its ideality, subtracted from the world of experience. Here, again in Heideggerian terms, we can witness most vividly the strife between “earth” and

“world,” between the dense material substratum for life, on the one hand, and existence organized in habitual spatio-temporal patterns that colonize and domesticate this substratum, on the other.

To put it bluntly, inaccessible or barely accessible mountains deconstruct the distinction between space and place. They are, certainly, concrete geological and geographical locales, but their inhospitable character transforms them into space-places or place-spaces, each imbibing the distinguishing features of the other. Our distance from a mountain, even when we stand at its foot, is not only ontic, or empirically measurable, but, above all, ontological. Mountains do not open themselves up to whoever comes near; they do not welcome the human intruder, unless she or he is an experienced climber, capable of reading the marks on their slopes as so many steps on the path to the summit. Faced with the mountains, an uncanny sensation persists: one cannot help but feel “out of place,” unable to rely on the familiar routines, lived interpretations, and practical orientations of our world.

Forewarned about the possibility of being unsettled by the sublimity of mountains, eighteenth-century travelers who, in their voyages, passed the Alps closed their eyes or drew the curtains in their means of transport. They tried to protect themselves from the unworldly presence of the peaks by blocking these from the field of vision, by refusing to engage with the mountains if only indirectly, by means of the “distance sense” that is seeing. Philosophers interested in the meaning of place and space cannot afford to resort, in their thinking, to defense mechanisms analogous to those of these eighteenth-century travelers. Instead, we should consider, as thoroughly as possible, the place of the mountain in the distinction between the space and place. It could well be that, as a result of such consideration space will turn out to be a quality or a predicate of some unlivable places. As a result of this cross-contamination, however, phenomenological thinking will be further enriched, becoming suppler and more attuned to the nuances and paradoxes of actual places that do not fully correspond to the ideal notion of place.

Mountainous Space-Places

For someone living in the Basque Country, a region ensconced between the rest of Spain and Southern France, mountains are not just a background of daily life; they are an ever-present reality. In geological parlance, they are known as the *Basque threshold*, a range marking the transition between the Cantabrian Mountains to the West and the Pyrenees stretching to the East. It was Pascal who famously quipped that “truth on this side of Pyrenees” is “error on the other side” (2008, 23-24). But what if you find yourself smack on the threshold—for instance, on the Basque threshold—or, as Casey prefers to put it, on the edge? Do these mountains blur the crystal-cut distinction not only between space and place but also between the French truth and the Spanish error? Being close to what, for Pascal, was “the other side,” I cannot evade this question, any more than my gaze is able to detach itself from the mountains themselves.

The phenomenological threshold, in turn, is where places pass into space, and vice versa, without losing their identity in the spatial medium. We ought to approach this threshold from both sides, registering, on the one hand, the spacing of certain places and, on the other, the placing of space, which becomes evident when mountains are described as the “aristocracies of space.” But what could be more paradoxical and self-contradictory than this expression? Aristocracy generally connotes inequality, unevenness, social and political stratification. Space, conversely, is supposed to be ideally homogeneous, contiguous, and, in a certain sense, prior to its parceling or subdivision, democratic. Although this description of spatiality is accurate within the context of post-Newtonian European philosophy, it hides a dangerous unexamined presupposition. The keyword in my brief definition is “ideally.” Only when we disregard material differences among various places, whether in natural or built environments, does the image of space as an undifferentiated void, as figured in terms of a homogeneous plane, gain validity. Transcendental ideality is the product of this disregard; it is the effect of this indifference to infinite empirical differences in the textures of places.

We might say, somewhat poetically, that mountains are forms of *anamnesis*. They stand as reminders of the non-coincidence of earth and

world, the material resistance of places to their leveling and homogenization under the umbrella of abstract spatiality, and, therefore, a noteworthy instance of the placing of space. The experiential facet of this resistance is the difficulty of access and the danger involved in our selective admittance to the mountains, indissoluble into a geometrical void we associate with the smooth plane of spatiality. The geographical unevenness of a locale harbors consequences far in excess of the field of geography; it goes to the core of the meaning of place rooted in the human experience of being-in-place.

Such is the original sense of “aristocracy of space,” a syntagma I have extracted from the influential book *A Sand County Almanac* by an early American nature conservationist, Aldo Leopold. In a trilogy of short entries on the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico—“On Top,” “Thinking Like a Mountain,” and “Escudilla”—Leopold coins the expression to emphasize that the plateau at the top of Arizona’s White Mountain was “the exclusive domain of mounted man: mounted cowman, mounted sheepman, mounted forest officer, mounted trapper, and those unclassified mounted men of unknown origin and uncertain destination always found on frontiers” (1949, 123). Their aristocracy of space, Leopold suggests, went hand-in-hand with “a democracy of debt to the general store, and a communal wealth of Arizona’s dust and Arizona sunshine” (1949, 123). Material need, ironically made apparent in the equal distribution of poverty, was the obverse of an embodied and unequal relation to mountainous places, to which many of the frontier explorers were driven by their destitution. In contrast, the abstract democracy of space born in the minds of philosophers is the upshot of a severe repression of their embodiment, thanks to a certain level of material comfort conducive to the forgetting of the body and a proliferation of ethereal abstractions. (Think of Descartes, who meditated in the coziness of his study at the dawn of modern philosophy.)

Mounted cowman, sheepman, and so forth, become, in keeping with Leopold’s description, the substitutes for the gods, who themselves substituted humans as the inhabitants of inaccessible mountaintops. I wish, nonetheless, to extend the sense of “aristocracy of space” beyond the confines of the original, admittedly metaphorical, usage. In addition to applying this expression to selective modes of access to the mountains, I

propose to use it as an apt descriptor for the ontology of the mountains themselves. As concrete resistances to the routines of idealization, mountains give us a foretaste of space that cannot be gathered into a simple conceptual (or, as in Kantianism, pre-conceptual) unity. Leopold, too, hints at this possibility in his notes on Escudilla, a mountain on the edge of the Apache National Forest, which dominates the landscape to such an extent that “[t]here was, in fact, only one place from which you did not see Escudilla on the skyline: that was the top of Escudilla itself. Up there you could not see the mountain, but you could feel it” (1949, 134). The mountain literally presides over its surroundings and delimits our ideally unbound freedom of the gaze by imposing itself upon our senses that cannot avoid it in the manner of the eighteenth-century travelers in the Alps. It is an “aristocrat of space” vis-à-vis the human figure it dwarfs.

The placing of space thus involves a series of unsurpassable obstacles on the way to forging pure spatiality, complicating in the seamless process of spatialization. The difference of the mountain from the milieu that surrounds it is one where, as in Hegelian philosophy, a dialectical *salto mortale* is ventured from quantitative to qualitative relations. To be sure, it is always possible to map mountain peaks on a virtual three-dimensional system of coordinates, creating an ideal scheme of the landscape, subjugated to the ideal representations of cartography. But despite the illusion of quantitative continuity, qualitative discontinuity makes itself know as soon as one asks, “What is a mountain?” Described in terms of “aristocracy,” it is the site where place irrupts in space and interferes with the abstract equalization of every site and locale. At the same time, however, it is a place that displays some of the key features of abstract spatiality.

Mountainous Place-Spaces

In the phenomenological tradition of twentieth-century philosophy, the abstract spatiality of the philosopher and of the scientist is scrutinized against the background of our everyday spatial being-in-the-world, inhabiting, or dwelling. Edmund Husserl’s notion of “life-world” and Heidegger’s idea of “existential spatiality” are attempts to bring the ideas of void and undifferentiated space back to their suppressed origin in our

lived bodily intuitions. Barely accessible mountains similarly de-idealize space. But what is salient in them is not so much the habitual mode of dwelling as the exact opposite: their un-inhabitability, their excess over, or overflow of, our world. This is the deeper reason for the identification of mountains with the sublime in the imaginary of the nineteenth century and, much earlier, their coding as the divine abode in world religions. Determining and overwhelming our senses, they are not things of this world, if by “world” we understand, in a phenomenological vein, the realm of habitual existence where everything is at our fingertips. Even to an experienced mountaineer, the mountain is not quite “ready-to-hand.”

The unworldliness of the mountain is what situates it on the hither side of mundane existence *and* of cold abstractions. Its un-inhabitability makes it, at once, a place of danger and salvation, of an imminent death and of welcome refuge. In July 2012 alone, eleven people lost their lives in Mont Blanc avalanches. But, historically, hiding in the mountains or traversing a mountain range beckoned with the possibility of survival. After the 1492 Decree of Expulsion was issued in Spain, at least three thousand Spanish Jews crossed the border and hid in the rugged and inaccessible region of the Portuguese North East called Trás-os-Montes (Behind-the-Mountains). The mountain, then, symbolizes a state of exception where neither political law nor the *habitus* of everyday life apply and where sovereignty, the supreme power over life and death, is most palpable in the clash between the governable plains and the insubordinate high places. Could it be the case that traditional epistemological distinctions (between truth and error, subject and object, the thinking and the thought, not to mention place and space) are equally irrelevant there? If so, then not only the Basque range, but any mountain whatsoever is nothing other than a threshold.

The symbolic exceptionality of the mountain mirrors its actual prominence from the terrain that surrounds it. The mountain elevates the earth without idealizing it; the earth, endowed in this elevation with an overpowering privilege, is revealed to be much more than a stable substratum on which human beings live and build: it is the substratum that cannot be framed in the categories of our phenomenological world. Indeed, the mountain denies, precisely, the possibility of transforming the earth into a complacent foundation for human activity and, in this

denial, interferes with the objectifying work of thinking as much as of acting. In other words, when we deal with the spacing of place, we come across places that are not only uninhabitable but also, in some sense, unthinkable, irreducible to straightforward objects of thought.

We know, to be sure, that mountains are much more than mere protrusion of the earth: they are also ecosystems, social constructs, objects of study for orography, geomorphology, geology, and so forth. But what if, exceeding the scope of objects we think (or dream) about, they are also the agents of thought? This seemingly bizarre question is implicit in the middle part of Leopold's trilogy titled, "Thinking Like a Mountain." Like Plotinus before him and Gregory Bateson after him, Leopold considers the locus of thinking to lie outside individual human beings, in the interactive relation between the living and their environment. The mountain is a subject of thinking, insofar as it maintains a fragile balance among all organic and inorganic entities that populate it. Disequilibrium (for instance, the sudden predominance of a single species) would, according to this logic, signify the madness of the mountain. Be this as it may, its non-belonging to our world turns the mountain into a world of its own and, hence, into a distinct supra-personal subject irradiating meaning. Existential spatiality means, in this case, the existentiality of a locale, the autonomous and anonymous life of mountainous place-spaces. At the limit of phenomenology, pure consciousness is supplanted with the subject "mountain" that experiences itself, relates to itself, and furnishes the non-transcendental conditions of possibility for whatever is thought, or whatever takes place, on its slopes.

Unfortunately, human beings have often acted to drive the mountain to the brink of madness. They have not learned, as Leopold complains, "to think like a mountain" (1949, 132). When mountain wolves are exterminated out of "safety considerations" and deer populations explode, exhausting large portions of the flora, what gets violated is not only the ecosystem but also "a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself" (1949, 129). This meaning is not at all distinct from the mountain's relational being; to paraphrase Parmenides, mountain-thinking and mountain-being are one and the same. To interfere with (worse yet, to destroy) one of these is, by the same token, to interfere with (or to destroy) the other.

If it is predicated on the being of the mountain, the thinking of the mountain is based on extension, not on intention, in that it emerges out of

the articulation of spatial relations among its component parts. The sense of the mountain may be understood as the Heideggerian totality-of-significations, or a spatial articulation of entities populating a given place. Taken as a whole, the interrelation among the various beings situated on a mountain gives birth to its own meaning. Another semantic inflection of the “aristocracy of space” is, therefore, the aristocracy of thinking—a higher, because more encompassing and more holistic, form of thought than that characteristic of any individual subject. To think like a mountain is to refuse to be a monad! But even here elevation is far from being spiritual, sublime, or sublimated, given that the thinking embedded in spatial relations does not idealize what is thought in and through it. The sense of the mountain is much more than our ideal or idealizing projection of it; its “deeper” meaning is, in light of the subjective genitive, one that it, itself, creates in maintaining together everything and everyone it sustains.

It would be a gross mistake to claim that the meaning in question is extra-temporal; indeed, the emphasis on spatiality does not imply that, when approaching the mountains, we must leave time out of the picture. The finitude and materiality of places has to do with the fact that, in them, space is always already temporalized: that places are the constellations of space-time resisting the logic of idealization. By analogy, we might say that mountains are the aristocrats not only of space but also of time: “Only the mountain,” Leopold writes, “has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf” (1949, 129). Its “objective” listening does not refer to an immutable standard of truth; rather, it is the cumulative result in the present of a long chain of past ecosystems, natural phenomena, and creatures that kaleidoscopically alternated on the face of the mountain. (Imagine centuries passing in seconds, compressed as though in an elaborate experiment in time-lapse photography. This thought experiment would come close to the seemingly mysterious phenomena of mountain-thinking.) Compared to its lifespan, the mountain, only gradually undermined by the ineluctable force of erosion is quasi-eternal—hence its claim to “objectivity.” To experience the world from the standpoint of eternity, as Spinoza once recommended, and, in this experience, to grow indifferent toward the exaggerated concerns of the everyday, climb a mountain and look down!

Thinking from a Mountain

It is not by chance that I have mentioned Spinoza and his perspective of eternity in this context. As soon as our attention shifts to the temporal dimension of mountain aristocracy, we enter the domain of philosophy *proper*, and especially that of Friedrich Nietzsche. As in many of his other works, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche stages an encounter between the weak of the herd and a strong aristocrat. The encounter in a mountainous setting is indicative of a differential elevation of the two, translatable into the unequal quanta of the will to power: “You look up when you feel the need for elevation. And I look down because I am elevated. Who among you can laugh and be elevated at the same time? Whoever climbs the highest mountains laughs at all tragic plays and tragic seriousness” (Nietzsche 1954, 152-53).

Here, too, quantitative differences give rise to qualitative distinctions that hinge upon the degrees of elevation. Nietzschean aristocrats have enough stamina and humor to endure the solitude of the mountains, to view both everyday reality and its tragedies from the standpoint of eternity—or from the perspective the eternal return of the same—mediated by the mountain’s own aristocracy of time. Viewed from above, everything that happens below appears minuscule, including the significance of the events and possibilities (for example, of death) that loom large over our everyday horizons. The laughter of Zarathustra is thus born of his realization that he had attributed too much importance and seriousness to what is but a passing shadow on the slope of a mountain. The mountain is a spaced place of joyous nihilism, relativizing not only our concerns but also our capacity for sense-bestowal. Its non-anthropomorphic meaning, which cannot be fully constructed by a human subject, fatefully alters our mundane worldview, inflecting it with the indifference of space that yawns in the midst of mountainous places. It is this spacing of place that is instrumental in the re-valuation of prefabricated, tightly knit values and meaning, from which we usually do not distance ourselves.

More famously, perhaps, in *The Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche proposes that we view the history of exceptional individuals (what he calls “monumental history”) in terms of a series of mountain peaks that protrude from the plain of commonality in every epoch. “The great

moments in the struggle of the human individual,” he writes, “constitute a mountain chain [and] this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, so that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright, and great” (1997, 68). Monumental history is an aristocratic history that marks the passage of time with the spatial metaphor of leaping from one mountain to another. It is an exceptional history that does not transcend the immanence of time but, rather, finds a trans-historical vein (and, essentially, unique mountainous spaced places) within time itself. On its part and despite all its sublime elevation, the mountain does not transcend the immanence of space but carves out a unique place, which cannot be subsumed or dissolved within this immanence, even as it spaces a network of readily accessible places. And it is starting from these exceptional points of reference in space and time that the rest of historical and geographical landscape receives its secret meaning and justification.

Finally—and returning, once more, to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—we can touch upon the Nietzschean theory of meaning and its connection to the spatial aristocracy embodied in the mountain. Drawing a parallel between aphorisms and mountains, Nietzsche observes: “In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak: but for that one must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks—and those who are addressed, tall and lofty. The air thin and pure, danger near, and the spirit full of gay sarcasm: these go well together” (1954, 152). Like a mountain peak, an aphorism stands alone and stands out from the sea of meaning. As such, it offers no easy access to what it expresses and, like Leopold’s White Mountain, remains open only to the select few. Now, a group of aphorisms forms a mountain range, much in the same way that the exceptional peak moments of humanity constitute monumental history. And, just as the historical exceptions bestow overall sense onto history, so the aphoristic exceptions, punctuations, and disruptions of ideal continuity illuminate and give meaning to the free-flowing prose they eschew.

Revealing as these metaphors may be, we must prevent them from drawing our gaze away from the mountain itself, the aristocrat of space and of time that, neither noumenal nor phenomenal, thinks and is meaningful *in itself*. Thinking *from* a mountain is as much a necessity as it is an impossibility: a necessity, because it entails thinking like a mountain,

starting with its sense-bestowal and existential spatiality; an impossibility, because we cannot—not even by analogy—occupy the uninhabitable space-place or place-space that it is. Perhaps due to this exceptionality, much in the mountain's ownmost meaning converges on the idea and the feeling of solitude that betoken its aristocratic status. Suffice it to evoke two images: that of a mountain towering over the plain and that of a mountainous ecosystem gathering together both the animate and inanimate entities that populate it. Describing White Mountain, Leopold accentuates this existential dimension of its being, referring to its "high solitudes" and contending that "never had there been ... so rich a solitude [as that of White Mountain] to spend" one's time in (1949, 125). Human solitude resonates with the non-monadic solitude of the mountain that envelops it. The aristocracy of space is this solitude redoubled, intensified in the discrete place, in the here-and-now of the mountain.

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Notes

1. For a more complicated view of Kant as a phenomenologist, refer to Rockmore (2001).