

*American Spaces - Horizontal and Vertical*

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Editor's Foreword

*I am vertical*

*But I would rather be horizontal*

Sylvia Plath (1961)

The New Orleans disaster of August-September 2005 symbolically and dramatically epitomized the theme of this "European Issue" of *RSA*. As Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, a region already weakened by decades of inconsiderate development, much was being written about the city's unlikely location — about its being *above and below* the sea (and river) level, about its *horizontal and vertical* extension: and "the low-lying river delta... the hurricane's storm surge..." were part of the vocabulary which became sadly familiar in those days.

Indeed, this very dialectics— between horizontality and verticality — lies at the core of American culture at large and through the ages. When the Pilgrim Fathers set foot on Plymouth Rock, they carried with them the project of building a "City upon a hill," a real and metaphorical elevated *locus*, which might watch (and be watched from) all around; and when their descendants began migrating beyond the Appalachian range, their eyes met with the seemingly unending plateau soon to be known as the Great Plains. Verticality and horizontality, again — as Francis Parkman would repeatedly note in his *Oregon Trail* (1849), thus giving an early (and often extraordinarily cinematic) rendering of the complex dynamics between these two points of view and spatial experiences: "The prairie does not always present a smooth, level and uniform surface; very often it is broken with hills and hollows, intersected by ravines, and in

the remoter parts studded by the stiff wild-sage bushes" (405). Wallace Stevens would echo this with ironic subtlety when he wrote in 1919: "I placed a jar in Tennessee, / And round it was, upon a hill" (46).

But such dynamics between verticality and horizontality were also deeply embedded in the Native American cultures: Cahokia, the large and crowded Mississippian town, was built in the middle of a great riparian system, of flat and unending prairies, and its huge, mysterious mounds (some of them higher than the Mayan pyramids), were symbols of power and presence to be seen from all around (Chappell 51-75), before the sudden and still unexplained disappearance of the Mississippian culture.

While horizontality and verticality as realities and symbols accompanied the transformations of American society through the nineteenth century (the "West" containing both dimensions), it was really towards the end of it that they took on deeper, more complex and even disquieting implications. As Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor have clearly shown (189-219), these tensions were present from the beginning in the very conception of skyscraper building: particularly in the period leading to the late 1920s and early 1930s, the vertical *élan* was always mitigated, checked and restrained, by the interplay of horizontal ornamental elements, which led the eye away from the purely soaring movement, and thus readjusted a new, difficult (and almost unnatural, as Lewis Mumford has taught us) perception, to a more captivating and familiar horizontality. It was a confrontation between "space" and "concrete": an economic, financial, aesthetic, cultural conflict, which at its heart, in those turbulent decades, had the urgencies and exigencies of real estate and financial capital — and which opposed Chicago to New York, Frank Lloyd Wright to Le Corbusier.

In an astonishingly pre-modernist fashion, this confrontation had been anticipated by that symbol of all symbols, in terms of horizontality and verticality: John and Washington Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge (Trautenberg). Here indeed are contained and summarized all the implications of that dialectics, even in their contradictory (or reversed) relation-

ship: the bridge's *verticality*, in fact, is made up of very traditional pillars of stone with church-like gothic openings, which give the whole (*horizontal*) bridge span the form of a nave, sustained by a very modern, intricate (*horizontal and vertical*) net of iron cables. A paradox, if you like: but — metaphorically, symbolically — a very dense one. Something which would not go unnoticed by Hart Crane when he wrote *The Bridge* (or by Joseph Stella or Walker Evans, when they painted and photographed Roebling's masterwork). And a paradox which lies deeply in that dialectics, and can also lead to dark forebodings — as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "My Lost City," which presents the bitter disenchantment of the New Yorker who, upon returning to his beloved city and resorting to his usual ritual of climbing its tallest structure (then, the Empire State Building), becomes aware of "the crowning error of the city, its Pandora's box": its *limits*: "and with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground" (30).

Since then, the dialectics of verticality and horizontality have surfaced time and again, in American life and culture, and it would be impossible even only to summarize them here, in this brief introduction. But if, after 11 September 2001, Fitzgerald's final image — "the whole shining edifice . . . came crashing to the ground" — has inevitably taken on new tragic overtones, after Hurricane Katrina the theme itself of "verticality-horizontality" has become impregnated with new, no less tragic implications, and offers new grounds to literary and cultural reconsideration.

Therefore it seemed appropriate that most of the essays in this issue of *RSA* should deal with verticality-horizontality. They do so by offering a wide range of subjects and interpretations, from Henry James to Sylvia Plath and Joan Didion, and to more recent, stimulating approaches (William Least Heat-Moon and David Benioff's collaboration with Spike Lee). Substantial articles on womanhood in colonial Low County, and on religion in America, complete this issue, which also presents a telling testimony on Hurricane Katrina from a colleague in New Orleans. As

always, we include an unpublished text from the U.S., in this case three notable new poems by Mary Jo Salter, that are also very much concerned with the relation of space to perception and existence. Our cover, with Rockwell Kent's magnificent design for *Moby-Dick*, presents the American challenge of vertical versus horizontal at its most intense, and suggests further directions of exploration that we hope others will pursue.

This special issue of *RSA* is offered as a "European" number, because it includes essays kindly contributed by colleagues from France, Germany and Britain. All are members of EAAS, the European Association for American Studies, which has tirelessly promoted communication between European Americanists and their counterparts in North America. We hope that, in its modest scope, *RSA* will continue to demonstrate the vitality and distinctiveness of the European contribution to American Studies.

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