

*H-France Forum* Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, # 2

Jeffrey N. Peters, *The Written World. Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. vii + 272 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3697-7; \$99.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8101-3698-4; \$34.95 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0-8101-3699-1.

Review by Volker Schröder, Princeton University

Ninety years ago, Alfred North Whitehead famously characterized the European philosophical tradition as “a series of footnotes to Plato.” [1] Jeffrey N. Peters’ thought-provoking new book reads the canon of seventeenth-century French literature as a series of illustrations to Plato’s *Timaeus*. Whitehead himself might well have endorsed such an endeavor, given that he viewed the *Timaeus* as one of “the two great cosmological documents guiding Western thought,” next to Newton’s *Scholium*:

To the modern reader, the *Timaeus*, considered as a statement of scientific details, is in comparison with the *Scholium* simply foolish. But what it lacks in superficial detail, it makes up for by its philosophic depth. If it be read as an allegory, it conveys profound truth [...] While we note the many things said by Plato in the *Timaeus* which are now foolishness, we must also give him credit for that aspect of his teaching in which he was two thousand years ahead of his time. [2]

To exemplify the modernity and poetic legacy of the *Timaeus*, Whitehead went on to quote the description of Chaos in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “a dark / Illimitable ocean, without bound,/ Without dimension, where length, breadth and height, / And time and place are lost.”

*The Written World* dives into these philosophical and allegorical depths of Platonic cosmogony in order to situate the kind of world-making accomplished by early modern French literature. Neither Whitehead nor Milton is cited by Peters, who refers instead to more recent readers of the *Timaeus*, especially Derrida and his reflections on Plato’s notion of *chora* as an originary principle of cosmic becoming. Invested with a multitude of meanings (space, place, matrix, nurse...), *chora* is the locating receptacle in which things come into being. It is a third *genos*, neither sensible nor intelligible, about which one can speak only in the language of poetry and myth. Peters seizes upon this Platonic premise to posit *chora* as a figure of becoming that is at once cosmic and poetic, a creative force that may help us conceive of the ineffable origins of both the material world and the literary work.

This “chorological” framework is reinforced throughout the book by somewhat less speculative developments on early modern cosmology and geography, highlighting the radical transformations of the ways in which space was conceptualized and represented. Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy are here joined by Descartes, Pascal, and Gassendi, as well as influential cartographers such as Ortelius and Bouguereau. All this provides a rich backdrop for Peters’ probing re-readings of canonical literary works, in which spatial features and effects (location, gaps, proximity, verticality, etc.) are interpreted in relation to the texts’ own “becoming” as discursive, cosmological events.

After a clear and substantial introduction, the nicely balanced book is divided into six 30-page chapters which move from poetry (Boileau, La Fontaine) to drama (Molière, Corneille, Racine) to prose narrative (d’Urfé, Scudéry, La Fayette). The chapters can be read in sequence or separately, as Peters sets up the discussion of each work in an accessible and didactic manner, providing helpful transitions and recapitulations as well as excellent, concise endnotes which point the reader to relevant criticism in English and French. In contrasting the book’s focus on space and the physical world with earlier critical tendencies, the author himself tends to exaggerate the prevalence of certain clichés and generalizations – surely no one familiar both with Boileau’s *Satires* and his *Art poétique* would bluntly assert “the profound antimaterialism of classical poetry” (29); and the importance and concreteness of space in Racine or La Fayette, for example, have been recognized and analyzed by critics for several decades. Nevertheless, Peters’ personal approach to these questions, growing out of his long-standing interest in the relationships between space and early modern literature (see especially his 2004 study of allegorical cartography, *Mapping Discord*), undoubtedly makes for an original contribution and offers many fresh insights and arguments.

Rather than summarize and debate specific points, I would like to highlight two general issues or tensions that seem to reside at the heart of Peters’ project: on the one hand, the definition of the “poetic” with respect to literary creation; on the other, the treatment of the materiality of the works under discussion.

In a note to his introduction, Peters explains: “Throughout this book, I use the term *poetic* far more often than *literary*, or *literature*, to describe the object of my discussions. I use the term broadly, and somewhat anachronistically, as a shorthand for writing that reflects upon its own status as a way of knowing the world discursively [...]” (218). A few notes later, he refers to “Rama-chandran’s detailed discussion of the importance of *poesis*, or artful making, to early modern natural philosophy” (220). It is of course this latter sense, derived from the verb *poiein* (to make), that still dominates in seventeenth-century concepts of *poésie*, understood as an art or *techne*: “L’art de bien raconter ou représenter en vers les actions et les passions humaines sous des fictions ingénieuses.” [3] Peters’ compelling analysis of La Fontaine’s fable “Les frelons et les mouches à miel” adopts this traditional understanding of poetry by interpreting the bees’ productive activity as an image of “poetic making,” of “work, or craft” (63), and showing its dependence on the interstitial space conceptualized in Gassendi’s neo-Epicureanism. At work (*à l’œuvre*) in La Fontaine’s fable is “the bee-artist who makes the work out of movements-between” (66). Plato’s *chora* plays no role in this context, nor in the ensuing discussion of Molière; instead, the chapter ends with a reference to Ptolemy’s notion of “chorography” as “a detailed depiction of local places” (85), emphasizing again a Lucretian rather than Platonic concept of space. Chorography, according to Ptolemy, “needs an artist” – for example, a playwright whose comic portraiture is “a kind of dramatic chorography [...] In Molière’s poetics, literary being emerges locally” (85-86).

Poetry as work also appears in Chapter 5, on *L’Astrée*, now in a framework defined by Ficinian Neoplatonism, which emphasizes the divine origin of all creation. “D’Urfé’s poetic work is brought into being at the site of this topography,” i.e., Forests, which originates in an eternal source (175). The “poetic Work” is “a divinely wrought product of landscape (Astraea-Astrée) [...] It is

given the form of Neoplatonic love” (156). The shepherds’ pastoral space, then, still includes a kind of poetic work, defined not by the horizontal axis of the busy bees’ movements-between, but by the vertical axis connecting earth and heaven.

Elsewhere in the book, the poetic is conceived predominantly in terms not of (human or divine) “work” and “making,” but rather of (impersonal) “event” and “becoming.” For example, in the context of a long development about *inventio*, Peters quotes Tasso and Ronsard:

the poet will “choose subject matter such that it is apt to receive (*a ricevere*) in it the more excellent form which the skill of the poet will seek to introduce into it.” Indicating even more precisely the procreative aspect of invention, Pierre Ronsard writes that *inventio* is “the mother of all things” (*la mère de toutes choses*). (109)

These quotations serve to present *inventio* as a “receptive principle” and to argue for the *chora*-like creative power of rhetorical *topoi*. Peters does not comment on Tasso’s reference to the poet’s “choice” and “skill” and glosses over the active, masculine role given to the poet in this allegory. The gendered nature of Plato’s *chora* (as womb, matrix, etc.) is briefly acknowledged on page 108, but not pursued further. Nor, for that matter, is the *demiourgos* ever mentioned – rather than being part of a divine design and a receptacle of paternal Forms, *chora* appears as an autonomous, autogamous force.

Whereas Peters’ Lucretian interpretation of La Fontaine centers on the figure of the working bee-artist, his “chorological imagination” tends to dispense with any author-creator in order to foreground *chora* as a seemingly self-sufficient creative principle. This subjectless vision of the poetic seems indebted not only to the Deleuzian concept of event as “impersonal, disjoined from a subject of enunciation” (222), but also to Blanchot’s idea of the literary – an influence that is first signaled in an endnote (219) and fully revealed in the final pages of the book’s conclusion. Where notions of space are concerned, Peters repeatedly cautions against anachronistic discussions (see for example pages 114 and 120). In his meditations on literary creation, on the other hand, he seems less concerned with the perils of anachronism and draws heavily on twentieth-century concepts – an approach that is certainly common and legitimate, but is here occasionally at odds with Peters’ precise and well-informed exposition of classical poetics and rhetoric.

My second critical comment concerns the place granted, or rather not granted, to the material and visual aspects of the books analyzed in *The Written World*. From the outset, Peters states that his purpose “is not to enumerate the formal elements of the literary text – materiality of the page, graphic design, visual organization [...],” as critics may do with Mallarmé or Apollinaire (3). Later he cites the traditional view that seventeenth-century French literary works are “antimaterialist and surpassingly abstract,” in contrast to “many of the literary works produced during the Renaissance, whose shape and manner evince the impact of, for example, early print culture, the development of artificial perspective in the visual arts, and the Columbian discoveries” (6). Of course Peters criticizes and refutes this antimaterialist view – but he does so, ironically, in a surpassingly abstract manner. Throughout his book, I noticed only one concrete reference to the material presentation of a literary work: “a tantalizing detail of the first productions of *Bérénice* in 1670,” namely the intertwined initials T and B seen around the stage, is queried for possible echoes of the medieval T-O map (139). Chapters 5 and 6 do include nine illustrations, but all of them come from

cartographic and pictorial works, not from the novels under consideration. The literary texts are read in spatial and material terms, including the obligatory Derridean reference to “the materiality of writing” (206), but their actual embodiment as printed books (format, typography, presence or absence of illustrations, etc.) is completely neglected.

To illustrate this point, let us conclude with a brief look at Boileau. In demonstrating “the emphasis on the materiality of the poetic” in *L’Art poétique*, Peters mentions, as a “final aspect,” that the poem was first recited orally and provoked “affective, embodied reactions from a listening public” (44). He does not discuss the print editions, except for noting that the *Traité du sublime* was published “the same year as the *Art poétique*, 1674” (46). In fact, the two texts were published together, joined in a single volume, although separated by the first four cantos of *Le Lutrin* and with distinct paginations. The book opens to an allegorical frontispiece, which shows Minerva directing two laborers in the gardens of a French royal palace. The goddess indicates where to install an orange tree which sits in a vase adorned with the radiant face of Apollo: it belongs on a pedestal inscribed with the words UTILE DULCI. This image, which was surely conceived by Boileau himself, would work just as beautifully as a frontispiece to Peters’ first chapter, entitled “Everything in Its Right Place” (a motto borrowed not from Horace but from Radiohead, as the book’s index acknowledges). The duodecimo edition, published a few months after the quarto, includes a reduced version of the same engraving and adds frontispieces for the *Satires*, *L’Art poétique* and the *Traité du sublime*. All of these images, with their specific spatial and poetic language, composed the framework in which Boileau’s *Œuvres diverses* came into being and interacted with the public; not including them as part of the literary analysis is a historical *contresens* and a lost opportunity to more fully re-embodiment classical poetry.

## NOTES

[1] *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 39.

[2] *Ibid.*, 93-94.

[3] *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (Paris: Coignard, 1694), s.v. “Poesie.”

Volker Schröder  
Princeton University  
volkers@princeton.edu

© 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum* Volume 14 (2019), Issue 4, #2