Space, Time, And Structure In The Modern Novel
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In his introduction to The New Art, Gregory Battcock writes that "art is not merely a question of understanding, but of acceptance and response."

Since people have so much to lose by facing up to the challenge of art, they will not—cannot—do so. Insecurity, intolerance, and reaction are all incompatible with art appreciation. Art is humanism and reality and, as such, cannot be seen accurately in terms of the past. At this point, responsible criticism becomes absolutely essential.

Battcock is talking about painting; and the ordinary reader (recalling examples of abstract, minimal, pop, or conceptual art which have perplexed him) is likely to agree. If, however, the point were being made about literature, the same reader might find it difficult to summon up occasions when he was unable to face up to the challenge of a novel or a poem. One reason for this is that most people (including English teachers) have simply avoided works of fiction that lack plot, "character" in the traditional sense, and predictable narrative lines. Another reason probably is that people are unaccustomed to thinking of literature—particularly prose literature—as art. They overlook the fact that novels are deliberately created objects rather than pseudo-histories, that they have the capacity to be as mysterious and question-provoking as any painting or symphony. In consequence, numerous readers have deprived themselves of many revelatory experiences, many new perspectives on their worlds.

Sharon Spencer's well wrought study of a variety of modern novels makes it possible to compensate for such deprivation. She provides the kind of "responsible criticism" Battcock has in mind, criticism that makes available works that are antirealistic, alogical, and (on the surface) difficult or strange. Quite aware that many readers have been intimidated by them, or have been too intolerant or self-indulgent to cope with them, she points out that the same people flock to modern films, listen to avant garde music, and crowd the art galleries. On some level, they expect and demand traditional realism in the novels they read, no matter how open they may appear to be to experiments in the other arts. Spencer sets out to liberate them to discover not only new modes of expressiveness, but a new realism appropriate to the contingent, diverse realities of the modern age.

She spends much of her time explicating the works of such writers as Robert Musil, Carlos Fuentes, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Anais Nin, most of whom are strangers to college as well as high school students. She anchors her discussion, however, to lively treatments of more familiar precursors: Virginia Woolf, Andre’ Gide, John Dos Passes. The book, therefore, is not esoteric or beyond the reach of literate teachers, those who recognize that they also are committed to "responsible criticism," if they wish to keep alive the experimental novel and enable their students to see what was never visible before.

To come to terms with what the contemporary writers are doing, Dr. Spencer explains, it is necessary to understand something about the revisions of spatial perspective and the new modes of perceiving time that result from modern scientific exploration. Implying (although not stating) innovative modes of interdisciplinary study, she communicates succinctly such ideas as the simultaneity of time, the significance of time as an aspect of space, and the impact of these notions upon the creation of literature. Her work, in fact, is explicitly focused upon "books that embody approximations of time-space fusions achieved by various ingenious structural procedures." It follows that many of the novels she deals with are "architectonic" in the sense that they are ordered in such a fashion as to create semblances of cities, worlds, circles, mazes, rather than to represent human action in the real or commonsense world. Characters are invented for the perspectives they make possible on the fictional reality the author has imagined. More often than not, as in Robert
Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, character is deliberately subordinated to some vision of totality—in Musil's case, to a vision of Vienna, seen through multiple and contrasting perspectives. It is the perspectives—or the concepts—that are given a kind of three-dimensional being, objectified, or "spatialized." In their very multiplicity, conflict, and complexity, they themselves compose a recognizable structure. The structure may resemble a city, as in Musil's case (or in the case of Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*); it may take the form of a maze; it may even—as in the case of Julio Cortazar's remarkable *Hopscotch*—be built up in hopscotch squares. Sometimes, as in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, sensations and perceptions are woven together in a patterned cobweb. What is important throughout is the spatial rather than the temporal form that results. The reader is invited to enter a new, self-existent space or place when he moves inside the book, to separate himself from the ordinary and mundane. Doing so, he is enabled to explore new dimensions of another world and, at once, to clarify his vision of the world over there, the world he temporarily has left behind.

Spencer distinguishes ingeniously between novels with closed and open structures in her effort to disclose new possibilities of literary experience. The work of Jorge Luis Borges provides examples of the closed structure, since he so often creates worlds entirely independent "of the laws and restrictions of ordinary, mundane reality." His fictions are alternate or equivalent worlds, not mirror images; they are self-sufficient; they do not overlap the common sense reality. In contrast, open-structured novels accept both mundane reality and a variety of competing realities. Dr. Spencer, like Wylie Sypher before her, compares these novels with Cubist paintings. Her most telling example is Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, "an unframed and endless novel," which permits its author to move in and out across the aesthetic frame. The same is true of Fuentes' *Change of Skin*, where real characters (like Adolf Eichmann) rub shoulders with imaginary ones, where essays follow fictions and sometimes merge with them, where the narrator himself changes skin. Novels like these project themselves into ordinary life. Through the mingling of perspectives they allow, they inevitably increase the reader's self-consciousness about the relationship between art and reality, even as they enlarge his vision of what is conceived to be real.

The notion of perspective (probably deriving from Ortega's view that "the sole false perspective is that which claims to be the only one there is") is fundamental to an understanding of the new novel, and Dr. Spencer introduces her reader to a fascinating array of the perspectives that can be used. She has illuminating things to say, for example, about the relationship between perspective and narrative point of view and about the ways in which acts of perception are clarified through a consideration of multiple visions. Writers like Gide, Fuentes, Durrell, and Woolf, she says, are asking "that their readers observe and acknowledge that reality is polymorphous, illogical, fragmented, chaotic, and, above all, myriad faceted." This is the distinctly modern viewpoint with which all teachers ought by now to be familiar. The difficulty is that so few have thought of confronting and appropriating it by means of encounters with literary art.

There are other insights and illuminations in Sharon Spencer's book. Among the most enticing (and the most attractive to film-oriented readers, one can be sure) is her insight into the ways in which the camera suggests new modes of seeing to the novelist preoccupied with objectivity. She returns, first, to John Dos Passes and his use of the "Newsreel" and the "Camera Eye" to expand the perspectives of *U.S.A.* She follows this with a discussion of Robbe-Grillet's use of cinematic devices to communicate a sense of total objectivity to the reader when, for instance, the images of the novel compose a version of the ancient labyrinth. She shows how the juxtapositions used resemble montage, how serial repetitions and presentations (as in Gertrude Stein's work) fuse style and structure cinematically. "In an art work that embodies multiple perspectives, there is always the possibility that some of the perspectives will consist of the media of some other art, or of approximations of such media." What is particularly important here is the fact that habitual categories of thought, fixed ideas, and stereotypes can be demolished through the use of various media or the simulation of them. Again, the expressive power of the novel increases; readers are enabled to see, to sense, to think, to feel in all sorts of unpredictable ways.
This, after all, may be the main point of Sharon Spencer’s book. Engaging in the kind of criticism that elucidates and discloses, she opens windows on diverse possibilities. The teacher who is eager to achieve relevance, to overcome boredom, and to engage himself in the process of opening new perspectives, cannot but find significance here. The novels discussed need to be understood; they also need to be accepted and made available. The alternative is to refuse a challenge, to refuse to see.