

Spatiotemporal schemas of progress and stasis in Rose Macaulay's *Told by an Idiot*: on moving forward and going round

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Abstract: This article demonstrates how narrative sense-making involves mapping social spaces onto physical structures with which they correspond image-schematically, focusing on the spatiotemporal coordinates of lines and circles as organizing principles of the storyworld in Rose Macaulay's 1923 novel *Told by an Idiot*. This essayistic novel follows the Garden family from the late Victorian through the Georgian periods, reflecting on the interrelated patterns of circular stasis and linear progress that govern both generational dynamics within the family and their political, social and cultural backdrop. A key scene takes place on the "Inner Circle," later the Circle Line, where two teenaged Gardens, Imogen and Tony, aimlessly ride the trains all day as they go round and round the looped track. The novel sets this pattern of circularity, repetition and stasis against that of the linear "Twopenny Tube," now the modern Central Line, a route mainly used by commuters travelling to the city centre from outlying districts. I argue that Macaulay's storyworld unites these two image-schematic structures of urban movement just as the model of history adumbrated in the text likewise involves a tentative union of stasis and progress. Macaulay thus establishes an isomorphic relationship between the spatiotemporal structure of Underground image schemas and the settings through which the novel's characters move physically, socially, and historically. Reading fiction in this way, I propose, helps to uncover the role that spatiotemporality and isomorphic relationships play in patterning storyworlds, as the structures of the environments through which characters travel and within which events unfold are revealed as "significant forms" that figure in the encoding and decoding of narrative.

Keywords: social spaces; spatiotemporality; Rose Macaulay; *Told by an Idiot*; urban movement..



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series

<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>

Volume 14 | Issue 2 | 2024 |

EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN BUCUREȘTI



BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY PRESS

<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.1>

ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)

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Introduction

If a spatial pattern “organizes” a literary text, how does such organization work, and what elements of the text are so organized? Borrowing the terms of Julia Kristeva’s spatialization of intertextuality, Susan Stanford Friedman defines narrative as “the representation of movement within the coordinates of space and time” (12) and distinguishes between the two axes along which these are arranged, “whose intersections are reconstructed by the reader in the interactive process of reading” (14). For Friedman, the “horizontal narrative” comprises the familiar storyworld components of character, setting, action, and so on, and reading it involves ascertaining the relationships between objects moving through diegetic time and space, with the textual presentation of scenes and events following and being “constrained by the linearity of language” (15) but ultimately aggregated through the reading process into a spatial cognitive map of the storyworld. By contrast, the vertical narrative “involves reading ‘down into’ the text, as we move across it” (15), thereby bringing into view the structure of the whole. It is in the vertical narrative where conceptual elements such as genre conventions operate “as a chronotope, a space-time, within which the specific text is read” (16), and according to which the text “maps” not just physical spaces within the storyworld but an overall spatial pattern that itself *represents* or *signifies*, in the sense that Clive Bell means when he refers to visual artworks as comprising “significant form[s]” (16).

The spatiotemporal analysis below moves along both of these axes. As I will show, by tracing characters’ paths and tracking their movements along the “horizontal axis” in a work of fiction partly set in the London Underground, Rose Macaulay’s 1923 novel *Told by an Idiot*, we see how structures in narrative such as the architectures of the Underground establish the coordinates according to which characters physically move and the spaces within which, on Friedman’s vertical axis, they ultimately come to be conceptually located and identified. Underground architectures organize elements of the storyworld so as to constitute and stabilize, for characters and readers alike, a sense of space and place within it; narrative space mapped onto schematic structures of the Underground reveals an underlying, ordering spatial logic that extends setting beyond its conventional role as merely the places where story events happen. Rather, these structures operate as “significant forms” in Bell’s sense, organizing the text into patterns that are themselves legible and bear semantic value.

A key scene in Macaulay’s *Told by an Idiot* takes place on the “Inner Circle” of the Underground, later the modern Circle Line. Macaulay’s novel associates the cyclical, repetitive movement of the Inner Circle with the socially liminal position of adolescence; by contrast, adult life is identified with the purposive movement of the Central Line, which connects outlying districts with the city centre. Macaulay’s narrator explores the tension between these two patterns, which for her constitutes the spatiotemporal structure of both personal and social history. She finds a spatial symbol of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history in the emerging union of discrete transit lines into a centrally administered urban transport network in the years leading up to the creation of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933. The character of Imogen, whom the novel associates with cycles of repetition through her link to the Inner Circle, emerges as

the novel's protagonist and moral centre, and thus the narrative seems ultimately to privilege circular over linear movement in time and history. However, as the Underground is a system comprising both the cyclical movements of the Circle Line and the linear itinerary of the Central Line, it thus unites the spatial schemas of stasis and progress in ways that mirror the model of history explored and ultimately advocated in the essayistic portions of the novel. *Told by an Idiot* critiques early twentieth-century optimism and reminds us of the extent to which historical progress and stasis are in tension. A spatial reading of Macaulay's novel sheds light on this unstable and tentative union and reveals how it structures not just the larger-scale course of multigenerational history but the predicaments of individual characters such as Imogen and her sister Phyllis, whose lives are likewise organized into both of these distinct spatial narrative patterns.

The dynamics of stasis and progress in Macaulay's *Told by an Idiot*

Told by an Idiot describes the experiences of three generations of the Garden family from 1879 to 1923, tracking the movement of history and establishing the major social and political developments of the time as a backdrop against which to view events in the Gardens' lives through four main sections named for their respective periods ("Victorian," "Fin-de-Siècle," "Edwardian," and "Georgian"). Gloria Fromm argues that *Told by an Idiot* employs the Garden family as "the narrative vehicle for an extended essay in modern social history" (299), fulfilling the original plan that Macaulay's better-known associate and sometime literary rival Virginia Woolf had for "The Pargiters," which after much struggle she later substantially reworked and published as *The Years*. Macaulay's novel is replete with "facts and ideas, but also 'satire, comedy, poetry, narrative' – all that Virginia Woolf would claim she wanted to include in her own essay-novel" (299). Diana Wallace makes a similar connection as she traces the feminization of the historical novel during the 1930s and its emphasis on family narratives "concerned with contemporary history as, in [Winifred] Holtby's phrase, an 'age of transition'" (Wallace 80). *Told by an Idiot* is an experiment in the expansion of the novel form to include extended essay-like reflections, departing from character- and incident-driven plot as the narrator chronicles the decades and challenges the regnant scheme of periodization by which they are conventionally grouped.

Macaulay's aim in following the generations of the Garden family is to explore the seemingly opposed but linked dynamics of stasis and progress, "the interaction of permanence and change" (Irwin 63). Wallace writes that *Told by an Idiot* "exposes history as cyclical: each generation believes it lives in 'troublous times' and civilisations are 'wrecked and wrecked all down history'" (81), but the novel "conduct[s] a kind of historical stocktaking, a measurement of the progress already made and that still to be attained" (81). Thus, despite its wryly cynical representation of the repetitions and ostensible inevitabilities of time as constituting a form of stasis, as "history repeats itself almost statically, from one generation to the next, so that significant change is imperceptible" (Irwin 66), the novel displays a certain cautious faith in forward movement as well. The "essayistic" portions of Macaulay's work establish two more or

less explicitly stated arguments about the patterns of personal and historical development: that while history seems to involve progress over time, the recurrence of events as part of a predictable, cyclical structure calls for a rejection of the conventional view of a forward-moving history, and that ultimately, for better or worse, human society at all points in time has “always been much the same, and always will be” (Macaulay 69).

Thus, the novel tracks historical time according to two spatial patterns. In setting a key scene inside the Inner Circle of the Underground, Macaulay demonstrates how the spatiotemporal coordinates of two of the lines, the Circle and the Central, organize the family saga narratively in its representation of the tension between stasis and progress. The Central London Railway, later known as the modern Central Line, reflects the structure of a conventional timeline plotted left to right, with linear forward movement describing the ostensible progress of time and history. In this way the Central Line corresponds structurally with the conventional historical arc moving from late Victorian to Georgian life in Britain, the purposive structure of a Whiggish conception of history as progress. Within this pattern, though, as demonstrated in the novel’s strong emphasis on cyclicity in the experiences of the Garden family, and more generally in British political and social life, the spatiotemporal structure of the Inner Circle maps out the pattern of stasis-through-repetition that dominates the individual lives of the Gardens. It is the interplay of these patterns that organizes both the storyworld of the Gardens’ experiences and the world beyond it to which the narrator repeatedly shifts in the novel’s meta-commentary on history. For Macaulay, the expanding and increasingly integrated Underground of the 1920s, which was transitioning from a tangle of discrete railway lines and corporations to a centrally administered, integrated system with the creation of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933, comes to represent this tension between stasis and progress in its integration of linear and circular itineraries in the heart of London.

What we now know as the Circle Line began as one among a number of different proposals for an “Inner Circle” to connect the stations of central London along two main east–west corridors – the routes of the original Metropolitan Railway from Paddington to Farringdon and, farther south, the Metropolitan District Railway (referred to hereafter by its modern name, the District) from South Kensington to Tower Hill – into an elliptical loop that would allow for circuits of continuous movement around the heart of the capital. The Circle Line exists not as a separate set of tracks, but rather as a service running alongside others on the same rails. In 2009, Transport for London redesigned this service, such that the trains no longer run in their original, continuous loop. But for its first century of operation, the Circle did indeed offer passengers non-stop movement around central London. Already we see how the nature and structure of the Inner Circle mirror aspects of the historical model that Macaulay explores in *Told by an Idiot*: trains move in a continuous flow along a seamless loop of tracks, separated arbitrarily into distinct services under different headings just as, Macaulay’s novel suggests, historical periods constitute arbitrary designations of portions of a continuous temporal flow. The narrator points out that decades “are not, of course, really periods at all, except as any other ten years may be. But we, looking at them, are caught by the different name each bears, and give them different attributes, and tie labels on them, as if they were flowers in a border”

(77); the result is an arbitrary system of segmentation that is “unscientific, sentimental, and wildly incorrect” (202).

The other major Underground line that figures in Macaulay’s novel is the “Twopenny Tube,” constructed by the Central London Railway beginning in 1891 and brought into service in the summer of 1900. Until that time, subterranean rail services on the Metropolitan and District had been steam-powered, and the lines were constructed via a method known as cut-and-cover, whereby roadways were excavated to form a trough in which tracks and platforms were built, with the line then covered with a roof upon which to replace the road surface. The City & South London Railway, however, had in the 1890s incorporated innovations that would come to radically reshape the Underground and effectively divide the history of the system into two major periods: the Victorian age of smoky, brick-lined corridors for steam engines and the modern era of sleek electric-powered trains running in tunnels bored far below the surface. The Central London Railway was constructed using this deep-tunnelling method and was designed for electric traction – both potent symbols of a futuristic new epoch in urban transport.

In the “Fin-de-Siècle” section of Macaulay’s novel, young Imogen Carrington, daughter of Victoria Garden, considers the confusion surrounding the turn of the twentieth century; the narrator points out that, like many others, Imogen “thought and hoped that 1900 would be a new century” (186), when instead it was merely the final year of the previous one. She is troubled by the arbitrariness and apparent indefinability of this seeming transition between epochs, recognizing that “you could not, however hard you thought, lay your finger on the moment when the new century would be born” (187). In placing the Underground at the heart of the intergenerational narrative, as the Fin-de-Siècle period gives over to the Edwardian, Macaulay’s novel emphasizes one powerful symbol of modernity and futurity whose advent seems in a way to resolve the uncertainty that troubles Imogen: the electrified Central London Railway, which opened for business in August 1900 and was immediately a great success with Londoners (Wolmar 156), not least because, in another break from railway tradition, it abandoned class-based seating and pricing, setting the twopence fare for all journeys that led to its original nickname. The Central London Railway thus marked the end of the nineteenth-century steam Underground and the beginning of a new age of clean, efficient, egalitarian, high-tech modern urban transport.

Thus the Underground railway is an important means of conceptually organizing, historically, geographically, and socially, Macaulay’s turn-of-the-century London storyworld. In a crucial scene set in the Inner Circle, we see how Macaulay spatializes the historical structures of stasis and progress, associating them with the Circle and Central Lines respectively and exploring how the increasingly integrated Underground system holds them together. In the “Edwardian” section of the novel, two teenaged members of the Garden family, Imogen and her cousin Tony, spend part of their summer holiday playing a game that has become a family tradition: devoting a whole day to riding the Inner Circle. The pair repurpose the Underground, normally a means of transit between city spaces, as an end in itself, a thrilling site of adventure hidden away belowground, far from mundane family life. They venture into the “delicious, cool, romantic valley” (217) of Sloane Square Station, discovering to their delight a “half empty compartment” (217).

They travel around the Circle all day, watching the stations pass one by one, their names forming a rhythmic chant synchronized with the movement of the train as it rushes “like a mighty wind. South Kensington Station. More people coming in, getting out. Off again. Gloucester Road, High Street, Notting Hill Gate, Queen’s Road. . . . [T]he penny fare was well over. Still they travelled, and jogged up and down on the straw seats, and chanted softly, monotonously, so that they could scarcely be heard above the soft roaring of the train” (217–18). As the circuit continues, an air of mystery surrounds the journey to and from a kind of central London Orient, “past King’s Cross and Farringdon Street, towards the wild romantic stations of the east: Liverpool Street, Aldgate, and so round the bend, sweeping west like the sun. Blackfriars, Temple, Charing Cross, Westminster, St. James’ Park, Victoria, SLOANE SQUARE. Oh, joy! Sing for the circle completed, the new circle begun” (218).

The pervading sense of foreignness and mystery throughout this scene underscores Imogen and Tony’s status as outsiders in the adult world; however, for this same reason it is ultimately a sense of familiarity and homeliness in the Inner Circle that sustains its appeal for them, as they lack a space of their own in the social order, not yet being part of adult life but no longer feeling truly at home in their former domestic roles as children. The prospect of a penny’s worth of “eternal travel” (219) on the Underground does appeal in part because of its enticing prospect of adventure, but the subterranean railway also provides these socially liminal adolescents with a place in which to establish themselves and stage a make-believe encounter with adult life – as emphasized in their assumed roles as Holmes and Watson “investigating” their fellow passengers and solving what they proclaim the “Sloane Square murder mystery” (219) – within an environment to which they feel they belong.

Consider, in contrast to this socially liminal position of adolescence, Imogen’s older sister Phyllis. Having returned from Cambridge and recently assumed her place in the adult world, Phyllis has become disinterested in the Inner Circle game and declares her newfound fondness for the “Twopenny Tube,” which carries workers into the City, and whose route she finds cleaner than the brick tunnels of the old steam underground on the Metropolitan and District Lines. Imogen does not understand the appeal of the Central Railway, objecting that “it doesn’t go *round*” (217). Phyllis responds by asking, “Who wants to go round, you little donkey? It takes you where you want to get to; that’s the object of a train” (217). Now possessing an adult identity free of the social confusion of liminal adolescence, Phyllis has gone from experiencing the Inner Circle as an end in itself, a place with which to identify and in which to dwell, to a means of transit between the fixed city sites in which one belongs through externally constructed and prescribed social roles. Imogen recognizes that it is “obvious that Phyllis had grown up” and that “[i]t must happen, soon or late, to all of us” (217). Each generation of the Garden family undergoes this spatial and social transformation, the inevitable consequence of the movement out of liminal adolescence and into social roles associated with the prescribed spaces of adult life. Yet, whereas the “whole family had been used to do it” and apparently all but Imogen and Tony “had now outgrown” (217) the Inner Circle game, favouring other sites of city life – Rome Garden at gambling houses (178), Maurice Garden in the newspaper office (153), Imogen’s mother, Victoria, at home in the role of

materfamilias, Irving Garden in his “bachelor chambers in Bruton Street” (115), and so on – Phyllis’s new place in the adult world is framed in terms of a graduation from one *Underground* space to another, and thus from one to the other of two spatial schemas embodied in the transit system.

As Macaulay characterizes it, the tension between progress and stasis in history more generally resembles that between the Central and Circle Lines, which represent forward motion and cyclical repetition respectively. Expressed in terms of spatial schemas, history is structured as an interaction between permanence and change that structurally mirrors the contrast between the two main Underground lines with which the spatiotemporal storyworlds of adolescence and adulthood are associated. On the one hand, *Told by an Idiot* emphasizes patterns of change through history that suggest progress, as for example in the passing of the world from generation to generation, as Mr. and Mrs. Garden’s children in 1879 grow to have families of their own, serve in the First World War, contribute to public life in London, and so on. In these respects, the novel’s conception of history is organized spatiotemporally according to the schematic pattern of the Central Line, whose structure echoes the linear, progressive timelines of history and genealogy. On the other hand, though, Imogen’s aunt Rome reflects that, with respect to freedom, “each generation of people begins by thinking they’ve got it for the first time in history, and ends by being sure the generation younger than themselves have too much of it. It can’t really always have been increasing at the rate people suppose, or there would be more of it by now” (50). That Rome assumes there is indeed no more freedom today than in the past is arguably an instance of the very generational myopia and solipsism that she describes here, and she admits later that segmenting history into discrete periods is an exercise in psychological projection insofar as we “see posterity as a being precisely like ourselves” (134). Presiding over the novel’s path through history, the narrator emphasizes that there are no significant differences between ages, and that ostensible signs of progress, such as acceleration, technological modernization, social improvement, and so on, come to define all moments in history: “One knows the kind of thing; all discourses on contemporary periods have been full of it, from the earliest times even unto these last” (77). Even the relatively traditional Victoria Garden stresses to her mother that the “world is always new, mamma darling, and always old. It’s no newer than it was in 1880, or 1870” (126). Though the narrator acknowledges that there is a sense of progress in the “audacious experimentalism” (128) that characterizes contemporary social, literary, and intellectual life – a development to which Macaulay’s own unconventional novel arguably contributes – past examples of such “cleavages made by our forefathers in those years are now regarded as quaintly old-fashioned even as our own audacities will doubtless be regarded thirty years hence” (128).

Ultimately, then, in exploring the tension between historical progress and stasis, Macaulay’s essay-novel critiques the optimistic emphasis on modernity and futurity that is represented in the structure of the Central Line, setting this view of historical development against the cycle of repetition represented by the Circle Line. In organizing the family saga and its storyworld around spatial patterns of both progress and repetition embodied in the Underground, Macaulay demonstrates the same complex pattern structuring both personal and social history: a tension between forward movement along

the “timeline” of the Central London Railway toward the heart of the metropolis and the seemingly endless reiteration of events as part of a circular pattern. Each member of the Garden family passes through a period of adolescent social liminality, taking up the Inner Circle game before carrying on to adult life and using the Underground for its prescribed purpose as a means of transportation between city sites. This generational pattern seems to reinforce the status of the Central Line as the architectural symbol of individual maturity and social modernity, of history as purposive and progressive, though as a cycle that repeats over time, it also structurally mirrors the pattern of the Circle Line as well. As Macaulay’s novel sustains the tension between stasis and progress in its conception of history, both the Circle and the Central Lines are revealed to embody early twentieth-century life. Though Phyllis leaves for Cambridge and seemingly makes her way into the public world of adults, she ultimately retreats from it, and by the end of the novel she has returned to her childhood home, where she helps her mother “with entertaining and drawing-room meetings” (237). So much, then, for the Twopenny Tube’s promise of movement from one place to another and thus to “take you where you want to get to”; indeed, in reproducing the circumstances of her mother’s domestic role, Phyllis’s adult life merely sustains the intergenerational cycle, and though she had earlier criticized Imogen for the young girl’s desire to “go round,” her adult life describes just such a circular pattern.

It appears to be Imogen, proceeding from childhood reverie to success in the wider world as a published poet while displaying no interest in perpetuating the cycle of the generations through marriage and family (303), who manages an escape, such as it is, from the cyclical pattern of history. Yet insofar as the novel identifies her with the Inner Circle, and suggests that she alone does not outgrow the family game played there – the rather unconventional course of her adulthood as a whole constituting a departure from the prescribed itinerary of life – here, too, in the end we find personal and social history representing a complex interplay of movement and stasis, progress and repetition, as the novel closes with a reflection on a distant future in which the now lifeless earth may either be left “a great revolving tomb, to spin its way through space,” or otherwise “dash suddenly from its routine spinning” and fly “like a moth for a lamp, to some great bright sun and there burst into flame, till its last drift of ashes should be consumed and no more seen” (340). In other words, for the essayist-narrator it remains equally possible that the future course of history may see the world itself either revolving endlessly like the Inner Circle or terminating like the Central Line.

Conclusion

Not a competition between opposed and ostensibly incompatible spatiotemporal models of history, then, but a tentative union established between them, and as Macaulay’s narrator suggests in characterizing the patterns of personal and social history in terms of Underground structures, it is a union that resembles the administrative one finally established in the 1930s with the formation of the London Passenger Transport Board. Thus we see another structural isomorphism between “the interaction of permanence and change in the lives of people and of societies” (Irwin 63) and the

amalgamation of the Underground railways under central administration in an attempt to unify the transit cityscape. The suspension of both these structures and dynamics together as part of an overall system held in tension, just as the early Underground was with its independent companies and competing financial and architectural plans, ultimately provides the schematic narrative pattern not just of the progressive movements of the Central and the stasis of the Circle, but of the relationship between the two that organizes time and history as Macaulay frames them.

In *Told by an Idiot*, to conceive of personal and social life as structured spatially on an emerging urban transit network that assimilates linear and circular image schemas is to establish a temporal model that likewise assimilates the progressive and the static in social history. Viewed in this light, individual lives also reflect a tentative union between seemingly opposed spatiotemporal patterns. The narrative mapping of structurally isomorphic spaces, conceptually organized according to patterns found in the physical Underground spaces within which the novel is partly set, organizes the spatiotemporal storyworld of the narrative at the level of characters' movements through diegetic geography. But more than constituting a mere cartography of these spaces and movements, readings that trace the structures of spatiotemporal narrative patterns in this way extend diegetic space and time beyond setting, articulating the role that spatiotemporality and isomorphic relationships play in the "pattern of thinking and communicating" (Herman 298) that is narrative in general, as the structures of the environments through which characters travel and within which events unfold are revealed as "significant forms" that figure in the encoding and decoding of narrative. The isomorphisms that structure the relationship between spatiotemporal patterns and diegetic narrative spaces in turn mirror a larger correspondence between physical and what we might call representational or symbolic conceptual space – the structural logic of both a subway line moving characters along Friedman's "horizontal axis" and a chronicle of individual movement and development that is organized according to its trajectory and coordinates. Within such an isomorphic structure, spatial forms ultimately *signify* "vertically" as well, aiding in the process of narrative sensemaking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Citation: Melhoff, Craig. Spatiotemporal schemas of progress and stasis in Rose Macaulay's *Told by an Idiot*: On Moving Forward and Going Round. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 14(2), 2024: 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.1>

Received: August 03, 2024 | **Accepted:** October 1, 2024 | **Published:** October 10, 2024

