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Place and Space in Modern Fiction (review)

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 251-253 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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Place and Space in Modern Fiction. By Wesley A. Kort. University Press of Florida, 2004. 269 pages. \$59.95.

Wesley Kort sees his most recent book, *Place and Space in Modern Fiction*, as fourth and last in a series of studies on the elements of narrative: on the teller's interests or attitudes (1972), on character (1982), and on action and event (1985). Each of Kort's books looks to narrative literature both to identify aspects of modern culture that fail to nurture the common good and to disclose alternatives to them. In *Modern Fiction and Human Time: A Study in Narrative and Belief* (1985), for example, Kort shows how novels dominated by plot counter a pervasive modern sense of time's meaninglessness by representing time as complex, primary, and trustworthy.

In *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* Kort turns from time to space and from the narrative element of plot to that of "setting"—place, environment, or atmosphere. He argues that the categories of time and history so central to modern western culture have in recent decades given way to the postmodern categories of place and space, with hints of this turn already apparent in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in Thomas Hardy's writings. As he puts it in his introduction: "We are beginning now to read places as our cultural 'scriptures' and to identify and evaluate ourselves and other people spatially" (5). From the writings of six modern novelists Kort draws three kinds of human-place relations: social/political space, cosmic space, and intimate space (20). Kort is convinced that "the present state of places and the relations of people to them in the culture are faulty and that these faults have consequences for human moral and spiritual well-being" (19). Social place relations in modern culture, for example, tend to be hegemonic, abstract, overly rational, rigid, and unresponsive to human activities and interests. The novels of Joseph Conrad and William Golding (read alongside the writings of Lefebvre, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Gillian Rose, Raymond Williams, and others) show that social space can be construed in more positive terms, as always already related to cosmic and intimate space and as necessarily "particular, relative, and dynamic" (161). Cosmic space—which predominates in Hardy and Conrad—is space accessible "outside of, prior to, between, or beyond places that are humanly constructed and controlled" (151); it can be both gift and threat. Intimate space—of special concern to Forster and Spark—can serve as both refuge from social space and the "site of morally and spiritually grounded resistance" to it (170).

Kort further divides each type of place relation into physical and spiritual components and then, for reasons not clear to me, correlates the pair with temporal elements, archeology and teleology. In fact, the book's organizational tools sometimes become so elaborate that the reader (this reader, at least) must work diligently to keep the structure's intricacies in mind. Kort structures *Place and Space* systematically with the aim of constructing what he calls a "theory of human-place relations" from elements already implicit in the six novelists' writings (19). To accomplish this he moves back and forth between the novels and secondary studies about space and place drawn from all sorts of disciplines,

including post-colonial literary theory, geography, humanist sociology, theology, and urbanism. Indeed, the book provides a wonderful mini course in current "space and place studies," replete with a rich bibliography for anyone wishing to enter the conversation.

Kort is also astute at identifying family resemblances among current trends in scholarship. He observes, for example, that current cultural studies tend to view the category of "space" as abstract and empty of particular qualities. Unlike the category "time," space has not yet been relativized. If space evokes rationality, "place" instead is cognate with current scholarly interest in the body. As Kort quotes Edward Casey, "just as there are no places without bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse" (176). Body is to soul or mind as place is to space: particular, gendered, and relational. Kort is especially interested in reflecting on cities from this perspective, and he embraces Homi Babha's notion of "hybridity." Applying post-colonial theory to urban social space, Babha affirms an understanding of culture as complex, multiform, changing, and conflicted, as opposed to the typically modern understanding of it as unified, stable, and transcendent (219–220). Culture, in other words, is constituted by "place-relations"; it is the soul as fully embodied. As such, writes Kort, "the multicultural and ethnically diverse character of urban life does not threaten culture but liberates it" (220).

It was not clear to me until the end of the book just *why* the author would want to construct a "single, adequate theory of human-place relations" or how such a theory would be useful. I remained somewhat puzzled even through the last chapter, where Kort accepts responsibility for the term "adequate" and labors to define a single norm to designate "positive place-relations." In a final, concluding section ("Conclusion: Freeing the City from the Factual Profane"), however, Kort takes up the idea of "sacred space" by challenging Eliade's definition of the sacred as what is opposite the profane. Since modern western culture has for the most part constructed "the city" as indisputably profane, sacred space has been defined as its contrary—"some version of dissociated place, a social utopia, the realm of spiritual internality, a religious community or tradition, a canon of texts viewed synchronically, and so on" (213). Here Kort insightfully takes on the "radical orthodoxy" movement as it is represented in Graham Ward's *Cities of God*. For Ward the synecdoche for city is the porn shop. Like a soul cut free from concupiscent body, Ward's church becomes a sacred community located nowhere in particular. Kort finds a better model for sacred space in some recent studies of pilgrimage sites, freshly understood as complex, contested, and subject to change—as "hybrid." Here at the end it becomes clear that by "theory" Kort means something like a theology of culture. His purpose is normative: he wants to articulate what positive human–place relations could and should be, a norm he calls "accommodating." This term expresses for Kort human–place relations that are mutually fitting and adaptive, inclusive of complexity, open to change, and gift-like. Sacred places are *intensely* accommodating places: "the sacred stands to the quotidian...as the concentrated to the diffuse, as, that is, an epitome or synecdoche" (222). Kort's theology of culture, it should be noted, is not Tillichian. For Tillich, literature, as a vital expression of modern

culture, can only raise questions about human existence; with an eye to the kerygma Christian theology articulates the “answers” to literature’s—and culture’s—questions. Kort’s method is happily much messier. He finds in literature and other cultural expressions both questions and answers, and culture to him is always cultures. The book keeps good company with Kathryn Tanner’s *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*.

What remains unclear to me is how Kort can privilege narrative as the form of discourse that is able to articulate place-relations most fully. Although I can see how fit storytelling is for this task, by excluding other literary genre Kort seems to violate the idea of “hybridity” he also embraces.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj045

Advance Access publication January 10, 2006

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Religion and the Death Penalty: A Call for Reckoning. Edited by Erik C. Owens, John D. Carlson, and Eric P. Elshtain. William B. Eerdmans, 2004. 294 pages. \$28.00.

In his essay on Christian witness, Richard Garnett rightly protests that, all too often, religious believers are viewed as unwelcome participants in public policy discussions. In a manner ironically analogous to advocates of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, critics of religious voices in the public square attempt to marginalize and silence those whose religious views are considered an embarrassing private practice (148). Yet, religious faith not only transforms individuals; it also challenges the mores of civil society.

Religion and the Death Penalty: A Call for Reckoning is therefore a welcome chorus of voices informed by religious faith on one of the most important questions of our time. The intensity of the debate over capital punishment has been heightened in the past few years due to the moratoriums on execution by the governors of Illinois and Maryland and the reversal of long-held, pro-death penalty views of prominent evangelicals and fundamentalists. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, for example, opposed the execution of Karla Faye Tucker who had become a born-again Christian on Texas’s death row, yet failed to obtain clemency for her from the then governor George W. Bush. For these reasons, much is anticipated from this volume of essays by prominent politicians, judges, lawyers, theologians, and religious studies scholars, drawn in part from a conference on capital punishment held in 2002 at the University of Chicago Divinity School and sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

For some inexplicable reason, however, the editors chose to begin with a rather disappointing essay by Avery Cardinal Dulles, whose article focuses on defending the consistency of the magisterial teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the death penalty. Arguments about the death penalty itself seem secondary, and deflect readers, particularly non-Catholics, away from the volume’s