" You complain of the long way home to the west,
And I sigh at the endless road to the east."

<div align="right">Hyecho (Korean Buddhist Monk, 6th Century)[i]</div>

Locality in the Age of Virtual Transcendence

Outside the window of my small studio apartment, high above the Ewha University campus, the urban landscape cascades down precipitous slopes, streaming towards the basin of the Han River. Green- and blue- tiled residential neighborhoods plough downhill, sowing late autumn leaves in their furrows. Across from the multi-colored urban rapids looms Namsan, Seoul's inner-city mountain, topped by an imposing 260m tower.

I turn away from the window to a satellite image of Earth displayed on the screen of my laptop. I navigate the Google globe[ii], rotating it along two axes, and stop when I identify the small rounded form of the Korean peninsula. I zoom in, occasionally pausing to pan and tilt the image and realign the center of my descent. The boundaries of the planet are the first to disappear; the continents are next, followed by the Korean shoreline. Immediately thereafter I recognize the winding form of the Han River. Hovering above the city and on to Namsan Mountain and Tower, I proceed to trace a virtual west-north-west line, skimming across the blue- and green-tiled buildings until I detect the cluster of hills of Ewha University. I zoom further in, navigating past the University stadium and the Church, up the hill, past the Arts and the Law buildings, finally arriving at the building where I reside.

Whether due to metaphysical intervention or the current – albeit temporary – limitations of technology, my trek comes to a stop. Another step and I would have found myself crossing over the window pane into my small room and delving back into the computer screen, plummeting down an infinite recursive vortex.[iii]

Our experience of Place, i.e. of a particular locale, is intimately bound with the idea of distance. It embodies the potential of being away from and outside of a geographical, cultural, mental or emotional 'site'. *Locale* as a human-centric concept reflects a spatial relationship between presence – a mobile, ever-shifting entity – and a perceivably stationary place.

The relation to a Locale often bespeaks opposing desires – on the one hand, a longing to be absorbed into its bosom, to find solace within its boundaries; on the other, a desire to escape it, to distance oneself from its confines.

The desire and ability to transcend the boundaries of one's locale are fundamental human faculties. Plato, in the Book of Laws,[iv] suggests that the origin of play lies in the need of the young to leap. Similarly, we may speculate that the origin of creativity lies in the need of the mind to leap. Creativity requires space to maneuver, and it requires "free-play" -- that paradox of freedom within set boundaries.[v]

The German phenomenologist Hans Georg Gadamer speculated that it is in the movement between languages – in translations and interpretations – that new thoughts and meaning arise. Translation prescribes a unidirectional trajectory: a "leap", as it were, from within one locale and a decent into another. The structure and dynamics of Interpretation, on the other hand, can be described as a reciprocal motion between two locals; it has the form of Paraphrase, i.e. meaning generated in the course of perpetual motion between two linguistic utterances.

In Jewish Mysticism, *Tzimtzum* ("contraction" or "constriction" in Hebrew) refers to the Kabbalistic theory of Creation according to which God "contracted" His infinite essence in order to allow for a "conceptual space" that could accommodate a finite, independent world. It is only in such a space, where the divine meaning of Creation is concealed that a physical universe and free will can exist.[vi] The concept of *tzimtzum* contains a built-in paradox, requiring that God be simultaneously transcendental, before or outside causality, and immanent, pervading the natural world ("God's Glory fills the world" Isaiah (6:3)).[vii] Moreover, God's inherent omnipresence by definition collapses distances in the physical world, in the sense that aspects or attributes of the universal are to be found in each and every locale. In other words, an omnipresent God, or the concept thereof, can paradoxically sustain both locality and universality, immanence and transcendence.

If meaning is indeed predicated upon the motion between "locales", then what may follow is that hindering this motion, whether by the transcending of Distance or of the boundaries of the Locale, or by tampering with the motivating underlying Desire (the need to leap), may undermine the very possibility for meaning?

For us limited earth-bound creatures, the ability to maintain a clear notion of Place can be said to rely upon what has until recently been considered a basic existential constraint: the inability to occupy more then one location at a time. And yet, in a time when we undergo constant transitions into virtual extensions of the physical world, such an existential limitation may seem like an outdated constraint.

One global outcome of contemporary technological advance is that in various aspects of human experience, built-in temporal and spatial distances seem to have been overcome. Two subjects can occupy the same Place in sound and image irrespective of the physical distance between them; they can share a virtual space through avatars that serve and are experienced as online extensions of the self, and access physical spaces in temporally disparate and spatially remote locations through pervasive networks of live webcam and satellite broadcasts.

In a very real sense, contemporary communications have rendered the world smaller. Yet even as technology pursues speed as a means to overcome physical distance, it is casting doubt on the very need for movement.

In a wide range of disciplines – phenomenology, psychoanalysis or metaphysics, to name a few – Place and its relation to the attendant concepts of Distance, Boundaries, and Movement have been considered fundamental for the production of Meaning. Shifts in their essence – and in their relations – are bound to affect changes in whatever meaning can be culled from them.

The deception inherent in modern communication technologies is that the human subject occupies and controls the world from the center, namely that he or she experiences a transcendence of boundaries, and by being able to simultaneously "be" both outside and within, approaches a sense of omnipresence. But omnipresence has its risks. As my gaze shifts from within my room to the outskirts of the planet and back again to gaze at the gaze of my gaze from the outside-in looking out and in and out again *ad infinitum*, I face the threat of losing myself to my "self". Paradoxically, in the relationship between Man and Place, the desire to overcome distance and collapse the boundaries of locality may spell the loss of the ability to 'leap', the loss of the possibility for transcendence.

---

[i] Meditative Poems by Korean Monks, introduced and translated by Jaihiun Kim ©2002
Asian Humanities Press, Fremont, CA

[ii] http://earth.google.com

[iii] Video feedback is created when a video camera is pointed at its own monitor. "Complex animated patterns are [generated by] light which is trapped in a loop. Often [these patterns] resemble common fractal forms... elsewhere perfect labyrinths immerge out of the void, sometimes fine lineations form into fingerprints. Many of the shapes generated can be found in nature – Some Video Feedback forms look like micro-organisms... sometimes they take on the form of spiral galaxies and star clusters from deep space."
(http://dataisnature.com/?p=186)

[iv] (ii,653)

---

[v] The German 'spiel', and the Hebrew equivalent 'mishak' mean both "play" and "free-play. In Hebrew the word "mishak" is derived from the root "sahak" meaning laughter. Play, laughter and freedom seem not only to be inseparable concepts, but appear to define the very parameters of human creativity.

[vi] "The function of the *Tzimtzum* was "to conceal from created beings the activating force within them, enabling them to exist as tangible entities, instead of being utterly nullified within their source". The *tzimtzum* produced the required "vacated space" (*chalal panui*, *chalal*), devoid of direct awareness of God's presence."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzimtzum

[vii] Rabbinical Literature often refers to God as Hamakom ("The Place"); Man's religious obligation to God is described as duties that are Between Man and The Place (*ben adam lamakom*).