

MAPPING OSLO- LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE

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Abstract: Robert T. Tally introduces literary cartography as a method of analysis which can generate fresh approaches to the study of spatiality in literature by comparing narrative to a form of mapping. Tally's literary cartography functions metaphorically and does not include the use of real maps, but rather of mental maps that writer, characters and readers work with in deciphering a text. Real maps are in their turn symbolic visual representations of the world they stand for and similarly to narratives and mental maps, they work with conventions. This paper intends to analyze the interplay of walking, mapping and writing the city of Oslo in the fiction of contemporary Norwegian writer Lars Saabye Christensen, making reflection on how literary cartography may be applied to literary studies in general.

Keywords: mapping, literary cartography, walking and the city, Oslo, Lars Saabye Christensen

Introduction

Maps have for long been an integral part of human life, evolving from very primitive forms to the extremely modern satellite maps that we have today. However, what remained a characteristic of maps is the fact that they operate through symbols and conventions. Be it navigation maps, tourist maps or any other form, they are all used in order to make sense of the world and as a help for orienting ourselves in the environment. Narrative plays a similar role and works of fiction in many ways are connected to the idea of mapping, more often than not mental and not concrete and scientific mapping, but still a successful form of drawing maps. Narrative also operates with symbols and conventions and much as maps do, it needs the participation of the reader to decipher it. Lars Saabye Christensen is a contemporary Norwegian author, well known both at home and internationally, having written in a variety of genres. His writing is deeply interconnected with a literary geography constituted by the city of Oslo and his narrative project becomes also a cartographic project in relation with the urban space of Oslo.

Maps and Literary Cartography

Robert T. Tally is a key theoretician in the field of spatiality and narrative, having introduced literary cartography as a method of analysis which can connect spatial representation and storytelling, by comparing narrative to a form of mapping:

Narrative is a fundamental way in which humans make sense or, give form, to the world. In that sense narrative operates much as maps do, to organize the data of life into recognizable patterns with it understood that the result is a fiction, a mere representation of space and place, whose function is to help the viewer or mapmaker, like the reader or writer, make sense of the world.

Literary cartography as I call it, connects spatial representation and storytelling. (Tally 2009: 17)

Tally's literary cartography functions metaphorically and does not include the use of real maps, but rather of mental maps that writer, characters and readers work with in deciphering a text. Real maps are in their turn symbolic visual representations of the world they stand for and similarly to narratives and mental maps, they work with conventions. Peter Turchi's book *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* analyzes this connection between writing and mapping, starting with the following premise: "To ask for a map is to say 'Tell me a story'" (Turchi 2004: 11). The author believes that our mental maps are very often not very accurate, since they are preponderantly subjective and selective, that is constructed based on our own experience of places and our memories connected to these places: "Our sense of place is in many ways more important than objective fact. The impressions we carry of the house grew up in and the places where we played as children are more important to us than any mathematical measurements of them." (Turchi 2004: 28-29) This study is written mainly for writers to provide them with directions on their role as cartographers who chart the world. This is how he describes the process of writing and reading in connection to maps: "So, the world of a story is a thing we create or summon into being, but which the reader participates in creating and understanding. A story or novel is a kind of map because, like a map, it is not a world, but it evokes one (or at least one, for each reader)." (Turchi 2004: 166)

Tally emphasizes as well the importance of maps for spatial approaches to writing and reading. There is an exchange between writing and cartography, since while the act of writing is a form of drawing a map, in order to describe a place one must very often tell the stories implicit in that specific place.

I take mapping to be the most significant figure in spatiality studies today, partly because of its direct applicability to the current crisis of representation often cited by theorists of globalization or postmodernity, but also because of the ancient and well known connections between cartographic and narrative discourse. To draw a map is to tell a story, in many ways, and vice versa. (Tally 2012: 4)

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope is also a fruitful approach to literature from a spatial perspective and Tally considers that Bakhtin's study gives equal importance to time and space, thus being a pioneer of the spatial turn:

"In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope." (Bakhtin 1981: 84)

Space is thus seen as dynamic again and responsive to the movements of time, the two components fusing into the artistic chronotope, a concept that helped restoring balance and harmony between the two coordinates. Bakhtin's theory together with Jameson's cognitive mapping constitutes the foundation of spatiality studies applied in literature. Mapping is a useful concept in the discussion of both city and memory, since both are shaped and organized through this mental process. In the context of Lars Saabye Christensen's novels that are the subject of this research, employing ideas from literary cartography opens the way to analyzing both how the city is mapped through writing and how memory functions in connection to the map of the city.

Lars Saabye Christensen similarly maps Oslo in the process of writing and two very good examples of this are the novels *Beatles* (1984) and *Bly*¹⁸ (1990), consequently, the examples used in this paper are taken from these two works. Christensen's characters walk through the city while the narrative weaves its nets across the streets and thus the map is gradually drawn. This mental map works as a point of reference for both characters and the narrator and it simultaneously helps the reader in navigating through the novels. One does not need to be familiar with the city of Oslo beforehand but after reading and exploring this literary map, the city becomes familiar and known. This is where one of the main strengths of Lars Saabye Christensen lies, in the power of describing the city so profoundly that the reader ends up feeling he/she has actually taken a trip to Oslo. Peter Brown in his introduction to the volume *Literature & Place 1800-2000* speaks of place as a means whereby literature effects a dialogue with the past, bringing again memory and place together: "Novelists create simulacra of places known to their readers and in such instances the thrill of recognition is part of the text's appeal" (Brown 2008: 18) Brown sees fictional maps as mnemonics which help the reader inhabit the world of literature. Some authors choose to provide real maps along with their works, but this is not necessary. The mental map created through narration is just as powerful as a concrete map.

Walter Benjamin's theory of the flâneur is a fruitful approach to the topic of city and literature. It brings in the spotlight the act of walking in a city, one of the most important spatial practices enacted by human beings, according to Michel de Certeau, who notices that contemporary urban discourse is obsessed by figures that traverse space, such as the flâneur, the spy or the detective and stresses that all these urban explorations are in fact spatial stories. Lars Saabye Christensen's characters are this type of figures and wandering through the city is one of the most common situations they find themselves in. By telling such spatial stories, Christensen's protagonists allow for both the city and memory to be mapped along with their explorations of urban space. In the cartographical project undertaken by the novels, the protagonists are the ideal partners since through their movement through the city they open it up for the map to be drawn.

Tally's discussion of literary cartography further extends to encompass another important idea that connects spatiality and memory, that is, the sense of a place or the genius loci. This matter will be further discussed next, included in the broader discussion on the distinction between space and place which has been mentioned briefly in the beginning of this

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presentation. In Tally's opinion, the story and the place are inextricably bound together and a literary work will become infused with the places that it explores:

“In reading, the spirit of place emerges from the writer's literary cartography which the reader uses to give imaginative form to the actual world. In so doing, the reader of the narrative maps draws upon frames of reference to help make sense of both the text, the spaces it represents, and the world.”
(Tally 2012: 85)

Walking and the City

Walking as a spatial practice is an effective way of exploring and mapping the city. It is thus enlightening to analyze the way characters in Lars Saabye Christensen's novels move around the city, while assigning meaning to different places. Narrative and walking are both forms of mental mapping, most of the times being interwoven. Having characters that walk through the city is a good pretext for the unfolding narrative that fixes memory in place containers.

Christensen's characters are to a great extent characters on the move, most of the time engaged with the city that becomes a form of scene for the unfolding of their lives. There are different ways of experiencing the city on the move, from aimless walking to cycling or playing hide-and-seek. From this point of view, walking and narrative contribute to the cartography of the literary works, both being a form of mapping. Oslo is mapped first and foremost in *Beatles*, while walking the city in the other two novels of the trilogy is a way for both characters and readers to revisit that map, a situation that favors the resurfacing of memory.

When discussing literary cartography, Walter Benjamin's theory of the flâneur was mentioned and if Christensen's characters are not exactly the classic embodiments of this idea, they do have traits that connect them to it. For example, one of the most used descriptions for Christensen's protagonist is that of the stumbling hero, the person who sometimes has issues in adjusting to the environment but is however always on the move and engaged with the city life. It is also useful to note that footsteps, shoes and shoe laces are recurring symbols in the novels which reinforce the importance of walking as a spatial practice. Walking, mapping and narrative all have characteristics that are inherently spatial. The three acts are also interconnected: mapping the city would not be possible without the act of walking, writing the city is in itself a form of mapping, while narrative is supported by both the act of walking and the consequent mapping of meaningful places.

Mapping Oslo

In *Beatles*, the map is established and laid out and this is done mainly through the use of real place names that can still be found in today's Oslo. Authenticity is another trait of Lars Saabye Christensen writing and the mental mapping of memories is supported by a mapping of the city that follows closely the real Oslo. The fact the years of late childhood are described together with the years of adolescence allows the author to better document the city since the characters are constantly moving, discovering and

negotiating their relation to the urban space of Oslo. Lars Saabye Christensen's narrative may in this sense be perceived as what Robert T Tally Jr. considers a spatially symbolic act:

“An approach to narrative as a spatially symbolic act enables us to navigate literature and the world in interesting new ways, by asking different questions, exploring different territories, and discovering different effects. As writers map their worlds, so readers or critics may engage with these narrative maps in order to orient ourselves and make sense of things in a changing world.”¹⁹

Oslo in *Bly* resembles a palimpsest where the map drafted in *Beatles* is visible but new experiences are added as our characters' lives continue to unfold on its streets. As such, the scene is set for the interplay between past and present, with memories surfacing around every corner of the city. Objects from the past, such as an old photo album or old records, will trigger even more memories while the senses, particularly the sense of smell, play a central role in the remembrance process. The powerful connection with places that has been established in *Beatles* provides now the stability needed for memories to be sheltered and as the protagonist walks through the city in search for ways to make sense of his identity and surroundings, these meaningful places create stable points of reference. The childhood neighborhood and home become less important and pushed to the background while Karl Johan Street and the places claimed by the artistic underground of Oslo become more visible. A new map of the city is in a way created for the reader to navigate through but this new map is an overlay for the map created in *Beatles* as new place experiences are woven on the past experiences. The everyday life of the city and the act of walking are still central factors behind the creation and recreation of a sense of place.

Bly contains a very enlightening description of mental mapping of the city in chapter I, the first chapter that disrupts the linearity of the novel by presenting an episode from the past, when Kim had rubella and had to stay in bed for several days. He then receives the visit of Seb, Gunnar and Ola. As they leave, Kim follows their steps on the streets, knowing each turn they take, which shows that the map of the city is deeply ingrained in his mind:

“Soon after, I hear Gunnar, Ola and Seb go away over Svoldergate. They go round the corner and I hear their voices and their laughter, especially their laughter (...) They have stopped at Bygdøy Allé. B-b-bananas! Roger replied bananas. I hear laughter still. I hear footsteps crunching in the sand. They are going to Vestkanttorget. I know Seb has a scout knife to cut the car signs. I hear them go, I hear them until they pass the fountain in Gyldenløvesgate, and then a strange thought hits me: I've lost them.”²⁰ (Christensen 2008: 33)

¹⁹ <http://www.nanocrit.com/essay-two-issue-1-1/>

²⁰ Like etter, hører jeg Gunnar, Seb og Ola gå bortover Svoldergate. De runder hjørnet, og jeg hører stemmene deres, latteren, særlig latteren (...) De har stanset ved Bygdøy allé. B-b-bananas! Roger svarte bananer. Jeg hører latteren fremdeles. Jeg hører skrittene som knaser i sand. De skal til Vestkant-torget. Jeg vet at Seb har en speiderkniv i beltet. Med den skal de brette av bilmerker. Jeg hører dem gå, jeg hører dem helt til de passerer fontenen i Gyldenløvesgate, og enda en underlig tanke slår meg: Nå har jeg mistet dem.

This fragment shows how the art of story-telling and the mapping of places are interconnected as in the literary cartography concepts developed by Robert T. Tally Jr. with narrative organizing the data of life into recognizable patterns. The three boys weave their own story while walking the streets that Kim holds very closely mapped in his mind. The story emerges as the map of the city emerges, this fragment representing at a micro level what Lars Saabye Christensen does throughout his writing.

A similar episode appears in chapter VI of the novel, when once again, we are taken back to the past. The exact time of the events depicted is not given, but there are signs that place them shortly after Kim recovered from rubella. Other than that, the moment is depicted as follows: “It is a Saturday afternoon, in May, with sand on the streets and warm wind in the hair.”²¹ (Christensen 2008: 285) The boys are out playing when Kim hits too hard their last tennis ball and they set off on the streets in an attempt to find it. This works as a pretext to map the city since the boys get so far in their act of searching it that it seems implausible for the ball to have gone so far: “And so, Seb, Gunnar, Ola and I wandered up the streets.”²² (Christensen 2008: 285) The ball is symbolically inscribed with their initials, GOKS, which turns this search in a metaphor for friendship and unity. During their search, they get to the fountain in Gyldenløvesgate, to Mannen på Trappa where they buy frozen juice before heading to Drammensveien. They get to Solli Square by sneaking on the tram and then decide to head to ‘the city’: “We head down towards the city instead.”²³ (Christensen 2008: 287) The ball is still not found as they get to Pernille and Karl Johan until they reach the Fred Olsen quay. In the end, they have to head back home without finding the ball, to an empty street and surrounded by a disquieting silence: “The only sound we hear is the sand crunching under our shoes.”²⁴ (Christensen 2008: 289)

Conclusion

This paper had the intention to apply Tally’s theory of literary cartography in order to reveal the interplay between mapping the city and writing the city in Lars Saabye Christensen’s novels, showing how the two projects are related and almost identical at times. Mapping, walking and narrative are interconnected as shown here and as the story presented unfolds, the map of the city is drawn for the reader to interpret and use it.

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²¹ Det er en lørdag ettermiddag, i mai, sand i gatene, varm vind i håret.

²² Og så vandrer Gunnar, Seb, Ola og jeg oppover gatene.

²³ Vi går nedover mot byen i stedet.

²⁴ Den eneste lyden vi hører er sanden som knaser under skoene (...)

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