



Considerations Surrounding the Symbolism of Space

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The initiatory process is in the most proper sense a re-presentation and a re-action of the cosmogonic process, because it constitutes the passing from darkness to light.¹ As Guénon has noticed (*The Symbolism of the Cross*, chp. 24), any state of being can play, in the initiatory process, the role of Prakriti in relation with the Celestial Ray. Obviously, the two processes, although they are analogous, differ in terms of *direction*, the initiatory one being ascendant, while the other descendant.² Even though the initiation targets the exit from cosmos, that is, the realization of the non-manifested, the Supreme Identity requires the *re-turn* to manifestation, which means basically *cosmogony* or cosmic re-novation.³ And cosmogony envisaged from the descendant perspective is the *withdrawal* (*anachoresis*) of the Supreme Identity, a withdrawal which leaves a hollow, an “empty” primordial “space”, that is properly the Platonic receptacle (*hypodochē*) and *chora* (space).⁴ In the Judaic Kabbalah, this primordial “empty” “space” (*hallal*) is left as a consequence of Ein Sof’s withdrawal (*tsimtsum*).⁵ Now, two things are to be underlined: the first one is that both *chora* and *hallal* designate symbolically the *materia prima*, the

¹ This process of “clarification” (bringing into the light) is an “expression” (Lat. *ex premere*, to press out), and the fact that it is thus is also suggested by the etymology of the word itself: “to clarify” comes from the Indo-European radical *kel*, which means “to call”, “to yell”, and which gave the Greek word *kalein* (to call), and the Latin words *calare* (to call) and *clarus* (clear, bright). So the proper meaning of *geometry* (Gr. *gē metria*), the measuring of earth (where *to measure* is *to order* (to call, to enact) and *to manifest*, while *earth* stands as a symbol for the *materia prima*), is cosmo-genesis: *the manifestation of the intelligible*.

² It is significant that *direction* is the qualitative factor of differentiation when, in order to express such realities, a spatial symbolism is used. The Greek word *chalaō*, which means to lower into a void, comes from the same Indo-European radical *kel* (to call, to yell).

³ The *re-turn* suggests the ending of a complete cycle and the begging of a new one, but it can also be understood in terms of presence and absence.

⁴ What Plato called *hypodochē* (receptacle) (*Timaeus* 50b-51b) or *chora* (space) (*ibid.* 52a) is the substance (*hypokeimenon*), and it is not *ousia*. Therefore, when Aristotle says that to ask “what is Being (*on*)?” is the same as to ask “what is *ousia*?” (*Metaphysics* 1028b), he identifies *Being* with *essence*, and not *Being* with *hypokeimenon*. For Aristotle, the Platonic *hypodochē* is *hyle* (*Physics* IV, 209b). Moreover, *ousia* cannot be translated as “existence” either, because *Being*, rigorously speaking, is non-placeable, being neither *ex-stare* (out of a state; existence), nor *sub-stare* (the under state; the primordial “space”; substance), but *essence*, that is, that which *is* in itself and by itself.

⁵ *Chaos* signifies also a gap, a chasm, and Guénon unequivocally identified it with Prakriti (see *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, chp. 31).

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primordial substance, and therefore space is only its particular determination corresponding to the present order of things. And because space is not identical with the receptacle, but it is only its analogical and symbolical expression in our world, it partakes of *materia prima*'s "void" only symbolically, by being the "sum" of all the physical places hierarchically ordered through the noetic measurement (actualization), and which previously lay within the amorphous void of indifferentiation. And this brings us to the second emphasis that has to be made: the so-called "void" or "emptiness" of the *materia prima* is in fact the indefinite source wherein "reside" all non-actualized potencies, and thereby a rather quite "full" receptacle. It appears empty because its utter obscurity and complete non-intelligible nature, being the primordial complement of *essence (ousia)* and *intelligence (nous)*. Space, therefore, comes out of this nurse (*tithene*) through the noetic activity of actualization, that is, through measurement or cosmogony.⁶ And because space (*chora*) stands so elegantly as a symbol for the primordial substance, it is usually used in expressions meant to designate both the *materia prima* and the levels of manifestation (be they infernal or supernal), and consequently we have such phrases as "chaotic space", respectively "ordered space". The fact is that "space", with the sole exception of designating the receptacle of the corporeal manifestation, has only a symbolical quality in such locutions, and in itself it is never pure chaos, nor pure order, but possesses both qualitative and quantitative natures, partaking thus of both parents' "dowers", and it is obviously so since space is within manifestation and not at the root of it.

⁶ It appears evident why the "cave" veils Heaven, as both Plato (in *The Republic*) and Guénon (in *Le Roi du Monde*) noticed. The receptacle is also symbolized by the cave of Amalthea, the foster mother of Zeus.