

The Eighteenth-Century Novel and/as Space

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Abstract

Spatial thinking and elements of architecture were used extensively in the conception of the eighteenth-century novel and proved to be essentially fruitful in the expression of various relations and situations. The famous novelists of the period, such as Defoe, Fielding or Richardson, along with Oliver Goldsmith constitute successful illustrations of this practice and their works may be discussed in terms of space in almost every aspect: style, form, conception of characters and situations and the psychological weight carried by any initiative coming from the part of the personae in the fictional world or from the author.

Key words

space, novel, identity, ordonnance, convenience, decorum, distance

Literature and writing were compared to travelling, rambling, which in metaphorical terms necessarily transformed the written material in a space, a territory to be explored; analogically, reading was equated to discovery and walking, shortening of distances and helping perception by favouring a closer examination, a more thorough view of facts, people, situations. Reading meant exploration at all levels and, consequently, individual evolution for the one who undertook this mission. As Fielding particularized it in the opening chapter of *Tom Jones*, the novel was essentially a territory that invited to journeying, or a locale, a public place, a restaurant where people gathered and that his readers entered. It involved discovery and exploration. The idea of sharing an experience and of perceiving one in a palatal way (similarly to tasting food) were the ways in which the author dealt with his material and with its receivers. The “new species” served as a space of meeting the new and, by accumulating experience, of becoming a citizen of the world.

Since the novel was a space, a world that mirrored reality, it had its own sites. The most important and present one was the city. If one were to draw an analogy between the city and a building as spaces of living, inhabited by people, (the city

being considered an extension of the house, its counterpart at a larger scale) and would apply the principle of convenience to the city, one would realize how active and used this analogy was in the 18th-century literature, the novel in particular. Convenience did function and at a subtle level: the atmosphere in the city matched the psychological state of the character, which was loneliness. Human activity was presented as individual rather than social, people as indifferent to the problems of the others, caught up with their own; everyone was isolated, alienated, feeling lonely and out of place. The consequence was a less colourful environment, a less personalized space, lack of detail in description, absence of any type of individualization; the city was a “two-dimensional” space, an “abstract environment”, especially in Defoe’s novels where the city of London was a recurrent theme (Varey 139).

In Goldsmith, the opening chapter, which is dedicated to the description of Lien’s impressions at his arrival to England and at the first contact with the city of London reveals the possibility of discussing convenience from a twofold perspective. First, convenience exists, as perceived by the eyes of the Chinese philosopher, between the city and its inhabitants; one of the terms that would characterize the city as well as the citizens would be lack – of richness (as ornamentations are poor and poorly executed and on this basis Lien reaches the conclusion that poverty is a characteristic of the people, mirrored by their environment), but also lack of imagination and of interest, which leads to the idea that indifference is an attribute of the Londoners and of the city itself which is not only unwelcome but also aggressive and therefore dangerous (one has to mind one’s step not to be crushed by carts) (Goldsmith 89).

Secondly, convenience also applies to Lien and the city; he feels out of place, an alien which he actually is not only by nationality but also by culture, which extends the gap between himself and the object of his perception. Alienation is a feeling preserved throughout the whole novel, every intervention from the part of the character being marked by a completely different vision than that of a British or a European, - that of alterity, which he embodies and which he does not really exceed in an individualizing way (at least not to a very significant degree), as his importance lies more in being a type – that of the stranger – rather than in being a person.

Along the same line, there are few characters identified by names in the novel and, even when these appear, they stand for types, in their turn (the little beau, Mrs. Tibbs as the snob and the fake). Whatever the subject picked out by Lien may be,

he discusses the British as a people, or if he refers to categories (poets, critics, physicians) he never particularizes them by talking about one individual (in case he nevertheless does that, this individual does not have a name but wears a label, which makes him relevant only as the representative of a class picked at random for the sake of the example). Non-individualisation is a characteristic of the atmosphere in a crowded and aggressive city, as well as alienation, especially since in *The Citizen of the World* is not just a disposition, a psychological state, but also an objective reality, since Lien is a foreigner. Convenience therefore manifests itself through alienation, which is common to the atmosphere in London and the atmosphere in Lien's mind and through non-individualization, again a characteristic which the city crowd and Lien's manner of presenting people share.

In Defoe and Goldsmith's novels, the characters seemed to be endowed with the vision of a skilful architect, preoccupied with design. Convenience, one of the architectural principles revaluated in the novel was accompanied by *ordonnance*, as the characters' perception of the city concentrated on the whole instead of lingering on detail. "Defoe's characters generally care little for such minute observations of the city or its people but caring mostly about themselves, seem to be impressed instead by generalized wholes rather than particular parts" (Varey 139). *Ordonnance* at the level of the conception of the novel, present in the art of the writer as a creator of design may be admired in Fielding's complicated, admirably organized and controlled, as well as conspicuously detailed *Tom Jones*. The author's control over such an extensive material is highlighted by the use of reference to episodes that are far back in the novel, as well as by a very good memory of details from his part; the general impression is that nothing is left to chance, all being submitted to thorough and constant control at the micro- as well as the macro-level.

Ordonnance is present in Lien's conception of the city of London. He notices details (the decorations representing animals – blue boars and black lions above the windows and doors of the houses) but then recomposes the general lines of an architecture to render the feelings and the atmosphere it inspires (Goldsmith 89). The initial zoom-in type of perception with focus on small parts is used only to recreate the whole in order to offer a description as well as an interpretation of it. As for *ordonnance* in Goldsmith's conception of the novel, one may speak of accuracy in depicting cuttings of reality, extreme density of ideas and images in all letters, flexibility in creating the vision of a complete foreigner (of which he is separated by culture, but with whom he identifies because he is a foreigner himself

to England, an Irishman), as well as a remarkable capacity to explore every bit of human experience presented in the novel in such a way as to serve a didactic purpose. The type of control required by such work sends to *ordonnance* in his writing skills as a novelist.

Before going back to convenience, to analyse other implications of the application of this concept in writing, the mention of function for the description of a space – another frequent technique in architecture – appears as necessary. The city of London was defined in the 18th-century novel by the activity of its inhabitants. In a commercial culture, the function of the city was to provide a space that would serve the individual pursuit for material security, a propitious environment for raising up a fortune. Keeping a low profile helped this pursuit, as little exposure and more privacy made the individual less vulnerable. Relationships were only superficial, maintained to keep up the appearances of sociability and dictated by self-interest, socialising being in fact a form of disguise, which explained the feeling of alienation experienced by the characters and the less vivid or detailed description of the town.

As the city was the house of its citizens, so the human body was the space that hosted the soul. Convenience of this type was used extensively by Fielding, whose characters' physical features mirrored their personality. There was a perfect harmony between the outside and the inside, the world of *Tom Jones* being conceived in this way. Nevertheless, sometimes the device of convenience applied to an individual was exploited in order to identify a disbalanced character and unmask an unusually profound inclination towards mystification and hypocrisy, a bent on dissimulation that was particularly intense in that personality; in such particular cases the physical features contradicted the character's nature. "In Sophia's case, the outside is in perfect harmony with the inside. But one of Fielding's favourite theme is the discrepancy between an attractive appearance and the sordid reality behind the façade" (Varey 173). One such character, Blifil, who appeared to be sober, discreet and pious was in fact the opposite.

In Goldsmith, physical convenience applies to Lien: he is a stranger by appearance (and Goldsmith has chosen a Chinese – a representative of another race than the European to render differentiation even more obvious) as he feels alien by mentality. If in Lien's case there is a match between physical appearance and personality or, in other words, there is harmony between the outside and the inside, both being conducive to the same idea, when Goldsmith offers, through Lien's

vision, the portrait of the philosophical beau in Letter CIV, a vacillation from disagreement to agreement between physical description and character appears.

When this beau is described as a character who receives company in his study “in all the pensive formality of slippers, night-gown and easy chair”, the table always covered with “a large book, which is always kept open”, the portrait brings him close to the almost archetypal image of the genius as an anonymous figure who consumes his life in misery, dressed in modest clothes, studying somewhere unknown in the solitude of his privacy, genius of whom Goldsmith’s philosophical beau is in essence exactly the opposite, namely a common significant being, endowed with second-rate intelligence and having ordinary preoccupations (Goldsmith 249).

The narrator, however, does not content himself with merely suggesting the discrepancy between appearance and essence by slipping an allusion about the book which is “never read” although “always kept open”. He goes on revealing the true nature of the philosophical beau by discussing his activities: “dozing, mending pens, feeling his pulse, peeping through the microscope and sometimes reading amusing books which he condemns in company” and his behaviour, such men being “candidates for admittance into literary clubs, academies and institutions when they regularly meet to give and receive a little instruction and a great deal of praise”. In this way the deceitful quality of the initial remarks reveals itself as a technique of pointing to the truth by stating the opposite with subtle irony.

Linguistic convenience referred to the way in which characters’ words mirrored the environment, which was best visible in Richardson’s novels. Female characters that were confined in a hostile space were likely to start writing letters in which their speech was clearly affected by their quality of being prisoners. The style reflected the effects of deprivation of liberty under violence or stressful conditions, among which claustrophobic tendencies, frustration and struggle for the preservation of mental sanity under the pressure of an atmosphere that tended to rival horror Gothic interiors. Linguistic convenience referred to both characters’ manner of speaking which matched the psychological state induced by the situation and the environment, and the author’s choice for the conception of the literary work. Richardson and Goldsmith’s novels are composed of letters, in themselves the expression of seclusion, as they are restrictive ways of discourse. Written in the first person, which points to subjectivity, they belong to the narrower space of the private, inferred secrecy, personalized language. They pointed to a feeling of seclusion, constraint or alienation which the character(s) experienced.

As to the necessity of adequacy between the character's language and the environment, Lien fully observes it as he speaks a polite language, a prerogative of the 18th-century gentleman. In order to understand Lien's polite language, before giving examples of instances of such communicational behaviour, it would be interesting to briefly discuss what "polite" referred to exactly and how the term was understood in the 18th century.

Besides making the distinction between humanistic or artistic, on the one hand, and mathematical, philosophical, scientific on the other, the term "polite" also came in associations such as "polite knowledge" which included Morality, Politics and good Literature or "polite learning" meaning that type of learning which did not require specialized or technical knowledge, but tended toward the development of the whole person, keeping its social relationships in view, the kind of learning which transformed one into a polite gentleman (Klein 5-6). One of the representative figures for politeness was Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury whose notion of politeness led to the language of politeness – an important idiom in the 18th-century England – and was then transformed into a philosophy and a culture of politeness.

Politeness was "the art of pleasing in company" an expression which points to psychological gratification because of the term "pleasing", and which clearly shows that the term may be referred to or defined only in relation to a certain type of behaviour within a group, that is in society, among people, i.e. in "company" (3). Politeness was therefore situated within the realm of social intervention and it governed relationships. In conversation, the laws of politeness required that the participant should neither dominate, nor be subject to self-effacement; excessive gravity or affectation were excluded, as well as pushing the other's opinion too relentlessly.

Other recommendations referred to the use of humour and raillery along with self-irony, this type of ironic stance preventing the participant to the conversation from becoming either an "entertainer" – exceedingly sociable, putting oneself on display for the others – or a "reformer" – accompanied by aloofness and superiority, protecting in this way both one's autonomy and sociability (94). Along the same line, one had to keep a distance from the observations contained in one's speech, also by self-irony and by avoiding didacticism, dogmatism and authority. In writing the "candidate" to politeness had to make his discourse pleasant to the reader, employ rhetorical questions, engaging the interest of the general readership, and always stick to simplicity (achieved through brevity which favoured

quotability and through an elliptical style which aimed at provoking thought), and sometimes cast doubt (110-11).

Lien achieves politeness in linguistic expression by adopting the naïve vision, an attitude of the open-minded, disinterested stranger he claims to be, whose only purpose in studying and describing alterity is to accumulate experience. Through intentional exaggeration of naivety the impression of distance from the object of study as well as that of self-irony is more easily rendered. Naivety represents, besides a means of achieving polite language, a way of manipulating the readers by winning their sympathy. The stories told by Lien observe the requirement for simplicity as, besides serving a didactic aim by illustrating samples of wisdom and moral teachings, they also translate these in very simple words, accessible to all people. Moreover, the morals of some of the stories are not mentioned, they are not “explained” as it were, leaving further meditation on the intended topic to the reader. One example of a fable which manages to shed light on the less self-explanatory phrase “Ignorance is the happiness of the poor” is the story presented in Letter LXXXII, about the elephant who was granted human intelligence at its request and as a reward from a god; nevertheless, this new state made the animal miserable because, in its shape of an elephant, it could not satisfy its new human needs, so it was restored to its blissful state of ignorance (Goldsmith 220).

Temperance in expression, an attribute of polite language is sometimes achieved in *The Citizen of the World* through rhetorical questions (not the ardent type of the orator but the temperate ones of the philosopher). For example, while discussing about poverty Lien wonders: “Come then, o Poverty! for what is there in thee dreadful to the wise? Temperance, Health, Frugality walk in thy train. Cheerfulness and Liberty are ever thy companions. Shall any be ashamed of thee, of whom Cincinnatus was not ashamed?” (196). By the use of such questions a feeling of common sense in judging the matter, as well as the impression of the truth of the conclusions reached is rendered. By doubt, by weighing the ideas and pondering upon them trust is won and when the conclusion is finally drawn, it necessarily appears as right as the person who reaches it has already gained the credit of the readers with the help of the above-mentioned strategies.

In many instances, Lien’s naivety hides irony: for instance, when he characterizes the English as hospitable because he is offered company by prostitutes in the street, or as generous and obliging when one of these women steal his watch to take it “to be repaired” (97-8). The silence kept by the Chinese philosopher while being misunderstood and even denied his Chinese origin because he does not behave

according to the patterns in which the Europeans see Orientals' behaviour, as well as his calm and amiable tone in responding, although he has been insulted or his openness to listen to somebody who is obviously mistaken and obstinate in his ignorance makes him a polite character, as opposed to his interlocutor's rude reactions and disinterest with his partner to the conversation (138-40).

To come back to the analysis of how architectural concepts applied in literature, let us observe that spatial limitation or enclosure lay at the core of another type of convenience, namely situational. Space was insufficient to characters who found themselves in predicament. On the one hand a narrowing of private space may be noticed in Richardson's novels, which is accompanied by lack of liberty of movement and decision; such female characters like Pamela or Clarissa become victims of outside authority which expresses its power by delimiting their area of activity to a very narrow space, so much so that one may speak in this case of imprisonment or enclosure. On the other hand the characters' privacy or rights are denied even within this limited space – Lovelace rapes Clarissa – an act that may be translated as a brutal invasion of space (Varey 199). Little or no liberty at all and loss of dignity and of any rights as a human being is mirrored in the abusive narrowing of private space which is, this one too, ultimately invaded. Lack of physical space parallels psychological entrapment and the status of a character who finds itself in such a plight; this is an illustration of what may metaphorically be called situational convenience.

The moves of the female character who is the victim are monitored. Close surveillance, spying through keyholes or eavesdropping are manifestations of violation of physical space. Richardson's characters and people in general manifest their consciousness of themselves by a claim on space that can be called their own. Possession of space that also represents property is in fact equated with identity whereas lack of it is denial of identity. "If people are like buildings, [...] then people too can achieve identity only by means of their place among other people" (203). This tendency of considering identity in terms of space functions at the micro-level of the human being but also at the macro-level of the British nation, for example, where property of land, the imperialist tendency of engulfing space went hand in hand with the desire of control for the sake of building up an identity that would suit British pride and expectations.

Yet another example of situational convenience may be found in Goldsmith, with the couple formed by the little beau and his wife, Mrs. Tibbs. In spite of their efforts to offer such an image of themselves as to be included within an elite of

wealthy, as well as educated people, the environment betrays and defines the couple's social status, as well as their psychological state, the representative word for all being limitation. They mean to offer the illusion of prosperity and quality on both intellectual and material plans; to this purpose the little beau bows to several well-dressed people in the street, pretending that these are his acquaintances (in order to be considered such a person himself), he praises his wife, claiming that she has been bred under the inspection of a countess, for similar reasons – the desire to be associated with people of the high society and treated as one of them (Goldsmith 175-6). This glamorous identity is revealed as a sham as soon as contact with their habitation is established, a place which is described by Lien as a “dismal-looking house in the outlets of the town”, a poorly furnished, narrow space which mirrors poverty and matches the real identity and status of the inhabitants as well as their psychological discomfort (a feeling of constraint) in agreement with the principles of convenience.

Besides situational convenience, the Tibbs offer a relevant example of linguistic convenience, too. According to Lien, they speak a “peculiar dialect” of which we are offered a few lines during their dialogue upon the guest's arrival, and which does not resemble the language they use on other occasions outside their household (176). The dialectal version is the one matching their true nature and lower status; whenever they find themselves in a more pretentious gathering, among members of the high society the use of an elevated language mirrors their desire to be integrated and is a response to the rules of decorum.

After having discussed how convenience may be applied to characters' portraits, to language or to situations as such, another concept comes to attention, namely distance, which will be analysed not only in terms of physical distance as it may appear in architecture but also in terms of social distance as necessity of decorum. People who belonged to the polite society in the 18th century did not allow themselves to get too close to one another, especially in a public place; physical distance was kept between conversing parties as well as linguistic and mental distance, i.e. private matters were not openly discussed, as expressing too much or intruding in one's privacy was considered a breach of the principles of decorum and contradicted the requirements of polite behaviour. Since the world of the 18th-century novel imitated reality or at least sought to render the appearance of reality, its characters followed the same line of conduct as people in real life.

Moreover, the narrative technique itself observed the decorum of distance. The narrator kept some space from the story and the characters. Fielding, for example,

was ironic towards his characters but his irony was subtle, only hinted at and never obvious. In *Tom Jones*, when Sophia falls off the horse, Fielding laughs at her but covers his attitude in very polite language. Distance was important not only for the sake of decorum, but also for the author's control over the written material. Since the novel was a public space, the meeting place of the narrator and the reader, distance needed to be observed in the relationship between the two; in order for this to happen, the same detachment from the facts that were presented and from the people that were invented and populated this place was necessary.

The narrator in Goldsmith identifies with the character of the Chinese philosopher, whose devices for the creation and preservation of distance are polite language and naivety which he may use abusively under the protection of his status of a stranger from whom certain awe and disagreement with local custom are expected and accepted more lightly, without suspicion of ill intentions, as they are put at the expense of difference in the perception of the world. Under this cover, Lien mocks at the British, wearing the mask of candour in the process. One such example is the description of the shops in Britain in opposition to those of Pekin; under the pretext of referring to the appearance of the place (while in fact an allusion at the lack of honesty of the shop-keepers is subtly made), Lien notices candidly: "The shops of London are as well-furnished as those of Pekin. Those of London have a picture hung at their door, informing the passengers what they have to sell, as those at Pekin have a board to assure the buyer that they have no intent to cheat him" (212). Also polite expressions are preferred to a straightforward style: Lien refers to the shop-assistant's behaviour as a capacity "of turning me as he thought proper, and moulding me to his inclinations" instead of calling it manipulative (213).

Among the symbolic places that appeared in the world of the 18th-century novel were the prison and the island. There was a literary tradition even before the novel of the Enlightenment, in which prisons, especially London's Newgate were likened to hell. In some novels London itself was associated with hell, from which naturally followed the comparison of the city in general and London in particular to a prison. There were at least two arguments upon which this chain of correspondences was based: at the level of emotions the element that linked these places was the low quality of life, not necessarily from a pragmatic point of view, but as connected to the psychological impact it had on one's mind, leading one to discouragement, alienation, disappointment and to perceiving life as an ordeal. The other argument was purely spatial and referred to these places being narrow and crammed. London was crammed with places of detention as well as crowded

because of geographic mobility and urbanisation. A prison cell is by definition a very narrow area. The comparison of these two to hell was based on the proverbial lack of space which characterized the latter, as well as the feelings of despair it inspired, being a place of punishment.

Lien's view of London is similar: "a stranger, instead of finding time for observation is often happy if he has time to escape from being crushed to pieces" (89). The Chinese philosopher associates the crowded streets of the city with the narrowness of spirit of its inhabitants, as well as with their financial situation: "there is not a poorer nation under the sun" and with the lack of imagination of the British artists: "the fancy of their painters is also deplorable" (89-90). This parallel between, on the one hand, the appearance of London and the characterization of the citizens (based on the concept of narrowness as lack of space and, respectively, lack of spirit) and, on the other hand, London as prison and Lien's psychological state – alienation (i.e separation as in a prison), shows conformity with the principle of convenience.

The island represented an ideal space and the space of reform. In utopias the island was an escape from civilized contemporaneity which was also presented as imbued with vice or prey to a new order which contradicted basic conservatory values that were seen as representing virtue. In most of the 18th-century utopias the island was a refuge from a corrupted world (in which usually commerce was considered as the main cause of luxury and vice) and a starting place in which the foundations of a more moral community were laid.

Britain itself was an island, as opposed to other European powers, and this very geographic configuration made the British see themselves as a privileged nation, pre-destined to fame and entitled to call itself superior to others. Being a territory that was surrounded by water conferred Britain a sense of uniqueness and power. This imagery and the supposedly-attached signification was largely used to render the nation self-confident and it helped, along with Protestantism, to the building up of the British identity as the chosen nation – people believed that they were protected by God more than others and that Great Britain was another Israel. Helped by this protective aura, the British built an empire on "this unstable element" – the sea – as the condition of being isolated on land in the middle of it meant a separation from the world which pointed to both self-sufficiency and control (of themselves and of other territories worldwide). Isolation and grandeur were made to look as inseparable.

This mentality of uniqueness of space matching uniqueness as fame may be read as convenience. Defoe's Crusoe exercised the rights of a self-conscious owner of property when he assigned names to spaces on his island (the Biblical allusion to Adam's naming of the animals). On the contrary, in Goldsmith the protagonist does not come to the island to take it into possession, to name it and to establish a new rule on it, by assigning the land a function and by organising it to a purpose. Lien chi Altangi's passage to England is a "subject of astonishment and terror" as well as the island itself which is an element of instability, an oddity to him, as the very concept of raising an empire on water which appears as both dangerous and nonsensical (Goldsmith 89). Lien is not a master or a colonizer but a philosopher, whose intention is not to impose but to observe and experience. The globetrotter coming to the island was a widespread motif in the fiction of the stranger. Lien's impossibility or unwillingness to fully understand an empire on water may be translated as Goldsmith's complex in front of England, or in other words the complex of an inhabitant of a smaller island – Ireland in front of a larger, more powerful one – England.

18th-century literature mirrored reality or presented a version of it. It also transposed spatial principles that were extensively applied to writing, from architecture. Consequently, such notions as convenience, *ordonnance* or function may offer a rich and intriguing perspective on the interpretation of literary works, especially the novel.

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