

THE CONCEPT OF PLACE IN LITERARY STUDIES

Andra – Lucia RUS, PhD Candidate, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: This paper intends to reveal and analyze how versatile the concept of place may be in the context of literary studies. Place contains both spatiality and temporality, it is a meaningful and concrete instance of the more abstract space and it displays layers of time and thus memory. Awarding sense to a place may happen through storytelling and, from this point of view, it is highly enlightening to look at how progress made in human geography and other traditionally spatial disciplines may be used in analyzing literature. The research conducted focuses mainly of meaningful places belonging to the city of Oslo as depicted and created in the fiction of contemporary Norwegian writer Lars Saabye Christensen.

Keywords: space and place, the sense of place, Oslo, Lars Saabye Christensen, smellscape

Introduction

The current paper has as a goal to establish ways in which the concept of place may be used in the analysis of literature and review theories from spatial disciplines that have contributed to its establishment as a versatile concept that may be used interdisciplinarily. It is a result of the research conducted in relation to my PhD thesis that deals with the connection between memory, narrative and the city of Oslo in the novels of contemporary Norwegian author Lars Saabye Christensen. The author's literary geography revolves around the city of Oslo which constitutes the backbone of his fictional works and, consequently, a spatial approach to his writing becomes a fruitful way to tackle it. The paper will begin with a brief introduction to the spatial turn in the humanities, followed by clarifications concerning the concept of place together with the idea of a sense of place and how it might be created, specifically through sensory experiences.

The Spatial Turn

The broader theoretical framework that inspired my research is provided by what came to be called the spatial turn in the humanities, an umbrella term that might bring together ideas and theories from various fields that are engaged with the study of spatiality and which proposed an increased attention to this coordinate. It is probably still debatable how this direction should be defined and its starting point may not be clearly pinpointed, however, a number of theoreticians may be named in order to clarify this topic.

"The spatial turn" is a term coined by the American human geographer Edward Soja but its roots may be traced further back and important roles in this shift have been played by both Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson. The latter is well known for supporting the spatiality implicit in the postmodern: "A certain spatial turn has often seemed to offer one or more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper"

(Jameson, 1991: 154) Another founding writing is the article "Of Other Spaces" written by Michel Foucault in 1967 and published in 1984 where he stresses that the present epoch will be above all the epoch of space since the anxiety of our era is fundamentally concerned with space, perhaps more than with time. The essay begins with the following statement, emphasizing the assertion of space as a central topic:

As is well known, the great and obsessive dread of the nineteenth century was history, with its themes of development and stagnation, crisis and cycle, the accumulation of the past, the surplus of the dead and the world threatened by cooling. The nineteenth century found the quintessence of its mythological resources in the second law of thermodynamics. Our own era, on the other hand, seems to be that of space. (Foucault 1986: 22)

This turn to matters of spatiality announced by Michel Foucault may be linked to the shifts that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century as the trust in grand narratives, ideologies and historicism has been destabilized. Foucault does not see the concept of space as an innovation in its own, since space has always been an integral part of human experience; however, what he draws attention to is an increased interest in matters of spatiality since the main anxiety of the current era revolves around space. Space has often been treated as given and static and not enough attention was awarded to its dynamicity and role in human lives as it was often oversimplified as context or mere background. The article does not focus on the inner space, but more on exterior space, defined by Foucault as: "The space in which we live, from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time, our history takes place, this space that wears us down and consumes us, is in itself heterogeneous" (Foucault 1986: 23). Foucault does not operate with the dichotomy place/space, however, his reflection on the role of space points out again to its centrality in the context of human lives as the scene where both time and history unfold and get eroded. Gaston Bachelard's works together with phenomenology are fundamental readings for the analysis of internal space. This type of space is defined as the intimate space of our experience and thus the space more open to elements of subjectivity and memory. Introducing the concept of topoanalysis, Gaston Bachelard is another key theoretician of space who undertakes the project of analyzing the centrality of place in the context of human experience. He sets out to analyze how humans experience intimate spaces and how these spaces become the receptacles of memory, the space that protects. Topoanalysis is defined as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives." (Bachelard 1998: 8).

In the context of this return to matters of spatiality, Bertrand Westphal introduces his theory of geocriticism, as a critical approach to literature, arguing for a closer connection between literature and geography, which would help both disciplines to be better equipped when discussing spatial topics. Humanist geography has taken this step towards awarding more attention to literary works and theorists such as Yi-Fu Tuan or Edward Soja have come to be influential names across the two disciplines. Bertrand

Westphal uses the expression "space strikes back" in order to summarize the various theories that led to the spatial turn in the field of humanities. The spatial turn in literary studies has managed to bring closer literature and geography and to provide new tools for understanding literary works, but also for understanding the world we inhabit and the way in which we make sense of this world. In literary studies, this paradigm shift did not mean only bringing closer geography to literature, but rather a fruitful exchange among the various disciplines involved in the study of spatiality, such as architecture and urban theory.

The spatialization of time was one of the means of „counterattack” or „striking back” of space against time, or of geography against history. In certain cases, at issue was not the balance between the coordinates of time and space, but the assertion of temporal rule without giving space its fair share. (Westphal 2011: 23)

What Westphal wants to balance is not the inherent connection between time and space but rather the attention that was awarded to the latter by theorists. As time became spatialized in postmodernity, the attention also started to shift and space became of more interest to researchers. The wordplay in "space strikes back" will obviously make one think of postcolonialism, which aimed at reasserting the periphery in its relation to the center, reclaiming space and bringing once more the idea of space at the center of debate, just like globalization did in its turn. Foucault points out as well that it is not possible to analyze space without taking into consideration the time coordinate, the two are inextricably meshed in his opinion. Consequently, the spatial turn did not seek to ignore time, but what it attempts to do is to draw more attention to space and geography. Space should no longer be seen as static and time as dynamic and fascinating, but both elements should have an equal position in the understanding of human experience.

Space and Place

Since the goal of this paper is to analyze the concept of place, it is also necessary to clarify the concepts it operates with, space and place. One theoretician who has been involved with this matter is Yi-Fu Tuan who defines the difference between the two as follows: "Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values." (Tuan 2001: 54). Louise Mønster in her article "At finde sted" analyzes this distinction between space and place and one of the theoreticians she refers to is Yi-Fu Tuan, who sees space as movement and place as pause. Through what it represents, the idea of pause includes the meaning awarding process necessary for creating places. In the same article Mønster argues that literature is a privileged medium for the conveying of places and reflects on the connection between literature and place, by using two examples of authors that have been engaged in the debate: Seamus Heaney and Franco Moretti with his project of creating a literary atlas of Europe. She sees this area of research as interdisciplinary and constantly evolving at the same time as it is necessary since humans have a fundamental need to understand themselves in

connection to places and literature is traditionally dedicated to analyzing fundamental needs of humans and how they relate to the world.

Yi-Fu Tuan is also interested in what is called the sense of a place, the way in which humans award meaning to places they come in contact with. Undoubtedly, one way create meaningful places is through writing and reading literature and in the following fragment, Tuan describes what is the sense of a place and the role of the everyday in acquiring and creating it:

But the "feel" of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones. (Tuan 2001: 184)

Further, Yi-Fu Tuan gives the example of the Kronberg Castle in Denmark and how its perception is influenced by its association with *Hamlet*. Such examples from literature lead to the conclusion that writing about a city might indeed have a performative function, influencing the image of the real city.

What is a place? What gives a place its identity, its aura? These questions occurred to the physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg when they visited Kronberg Castle in Denmark. Bohr said to Heisenberg: Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. (Tuan 2001: 4)

The Sense of Place

As mentioned from the introduction, the concept of place stands at the core of my analysis of Lars Saabye Christensen's novels together with memory and mapping the city through both narrative and walking. It is thus important to draw attention to what makes a place be exactly what it is, what gives a place its "sense". The stories that are woven into these places together with the memories they bring about, sensorial experiences of the place and the intimate contact with places through the everyday and the spatial practice of walking are some of the elements that contribute to this meaning-awarding process,. The sense of a place is not only awarded by the stories and memories linked to it, but also by the sensorial experiences one has in connection to the given place. The senses play a fundamental role in our experience of places, being the primary way in which we know places while also contributing to the anchoring of memories, aspects that will be discussed in the next section.

A good starting point for this discussion on narrative, place and memory in literature is the very expression "to take place" which has correspondent translations in a

number of languages and is the synonym of “to happen”. It is this expression and its wide usage in everyday language that clearly shows the central role played by spatiality in human experiences and, more importantly, the idea that place is first and foremost a dynamic concept, constructed and reconstructed constantly. Louise Mønster analyzes this idea in an article published in 2009, “Taking Place. An introduction to the concept of place and its literary potential.” The author argues for the great potential that place has in literary studies, especially in the context of the modern and globalized world that we find ourselves presently in. A history of the concept of place is given, though not exhaustive, but primarily focused on the role that phenomenology played in shaping it. Place is perceived here as a form of the more abstract space and something that we relate to and invest meaning into. Globalization is seen as the core catalyst behind the increased attention given to place and to the local, since globalization with the advent of new travel and communication technologies has shattered spatial boundaries. This shift together with a fundamental need of human being to relate and connect to places has led to an increased interest in the study of places.

The central argument made by Louise Mønster, following the phenomenological tradition is that place “becomes” and not “is”, which contains in it the tremendous potential of a study of place in literature. She defines place as follows:

“Place is rather the form of space or spatiality where human life unfolds. It is concrete, sensuous, associated with meaning and thus existentially charged. Human life unfolds in places, and just when we invest life and meaning in a given location, there may appear a place”¹ (Mønster 2009: 36; my own translation)

One of the words Mønster uses to characterize place is “sensuous” and this is an element very well represented in the three novels, as the sense perceptions and reminiscences play a major part in mapping the city. This fact also makes places to be subjective and influenced by personal experiences, which again brings us back to literature, which has the means to express fully this subjectivity. Place is also characterized as dynamic in the paragraph above, it is not something given, but rather something that needs to be created from space. This is done by investing meaning and life in a given location, as Mønster explains. The advantage of analyzing Christensen’s work from this perspective is given by the fact that the narration stretches over a long time span, which allows for reflection on the dynamic character of places seen together with the stability of places as containers of memories.

Investing meaning in a place may happen in different ways, but one of the two most important ones are writing a place and memories connected to a place, which are both the topic of my current research. J.H. Miller, in his book, *Topographies*, also discusses the continuous construction of places and the role that literature plays in this process: “The topography of a place is not something there already, waiting to be

¹ Stedet er derimod den form for rumlighed eller spacialitet, som menneskets liv utfoldes i. Det er konkret, sanseligt, forbundet med betydning og således grundlæggende eksistensielt ladet. Menneskets liv foregår på steder, og netop når vi investerer liv og mening i en given lokalitet, kan der opstå et sted.

described, constatively. It is made, performatively, by word or other signs, for example, by a song or a poem” (Miller 1995: 276). Just like Mønster, Miller draws attention to the nature of places which in order to be described must first be created in a performative act. It is this performative nature of literature that Bertrand Westphal also argues for in his works on geocriticism and from the perspective of my current research, this idea stands at the core. Space and place production happen both in the act of writing and in the act of reading. It also happens in the fictional characters’ experience of places, which in the case of Lars Saabye Christensen is very prominent. Westphal is primarily concerned with the performative power of literature in relation to the real world referents but it is worth investigating this power also within the boundary of the fictional work itself, by looking at how stories attached to different locations through the narrative act contribute to creating these meaningful places.

The City and the Senses. Smellscape. Oslo’s Meaningful Places

The sense of place discussed above is to a great degree connected to the sensory experience of places, since it is the main way humans perceive and make sense of the environment. The English language itself provides an interesting insight on this topic since the word ‘sense’ is also used as synonymous to meaning and, for example, the expression ‘to make sense’ is widely used to refer to the way humans relate to different situations. Thus, the senses may be seen as containing two components, one related to raw perception and the other related to knowledge, thus including both physical and mental aspects. In reading Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels it becomes clear that the senses play an important role in mapping the city and in fixing and reactivating memory. The close reading of the novels will bring to light many examples of the role played by the senses in mapping the city and memory at the same time. It will also reveal how important the sense of smell is in this process, though all the other senses are well represented.

Bertrand Westphal draws attention to the concept of polysensoriality in experiencing and reading spaces. He starts his discussion around the senses with a reference to Yi-Fu Tuan’s observations that when someone says “I see” in English, the phrase is synonymous with “I understand”, thus bringing the visual close to knowledge. The visual sense has been privileged when it comes to understanding the environment, but the other senses play a major role as well and they become even more important in the discussion of memory since they tend to be more personal and intimate than sight. In French, the verb “savoir” is closely linked etymologically to “saveur” (taste), while both trace their roots back to the Latin “sapere”. Similar connections between the senses and knowledge may be found in several languages. Dolores Hayden explains the connection between the senses and memory in her 1995 book *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History*:

“If place does provide an overload of possible meanings for the researcher, it is place’s very same assault on all ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch and taste) that makes it powerful as a source of memory, as a weave

where one strand ties in another. Place needs to be at the heart of the urban landscape not on the margins” (Hayden 1995: 18)

Thus, the senses contribute to experiencing and organizing the spatial, while also playing their role in the creation of the sense of a place. As already mentioned, the senses are well represented in Lars Saabye Christensen’s writing and the sense of smell in particular is important to this research since very often, familiar smells connected to a place give rise to reminiscences. John Douglas Porteous is a researcher within the field of sensuous geography that has reflected around the idea of “smellscape” and its link to memory:

“Further, smell is an important sense in that it is primarily a very basic, emotional, arousing sense, unlike vision and sound, which tend to involve cognition. Certain smells are, therefore, deeply meaningful to individuals. The smell of a certain soap may carry a person back to the purgatory of boarding school. A particular floral fragrance reminds one of a lost love. A gust of odor from a spice emporium may waft one back, in memory, to Calcutta. And above all, as we shall see, smells can be memory releasers for the reconstruction of one’s childhood.” (Porteous 2006: 89)

Porteous argues that smell, though apparently a non-spatial sense if compared to the visual, contributes together with the other senses to the enrichment of our sense of space and the character of place. Making reference to the “Proustian hypothesis of odor memory”, Porteous also draws attention to the intimacy and subjectivity that the sense of smell presupposes: “one is *immersed* in smellscape; it is immediately evocative and meaningful.” (Porteous 2006: 92) This observation applies to Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels as well, since whenever the sense of smell appears, it evokes memories and it is connected to meaningful places in Oslo. Unlike the moments when visual representations are present, most of them in connection to observing the city from a window, roof or the fortress, smell perceptions and memories are experienced directly through the character’s immersion in the rhythm of the city life. Familiar smells may transport one in both time and space, thus being an efficient catalyst for memory and meaningful place production and, from this point of view, central arguments in my research. One particular fragment from Christensen’s novel *Bly*² illustrates very well the role played by the senses in shaping meaningful places and memories. Kim, the protagonist, comes across the records he has so dearly listened to during his teenage years depicted in *Beatles*, records that he sold when he needed money. At that time, the decision to sell the record collection which dominated most of his teenage years was a symbolic act of breaking away with the past, but the past resurfaces now through this objects that once again play the role of anchoring memory:

“It smelled of football, apples and Norwegian lessons. It smelled of lager beer, moody girls and rusty car signs. I looked closer at the cover. Beatles for sale. Scarves. They had heavy scarves and looked so old and tired. And

² Lead

on the bottom corner, someone wrote with clumsy capitals: LP no. 3. KIM KARLSEN.”³ (Christensen 2008: 27)

This passage contains several key ingredients from *Beatles* and thus works as a bridge towards the past. It is mainly through the sense of smell that memories are brought back to life, with football as a memory of friendship and childhood games or car signs as referencing back to the boys’ habit of stealing them. Place as a container is also inhabited by people and is situated as the intersection of past and present: “Places and their memory sustain us in our everyday lives, subject as these lives are to fragmentation and rupture of many sorts. Even persons (i.e., the very beings who are the sources of separation anxiety) are experienced and remembered as persons-in-particular-places: (...)” (Casey 2000: 195) This observation is valid for Christensen’s characters and their connection to places as the protagonist of the novel has to deal with the fragmentariness of adult life but finds a refuge in the meaningful places of the past and the memories they contain.

Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels abound in this type of experiences and most of them seem to be connected to places that in their turn have been created to the stories that were woven into their pattern. The city of Oslo and its meaningful places come up in most interviews with Lars Saabye Christensen, as for example, in the June edition of *Aftenposten*, entitled „Hjemme i Oslo 2” and that starts with the following description of the author: „Lars Saabye Christensen knows by heart the streets and and parks of Oslo West, he knows the pulse and the smells in the neighborhood.”⁴ (my own translation) The interviewer, Erik Bjørnskau, meets Lars Saabye Christensen in the very place that he depicts in his writing, Frogner, and the author of the *Beatles* describes his connection to the place: „It was important for me to decide upon the scene, this scene, these streets, says Lars, and looks up towards Bondebakken in Briskeby. There where the boys steal car signs, on the streets where they accompany girls homes from parties- This is my landscape.”⁵ (my own translation) The reader thus gains access to the back stage of the city through the characters that Lars Saabye Christensen creates.

The city as lived space is alive and it generates sensations that mark the protagonist’s contact with it. A vivid description of the rhythms of everyday life in the city is depicted in the beginning of chapter 11, encompassing the little elements that characterize the life of the city:

“I saw the city wake up. I saw the town slowly turn out of sleep. Curtains were drawn aside, faces appeared at the windows, eyes, yet weary of the night, measured that day and found it good enough. Smell of coffee and bread filled world. Radios were turned on. Shoemaker sat down at work and put a half sole on some leather shoes. In the flower shop they prepared

³ It smelled of football, apples and Norwegian lessons. It smelled of lager beer, moody girls and rusty car signs. I looked closer at the cover. *Beatles for sale*. Scarves. They had heavy scarves and looked so old and tired. And on the bottom corner, someone wrote with clumsy capitals: LP no. 3. KIM KARLSEN.

⁴ Lars Saabye Christensen kjenner gatene og parkene i Oslo vest, han kjenner pulsen og luktene i bydelen

⁵ Det var viktig for meg å bestemme scenen, denne scenen, disse gatene, sier Lars, og ser opp Bondebakken mot Briskeby. Der de fire gutta rippet pansermerker fra biler; i gatene der de følger jenter hjem fra fest. –Dette er mitt landskap.

wreaths and bouquets. The priest took the stairs up to the church in two leaps. And the postman came to me with bags full of dreams with stamps on them. I was heading down Kirkeveien, from the heights of Ullevål to the plains of Marienlyst. I felt a bit like a genius, as if I could walk on water. The asphalt was wet after the night, dew on black asphalt. It quite obvious that light had wings. It was Monday. It would be a nice day.”⁶ (Christensen 2008: 168)

The everyday life of the city and all the small elements that together compose the sense of place are concentrated in this fragment. The city wakes up as the people who live with it get on with their daily activities and our character walks its streets and becomes immersed in the life of the city. The smell of coffee and bread or the image of the postman who carries people’s dreams paint the living city, thus turning it into a meaningful place which may anchor memory as well. As usual, we find the protagonist walking the streets and experiencing its places.

Conclusion

As stated in the beginning of this paper, the intention was to show how fertile the concept of place may be when used to discuss works of fiction, illustrated here with a selection of examples from Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels. Meaningful places have stories woven into their fabric, thus containing layers of time and experiences and having the power to evoke memories and states of mind that might have been long forgotten. Approaching Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels from this perspective allows for fresh interpretations and this analysis aimed at showing why a spatial approach to literary studies could turn out to be fruitful and build bridges across disciplines engaged with matters of spatiality.

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⁶ Jeg så byen våkne. Jeg så byen sakte snu seg ut av søvnen. Gardiner ble trukket til side, ansikter kom til syne i vinduene, øynene, ennå slitne av natt, målte denne dagen og fant den god nok. Lukt av kaffe og brød fylte verden. Radioer ble slått på. Skomakeren satte seg ved maskinen og halvsålte en skeiv lakksko. I blomsterbutikken gjorde de i stand kranser og buketter. Presten tok trappene opp til kirken i to sprang. Og postbud kom mot meg med veskene fulle av drømmer med frimerker på. Jeg var på vei nedover Kirkeveien, fra Ullevåls høyder til Marienlysts sletter. Jeg følte meg litt genial, som om jeg kunne gå på vannet. Asfalten var fuktig etter natten, dogg på svart asfalt. Det tydlige lyset hadde vinger. Det var mandag. Det kom til å bli en fin dag.

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