The Manifestation of Presential Space in Don Berry’s *Trask*

Therése Jörgne  
Bachelor Degree Project  
Literature  
Spring, 2012  
Advisor: H. W. Fawkner
Abstract

The essay is a phenomenological study of Don Berry’s novel *Trask* (1960), demonstrating that experiential priority is given in the text to what Erwin Straus and Otto Bollnow call presential [präsentisch] space. The investigation analyses the difference between two forms of such space. On the one hand presential space is constituted automatically. This happens for the mountain man through the relentless momentum of long-distance trekking. On the other hand presential space is constituted as a mystical terminus of a tribal quest preceded by years of extreme self-discipline. Although such tribal ‘Searching’ is designed to lead to a sublime space-experience devoid of human agency and control, only agency and control make that happen. The essay proposes that, in the text, this structural contradiction makes traditional-cultural attainment of presential space less subtle than the automatic constitution of presential space that happens effortlessly on long mountain trails, without the consciousness-engineering of shamanistic choreography. By lacking any interest in ‘the Searching,’ and thus not programming himself for mystical enlightenment, the rapturous end of Trask’s half-hearted ‘Searching’ adventure comes across as a miracle rather than as reward for socially approved self-discipline. When mystical clairvoyance in this way finally comes to Trask, without him ever really having sought it, its perfectly gratuitous materialization becomes an extension of presential moments given with equal gratuitousness on the mountain trail. In the last analysis, mystical enlightenment in *Trask* is not the outcome of any striving but something that emerges effortlessly from sustained walking and from the stillness in which it pauses to renew its momentum.

Keywords: Don Berry, *Trask*, presential space, presential movement, trekking, Erwin Straus, Otto Bollnow, phenomenology
1. Introduction

This phenomenological essay proposes that the basic structure of Don Berry’s novel *Trask*¹ is a configuration of space-zones. In each zone, space comes across in a specific way. At one end of this spectrum of space-modes, space is the logical-geometric field that we find used by modern technology. This space is designed for exact calculations focused on facts, measurements, and cold data in general. At the opposite end of the spectrum, space is what Erwin Straus calls *präsentisch* (HS, 231).²

As Otto Bollnow notes in his discussion of Straus’s “presential space,” such space, like the special type of movement found in it, “fulfils itself purely in the present” (HS, 237). Thus in dancing that is done purely for its own sake, all movement “fulfils its meaning in itself.” It is immanent; it “rests in itself.” There may be a sense of moving up and moving down, or of moving faster and moving slower—but these processes are not “historic” in the sense of promoting some sort of “progress.” Presential space has broken away from “the purposefulness of active existence in general.” Presential movement is non-teleological; it has “no aim” other than itself. If a dancer is absorbed exclusively in the dance-moment, the presential space materializing in that moment is nothing more than “the movement of the moment” (HS, 237). “In dancing, man enters a changed relationship with space”. Instead of moving “through” space that “remains external to us” we are “taken up” into space and “become part” of it (HS, 236).

Bollnow states that “a deep metaphysical experience” animates the desire to dance; yet the dancer “does not dance in order to have this metaphysical experience” (HS, 237). Although the deep metaphysical experience of being in presential space “is always present in dancing” as something that constantly “underpins” dance-experience beforehand, “dance is not a means to an end” (HS, 237).

The circumstance that there is no factor “beyond” manifestation in presential space defines it as a space of immanence (HS, 231). The “purposeful” space of history and politics is in contrast one of transcendence (HS, 238). Here movements and

---

¹ Don Berry, *Trask* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004; first published 1960); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated T.
moments have a target or meaning transcendent to themselves. Unlike “acoustic space,” “pathic space,” “dance space”, and other forms of presential space, “political space” and “historic space” are defined by purposes, ends, and aims (HS, 238).

Elbridge Trask’s temperament is aligned with the possibilities of presential space; but since, unlike his native mentor Charley, he is not culturally programmed to take presential space for granted as some sphere of wisdom idealized by tribal traditions, his encounter with its allure is peculiarly authentic, personal, and intense. Since I believe that personal experience lies at the core of the text, and since I view Trask’s experiences as realities that cut right across culture, I will not be simplistically reducing the conflict of experienced spaces in Trask to a conflict of cultures. Although the text makes references to cultural differences between settlers and natives, Trask is a specific type of settler and a specific type of individual. I think the intrinsically mysterious figure of Elbridge Trask is powerful enough to blur and problematize culture-differences reduced to stereotypes. In the text, simple binary oppositions tend to get undermined by personalities and personal experience.3

Setting the cultural-colonial horizon in brackets,4 my research-focus is set specifically on Trask’s experiences. These are taken as moments of experience occurring in modes of space. This tight rather than loose focus has been put in place in order to make possible analysis of specific, central features of the text: the constitution of experience as a space-determined and space-determining phenomenon.2

2. Space versus Space

Most of the people that Elbridge Trask meets on the trail have not, in Heidegger’s words, reduced history and nature “to the level of domains of objects” (HCT, 2).5 Such objectification occurs in utilitarian situations of pure greed. Acquisitive fortune-seekers and conquerors have of course in all times wanted to fragment space into units of possession and property. Modern rationalism accentuates such fragmentation by

3 Trask is more mysterious than a shaman; tribal leaders often come across as villains.
4 This move is in alignment with the phenomenological method of “bracketing” research-phenomena that are not immanently and directly under review as appearings manifestly and evidently belonging to the field of observations.
5 Martin Heidegger, History of the Concept of Time, translated by Theodore Kisiel (Indiana University Press, 1992; first published 1985); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated HCT.
reducing space to measurable units of logical abstraction. As Christopher Tilley remarks, that sort of mechanical outlook creates the feel of a “gap, a distance in space,” between experience and reality (PL, 12). From the viewpoint of crass utility, a tree is “only wood” and a “mountain only rock” (T, 172). Once space has been completely objectified, nature is little more than a system of resources, “a big box full of many, many things” (T, 44).

When the businessman Roode visits Trask, hoping to make money out of the explorer’s proposed settlement in Murderer’s Harbour and possibly finance Trask’s venture, he quickly notices that the mountain man is a settler with the spirit not of a property-holder but of a restless nomad:

Men like you are incomprehensibly impractical from my point of view. Everything you do, you do the hard way; I, on the other hand, could not live for a week in this country, because I wholly lack your brand of practicality. [...] I deal with men of your stamp often, Trask. You wander off into the mountains for no discernible reason. You undergo a kind of life I would find unbearable. Then you come back, by God, and manage to find others like you to settle the wilderness! And when the land is tamed, you get restless once more. I can respect this, but it is frankly quite beyond my understanding (T, 74).

I submit that these lines reveal a distinction that is interior to Trask, rather than a distinction between different men or between different cultures. I suggest in fact that Trask is not a literary work that really concerns itself all that much about cultures or culture-conflicts, focusing instead on conflicting mind-sets that could crop up in any individual and clash within any culture whatsoever. The structural alienation between Trask and Roode is a case in point. Trask is “beyond” Roode’s “understanding” because something central to Trask’s personality keeps actualizing itself “incomprehensibly” and “for no discernible reason” (T, 74).

As the story about to unfold will show, this incomprehensibility has nothing to do with Roode’s assumption that the two men are engaged in different types of “play,” the “rules” of one “game” not being the “rules” of the other. This neat categorizing is rather further evidence of Roode’s objectifying rationalism. He knows that “commerce” is a “game” with certain “rules,” and therefore assumes that Trask’s type of mountain-life is a mountainous version of that, “the rules of the mountain” supposedly being a sort of wilderness-law that keeps Trask and his restlessness going

---

6 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated PL.
in a parallel (but equally law-regulated) universe (T, 74). The reader will eventually discover that Roode’s conception of Trask is quite false. The businessman’s notion of a pact between them is absurd:

We must learn the rules of the game, or we are not permitted to play, and rightly so. And eventually, I think, we drift into the segment of the game whose rules we understand best. You can understand the rules of the mountain and the forest and the beasts that walk them, you can live in harmony with these things. Now I, for my part, better understand the rules of commerce and civilization; this is my part of the great game, and I play it to the best of my ability. Between the two of us, much is done (T, 74).

I suggest that the novel precisely comes to show that nothing of this is true. Roode’s smug, inclusive discourse was designed to assimilate what he could not understand (everything far to the side of norms, law, and game-regulated play) into his own rational mind-set. He abstractly divides the world of order and reason between Trask and himself, assuming that the mountain man would be interested in that sort of mundane status. Roode fails to understand that Trask lacks any interest whatever in “the great game”; the difference between the two men is not reducible to the difference between “mountain” wilderness and “civilization” (T, 74). More importantly, Roode’s mind-set with its fixation of goods, laws, games, and play does not understand that “to settle the wilderness” is not an event that harbours an inner contradiction, as if exploring the wilderness and building a settlement there were aspects of two quite different life-styles (T, 74).

Roode is unwilling to trust anything that will not fit into his into business-based logic. Indeed, he “sadly” admits that his compulsion to constantly “comprehend his own position in the world […] is a kind of disease” (T, 75). The difference between the men is made evident by the circumstance that Trask is unable to identify the reason for commencing his journey despite Roode’s refusal to finance it. The businessman always lets the available facts determine his decisions; in contrast Trask relies on hunches that are already embedded in his bones prior to all conscious decision-making.

This pre-conscious factor is central to Trask’s extensive trekking. There is a certain return to animal life on the trail, a falling back to something primal. When we learn that the horse ‘Doctor,’ carrying much of Trask’s equipment, is an animal that has just accepted the slow tedium of the journey, plodding along “philosophically”
without at all “becoming restless as did the men” (T, 136), this information hints at the possibility of the superiority of pre-rational modes of being, movement, and space-constitution. The horse obviously knows nothing about the journey’s distance and goal, all motion therefore being vaguely non-teleological. But this aimlessness eventually befalls the men too, as conscious walking slowly gives way to automatic leg-movement in a sort of sleepy state of world-oblivion. After a while, trekking simply means acceptance of an event in which walking is just walking. As the hours pass by on the trail, the men have no choice but to surrender to an endless rhythm in which strides become increasingly automatized and oddly timeless.

We see then that trekking space is different from *hodological* space, from the space defined by Kurt Lewin as the system of paths or routes that we take in our daily lives on the basis of rational choices designed to avoid zones of danger, use shortcuts, minimize delay, etc. (HS, 185). Like trekking space, to be sure, hodological space has little to do with rational-geometric space: “In mathematical space the distance between two points is determined only by their respective coordinates; it is thus an objective quantity, independent of the structure of the space lying between them” (HS, 185). But whereas this “space lying between” is of importance to folks going about their business and not wishing to get bogged down in traffic jams and other obstacles, this between-space has no importance in *pure* trekking space, not even being real there. For once walking has been going on to the point where it has started to forget reality as such, merely marching to the rhythm of its own beat and finding meaning only in that, there is no “between” (HS, 185) but only the step, the stride *itself.*

### 3. The Spirituality of Mountain Space

Elbridge Trask is presented as a mountain man. After thousands of miles of solitary mountain-trailing, a mountain man has assimilated lawless patterns of experience other than those promoted by social norms and cultural expectations. These laws are enforced by the mountains themselves and by the intricate length of extremely strenuous mountain paths. No mountain-trailer can escape from the effects on consciousness of sustained kinetic processes that gradually become more and more
automatized and less and less conscious. On extremely long trails consciousness settles “into a kind of automatic indifference,” into a “frame of mind” in which experience is refined to the point where input “does not reach” the sphere of common ideas and emotions (T, 115). When Trask finally wakes up out of his coma at the end of the tribal ‘Searching’ for mystical enlightenment to find that Being is an awesome state of peace “without volition” (T, 338), this moment of illumination is arguably only a modification of the trance that arises effortlessly on the mountain trail once fatigue gives way to an almost hallucinatory motion comparable to sleepwalking.

Through the presence alongside Trask of the outstanding shaman Charley Kehwa, and through the key role that this tamanawis man plays at the end of the novel, it is constantly implied in the text that the mountains constitute a spiritual space with a hidden form of mystical energy that will tend to disclose itself to anyone who stays in the mountains long enough to get spiritually and physically lost in them. This getting-lost is not a mere sense of disorientation, but a getting-absorbed, getting-immersed, and getting-within. On the longest mountains trails, one does not have to lose one’s way to get a sense of this mystery; all one needs to do is fall into a kinetic trance in which the very act of marching blots out consciousness of the world, of the self, and of the trip’s practical purpose—that of reaching a specific destination.

While a shamanistic tamanawis man like Charley Kehwa makes mystical states possible by special techniques for manufacturing altered states of consciousness, the possibility of such mystical communion with the intrinsic nature of reality is for the mountain man not produced by a technique separate from daily life, but by this daily life itself in the form of long-distance walking. Solomon, a settler married to a native woman, acknowledges that this cross-cultural factor is a universal rather than person-specific or culture-conditioned mystical possibility. Mystical disclosure of ultimate reality is not reserved for professional mystics: “Everybody’s got tamanawis some way or another” (T, 62). Tamanawis meaning bridge, El/bridge Trask is a case in point. He is not a mystic, yet he is in no way debarred from the mystical.

Mystical reality cannot be put “in words,” as Charley Kehwa admits (T, 93); yet his mystical teachings are verbal. This uneasy tension between the mystery of Being as something non-verbal and the verbal sphere of mystical discourse is sensed by most people (T, 63), including Trask (T, 62). He does not hold the mystery of
Being in front of consciousness like a thing one looks at from a theoretic distance. The mystery-factor in Trask is not open and theoretic but hidden. It is disclosed with great reticence and subtlety through slight oddities of behaviour and thought out in the wilderness. Like the peoples of the mountains and ocean-plain, he has learned to trust this or that “little something” in the mind; this or that “sudden notion” that for some reason seemed to say “something” (T, 63). Ideas that are little more than “hunches” are precious precisely because they do not clearly belong to mind or feeling but, as it were, to the mountains and plains themselves—i.e., to presential space. What is far out in presential landscape is by the same token automatically far inside the mountain man within the presential mystery of his soul. Landscape and soul speak the same non-verbal language: “Eventually most mountain men came to rely pretty heavy on that still voice inside” (T, 64).

Sustained trail-experience is a sphere of mystical paradox. When trailing starts, the mountain man moves forward as his feet move forward; but once the walker has lost himself in the walking, and once he has at the same time gained something mystical replacing the self, there is a strange retreat from the sensation of forwardness. Stepping-forward is suddenly stepping back. The trail takes the walker nowhere. Yet this ‘nowhere’ is synonymous with the whole mountain-world understood as a spiritual space. The transformation of space into something entirely presential is automatically also access to a realm of disclosure where kinetic experience has transformed the trail into something other than a line directing a subject towards an object (the journey’s end). Now movement has no end. It comes across as having endlessness as a principle embedded in its very being. Consequently, Trask is struck by a sense of surprise when the goal is actually reached (T, 149). Goal-attainment is just a momentary interruption of something kinetic that is always latently ‘there’ to be drawn on.

7 The shaman holds mystery in the frontal position criticized by Martin Heidegger in his review of the intellectualizing attitude of wanting phenomena to be present-at-hand (vorhanden) rather than naturally ready-to-hand (zuhanden). Graham Harman has recently called attention to the fact that while Heidegger’s zuhanden state is an advance over the overly theoretic vorhanden attitude, the pragmatic slant given by Heidegger to the zuhanden attitude implies a loss of energy. Natural situations like work in a workshop do not normally disclose ultimate reality but only mediocre work-reality. Work-reality does not normally disclose ultimate reality as a space filled with objects qua mystical power-stations, the sort of surreal reality that fills Trask with awe on the trail and at the end of his ‘Searching.’ See Towards Speculative Realism (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010), p. 44–49; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated TSR. See also Heidegger Explained (Illinois: Open Court, 2007), p. 35-38.; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated HE.
While Charley Kehwa knows about this mystical space embedded within ordinary world-space theoretically and self-consciously, Elbridge Trask knows it corporeally and pre-theoretically. Whereas Charley has access to this embedding-secret as a representation or object of knowledge, Trask has kinetic access to it in his legs. Charley lets Trask know that he knows more than him: “Something happens to man, Bridge. When a man makes strong tamanawis he changes inside. He is not the same man as before” (T, 93). This is a reference to the state of being-reborn that Charley finally helps Trask experience by being a ‘spirit helper’ ready to die for the sake of enlightening him. Yet in his quiet way Trask already has secret access to this sort of embedding. Trask’s discreet, unobtrusive auto-enlightenment through the kinetic automatisms of sustained trekking foreshadows, and in a sense makes personally possible, the grand revelation that Charley finally stages.

It could indeed be argued that this final dreamy revelation of Being as a sublimely tranquil “newness” with a presence “scoured clean” and up-lifting (T, 340) is nothing that in the last analysis is really new for Trask. That disclosure had already been presented in a quiet mood of unassuming sobriety when, much earlier, landscape as such had been allowed to mingle seamlessly with the kinetic peace of absent-minded trekking. On the trail, the secret spirituality of Being is disclosed to Trask without the assistance of Charley Kehwa or any other ‘spirit helper.’ This happens when the sudden sight of a mountain at the edge of the ocean brings home to him the sense that the mountains constitute a spiritual space. He does not need Charley to tell him that “god walks” in the mountains, for Trask’s entire life as a mountain man with a sensitivity no less esoteric than that of a tamanawis man (T, 94) has beforehand wiped out the line of demarcation between supernatural and natural walking. When he suddenly sees the Cape of Falcons, with a “cove of perfect grace” peacefully “detached” from the stormy ocean (T, 118), “the miniature perfection” of the system of gentle foam-lines and deep green waves, as piece of the sea embedded within the cove, is the correlate of a cove-of-consciousness embedded within consciousness. Trekking has disclosed a little kinetic mystery hidden as a possibility given through the completion of its momentum:

Trask was stunned by the miniature perfection of the cove, and it was a long moment before he raised his eyes and saw the mountain that formed the south

---

8 The concept of ‘legs’ here does not denote so-called ‘embodiment,’ since physicality is not necessarily somatic, and since what is being referred to is kinetic experience. See Ian Hamilton Grant’s attack on somatism (NAS, 33).
horn of the crescent. The humpback ridge loomed a thousand feet above him, and he could not even be certain he saw the skyline at all. A streamer of cloud began at the very meeting of land and sea, and cut off the mountain’s top as with a knife. As the cloud swept inland, it almost seemed to Trask the massive seaward face of the mountain moved, slowly plowing out in the gray sea like the prow of a great ship. He guessed the cliffs themselves to be five hundred feet, straight down into the turbulent boil of white water.

He was not aware the others had come up to him until he heard Charley’s voice.

“Neahkahnie,” Charley said quietly. “Where the god walks.” (T, 119)

Here landscape is spiritual space, and spiritual space is present space. Although Trask is “stunned,” presential spirituality is here a seamless extension of the presental space that lies embedded at the kinetic core of his trekking. While walking, Trask has gradually sunk down into the tranquil cove of movement as a recapitulation-event in which feet keep themselves going in a little eternal circle of motion free from human agency and purposeful directedness. His feet just keep moving. The odd magic that keeps motion alive without Trask having to make it all happen is like life itself—“the invisible,” something that does “not move” (T, 143).

Against the glow of the night sky, the great bulk of Neahkahnie reared sharp and distinct. He stood there for a long moment, watching the still, impassive cliffs. Shadowed there in the night it seemed almost unreal; too big, too impersonal; the massive body of some ancient behemoth. Trask was suddenly aware of his tiny position in the shadow of the great mass looming over him like a canopy of stone.

Where the god walks, he thought, remembering Charley’s words. It looked it, standing massive in the night and still. The mountain was sleeping.

He turned and went back into the tent (T, 125).

These last lines highlight the presental stillness of this spiritual space. As Trask raises his eyes towards the mountain he is immersed in an almost surreal spaciousness, in which he becomes strangely aware of his own littleness. The invisible spiritual factor is somehow so tangible that it seems to Trask that the mountain is alive, vibrant but “sleeping”. He is now enwrapped in a mystical space that comes across as an embedding in everyday space. The reality of the mountain, “still” and “impassive,” is a surreal reality, something at once real and more than real.

This particular conception of the invisible has the meaning that, as a mode of presental space, kinetic experience is disengaged from mind-work in general and from the production of representations in particular. When Trask settles into his longstanding “habit” of “falling into a kind of reverie” on the trail, everything more or
less vanishes from his horizon of attention (T, 148). This vanishing from the perceptible into the near-imperceptible means that he does not have a representation of “the steady pumping of his legs,” of his “progress” along the trail, of any object “he was thinking about,” or indeed of any “patterns” whatever “that flowed before his mind” (T, 148–49). Instead of being representation-constituted, these “featureless” arrangements are in all their “neutralness” just as movement-constituted as walking itself (T, 148). Being “barely conscious of the passage of time” as he moves along the trail, Trask is deprived of a stream of consciousness qua stream of representations (T, 149). As someone “not thinking,” he finds himself in an “odd” state of “neutralness” in which phenomena, far from being objects of experience (representations), are just a flow of impressions forming “a vague mental counterpart of the rhythm of walking” (T, 148–49). Walking reads the world pre-theoretically and pre-objectively, ahead of consciously lucid world-representing. The presential spirituality encountered in extreme endurance-walking thus forbids what authentic spiritual enlightenment forbids—representation. As Charley the shaman asserts, “the Vision” sought in mystical ‘Searching’ cannot be “something made up in your own mind, something springing from the hungry-head” (T, 172). Presential space cannot be summoned into manifestation as a mind-constituted field of representations.

This demoting of agency, free will, and representing is observable on several levels. When Charley Kehwa prepares Trask for the painfully ascetic Searching that is going to lead him to his great mystical vision of ultimate reality, he urges the mountain man to “always control” animal instincts such as hunger in situations of food-deprivation (T, 283); yet the “kind of control” that Trask finally gains access to once he has become embedded in the mystery of ultimate reality is not control as world-mastery monitored by human agency and human free will but an “easy control” that belongs to presential space as such (T, 340). Since everything in presential space

---

9 Steven Galt Crowell has demonstrated that the importance of the pre-objective and pre-theoretic was highlighted before Heidegger in the pre-phenomenology of Emil Lask. See Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths toward Transcendental Phenomenology (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001); p. 78–85; in parenthetical references abbreviated HHS.

10 As Graham Harman observes, there is a decisive difference between “silently relying” on features of the world and “observing them as present-at-hand”; The Quadruple Object (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2011); p. 35; in parenthetical references abbreviated QO. To consciously be representing the world and its objects is “to see something ‘as’ such-and-such,” not to just see it; such an attitude “never encounters things, but only things ‘as’ things”. One loses “a rich, implicit layer of dark pretheoretical experience,” only to find oneself stranded in “a luminous but impoverished plane of explicit awareness”; Towards Speculative Realism (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010), p. 112; in parenthetical references abbreviated TSR.
is presential, and since presential reality is a domain where everything is effortlessly present to everything else, this “easy control” is something achieved, as it were, by space itself, not by Trask (T, 340).

4. The Inevitability of Land as Newness

Within presential space Trask does not control pain by suppressing it through an act of will; rather, he lets “it slide from him unnoticed as a leaf falls from a tree” (T, 340; emphasis added). I suggest that the word “unnoticed” calls attention to the fact that Trask does not have or make a representation of pain. Nor is his mode of control here a type of mastery in which control is represented as a useful or desirable act. In fact control is in presential space almost synonymous with not-control, with a letting-go of control. Yet this letting-go can obviously not itself be a representation, for then the spell is broken and the Vision’s wisdom lost.

It is interesting to note that Trask’s access to full communion with ultimate reality remains slightly incomplete until he rids himself of the very last vestiges of human agency and will-directed world-connectivity. This remainder is the egotism and intentionality keeping him directed with his spear towards a human being who is taken to be a threat. Trask’s spear points at the representation of his enemy Illga; but a representation is not the real thing. The real man getting ever closer is his friend, the shaman Charley. Clinging to his last representation, to “the one connection he had with the world” (T, 314), Trask inadvertently kills his mentor. Here the shaman dies in Christ-like fashion for the one he needs to save; but the further meaning of the incident is that in driving his spear into the representation of Illga rather than into Illga, Trask’s final life-error enables him to murder his last little hold on the world as a sphere of human representations arranged around ‘free’ human subjectivity. Seeking to convey the mentor he has mortally wounded back to the village, Trask finally understands that trust in human agency is problematical. This insight occurs when his mortally wounded companion manages to make him understand that the great obstacle that had blocked Trask’s path back from the Searching was an obstacle only in his own will-driven, obstacle-representing mind. The act of tearing at the great tree’s bark with bleeding hands was a stupidity created by exaggerated belief in
human will-power: “The tree wishes you no harm. Go around it in peace. You are hurting yourself” (T, 340). When Trask insists that he needs to “kill” the tree to get past it, his mentor gives him final enlightenment on the issue of human agency: “‘You kill yourself,’ Charley told him, and Trask knew then it was true that the tree was himself” (T, 341).

It would be a mistake at this point to believe that presential space is selfless, a sort of vacuum peopled by abstractions rather than human personalities. It is rather the case that just as presential space is discoverable as an embedding within commonplace space, a presential self is discoverable as an embedding within the everyday self. This is why, with a foretaste of communion with ultimate reality at the climax of the Searching, Elbridge Trask looks back with wonder at his old self, a sort of twin brother now materializing in the shape of a weird stranger. When he realizes that he is “on the verge of perceiving existence raw,” he is amazed that he had “never before seen the impartial and lovely glow with which all things are lighted” (T, 315), and quite astonished to look back with incomprehension at “some other person he had known named Elbridge Trask” (T, 315).

I propose that the vanishing of one Elbridge Trask and the materialization of another has to do with a shift from selfhood understood as reality-shaping human agency to selfhood understood as reality-accepting non-agency. This swing does not imply that the new self is lethargic. On the contrary it is extraordinarily alert. This alertness comes from the fact that the new self is in an intense but calm state of watchful readiness for revelation. Thus the major event of finding new land is not the outcome of hurried seeking but of patient waiting. Trask is predestined to meet the piece of land that will show up as the ultimate topos of his life-destiny. He is drawn to this piece of land rather than zealously directed toward it as a property hunter. Accordingly, the moment when the sought land comes into view has the feel of recognition, as if he had always been there. Trask feels that he is finally coming home. Newness does not come across as a novelty presented in an act of transcendence but as disclosure of something timeless given in an unveiling of oddly familiar immanence:

The moment of recognition, the moment when a man rounds some corner and sees clearly his own face before him, begins […] like the fall of a fir in the woods; a thunderous, stately crash, sweeping all things inevitably before it. It ends like the tide, imperceptibly, obscurely, and no man can say with certainty the ebbing is done and the flow begun. But the knowledge of
that moment remains with him from them; relentless as the falling and
inevitable as the tide.

It can happen at any time a man looks on new land. It happened to
Elbridge Trask under a sullen gray sky, cramped uncomfortably on the thwart
of a Killamook hunter canoe with droplets of cold rain running down his neck
and caught hanging in his beard. (T, 208–209; emphasis added)

The sense of inevitability and predestination (signalled by the words “inevitably” and
“inevitable”) has to do with the disempowering of the commonplace world-self and its
free-will egotism. The manifestation of the seeker’s “own face before him” is
accordingly not to be understood as a mirror-representation (which suggests doubling
and distance) but as a convergence-event in which the self that is found is not a
human self but a land-self; the self as land and the land as self. Selfhood is no longer
anthropological but something indistinguishable from land and landscape as ultimate
reality. The event of “finding his own image, the solid configuration of himself” (T,
208) has got nothing to do with the popular notion of finding one’s true self. For what
is “solid” here is the solidity of the land (which is now automatically also the mystical
self).

There is no possibility of ordinary human free choice here, for freedom
belongs to the land rather than to human volition. To have communion with land as
ultimate reality is to have “lost the faculty of choice concerning it” (T, 208). When
Trask accordingly gets the revelation of his new and final piece of land, it is not the
land that has been chosen by Trask but Trask who has been chosen by the land: “He is
chosen, and from that moment the land and he work each other” (T, 208).

The event of comprehending all of that is indistinguishable from a mode of
passion that automatically means “turning away from the demanding gaze of logic”
(T, 208). Understood as pieces of property, “clods of earth and stands of timber and
runs of water […] are reasonable things”; but as phenomena blurring every “clear
edge of difference” between land and self they are not (T, 208).11

We have seen, then, that the ordinary, property-hungry everyday self can give
way to a non-ordinary, mystical land-self—one that is not interested in acquiring land
as a source of revenues but open to land as a site for communion with ultimate reality.

---

11 This state of affairs is not reducible to the banal idea presented in Jeff Baker’s introduction to
Moontrap that Berry’s fiction is what Glen Love calls “regional” literature with a “sure sense of place.”
Space in Berry’s fiction is precisely not place (a part of the world) but a terrain determined by various
levels of spirituality actualized in altered states of consciousness.
We have also seen that the breakthrough from one self to another, and from one land-conception to another cannot be organized by human agency as human volition. The event is not chosen in time and space but presented in terms of the “inevitable” (T, 209). At an inevitable moment in time and in an inevitable location, land is given to the one chosen to discover it. As I have suggested, this conception of personalized inevitability makes Trask’s individuated inner journey more intriguing and powerful than the tribal version of the Searching. Within tribal culture, adolescent males undergo years of training in which they are encouraged to summon all their powers of volition to prepare themselves for the ordeal of the Searching. All of them do not gain communion with ultimate reality during or after their ordeal; yet all of them use their human free will to push themselves into ascetic self-discipline and to summon courage for their days of tribulation. Nothing like that applies to Trask. He does not undergo any training. He does not use any training-insights to bring his will power to bear on the tribulations that await him. He has no plan or even desire for the Searching. He dislikes the whole idea, until he one day without much interest just finds that it is time to give it a half-hearted try: “It suddenly seemed inevitable to him, as though it had been coming for a long time” (T, 269).

We see here that the word “inevitable” (“inevitable as the tide,” T, 209) that had defined the mood of his moment of land-detection as land-recognition returns here on the threshold to the Searching—understood not as tribal Searching in general but as Trask’s very own (not-)searching. Not really believing in tribal wisdom, he just goes along with the social pressure in a polite act of disinterested compliance. I propose, then, that behind the self-evident idea that tribal wisdom is teaching an outsider how to gain ancient wisdom, the text is presenting the less self-evident idea that Trask’s manner of coming to the Searching conceals the implication that tribal wisdom does not have the final word. Trask’s state of beatitude in the aftermath of the Searching would have looked simplistic and romantic had its manifestation not been an expanded echo of what he had felt in his bones all along as a mountain man gaining wisdom not just from tribal mind-tests but also from the mountain man’s way of life. Trask’s ultimate spirit guide is the mountain trail.
5. Gnosis

The investigation has been demonstrating that *Trask* is a novel organised around the phenomenon of the materialization of presential space and presential movement. We have seen that the actualization of presential space is synonymous with the fading-away of what Bollnow calls “the space of everyday life” (HS, 233). The point has been made, however, that for a mountain man like Trask, the space of everyday life is frequently presential rather than commonplace due to the fact that the habit of spending most hours of the day on the trail introduces an uncommon heightening of a kinetic factor that makes trail-space similar to the presential sphere of dance-space (HS, 232–36) rather than to the normative “visual space” of non-presential experience (HS, 233). Although there is superficially an opposition between trekking and dancing, dance not being designed “to get from one point to another,” the *feeling* of walking sooner or later comes across for Trask as the *feeling* of a motion that “never gets anywhere” (T, 233). In the manner of dance-movements recapitulating themselves endlessly till the dance is over, the trekker’s feet keep going in the motion of a little recapitulation-event (left–right, left–right, left–right, . . .) till the walking is over. Despite the effort made by the text to thematize a contrast between Trask as someone who has not yet undergone the Searching, and Trask as someone who gets initiated into the wonders of presential space by a self-sacrificing local shaman, this opposition is beforehand shrewdly undercut by the fact that Trask has already been initiated into presential space by being a mountain man. The difference is to a certain extent an opposition between pre-knowing and knowing; between having cognizance of something without knowing that one has this cognizance and having cognizance of cognizance. From this perspective, Charley Kehwa simply makes much more explicit what Elbridge Trask had known pre-reflectively.

Pre-reflectivity is a form of pre-knowing in which realities have not yet been arranged into explicit mental representations qua clear-cut cognitions (HHS, 48). Prior to his Searching, Trask lives, thinks, and moves a primal space of meaning (HHS, 53). In the primitive, raw streams of consciousness of “precognitive experience” (HHS, 72), presential space is fully given but not as a field illuminated in intellectual clarity. Thus presential space is *there* for Trask on the trail, but not—as for Charley Kehwa—in the form of an intellectually cognized space that could be lucidly and calmly contemplated in a state of shamanistic gnosis. Trask’s state of clairvoyance after the
Searching marks a shift of presential awareness to an explicit level of mystical gnosis. His sighting of the Cape of Falcons (T, 118) is no less presentially sublime than his dreamy sighting of ultimate reality as “pure existence” at the end of the Searching (T, 344); the difference being that a mental polish has been added to presential space by means of quasi-theoretic contemplativeness. What is given on the trail is what is given in the Searching, with the difference that in the Searching the walker is forced to stop walking due to exhaustion. He gains access to the nature of ultimate reality in a new way—i.e., through the unfamiliar state of sustained motionlessness verging on coma. Charley Kehwa had admitted that Trask was a born shaman, a man no different from himself in terms of talent and experience. What has separated them until the gnosis of Trask’s Searching is the mountain man’s lack of interest in contemplative theorizing. When such theorizing has been forced upon him by physical and mental shocks of unprecedented violence, he comes to hold sacred in a metaphysical way what he had beforehand always held in awe pre-reflectively.

When Trask had suddenly beheld the sublime panorama of the Cape of Falcons (T, 118) he had been given a view of the sacredness of ultimate reality as something that landscape (without the aid of theory) can disclose. What stretched out before him was not just the “perfect grace” of a cove but the perfection and grace of ultimate reality. Trask had “stopped suddenly” at the sight of something so “incredible” (T, 118). Yet this brief motionlessness is of course quite different from the one imposed on him by the rigors of the Searching, an ordeal designed to bring a man physically and psychologically to his knees. When the Searching has pushed Trask to and beyond his bodily and mental limits, he stands outside his little cave in the wilderness in a state of “dizziness” in which “detachment” mainly comes from a sense of indifference that is indistinguishable from faintness, mental depletion, and physical exhaustion. The gnosis that then gets constituted is therefore in a sense contrived, despite its sublimeness:

There was no good or bad connected with anything anymore. Pain had lost most of its terror; he barely felt it. Consciously he knew the pain of his hand was severe, but somehow it didn’t seem to make much difference. It couldn’t reach him.

He regretted nothing; wanted nothing. He was simply existing, and the way things were was the way they had always been and always would be. He didn’t care any more. He did what had to be done, and endured in a timeless present, without past or future (T, 313).
We once again see Trask as a figure open to states of experience where motions are automatic; but whereas the automatism of feet-movement on the trail was seamlessly a part of his natural way of life as a mountain man, the automatism that arises during the ordeals of the Searching resembles that of a dreamer. It is as if Trask has stopped living, existing now as a dazed and faint ghost sliding about in a twilight zone between life and death: “He washed the bandage without any thought of infection or dirt or sticking, but simply automatically. He bandaged again with care, but could not have said why. He did it, simply that” (T, 313; emphasis added).

The question arises: Is this presential space at all, in the sense discussed by Straus and Bollnow? They review spaces that form part of human living, like dance space, walking space, and play space. But in a sense the Searching has pushed the Searcher to the side of life, into a zone hovering between life and death, wakefulness and sleep.

Having collapsed after a prolonged near-death experience that enabled him to carry Charley Kehwa back to the village, Trask’s convalescence includes the process of having to deal with the trauma of having accidentally killed his mentor, the very friend who had given him final enlightenment. The completion of this process of recovery announces itself as a state of being spiritually re-born:

As a child explores the reaches of a new-found cave, he worked along the huge dim passages of his mind and body; touching, wondering, watching, exploring. He found without surprise that both had been scoured clean in the ordeal [...] He felt, as he explored, a newness; as he had been in the beginning, a vessel of worth waiting to be filled (T, 340).

As regeneration continues, we are told that Trask has been metaphysically liberated in a way that has enhanced physical experience: “The clear precision of his body made the simple act of living so intense his mind had room for nothing more. The ground fog on his mind had burned away; a searing sun caught veils of mist and scorched them out of being” (T, 345). A sea-change has occurred: “He saw a world he had not seen before; a world made not for mastery but for living” (T, 345). The fear that formerly had lured him into a conquering state of mind has vanished, disclosing the absurdity of being afraid of something that is “part of himself” (T, 346).

While it is possible that the issue of “mastery” has introduced a philosophic change in Trask’s outlook on life, I submit that the Searching has not really contributed anything significant to the mountain man’s longstanding ability to
recognize and acknowledge *presential space as a spiritual landscape promoting immanent communion with ultimate reality*. I close by highlighting the text’s final panorama of physical phenomena as evidence of the fact that the presential space that automatically comes across to the mountain man as a spiritual terrain disclosing the intrinsic sacredness of Being is little more than an extension of what Trask was able to feel for landscape in bygone days. The final revelation of ultimate reality, and of the possibility of gratuitous communion with it, is intrinsically not different from what Trask beheld when the Cape of Falcons suddenly lay before him, long before the completion of his brief shamanistic education. When Trask’s fever has subsided during convalescence,

the intensity of any simple act of perception was almost unbearable. The sheer brilliance of color was blinding; the sweet, clear tone of every sound came to him almost as a physical shock, making him catch his breath. The swinging glide of a gull came to have an almost-grasped significance that kept the mind hovering on the edge of joy.

Reticulated swells of ferns across the plain; a time-eroded face of weathered wood; the mingling of needles on the forest floor; a smear of pain across a grained rock; the quick-smooth sliding of a cloud across the fretted surface of the sea; there was to all these things a richness [...] felt so profoundly in the hidden reaches of his being that each facet of the world thus caught became at once a part of him and he of it. (T, 345)

I suggest that what has happened here is a collapse of the *out-there* feel of visible space as an external field of coloured objects into the *right-here* feel given in kinetic and acoustic space. We have seen that the mountain trail is a kinetic domain in which Trask progressively sinks into the hypnosis of the beat of his own marching feet; and just before this account of him succumbing to the “sheer brilliance of color” he is shown succumbing to the enveloping sound of tribal music from the “steady slow thumping of long poles against the dirt” (T, 336). Were we to follow the theoretic model advanced by Straus, the “brilliance of color” would be part of the non-presential space of everyday life, while the thumping in contrast would be part of the presential space of music and dance. In theory, then, we “always see colours over there” held by “the world of coloured objects” “at a distance” (HS, 229). In theory, they are therefore in a non-presential zone that is phenomenologically alien to the presential zone of dance space and acoustic space. I propose, however, that this separation of colour space from sound space and dance space is overly theoretic and mechanical. There are states of awareness where colour definitely does not come
across as something less immanent than tones of music or movements of dance and marching.

We saw an instant ago that throbbing waves of colour come to immanently “shock” Trask’s perceptual body with an intensity and style no different from that of incoming tonal waves (T, 345). We are all familiar with the sense of music as something immersing us in oceans of sound waves; but here such immersion is performed also by optical waves of colour. Colour has become acoustic in the sense that as something “blinding” it is not strictly visual any longer but quasi-acoustic (T, 345).

The destruction of the “distance” factor (HS, 229) that usually makes visual space come across as something with a faraway feel is adumbrated by the “sliding” manifestation-mode of the “cloud” that is perceived not in the faraway sky but on the “surface of the sea” (T, 345). In the way that the cloud is a presential phenomenon in the ocean ‘perceiving’ it (holding its colours and shape), the “sheer brilliance of color” is a presential phenomenon in Elbridge Trask’s spellbound convalescence-consciousness. The fact that colour is external to consciousness matters nothing; what only matters is its way of appearing—the way of presential immanence.

I submit, then, that the space-models set up by Straus and Bollnow, while being illuminating, fail to always work on account of the fact that manifestation (the way things come across) is situation-specific. There are situations in which visual space is presential rather than non-presential. It could be said that one field of space affects another. The acoustic space governed by the thumping poles is so dominant and forceful that fields of perception other than those of sound and movement get drawn into it. There is thus an assimilation of visual space into the acoustic-kinetic space of the tribal dance-ceremony. The conglomeration of spaces does not become a space with manifold space-feels but a single, homogenous space entirely governed by the presential reality of rhythm.12

Following the rhythm, the dancers and those hearing the sound of the dance-music fall away from the space of everyday life into a presential space where motion,

---

12 As Edmund Husserl observes, different types of space mutually support each other. There is thus no constitution of visual space that is not in some way in alliance with the constitution of kinetic or acoustic space. The “visual constitution of space and place” is affected by “sensations of movement, which indeed do not belong in the category of visual contents.” In fact “visual contents are not sufficient by themselves to serve as apprehensioonal contents for visual spatiality and for a thing in general. And I add immediately that the same goes for tactile contents and for tactile spaces”; *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, translated by Richard Rojcewicz (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), p. 135.
like music, reposes in itself. The rhythm is there for its own sake. All who fall under its spell get surrounded, seized, and embraced by the sound. As Straus notes, music changes space into something acoustic-kinetic. Movement “bestows its own movement on space so that the dancer can participate in it” (PP, 32).

Recovering, Trask finds that the sound of the thumping sticks fills his cabin. He comes to feel that he has “lived all his life with the steady slow thumping of long poles against the dirt” (T, 336). The fact that the sound is now “more a part of him than his heart’s rhythm” (T, 336) is an idea that gets developed at the end of the set of lines we looked at a moment ago. Once landscape-directed colour-perceptions have become no less presental than the acoustic-kinetic perceptions of dance, there is a dissolution of our ordinary sense of subject–object opposition. All “at once” reality becomes “a part of him and he of it (T, 345).

As the rhythm of ultimate reality itself, the thumping now penetrating Trask’s exhausted body is buoyant enough to support his body-weight as he attempts to stand up and move in his faintness. He “moved forward with the pounding of the poles and drums working in his blood” (T, 338). Although his legs are actually too weak for the dance, he becomes a dancer, one who is completely present in presental space.

13 Theodore R. Schatzki points out that our understanding of the constitution of space in experience was dramatically increased when phenomenologists like Heidegger dismantled Kant’s previously influential idea of experienced space. Kantian space is subjective. Kant believes that the mind “imposes” spatial relations on a world with subjectively constituted objects that are mental “representations”—a view challenged by Heidegger’s proposal that space is not subjective but “lived.” That space in experience is “lived space” means that the “character” of space in work-situations such as manual labour depends on “features of activity and not of mind or subjectivity.” When we are busy getting something done, we are not mental beings busy making space as a conglomeration of mental representations and mental relations; instead space is part and parcel of life as “carrying-on with” something; Martin Heidegger: Theorist of Space (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007), pp. 35–36; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated HTS. From the viewpoint of what keeps getting revealed in Trask, however, both of these views of spatiality (Räumlichkeit, HTS 33) are reductive. Trask keeps entering spaces that have the quality neither of the “representations” (HTS, 35) of “subjective space” (HTS, 37) nor of the industrious “carrying-on” (HTS, 36) of “lived space” (HTS, 35). The spatiality in which he finds himself is too passively materialized to qualify as something derived from “actions” (HTS, 34). It is indeed when he gives up all actions that space becomes wonderfully and awesomely presental. Furthermore, this materialization of space as spellbinding magic capable of disclosing ultimate reality seems to have its source in that very ultimate reality, and not at all in a Kantian-subjective mind eager to “impose” spatial “relations” and space-situated “representations” (HTS, 35).

14 This power of acoustic space to create a sense of immersion in its pulsations is elucidated by Bollnow (HS, 230).

15 Discussing such ecstatic sensations of “merging,” Straus remarks that there is an inevitable “reduction” of the “subject-object tension” (PP, 32).
Final Remarks

We have seen in *Trask* how presential trekking-space gets kinetically disclosed to the mountain man as space standing in opposition to the space of everyday life and to the logical-geometric space of profit-directed land-acquisition. But more importantly, we have seen that the kinetic space of the mountain trail is a presential space that is different from presential space as a sought metaphysical realm. While these two forms of presential space are identical in so far as they are both intensely presential, they differ in so far as the paths leading to them are different. Although presential space is always a form of passive space-constitution, the path leading to its realization can either be an actively constituted path, as in the case of tribal Searching, or simply the experienced mountain trail that the mountain man inhabits as a passively-constituted movement space. The tribally organised Searching is designed to lead to a sublime space-experience devoid of human agency and control; yet ironically, excessive control and excessive self-mastery are put in place in order to make it glamorously happen. There is thus an inner contradiction between the intrinsic nature of the sought space and the way one is expected to discover it. By lacking any genuine interest in the Searching before half-heartedly agreeing to undertake it, Elbridge Trask escapes from presential space as a field of spirituality disclosed by means of a theoretic agenda.

Works Cited


