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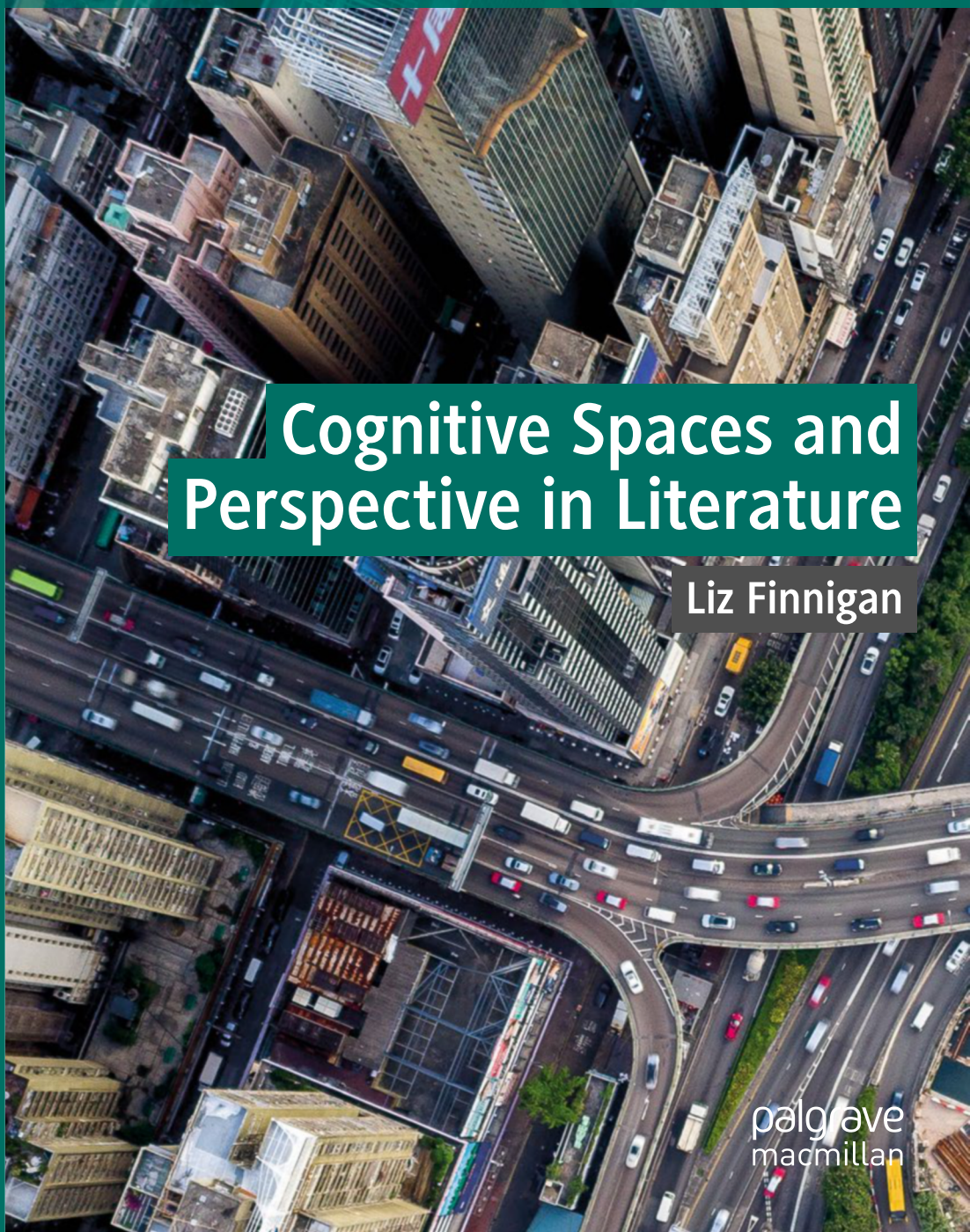

Cognitive Spaces and Perspective in Literature

Liz Finnigan

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Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies

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For My father, Tom, a True Original.

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About the Author

Liz Finnigan is the Course Director for undergraduate English Literature and History at Southern Regional College, Northern Ireland. She studied for her English Studies BA Hons degree, Masters and PhD at Strathclyde University, Glasgow. In 2019, she was appointed as Senior Fellow to the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests are Literary Linguistics, cognition, neuropsychology, visual perception, stylistics and narrative theory. However, she has also worked on Irish writing and postcolonial theory. Some previous work can be found in Finnigan, E. (2013) 'Cognitive Landscapes: The Systematic Construction of Narrative Space' in *Spaces of (Dis)location* (edited Rachael Hamilton, Allison Macleod, Jenny Munro), Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars and Finnigan, L. (2018) 'Literary Spatial Patterning' Literary Universals Project (edited by Patrick Hogan) University of Connecticut https://literary-universals.uconn.edu/2018/05/25/literary-spatial-patterning/.

Abbreviations

AM	Apparent Motion
EFT	Episodic Future Thinking
FIT	Feature Integrated Theory
LATER	Linear Approach to Threshold with Ergodic Rate
TWT	Text World Theory

CHAPTER 1

Literary Space and Systematicity

1.1 Introduction

This is a book about the discovery of spatial patterns prompted by two things: first, a question on whether literary spaces behave in the same way that they do in the real world and second, a foolish late-night experiment using a dark January evening and its reflection in a large window to recreate the perspective of Jane Eyre's view. Needless to say, it was the former that led me to the patterns.

I am that fortunate kind of reader that utterly escapes into a story world and this book began as an investigation into why that happens. The patterns were a serendipitous find in the midst of what I thought were bigger questions. The ideas in this book began with a broad, and undoubtedly romantic, notion that stories have the capacity to do things that the real world cannot; give us the impossible outcomes, reward us with happy endings and make us care about people and worlds that don't even exist. However, the impossibility was not to be found in the sweeping strokes of plots or themes but in the unremarkable spaces of setting. The adage about devils and details delivered an unexpected find: landscapes that appear to systematically describe the spaces from near to far or character descriptions that always begin with the outline of the body, or descriptions of rooms that alternate between furnishings at the centre of the room to those positioned at its edge. However, upon realising that the spaces in

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Jane Eyre were systematically organised, I followed the evidence and, of course, checked the works of her sisters. They were present there too and in the prose of Dickens and Austen and Tolstoy and Stevenson. Naturally, I wondered if these patterns of spatial organisation occurred in other time periods and genres. They did and it was quickly dawning on me that a cultural operating principle was not at work here. How, I asked, are the spaces of Charlotte Brontë, drawn from the Yorkshire landscapes of the 1840s, producing the same spatial patterns as Achebe's fictional Kangan in the 1980s?

It was early in my Victorian phase that I realised that this patterning only occurred in certain scenes. I have given these scenes the official title of topological frames, explained in detail later, but privately I still think of them as the 'no murders or marriage proposals' moments because nothing of narrative note tends to happen in them. Yet, their presence has changed my understanding, and hopefully yours, on how stories are produced.

Identifying and tracking these patterns led to what really became the big questions of the January experiment: What are they? Where are they? And, for a large part of this book, I try and answer the much more difficult question: why are they? Whilst a tri-partite structure, around these three questions, shapes the narrative of the book's outcomes, I have attempted to try and advance the literary questions (the what and where) along with scientific explanations (the why) simultaneously in each chapter. This is a deliberate choice and is founded in a genuine attempt to reflect the necessary interdisciplinary solutions to my questions but also to encourage us literary readers to think around the remarkable processes in the brain and the body that occur when we escape into our story worlds.

1.2 Patterns: The What

Landscapes

Consider the following literary description of a landscape:

> I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. There were the two wings of the building; there was the hilly horizon; there was the garden; there were the skirts of Lowood.

What spatial information is being communicated within this passage? For instance, we could say the following:

1. We know where the narrator is in relation to the space; we know this because she implies that she is located indoors (window) and that to view the space she must look outwards.
2. We know that she has a visual relationship with the space; she 'looked out' from the window.
3. The space described is outdoors because she lists types of spaces that are typically located outdoors: horizon, woods, garden and so on.

Now consider the following description:

> I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. There were the two wings of the building; there was the garden; there were the skirts of Lowood; there was the hilly horizon.

Is there any new or different meaning to be gained from this second passage? The discernible difference is that the spatial description in the second passage is organised in a proximal to distal structure. In other words, she describes the space closest to her first and progresses to the space further away. However, does knowing this enhance, or even diminish, the spatial meanings from the passage outlined above? Does a systematic design add further aesthetic or symbolic meaning to the space of this narrative? Arguably, it does not.

The text used in the examples is a passage from *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847) with the first example a rearranged construction on my part and the second the actual passage, so we have Jane looking out the window of her school and narrating the space in a particular order:

> I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. There were the two wings of the BUILDING;[1] there was the GARDEN; there were the SKIRTS OF LOWOOD; there was the hilly HORIZON. (Brontë, 2001 [1847], p. 72)

We must note too here the lack of action or dialogue and it is these specific scenes that I call topological frames. Topological frames are familiar to us as fiction readers; they are the passages in a text where the spatial detail is typically delivered for the sake of orientation and information. They deliver a specific reference to the location and view of the narrator/focaliser.

[1] Capitalisation, where necessary, will distinguish patterning throughout.

Brontë's landscapes are produced in the same way where topological frames occur throughout the entire novel, for example:[2]

> Leaning over the battlements and looking far down, I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map: the bright and velvet LAWN closely girdling the grey base of the mansion; the FIELD, wide as a park, dotted with its ancient timber; the WOOD, dun and sere, divided by a path, visibly overgrown, greener with moss than the trees were with foliage, the CHURCH at the gates, the ROAD, the tranquil HILLS, all reposing in the autumn day's SUN. (Brontë, 2001 [1847], p. 90)

Once we identify Brontë's topological frames, we see that the space of landscapes is consistently formatted as a systematic proximal to distal representation resulting in what appears to be a pattern of progression. This pattern emerges when we identify the first noun (lawn) and track its spatial relationship to all subsequent nouns (field, wood, church, road, hills and sun).

We also see the same pattern emerging in other texts from the same literary period. For example:

Sense and Sensibility (1811)

> The situation of the house was good. High HILLS rose immediately behind, and at no great distance on each side; some of which were open downs, the others cultivated and woody. The VILLAGE of Barton was chiefly on these hills, and it formed a pleasant view from the cottage windows.

Yet, this pattern emerges too in later, arguably more stylistically complex, literary periods such as Joyce's Modernist novel below.

Finnegans Wake (1939)

> Who blocksmitt her saft anvil or yelled lep to her PAIL? Was her BANNS never loosened in Adam and Eve's or were him and her captain-spliced? … I heard he dug good tin with his doll, delvan first and duvlin after, when he raped her home, Sabrine Astore, in a parakeet's cage …[3] [There are 8 other rivers mentioned in the intervening text here] Who sold you that jackalantern's tale? Pemmican's pasty pie! Not a grasshoop to ring her, not an ants grain of ore. In a gabbard he barqued it, the boat of life, from the harbourless IVERNIKAN OKEAN till he spied the loom of his landfall and he

[2] See Appendix for full list of data sample detail.

[3] Where ellipsis is used in any of the pattern examples, it indicates that there is extraneous information on an object in a pattern but does not exclude any new spatial objects.

> loosed two croakers from under his tilt, by the smell of her KELP they made the PIGEON HOUSE. (Joyce, [1939], p. 197)

As this passage is from the famously complex *Finnegans Wake*, it requires some decoding in order to see the pattern. This passage is discussing the moment HCE, the male protagonist, first meets ALP, his female counterpart. As with the entirety of this text, each word is generally a pun on another, although not necessarily from the English language lexicon. The first point of space here 'pail' could refer to both a pail of water or The Pale, an Anglo-Norman term for Dublin and its hinterlands. As with Bann—a river in Northern Ireland and also a marriage band (captain-spliced). However, what is evident is that all the points of space can be said to refer to a body of water: pail—river—ocean. And, like the other examples, this is a progressive movement from proximal to distal. The pail is swollen to a river and the river washes to the ocean. What is also of note here is that the pattern is reversed when HCE spots ALP ('till he spied the loom of his landfall') and the water volume, and distance, dissipates: Ivernikan Okean—Kelp (which only grows in shallow oceans and seas) — Pigeon House (South Wall entrance to the river Liffey in Dublin). So even in a text this stylistically complex, we have evidence of the same properties at work in the other landscape examples: HCE is looking at his view, albeit a visually impossible one, and the description is organised through a progressive description of proximal to distal space—and in this case, volume too.

Thus, if we think about plotting the type of patterning occurring in these examples, it could be described as a progressive pattern which follows this order:

$$\text{Landscape} : \left(\text{P} \rightarrow M \rightarrow \text{D}\right) = \text{Progressive}$$

Where P = the proximal space, M = median point, D = distal space.

M is key to revealing the progressive pattern because it aids with the distinction between proximal to distal. Therefore, the 'wood' in the extract below from *Jane Eyre* would establish a median point in this description:

> Leaning over the battlements and looking far down, I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map: the bright and velvet LAWN closely girdling the grey base of the mansion; the FIELD, wide as a park, dotted with its ancient timber; the WOOD, dun and sere, divided by a path, visibly overgrown, greener with moss than the trees were with foliage, the CHURCH at the gates, the ROAD, the tranquil HILLS, all reposing in the autumn day's SUN. (Brontë, 2001 [1847], p. 90)

However, an immediate question arises here as to what constitutes an object or location because if we examine the scene above, it could be argued that this passage has one distal point (*D*), the 'autumn day's sun', however, it could also be said that 'hills' represent a distal point from the narrator's position within the 'battlements' of Thornfield Manor. This is a typological issue: does a pattern present itself here because it is indicative of a location that remains ontologically distal or does the systematicity lie with measurable spatial relations? Thus, is the 'sun' always distal because it represents an unreachable location within the pattern—rendering it always distal—or is it distal because it is the furthest point from the narrator's location?

Kosslyn et al.'s research (1989, 1992) on visuo-spatial processing focuses on how these types of space are conceptually distinct from one another. Arguing that the processing of both types is governed hemispherically, the left cerebral hemisphere controls the processing of categorical spatial relations whereas the right controls the coordinate (Baciu et al., 1999). Kosslyn et al. define this difference as:

> *Coordinate* representations specify precise spatial locations in a way that is useful for guiding action … *categorical* representations assign a range of positions to an equivalence class (such as connected/unconnected, above/below, left/right). For many objects, parts retain the same categorical spatial relations no matter how the object contorts. (Kosslyn et al., 1992, pp. 562–563)

Important here is the notion of guided action. Kossyln et al. note that for visual perception, the units of coordinate space are not equivalence classes because the governing function of this type of processing determines a guide for action and thus, each object or obstacle has to be measured as a separate entity in order to prevent the body from harm. However, a certain measure of spatial specificity is needed in order to guide one's potential action through this space. Categorical space is a less specific perception of our space, particularly for scene processing—all that is needed is some general spatial positional detail. As Kosslyn et al. comment, 'the brain does not need to represent metric information precisely; differences in the precise positions of two objects or parts are often not relevant' (p. 562). Yet, categorical space does operate on the principle of equivalence classes. Therefore, in conceptual terms, the cat's paws, for example, are connected to the whole and each part will retain a categorical relationship (above, below etc.) to the whole despite the part being contorted when running or sleeping and despite its change of specific location within