

Discworld: Spatial Metamorphoses of the Faustus Narrative in *Eric* (1990) by Terry Pratchett

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Abstract: *Traversing spatio-temporal borders is a feature of post-modern narratives, such as the novel Eric by Terry Pratchett. Time and space are more than the background elements in this story; they are part of its essential fabric and they profoundly influence the ways in which readers build mental images of what they read. The reader's recognition of this spatio-temporal transgression is part of the reading experience. Drawing on the concept of "focalization" (Bridgeman 62) from Teresa Bridgeman's article entitled "Time and Space," from The Cambridge Companion to Narrative (2007), this essay discusses the function of space (in relation to time) in Eric, in combination with the Faustus narrative. I argue that time and space overlap in Eric; there is the parallel time-space of the Faustus myth (in the background) and a totally different space-time continuum, related to the space of the Discworld, and the two overlap in this novel. Spatial metamorphoses suggest a shift in conceptual space from the main-story world (a parody of the Faustus narrative) to a subworld of the novel, which is in the protagonists' mind, transmitted to the reader through the medium of the postmodern narrative.*

Keywords: Discworld, *Eric*, narrative, Pratchett, space, time

The Faustus narrative—which has been turned into a myth throughout the centuries—has captured the readers' and audiences' imagination ever since its inception in the sixteenth century. The story of the insatiable scholar who makes a bargain with the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of pleasure and power has been taken over in various literary forms, from Christopher Marlowe's tragedy, *Doctor Faustus* (1592), to *Faust* by Goethe (1808) and Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947), to mention only a few adaptations of the story. Modern dramatic adaptations of the Faustus narrative include *The Devil to Pay* by Dorothy L. Sayers (1939), *An Irish Faustus: A Morality in Nine Scenes* (1963) by Lawrence Durrell, and *Tomorrow Morning, Faustus! An Infernal Comedy* by I. A. Richards (1962). Unlike drama, however, which involves dramatic characters, narrative has different parameters, suggesting an implied reader, and definitely involving the reader's imagination in the process of recreating fictional space. According to Teresa Bridgeman's article, entitled "Time and Space," from *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007),

To read a narrative is to engage with an alternative world that has its own temporal and spatial structures. The rules that govern these structures may or may not resemble those of the readers' world. And while readers do not, on the whole, try to map out hierarchical relations between world levels in the way narratologists do, they nevertheless have a sense that narratives can be divided into different temporal and spatial zones. (52)

I will address these “temporal and spatial zones” in my analysis of the novel *Eric* by Terry Pratchett, showing the ways in which the space of the Discworld overlaps with the novel's narrative space, and with the Faustus myth.

The term “narrative” has been frequently used—and even misused—to denote a significant way of organizing human experience, in real life and in fiction. According to narrative theorist Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), the surging popularity of the word “narrative” may be attributed to a positive cause; as Brooks observes, because narrative is one of the principal ways in which we organize our experience of the world, it is important to talk about “the dynamics of temporality and reading, of the motor forces that drive the text forward, of the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force” (xiii-xiv). Indeed, the ways in which the author tells a story is a charged field of human force, just as the space and time invoked by the story is an emotionally stimulating experience. This statement is even more valid when considering that the Faustus story itself is another “highly charged field of force” (Brooks xiv), as the story has been multiply rewritten in various ages and by several authors, dramatists as well as novel-writers and poets.

In addition to the concept of narrative, “space” and “place” are geocritical concepts that are used to denote something more than mere physical space. In Bertrand Westphal's theory, defined in *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011), spatiotemporality is a concept that focuses on spatial and temporal data in literature, and it takes into account the “spatial metaphors” (9) and the “spatiotemporal intersection” (10) in the story. Similarly, Robert T. Tally Jr., in *Spatiality* (2013), defines geocriticism or spatial literary theory as a composite field including “both aesthetics and politics, as elements in a constellation of interdisciplinary methods designed to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the ever-changing spatial relations that determine our current, postmodern world” (113). Indeed, especially in postmodern novels, space and time are given special valences in the chemical interaction between narrative, plot and characters. What is the function of space and time—or the spatiotemporal continuum—in Terry Pratchett's *Eric*, drawing loosely on the Faustus story? In what ways does the narrative itself diverge from the traditional moralizing story involving the hero's pact with the

devil? What are the experiential places in which the novel's characters evolve? My argument provides fluid answers to these questions, in accordance with the reader's interpretations and the authorial voice in the novel.

First of all, the novel's full title is *Eric: A Discworld Novel*, so the title reveals the imaginary space of the Discworld series, evident in most of Pratchett's thirty-four novels, among which are *The Colour of Magic*, *Equal Rites*, *Mort*, *Sourcery*, *Wyrd Sisters*, *Pyramids*, *Reaper Man*, *Witches Abroad*, etc. Discworld is an imaginary space placed on a flat planet, a "multiverse" (*Eric* 5) balanced on the backs of four elephants; in turn, these huge creatures stand on the back of a giant turtle. Inspired by fantasy or science fiction, the novels parody classical works, as well as mythology, folklore and fairy tales. The Discworld is itself a parody of ancient beliefs in the creation of the universe, based on pseudo-science and imagination. *Eric* is a parody of the Faustus story, but the narrative has little connection with the popular story of the German scholar selling his soul to the devil for twenty-four years of leisurely life. The main character (supposedly Faustus) is not even named so, but his name is Rincewind. As a result of "an unusual conjunction of circumstances" (*Eric* 12), the wizard Rincewind has been forcefully sent to several places of the multiverse by his colleagues in wizardry. The imaginary city is Ankh-Morpork—a bleak and hot place—hosting a "Premier College of Wizardry" (*Eric* 3); the members of the Council of Wizardry (the Archchancellor, Erzolit Churn, the Senior Tutor and a Bursar) summon Death through a mystical ritual (the "Rite of AshkEnte," *Eric* 8), in order to enlist his help in preventing Rincewind from going back home. It is understood that Rincewind has been lost "INTO THE DUNGEON DIMENSIONS" (*Eric* 10) and now he is trying to get back home.

The Land of Death is another fearsome place in the novel, similar to the Dungeon Dimensions. There are several abnormalities in this land, starting with honey, which is "black as night, thick as sin and sweet as treacle" (*Eric* 1), and continuing with the "black grass in the black orchard under the black-blossomed trees that will, eventually, produce apples that ... put it like this ... probably won't be red" (*Eric* 1). The enveloping blackness associated with the idea of death is blended with the irony sending to the biblical Tree of Life, whose fruit are supposed to be red; yet this should be the Tree of Death, whose fruit are supposed to be black, like its flowers, and everything in the surrounding nature. In this gloomy atmosphere, Death hears the scared voice of someone who says, "*oshitoshitshit, I'm gonna die I'm gonna DIE!*" (*Eric* 1). This may be the voice a human being who is scared of death (as all humans are), but it may also be Rincewind's voice, who is lost in the multiverse, yet Death is able to hear him. Everything is stillness here, as "the air in the land of Death is always warm and still" (*Eric* 1). This "little world between the realities" (*Eric* 1) belongs only to scary Death, so it is unusual to hear voices,

stirring a wind in the still atmosphere. As Death sat at his desk, pondering about the voice he had heard, “he stared through the mists of time and space” (*Eric* 2) and realized “IT’S HIM” (2). This mysterious being is Rincewind, a human with wizardry powers, who can be heard even by Death himself, during his leisurely hours.

Ankh-Morpork is “the most crowded city on the Disc” (*Eric* 2), and it is terribly hot, as the spears of the sun had achieved “what innumerable invaders, several civil wars and curfew law had never achieved” (*Eric* 2). The stifling place had been “pacified” (*Eric* 2), and it was as still as the land of Death; “the heat had besieged the city and triumphed over the walls. It lay over the trembling streets like a shroud” (*Eric* 3). Even the assassins were too tired to kill in this godforsaken place. The premier college of wizardry at the ivy-covered Unseen University in the city of Ankh-Morpork is formed of several wizards, and the head Librarian is an “orang-utan” (*Eric* 4). The sorcerers try to prevent Rincewind from returning to their hell-like city, so he is transported—by means of magic—to several realms of the multiverse, which looks like reality, but it is not. The first place in which Rincewind lands, crossing the “paranatural dimensions” (*Eric* 15), is a magic circle created by a would-be “Demonologist” (*Eric* 17), Eric Thursley, who lives in a city called Pseudopolis (*Eric* 17). The name of the city suggests that this is a fake place, a pseudo-location or an imaginary place, just like Utopia or Neverland. Eric is an acne-plagued young sorcerer, who is still afraid of his mother, and who summons Rincewind by chance, as a result of the disturbance in the multiverse created by the wizards’ invocations. There is a misunderstanding at first, as Eric thinks that Rincewind is the devil, coming from a place called “Pandemonium” (*Eric* 17). The term means “all devils” and it is a metaphoric place coined by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, signifying the abode of all devils, their palace in Hell. Therefore, Rincewind is ironically associated with Mephistopheles from the Faustus myth, while Eric may be a blundering Faustus himself.

The city of Pandemonium is described as existing on the Discworld, in “a spacious dimension close to reality, traditionally decorated in shades of flame and maintained at roasting point” (*Eric* 23). In a footnote, the narrator gives details about this place as being “quite different from the Dungeon Dimensions, those endless parallel wastelands outside place and time” (*Eric* 23). The Dungeon Dimensions are amorphous spaces, devoid of experiential interests, populated by “Mad Things” (*Eric* 23) that “have no understanding of the world, but simply try to warm themselves at the fires of reality” (*Eric* 23). By contrast, the devils and their Pandemonium “belong to the same space-time wossname, more or less, as humans, and they have a deep and abiding interest in humanity’s day-to-day affairs” (*Eric* 23). Therefore, Hell is an experiential place, like human habitation, whereas the Mad Things abide in the amorphous

Dungeon Dimensions, and they are creatures deprived of selfhood. Even more so, devils are similar to humans, so they frequently interact, just as, it is inferred, in the Faustus story, reinterpreted through Eric's and Rincewind's adventures. Both characters may be human, just as they may be taken for devils. Their interchangeable nature is inferred throughout the novel.

The devils inhabiting Pandemonium have specific names, such as Astfgl, the new King of Demons (who is furious because the air-conditioning has broken down again, *Eric* 23), or Duke Vassenego, a lecherous lord who is supposed to offer carnal pleasures to Eric. These devils are impatient creatures, who like to toy with human souls; the humans' files lie in a newly-installed "filing cabinet" (*Eric* 26), which has replaced the old ledgers that had been there before. Therefore, the King of Demons is the adept of new technology used for his comfort, such as air conditioning, new filing cabinets and notepads with magnets for paper clips. Moreover, Astfgl uses a "Mirror of Souls" (*Eric* 26), which is a magic object by means of which he is able to supervise the unheeding humans and "to adjust the temporal control" (*Eric* 55). Eric still believes that Rincewind is a devil, repelling him with the biblical term "Avaunt!" (*Eric* 29), which is intended to make the devils go away. In an ironic replay of the Faustus myth, the teenage wizard (Eric) commands Rincewind to give him "The most beautiful woman who has ever lived, mastery of all kingdoms of the world, and to live for ever" (*Eric* 29). These are demands that Rincewind cannot accomplish—as Faustus' devil (Mephistopheles) said he could—but Rincewind just snaps his fingers and both of them disappear in a puff of smoke.

Rincewind may not be Mephistopheles—as Eric believes—but he belongs to a section of the multiverse in which strange things may happen; the wizard can travel to places without being aware of how he got there. As he was flying above the Discworld, Rincewind could see the configuration of the Discworld space: "Below, harshly lit in the arid vacuum of space, Great A'Tuin the world turtle toiled under the weight of Creation" (*Eric* 30), with the four giant elephants supporting the disc. Rincewind is still in his Mephistopheles mode and asks Eric to sign the pact in blood, but the incredulous boy says, "I'm not signing for it until I've seen it work" (*Eric* 31). This is the modern consumer's attitude, who does not want to accept a new product (and pay for it by signing on the credit card bill) unless he has been convinced that the object really works. In this way, the Faustus pact for the human soul becomes a kind of object, a form of commodity that can be bought and sold at whatever price, accompanied by a customer satisfaction report.

The novel's Discworld has a "tiny moonlet" (*Eric* 32) and is surrounded by jungle (*Eric* 33), which signifies the darkness and lushness of the soul. These are the "jungles of central Klatch" (*Eric* 34), another metaphoric space, inhabited by "lost kingdoms of mysterious Amazonian princesses who capture

male explorers for specifically masculine duties” (*Eric* 34), or sex, in plain terms. The Amazons are imaginary beings, like in ancient classical Greek accounts, where the Amazons were, famously, strong women who mated with men for procreation. The irony is that this particular myth is included in the Faustus motif, along with other stories that humans have invented to justify their actions. The Discworld, therefore, is a metaphoric space formed of a conglomeration of myths and fictional narratives invented along centuries of human culture in order to deal with the fears and demons of imagination.

This imaginary space in which Rincewind and Eric have landed is identified as “the Tezuman Kingdoms” (*Eric* 35), ruled by “the Great Muzuma” (*Eric* 35). This is an acronym for King Montezuma, the last king of the Aztec Empire, just before it was conquered by the Spanish conquistadors. The myth suggests the failure of human endeavours and the cruel conquest of one people by another. In this land of South American ancestry, where people use llamas for transport (*Eric* 36) and mosquitoes are the size of humming birds (*Eric* 38), there are “step-pyramids” (*Eric* 38) and people worship a god called “Quezovercoatl, the Feathered Boa” (*Eric* 41), which is another acronym of Quetzalcoatl, an ancient deity of Aztec culture. In fact, as readers would learn later, Quezovercoatl is a minor imp who came to be worshipped by the Tezumen, and who imposed human sacrifice on them as a hobby. Rincewind and Eric experience incredible adventures in this land, such as being worshipped as gods themselves; finally, they are about to be sacrificed on the altar of the god Quezovercoatl. As a conclusion to their near-death experience in this empire, Rincewind reproaches Eric, saying, “You never should have wanted to be ruler of the world” (*Eric* 51). This is an allusion to the Faustus myth, where Faustus wants to be ruler of the world, but he ends miserably in hell. This shows that human actions have consequences, and the inordinate wish for power leads to unpredictable results.

The next place in which Rincewind and Eric land in Pratchett’s novel is the “huge wooden horse” (*Eric* 57) of the ancient city of Tsortean (*Eric* 59), which is an acronym for Troy and an allusion to the Trojan War. The ancient Greeks are called “Ephebians” (*Eric* 58), which is a Greek term for a male adolescent. As Rincewind and Eric descend from the wooden horse, the Tsortean soldiers are expecting them, because everybody knows the myth of the Trojan Horse, but they are amazed when they see just two people, while they expect an entire army. In this quasi-mythical context, according to Eric, Helen of Troy becomes “Elenor” (*Eric* 59), who has been kidnapped from the Ephebians. The myth of the Trojan War is transformed into a parody of the story, with allusions to Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, when Rincewind thinks of associations of Helen of Troy with “women launching thousands of ships with their faces” (*Eric* 60). This is an allusion to the famous line in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, in which Faustus wonders, when seeing

Helen of Troy's ghost (summoned by Mephistopheles), "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" (XVII, 99-100). In Marlowe, Faustus' exclamation expresses disappointment at the cold beauty of the one who was considered the most beautiful woman in the world, while Rincewind looks ironically at the classical allusions that crowd the literary world (such as the allusion to Helen of Troy), which have populated the collective imaginary throughout the ages. Rather than being the most beautiful woman in the world, Rincewind's Helen (or Elenor) becomes "an over-rated female" (*Eric* 64) for Rincewind, and she is shown as a ripe woman with seven children. Elenor is an almost-comic figure who has lost her lustre as Helen of Troy because of use, and often misuse, in stories such as the Faustus platitude.

The next place in which Rincewind and Eric end up is "Total nothing" (*Eric* 84) and "Nowhere" (*Eric* 85), according to Rincewind, a place where there is no air and matter, so sound cannot travel, nor can light. There is no time in this place, and here they meet "a little rat-faced man sitting cross-legged" (*Eric* 85). This is an image of the universe before the creation, and the little man is nobody else but God. The description of infinity at the end of time is breath-taking: "Time and space collided silently, and collapsed" (*Eric* 86); "Nothingness uncoiled its interminable length through the droughty spaces at the end of time" (*Eric* 87); and "Forever was over" (*Eric* 87). In this complicated universe, a "paperclip" (*Eric* 88) becomes the element of matter facilitating what would be called the Big Bang, the creation of the universe, so "the Universe came into being" (*Eric* 89). This cosmogonic vision recreates the primordial space and time, "when nothingness bunched together to form space and time" (*Eric* 89). God, as an unassuming little man, is the "Creator" (*Eric* 90), as Rincewind realizes; as God humbly says, "I makes things" (*Eric* 90). As the Creator says, "There's a load of other universes, you know" (*Eric* 91). This accounts for the novel's multiple spaces as multiverse, with events occurring simultaneously. This is the time-space continuum of the novel, and the devil is described as he "surfed across the entropy slope, an angry red spark against the swirls of interspace" (*Eric* 92). This kind of space-time is similar to quantum physics, where matter can go from one place to another without moving through the intervening space, while the entire universe is a series of possibilities.

This in-between space is the fluid universe of the literary text, which the author imbues with life by moving the sorcerer's magic wand. The novel's Creator says that this creative process is "quantum mechanics" (*Eric* 95), but when the innocent Eric asks, "What are quantum mechanics" (*Eric* 95), Rincewind answers negligently, "I don't know. People who repair quantums, I suppose" (*Eric* 95). This shows how people understand and explain things differently. Multiple realities created by the god-like Creator are, sometimes,

unintelligible to the average interpreter. Therefore, the meanings of literature—and of the spatiotemporalities of the narrative—are different, according to various interpretations given by readers of the novel. Just as the Faustus myth has been re-interpreted by countless creators (playwrights, poets, novelists), the spatiotemporal continuum of the quantum mechanics of literature may be interpreted by various readers differently. The space-time continuum of the novel *Eric* is different from the time frames that include the Faustus myth, so that the Discworld and the Faustus spaces and avatars are different, and yet similar. These spatial metamorphoses trace a shift in conceptual space, from the main story of Rincewind and Eric (which is a parody of the Faustus myth), to the parallel quantum-world of the novel. The movements of the protagonists' minds are transmitted to the reader by means of the postmodern narrative. In this way, fiction becomes metafiction, and each reader is free to re-create his/her own private space delineating the Faustus story.

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