

The Language of Space in Austen's *Mansfield Park*

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's controversial *Mansfield Park* (1814) was hailed by critics to be symbolic of imperialism and slavery prevalent in the British consciousness. Austen uses this social fabric of slavery and its absolution by using the metaphor of space. The novel explores a range of spatial structures which are inherent to social identities and consciousness. The protagonist's Fanny Price, very name is indicative of a social transaction or exchange, dialectical in nature thus, establishing a dualism in spatial identity. Soja's concept of the "socio-spatial dialectic" resonates in the shaping of characters and their interactions / transactions with the world. Domestic geographies help characters build their consciousness and seek their identity. The paper seeks to theorise spatial transactions among the characters and analyse the subjective personal and socialized spaces that the moral fabric of the novel.

Key terms: Socio-spatial transactions, Sublation, Spatial Identities

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Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* first published in 1814, drew little attention until the twentieth century. The novel deals essentially, with a flux of social relations and personal spaces, both of which tend to exert varying degrees of control, influence, obedience and servitude among its chief characters. Each character carves out its own significant space, which merges with their different rationalities in terms of property, influence and consciousness. Recent attempts to analyse space in *Mansfield Park* by Ruth Bernard Yeazell and Fraser Easton have thrown light on aspects of reading in spatial contexts. The present paper examines spatial transactions through the process of *sublation*¹ and Bataille's idea of obligatory exchange along with spatial theories of Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre and Michelle Foucault.

¹ Hegel; *The Phenomenology of the Mind*

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen experiments with a range of human traits within domestic confines, spatially coding human emotion and spirit. Fanny Price's displacement from her 'lowly' home in Portsmouth to Mansfield, is eloquently spelt out in the words of Sir Thomas, her uncle, who aims to put her at ease in her new surroundings.

After a short pause Sir Thomas added with dignity, "Yes, let her home be in this house. We will endeavour to do our duty by her, and she will, at least, have the advantage of companions of her own age, and of a regular instructress."² (pg. 9)

The conversations, between the Lord and Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, also an aunt of Fanny's, tend to be spatial in discourse. Mrs. Norris the self-confessed *doer* of all things at Mansfield Park reminds Fanny of how the Price family has been obliged by one mouth less to feed. Sir Thomas through his consent lets Fanny create her own space within the Mansfield walls. By absorbing her into Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas affords Fanny a surety for advancement in life.

Mansfield Park thus functions in all its essence as a body of consciousness designed to generate a range of identities controlled by space. Fanny Price in accommodating herself in her new surroundings seeks to decode these textual and spatial controls. In so doing, she attempts her own evaluation of self as a volatile spatialised commodity. Hers is a highly unstable position within the household, sharing distinctive relations with each member of the family.

Foucault writes about these spatial entities or *sites*, in his essay, *Of Other Spaces* (1967).

we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another...one might attempt to describe these different sites by looking for the set of relations by which a given site can be defined...One could describe via the cluster of relations, that allows them to be defined, the sites of temporary relaxation.. Likewise one could describe, via its network of relations, the closed or semi-closed sites of rest..certain ones which have the curious property of being in relation with the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that happen to designate, mirror or reflect.³ (pg. 24)

Fanny's roles as observer, witness or the *other*⁴, works on a pattern of images in a perpetually altering and truncated jigsaw of relationships. Read thus, *Mansfield Park* subscribes to Soja's Socio-spatial Dialectics⁵, as a method to study of spatial indexing. Soja's socio-spatial dialectic, influenced by Lefebvre and Foucault, puts forward the concept of how the social spaces tend to

² Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park. A Norton Critical Edition* (1998)

³ "Des Espace Autres,"; 1980

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas introduced the concept of the other

⁵ Edward Soja, *The Socio-spatial Dialectic*

encompass a binary bind. In his book, *The (Social) Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre contested that,

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus can be reduced to the rank of the same object... Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others.⁶ (Pg. 73)

The resultant network of *interrelationships* that emerge, essentially deal with spontaneous overlap of its entities or *products*. A social space exists solely on the basis of the components that inhabit it. The social space is a result of *actions* and interactions among those who inhabit it..

Thus Mansfield draws Fanny into its consciousness, the moment she is transplanted from her native home in Portsmouth and brought to Mansfield. A situational space has already been prescribed for her. Sir Thomas' qualms about bringing in a cousin that could lead to problematic prospects for his sons' future are derided by Mrs. Norris' ideas on distance. She removes his misgivings, telling him that it is space that could create any *mischief* (pg. 7). She explains,

The very idea of her having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect, would be enough to make either of the dear, sweet-tempered boys in love with her. But breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never be more to either than a sister. (pg. 8)

Mrs. Norris advocates the idea of proximity, which results in Fanny's subsequent arrival at Mansfield. A domestic space is recreated through proximity. Through the course of the novel, however, Edmund and Fanny do get married, thus indicative of Lefebvre's idea of *fresh actions* influenced by renewed social spaces.

Soja in turn follows the Hegelian dialectic, attributing it to Marxist theories of social space. In his essay, *The Socio Spatial Dialectic* (1980), he remarks,

The structure of organized space, is not a structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it simply the expression of a class structure emerging from the social (i.e. aspatial) relations of productions. It represents instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of the production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial.⁷ (Pg. 208)

He further goes on to explain this dialectical divide, to say that every space is split into a *contextual* space and *created* space. *Contextual* space represents the social viability of physical

⁶ Henri Lefebvre; *The (Social) Production of Space*; tr. Donald Nicholson Smith (1991)

⁷ Edward Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic." (1980e).

space and the *created space*, the one manifested by the actual social relations works within the contextual space. Fanny escapes from the actual physicality and overpowering Mansfield Park, where control represents the natural, into the east room where she finds solace and peace. In this case Mansfield Park, represents the *contextual space*, necessary for the emergence of the *created space* that is, the east room.

Fanny Price's spatial encounters conform to a matrix of *subsuming* or in Hegelian words, the process of *sublation*; a concomitant process in the master-slave dialectic, Hegel explains the term *sublation*, a translation from the original German- *Aufhebung*, in terms of force -

..the other comes forward soliciting or inciting it to reflect into self, to turn this pseudo-external factor into an aspect of itself; in other words, this other cancels its external expression. ...it is force itself that is thus reflected into self, that is the sublation of the external expression. (Pg. 49)

Throughout Mansfield Park, Fanny Price engages in this constant need to sublimate her spatial sensitivity thus, enabling a created space of superiority to those around her. She follows a practice of doing so with every character she encounters. These are reinforced by the recurring tropes that occur throughout the length of the novel. Thus slavery and ownership act as a grid on which the novel seems to rest. Each association within the text, involves slavery and/ or ownership with regard to relationships. For example, Fanny Price's interactions with members of the family make her out as an agent or an agency through which varied combinations of the two tropes are set in motion. Another aspect is her acceptance of the control specific to the confines of Mansfield Park, as natural. Fanny's obligation lends a deeper significance to the idea of exchange and contract. Each transaction plays out within a collateral of obliged servitude on the part of Fanny. To, refer to Derrida, the *Truth of the master is in the slave*.⁸ (Pg. 322)

In the case of Mrs. Norris and Fanny Price, the exchange is of authority and servitude. Fanny's encounters with the other members of the family conform to different categories of "spaces". In her interactions with them the dialectic (re)creates and (re)contextualizes her own spatial identity. She is fully conscious of her position of obligation within Mansfield Park and she textures her contextual space accordingly.

Fanny Price tries to see herself through the encounter with the other. Thus Mary Crawford classifies her as *not out* in the Victorian sense as she had yet not attended a ball. Fanny's identity is thus transcribed by Mary Crawford a relative outsider to Mansfield Park as compared to Tom and Edmund Bertram, two characters deeply embedded within the consciousness of Mansfield. Thus Fanny's physical identity is defined by the reality of Mansfield however; her spatial self is removed from its workings. Even Fanny is deeply conscious of this, trying to understand it through her idea of obligated exchange. Bataille provides an interesting concept of obligatory

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (1978)

exchange in his essay *The Notion of Expenditure*. Bataille refers to Mauss as he decodes the system of *Potlatch* that was practised in the ancient American tribes. He explains,

Potlatch excludes all bargaining and in general, it is constituted by a considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying and *obligating* a rival. The exchange value of the gift results from the fact that, in order to efface the humiliation and respond to the challenge, must satisfy the obligation (incurred to him at the time of acceptance) to respond later with a more valuable gift, in other words to return with interest... it is equally possible to defy rivals through the spectacular destruction of wealth. (172)

This very idea of obligatory exchange is seen in the form of a “gift” which, in this case is bestowed on Fanny by Mrs. Norris by bringing her to Mansfield. Through an emphasis on lifelong indebtedness, Fanny feels *obligated*. Her *interest* is paid back by her striving to fit into the Mansfield consciousness well aware of her position, uncomplaining in her servitude to Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris. This idea also resonates in Henry Crawford’s “gifts” to Fanny i.e., the gifting of the gold chain and the promotion of her brother, which resulted in a reverse obligation sequence manifested in the novel, as is observed in Henry Crawford’s courtship of Fanny Price. Through these gifts however, Fanny feels thoroughly *humiliated*. On the basis of his *past actions* she resists his approaches and thus defies any expectation of a potlatch. Although the rest of her family at Mansfield pressure her to be obliged to him, she does so with resentment refusing however to sublimate through the exchange of matrimony. She refuses Henry Crawford’s very manifest offer of sublimation resulting in conflict with different spatial forces especially that of Sir Thomas, that attack her within her codified space i.e. the east room, where she is the most powerless and disarmed. The result leaves her emotionally shattered and broken, but she still refuses to marry Crawford. This is her first sense of sublimation that has been refuted. She refuses to pay *interest*, in this case, her affections. She justifies her stance in her refusal of him, hoping Sir Thomas would understand,

..how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how wicked it was to marry without affection. (Pg. 220)

Her contextual space is one of defiance although her created space is one of failure in relation to Sir Thomas. In this case, the contextual space prevents her sublimation and agree to Sir Thomas’ wishes. Sir Thomas however, decides to send her to her home in Portsmouth. He hopes that it would be a *medicinal project for his niece’s understanding* (pg. 250) and that she would prevail with better sense afterward. He felt that her lifestyle has undermined her sense of space and standing. He cannot understand Fanny’s *contextual* space of defiance. He wants her to return to previous obligatory patterns and carries out his *experiment* for the same.

Sir Thomas' decision can be interpreted through a Foucauldian approach as designed to send Fanny to a place of *heterotopia of deviation*⁹ even though it is her own home.

..those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. (Pg. 25)

Sir Thomas hopes to return Fanny into the contextual space which he feels she has dislocated herself from. On her arrival to Portsmouth, Fanny's socio-spatial zone is thoroughly disrupted and she is left feeling confused and lonely. The contextual space of obligation, which she had hoped to fill with love and acceptance, has unfortunately been filled with alienation and even disgust. She tries to create a space with her sister Susan, teaching her from books and in general spending her time with her. Fanny sublates herself to Susan finding release in the absence of the more powerful strains within Mansfield.

The arrival of Henry Crawford offers some relief to this disillusionment. Her own contextual identity however, tries to sublimate itself to his, judging her own father through his eyes.

He must be ashamed and disgusted altogether. He must soon give her up, and cease to have the smallest inclination for the match; and yet, though she had been so much wanting his affection to be cured, this was a sort of cure that would be almost as bad as the complaint; and I believe there is scarcely a young lady in the United Kingdoms who would not rather put up with the misfortune of being sought by a clever, agreeable man, than have him driven away by the vulgarity of her nearest relations. (pg. 273)

However the space she creates on introducing her father to Crawford is reiterated with perfect cordiality on both sides. She is struck by this as her normal contextual space in Portsmouth is violated by the revulsion it feels.

His manners now, though not polished, were more than passable: they were grateful, animated, manly; his expressions were those of an attached father, and a sensible man; his loud tones did very well in the open air, and there was not a single oath to be heard. (Pg. 273)

In this state of confused fluctuation of her spatial selfhood, Fanny is moved by Crawford's determinate willingness to marry her towards the end of his stay. She contemplates a change in her feeling for him. Thus, it can be seen that Sir Thomas' idea of 'curing' his niece proves to be a success as Fanny decides to *reward* the persevering Crawford.

The theatrical interlude in the novel offers another example of Foucault's heterotopic or other spaces. It relates to feeling of nostalgic happiness alien to Mansfield or Portsmouth. The *social space* thus created here is mainly for the purpose of *subsuming* to the real rather than the unreal.

⁹ Michelle Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*

Unreality sublates reality enabling the characters' to be co-participants in the creation of a different space. In his *Of Other Space*, Michel Foucault enumerates six principles of heterotopias, Foucault says,

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another.... (25)

Thus contextual spaces are allowed to take over created spaces thus, making the theatre in Mansfield Park, a utopic release limited by its performative essence. Fanny however, feels claustrophobic and restless within this setting. She performs the role she has been trained to perform by Edmund i.e. the role of the spectator.

Edmund uses narrative space and establishes her role as a mute witness. As he stresses on *the same people to look at*, he is in a sense excluding the newness of being in a physical space removed from *Mansfield* by reiterating the 'sameness' of identities. He therefore encourages a spatial identity not removed from Mansfield but a dependent extension of it. Fanny is consoled by the idea sameness and she braces herself to accommodate the newly *created space*. The spatial synthesis challenges the dialectics of being. In the theatre, however, her role of witness is threatened by the entreaties of the rest of her family to participate in the acting, where she finds a voice only when she is asked to take over the character of the cottager's wife.

"Me!" cried Fanny, sitting down again with a most frightened look. "Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act anything if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act."

"Indeed, but you must, for we cannot excuse you. It need not frighten you: it is a nothing of a part, a mere nothing, not above half a dozen speeches altogether, and it will not much signify if nobody hears a word you say; so you may be as creep-mouse as you like, but we must have you to look at."(pg. 102)

The theatre where Fanny feels "*almost every eye was upon her*" subverts her role as the eye on everybody. Fanny looks to Edmund, who has instilled in her, the need to observe. It is Edmund who has greatly influenced her choice of space as an observer. But Edmund looks on at her *kindly*, however refusing to come to her aid. She is happy to be forever the audience. The theatre a staged reality, takes shape away from Sir Thomas' discerning eye, to create a conflicted contextual space. In his own case,

Edmund's affections though initially drawn to Mary Crawford, find in her an opposed spatial identity, non-reflective of what it sees but flourishing on what it hears and vocalizes. During this period, he is clouded by an attraction, which makes it impossible to 'see' her clearly. The two of them see in each other the promise of Utopia distanced from reality. Fanny becomes indispensable at this juncture. She functions as the mirror through which Edmund is able to see a

heterotopic form of Miss Crawford. Thus Edmund's ability to look now depends on Fanny's ability to see clearly.

Mansfield Park, as mentioned earlier, may be read as a mesh of spatial contracts. The different roles assumed by the occupants are defined through sanctioned or created spaces. Thus three kinds of spatial associations define Fanny's identity. The first deals with those nearest to her in proximity in relation and authority, on the basis of her immediate recognition of importance enmeshed well within Mansfield. The second, a little removed from the physical establishment, however continues to exert an equally powerful strain on Fanny's spatial identity, on the basis of an extension of the Mansfield's influence. The third kind involves her family and, although distanced from them entirely, she is constantly made to remember her connections, and inescapably she surrenders to obligation. This triad¹⁰ of influential cognitive spatialisation acts as the undercurrent that affects Fanny's own sense of self. William Price although, not a part of the physical space within Mansfield, belongs to the first category, as similar to his sister, he is also indebted to Lord Bertram for his future in the navy. Mrs. Norris, although an extension of the Mansfield consciousness, resents being so removed from the point of action and therefore tries to overcompensate her absence by magnifying her presence through a volley of articulations. Mrs. Norris is a clever space shifter. She breaks down spaces, refusing to conform and tries to renew them through her interventions as she continues to *do* everything possible for the *good of her nieces and nephews* and is *a great deal too necessary to Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram*. Mrs. Norris practises a form of enforced spatialisation. As a sharp economist, coupled with an unpredictably irregular pattern of obligatory transactions, she appropriates her nieces and nephews with the exception of Fanny as her own. In Fanny, Mrs. Norris sees a spatial identity of her own creation. In her transplantation of Fanny from Portsmouth to Mansfield she claims ownership. In the process she stands sublated in the presence of Fanny. After Sir Thomas' return from Antigua, Fanny's position, although still under obligation, no longer remains suppressed in the background but receives encouragement to form a stronger spatial consciousness. Mrs. Norris is thus threatened by Lady Bertram's approval of Fanny. When Lady Bertram, asks her whether she is ready to take Fanny in, Mrs. Norris refuses to do so, citing fiscal constraint. Mrs. Norris insists that all her savings are meant only for the family as she mentions "my sole desire is to be of use to your family." Lord Thomas although surprised by her refusal, is pacified by her reasons even finding them *advantageous and complimentary*. Mrs. Norris' oblique comment of *poor returns* from the plantations in Antigua is an unconscious implication that Fanny as commodity also meant *poor returns*. A contract enabled solely on the basis of obligated exchange is thus established. Her sense of servitude however, is touched with a dualism of propriety and obligation. The name 'Price' stands for a worthless commodity imported to Mansfield Park until the end when her identity is stabilised.

Edmund and Mary Crawford perceive space in their own way reflecting an incompatibility through a reference to time and space,.

¹⁰ Hegel; *The Phenomenology of the Mind*

"But if you remember, before we left that first great path, we saw directly to the end of it. We looked down the whole vista, and saw it closed by iron gates, and it could not have been more than a furlong in length."

To which she replies,

"Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood, and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came into it; and therefore, when I say that we have walked a mile in it, I must speak within compass."

"We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here," said Edmund, taking out his watch.

"Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?"(Pg. 68)

Towards, the end of the novel, Edmund realizes how *dear* Fanny has become to him. This in turn showcases how Edmund's need to see, finds a compatible nature in Fanny and they are united in their gaze of the world. His spatial identity has unconsciously been sublated and Fanny is seen as a confidante rather than the subdued.

Both Crawford and Edmund show an increasing dependence on her opinions and ability to observe. As Henry Crawford tells her,

When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right. (pg. 280)

Through the course of the novel, her interactions with all kinds of spatialities ranging from a mute spectatorship to actual participation in the life within Mansfield endorses a diligent growth of Fanny's personality through negotiation and sublation to construct a viable socio-spatial space and identity. After marriage and the move to Thornton Lacey, Fanny locates herself as an observer, content with Edmund; and enabled to extend the Mansfield consciousness and create her own contextual and recreated space.

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