

# The Aesthetics of Space in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, 1843-1907

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‘How did the city that later authors wrote differ from that constructed by Dickens?’, asks Giles Whiteley in his latest monograph, *The Aesthetics of Space in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, 1843-1907* (Whiteley 2020, p. 22). Whiteley makes an important contribution to spatial literary studies, as he offers an insightful reading of the stratified space of nineteenth-century

British literature. Drawing on material from male canonical authors, namely Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Henry James, he demonstrates how the aesthetic criteria of Charles Dickens’s formal realism and John Ruskin’s definitions of *theoria* and *aesthesis* pervade their accounts. By providing a compelling consideration of Dickensian aesthetics and using the critical theory

of Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, this volume focuses on the notion of producing images of the metropolitan city after Dickens's realism. Whiteley's idea on the representation of space is based on Julian Wolfreys's study on understanding the urban environment in a "psychic context" (1998, cited in Whiteley 2020, p. 23) and Jeremy Tambling's argument on how Dickens creates a type of "poetry of the city" in which silently [he] cites others and autocites himself' (2015, cited in Whiteley 2020, p. 42).

Early in the Prologue, 'Joris Karl Huysmans, or "After Dickens"', Whiteley (2020, p. 20) establishes the idea that, 'space is approached through its prior aesthetic representations, so that any aesthetics of space constitutes an intricate textual sensorium'. Using effectively, as an example, Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À Rebours* [Against Nature] (1884), Whiteley observes that the main character, des Esseintes, experiences Paris through Dickens's London. Whiteley suggests that a shared network of aesthetic impressions in the late nineteenth century contributes to the construction of imaginary aesthetic places. Another notable observation is,

that des Esseintes uses travel guidebooks to 'map the city' and 'mediat[e] his relationship with space' (Whiteley 2020, p. 10). It is surprising that there is no reference to James Buzard's influential study, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918* (1993), as Whiteley (2020, p. 10-11) acknowledges, travel guidebooks as *Baedeker's* and John Murray's 'Handbook's for Travellers' produce a 'specific representational space', that can be layered with a vast array of 'intertextual allusions (Romanticism, impressionism, pre-Raphaelitism, Renaissance art)'. The lack of sources on how travel guidebooks and travelogues contributed to the construction of a symbiotic ecosystem of spatial representations, puts limitations on Whiteley's analysis.

The Introduction, 'The Spatial Turn' is thematically separated from the Prologue and contains an intricate web of theoretical approaches by various critics such as Freud, Foucault, Heidegger, to name a few, as well as Ian Watt and Nicholas Freeman. Whiteley seeks to uncover the link between Dickensian aesthetics and John

Ruskin's *theoria* and *aesthesis* in the aesthetic experience. Whiteley's (2020, p. 47) choice for including only male canonical writers revolves around the Victorian polarisation of space, as he puts it, '[on gendering of space] Ruskin and James were particularly attuned to and an idea we have already seen Huysmans play on in his critique of Dickens'. For Whiteley (2020, p. 47), late nineteenth-century women authors, as Octavia Hill, Vernon Lee, and Clementina 'Kit' Anstruther-Thomson, provide great material for 'creating "aesthetic" spaces' or 'experimental aesthetics'. Whiteley's idea on female spectatorship and the aesthetics of space is an interesting topic for further publications.

Chapter One, 'John Ruskin: Towards a Theoretics of Space', and Chapter Two, 'Charles Dickens: After Realism', provide a comprehensive examination of the theory of *Modern Painters* (1843-60) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), and Dickens's last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), respectively. Whiteley (2020, p. 60) undertakes an analysis of the crucial distinction between the definition of *theoria*, 'the intellectual lens and moral

retina of true artists' and *aesthesis*, a concept closely connected with the decadence pertaining to 'the sensory effects of the beautiful'. For Whiteley (2020, p. 84), the metropolitan space of London cannot be read *theoretically* in Ruskinian terms, but *aesthetically*, through decadence and decay. A notable observation by Whiteley (2020, p. 87) is that *aesthesis* in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) can be connected to Walter Benjamin's 'ecstatic states', namely, 'dreamer', 'madman', and 'intoxication'. This illustrates how body perceives space, leading to the deterritorialisation of space, in other words, the construction of a dream space. Whiteley's (2020, p. 92) claim is useful, as it shows that Gothic landmarks, as Cloisterham Cathedral, may construct dreamscapes, blurring the boundaries between reality and the past, leading to a fantasy, as in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), "'How can the ancient English Cathedral tower be here!'", "'How can that be here!'", "'Stay!'" (Dickens, as cited in Whiteley 2020, p. 92).

In Chapter Three, 'Walter Pater: Towards an Aesthetics of Space' and Chapter Four, 'Oscar Wilde:

Cosmopolitan Space’, the theoretical framework of *theoria* and *aesthesis* is not directly connected with previous chapters. Chapter Three explores mainly Pater’s treatment of space using Ruskin’s theory on the Gothic. The discussion is tightly centred on how Gothic architecture erodes the boundaries of realism and fiction; how death provides an ‘aesthetic experience’ (Whiteley, 2020, p.141); and how Rome in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) becomes a metropolitan layered space. Importantly, Whiteley (2020, p. 134) suggests that the Gothic is related to *aesthesis*, and, therefore, influencing the ‘aesthetic expression’. Chapter Four, ‘Oscar Wilde: Cosmopolitan Space’, moves from the Gothic and focuses how political and social conditions intertwine in London, resulting in an aesthetic product (Whiteley 2020, p. 165). The main texts are *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ (1887). Whiteley (2020, p. 166) suggests that, for Wilde, London functions ‘as a city “rich in curious effects”’, containing clichéd language pertaining to Dickens’s London and Baudelaire’s Paris. Even though this chapter makes an important contribution

to understanding space as ‘seen through the eyes of another’ (Whiteley 2020, p. 202), the use of Lefebvre’s arguments on how the rhythms of the city ‘invest space’ (1991, cited in Whiteley, 2020, p. 167), creating “polyrhythmia” (2013, cited in Whiteley, 2020, p. 182), makes analysis disconnected from the theoretical framework of *theoria* and *aesthesis*.

Chapter Five, ‘Henry James: Modern Space’, concentrates on James’s travel narrative, *The American Scene* (1907). Whiteley offers a detailed analysis of James’s endeavour to read the American city (for example, New York and Boston) in a European context. As he observes, James follows Ruskin’s idea on what can be considered beautiful or not, ‘the artist’s selection of objects may be conducted more “for their meaning and character, rather than their beauty”’ (Ruskin, 1903-12, cited in Whiteley, 2020, p.208). In other words, New York creates an ‘aesthetic wound’ (Whiteley 2020, p. 209) caused by emergent modernity, in which ‘the American scene attempts to [...] to deny the past’ (Whiteley 2020, p. 212). As Whiteley (2020, p. 236, 235) puts it, ‘the space of early twentieth-century

America resists both *theoria* and *aesthesis*' because 'American space seeks to forget the past, overwrite the history, in a capitalist orgy of limitless expenditure'. The absence of maps and illustrations, in this chapter, renders the visualisation of space difficult. For example, Whiteley's (2020, p. 215) reference to the 'architectural style [of] the "Cosmopolitan Era" (1865-90) [...] and the "Composite Era" (1890-1915)' of New York and the topographical details of Park Street Church in Boston cannot be fully grasped by the reader. Also, it would be interesting to see how James's spatial perception differs in *Italian Hours* (1909) compared to *The American Scene* (1907).

In the book's Conclusion, 'Unreal Cities – Towards Modernism', Whiteley (2020, p. 244) shifts from nineteenth-century spatial aesthetics and turns to Virginia Woolf's 'synaesthetic aesthetics of space', James Joyce's Dublin and Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, a 'subjective experience of space, registered in a moment of *aesthesis*' (Whiteley 2020, p. 252). Whiteley offers a short analysis of Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* [The Way by Swann's] (1913), noting how

aesthetic representations are interrelated. However, it would have been more fitting in Whiteley's narrative, if Proust's concept of *mémoire involontaire* had been developed separately in a chapter. The Conclusion does not contain the main findings of the book, it opens a new discussion on how spatial representations can also be found in modern authors.

Using a broad array of texts and rich material, *The Aesthetics of Space in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, 1843-1907* provides a new twist to spatial interpretation, inviting us to see that, 'after Ruskin as much after Dickens [...] the city and its pleasures could become the object of an explicitly "aesthetic" gaze' (Whiteley 2020, p.241). Whiteley offers a starting point for further research in reading space, through the lens of other literary figures. The text is complemented with fifteen maps of London, Rome and Paris; two engravings of Gustave Doré, one engraving of Luke Fildes and one engraving of Phil W. Smith; three photographs of Pater's rooms in Brasenose College in Oxford and two photographs of Rochester Cathedral.

Whiteley's enlightening discussion opens up new avenues of thought in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spatial studies, offering the academic reader stimuli for further research.

### **Bibliography**

Buzard, James. 1993, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.