

## Introduction:

# On Space/Time

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Spatiality and temporality underpin the 'modern humanities', conditioning their very 'modernity', their relativistic place in time, as well as their their 'humanity', that is, the relationship of the human, both physical and psychological, to culture in particular spaces and times. One aim of this, the fourth volume of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, is to explore this hypothesis in terms of literary and other narrative discourses. The essays presented here address this relationship between space, time, and the humanities in different and fruitful ways, taking up, in particular, the ways in which space and time condition social and national borders and identity, as well as collective and individual memory.

This collection is also concerned to address the spatial and temporal relations internal to those texts (in the broadest sense) that are studied within the modern humanities. Susan Sontag sets out how these two concepts provide a model of internal deferral and relation:

There is an old riff I've always imagined to have been invented by some graduate student [...] late one night, who had been struggling through Kant's abstruse account in his *Critique of Pure Reason* of the barely comprehensible categories of time and space, and decided that all of this could be put much more simply. It goes as follows: 'Time exists in order that everything doesn't happen all at once . . . and space exists so that it doesn't all happen to you.' By this standard, the novel is an ideal vehicle both of space and of time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, ed. by Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (New York: Picador, 2007), pp. 214-15.

The novel, or cultural product, is here taken to be a ‘vehicle’ for space and time. We can infer that the novel would be a model or exposition of time and space in a wider understanding of language and discourse. However, if literature is to retain any specificity or any resistance to being a simple index to historical issues, then the ‘vehicle’, not merely in its modernist or self-reflexive mode but *as such*, must also be seen as a supplement, a retelling, a distortion.

Mark C. Taylor states that, ‘the space and time of literature are space and time’; thus, literature should not be absolved from responsibility, viewed as fundamentally aloof or escapist.<sup>2</sup> However, he continues, ‘literary space-time is a space without presence and a time without the present.’<sup>3</sup> This may be seen as an admonition to caution when dealing with any scholarly approach to literature that remains purely within the category of temporal or historical presence. The articles this journal presents seek, then, to respond to two demands facing the modern humanities: that of remaining responsive to what surrounds literature, and that of retaining its irreducible fragility. Each of these working papers by early career researchers appears at the critical juncture of space and time in the humanities, parts of works-in-progress which probe the boundaries of contemporary critical thought.

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Abigail Dennis’s paper takes up the relation of the human body to space in her essay on Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel, *North and South* (1855). Dennis develops Raymond Williams’s notion of the ‘knowable community’ in order to examine the text’s construction of social space and of class boundaries. For Dennis, Gaskell’s novel does not simply work through a dichotomy of urban and rural space, but rather characterizes the movement of the gendered body through a social space that is itself mapped by class and gender, so that Margaret Hale might be read as a social and spatial mediatrix. While this works to promote active identification with, rather than an aestheticization of, the working-class poor, Dennis posits, *North and South*’s urban rusticism means that the novel ultimately stops short of endowing working-class characters with individuated consciousness, and of a radical rethinking of class relations. Dennis’s paper thus offers a feminist and cultural-materialist reconsideration of the social function of Gaskell’s work.

Georges Bataille’s *Le Bleu du ciel* (written in 1935 and published in 1957) is the subject of Michael Eades’s investigation into space, understood as a principle governing the

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<sup>2</sup> Mark C. Taylor, ‘Introduction: System ... Structure ... Difference ... Other’, in *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts*, ed. by Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 1998), III, pp. 373-404 (p. 399). This recalls Maurice Blanchot’s notions of the space of literature and of the ‘time of time’s absence’: see *The Space of Literature* (1955), trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, p. 399.

relations of physiognomy and architecture. His interest is in the possibility of transgression raised by social space, and his article sees recesses, cells, basements, and tombs as the privileged sites of that possibility. The article concerns itself, then, with an antistructural impulse in Bataille's thought: not merely on a conceptual level, but also in terms of how that impulse relates to literary form. This relation is developed through a parallel reading of Maurice Blanchot's conception of reading as an experience of vertigo and fascination. Throughout the article Eades engages with the fruitful paradox that Bataille's writing represents: that the notions of the erotic, the riot, the 'fête', and so on, are strikingly literal in his experience and, simultaneously, that this experience should so thirst for abstraction.

Richard Lee's 'The Rebirth of Inherited Memories' looks at Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel, *What the Body Remembers* (2001). It investigates the violent contestation of shared spaces, as well as how Baldwin attempts to interrupt the neatly packaged, linear time of ideological nationalist narrative. In the novel in question, the intrigue behind a particular, and particularly, horrific murder serves to trigger an investigation into the intersections of religious and gender-orientated violence. Lee draws enlightening parallels between the novel's models of intersubjective relationships and those found in various Eastern religions, Jungian psychology, and the philosophy of science, as each explores the relation of body and mind or soul. For instance, one particular character is able to become a conduit both for her murdered sister-in-law, and for her late co-wife (whose animosity to the first character when alive is replaced by a posthumous benevolence). This is a way of preserving the memory of the traumatic event and, it seems, casting light on unequal gender relations. This could be seen to work against Sontag's principle of spatio-temporal separation: in this case, not only does time refuse to move on, but the spatial boundaries between people are broken down.

For Elaine Luck, the interaction of spatiality, temporality, and the humanities is exemplified by the museum: a spatial organization of time, mediated and interpreted by the human body. Luck's research on Mexico's *Museo Nacional de Arte* points up the sociocultural role of the museum in the work of nation building; museums, in other words, work as models of national and cultural identity. The organization of the past in the *Museo Nacional*, Luck argues, demonstrates how visual culture can come to shape state discourses. Luck's paper thus at once offers an analysis of the way in which bodies in museums negotiate a path through the past, and of the way in which the spatio-temporal organization of the museum influences the national and cultural identity of that body, and of the state.

Will Slocombe's piece also takes up ideas about national and racial identity through an examination of Herman Melville's 1855 text, *Benito Cereno*. For Slocombe, Melville's

‘misplacing’ of the island of Santa Maria in his novella is an important point in critical interpretation of the work’s social function. In this way, the fictional representation of real space and place in Melville’s work can be read, Slocombe argues, as part of his criticism of colonialism and of contemporary race relations. Spatial reference, in *Benito Cereno* (as in Dennis’s work on Gaskell’s *North and South*), thus has broader social implications. Slocombe’s close readings in the current essay bring forth new evidence which contributes to current critical debate over this ambiguous text.

One final essay stands outside the theme of space and time. Brian Sudlow brings various aspects of René Girard’s theories to bear on two works from the French Catholic literary revival: Paul Bourget’s novel *Le Sens de la mort* (1915) and Georges Bernanos’s political pamphlet *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (1938). More particularly, Sudlow explores in these pieces Girard’s theory of desire based on mimesis; the resolution of the resulting conflict through the ‘scapegoating’ of one party, whose violence provides the basis for the sacred; and a non-violent, biblically based, alternative resolution of this same conflict. In his reading of the first work, Sudlow carefully weaves Girard’s theory together with the Christic sacrifice the novel discusses, and disregards relative, worldly concerns in favour of the absolute. In the second work, an earlier intimation of a meta-level of mimetic rivalry between Catholicism and secularism is confirmed by following Bernanos as he tries to avoid the violence of the Spanish Fascist rivalry with the Communists, whilst retaining a nationalist effectivity for the French Catholic Right. This article poses searching questions, and asks whether a non-conflictual, non-violent approach might provide an answer precisely in its abstention from giving any.