

ANA MARIA MANZANAS and JESÚS BENITO, *Occupying Space in American Literature and Culture: Static Heroes, Social Movements and Empowerment* (New York/London: Routledge, 2014), 170 pp.

This intellectually ambitious and intelligently provocative study puts into analytical practice what its authors call a “spatial turn in literary theory.” They situate their book at the “intersection of geography, literary criticism, and cultural criticism” (2-3), and, in doing so, display not only considerable expertise in a wide spectrum of contemporary theory (from Giorgio Agamben to Slavoj Žižek), but are also able to make literary texts speak theoretically and politically. In addition, they show the aesthetic implications of much contemporary political thought and the practice of recent political movements. Re-thinking “space” and its function thus provides the link between the widely different spheres of their inquiry, creating a field of discourse in which political theory, literary text(s) and the actual experience of the historical moment interrelate and interact. Who owns or occupies what space in times like ours, marked by the dynamics of migration and the space-dissolving and border-defying (but also border-reinstating) processes of globalization? To what extent can space not only be the locus of repressive order, but also of radical refusal, even an agency for creative change in political thought, in the practice of literature, and of political protest? Can there be imagined or practiced alternatives to the way “space” is conceived in the narratives of contemporary neoliberal politics?

What is curious about this study, then, is the fact that although it claims much for literature and the imagination, its concerns are not primarily literary. Rather it is driven by a consciousness of political and social crisis in the face of non-functioning political systems, the social impact of an economic policy of financial austerity, or the influx of “alien” immigrants that nations in Europe and elsewhere are either unwilling or unable to accommodate. And yet the book appears to place trust in the power of the aesthetic: It is based on the assumption that objects of the imagination (literature, film, or art) may anticipate, even shape, reality since they are driven by a desire for change beyond the realm of the aesthetic (yet inclusive of it).

Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” frames Manzanas’ and Benito’s study—

they discuss it in their opening and then again in a concluding chapter called “From Bartleby to Occupy Wall Street: The Politics of Empty Spaces.” Melville’s story thus establishes the book’s focus, allowing its authors to advance and exemplify concepts concerning the aesthetic as much as the political relevance of space. Here, as elsewhere, they acknowledge their indebtedness to Doreen Massey who, in her treatise *for space*¹ argued that space was not a stable and closed system but heterogeneous and fluid, always under construction, “always in the process of being made” (Massey 9). Massey does not deal with “Bartleby,” but other intellectual mentors of this book (such as Agamben, Deleuze, Rancière or Žižek²) have done so, making it a foundational text in their own efforts to develop, in their theoretical thinking, alternatives to progress-oriented and end-directed concepts of history that have been the engine for globalization and capitalist expansion. All of them are fascinated by the impact Bartleby’s determination to “prefer not to” has on his employer (a lawyer with an office on Wall Street). Bartleby’s passive-aggressive non-cooperation taxes his employer’s tolerance, eventually unsettling him when Bartleby quietly occupies his place; whereupon the exasperated lawyer feels forced to exclude and discard Bartleby, who, through his insistence on preferring “not to,” has put the settledness of existing society itself into doubt.

The traditional figure of the American hero as “nomad” like Huck Finn—“setting out for the territory” to escape the pressure of society and civilization—is reversed here since Bartleby is a nomad in spirit only, while his body remains stationary until forced out of place. He thus illustrates Agamben’s notion (as rephrased by Manzanas and Benito) that “[i]n the face of capitalist accumulation and exploitation of the land, nomadic thought may

¹ Doreen Massey, *for space* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005).

² Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford UP, 1999), 243-302; Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby, or the Formula,” *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), 68-90; Jacques Rancière, “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” *The Flesh of Words—The Politics of Writing* (Stanford UP, 2004), 146-73; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2006), 381-85.

give rise to forms of on-site resistance to the advance of territorialization” (20). Accordingly, Bartleby’s uncompromising preference “not to”—a refusal to participate without proclaiming what he would do instead—becomes a blueprint for the future of Occupy Wall Street and related political movements of the present, movements heterogeneous in their social aims as much as their social composition, yet unanimous in their refusal not to do what is, or might be, expected of them.

The heavily dominated and striated space of Wall Street, with its physical and ideological verticality, became imbued with Bartleby’s blankness, with a feared and despised vacuum. Like Bartleby, the movement unwrites the pages of the law, empties out its premises, and allows for a new writing. It drives political language to a moment of total silence that breaks down the grammar of power. OWS prefers not to. (143)

Although one may doubt that the “grammar of power” is indeed broken by the dissenters’ refusal to participate in it, the authors argue that by reclaiming public space not as a space of politics but as a “space of dissensus,” OWS leaves, even in defeat, a “trace” of possibility and openness (even marking, perhaps, a path of action in the future). It should be noted that the refusal to state a political program connects OWS not only with Bartleby’s preference “not to,” but also with the literary text (the aesthetic text in general) whose semantic non-closure is the very condition of its unsettling impact on the mind of the reader/participant—its disturbing indeterminacy marking its inherent commitment to change and contingency.

The book’s five chapters are focused on four crucial concepts in the contemporary discourse on space: 1) on space as seemingly stable, yet tested by the dynamics of difference and dissent; 2) on space conceived in terms of order and systematization, which includes the exclusion of everything it has used up, or that does not “fit” or comply; 3) on space as confined and fenced-in territory, with the “camp” as its historical place of internment and exteriorization; and 4) on the fluid space between border and “home,” which corresponds to a notion of identity torn away from the safety of belonging and thus always at the brink of dissolution, yet also always in a process of becoming.

The texts the authors analyze are chosen accordingly: William Kennedy’s *Ironweed* and

Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* as fictional enactments of systematization and its logic of refuse; Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, Miné Okubo’s narration of Japanese internment *Citizen 13660*, and the science fiction novella *Lunar Bracers 2125-2148* as dramatizing the concept and practice of encampment in historical contexts of the past and in imagined contexts of the future (which we may recognize as present now in the readiness to erect new walls, barbed-wire fences, and camps of exclusion). For their textual analyses in chapter four on divided selves and shifting lines of separation, the authors chose two films: Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (dealing with racial and geographical border-crossings) and Philippe Lioret’s *Welcome*, a film anticipating the present refugee crisis and the borders eagerly reconstructed, individually and collectively, in our heads.

The authors’ textual analyses are sophisticated and impressive in most cases (as in those of “Bartleby,” *Cosmopolis*, and *Citizen 13660*). The application of a theoretical (spatial) frame is illuminating because it reveals new or hitherto underemphasized dimensions of the chosen texts by placing them in unexpected relation to aspects of contemporary thought or experience. However, that frame can also act as a filter excluding elements of possible other readings that do not quite “fit” the larger map of interrelatedness the authors have in mind. They are surely aware of this when they argue that “[t]he analysis of these interlocking spaces may obscure some of the specific features, but it may also contribute to an understanding of the relationship between, race, class, space, and society and a wider canvas” (4).

Although they value the aesthetic, they do not inquire into the “madness” of the aesthetic object itself. Indeed, they largely disregard the assumption of an innertextually structured and coherent text and replace it with the intertextual continuum of a shared discourse in which theoretical and literary texts “interlock” and mutually illuminate each other. The “interaction” usually goes only one way, however: from theoretical frame to literary text which is embedded in a multitude of theoretical references, even disappearing at times within a plethora of quotations so that the reference to the theoretical statement often seems to legitimate textual analysis (with a quote from Agamben or Deleuze “proving” the point made). Much against their overall assumption of heterogeneity, in this discourse

on space and politics, all texts—whether literary or theoretical—seem to converge in mutual confirmation. But couldn't they also be seen as testing and questioning each other?

I find this study nevertheless intriguing. In relating the literary text to political theory and action, it makes literature the textual space in which the desire for dissensus and change becomes homologous to places of protest and dissent—its very ambivalence and inconclusiveness being the mark of its aesthetic as well as its political potential. However, in thus making literature politically relevant, it also makes this relevance dependent on the political relevance of the theories that frame the textual

analysis. In a way, this book is a statement of faith—taking strength from “Bartleby” and the theories (and political movements) that draw on Bartleby's example. The question remains whether the relevance of the literary really depends on the relevance of the theories that sustain its politicalness and whether, by nature of its being aesthetically constituted, the literary is always already “political.” Even if it is in fact politically irrelevant, it nevertheless leaves the “trace” of a different life—a life that can never be translated into political reality, least of all into the reality of politics.

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