

Confessions of a Doctoral Dissertation Defense:
On *Re-Temporalizing the Self: Ontological Fictions of Spacetime*.¹

Walter Mucher

May 16th, 1996/July 4th, 2007

Foreword

As I sit here preparing to talk about my dissertation, I am reminded of its origins. And, I am also reminded that I am supposed to talk about what lead me to this project, and, hopefully, where it will take me, other than the award of this degree and, someday, of a job.

The origins of this dissertation stretch as far back as my childhood, when I used to lay awake in those wonderful Caribbean nights of my “innocence”, and look at the warm darkness that surrounded me wondering what made darkness so dark, and why I could see it. I would lie in bed and feel time moving; I would hear it in the rhythmic cacophony of the *coquíes* and the soft swaying of the palm trees against the metronomic tick-tocking of the clock. And, I could smell it in the fragrance of the garden that was carried lovingly on the shifting winds of the warm night. For me, time was contained in the movement of a passing car as its headlights shone upon the walls of my bedroom, growing in brightness and size as it shifted on the wall, changing with the passage of each moment my perception of the space in which I was, until reaching its climax, to, eventually, fall back into darkness.

¹ Revised version of the original doctoral defense presentation offered on the 16th of May, 1996 at SUNY-SB. (PhD Dissertation in Comparative Literature, SUNY at Stony Brook, N.Y. August 1996. Available through UMI Dissertation Services: Ann Arbor, Michigan. UMI Number: 9713861.)

Like a (cinematic) text, time and space were contained in that one place, in that one moment, framed by the experience of my room, and my consciousness. And I wondered if it was the same in other houses, other streets, other times ... until it came to me to ask, “How is it in other minds?” After all, “Do other people perceive time and space as I do?” “Or is it different?” These simple questions defined who and what I was.

As I grew older, though not necessarily wiser, and joined society's well formed body of consensual malcontents, I noticed that these questions were never answered to my satisfaction. No religion, no science, no dogma, has ever illuminated the brightest of dark corners of my room. Even today, as I sit here pretending to have resolved this question of time and space, I question these institutional premises upon which we define our every experience, and wonder how it is that we take all of this for granted, especially when we, as humans, define who or what we think we are. It is these questions, or, rather, the precious act of questioning inherent to a child which leads me to today's performance.

I now realize how similar my journey has been to that of the protagonists in the novels under discussion. So, as I sit here and ready myself to partake of the communion with others, I must take a deep breath and realize that what I've tried to salvage may be less tenable than I hoped.

In my long years of study, and the many more to come, I have tried to understand what defines humans, socially, culturally, and institutionally: and have come to the conclusion that our need to control time and space determines our very being. But time and space are also taken for granted. There must be a space for time and a time for space and what happens happens within this relation. Like this defense, in this locale, and at this moment, being is prescribed by its limiters, them being time and space. These limiting factors are equally present in texts, not merely as tools for the writer, nor as mediums for the reader, but as enactors of the texts own being.

My dissertation explores the practice of literary hermeneutics in an attempt to establish a critical methodology based not merely on linguistic spatio-temporal turns, but, rather, on physical and philosophical notions of time and space. Through a reading of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965), Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1958), Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* (1968), and Alan Moore's "The Reversible Man" (1983), I dwell on the basic human need to answer the ontological questions that define humanity's quest for meaningful self-identity. This is achieved by describing how these texts adopt a broad sense of space and time based on its socially constitutive function, thereby releasing space and time from their strict religious and scientific character. I propose that each work in question embodies one of three major forms of temporal consciousness: the transcendental, the historical, or the narrativistic. Such an apprehension of spatial temporality will eventually lead to a better understanding of the problems that critics and theorists face when confronted with the crumbling borders between literary genres, and, ultimately, when trying to understand the hermeneutical and temporal relationships established between ontological narratives and the self-constituted reader.

The Problem of Time and Space

From the time of the Ancients, an understanding of the concepts of space and time has been crucial in answering questions pertaining the self. Both Parmenides, as well as Heraclitus, viewed being through problems of sequence, continuity and flow of time (chronos — human interaction with space and time came to be understood as a river that flows in one's backyard —) also referred to by some as the arrow of time (thus Time's Arrow). The physical qualities of time and place were eventually distinguished from a special sense of appropriate or just time, and, I may add, space (kairós).

With Plato and Aristotle the quest is divided, being becoming a “spiritual” quest while spacetime a purely physical one. For the following centuries spacetime would become physical categories apart from man —absolute space and time—, or, eventually, they would be considered artificial experiential contraptions created by man. As such, Aristotle's determination of time as a series of "now-moments" would condemn the West to see time as nothing more than a physical quantifiable concept. Newton, Descartes, and the British empiricists would relate to space and time as things of lesser human endeavor, except as referential to the organizational power of human being.

By the late modern period, Nietzsche, worried with the advent of the Industrial Age, would forewarn of the error in misconceiving time as nothing more than a tool for man. “The intent [of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same], Nietzsche stipulates, is for the present never to be depreciated as a mere means to the future: each moment is to be self-fulfilling” (Thiele 222).²

In the twentieth century, history had joined science in determining time and space as quantifiable elements of nature. Faced with the need to understand the realities of the world that surrounds us in a quantifiable manner, man would come to define the world through established and accountable scientific, or, rather, technological certainties. Consider the necessity in the twentieth century for a position like that of the Directorate of Time, which takes care of the world's number one clock at the United States Naval Observatory. As a major part of the world's effort in the ordering of time, especially since it makes up for 40% of worldwide official time, the Directorate depends on 54 cesium atomic and hydrogen maser clocks by which, through consultation with its international

² Thiele, Leslie Paul. *Timely Meditations: Martin Heidegger and Postmodern Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995.

counterparts, the Directorate tracks the exactitude of the passing of time. But, as time passed, even these technological certainties have deteriorated into mere speculations upon the relation between differing theoretical suppositions. With this breakdown of the cognitive system, the certainties that defined the self also suffered, leaving humanity to attempt to recapture its supremacy over the world through new ventures in space and time, especially through the act of narrative.

Postmodern and deconstructive agendas would undermine the authority of history and science by denying them as the transcendental mediums in which perspective is possible (Ermarth 58).³ Postmodern fiction would emphasize not the time that ordinarily surrounds us (chronological time) nor the locale which we inhabit (geographical space). Rather, postmodern and deconstructive modes of reading would emphasize the time circumscribed by the reading act itself (experiential time) and on the place of the reading itself, that is the text (topographical space), as expressed in language and consciousness itself.

But the solutions proposed by postmodern and deconstructive modes fall short of their enterprise. Postmodernism and deconstruction attempt to lay the methodology for a linguistic treatment of being free on centric discourse. But, in reality, this treatment of the text, and of the self, maintains the same bipolar structure between a center and its margins of modernism. This oppositional relation only establishes new authorities by the transvaluation of discerning centers. In such an act, both postmodern and deconstructive moves turn out to be no more than a new subjective and biased treatment of the self. And,

³ *Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1992.

in such an act, the quest for a supposed true ontically pure being is lost in the comfort of a cognitively acquired self.

Is a true pure ontic self possible? Quantum theory revives an idea as old as Anaxagoras and Heraclitus, or as old as the concept of Ying-Yang, that is, that life is an endless relationship between “bodies” at the most primary sense. In *Mindwalk* (D: Bernt Capra, 1990) the poet Thomas Harriman, played by John Heard, quotes Pablo Neruda as he questions what it is we search for when we throw out our nets at night. Harriman states that we cast nets and search for the answers of the universe. But, when we wake up naked in the middle of the night, all we find is a fish trapped in mid air. “Don't you find that what you catch is your own self again? Like that fish trapped inside the wind?” Furthermore, “Life feels itself, and the search for life is an internal one.” And in the few words of Pablo Neruda, and of himself, Harriman questions the insistence of the politicians (represented by Sam Waterston) and the scientists (represented by Liv Ullman), as of every other human in the world, in searching for perfection outside of the self.

Postmodernism and deconstruction has remembered that no one entity is in itself pure and separate from all others. Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, among others, remembered the relationship between the existent and the nothing. As Shiva dances, the Hindu myth tells, the world dances in its existence. And in this dance, the search for knowledge reigns. In such a quest, the Ur-text is envisioned and an Ur-self imagined. And, in the end, the search ends in ogling the packaging, while one wishfully, yet fearfully, shakes the interior to find out, without looking, what is inside. It is this avoidance of the package's interior which I believe has fueled the ever so constant re-determination of the self in the past century. And, it is this re-determination of the self which I look at in relation to spacetime. For in the end, Shiva's dance takes place and

implies duration. It is this place and duration, understood as the constitutive moment and locale of being, which eventually must be questioned by all.

The texts

Each text selected for my dissertation embodies a different treatment of spacetime and the self, especially in their different textual structures. For example, Italo Calvino's *Le cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*) and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* are examples of the human need to compile stories gathered around a temporal narrativistic framework: the diary.

The structure of Calvino's narrative in *Cosmicomics* resembles more a scientific journal than a tale. It reproduces the transcendent accident of being as expressed by Heraclitus' river and Newton's physics. From the beginning, the protagonist of *Cosmicomics*, Qfwfq, is thrown into the river of space and time, left to defend itself against the tides and wills of his surroundings. As a result, being is inevitably powerless of determining its own course.

Calvino's *Cosmicomics* represents the ever present, the Aristotelian “now-moments”, as Qfwfq is moved, pushed and flung out into existence, without ever being capable of influencing the choices that appear in his journey through time and space. Time is referential movement outside of experience. The Past and the Future are just referential points in an ever present journey of evolutionary progress—Time's Arrow. Qfwfq's being is one determined by the “now”, not by a before nor by an after. It is only the present moment which is pertinent to Qfwfq's consciousness, a testament to non-referential mental processes in the arbitrary causal vastness of nature and the universe.

Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* is a more humanistic treatment of the experience of spacetime, as embodied in the history of a people and a place, in the guise

of a chronicle/diary of the explorer's ([hu]man/martian/kind's) struggles on a "New World" (Mars). This is done by primarily focusing on the question of "Martianess." What does it mean to be Martian? A treatise on the power and evils of colonialism, *The Martian Chronicles* traces the colonizing process by which an identity is created.⁴ This colonizing process can be defined as the active conscious act of perceiving the being as described by Edmund Husserl's concept of time-consciousness. This problem is further emphasized by the intrusion of Earth —the past— on Mars —the future—. Eventually, to be a Martian is to problematize what such an identity entails in time and space. Mars becomes the space by which the identity is questioned. The open future offered at the end of the chronicle becomes the time towards which an identity is formed. To bring "Earth" to Mars is to force one identity upon another. The question of identity (Now) in modernity, then, is a question of an effacing supremacy (Future, especially in the scientific-technological promise of the space program) brought upon being by the colonizing obliteration of its being (Past).

Even so, for the Late-Modern, the question of identity is itself more of a psychological programme than a physical one. For in the Late-Modern identity is a mental construct of those experienced spaces and those experienced times brought into review post-experientially by the mind. And, in such a review of experienced moments, there is an expected end, an identity brought to fulfillment, not by nature, as in *Cosmicomics*, but by choice. Still, the programme is written, and the conscious individual follows course until finally reaching the telos of his self.

⁴ For a treatment on *The Martian Chronicles* as a treatise on the colonization of America see Gary K. Wolfe's "The Frontier Myth in Ray Bradbury." In *Ray Bradbury*, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, editors. Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1980.

Clarice Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*) is the transition between the certainties of the modern, whether physical or psychological, and the pretenses of the post-modern. It is a self-reflective post/modern novel, yet it is also the protagonist's personal diary as she confides her psychological fears and human disillusionments to an unidentified listener. *The Passion According to G.H.* plays with the deepest sense of being, that is, with non-being. Contrary to Calvino's transcendent "now" and Bradbury's conscious being, Lispector presents the hidden question of the unknown rejected by the Modern and the Late-Modern. Not only are all definitions of being put to question, but also the essence of the quest for an identity. It is this quest which troubles the protagonist of *The Passion According to G.H.* As such, time and space become useless as G.H. fights with her self.

Finally, Alan Moore's comic strip, "The Reversible Man," brings to light the graphic quality of today's non-canonical act of storytelling by treating a serious theme in what is considered by most canons as a genre of adolescent frivolity. But, it also brings to light the glyph-likeness of the postmodern and deconstructive world, as it brings into the canonic form of the epic a marginal quality, similar to the cinematic form of modern epic storytelling.

Alan Moore's cartoon "The Reversible Man" focuses on the attempts of the post-modern to understand unconventional time and space. The act of time in reverse questions the authoritative flow of time and the sequence of space. But more than just a reverse in time and spatial habitation, the story leads to questions on the spatial construction of the self, especially because of its graphic nature. For, in the unbecoming of the protagonist, both physically as well as mentally, the presuppositions of constitutive identity are shaken up, especially when one considers that deconstructive modes are still

structural forms of constructing a self-identity, even though they reject the premise of an absolute and centering station in being.

Final Words

A complete life may be one ending
in so full identification with the non-
self that there is no self to die.

—Bernard Berenson

Though there may be as many interpretations of Spacetime as instances in a moment, one has to limit his views to a sample of those available in a vast ocean of possibilities. With many theories and many more examples to quash them, one tries to have a grasp on a corner of the amorphous beast before him: a theoretical security blanket of sorts, upon which one pounces in hopes of spiriting away the existential creatures that lurk in the liminality of being. It is with this in mind that I resolved on choosing the texts I did and the treatments I choose to impose on them.

With Calvino's *Cosmicomics* and Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* I described the eternalizing self in spacetime as expressed by the epistemic tendencies of the Early- and the Late-Modern periods, our cult to Time's Arrow (a problem already brought to light by Zeno's paradox in the 5th century BCE). With Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* I dwell on the experiential dissonance resulting from the confrontation of the self with itself through the early postmodern nothing, as present. And with Moore's "The Reversible Man." I looked at how the self, in a post(post)modern, or deconstructive, mode of spacetime faces death, or, rather, the negation of death, ratified by Heidegger's binary absolute-nothing and Jacques Derrida's deferred marginal.

All of these texts basically express the existence, implicitly or explicitly, of an all encompassing locale for the contents of being, be it in the form of absolute physical spacetime; be it in the form of subjective experiential consciousness; or be it in the form of a graphically reified text. It is not, then, about content, but about defining the “chalice” which holds the content of being in place. As I have shown in my analysis of Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, this locale and moment is the scientific myth of t_0 , that is, of the legendary origin of the universe. T_0 , ideologically known of as the origin of time, is also the locale that contains all contents, both primary, as well as marginal. Through the centuries many have queried the primacy of this locale over the known world, and over the self. But even postmodern and deconstructive attempts at disavowing the Absolute have become no more than affirmations of spacetime's locale as the reigning locale of the Absolute.

In “Back to the Future,” Mark C. Taylor claims

that to understand the difference that marks the margin *between* modernism and postmodernism, it is necessary to refigure space by imagining time without presence. Time that lacks the present implies a space that is never present (though it is not simply absent). The space of postmodernism is “the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time. (13)⁵

It is true that there is a need to refigure space and time, or, rather, our experience of space and time. But to make “presence” and “present” equals is pushing the envelope of credibility too far. Clearly Taylor is basing his claim on Derrida, and on the fact that

⁵ *Postmodernism: Philosophy and the Arts*. Continental Philosophy, 3. Edited by Hugh J. Silverman. New York: Routledge, 1990. 13-32.

Derrida is using Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty to pair space and time against each other as distinct and separate vectors of experience. But, as I demonstrate through my reading of Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, in reality both Taylor and Derrida are going back to Husserl's perceptive act of time-consciousness as they express the existence of pasts and futures that are not readily distinguishable in the fleeting moment of perception.

Strangely enough, the postmodern is about the end. But it is not about the end of the modern, as it is commonly purported. Rather, as I show in my analysis of Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, the postmodern is an attempt to embrace the ends of the world in hopes that it will not come to fruition. Emphasizing the graphic nature of modern life, the postmodern desensitizes humanity to the perils of their modern egos. "Death is the absolute future in which the absolute past approaches, but only approaches, for death is never present" (Taylor 18). In a weird reclaiming of Epicurus, the postmodern becomes a comic strip of death, of hatred, of deformity, and of the end of civilization. As such the value of being is diminished as the value of spacetime diminishes, and as the need to find oneself is banalized in its mere existence in the postmodern.

Finally, through my analysis of Moore's "The Reversible Man" I propose that self-identity also suffers as the postmodern takes away the precious uniqueness of past events and their relation to the composition of our being. As Nancy M. Farris states, "The mystery of transubstantiation lies precisely in its recreation of a unique act, which occurred only once and in historical time" (573).⁶ It is this non repetitive quality of time

⁶ "Remembering the Future, Anticipating the Past: History, Time, and Cosmology among the Maya of Yucatan." *Comparative Study of Society and History*. 29 (1987): 566-593.

that makes identity so distinct in the self. The self becomes as time travels “forward” presenting it with new experiences with which to constitute being. And yet the postmodern spends its time rewriting the past to its excesses. Like a spoiled child who is unsatisfied with the beginnings it was dealt, the postmodern searches the deck of space and time for a better hand to play. But Søren Kierkegaard, as well as Nietzsche and Heidegger, knew that for being to be free it must embrace its death with open arms.

In a way, to search for one's death is to search for one's beginning. It is to embrace the unknown, for that is what spatio-temporal experiences give hints about: that is, that to enact the true nature of being is to realize the fleeting nature of being, and that despair comes as a result of man's futile act of trying to maintain it in stasis. Being is only possible by embracing the child inside us: that “Yeah-saying” being which grasps its world, not as a burden, but as a chance to enact its being.