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The Study of Space in Literature: Some Paradigms

David Spurr

Gibt es auf Erden ein Mass? Es gibt keines.
Hölderlin

The study of space in literature needs to take into account both the philosophical conceptions of space contemporary with given literary works, and the actual construction of space in the social order which provides the context for literary production. With these imperatives in mind, this essay argues that modern literature from the seventeenth century to the present has been the site of a struggle between a dominant Cartesian model of space and a series of challenges to this model. The history of literary representations of space is thus marked by various forms of resistance to empirical rationality. Whereas the origins of these challenges can be traced to Platonic conceptions of space, they also reflect the inadequacy of a purely rational model for literature in its attempt to come to terms with modern experiential reality.

"Where now?" begins the disembodied voice in Beckett's *The Unnameable*, as if to concede that no matter how relentlessly abstracted from all possible points of reference, it still does not escape the dimensions of space and time. Even this disembodied voice has its spatial orientation: "this place," "my abode, this labyrinthine torment." However, if spatial representation is fundamental to literary expression, neither the manner nor the subject of this representation is fixed, for even the definition of what space is has undergone important changes since the origins of western literature. The remarks that follow are at best exploratory, but they are nonetheless intended to show that, in the four or five centuries belonging to the history of modern literature, the literary representation of space has been bound up in a broader epistemological conflict concerning the very nature of space. As in all epistemological conflicts, at stake is the question of what constitutes knowledge – and thus authority

– in the face of a changing world. The literary responses to this conflict have produced a variety of forms of spatial representation, some of which I shall propose as paradigms for the study of space in literature.

Space as *chora*

In order to understand the foundational instability of modern conceptions of space, we need to go back to the primary classical treatment of the subject, in Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato, as we know, defines two orders of being: that of being's essential Forms or Ideas, and that of Becoming – the changing world of phenomena and of the objects of our senses. But then Plato posits a third order of being between these two, one that "provides a place for all objects that come into being" (52b). This intermediate dimension of being is named *chora* [χωρα], a word Homer had used in the sense of a spatial limit or interval[1], and which in Plato's own time had a range of limited meanings: a "place" in the sense of one's place or position in life; a piece of land or territory; the country as opposed to the town. Plato's use of the word, however, is both more universal in its dimensions and more uncertain in its meaning. He approaches it only indirectly, employing a variety of figures: *chora* is the matrix, the mother, the nurse. At other times it is the receptacle or the "bearer of imprints" of all things, yet being distinct from these things, in itself formless, homogeneous, and eternal. Finally, it is compared to the excipient: the odorless substance to which perfume makers attach odors, or the gold in which the jeweler engraves his figures (50 c-e).

Despite the vividness of these images, Plato, in a rare moment of confession, cautions us against a strictly rational understanding of his subject: "It is perceptible only through a kind of hybrid thinking unaided by sensory experience: one can hardly believe in it. We perceive it as if in a dream" (52b). As Derrida observes, there is something in the nature of Plato's *chora* that rational language can express only in a contradiction: something which is not a thing, and which undermines the distinctions we assign to things, such as kind, type, species, singularity, etc.: "'quelque chose' [qui] n'est pas une chose et [qui] se soustrait à cet ordre des multiplicités" (31), something which is not a thing and which

[1] e.g., *Iliad* 17:394 and 23:521. I wish to thank Guillemette Bolens for bringing these passages to my attention.

withdraws from this order of multiplicities. *Chora* retains its mystery no less than its reality.

For our purposes, there are two aspects of Plato's formulation of *chora* that will prove crucial to modern ideas of space: the first is its nature as something neutral, formless, unchanging, and homogeneous; the second is its dynamic nature as the medium in which and through which things come into being. The tension between these two, which Plato claims can be resolved only through an oniric or hybrid order of thinking, will be reflected in the profusion of different and competing conceptions of space produced by the modern imagination.

Space as extension

The qualities of formlessness and homogeneity that Plato assigns to *chora* are essential to the Renaissance conception of space as *res extensa.* Newton saw space as an eternal, infinite, and isotropic continuum – something uniform in extension, equivalent in all directions, and imperceptible by the senses: this infinitely extended dimension can be understood either as one in which objects are placed or contained or, more radically, as the condition of their existence. For Descartes, the existence of an object is no more nor less than its extension in space. These formulations have their origins a century earlier, in the work of Galileo. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez shows, Galileo conceived of "a space of ontological continuity to be no longer contemplated but instead inhabited or manipulated," a model that created the conditions for instrumental and technological culture in general (22). Pérez-Gómez's larger point, however, is that the Renaissance conception of space was developed at the expense of its metaphysical or cosmic nature as the "third term" between Being and Becoming, as that order which "gives place" to all the things of this world. This is precisely the dimension of space that escapes Plato's attempts at rational formulation. In their zeal to master a purely physical universe, Renaissance thinkers stripped away its cosmic dimension, in the process reducing space to the merely ontic world of represented objects (22). The consequences of this movement for architecture and the visual arts were the elaboration of the science of perspective, creating a highly uniform and rational basis for spatial representation.

This conception of space, which I shall refer to as Cartesian, came to dominate not just the visual arts, but post-Renaissance literature as well. In the opening lines of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), Samuel Johnson proposes to

> Let observation with extensive view
> Survey mankind from China to Peru.

Following the scientific model, knowledge in the first instance derives from the visual observation of objects in space. The object of knowledge, here mankind itself, is coextensive with the geographical limits of space; mankind can be observed from a single, commanding point of view that ranges freely over the inhabited world between the extremes of East and West. The English rhyming couplet is like the French alexandrine in its precision, uniformity, metrical balance, and infinite, serial reproducibility. As a series of regular, measurable units placed end to end, the form of the rhyming couplet is the perfect prosodic embodiment of Johnson's thematics of *res extensa.*

Even more than the poetry of this period, the new form of the novel is particularly adapted to the Cartesian concept of space. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel's dominant mode is that of a narrative movement through a space and time that are empirically measurable as well as historically and geographically recognizable, even when highly fictionalized. Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771), for example, gives an accurate representation of how long it would take a party of tourists to tour Great Britain by travelling from Wales to Bristol and London, then north to Yorkshire and Scotland, and back again. Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1760) has a similarly verifiable itinerary, even with the most idiosyncratic of travelers as narrator. The two novels, of course, have very different concerns: on one hand, an important effect of Smollett's narrative is symbolically to join Wales, England, and Scotland into the single space of the newly United Kingdom of Great Britain. Sterne's narrative, on the other hand, provides an empirical ground for the exploration of a newly defined aesthetic of sentiment. What is noteworthy is that two such distinct novelistic objectives are realized through the device of travel: the leisurely penetration and dominance of geographical space. The mastery of a uniformly conceived spatial dimension extends even to the most imaginative fictional inventions of this age. In a parable of colonial conquest, the exotic landscape of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is relentlessly measured out, fortified,

and domesticated by the rational and systematic labors of the novel's first-person narrator. Even the fantastic landscapes of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) retain within themselves the proportions of empirical space, being merely enlarged or miniaturized versions of a familiar spatio-temporal world.

The science of perspective in the visual arts – the rational organization of a visual field from a single point – has its literary counterpart in the novelistic development of point of view. This development reaches its apogee in the great social and historical novels of the nineteenth century, where narrative observation masters a vast and busy landscape as readily as a detail of dress. Among the characteristic devices of the nineteenth century novel was what is called in cinema the zoom effect: the swift movement from a panoramic perspective to a narrowly concentrated object of view. Tolstoy begins the second volume of *War and Peace* (1869) with a wide-ranging description of the Russian army's occupation of Austria in October, 1805. The following paragraph concentrates on a single day, October 11, and on one of the infantry regiments that has just reached the army's headquarters at Braunau, in a region of "fruit gardens, stone fences, tiled roofs, and hills in the distance"; a succeeding paragraph relates the regiment's preparations for their inspection by the commander-in-chief, Gen. Kutuzov. By the fourth paragraph the narrator has zeroed in on a close-up of Kutozov himself, down to his "grizzled eyebrows" and his "thick gold epaulettes which seemed rather to stand rather than lie down on his massive shoulders." In the space of four paragraphs, then, we move in the mode of the telescopic zoom from the widest possible field of vision to the smallest detail of an object in that field. Historically speaking, Tolstoy's mastery of this technique represents a kind of saturation point for the rational domination of narrative space as *res extensa.* In order for the artistic representation of space to evolve further, the nature of space itself must be differently conceived.

This reconception of space had already begun by Tolstoy's time; in fact, it had existed as an alternative vision of space from the time of the Renaissance. Even as Newton and Descartes were subjecting space to the laws of reason, Milton was imagining the eternal spaces beyond this world as those of "transcendent brightness" or of "vast and boundless deep" (*Paradise Lost* [1667] I: 85, 177). Milton's dynamic and transcendent conception of space belongs to a history of artistic resistance to the dominant mode of a rational and instrumentalized space. This subver-

sive history seems designed to recover something of the mystery of space as it is conveyed in Plato's *chora*: space as both the concealment of being and the transitional third order through which the world comes into being, yet which itself is not entirely to be grasped by the discourses of either myth or reason. Derrida hazards the formula "l'anachronie dans l'être, l'anachronie de l'être," the anachrony in being, the anachrony of being, in an attempt to suggest the ambiguous, always-already displaced nature of *chora* (25). This *other* history of space implicit in Milton's cosmology takes later form in the labyrinthine designs of Giambattista Piranesi, in the sepulchral monuments of Etienne-Louis Boullée, in the eighteenth-century cult of ruins, and in the Romantic poetic imagery of depth and concealment.

Romantic space

What I shall call *Romantic depth* is the first of several paradigms of spatial representation in literature that I shall offer as historical alternatives to the dominant mode of space derived from Enlightenment rationalism. The Wordsworth poem known as "Tintern Abbey" (1798) is derived from two distinct literary modes of the eighteenth century: the travel narrative – in this case the walking tour – and the consecration of place. The originality of the poem, apart from Wordsworth's distinctive voice, consists in its transformation of these familiar poetic occasions in terms of the time and space of the speaker's experience. Whereas conventional travel narrative depends for its sense of novelty on each stage of the journey being new to the traveler, Wordsworth's poem conveys the thoughts and emotions of the traveler on his *return* to the banks of the Wye after an absence of five long years, thus enabling him to measure the changes in his life against the memory of his youthful self in this same place. Although the poem can be placed within a tradition of topographical poetry where particular places are celebrated in historical, political, and moral terms, its difference from a poem like Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713) lies in the deeply personal nature of Wordsworth's consecration of place and, in terms of spatial orientation, his attempt to see beyond the vanishing point imposed by the laws of optical perspective. Thus the poem's speaker claims that the losses suffered in the process of his emotional maturation are compensated by "other gifts" of ele-

vated thoughts, and by a more acute penetration into the nature of things:

> a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. (ll. 96-103)

What is pertinent to our discussion is Wordsworth's way of looking at space as animated by something mysterious and concealed, yet universal and dynamic, something present simultaneously in "the living air" and "the mind of man." Without needing to draw a strict parallel between this conception and that of Plato's *chora,* we can nonetheless note that both are treated as having an indisputable universal reality while remaining beyond the grasp of rational comprehension. Wordsworth conveys this paradox through figures of *depth,* whether the depth of a distance beyond the horizon marked by the setting sun, or the equally fathomless inward depth of the human mind.

Wordsworth's dynamic of concealment and revealment renders space as that in which the physical and metaphysical are bound in the same continuous process, and therefore as the dimension through which things come into being from some divine origin. We can witness a similar dynamic at work twenty years later, in the closing passage of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18). While Byron's poem descends from the tradition of the eighteenth century Grand Tour narrative, it effectively marks an end to that tradition through its subversive strategies: the narrator of the traditional genre, whether genial (Addison), irascible (Smollett), or sentimental (Sterne), is here transformed into a lonely, haunted figure, not so much pursuing a classical itinerary as pursued by his own demons. His journey is no conventional tour, because no return home is possible; nor is it a conventional pilgrimage, in that it is inspired more by despair than by faith. Having contemplated Rome as a "chaos of ruins" (IV: 80), the poet climbs the Alban hills and faces the sea, which mirrors the form of the Almighty:

> Dark-heaving – boundless, endless and sublime,
> The image of eternity, the throne
> Of the invisible, even from out thy slime
> The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
> Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone.
> (IV:183)

Byron's address to the sea recalls Plato's description of *chora* as "formless, and free from the impress of those shapes which it is hereafter to receive from without": the sea's "dark-heaving" echoes the violent thrashing motion of *chora*, which Plato compares to a winnowing basket, where the things that come into being are shaken and divided (53a). This is not to make a Platonist of Byron, but rather to demonstrate that the Romantic poets share with the philosopher of antiquity a sense of space as something other than the inert container of objects. In Byron's evocation, the sea is a figure of space as something tragically sublime in relation to the divine: it mirrors the Almighty in its boundlessness, but it is abandoned by God: "dread, fathomless, alone." Byron might ask, with Hölderlin, "wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" what are poets for in a destitute time? (90). If Byron's poetry registers a loss of faith in the divine order of things, it nonetheless imagines a metaphysical dimension in the landscape itself, as if in consolation for the profound loneliness of a destitute time.

The uncanny

The second "nonrational" spatial paradigm I wish to mention is that of the *uncanny*, in which the metaphysical dimension of space figures as a haunting return of the repressed. The modern notion of the uncanny has its origins in Friedrich Schelling's definition of *das Unheimliche*: "Unheimlich nennt man Alles, was im Geheimnis, im Verborgenen . . . bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist" (cited in Freud 235): Umheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but that has come to light. In his 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche," Freud adapts this definition to his theory of repression, and to a series of cases taken both from literature and from his own experience; these have in common the strangely disquieting quality of being familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. He concludes that the experience of the uncanny occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed, such

as the fear of castration, are once more revived by some impression; or when primitive beliefs which in the course of modern development have been historically surmounted, such as animistic notions of the supernatural, seem once more to be confirmed (249). In other words, Freud identifies an experiential rupture between the human subject, historically conditioned to an awareness of the supernatural, and the manifest absence of the supernatural in the modern world as rationally understood. The consequences of this rupture are the strange effects in the subjective experience of space and time known as the uncanny. Taking Freud's theory one step further in its historical implications, I would suggest that these subjective transformations are themselves a function of the reified and oppressive order of modernity. As I have argued elsewhere,[2] this would be one way to account for the fact that the uncanny emerges fully as an aesthetic phenomenon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely the historical era in which the conditions of modernity acquire enough impact on subjective human experience to provoke an important artistic response. It is thus no accident that the landscapes of the uncanny are commonly those of modern urban space, as in Baudelaire's poem "Les sept vieillards" (1861):

> Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
> Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant!
> Les mystères partout coulent comme des sèves
> Dans les canaux étroits du colosse puissant.
>
> Swarming city, city full of dreams,
> where the spectre in broad daylight accosts the passerby!
> mysteries everywhere flow like sap
> in the narrow canals of the powerful colossus.[3]

For Baudelaire, the space of the city is experienced on one hand as the powerful "colossus" of modern commerce and the crowd, through which the poet makes his way with steeled nerve; on the other hand, it remains full of mystery and dreams. The colossal city may seek to confine this oniric element to the narrow canals of its streets, but this element nonetheless returns in the form of a spectre accosting the pas-

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[2] In "Spectres of Modernity."
[3] Translations from the French and German are my own, unless otherwise noted.

serby, not in the shadowy groves which traditionally serve as the setting for ghostly encounters, but in the broad daylight of modern urban circulation. In the poem, the harrowing series of identical old men looms up out of the crowd in defiance of reason. The speaker's rational mind loses control, as if in this evocation of the uncanny Baudelaire sought to resist any attempt to reduce the space of the city to the rational, instrumentalized ends of modern life.

A similarly uncanny but more subtle loss of control takes place in Rilke's prose work of 1910, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. The title character of this narrative is struck with feelings of terror and alienation when he wanders into a newly demolished quarter of modern Paris. A wall, however, remains standing, exposing to view what was once the interior wall of the houses that are no longer there, an inner wall that is now the outer wall of the row of houses that remain. Rilke's narrator sees, at its various stories, bedroom walls with wallpaper still sticking to them, and here and there a piece of floor or ceiling:

> Neben den Zimmerwänden, blieb die ganze Mauer entlang noch ein schmutzigweisser Raum, und durch diesen kroch in unsäglich widerlichen, wurmweichen, gleichsam verdauenden Bewegungen die offene, rostfleckige Rinne der Abortröhre. (485)

> Near these bedroom walls there remained, along the entire length of the outer wall, a dirty-white space, through which, in unspeakably nauseating, worm-soft, digestive movements, the open, rust-spotted channel of the toilet pipe crawled (46).[4]

The narrator senses in this scene the living remains of a domestic life in all its intimacy: the stains of sweat, the steam of potatoes, the stale air, the soot, the smell of disease, of unwashed clothes, of unchanged diapers, of urine, and of dirty feet. Here are the objective correlatives of childish fears and adolescent desire, all the suffocating closeness of the domestic interior.

> Man wird sagen, ich hätte lange davorgestanden; aber ich will einen Eid geben dafür, dass ich zu laufen begann sobald ich die Mauer erkannt hatte. Denn das ist das Schreckliche, dass ich sich sie erkannt habe. Ich erkenne das alles hier, und darum geht es so ohne weiteres in mich ein: es ist zu Hause in mir. (487)

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[4] Translation by Stephen Mitchell.

> You would think I had stood looking at it for a long time; but I swear I began to run as soon as I recognized this wall. For that's what is horrible – that I did recognize it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it passes right into me: it is at home inside me (47-8).

To paraphrase Schelling's definition of the uncanny, something that ought to have remained secret and hidden – the interior of the house, alternately intimate and obscene, the concealed inner space of the narrator's being – has come to light. In this domestic space turned inside out, now become the exterior space of the modern city in the full process of its transformation, the familiar is made unfamiliar, and vice versa. The exposed face of an interior space is "recognized" as the image of the narrator's own most private self, and becomes an object of fear and loathing. Rilke breaks down the barriers between inner and outer space in an allegory of unveiling: the concealed mystery is revealed, the veil torn away, discovering the anatomy of being in the form of fear, debris and human waste. The uncanny is that form of modern experience in which the spectre of death traditionally assigned to the spirit world now haunts the nature of the object-world itself. A city street and a ruined wall wield potentially as much terrifying power as once held the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Limit-space

The ghost of the old King Hamlet, however, first appears in another kind of space that I shall offer as a paradigm for our study: the *limit-space* of margins, borders, and interstices. The limit-space corresponds to that aspect of *chora* by which it falls in between the order of ideal forms and that of phenomena; Plato points to the transitional nature of space as the ground between being and becoming. In an ontological sense this is indeed the space of *Hamlet*, a play which can be seen as being staged either in the midst of a transition between medieval and modern conceptions of space or, given the play's precocious modernity, as a resistance to Cartesian notions of space *avant la lettre*. From its very first scene on the ramparts of Elsinore castle, the play begins at the limit, on the margin between the known and the unknown, the natural and the supernatural. The opening line is given to a sentinel, the figure who stands at the border of a known and protected space, looking out beyond it. His anxious question, "Who's there?" registers the fragility and

vulnerability of the limit-situation, and establishes an interrogative tone for the entire play. Horatio's question, "Has this thing appeared again tonight?" (I.i.21) is directed outward at the darkness, and makes it clear that the space of Elsinore is menaced by something that its fortifications cannot withstand. When, four scenes later, the ghost appears to Hamlet, he follows it into the shadows until he reaches his own limit, which is also marked by a fearful question: "Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak. I'll go no further" (I.v.1). Hamlet stops at a point which corresponds temporally to the ghost's quite literal deadline:

> My hour is almost come,
> When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
> Must render myself up. (I.v.2-4)

In several senses, then, we are at the limit: between day and night, this world and purgatory, the human and the supernatural, reason and unreason, firm ground and the abyss. These distinctions, of course, as well as the definition of all space, depend precisely on the limit: it must be said, with Heidegger, that a boundary is not that at which something stops, but rather the point at which something – a space, a landscape, a destiny – comes into being (154).

The limit-space, however, is not just a boundary, it is also a space of transformation. In the last scene of Act I, Hamlet is supposed to end the work of mourning and begin that of revenge. But Hamlet proves, fatally, to be a figure who never returns from this transitional space: throughout the play, at least until the final scenes, he remains *between* a state of mourning and a course of revenge. As his most famous soliloquy suggests, he lives in the space between being and not-being, between the human and the beyond, belonging to neither world. For him the "goodly frame of the earth" has become a "sterile promontory" (II.ii.8-9), another topographical figure of the limit. In this sense Hamlet inherits his father's role not as king, but as a figure of purgatory: haunting the ramparts, the corridors and the passages of Elsinore, like a figure in one of Piranesi's vertiginous architectural fantasies. His restless course along the outer limits of being already calls into question the emerging Renaissance forms of knowledge that call for rational human mastery over both the natural and supernatural spaces of the world.

The void

What I am calling the subversive representations of space that I have treated up to this point all rely on some sort of transition: the transgression of the limit, the movement from surface to depth, the sudden *dérive* registered as the uncanny. In this respect these representations differ from that of the *void*, of a space conceived as empty of being. This is not to be confused with the conventional notion of space as a container, in this case a container that has simply been emptied of its contents. Rather, the void is a space that no objects can fill, for it is inherent in the nature of objects themselves, and in the subject who beholds them. What I have in mind here is the post-Romantic *askesis* that distinguishes much of T.S. Eliot's poetry – "The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant" (185) – as well as the universe of Samuel Beckett. Here is a passage from Beckett's novel *Malone Dies* (English version, 1956):

> But before leaving this subject and entering upon another, I feel it is my duty to say that it is never light in this place, never really light. The light is there, outside, the air sparkles, the granite wall across the way glitters with all its mica, the light is against my window, but it does not come through. So that here all bathes, I will not say in shadow, nor even in half-shadow, but in a kind of leaden light that makes no shadow, so that it is hard to say from what direction it comes, for it seems to come from all directions at once, with equal force. (221)

Beckett's space is free from the play of light and shadow, and from the penetration of light from any external, transcendent, and unified source. Its lightlessness belongs neither to light nor to shadow, nor even to something in between, but rather to an emptiness that will be filled by neither light nor darkness. Although it would be misleading to read Beckett as a mere nihilist, it is nonetheless possible to compare the grey, empty spaces of his work to what has been called the architecture of nihilism, particularly as represented in the work of Adolf Loos. Loos' architectural projects in early twentieth century Vienna, the Café Museum and the Michaelerplatz building, put into practice a form of composition that rejects the traditional architectural principals of symbolic expression, naturalism, and the synthesis of contradictions. Instead, Loos' spare and disciplined constructions are purged of "style" and the

"crime" of ornament.[5] He would have been a good set designer for Beckett's plays.

My use of the word *askesis* refers to a spiritual tradition that dates at least from the sixteenth-century San Juan de la Cruz – that of the *via negativa*: the ritual emptying-out of the soul, not just of the world of sense and imagination, but even of the awareness of any spiritual presence: it is the way of ignorance, dispossession, and hopelessness. In the tradition that runs from San Juan to Eliot, this evacuation prepares the soul for an eventual epiphany; it is the cleansing of the temple to provide a place in which the Holy Spirit may dwell. But this is where Beckett departs from the earlier generation of modernists. For Beckett there is no longer the possibility, as there is for Eliot, that this emptiness will come to be inhabited by a divine presence; his *via negativa* is not a way to some metaphysical order of being. The difference between Beckett and the earlier generation of modernists is one marked by the irreversible event of the Holocaust, the event that marks the end of the culture of the Enlightenment and of man's rational mastery of his environment. In the closing chapter of his *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno remarks on the way human reason has lost control of the course of history:

> Was einmal der Geist als seinesgleichen zu bestimmen oder zu konstruieren sich rühmte, bewegt auf das sich hin, was dem Geist nicht gleicht; was seiner Herrschaft sich entzieht und woran sie doch als absolut Böses offenbar wird. (358)

> That which the mind prided itself on constructing or creating in its own image moves towards that which does not resemble the mind, towards that which evades its mastery, whereby this very mastery is revealed as absolute evil.

In a formulation inspired by Beckett's own uncompromising language, he concludes that "Alle Kultur nach Auschwitz, samt der dringlichen Kritik daran, ist Müll" (359), all of culture after Auschwitz, along with the pressing critique of culture, is trash. Faced with this situation, what remains of the *via negativa* for Beckett is simply the ritual of clearing away, of creating a void as a space apart from all culturally or rationally acquired forms of meaning, which in any case have been reduced to trash. In this way Beckett's empty spaces serve, albeit in a negative way,

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[5] For a more complete discussion, see Cacciari's *The Architecture of Nihilism*.

the psychic and existential function once served by the space of the sacred.

Textual space

The forms of alienation from the Cartesian conception of space which I am documenting here bring with them a crisis of representation: once the literary text has renounced the visual mastery of space as a narrative and descriptive mode, on what grounds can it lay claim to any form of representation at all? Faced with this question, many writers in the early twentieth century responded by throwing off the conventional burden of representation by collapsing the function of representation into the text itself. In Ezra Pound's Imagist aesthetic, the verbal representation of space resonates with the poem's iconic function as a visual form against the white field of the page. Pound's "Alba," an *aubade* translated from an anonymous work in twelfth-century Languedoc, fully exploits the possibilities of typographic or "bibliographic" space:

When the nightingale to his mate
Sings day-long and night late
My love and I keep state
In bower,
In flower,
'Till the watchman on the tower
Cry:
"Up! Thou rascal, Rise,
I see the white
Light
And the night
Flies."

Pound calls our attention to the way the space of the page is marked out by the shape of the text. We note, for example, the progressive reduction of line lengths down to the visual center of the typographical field at lines 4-5, which render as a dimeter couplet the pattern of paired terms established in the first three lines. Visually, these two lines together form parallel sides of a small rectangular "bower" encased within the longer lines above and below, an enclosed space from which the reader's eye, like the lover addressed, is drawn by the watchman's "cry." In lines 8-12, the words of this cry extend across the space of the page,

just as, in the scene represented, they must travel from tower to bower. Finally, the blackness of the text thins out down and to the right, like the fading darkness of the night. The lover is warned to take flight by following the path of night, which is also the path of the text into the oblivion of the page's whiteness. Pound's poem creates its own time and space on the page. The crisis of literary representation here is solved by the transformation of the poem into a space of textual performance, like the time-space complex of a dance.

The space of power

The modern analysis of space as a function of power begins with Marx, whose essay on "The German Ideology" (1850) tells us not that we live according to a given philosophy, but that we develop a philosophy based on how we live: the production of ideas, of conceptions, and of consciousness is a direct consequence of the material relations between human beings. These relations can be traced not just in the activity of labor, but also in the human production and distribution of space: the division of town and country, of private and public, of property in general. In the twentieth century Marx's ideas concerning space have been further developed by Henri Lefebvre, for whom space is a social product which both contains and reflects the conditions of its production, and by Michel Foucault, who stresses the nature of a given space, such as a prison, a school, or a hospital, as the site of power relations: such a space in its construction bears the marks of such relations, while by its very nature it reinforces the effects of power.

Marx's contemporary Dickens is a master at conveying the manner in which power relations are reflected in urban space, and even in the architectural definition of an institution such as the London shipping firm which is the subject of *Dombey and Son* (1848). Dombey's office is separated from the "common world" by "two degrees of descent," both to much smaller offices: the first is to the office of the evil Mr Carker, the second to that of Mr Morfin, "an officer of inferior state," who inhabits the room next to the outer office occupied by clerks (238). The passage through this suite of offices marks the set of fine gradations between the *grand* and the *petit-bourgeois*. If Dickens offers here a straightforward exposition of architectural space in terms of purely hierarchical power, it is part of his larger strategy, in this and other novels, to show

the effect on human relations made by the forces of large-scale capitalism.

If Dickens shows us the effects of class difference in the organization of architectural and urban space, certain women writers have shown how such effects also apply to difference in gender. Jean Rhys, for example, offers a rather complex analysis of gender relations as precisely relations of power. The principal character of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) is Julia Martin, a rich man's mistress who has been used up and dismissed by him. Desperate and confused, she confronts him in a café on the Left Bank:

> She walked in – pale as a ghost. She went straight up to Mr Mackenzie's table, and sat down opposite to him. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. So he shut it again. He was thinking, O God, oh Lord, she's come here to make a scene. . . . He looked to the right and the left of him with a helpless expression. He felt a sensation of great relief when he saw that Monsieur Albert was standing near his table and looking at him with significance. . . . His eyes telegraphed, "I understand; I remember this woman. Do you want to have her put out?" (22)

Julia figures here as a ghostlike return of the repressed, a woman of pleasure transformed into a spectre equally as terrifying to Mackenzie as are the spectres of "Les sept vieillards" for the speaker of that poem. Whereas in Baudelaire the spectres threaten the power of the poet's reason, here Julia poses a threat to the power structure inherent in gender relations. If this threat is not *real* (in reality she has no power) it is at least *staged*: it arises from the fact that Julia confronts her former lover in a public space: the danger is that she will make a scene, and by doing so compromise his dignity. Faced with this prospect, Mackenzie finds a reassuring offer of support from the headwaiter.

The brilliance of this scene lies not just in its suspense, but in its nature as a parable of the forms of power used by the respective genders. The woman's power is primarily dramatic and theatrical – that of making a scene. The man's power is exposed as being ultimately that of physical force: "Do you want to have her put out?" But male dominance is also shown to depend on the solidarity between men who overcome class difference (the bourgeois and the headwaiter) to form a united front against the disturbing power of an unsubmissive woman.

The scene demonstrates, moreover, that the public space of the café is a contested space, where the uneven relations of class and gender are reflected in gesture and movement, in faces confronted and looks ex-

changed. Nonetheless the mastery of this space, however contested, is rendered as the reflection of a larger social and sexual order. Rhys reminds us of something that is true of various forms of spatial representation, ranging from the empirical and rational to the multiple forms of resistance to this model: that the human definition of space is never independent of the forces of desire.

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