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Moore, B.

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The Aesthetics of Space in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, 1843–1907, by Giles Whiteley, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, xiv + 290 pp., £80.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781474443722

In *The Aesthetics of Space in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, 1843–1907*, Giles Whiteley charts an alternative way of reading the major figures of the British aesthetic movement, namely Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Henry James, with the latter understood as an “Anglo-European literary figure [who] found himself very much a foreigner on home soil when he returned to America” (p. 209). Each of these writers has a chapter dedicated to him, together supporting Whiteley’s central contention that they constitute a “tradition of the aesthetics of space” (p. 30) that is heavily indebted to the earlier aesthetic mappings of John Ruskin and Charles Dickens. Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843–60) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), and Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), are taken as exemplary in this regard in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively.

Perhaps inevitably, given the importance of London to Dickens and Venice to Ruskin, the aesthetics of space outlined in this book is above all an urban phenomenon. Whiteley in this respect follows studies such as Nicholas Freeman’s *Conceiving the City* (2007), which looked at the innovations of art and literature in the post-Dickensian but pre-modernist London of 1870–1914. *The Aesthetics of Space* is most indebted, though, to scholars who have paid attention to the psychic and aesthetic dimensions of Dickens’s writing, such as Julian Wolfreys and Jeremy Tambling. Its major theoretical touchstones, beyond Ruskin himself, are Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre – especially the latter, whose tripartite division of space is usefully employed throughout the book. Whiteley’s method relies largely on extending to ‘aesthetic’ writers questions about spatial representation and the modern city that have been more commonly applied to Dickens, or to later modernist writers such as James Joyce. Modernism itself features in a Conclusion which looks ahead to Woolf, Joyce and Proust as inheritors of the aesthetics of space explored throughout the book, but which goes back ultimately to Ruskin.


It is this emphasis on Ruskin’s legacy which is the most original feature of the study. As Whiteley admits (pp. 46–47), he addresses a set of canonical and well-studied writers, who are all male and mostly British, but the intention is to establish the existence of a “relatively understudied dimension to their works, all informed to a greater or lesser extent by Ruskin’s distinctions between *theoria* and *aesthesis*, and by a reaction against the project of ‘realism’” (p. 48). Anticipating to some extent Matthew Arnold’s distinction between Hebraism and Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), a text which is indirectly mentioned (p. 27) but not emphasised by Whiteley, Ruskin’s pairing of *theoria*, meaning “moral insight” (p. 27),

and *aesthesis*, meaning “sensuous vision” (p. 27), is traced back to the second volume of *Modern Painters* in 1846. *Theoria* is Ruskin’s privileged term, which Whiteley puts into a tradition associated with Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), where the narrator asks for “a good spirit who would take the house-tops off” (p. 27) to reveal the suffering within. (Dickens is himself referring to Alain-René Lesage’s novel *Le Diable boiteux* (1707), where the demon Asmodeus uses this power for comic ends.) But even in Ruskin’s own writings, *theoria*’s drive to uncover truth is compromised by the more sensuous pleasures of *aesthesis*, with his descriptions of Venetian architecture and history displaying “ornamental flourishes” (p. 75) that bring “the body into play” (p. 75). This makes the distinction between *theoria* and *aesthesis* “precarious at best” (p. 60). *Aesthesis* is, then, as it were against Ruskin’s own wishes, a legacy he passes on to later writers.

The aesthetics of space that interests Whiteley is formed out of both a writer’s sensuous perception of urban space and their engagement with the former artistic and literary representations of that space, as when Ruskin is “unable to case off the traces of the Byronic city” (p. 77) while writing of Venice. Aesthetic space is therefore always layered space, and provides a framework for one city to be read through another, as when Walter Pater writing the Rome of *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) gives us at the same time “a portrait of contemporary metropolitan space” (p. 154). Perhaps the best example of this process is found in the engaging Prologue, a full chapter in itself, which analyses the echoes of Dickens that run through the Paris of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884). As Whiteley puts it, “Huysmans approaches one nineteenth-century city space through another one; writing after realism, he reads the city ‘after Dickens’, so Paris is approached through a literary London, creating an aesthetics of these spaces which refigure both alike” (p. 3). Attention to such multiplicity of representation leads Whiteley to discover un- or under-acknowledged literary connections shaping his authors’ depictions of space, such as Dickens’s implicit quotation of Robert Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) in the opening passage of *Edwin Drood*, where “ten thousand scimitars” (p. 95) flash in the sun. This same passage is also a dream-vision that draws on an 1866 article about opium dens by Joseph Charles Parkinson (p. 90), neatly demonstrating the multiple layering that defines the aesthetic approach to urban space.

Such aesthetic layering can quickly build up into a complex web. The East End opium den mentioned by Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is taken as not only citing Dickens (himself citing Southey and Parkinson), but also alluding to Holbein’s *Danse Macabre*, probably through Baudelaire, and to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742–5). Despite this rich network, which Whiteley explores assiduously, the chapters on Pater (Chapter 3) and Wilde (Chapter 4) rely at times on relatively scarce material. Pater’s descriptions of the cities of classical Italy sometimes relate only tangentially to the modern aesthetic impressions of the late-nineteenth century, and while Whiteley is at pains to establish that Wilde gives us more than just “‘stock’ images of London” (p. 165), the political and social engagement that is identified in his depictions of urban space is often fleeting and incidental. This is not the case with Chapter 5 on Henry James, which finds a wealth of material in *The American Scene* (1907), where James both dwells on the aesthetic impressions produced by his return to America and shows America to be an aesthetic subject in its own right, remarking on the country’s “living but in the sense of its hour and in the immediacy of its want, its instinctive refusal to be brought to book” (p. 220). Other perhaps than the discussion of Huysmans which opens the book, this chapter shows, to use Whiteley’s words, “more than any of the other spaces that we have encountered in the course of the book ... the condition of modernity as the law of a new mode of the production of space” (p. 236).

The Aesthetics of Space is a valuable voice in the ongoing conversation around literary and cultural modernity in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While the focus on Ruskinian *theoria* and *aesthesis* is not established as indispensable to reading the aesthetic tradition, perhaps because Ruskin expressed a dichotomy that was in the cultural firmament, articulated in various ways by various people across the century, it is certainly shown to be a productive (to use a Lefebvrian word) perspective for reading the spatial dynamics of the so-called aesthetic writers, and beyond that of the modernists who would follow them.

Ben Moore
University of Amsterdam
 B.P.Moore@uva.nl

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