STRANGERS AT THE EDGE OF HOSPITALITY
(Boston College, May 2, 2009)

Strangers at the edge? Where else would they be? The edge is their place – or rather their non-place, since the edge is no place to be: no place to be comfortable, to be identified, to have the status of a citizen... Yet, paradoxically, the edge is also where strangers are received: it is where hospitality happens. It is the non-place where the opening of hospitable place (a place called home, country, people: in short, archetypal place itself) emerges and where, deepened and prolonged, such place comes to stay: to last as reliable scene and setting of hospitality. As hospitality itself, even – considering that there is no hospitality in an edgeless place like the middle of a desert. Hospitality at the edge, hospitality on the edge: hospitality as edge: that is where I want to go in this brief talk today.

I

"Strangers Gate": these words are chiseled into the red sandstone wall next to an entrance on the west side of Central Park at 105th St., close to where I live in New York. Every major gate to Central Park has its own name. Other names, some twelve in all by my count, are more predictable and reassuring: names such as "Citizens Gate" and "Warriors Gate." But "Strangers Gate" is rather enigmatic. The first time I saw it, walking briskly by, I was stopped dead in my tracks, staring at it in disbelief. I wondered what it was meant to mean when it was constructed in the late nineteenth century. My best guess is that it refers to all who come to New York as foreigners: as immigrants especially but also (increasingly) as tourists and visitors. Anyone non-native is in effect a stranger, above all in

<u>this</u> city with its outsize buildings and high population density, its brazen wealth chock-a-block with unalleviated poverty – Manhattan with its multilingualism and intense energies. No one feels entirely at home here, not even native New Yorkers (whoever <u>these</u> may be). Only aboriginal "native Americans" could rightly declare this place as "home," but they are present only as absent – nameless, not even a memory at this late historical point, only bones encountered by chance as sewer lines are newly dug. Only historians of the city can refer to them with any accuracy; the rest of us late-comers have not the slightest clue. The most that residents of the city know now is that waves of immigrants have swept through the city from the seventeenth century to the present: the Dutch and the British, some Germans and French, African Americans and Irish (who, together, lived in shanytowns in Central Park when it was nothing but an open plain north of the heart of the city), then tides of Eastern Europeans in the late nineteenth century, many Southerners and Midwesterners in the early twentieth century, thousands of Chinese and fewer Japanese, and more recently economic andpolitical refugees from Central America, especially Mexico.

All of these were strangers initially – and many remain so, especially those who find employment only by doing the most menial of tasks (it is most often undocumented Mexicans who are bussing tables and washing dishes these days in New York restaurants: just look around...) All of these peoples came as strangers in the night, and those who stayed become strangers in the day. (As if to reflect this 24/7 strangerhood, Strangers Gate is open all day and all night.) All these strangers are odd fits, if not actual misfits, in everyday reality: never quite "fitting in." But this is also the way I would describe myself, an Irish Kansan transplanted in New York, even though I've lived there for some time now and am a salaried servant of the state. They, we, are strangers in the land, foreigners in the

city, reminding us that "stranger" in its French origin as *l'étranger* means, quite literally, someone from another country, another city – thus estranged from somewhere else, some other place...

To come from another place is to arrive from abroad – where the "broad" in "abroad" resonates with the minimal breadth that any place requires: *plat*, the ultimate etymon of "place" itself, means 'flat' and 'open'. To be a stranger or foreigner is to come from "elsewhere," another where than that which is habitual or familiar: from *d'ailleurs*, as the French say, a word in which we hear the *allos* of 'other' that also ends in the English word "alien," which becomes more of an accusation than a description: "an alien worker," we say with barely concealed suspicion if not outright contempt, or "foreign alien" in a wholly redundant expression that ensures that the sharp edge of insinuation turns twice in the flesh of those at which this epithet is flung.

II

But what of the Gate in Strangers Gate? If strangers come from a broad foreign land, an open place, to come to another land they must enter through certain gates, often stringent in their requirements for passage. "Strait is the gate, and narrow the way": at stake here are not just the pearly gates of Heaven or the fiercely guarded gates of Hell. To be from abroad, *être de l'étranger*, is to move from the breadth and history of one's place of origin – even if this culture has been repressed and displaced by tyrannical political regimes

– into a new country, where one must pass muster in order to enter: one must submit to the protocol, the rite de passage, of the tight gates of immigration control to start with; but even if this is successfully negotiated, the demanding gates of a new culture, a new language, a new people with their peculiar customs and mores, disciplines and rituals: these all await assimilation.

In short, the stranger as foreigner must pass through something that has a sufficiently sturdy constitution to persist over time and to resist, by its sheer materiality or dense historicity, any merely facile passage. A physical gate is emblematic of this situation: it can be opened and closed at specific times and under certain precise conditions, which are laid down by the authority of the state and are reinforced by delegated representatives of the government ("customs" officials, police, border guards). In this respect, Strangers Gate in Central Park is anomalous if not outright oxymoronic: although it is a gate, it has no gated door that can be closed and locked; nor is it ever guarded; nor, so far as I know, is it regulated by any pre-existing laws of the city or state. It is in effect, an ungated gate – an always open gate.

But all gates, stringent as well as relaxed, possess one very basic trait: they must be, or at least have, edges. Edges give them definition and structure: without them, gates would be so indeterminate as not to count as gates at all. In virtually every case, gates are edges of public spaces such as lots and parks, buildings and walls: they occur at the outer limits of these spaces. But they are also the end-points of physical objects and laid-out places: they mark the outermost limits of their surfaces. Yet they are not simply surfaces themselves: they have their own surfaces. Still, their primary function is to provide openings in the surfaces of places and things alike. This is true no matter how restrictive they may be, how

heavily guarded, how difficult of passage or discouraging of entry. Even the Gate to Kafka's Castle, forever barred from passage, is a break in the surface of the castle, even if it remains permanently closed; otherwise, it would not be a gate at all. Whatever their particular "coefficient of adversity" may be, gates are made to open under certain circumstances, however remotely attainable: to provide an opening in the surface of the structure to which they are attached.

Gates, then, are edges of places and things that offer passage. They are porous in principle. To this extent, they act as that kind of edge that I like to designate as a "boundary," that is, an edge that allows for traversal across it in various modes of two-way traffic. When gates are part of walls, however, they are features of what I designate as "borders," which are delineatable and continuous edges that serve to close off or seal a nation or city – as in "the U.S.-Mexico border" that is otherwise known as La Frontera. A gate in a wall such as that built recently at Nogales, Laredo, or Tijuana is thus a hybrid edge: it is a boundary in a border, a boundarylike break in an otherwise unbroken border. In the case of La Frontera, such gates are called euphemistically "checkpoints," which are the particular sites for immigration and drug control through which one can walk or drive – if one has the proper papers to show.

Strangers Gate, in contrast with such checkpoints, is an always open edge whose very lack of formal, state-sanctioned controls symbolizes nothing short of saying in effect: WELCOME! COME ON IN! ENTER FREELY AND WITHOUT PERIL! This gate is thus an edge that offers unchecked admission to anyone who wishes to walk through it. It is the very converse of the felt lack of welcome that is so graphically evident, and bodily felt, at La Frontera checkpoints, which serve more as obstacles than as facilitations to

passage. The long lines of waiting cars, especially those coming from the south, is a concrete image of this unwelcoming situation. Still more so is the anxious suffering felt in the bodies of the migrants who seek to find a way over or around the wall whose only openings are the carefully guarded checkpoint stations.

III

In these rather rambling ruminations, we are circling around a basic circumstance that I shall call "the edge of hospitality." I mean this in several basic senses: as the limit of hospitality, where it runs out; as the edge at which hospitality happens, whether this be a gate or a door; and hospitality as edge – as a liminal phenomenon, a matter of thresholds in human sociality over and through which significant exchanges and interchanges, transmissions and trespasses, transpire (or, in the negative case, are excluded, as when they are forbidden). I also mean the way in which hospitality doesn't just take place but <u>gives place</u> – offer space of a special sort. Let me say something about each of these four factors:

(i) <u>the limit of hospitality</u>. When hospitality is "conditional," it becomes the kind of thing that may <u>not</u> happen in a given circumstance. Each of us has experienced this: we come to the door, hoping to be greeted but are instead turned away abruptly: the door is "slammed in our face," as the idiom goes graphically. In this case, we have not met even the minimal criteria for admission, much less welcome. Failing to meet conditions of acceptability, we are <u>persona non grata</u>: we lack the "proper appearance," we have the wrong skin color, or we don't have the "proper papers." We do not meet the minimal conditions for social or legal <u>propriety</u>, we are lacking in the <u>proprius</u>: which is to say, we

are not accepted by the person who opens the door: he or she does not recognize us as one of their "own." So we are dis-owned at this fragile initiatory moment. The zero limit of hospitality is reached at a glance: we are deemed unworthy to merit admission, to step through the door – where "limit" signifies the exact condition that has to be met for a stranger to be admitted. (This is why we say that a situation like that at Strangers Gate in Central Park offers "unlimited hospitality": no conditions are observed, no strictures are invoked, no sanctions are levied.)

(ii) hospitality at the edge. It is a striking fact that hospitality as an event occurs at or on an edge – always, irremissibly. There is no hospitality in open air just as there is no hospitality in general. Doubtless this is why Derrida insists that even "absolute" or "unconditional" hospitality has a conditional aspect in terms of the particular laws and terms by which it is enacted: "the unconditional law of hospitality needs the [conditional] laws, it requires them. This demand is constitutive [of hospitality]." These laws or conditions are not only legal or customary; one is deeply situational: this is the requirement that events of hospitality occur in circumstances of edge. By this I mean primarily spatial edges: those that obtain at the door, at the gate, on the border.

Also at stake are bodily edges: finally, two or more bodies meet in acts of hospitality, whether those of host and guest, border guard and immigrant, or other bodies. But these bodily edges meet only in the terms provided by the first kind of edge, conjoining at the spatial edges of doorways and other such openings. At the same time, cultural edges obtain: there has to be an edge of difference in history or language or tradition for hospitality to be an issue. Two people who wholly share a given cultural matrix do not need to offer hospitable gestures to each other – or, if they do, they are pro forma: wholly

expected and thus perfunctory (however pleasurable they may happen to be).

All such edges, spatial and bodily and cultural, enact what all edges effect: they bring together and they also separate, both at once, albeit each at its own level and in its own way. Here is the bivalent basis of all hospitality, which must involve some modicum of each if it is to happen at all. When there is nothing but separation, we have reached the limit of hospitality, its null point; when there is nothing but fusion, nothing has been accomplished: there has been no act or event of hospitality: nothing has happened that was not already the case (as in the meeting of two culturally homogeneous beings: two "pals").

Otherwise put, hospitalizing as separative/conjunctive allows for reciprocal but asymmetrical relationships between beings who possess at least a minimal diversity with regard to each other -- who are strangers to each other in some significant respects. For the state of strangerhood is not confined to those we habitually designate as "strangers," that is, foreigners, immigrants, those who are unknown, etc. In the event of hospitality, all parties are strange to each other in significant ways: when the door opens, the owner of the house appears just as strange to the would-be entrant as the latter to the former. In this simple confrontation, we witness the reciprocity of the strange arising in the very midst of the asymmetry of hospitality.

(iii) hospitality as giving place. Derrida remarks that "absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give [access] not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them..." It is precisely because of the inherent asymmetry, the alienation, of the initial encounter of strangers that some leeway, some open space has

to be proffered by the person in charge, the "hospitalizer," to the dispossessed or petitioning other: she who wishes to enter. In other words, some room for passage has to be allowed or provided to the entrant, the"hospitalized," keeping in mind that the English word "room" is a linguistic cousin of German Raum, "space." This is why the threshold always has to have a certain breadth: enough at least to step over or pass through. This "breadth," as we saw earlier, entails place. Hence we speak of the "door-way"across which movement is to be made: way must be made, thus place given, into the area where we are made to feel welcome.

Place-giving is an instance of "activity in passivity" in Husserl's phrase: the giving is an activity, but what is given, room or place, is something there into which one enters. It is choric in character: it is a receptacle in and through which hospitality happens. It is at once impassive and impersonal, for what gives place is not simply some person freely bestowing admittance to a stranger. The hospitalizer (the host, the owner, the guard) is a phase in the process of hospitalizing: this, but not more.

(iv) hospitality as edge. What gives place, more than a person or law or sutom, is edge itself. It is edge that is the constant among the variables we have considered today. For there would be no act of hospitality without the ingredience of edges, their effective ingression into this act – whether these be the edges of gates or doors, bodies or cultures. The edge is where the action is: this is axiomatic for the enactment of hospitality. And I here mean edge not just as the point of intersection between pre-existing planes (of intention, experience, history) but edge as itself active: as edge-making or edge-work. This dynamic action is captured in an ordinary idiom such as "putting yourself on the line."Curiously, many acts of hospitality consist in just such an act, whose purport is

precisely not positioning ourself on a laid-down line but rather taking a risk, however great or modest, by extending oneself beyond one's usual limits of energy or resources in order to take an extra, unprogrammed step beyond: a pas d'hospitality in short... Derrida's title capturing just this sense of having to step forth from comfort and security to accomplish hospitality. This stepping-out is not just that of the person with more authority or power in the circumstance but that of both parties; they step toward each other – in and through an edge which their very convergence creates. This edge does not pre-exist; or if it does (as in the case of an established international border), it is re-attested every time it is recognized or resisted, being reconstituted by each act of legal traversal or illegal trespassing. The edge of hospitality is brought into being, or brought back into being, by the scene of hospitality itself. It is always an event. Its being is a matter of becoming; the edge is continually made, unmade, or remade in the event of its happening.

Hospitality, often seemingly so innocuous or formal, is anything but established. Despite its ritualistic enactments and its roots in local or national tradition, and despite the stability of the architecture (the house or wall) that subtends it, it is something that occurs only at the extremities of existence: at the edges, as the edges. It occurs by acts of going out – acts of radical exteriorizing, thus of making oneself vulnerable. (This vulnerability obtains both for guest and host, guard and border-crosser – just in different degrees and formats.) Such outgoingness is the very converse of the inwardizing that has been the great passion of the modern era: "Go within. Truth dwells in the inner man." St. Augustine's words are cited by Husserl, the last of the philosophical modernists; and they are re-cited by Merleau-Ponty, who realized that the task had become the very converse of what Husserl intended: it was to go outside the confines of conscious subjectivity, into the open of the lived world,

where “everything remains”(tout y demeuere).” This is a world of edges: it is the world on edge.

Hospitality is a signal step in the enactment of this exteriorizing, for it entails the danger and the risk of being ex-posed to the other. It is not the most dramatic form of such risk, yet it contains all the basic elements of this exposure: Who is that at the door? Whom (or what) will I encounter when I open it? And I, the person who knocks, whom will I confront when the door is flung open? In neither case can I know in advance; in both, we are in the grip of “the surprise of the event” – the event of hospitality... just where Derrida and Levinas, in the wake of Husserl, take us quite explicitly.

IV

“A stranger stood at the gates”: This familiar line, which goes back to a popular poem written in the 1930s by Lewis Sharrad, has lingered in the American popular imagination for a long time. Perhaps this is because of its stark juxtaposition of two things that call for each other. Strangers, being unknown, call for gates – for some control and surveillance, some checking-out or checking-in on the part of those who are in charge of the gates (in the original poem it is Satan who guards the gates to Hell). What could be more predictable, what more natural than this if strangers are presumed to be intruders and gate-keepers are taken to be agents of law and order? Yet Strangers Gate in Central Park suggests a different line of consideration. In its wide-open state, this gate embodies a situation in which strangers, rather than being threats, are welcome: in which case, gates need not be primarily defensive or exclusionary entities. The actual circumstance of

Strangers Gate suggests that gates can be the very vehicle of welcoming unknown others -- whom they embrace and usher in unconditionally. Rather than regarding strangers and gates as oppositional, as in a stand-off with each other, Strangers Gate encourages us to think of them as engaged in a collaborative enterprise that we might designate as a circumstance of "open hospitality" in the ordinary but telling English phrase.

Concord rather than discord of strangers and gates is indicated when we reflect on the fact that gates undergo two primary fates: not just keeping apart (as with closed or heavily guarded gates) but also bringing together. Such inclusiveness obtains when gates serve as "boundaries," whereas the separative tendency characterizes "borders." Borders and boundaries are species of edge – they are two ways by which the edges of surfaces and things, places and regions terminate. In their boundary capacity, gates are disposed to admit whatever presents itself to them. As borders, however, they close off and keep out, as when we take "a stranger stood at the gates" to imply that something dangerous or at least unreliable or unknown has shown up that requires scrutiny. No wonder, thinking in this direction, we are moved to invoke scrupulous inspections at borders, often under armed guard. It is something quite different to think of those who wish to pass through a particular portal as posing no threat and even being of special interest or value to us as gate-keepers: then we are disposed to welcome the supplicant: to give them "safe passage."

Just as "gate" shows itself to possess two distinctly different semantic ranges, so "stranger" has a comparable ambiguity. On the one hand, a stranger is someone who is deeply alien to everything we have experienced and known: so much so that such a person is not merely foreign but truly "strange": so odd and so different as to upset any usual expectations we might have, even to threaten our personal integrity at some basic level.

“He’s not one of us,” we mutter under our breath – or proclaim in live voice if we are a Texas vigilante who spots a Mexican migrant who has slipped across the border. In this spirit, we wish to exclude such a person from entry into our home, our neighborhood, or our country – our part of the world. We feel uneasy, destabilized in the presence of the alien other. On the other hand, a stranger can be taken as other in a non-threatening sense – as just “different,” where this is construed as calling for our curiosity, for wanting to get better acquainted, even to become friends at some point. Then we are moved to open the gates to the stranger forthwith, to welcome her or him through a passage that has become a genuine gateway, a porous edge that allows for ease of traversal rather than offering obstruction. We give place to the other.

The choice is stark: either the Stranger stands at the Gates; or there is a Strangers Gate. Either the stranger is stopped in his tracks, refused welcome; or the gate is the stranger’s, being hers or his as much as that of the gatekeeper – if there is one.

Between these two extremes, there are many intermediate cases. One of them is the situation where we act on the basis of a principle of “universal hospitality” of the sort which Kant posited and which leads to the aporia posed by Kant’s celebrated example of a killer at the door: why should we admit a professed killer, vowed to murder the very person we are harboring in our home? Kant has no humanly satisfactory answer to this dilemma: it is one of those places where his cosmopolitanism leaves us entirely in the lurch. In contrast, there are local traditions of hospitality in which welcome is extended on carefully constructed conditional terms: you may come in if you are a Shiite, but not if you are a Sunni. This, too, is highly problematic: if Kant’s position on hospitality is too unconditional, that of tribal tradition is too dependent on strict group membership.

Outside these two concrete dilemmas, there loom many instances in which decisions of hospitality are made for mainly pragmatic reasons: on the basis of "counsels of prudence" as Kant would describe such reasons. But then we are left with the precariousness if not the outright prejudice of individual judgment, which is certainly not reliable across a broad spectrum of cases.

Rather than trying to come up with a single correct ethic or practice of hospitality, we are better advised to think of the situation of hospitality in terms of its edge character: that is, of strangers as at the edge of our domestic or national space, of gates as edges that can serve as boundaries or devolve into borders, and of ourselves (whether host or guest, guard or immigrant) as on the edge ourselves, called to decide what to do in a circumstance in which hospitality is at stake: in short, to own up to the fact we are caught up in an ongoing game in which diverse edges figure and re-configure. Then at least we shall be clear as to the ingredients of the situation of hospitality – even if we have no infallible guide as to how we should be acting in any given instance of it. We shall be at least descriptively honest – even if not ethically impressive or even consistent. And that may be, despite its undramatic appearance, a significant step forward: a step toward, un pas vers, the understanding of hospitality as the enactment of an urgent edge-game that concerns us all at all times...

For a trenchant analysis of the role of borders in political life, and the resulting "border work" called for, see Mary Watkins, "Psyches and Cities of Hospitality in an Era of Forced Migration: The Shadows of Slavery and Conquest on the 'Immigration' Debate," in Politics and the American Soul, special issue of Spring, no. 78 (2007), pp. 1 – 25.

Jacques Derrida, Of Hospitality, tr. R. Bowlby (Stanford, 2000), p. 79; his italics. Derrida pitches this "reciprocal presupposition" (in Deleuze's term) as an "insoluble" and "non-dialectizable" "antinomy" of hospitality: see p. 77.

Ibid., p. 25. His italics.

I am here adapting J.J. Gibson's axiom for visual perception: "the surface is where the action is"(The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception [Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1986], p. 23).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, tr. C. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 230: "The problem of the world and, to begin with, that of one's own body, consists in the fact that it is all there"(his italics)."

This is the title of an essay by Jean-Luc Nancy: see his Being Singular Plural, tr. R.D. Richardson & Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, 2000), pp. 159-76. I discuss the factor of surprise in The World at a Glance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 56-7,125-30, 212-4, 215-18, 220, 243-4, 467-8.