Alice Jenkins. *Space and the “March of Mind” - Literature and the Physical Sciences in Britain, 1815-1850*

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“Space and the march of mind”, is the title of Alice Jenkins’ latest captivating book and a march it most certainly is, for endurance and breadth, as much as for sagacious learning and ambition. The book is divided into two main parts, one entitled “thinking with spaces” (chapters 1-4), and the other “thinking about spaces” (5-7) in a well-balanced volume of 230 pages, followed by a substantial bibliography.

The “march of mind” (or in Keats’s famous words, “the march of intellect”) in the title refers to that moment in early nineteenth century England of “extraordinary conjunction of enormous elite scientific progress and convulsive movements towards mass education” (9). As a powerful and operative tool, the expression allows Jenkins to explore the concept of space in all its guises, from access to knowledge to the more controversial views on progress (scientific as well as moral and political).

On the larger scale of Victorian criticism, it is clear from the outset that Jenkins places herself in the wake of Gillian Beer’s seminal studies on Victorian fiction and science (Darwin’s Plots, 1983), while offering her own style and voice: as the author states in the introduction, most criticism focusing on literature and science has laid emphasis on the life and earth sciences rather than on physics and chemistry. In her approach, the notion of space itself is broad and describes the scientific advances made around key issues such as atoms and molecules, and the nature of light, electricity, and magnetism. Every aspect is examined by showing the links between scientific theory and literature, and demonstrating the impact of new concepts of space on the contemporary imagination.

The originality of the book, therefore, lies in its ambition: not analysing actual places described in literature in relation to scientific advances, but outlining the period’s “spatial imagination” by showing the questions raised by inventions and discoveries. As one would expect, the book opens on landscape metaphors and tropes, and shows how the world of knowledge was defined and delimited in spatial terms referring to the natural world. It then offers a stimulating analysis of the structure of Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s writing using two differing scientific models (the hub and rays pattern and the aerial view respectively). The book then goes on to examine the construction of boundaries between scientific disciplines and shows the tension between an all-embracing wish for uniformity of knowledge (that would reflect the uniformity of the natural world) and a tendency to fragment science into many specialisations (an aspect that remains familiar in our own contemporary taste for labels and narrow-cultivated “champs de spécialité” in all fields of knowledge). The key notion is rhetoric, which leads the author to discuss the language of science in a case study focusing on the self-educated scientist, Michael Faraday and his search for the right term describing electrolysis.
The second part of the book takes us a step back and a level higher, by discussing pure space and geometry. It first gives a summary of the highly theoretical critical discourses on space from Foucault’s politics of space to Derrida’s and Kristeva’s interpretation of Plato’s *khora* before returning to nineteenth century authors to trace the origin of abstract space conceived as ideal and immaterial. More specifically, the author identifies geometry as a key example of the debates around reason and access to knowledge. Euclidean geometry, considered as the foundation of any kind of systematic thought, becomes the battle field of nineteenth century struggles around the new knowledge economy. An advocate of geometry, Coleridge appears here in the company of scientists such as Whewell or Mary Somerville, and their views are profitably analysed and compared. The argument then moves on to examine how geometry and mathematics were taught (in Victorian textbooks), reflecting two opposed views on the discipline and on the acquisition of knowledge at large. The next chapter shows very convincingly “how physics was also radically changing the nature of conceptions of space, essentially by dematerializing it” (25). Contrary to the accepted account of Victorian culture as space saturated and cluttered (such as Nickleby’s house in Dickens’s *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* of 1839), Jenkins demonstrates how the new theory of light and field theory affected all areas of thought and the writing about space. Her discussion of ether as described by Newton and its various representations in literary writing is very engaging and speaks volumes about the impact of science on the visual imagination. In the same way, her analysis of the language of light deriving from the discovery that light behaves like a wave gives us a real insight into the issues at stake in the conflicting undulatory and corpuscular theories. Finally, an analysis of field theory leads the author to discuss matter and solidity to have a quick (and refreshing) dive into George Eliot’s handling of matter and matter theories in her novel-writing.

The final chapter wraps up the subject (in so far as that is possible) by shifting from matter to Chaos and the void. As matter was associated with prose-writing, so the void is paired up with poetry. Starting from Milton’s vision of Chaos in *Paradise Lost*, Jenkins moves on to examine other minor cosmological verse epics of the early nineteenth century. Her claim is that “because Chaos was theologically less important than Heaven or Hell, it served as an experiment for writers wanting to advance a variety of scientific and religious pet theories” (26). As the author herself admits, the question of how dematerialization featured in the literary production of the period is much too large to get a fair answer in a single chapter and one must admit that in this respect the last chapter is a bit of a let-down and gives the (perhaps erroneous) impression that the author was rushing to complete the book. Although it does show how the content of the epic was inspired by the new outlook on matter, Jenkins does not examine into further details the connection between chaos and poetry in terms of form, for example. One can only conjecture that another book about space and structure / literary form (thinking not with, or about, space, but more radically thinking in space, i.e. in truly spatial terms) will carry out the investigation.

This book will appeal to any expert of the Victorian period that looks for a way out of the traditional approach to individual writers into intellectual history or history of science. It may of course appeal to scientists wishing to get a broader view on the impact of scientific progress and ideology. It also provides a good follow-up to recent studies on Victorian places and happily blends concrete examples and theory, fact and figures, while always maintaining a high level of both scholarship and didacticism. The approach can be
quite technical at times, and a bit of a stretch from literature per se (whatever that may mean today). For those who will venture onto these new grounds and climb these summits however, the view from up there is well worth the journey.

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