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Author(s): Leon Surette
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# Critical Response

*II*

## Rational Form in Literature

**Leon Surette**

W. J. T. Mitchell's "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory" (*Critical Inquiry* 6 [Spring 1980]: 539–67) raises some fundamental questions about the concept of form itself and makes some large claims for the centrality of spatial form not only in modern criticism but in our entire culture. I wish to address a few of the questions raised by his discussion. First, Mitchell posits an identity between spatial form and "synchronic structural models" as if all explanatory models abstracted from temporal alteration were necessarily spatial. Such an assumption excludes from the category of synchronic structural models such formulas as the quadratic equation, the algebraic expression of the area of the circle, and the structural description of language; in other words, it excludes all nondiagrammatic expressions of constant ratio.

Mitchell's argument for the absolute priority of spatial form would seem to claim that the diagram of the circle, O, is an expression of form but that the algebraic equation, the area of a circle = $2\,\pi r^2$, is not. Or, alternatively, it would claim that both expressions are somehow spatial. It is not entirely clear to me which assertion Mitchell means to make. His remark, however, that "all notions of form or structure carry spatial connotations" (p. 552) would incline me to suppose that he intends to assert the latter.

Clearly it would be possible to claim that the algebraic equation for the area of a circle contains spatial connotations since it is the formula for a geometric shape. It would not be so easy to demonstrate the spatial connotations of the quadratic equation: $a^2 + 2ab + b^2 = (a + b)\,(a+ b)$.

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Such an equation expresses a constant ratio between two terms quite independently of both time and space. It allows for any substitution whatever of quantity for a or b and permits any kind of proportion between a and b. In other words, the spatial form that the quadratic equation might yield if expressed geometrically would be capable of infinite metamorphosis depending on the values assigned a and b. At the same time (a temporal cliché, please note), the history (diachrony) of these forms would tell us nothing about the *form* of the quadratic equation. Algebraic equations express pure ratio entirely abstracted from sensible manifestation although capable of generating sensible form.

The concept of *form,* then, contrary to Mitchell's assumption, is independent of *both* space and time and is rather an expression of *ratio.* The simplest and perhaps most mysterious example of pure form is the series of whole integers: 1 2 3 4 5 and so on. This series expresses a fixed ratio between its members. It is capable of expressing any conceivable form, whether it be the DNA molecule or Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. However, ratio is *intellectual* not *sensible* form. Students of aesthetic form would not rest content with algebraic or numerical expressions of aesthetic form even though such expressions are entirely possible and are occasionally attempted—especially within the graphic arts. It is certainly not my intention to propose that literary scholars attempt to formulate an algebraic equation for the novel; I do think, however, that if we wish to construct a purely formal description of literature, it is in this direction that we would have to go.

Mitchell, of course, is not suggesting that we attempt anything like an algebraic expression of literary form but rather that the very notion of form is spatial and that culturally and linguistically we are predisposed to express form in spatial terms. I hope to have convinced my readers that this first assertion is erroneous. The second, however, is certainly true. To prove his point, Mitchell lists a number of words we use to describe time and points out that all of them are spatial:

> All our temporal language is contaminated with spatial imagery: we speak of "long" and "short" times, of "intervals" (literally, "spaces between"), of "before" and "after"—all implicit metaphors which depend upon a mental picture of time as a linear continuum. [P. 542][1]

1. Although I accept his point, I think Mitchell is overzealous when he claims that "before" and "after" are spatial. Surely he is thinking of "in front" and "behind."

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**Leon Surette** teaches literature at the University of Western Ontario and is the author of several articles on Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Canadian fiction.

There is no question that our culture participates in an intellectual bias in favour of spatial terminology. This bias has been ingeniously explored by H. Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and brilliantly criticized by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere. Both authors focus on the act of spatializing speech—in writing and print. Although this is not the place to recapitulate their arguments, it should be noted that they both identify an intellectual bias in favour of spatial or visual terms *within Western culture*. In other words, the priority of visual or spatial form is a characteristic of the beholder, speaker, or thinker—not of the things themselves.

This brings me to my second fundamental quarrel with Mitchell's article—and, indeed, with the whole debate over spatial form, which is posited upon the assumption that spatiality and temporality are attributes of things, that the form of the novel or whatever is either spatial or temporal. But, of course, space and time are not attributes of things at all. They are the *ground of our experience of things*. It is impossible to conceive of anything existing in abstraction from either space or time. The novel, for example, has a spatial "form" as a book, but if the book exists it is not only "here," it is "here" "now." Contrariwise, if the novel has not been written, and therefore has no spatial form, it nonetheless can be said to exist spatially in the synapses or whatever of the author who has already composed it. The very concept of being or existence necessarily involves both space and time. We can abstract time from space or space from time only conceptually. Spatiality and temporality, then, are attributes of our thinking about things, not of things themselves—all of which participate in the space-time continuum.

One can detect some confusion arising from forgetting that space and time are attributes of perception and conception in the misapplication of the terms "synchronous" and "diachronic." Both terms, of course, refer to temporal relationships, but neither of them describes things. A synchronic description—let us say of language—is a description of a language without regard to its morphological variation through time. It makes no assertions about the true nature of language but merely describes the internal ratios of the elements of language without considering how they might have altered through time. By contrast, a diachronic description of language does not assert that language can only be described in terms of lexical and morphological changes occurring through time; it merely chooses to describe those features that do change through time. A parallel case would be the synchronous discipline of anatomy within zoology and the diachronic discipline of embryology. Neither specialist would assert that the ape's true form is spatial or temporal. They have merely determined to divide their discipline into static and dynamic divisions.

Thus it makes no sense to speak of synchronous or diachronic form.

These terms describe the nature of our interest in the subject of study rather than attributes of the subject itself. Clearly we can speak of literature diachronically in many different ways: literary history, biography of writers, generic history, and theories of creative process—from inspiration to sublimation. Similarly we can describe literature synchronically as an order of genres, archetypes, rhetorical figures, or any other taxonomy. Those who are interested in the synchronic study of literature tend to denigrate the activity of those interested in its diachronic study, but such behaviour is a matter of polemics and has no intellectual justification. So far as I am aware, anatomists never castigate embryologists for wasting their time; no more should formalists castigate literary historians and biographers.

Mitchell has no quarrel with literary historians. He wishes to speak of the form or structure of individual literary works. Here we are all anatomists and must speak of literature synchronically. How the work came to possess the form it has is not our concern. The problem is to discover the conceptual tools which will permit us to describe that form. Now it is true, as Mitchell asserts, that "spatial form is a crucial aspect of the . . . interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures" (p. 541). What is not true or relevant is the accompanying assertion, which I have elided, that spatial form is also a crucial aspect of the "experience" of literature. Obviously our experience of literature—as our experience of music, painting, baseball, and love—is disposed in time. It makes no sense to speak of the "form" of experience. For example, the circle O has a spatial form. Is my experience of the circle also spatial? Or is it temporal? Whichever it is, how could it possibly be expressed? My point here is a small but important one: discussions of form are necessarily discussions about the manner in which we *conceptualize* the characteristics of things. The form of a thing is simply our conceptualization of the ratios obtaining between its component parts. The manner in which we express that form will depend upon (1) the analysis into component parts and (2) the formal model we adopt as an adequate expression of the ratios of those parts. In other words, it depends upon the intellectual process of analysis and synthesis, which is logically posterior to experience even though it may well be temporally concurrent.

It would take us far astray (a spatial metaphor, please note) to pursue the possibilities of analysis of literary works. Obviously they can be analyzed into words, phrases, lines, figures of speech, archetypes, characters, fables, stories, myths, events, and so forth. Some analytical models—such as prosody—are recognized as distinct studies within literary criticism. Others—such as archetypalism—would claim to be the true and adequate analysis of literature, containing all others. I have no wish to attempt a quixotic arbitration between the claims of rival analytical models. But it is obvious that the form we ascribe to a work of literature

must depend upon the nature of the component parts into which we have analyzed it. Thus a novel could have a narrative or fabular form, a figurative form, a prosodic form, and a grammatical form. And there is no reason to suppose that these forms would be congruent or identical.

Mitchell is well aware of the importance of analysis to the discovery of form but maintains that, whatever the analysis, our expression of the ratios of the parts will inevitably be spatial:

> Any time we feel that we have discovered the principle which governs the order or sequence of presentation in a text, whether it is based in blocks of imagery, plot and story, the development of character or consciousness, historical or thematic concerns—any time we sense a "map" or outline of our temporal movement through the text, we are encountering this third level of spatiality. [P. 552]

Mitchell's "third level" I understand as the formal level per se. The first level is literal (the book), the second referential (the fictional space), and the fourth hermeneutic. When we, then, according to Mitchell, conceptualize the ratio obtaining between the component parts of a work of literature, that conceptualization is inevitably spatial.

Although Mitchell disposes some intriguing learning on spatial concepts and terminology and elaborates an impressive argument for the priority of spatial form, he never makes it clear to me just what spatial form is. So far I have maintained that Mitchell and other spatial form critics are a little imprecise in their discussions of form, tending to assume that space and time are attributes of things and that form can only be expressed in spatial terms. But even if my criticism of these imprecisions is accepted, it may still be true that all formal descriptions of literature are spatial in character. To decide this matter, we must have a clear definition of spatiality as a characteristic of formal description.

It is not enough, I think, to assert:

> "Temporal form," then, is not the antithesis of spatial form but the term we apply to a temporal experience whose spatial pattern or configuration has been discerned. [P. 552]

What this statement says is simply that it is possible to conceptualize temporal phenomena within spatial expressions of form. But the issue is not whether it is possible to conceptualize all forms of experience within spatial expressions; I concede immediately that it is possible. The question that is implicitly posed by Mitchell's essay is: Are there any alternatives to spatial expressions of form for literary criticism?

To answer this question we must identify the characteristics of spatial form. Mitchell cites Joseph Frank's identification of "simultaneity"

and "discontinuity" as the hallmarks of spatial form in modernist literary works. There are inherent difficulties with this definition quite apart from the charge that the notion is merely a metaphor. In the first place, it can hardly be denied that simultaneity is a temporal, not a spatial, concept. It is a characteristic of things existent that they coexist simultaneously with one another. And it is further true that a pictorial representation best figures this simultaneous coexistence. But to argue that simultaneity itself is a characteristic of space is to confuse figure with concept.

If we apply the concept of simultaneity to aesthetic form, we find that it is a *formal* dimension only of music. Music is the only aesthetic form of expression in which the simultaneity of elements is generative of form. The musical chord is surely a form. It is also a group of notes sounded *simultaneously*. Simultaneity is not possible in written literature, but stage or film performances can, of course, present multiple expressions or actions simultaneously. However, simultaneity can never be a basic defining element of literary form as it is of musical form. Such stage or film simultaneity is analogous to orchestration in music, where many instruments play simultaneously. But there is nothing in literature analogous to the musical chord, which is *formal* according to my definition of form as the expression of ratios between elements. Of course, the simultaneous existence of the elements of a painting have nothing to do with its form. All concrete objects are by necessity simultaneous with themselves.

Second, the term "discontinuity" is similarly difficult to identify as essentially spatial in its signification. Discontinuity is, of course, the hallmark of the most perfectly abstract form I know—the series of whole integers. It is also an essential characteristic of musical form. The musical scale—of whatever type—is also a discontinuous series. Even though the musical term "interval" is a hidden spatial metaphor—as Mitchell cunningly observes—the musical interval between notes cannot by any stretch of the imagination be identified as spatial. It is a question of differences of frequency of the sound waves which we hear as musical notes. Frequency cannot be a spatial concept even though we can also express frequency as wavelength. It is frequency, not wavelength, that we hear.

It is difficult to see that continuity or its absence is relevant to spatially disposed forms. The line, it is true, may be defined as a continuous series of points. But the circle, the triangle, the square—as forms—are independent of the line as a continuous series. That is to say, geometric forms can be represented equally well by series of dots or dashes as by continuous lines. Indeed it is common practice to identify geometric forms in paintings which are not represented at all but can be extrapolated from the positioning of figures within the paintings. No one

would suppose that the formal element of a painting which disposed its principal figures in a triangular configuration was the discontinuity of the imaginary lines describing the triangle. It is the triangle, not the discontinuity, which is the formal element.

These observations lead me to conclude that Frank mislabeled the formal characteristics of "modernist literary form" in his 1945 article which began the whole spatial form debate. He ought to have called it "musical form," for simultaneity and discontinuity are the essential elements of musical form. One might label musical form "temporal form," but I would be loath to compound the imprecisions of identifying form with the bias of its disposition in time or space. It would be far more accurate to speak of auditory form and visual form, for when we speak of the formal characteristics of art disposed in time or in space, we are in truth speaking of the perceptive characteristics of our sense organs. The ear perceives simultaneity and discontinuity. The eye perceives shape and colour. Both the eye and ear perceive position, but with very different degrees of acuity. Thus the position of figures in a painting is of great formal importance, but the position of instruments in an orchestra is of no formal importance and is fixed by convention.

If I am right in my analysis of the formal properties of musical form, one wonders how the debate over spatial form in literature, based on such a fundamental error of labeling, can have continued for thirty-five years. The reason, I believe, is to be found in (1) the bias of our culture, which Mitchell points out, in favour of visual form; (2) the tendency of literary scholars to think of form as an embracing or enclosing outline; and (3) a failure to distinguish clearly between the expositions of the formal characteristics of aesthetic objects and the experience of them within the aesthetic object.

1. It is undeniable that our language is deeply steeped in visual imagery. Mitchell puts the point succinctly: "We cannot experience a spatial form except in time; we cannot talk about our temporal experience without invoking spatial measures" (p. 544). To illustrate his point he observes that even "rhythm" is derived from the positions taken by dancers and is thus originally a visual—or, as he would say, spatial—term. Virtually all of our terms describing ratios between parts of works of art are visual or even purely spatial: "above" and "below," "levels of meaning," "story line," "hidden meanings," "curved," "open," "closed," and so on. Such nonvisual terms as "harmony," "melody," and "counterpoint" are thought to be impressionistic and imprecise as formal descriptions.

Some spatial terms—as Mitchell points out—are not visual. We perceive space by touch as well as by sight; hence he would claim "texture" as a spatial term as well. Texture, however, is hardly a term describing *formal* characteristics unless we are to accept "close textured" and "open

textured" as formal descriptions. We are habitually as dissatisfied with tactile terminology in formal descriptions, however, as we are with auditory terminology. We may describe a work as ponderous or weighty, but these are purely evaluative terms and tell us little about the work's formal characteristics—except perhaps at the level of rhetoric. Style may be rough or smooth, but we would mean the same if we said it were shaggy or well groomed.

2. Although language is not devoid of auditory, tactile, or even olfactory and gustatory terms, only visual terms descriptive of shape are intellectually satisfying as expressions of aesthetic form. And here we can see that it is appropriate in one sense to speak of spatial rather than visual form, for colour terms enjoy the same low prestige in accounts of form as do auditory terms. We speak of works as "colourful," "dark," or "light" but do not accept such descriptions as accounts of form. Rather, they describe something we call "mood." "Form" means to the literary scholar some kind of container or enclosure. Hence we speak of form and content. It is true that formalists repeatedly remind us that form *is* content, but we—all of us—habitually fall back into the irresistible, and apparently inevitable, practice of thinking of form in abstraction from content. Artists like to fight this tendency by speaking of "figures in the carpet," "organic form," or anything which will tend to frustrate the reader's desire to *discover* the "hidden" shape of the work.

3. Thus, when we have read the work and attempt to "hold" it "at once" in our minds, we seek the shape, the outline, the configuration that will alone permit us to possess the work. Because this holding is imagined to be independent of the temporal succession which characterizes the experience of any work of art, we are easily seduced into conceiving the thing held as spatial. But, of course, what the mind holds has naught to do with either space or time. It holds concepts which are necessarily abstractions from our experience in space and time. In other words, the form of a work of art is a concept, whereas the work of art in itself is a percept. Perceptions necessarily occur within the space-time continuum; concepts do not. The fact that our conception of the form of a work of art does not participate in the temporal character of our perception of it in no way warrants the conclusion that the conception is therefore spatial.

These remarks bring us back to Mitchell's observation that we discover spatial form "any time we sense a 'map' or outline of our temporal movement." My point is that we do not "discover" such outlines, rather we *conceive* them. Spatial form, in other words, is an attribute of our thought about literature, not a privileged constituent of literary expression. And, further, its "spatiality" consists in its diagrammatic character and not in its instantaneity. Our bias in favour of diagrammatic descriptions of form is so strong that we have special categories for aesthetic

objects which strenuously resist reduction to diagrammatic form. We call such structures "baroque," "gothic," "celtic," "open," "discontinuous," and—in Frank's case—(paradoxically) "spatial."

Mitchell is well aware that it is difficult to avoid reducing the concept of form to that of diagram. He proposes to substitute "tectonic" for "spatial" "to suggest the global, symmetrical, gestalt-like image that is generally associated with so-called spatial effects" (p. 560). He further distinguishes between linear (nonaesthetic verbal form) and tectonic or enclosed aesthetic form. But, if I understand Mitchell, tectonic form is nothing other than diagrammatic form. Now a diagram is nothing but a conceptual expression of form as lines disposed in a plane. A diagram can express a great variety of forms, that is, of ratios, and is an extremely powerful expository and explanatory tool, but form cannot be defined as diagram. Mitchell is conscious of this fact but does not escape the trap of the diagrammatic imperative very neatly:

> Our search for literary patterning is not restricted, of course, to the realm of geometry and schematic, diagrammatic models. . . . We must suspect that the most complex and vividly imagined spatial form in literature is finally the labyrinth of ourselves, what Cary Nelson calls the "theater of [the] flesh" in which "the verbal events of literature are dispersed in the body of the reader," and "verbal space becomes an emblem for the physical structure we inevitably carry with us." [P. 562]

The labyrinth and James' "figure in the carpet" are undeniably spatial metaphors, but they are not expressions of form in any normally accepted sense. The labyrinth, by definition, is not an expression of constant ratios between elements.

In conclusion, I would like to remark upon the inherent difficulty of defining aesthetic form. Since any expression of form must satisfy the criteria of stating a constant ratio between elements, it requires a stable identification of elements and an invariable configuration of ratio. The geometric shape and the diagram meet these criteria admirably. The aesthetic object, however, is characterized by an unstable, "rich," ironic, or ambiguous identification of elements and by a *designedly* variable configuration of ratio. Therefore, no completely satisfactory expression of aesthetic form is possible except perhaps in a highly complex algebraic equation. It is far beyond my mathematical skills to imagine even the beginning of such an equation, but I supppose that in principle one could devise such equations for any work of art. Each work, however, would require its own equation. But, more to the point, it is difficult to imagine what purpose—whether explanatory, expository, or predictive—such an equation or set of equations would serve.

The literary scholar is probably doomed, then, to rely upon some explicitly or implicitly diagrammatic expression of literary form. To this extent I am in agreement with Mitchell's essay. It is, however, misleading to erect (in space) this methodological limitation into a principle of interpretation as it seems to me Mitchell is endeavouring to do.