Spatial Form in Literature: 
MacLeish’s “Einstein”

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In a well-known essay recently reconsidered by himself and others, Joseph Frank shows the importance of “spatial form” for modern literature and literary theory and for practical criticism. Such spatial forms can be seen as complementing the concerns of Gaston Bachelard’s almost equally well-known The Poetics of Space: “the communicability of an unusual image, . . . the phenomenon of the poetic image.” To put it broadly, Frank considers structurally and thematically what Bachelard considers texturally and phenomenologically. In sections I, VI, and VII of his essay Frank raises theoretical questions about our ways of conceiving and conveying our sense of formal structure in literature and about the nature of modernism itself. In sections II-V “spatial form” serves Frank as a basis for critical commentary. In this second way — but without the exact same force Frank gives it — I wish to apply the concept of spatial form to Archibald MacLeish’s Einstein: to give another example of the helpfulness of the concept for commentary and, above all, to give some sense of the overall force, significance, and importance of MacLeish’s poem.

To some degree Einstein displays the more traditional, linear narrative form against which Frank and many of the contributors to Spatial Form in Narrative set spatial forms. As Frank says of Eliot’s earlier poems, “although the sections of the poem are not governed by syntactical logic, the skeleton of an implied narrative structure is always present.” However, Einstein also has many of the specific characteristics of “structure, thematic focus, verbal texture, pace, and epistemology” that David Mickelson attributes to spatial form: “the tendency . . . for totality as an
aggregate of parts to predominate over totality as an ordered sequential whole" (p. 64); "leitmotifs or extended webs of interrelated images" (p. 68); "exclusive focus on a single individual... depictions of a state of mind" (p. 71); "complicated syntax, an unusual vocabulary, or elaborate imagery" (p. 72). The obvious combination of these in *Einstein* invites us to express our grasp and appreciation of the poem in terms of spatial forms that we discover within the poem.

This is all the more appropriate, of course, given *Einstein*'s specific subject, its "historical" protagonist. One commentator on Frank, James M. Curtis, has drawn an analogy: "New paradigms often come into being when someone resolves anomalies by applying previously existing concepts in a new and startling way, as in Einstein's application of non-Euclidean geometry to physical problems. Frank's essay does just this...." Another commentator, William Holtz, has proposed that in turning from the phenomenology of particular spatial images to spatial forms we turn from the poem as wave and its images as particles to the poem as field: in our example, *Einstein*, the field or fields of space as both theme and form. And like Curtis, Holtz associates spatial form, especially in Frank's sense, with the "recasting of physical reality in terms of a unified spatio-temporal 'field'" (p. 277). The representative spokesman of that recasting was, as Holtz reminds us elsewhere (p. 280), Albert Einstein. Spatial images and spatial forms in *Einstein* have the effect Holtz attributes to "verbal space": "it mediates between our world and our thought about it" (p. 283). In MacLeish's poem it also mediates between Einstein's world and his thought about it. Yet the chief concern of the poem remains not space, but Einstein confronting it. And for us as readers, "it is the specific 'spatiality' of our involvement with individual works, traditional as well as modern, that we would do well to scrutinize rather than a hypostasized spatial principle" (Holtz, p. 282).

To aid such scrutiny, W. J. T. Mitchell, who starts from the more general premise that "spatial form is a crucial aspect of the experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures," proposes a helpful system of four levels as "a heuristic device for discriminating varieties of spatial form in literature"
These four levels are: (1) the literal spacing of the physical text; (2) the spatial world described in the text; (3) the map or outline of temporal movement; (4) "a spatial apprehension of the work as a system for generating meanings" (p. 553). MacLeish's *Einstein* displays spatial form on all four of these levels.

First, the most basic of spatial forms, "spacing" itself. Adapting and applying to spatial form Northrop Frye's version of the medieval four levels of significance, Mitchell suggests that "we note that the literal level, the physical existence of the text itself, is unquestionably a spatial form in the most nonmetaphoric sense" (p. 550). For "the spatiality of English texts as physical objects is normally backgrounded, but that does not negate the significance of this aspect of their existence."

How does *Einstein*'s literal "spacing," its marginal gloss, support the theme of the poem's space? Obviously *Einstein* is not even partly or intermittently a "concrete" poem. However, both form and content of Lawrence Lipking's essay on "The Marginal Gloss" make it clear that any marginal gloss, as such, relies on spatial form for part of its effect. As Lipking says, and wittily shows with his own essay, "Margins, so conceived, rationalize the white space of books. The possibility of glossing demonstrates that the space surrounding print is not a vacuum but a plenum." Lipking's own demonstration supports implicitly *Einstein*'s expansion and recognition of space. Of "The Ancient Mariner" Lipking says, "The activity of the reader's eye, skipping back and forth between the margin and the text, now performs the work once left to the imagination" (p. 615). Such spatial activity by the reader of *Einstein*, although less frequently than with "The Ancient Mariner," does reinforce our sense of the hero's inner-outer dialectic and the contrast between the phenomenological textures of the gloss and the poem, between fixed and fluid identities of the protagonist, whereby the gloss becomes one of two "emblems of consciousness" (Lipking, p. 647). Of *The Waste Land* Lipking says, "Eliot sets his poem on the shore, where sea and land mingle and margins become difficult to distinguish" (p. 630). MacLeish set *Einstein* on the surface of our planet, where earth and sky mingle as do gloss and poem. In these and other
ways, then, "No mode of printing, no mode of glossing, can be neutral" (p. 638).

Mitchell's second, descriptive level of spatial forms, "in which we attend to the world which is represented, imitated, or signified in a work," includes "whatever our reading leads us to 'see' not simply in the visual sense but in the entire field of perception" (p. 551). In *Einstein* this descriptive space takes two broad forms; a local, particular, personal space; and a total, generalized, representative space. The poem's local space consists of the intensely compacted space occupied by the hero's bones, flesh, brain, arms, hands, fingertips, face, coat, trousers, and shoes, bounded by a lightly-sketched city and landscape of Bern and its environs. The disproportionate fictional densities of inner and outer local space reflect on the one hand the poem's insistence on its hero's ultimately inviolable self and on the other its acceptance of his indifference to the actual, unconceptualized, empirical surroundings of his daylong journey of thought. These surroundings are located formally and appropriately mainly in the gloss that bounds the poem proper. Not only are these local images themselves spatial and their totality spatial, but they are presented almost randomly in the poem so that our perception of them must be accumulated spatially as well. All this is also true of the poem's total space. Its images, interwoven just as randomly through the poem, can be organized along a range from the most infinite to the most minute: universe, dark, stars, constellations, worlds, sun, moon, sky, sphere, hillsides, fields, grass, dust, motes, foam, ether, atoms. Out from his compacted personal space and along this range MacLeish's Einstein seeks some way in, to the heart of total space's darkness.

The patterns of this seeking constitute Mitchell's third level of spatial form: "the order or sequence of presentation in a text, whether it is based on blocks of imagery, plot, and story, the development of a character or consciousness, historical or thematic concerns — any time we sense a 'map' or outline of our temporal movement through the text" (p. 552). The objective, allegorical narrative pattern of the gloss of *Einstein* has two recurring elements: an act, with increasing effort, and a scene, with increasing resistance. The acts are all "enterings": con-
temptation, descending, gazing into, attempting to enter, invading, asking at, hearing and discovering, forcing, and entering. The scenes are all “portals”: the surroundings of a public bench, a “strasse,” a mirror, a landscape, a “sommergarten,” a gate of stone, a wall with a back stair, and a secret door. Each of these acts and scenes can be glossed by literary and mythological parallels, ranging from the writings of Lewis Carroll to those of Joseph Campbell. Such parallels would confirm both the separate symbolic possibilities of such acts and scenes and how such clusters of significance could connect. Yet such symbolic images, at least in this work, may abstract, generalize, and oversimplify the poem’s full experiential subjectivity. The gloss, for example, can neither reach back to the poem’s beginning nor forward to its end, and must do less than full justice to either.

Spatially, the subjective experience that narrates the development of Einstein’s thought takes on three patterns: a tension, a rhythm, and a progression. Such patterns translate only partly into commentary, being both of the poem’s words and of what Winifred Nowottny calls “an aura of their suggestions, the ‘feeling-tone’ of their adhesions in the world of non-linguistic reality.” The poem’s spatial tension between inner and outer reality establishes a continuing musical and ontological ground that supports and stimulates the poem’s spatial rhythm and progression. One pole of this tension, “seems to keep / Something inviolate,” and “a living something” is fixed in the opening lines and reaffirmed in identical language at the very close (ll. 3-4, 9, 185-86). The other and Other pole, wholly extrahuman, is approached again and again but remains “the dark” (ll. 67, 107, 175, 181-82). The concluding reassertion of this tension gives the dramatic and thematic lie to the allegorical gloss’s “Einstein enters.”

One of the many recurrent images that combine to form these three spatial patterns is the poem’s shadows. To trace the behaviour of this particular image is to illustrate how such patterns of tension, rhythm, and progress form. The “space” of Einstein’s physical self objectively “blots / Earth with its shadow” (ll. 13-15). But the surrounding physical details subjectively “make / Shadows that mirror them within his skull” (ll. 44-45), which are, however, “Perhaps not shadows but the things itself” (l.
50). As Einstein tries to assert his importance to the world’s identity, “moons prolong his shadow” (l. 60) in a witty ambiguity of space-time. But when this assertion falters, objective “awful shadows loom across the sky” (l. 68). With Einstein’s growing—if still frustrated—efforts, subjective and objective worlds mingle dialectically:

But grope against his groping touch and throw  
The long unmeaning shadows of themselves  
Across his shadow and resist his sense. (ll. 131-33)

And thus shadows conclude their role in the poem’s spatial patterns.

The second narrative spatial pattern is the centripetal-centrifugal rhythm of Einstein’s dialectic encounters with the poem’s version of that actual space mathematically recreated and redefined by the actual Einstein’s intentional genius. This cyclical rhythm is carried, by vivid, metaphorical active verbs and skilful metrical patterns, back and forth along the range of total space. It is presided over mythically by recurring, implicitly cyclical images of sun and moon:

    and suns  
    Rise on his dawn and on his dusk go down  
    And moons prolong his shadow. (ll. 58-60)

Within this rhythm, images of dark, dusk, and dust resonate into one another and into other images: door, drone, drown, dumb, and (once) dead, to suggest what mental and even physical risks Einstein runs.

Added to this inner-outer tension and this centripetal-centrifugal rhythm is the pattern of the progress of Einstein’s intellectual quest to penetrate, comprehend, and become part of “space.” It is broadly linear but in three movements, each building directly on the previous movement’s partial achievements and dialectically on its eventual frustration. The opening premise is that post-Descartean dualism of subject and object still characteristic of our everyday attitudes to knowledge. For what Morse Peckham has remarked applies equally well to our physics: “Today most people, even at the higher levels of culture, live according to the metaphysics of the Enlightenment.”

Acting within
this premise Einstein apprehends as well as he can the “bodiless significances” (l. 47) of the outside world so that they “may be understood” (l. 51). He ends, however, with self-centred Lockean sensation which, no matter how vivid and gratifying for the moment, leaves too much of reality unapprehended. It gives Einstein only a Newtonian Enlightenment knowledge, in Whitehead’s sense of those terms, that is “less than a world” and that he must “communicate beyond” (ll. 73-74).

Einstein then takes a stance that puts him among the heroes of Whitehead’s “Romantic Reaction” against “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (p. 66). For Whitehead, these heroes were Wordsworth and Shelley; for MacLeish, no doubt, Emerson and Whitman. Thus Einstein attempts a more organic relation with outer reality, a relation that “grasps the whole of nature as involved in the tonality of the particular instance” (Whitehead, p. 104), “the concrete facts of our apprehension, facts which are distorted in the scientific analysis” (p. 104) of the preceding mechanistic Enlightenment. For as MacLeish’s Einstein also discovers, “the actual things experienced enter into a common world which transcends knowledge, though it includes knowledge” (p. 110) — again knowledge defined in Enlightenment terms. However, this second experience, made up though it is of intensely vivid moments of potentially transcendent communion with immediate, accessible nature, is only momentary and again resists.

The effort of communion is succeeded and superseded by one of analysis. Its characteristic arts are to break, subdivide, undo, dissolve, crumble, melt, collapse, crumple the not-Me into atoms, particles, flux, change, “nothing.” This action of analysis, for an age of analysis, follows Whitehead’s historical pattern by which “the final triumph of atomism had to wait for the arrival of electrons at the end of the [nineteenth] century” (p. 125). By these dramatic, thematic, and historical patterns the field of the poem’s inner-outer tension, set into motion by its centripetal-centrifugal rhythms, progresses (upward? downward? inward? — in any case, onward) by the three steps, stages, stations, strivings that form the poem’s map of our movement through the text.

In Einstein the quest patterns that MacLeish used directly in three sections of The Hamlet of A. MacLeish and throughout
Conquistador are only implied, by certain verbs and other images, as much in the gloss as in the poem. Nevertheless the hero's quest for knowledge of the not-Me does link the gloss's allegorical images. It may also impose a significant metaphysical pattern upon the hero's physical wanderings through the day and place of the poem. With such possible significances we come to the poem's fourth level of spatial forms.

This fourth and final level of spatial forms, to complete Mitchell's scheme, contains and conveys, thematically as well as dramatically, "the very metaphysics which lies behind a story told about this world in this particular way... what we experience when we 'see' what someone (or something) means" (p. 553). Although "spatial" only conceptually, schematically, or metaphorically, such metaphysical orderings must be included in any consideration of Einstein's complete poetics of space. Given Einstein's and Einstein's special concerns, this metaphysics could be of the powers of the self, the changing relation of the self to the not-Me, and the totality, the world, made up thereby. The last of these, the world implicit in the poem's spatial imagery, I have elsewhere conjecturally associated with one of Stephen Pepper's four "world hypotheses": contextualism.14

What is our overall, spatial apprehension of the powers of Einstein's self? Northrop Frye has proposed five ascending fictional modes "classified not morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same."15 I do not find, although Signi Falk does, that the poem itself "implies a warm human being."16 Yet such a figure clearly inhabits the biographical and iconographical context of the poem and may indirectly affect its literary substance for some readers. Rather, the Einstein of the poem hovers interestingly between Frye's high mimetic and romance modes: unambiguously superior in degree to other men, ambiguously superior in degree to his environment, the not-Me, but in no sense "pathetic and futile."17 Perhaps the plot of his relation with the not-Me, as we shall discover, "is not tragic; it is not even precisely critical."18 But Einstein is a potentially tragic character in that his heroic intellectual efforts do isolate him from his society (Frye, pp. 35, 54). He
embodies "the high mimetic conceptions reflected in twentieth century literature" (p. 63).

As character, Einstein displays his powers thematically more than fictionally. Here too Frye's observations are surprisingly apt. Einstein's modal status is the thematic equivalent of an historical translation during which "the centripetal perspective replaces the centrifugal one of romance" (p. 58). The poem unquestionably embodies "the theme of the boundary of consciousness, the sense of the poetic mind as passing from one world to another, or as simultaneously aware of both" (p. 57), which for Frye is typical of the episodic romance mode of thematic writing or writing considered thematically. The poem also embodies "the [high mimetic] theme of cynosure or centripetal gaze," "the theme of leadership being at the center of his normal fictional mode" (p. 58). For just as "the religious poet may transfer this imagery to the spiritual life" (p. 59), so does MacLeish, the poet of Man Thinking, transfer this imagery to the intellectual life and give us, as Grover Smith puts it, "an intellectual celebration of an intellectual triumph, attended by a voice bidding the triumphator remember that he is dust" (p. 23). Einstein has the added virtue of dramatizing, less "spatially" but with special clarity and emphasis, the powers that for Kenneth Burke define man: the symbol-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments [in this case, conceptual ones] of his own making, moved by a sense of order, and "rotten with perfection."

We have several times referred to Einstein's narrative as a quest. Can the pattern of the quest, as drawn together by Joseph Campbell and Frye, gather into a single significant spatial form the changing relation between Einstein and the not-Me? In the first forty lines the hero is still primarily in the world of common day. He then undergoes in both poem and gloss a subjective agon with the alien, at times seductive at times monstrous, not-Me in a region of almost supernatural wonder. In fact, MacLeish gives us Einstein's intellectual "comings and goings" in such physical imagery that the hero's mental adventures have at times the same surreal objectivity as those, for example, of Browning's Childe Roland, another quester. This special quality of Einstein's
marvellous adventures is well described by Campbell: "Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (p. 97). The conventional role of woman in the quest as temptress or romantic or spiritual bride is proposed but rejected (ll. 99, 107, 124-27), placing Einstein by implication in the second of Campbell's patterns, "so that . . . the One Presence will be seen again": in the poem in Einstein's passing visions, in reality in his fixed equations. Einstein has no "old wise man" (Campbell, pp. 72-73; Frye, p. 195) to play the part of Virgil to his Dante, but a single allusion to Democritus (l. 149) tells us who such a guide might be.

The final forty lines of the poem take us beyond the quest proper just as the first forty lines led up to it. In these lines hero and monster, Einstein and the not-Me, undergo a kind of pathos/catastrophe/death "into nothing" (l. 171), "into dark" (l. 175), immediately after which

Like a foam
   His flesh is withered and his shriveling
   And ashy bones are scattered on the dark" (ll. 180-82)

But, Frye reminds us, "Mutilation or physical handicap, which combines the themes of sparagmos and ritual death, is often the price of unusual wisdom or power" (p. 193). This observation brings us to the most crucial and controversial issue, Einstein's "return," the poem's conclusion.

For if the poem does not move beyond the hero's sparagmos — and he is explicitly torn to pieces on the poem's literal level of meaning — then it concludes with "the archetypal theme of irony and satire," as Frye has summarized it elsewhere in the Anatomy (pp. 223-39) and as some readers have interpreted Einstein.21 This may even have been MacLeish's surface intention when he first wrote the poem but not, I would argue, his full one. Nor, his most recent opinion of the actual Albert Einstein.22 Nor, the full effect of the poem on us, today.

Exactly what, then, does happen to Einstein in the last four lines of the poem?
But still the dark denies him. Still withstands
The dust his penetration and flings back
Himself to answer him.
Which seems to keep
Something inviolate. A living something. (ll. 183-86)

How do these “events” affect our final and total response to the spatial form of the overall poem? Do they confirm the hero’s *sparagmos*, his failure, or do they contain the *anagnorisis* by which he “comes back . . . with the power to bestow boons”? The ambiguously erotic imagery of the first line and a half of the passage does “deny” one obvious form of fulfilment. Unlike many of Whitman’s speakers, Einstein consummates no *liebestod* with the not-Me. But “flings,” which many read as a further sign of Einstein’s ironic futility, also parallels and, for some commentators, translates Heidegger’s “thrown”:

The net of circumstances that constitutes in the broadest sense my physical situation, the world into which I am flung—or rather into which, when I come to any kind of awareness, I have always already been flung—is, nevertheless, a world only through my projection of what I mean to make it.23

If we entertain this parallel, it would invite us to see the Einstein of this poem, finally, as modern, existential Man Thinking: not frustrated by his encounter with the not-Me but identified and affirmed by it, flung back from possible absorption in the not-Me into genuine existence. Recognition and acceptance of this genuine spatio-temporal existence would be the “answer” that “himself” gives to “him”: the completion of the quest, and the meaning generated by our spatial apprehension of the four levels of Einstein’s spatial form.

NOTES


cance of Spatial Form," *Spatial Form in Narrative*, pp. 186-87. For a detailed, more Bachelardian consideration of Einstein's spatial imagery see my "‘Intimate Immensity': On the Poetics of Space in MacLeish's *Einstein*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 14 (Spring 1983) 19-29.

3 All quotations from Einstein are from *New and Collected Poems 1917-1976* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), pp. 137-44; quotations and citations are by line reference to the poem's 186 lines.

4 *The Widening Gyre*, p. 11.

5 David Mickelson, “Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative,” *Spatial Form in Narrative*, p. 63.


9 The ontological authority and epistemological accuracy of such spatial forms to express our aesthetic apprehensions have been questioned by Leon Surette in "Rational Form in Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Spring 1981), 612-21, and redefended by Mitchell in the same issue ("Diagrammatology," pp. 622-33). But even Surette concludes that "the literary scholar is probably doomed, then, to rely upon some explicitly or implicitly diagrammatic expression of literary form" (p. 621). Which, for the present essay's heuristic purposes, will suffice. It might even be that for those such as myself, and perhaps my whole generation, whose earliest (and only?) rigorous introduction to systematic thought may have been the procedures and laws of geometry, spatial forms may have a special, aboriginal appeal and even authority they would not have for other generations whose introduction to formal thought took other forms.


13 Morton White, “Preface,” *The Age of Analysis*, Volume VI of *The Great Ages of Western Philosophy* (New York: George Braziller, 1957), p. ix: “It is intended to record succinctly, and in full recognition of the dangers in any title, the fact that the twentieth century has witnessed a great preoccupation with analysis . . .”

14 See the conclusion to my "‘Intimate Immensity': On the Poetics of Space in MacLeish's *Einstein*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, p. 28.


