The Idea of Spatial Form

JOSEPH FRANK

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"André Malraux: A Metaphysics of Modern Art," *Partisan Review* (February 1950).
"Formal Criticism and Abstract Art," *Hudson Review* (Spring 1954).
"E. H. Gombrich: The Language of Art," *Minnesota Review* (Spring 1961).

This volume is dedicated to the memory of
Allen Tate (1899–1979)
poet, novelist, critic, biographer, man of letters
with gratitude and admiration

Preface

The present volume of essays was conceived, initially, as a means of getting everything I had written on the question of spatial form between the covers of one book. My original essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," was published in *Sewanee Review* in 1945; sections of the text then appeared in various anthologies of criticism; and it was reprinted in full, with some slight changes, in my first volume of essays, *The Widening Gyre* (1963). This volume is out of print, and so is the paperback edition published in 1968. It therefore seemed a good idea to make it available again.

All the more so because, thirty years after writing it and when my energies had become absorbed by a quite different field of study (Dostoevsky and the history of Russian literature and culture), I decided to return to my youthful interest in modernism and take up once again, in the light of more recent developments, some of the issues broached in the article and in the gratifyingly large discussion it had elicited.[1] My decision to do so arose out of a specific event that I cannot resist recalling at this point, which made me realize to what extent my ideas, with whose repercussions I had more or less lost contact, were still attracting attention and provoking controversy.

I believe it was in 1975 or 1976 that I received an invitation to participate in a session at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association devoted to spatial form. The meeting was to take place in New York, I was then teaching in Princeton, and I decided to attend out of curiosity. Arriving a bit late, and quite surprised to find the room full and all the seats taken, I stood in the doorway for a good hour listening to the proceedings. The papers led to many questions about my ideas, and some participants speculated about what I had left unsaid (bringing up matters that, in truth, I had never thought about at all). One of the queries that kept recurring was why I had never written a word of response to all the criticisms that had been leveled at my theories and analyses. The real answer, aside from my innate aversion to literary polemics (I am always overcome by a depressing sense of tedium and futility whenever I read any), was simply that the focus of my studies had turned elsewhere. But I felt a little like a ghost returning to visit his former life and learning of everything he had neglected to do while on earth. I decided then and there to take the time to read through this material and see what could be said to answer the inquiries of those who were interested in my reflections. Initially, I thought I would only reply to my critics; but this hardly seemed worth doing by itself, and so I was led to reexamine my ideas in the light of theories I had been unfamiliar with earlier (such as Russian Formalism), or which had emerged later.

All this occurred fourteen years ago, and in view of the present ferment in literary theory and criticism one may well doubt that such a notion as spatial form, now more than half a century old, still has any relevance to contemporary concerns. If we are to judge the vitality of an idea by the frequency with which it is attacked, how-

ever, then spatial form, I am happy to say, still has not been relegated to the dustbin of history. Just as this book was going to press, I came across another sideswipe at it in the course of a rather rambling but touching tribute paid by Richard Poirier to his old teachers at Amherst. They were, it seems, far superior to the much better known New Critics reigning at Yale and Vanderbilt, who are piously denounced in ritual fashion. This is not the place to argue the merits of this critical mantra any further, but it appears that my essay is, as it were, the concentrated essence of the noxious New Critical influence on the study of literature.

As Poirier sees it, the incalculable damage that the New Critics and Eliot, with his "mythic method," have done to the reading of literature both new and old "is epitomized in such influential codifications as Joseph Frank's essay of 1945 . . . where it is proposed that Eliot, Pound, Proust, Joyce, and Djuna Barnes 'ideally intend the reader to apprehend their works spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.'" Hastening to the barricades, the vigilant critic retorts that reading "is an experience in time and not in space; we read, we know 'what it is like to read,' in sequence."[2] Indeed we do; and by the word "ideally" in the above quotation, I indicated my awareness that the intention mentioned cannot ever be fully realized precisely because reading is "an experience in time." But a good deal of modern literature makes no sense if read *only* as a sequence, and it was the implications of this self-evident anomaly that I wished to examine. Many people have assured me over the years that my explorations have been very helpful for *their* reading, and I can only leave it to the future to decide whether this will continue to be the case.

It would seem, then, that my theory of spatial form

has by no means as yet lost its capacity to stimulate response, whether approval or contestation; and I am happy to record an instance of the former coming from a totally unexpected quarter. A recent Russian anthology of Western literary criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose sixteen entries range from Sainte-Beuve and Taine to Dilthy, Heidegger, Sartre, and Northrop Frye, also contains a translation of the shortened form of my article prepared for Mark Schorer's 1948 collection.[4] It thus occurred to me that a few words about its origins might be of some general interest. The work originated in my fascination with Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, which I read shortly after its publication in 1937. The book haunted me for some reason, and I began trying to define for myself the difference between it and more conventional novels, even though it was not as obviously experimental as, say, *Ulysses* or some early Faulkner. I was struck by T. S. Eliot's comparison in the preface between the prose of the novel and poetry, which led me to see if I could pin down this observation more concretely. My preoccupation was never abstract or theoretical; I only wished to say something enlightening about a particular work. I did not set out to write a theory of modern literature, and the notion that I might be engaged in doing so, given my sense of my general ignorance, never crossed my mind.

This explains the somewhat lopsided character of the essay as a whole, which I am sure must have struck a good many readers. Works of such great scope as *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past* are passed by very rapidly, while *Nightwood* receives a far more extensive treatment. Part of the reason is that much work on Joyce and Proust had already been done, and I was not out to compete with it; part is simply that, even when

my original intention had greatly expanded, I still remained attached to my initial purpose. Possibly out of a sense of gratitude to the book that had started me on the way, and had received very little attention, I insisted on giving *Nightwood* a place of honor.

For a number of years after reading *Nightwood,* I thought about some of the questions it raised and jotted down quotations from my reading. Most were later incorporated into the text, but I did not find a place for others. I distinctly recall, for example, writing down the famous passage from G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire* (which several commentators have rightly spotted as related to my point of view) in which he asserts that "a Shakespearian tragedy is set spatially as well as temporally in the mind," and that there are in the plays "a set of correspondences which are related to each other independently of the time-sequence of the story." I also remember reading, with great admiration, an essay on Virginia Woolf by William Troy (one of the best and most original critics of his generation, now unjustly forgotten) who noted how Woolf's symbolic structures contradicted the laws of narrative. Taking down his *Selected Essays* from the shelf, I discover: "The symbol may be considered as something *spatial*" (italics in original); and the further remark that in poetry, "whether separate or integrated into a total vision, symbols are capable of being grasped, like other aspects of space, by a single and instantaneous effort of perception."

Suggestions of this kind no doubt came pouring in from all directions; but I really did not know how to use these hints and pointers for a long time.[3] It was only, I believe, when I began to think along the lines of a comparison of literature and the visual arts that matters began to become somewhat clearer. I had read a good bit

of art criticism earlier—Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Herbert Read—and had studied modern art with Meyer Schapiro at the New School for Social Research in the mid-1930s. Heinrich Wölfflin certainly taught me something about the possibilities of formal analysis; and I was led to Wilhelm Worringer by his influence on T. E. Hulme and the constant references to him in English criticism. But I recall vividly that my ideas only began to take coherent shape once I finally read Lessing's *Laocoön*, which I may have been led to because of the discussion of time and space in Edwin Muir's classic *Structure of the Novel*.

I have a distinct recollection of the exhilaration I felt after going through Lessing in the little Everyman edition, whose rippled crimson cover I can still feel in my hands and see before my eyes. Here was the systematic clue I had been searching for without knowing it. And I only began to write seriously and stubbornly after this discovery, now that I knew what I was doing and had something to say I had found nowhere else among the critics I had read and from whom I had learned.

Some years later, through a stroke of luck, the first part of the still unfinished essay was shown by a mutual friend to Allen Tate; and he called me from his office in the Library of Congress (I was then working as a journalist in Washington, D.C.) to invite me for lunch. I shall never forget his interest and encouragement, or his insistence that I hurry and complete the continuation I sketched for him so that he could use the essay for *Sewanee Review*, whose editorship he was soon to assume. The dedication of the present volume to his memory is only a small acknowledgment of all my indebtedness to him for his continuing kindness and unfailing friendship from that time on.

It was only after several years, in 1948 to be exact, that the publication of parts of the essay in an anthology of

criticism edited by Mark Schorer brought it to the attention of a wider audience and really launched it on its career. Shortly after the first periodical installment had appeared, however, I received a call from New York asking for the right to translate a condensed version of the entire text into Spanish. The caller was the editor of *La Revista Belga*, a monthly journal financed at that time by the Belgian government and intended for Latin American readers. Naturally, I was very pleased and hastened to agree; if my memory is correct, the last part of the essay appeared in Spanish even *before* it was printed in English. I have often wondered who read it, and whether it came to the attention of any of the younger Latin American novelists who seem to exemplify its principles so well.

The present volume also includes three other essays that, in my own mind, are linked with some of the questions raised in my spatial form article and written as offshoots and extrapolations of its ideas. All are concerned with the larger issues of modern art and modernism touched on in sections VI and VII; all focus on problems arising from the same mutation in Western culture that gave rise to spatial form. My article on André Malraux's *The Psychology of Art* is earlier than the one on *The Voices of Silence* published in *The Widening Gyre;* and though there is some similarity between them, there are also enough differences to justify the reappearance of this first reaction to a superb work (or series of works) whose present neglect by specialists is no gauge of their true stature. I was pleased to be able to record the revision by E. H. Gombrich of his initial, all too influential, totally negative appraisal.

All the essays are printed substantially unchanged, except for some slight modifications, but with the addition of notes and two postscripts that take account of

other or more recent opinions. I should like to thank Leslie Mitchner of Rutgers Press for her backing and aid with this project. Most of all, though, my thanks go once again to my wife Marguerite, who insisted for many years that a small book on spatial form was desirable and feasible even when prospective publishers thought it impractical. The present edition would not have come into being without her belief in its possibility.

JOSEPH FRANK
Paris, France, May 1990

Notes

1. For a bibliography of works concerned with spatial form, see *Spatial Form in Narrative,* ed. Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (Ithaca and London, 1981), 245–263.
2. Richard Poirier, "Hum 6, or Reading before Theory," *Raritan Review* 9 (Spring 1990), 26.
3. An extremely informative analysis of the general cultural background can be found in James M. Curtis, "Spatial Form in the Context of Modernist Aesthetics," in *Spatial Form in Narrative,* ed. Smitten and Daghistany, 161–178. An excellent reconstruction of the literary-critical situation can be found in chapter 3 of Ronald Foust, "The Place of Spatial Form in Modern Literary Criticism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1975).
4. *Zarubezhnaya Estetika i Teoriya Literaturi xix-xx vv.,* ed. G. K. Kosikov (Moscow, 1987). I am greatly indebted to my colleague Lazar Fleishman, who returned from the Soviet Union with a copy of this book and called it to my attention just in time to be mentioned here.

Contents

Preface ix

1

Spatial Form in Modern Literature 31

2

Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics 67

3

Spatial Form: Some Further Reflections 107

4

André Malraux: A Metaphysics of Modern Art 133

5

Formal Criticism and Abstract Art 159

6

E. H. Gombrich: The Language of Art 179

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Spatial Form in Modern Literature