

ACADEMIA | Letters

A Room of One's Own, "Of Other Spaces," and "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail": Thoughts on Literary Expandable/Contractible Space

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Socially we use contracted, confined spaces to punish one another. But sometimes we desire and need contracted, settled spaces of our own choice for solitude and work.

Politically we have outlawed others to open, waste places without safety and sustenance. But sometimes we free ourselves to follow the open road: your land, my land.

This book-chapter draft excerpt introduces some approaches to how and why writers use expandable/contractible space. The "works cited" affirm the central importance of our perceptions of spatiality in how we live and work—maybe even *if* we live and work.

Complex responses to perceptions of spatiality bind us as much through emotional as sensory experience, from the Grand Canyon or the Alps or Victoria Falls to artfully restricted spaces such as Japanese gardens or a Frank Lloyd Wright hallway or a chapbook. What becomes too "natural" or repetitive may contract in our thoughts; instinct may arouse reactions to dangerous spaces; inattention may dull the senses and perceptions and numb or disable the ability to enjoy spaces; attentiveness may open new spaces indefinitely, from books to nooks to the night sky.

Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* treats the destruction of space and place because of greed-driven environmental destruction and the depredations of disease as the world-space around us dissolves; Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach* shows the dissolution of humanity from a cataclysmic and apocalyptic nuclear war—gradual isolation spreads amidst contracting habitable space. Fictional space provides a *feel* for the expansion and contraction of literary imaginations. Wordsworth's *Prelude* uses "spots of time"—they are also spots of place or space into which the reader expands—epiphanies that remained to inspire and

gradually made him into the person and writer he became. The sealing of Oran in Albert Camus' *The Plague*; the endlessness of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*; the Youngers' yearning to move out of their tiny Chicago apartment in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*: all imbue spatial hauntings, subliminal grapplings segregated from an implied, desired space around or denied us.

Virginia Woolf's extended essay takes up freedom of choice and the need for means and recognition: a writer must have place and space to think and work, and critics must allow place and space to the writer's efforts and innovations in voice and content. We must respect Mary Carmichael's natural sentence as well as Jane Austen's artful one; we may admire Shakespeare's state of mind as the "most favourable to poetry that there has ever existed," but we must remediate cultures that deny his imagined sister Judith, in her embodied form, the same opportunities to achieve that state of mind. Women need space and opportunity just as men do; readers seek the expansive feel that the work produces in contemplating the necessity of private space amidst public space.¹

Michel Foucault's brief essay considers what space we make, one might say almost hege- monically, our own, and what space we "other": how we expand, mix, or restrict one or the other, how imaginatively expanded or enhanced space links with instances in time. We ex- pand ourselves into those perceived spaces. The "heterotopia" ("other spaces") "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incom- patible"; "I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there," Foucault observes of places such as cemeteries, theaters, cinemas, ships—places as widely different as brothels or colonies—and we expand into them.²

The *heterotopia* contrasts with *utopia*. Nominally a "real place" rather than "no place" or a fictional "true place," heterotopia as mixed place combines a perceptibly extant space with the perceiver's response to it, building a mental/emotional construct in its relation to the self, a constructed space not limited to fiction.

For the heterotopic/utopic room of one's own to function as Woolf requires, it must provide malleable space for creative thought and production and allow imaginative transportation to other places, mixed places that may come to have for the writer as powerful a reality as real places—as Middle-earth did for Tolkien. "Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites" (23), Foucault suggests—that term has even more powerful suggestions since the spread of the Worldwide Web. We "visit" sites and "explore them." One of my favorite sites, a source of books, dvds, and other educational materials, suggests

¹So far, kept from the library by pandemic restrictions, I've used on online text from Project Gutenberg, un- paginated, for Woolf's text.

²"Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miscopies, *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986), page 24.

that the visitor is walking through a garden and may see “a pavilion on the right, a waterfall over to the left”—the guest may “stroll a while and enjoy.” “The present epoch,” Foucault adds, “will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity . . . of juxtaposition . . . of near and far, of the side-by-side and the dispersed” (22)—or we were until the spread of COVID-19. In a pandemic we restrict ourselves more than ever to virtual spaces, visual and auditory but less tactile and olfactory and gustatory, only virtually immediate while the electrical connection works. Nearly all spaces begin as “other”; we bring them close for shared and partial habitation.

Woolf takes us back “towards the end of the eighteenth century [when] a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. . . . The Middle-class woman began to write”: women needed to make heterotopia their spaces, and their doing so has changed the world, as it had to. “Other” male space become shared space, diverse spaces.

Can we point to a similar juncture when Black Americans gained access, or Indigenous persons, or members of any culture or subculture who moved from suppression to lock or unlock their own doors or those that had shut them out before? “All women together ought to lay flowers on the tomb of Aphra Behn,” she adds, and we might name countless others since—before that we may name some but must imagine the rest. Now, as it was then, space is a social justice as well as literary question.

“A Letter from a Birmingham Jail”³ hasn’t the blitheness of Lovelace’s “To Althea, from Prison” (1649) with its famous lines “Stone walls do not a prison make,/ Nor iron bars a cage.” How could it, since King was striving for the freedom of a people? The letter shows enormous courage and a fantastic calm, a call for place and space. It trades the poetic emotional fireworks of the “I Have a Dream” speech for cool-headed pastoral logic. King responds to a claim of some of his critics that he is an “outsider” by answering that as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, with affiliates throughout the south, he came to Birmingham by invitation: his influence has expanded, and a place has opened for him. Also, as an agent against injustice, he comes as the biblical prophets might have, to a place where anyone might have come to expand the freedoms of others: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”—in the social context of civil rights, space expands to the whole world. He extends responsibility to all fellow clergymen: their position calls them to do as he does, expanding their own influence for others’ freedoms. They bear some of the responsibility for his incarceration since they have done nothing to stop it. He hopes that nonviolence can open spaces, actual and metaphorical, where violence could and should not. He is also dealing with time: he asks his colleagues, when may we act? They answer: not yet. He asks, if not

³Also, here, from an online source, the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

now, then when? And they have no answer. His program of peaceful protest opens a “door to negotiation” that should lead to the end of segregation, an opening of space on so many levels, from the right to live and attend school where one wishes to social equality and spiritual freedom from culturally imposed religious and personal limitations. The potential to vote and have one’s vote counted opens participation in political society. Yet Black persons find themselves in jail for protesting, still enclosed socially, financially, and politically, protesting or not. King notes Paul Tillich’s saying that “sin is separation”: separation from God, certainly, but also from equal social exchange, from rights and opportunities. White moderates had shut themselves away from their fellow humans, King argues, and so had closed themselves in sin, uncommitted to freedom and opportunity for everyone. The “inner spiritual church” may indeed be the true church and its adherents the true heroes, but organized religion had accepted the status quo of limited freedom and therefore inequality, real and metaphorical circumscription. The church should long have been the truest source of expandable space for everyone because of its vowed and avowed belief in the God who made us all. The letter gives a remarkable account of a historical “enclosure” that in many ways and in many places remains as it was then.

My questions for myself so far: How can those of us in literary studies help students, colleagues, or any interested party expand or contract their own space, productively, pleasurably, inclusively, as they wish? How might we compare metaphorical and actual spaces?