Kant's Mathematical Sublime and the Gothic Chronotope in Dostoevsky

Mark Pettus, Princeton University

mpettus@princeton.edu

By applying the Kantian distinction between the dynamic and mathematical sublime to the work of Ann Radcliffe, this paper will trace the early development of the mathematical sublime as a key device for constructing novelistic spaces which, inhabited and traversed by the protagonist, articulate his or her spiritual and existential struggle against a potentially infinite prison-like structure that is suggestive of the very nature of a fallen universe. By transposing the devices pioneered in Radcliffe’s descriptions of the vast mansions, castles and monasteries of the Gothic novel into a new urban setting, novelists like Dickens and Balzac set the stage for crucial chronotopic innovations by Dostoevsky—among them, a new degree of dialogic engagement between the protagonist and the inhabited space—that would prove indispensable for the adequate novelistic treatment of incarcerations, both literal and metaphorical, in the twentieth century novel.

After enumerating key features of Radcliffe’s novelistic space, the paper will point to several key instances of the Gothic chronotope in Dostoevsky, culminating in the Crystal Palace—which Dostoevsky exposes, chronotopically, as the Gothic prison of a new era.