Gábor Bednanics

Inside Out
Place and Experience in Modern Poetry[1]

In order to describe literary space one should dwell in it. Lyrical texts of literary modernity are usually concerned with the *structure* of places. However, from a structural point of view it is more interesting to develop a landscape (especially an urban one), rather than merely to describe it. For a better understanding of this in literature, one should take a theoretical point of view where the concepts mentioned above could get their proper meaning and give one a chance to understand the cross-relations between modern poetry and the notion of a spatial turn.

In his book about *The Culture of Time and Space* in early Modernism, Stephen Kern discusses space as a multidisciplinary issue.

> New ideas about the nature of space in this period challenged the popular notion that it was homogeneous and argued for its heterogeneity. Biologists explored the space perceptions of different animals, and sociologists, the spatial organizations of different cultures. Artists dismantled the uniform perspectival space that had governed painting since the Renaissance and reconstructed objects as seen from several perspectives. Novelists used multiple perspectives with the versatility of the new cinema. Nietzsche and José Ortega y Gasset developed a philosophy of »perspectivism« which implied that there are as many different spaces as there are points of view. The most serious challenge to conventional space came from physical science itself, with the development in the early nineteenth century of non-Euclidean geometries.[2]

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[2] Kern 2003, 132.

The interest that drove the natural sciences to turn away from the time-related perspectives to topographical measures matched the request to gain a more representative point of view that is not transcendental. Space (or more specifically: place) holds the promise of a stable *a priori* standpoint that can be immanent and more concrete than temporal ones.

The acquired model leads us to the well-known description of spatialized history written by Foucault:

> The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendents of time and the determined inhabitants of space. Structuralism, or at least that which is grouped under this slightly too general name, is the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other—that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration. Actually, structuralism does not entail denial of time; it does involve a certain manner of dealing with what we call time and what we call history.[3]

Spatializing time became a main topic for social and cultural sciences because of the plausible idea of configuring temporal perceptions through geographical or topographical marks. Although primary experiences precede apperception, the processing of the data we obtain from this primary act always comes to the foreground and assures that the primary experience remains unique – and therefore incomprehensible. The visual marks act like signs that always point to something that is absent. This *alibi* can remind us of the behavior

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[3] Foucault 1986, 22.

of media: temporal problems (like being in time) are usually rearranged as direct experiences connected with space.

The so-called »spatial turn« is frequently mentioned as a response to nineteenth-century historicism. It arose from the claim of avoiding teleological contextualization. Time is conventionally associated with the perception of past, present, and future as memory, experience, and desire or hope; spatial recognition, on the contrary, deals with simultaneous yet divergent structures. In order to develop the significance of spatiality, one should inquire into it as a productive substitute for the deficiencies of temporally-based theories. To that extent, space should not be conceived as a static or fixed background. The Endeavour to construct a non-substantial concept of space has met the scientific ambition that aimed to discover a material yet dynamic type of it. As Lefebvre, the French sociologist put it:

> The fields we are concerned with are, first the *physical* — nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the *mental* including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the *social*. In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols, and utopias.[4]

Space is therefore not an already given background or void where the objects can take their places, but rather an active medium emerging through transactions. For cultural studies, this indicates the possibility of replacing the dubious time-related investigations with spatial ones which can be regarded as both construction of material components and a social production. In that context, space is an accessible network with the function of pretending to be temporal without notions of time.

After Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja attempted to rethink this dynamic model of understanding space. As he maintains, the spatial turn offers a vantage point from which urban culture would be more explicable. He downplays temporal relations of cultural descriptions

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[4] Lefebvre 1991, 11–12.

(including historical issues), although he still claims that historical interpretation should not been rejected, because »the Spatial Turn is fundamentally an attempt to develop a more creative and critically effective balancing of the spatial/geographical and the temporal/historical imaginations.«[5] Hence the followers of this new perspective should focus on planned structures:

> 1. Spatiality is a substantiated and recognizable social product, part of a »second nature« which incorporates as it socializes and transforms both physical and psychological spaces. 2. As a social product, spatiality is simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationship. 3. The spatial-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship (including class relations) are materially constituted, made concrete. 4. The constitution/concretization process is problematic, filled with contradiction and struggle (amidst much that is recursive and made routine). 5. Contradictions arise primarily from the duality of produced space as both outcome/embodiment/product and medium/presupposition/producer of social activity.[6]

His subsequent work, *Thirdspace*, was concerned with the possibilities of new spatial experiences offered by the Postmetropolitan (as he calls it: *Exopolitan*) way of life. There, Soja follows Lefebvre's triadic classification from two points of view. The first is the trialectics of being, consisting of historicality, sociality, and spatiality; the second is the trialectics of spatiality: perceived, conceived, and lived.[7] Instead of using binary oppositions, this triadic conception gives him a possibility to liberate the model of the city from centralization and to coin the notion »thirding-as-Othering« in order to describe an alternate way of thinking about urban systems. »Postmodern geography« – as he calls it – evolves into a theory based on permanent cumulative approximation which always leaves the way open for reconsidering: »Thirding produces what might best be

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[5] Soja 2009, 12.

[6] Soja 1989, 129.

[7] Cf. Soja 1996, 71, 75.

called a cumulative *trialecticts* that is radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge.«[8] Although the modern categories of space–time relations were necessarily rewritten in the advent of the postmodern era, we are still able to use those challenged modern terms. Hence time remains essential for the humanities but only as a heavily contested issue.

In so far as sociology or historiography has coped with questions of time by means of disengaging from some of its basic notions, literary understanding cannot seem to benefit from leaving behind the problems of temporality and seeking the possibilities of geographical or topographical attempts. Such an effort calls for revolutionary acts like replacing Kant by Hegel or structural descriptions by symbolic ones. The notion of the spatial turn in cultural discourse belongs to the realm of visual turns, so the changes introduced by these theoretical trends can help us understand the possible place of space in literature. But while language-based literary forms remained »silent«, the visually rendered perspectives brought new media into the limelight. Communication, which has a lot in common with verbal arts, is by definition a spatial term: it is traffic which is organized by its own contributors and conceived as a network. The position of the letters on the paper also leads the readers' eyes into and through the layout. But could it be the spatial component for literary understanding? If the answer is yes, one has to take the kind of reading into account that has nearly nothing to do with literature as understanding. Thus is it possible (or necessary) to speak of (or perhaps to experience) »literary space« on its own? And if it so, what would it be like?

Francophone criticism was concerned with the connections of space and time as early as the 1950's. Maurice Blanchot, in his influential book (*The Space of Literature,* 1955), joined experience with space by means of literary works. In his view, poetic experience is connected to the absence or distance of a work of art rather than to its presence. Literary space, therefore, is the space where language can take its place.

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[8] Soja 1996, 61.

> It is never the language I speak. I never express myself with it, I never address you, and I never invite your answer. All these features are negative in form. But this negation only masks the more essential fact that in language at this point everything reverts to affirmation: in this language what denies affirms. For this language speaks as absence. Wordless, it speaks already; when it ceases, it persists. It is not silent, because in this language silence speaks. The defining characteristic of ordinary language is that listening comprises part of its very nature. But at this point of literature's space, language is not to be heard. Hence the risk of the poetic function. The poet is he who hears a language which makes nothing heard.[9]

Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach (1958) renews the investigations of formal structures related to experiencing the world:

> The phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a *surface*, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other. It should not be forgotten that in this zone of sensitized surface, before being, one must speak, if not to others, at least to oneself. And advance always. In this orientation, the universe of speech governs all the phenomena of being, that is, the new phenomena. By means of poetic language, waves of newness flow over the surface of being. And language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up.[10]

The questions of literary space invoke the issues of poetic experience and even philosophers like Merleau-Ponty or Lévinas share this point of view. Poetic experience is not an empiricist notion. Literary perception mixes the formalistic and contextual ways of understanding, neither can be conceived without the other. According to Georges Poulet, Proust in his major work strictly connec-

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[9] Blanchot 1982, 50.
[10] Bachelard 1969, 222.

ted his characters to places in order to show places forming characters:

> Without places, beings would be only abstractions. It is places that make their image precise and that give them the necessary support thanks to which we can assign them a place in our mental space, dream of them, and remember them.[11]

This interconnection has always been known for literary criticism through figures or images.

The usual approach recommends that we maintain the relationship between the notions of fine arts and those of literary criticism. For painting, the visual arrangement of colors, lines, and forms is as evidently topographical as the use of such techniques as drawing the vanishing point. For poetry, the terms borrowed from modern fine arts (for example Jugendstil, Impressionism, Symbolism) become familiar for critics by multiple transfers. Analogies of different forms of art relegate literature: »Painting can depict space, poetry can form an image of it, music can offer an analogy, but only architecture can actually create it.«[12] Literary topography, however, seems to be an uncomplicated metaphorical transposition. In his book, *Topographies*, J. Hillis Miller tries to outline the shift from describing a place in words to the meaning of the »representation of a landscape according to the conventional signs of some system mappings.« This is a chain of meanings transferred to literature from investigating and describing spaces: »Landscape or cityscape gives verisimilitude to novels and poems. Topographical setting connects literary works to a specific historical and geographical time.«[13] The ways of representing visual and spatial objects in literature should not make us jump to the conclusion that we can better understand the temporal status of literature by the places depicted in novels and poems.

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[11] Poulet 1977, 27.
[12] Kern 2003, 158.
[13] Miller 1995, 4, 6.

According to Sigrid Weigel, literary space is important in that it has used topographical transpositions from the very beginning.

> Topographical figures stand in the axis of different literary theories, because the literary representation deals structurally with the task of placing the relationship between time and space in the continuum of text. […] To that extent one can say that the »topographical turn« – unlike in cultural studies – has in literary theory made places not just as narrative figures or topoi, but rather as specific, geographically identifiable places.[14]

Emphasizing space can, however, also be problematic. As »postmodern topography« made the modern temporal structures suspicious, the application of semiotic codes derived from the literary discourse reduced »the space itself to the status of a *message,* and the inhabiting of it the status of a *reading*.«[15] Space should not be perceived as a mere swap for the concept of the worldview, because spatial experience prefers recognition to understanding. Reading a landmark can be the equivalent of reading a sign but never of reading literature. The former usually needs to be exact, but the latter obtains multiple meanings. The spatial turn has to concern itself with this otherness of literature as a challenge, and should clarify that it is not the gaze which fulfils the need for literary topography. The structure of spatial rendering has a lot in common with poetics. Although narrative works of art are easier to access through their metonymical structure than lyric poetry is, poems can remind us of the architectural setup of buildings and landscapes by means of metaphorical transpositions.

Modern poetry was topographic from its very beginning. The Baudelairean construction of the metropolis is the best-known example for it. English poetry also has its own modern cityscape. The Victorian aesthetes regularly used the schemes of geography to overcome the difficulties of time. John Ruskin and his contemporaries

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[14] Weigel 2002, 157–158.
[15] Lefebvre 1991, 7.

might mediate their relationship to the landscape they were describing. By naming places, signifying landmarks, and arranging the scenery's details into a scheme, the act of mapping gave them a kind of grammar through which they could understand the landscape's syntax. The map permitted them to see where normal vision seemed to fail or to close upon itself.[16]

Spatial rendering altered the way urban landscapes were seen. The city, as the most important place, became a centre of dissemination, and its interpretations borrowed their terms from the interpretations of paintings. Impressionism and the writers of the Victorian era dismantled the mimetic construction of the city view. Through atmospheric changes (fog, shadows, and alike), Impressionist painters could easily reverse the importance of forefront and background. As the modern cityscape became mysterious and maze-like – a network, as it were – the Impressionist perspective was converted into a Symbolist one:

> Symbolist London was composed of a small set of recurring images or associations: the sphinx, the labyrinth, the veil, dimness, darkness, and the persistent suggestion that surfaces were merely the outward show of far more significant realities.[17]

These set of ideas were more connected to language than to pictures. The city of fine arts became the city of literature and it brought with it the question of representation.

The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot displays the city (or cities) in three phases as the »Unreal City«. The first one presents the urban landscape as one of the meaningless surfaces, where poetic anecdote might suffice, as a dialectic of visionary death and ascension. The »Unreal City« is declaimed following Madame Sosostris' warning, »Fear death by water«:

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[16] Colley 1991, 107.
[17] Freeman 2007, 201.

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
> Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (60–68)

The city, which has special landmarks to help navigating, has no name. It could certainly be London (more precisely: a part of London, the City), according to the markers of places, but naming it as »unreal« reveals that it can change its own identity in relation to the reader of its signs. Interpretations which state that describing the city uses literary allusions go back to Eliot's own notes in which he mentions Baudelaire's *Le Sept vieillards* and Dante's *Inferno* as reference points. Pamela K. Gilbert is therefore correct when she states:

> Literary studies are interested not only in how literature reflects such understandings of space — how they operate thematically and at the level of plot and setting — but also in how literature shapes the understanding of space, how it intervenes in culture to produce new understandings.[18]

Both Baudelaire and Dante display the gathering of people as a crowd that marches towards its doom. This special *danse macabre* allows us only to see the city and its agents rather than to triangulate the positioning data.

The second phase of displaying the »Unreal City« in *The Waste Land* diverges from exact locations and mixes past and present by extending the memories conveyed by words:

> Unreal City
> Under the brown fog of a winter noon
> Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

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[18] Gilbert 2009, 105.

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
Asked me in demotic French
To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (207–214)

The City is as it has always been: a hub of crossways between distant places, but their characterization always remains different. Unlike the Apollinaire of *Zone*, T. S. Eliot was not really interested in the impact of modern technologies: in *Zone*

the challenge […] was not only to develop *poetic* styles and forms that could reflect these new realities, but to respond more profoundly to the existential disorientation occasioned by the need to jettison established categories of belief and understanding.[19]

Eliot was a more faithful follower of Baudelaire and the Symbolists when he used the places as connections of cultural diversities.[20] Even if the places in the city can be identified as London locations (except for the Metropole, which was a hotel in Brighton), the space where the poem positions an encounter (temporarily from dawn to noon) becomes occupied by linguistic elements (verbal or symbolic). Performing as the recollection of this encounter, memory is rather a result of imagination than real events. Researchers of imagined cityscapes use a parallelism to explain this peculiarity: »Memory shapes the city at the same time as being shaped by it.«[21] The space we belong to needs us to be inhabited, and hence created.

The *Danse macabre* continues in the fifth part of the poem *(What the Thunder Said)*. The last part of *The Waste Land* disseminates signs that have to be seen as reference points. Although it is Eliot himself who turns the reader's attention to Hermann Hesse's book in a footnote, the citation from the German-Swiss writer's vision of post-war Europe does not convey an exact historical explanation of the 1920's. It is rather a collection of impressions inspired

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[19] Sheringham 1996, 87.
[20] Faulk 1988, 37.
[21] Bridge/Watson 2000, 9.

by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Therefore the historical reflection turns out to be a literary consideration, which is, of course, neither a diminution nor an understatement. The literarily arranged historical essay becomes assigned to Dante's and Baudelaire's poetic composition, thus Eliot's poem brings together elements that usually were regarded as separate. So dislocated signs could easily take place in a different field of signification. Dissemination disrupts the known urban landscape, so that it will be impossible to establish identity by its assistance:

> What is that sound high in the air
> Murmur of maternal lamentation
> Who are those hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
> Ringed by the flat horizon only
> What is the city over the mountains
> Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal (366–376)

The enumeration of the cities also has its counterpart in contemporary Avant-garde literature, such in Apollinaire's poetry,[22] in Blaise Cendrars' *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*, and in the Hungarian author, Lajos Kassák's *Craftsmen* and *The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away*, but the main concern of Eliot's poem is not the allegoric rendering of personal progress by means of the signs of a voyage. Eliot may have »created a complex version of the modern city, locating it between an earthly (sometimes infernal) and a heavenly realm, between the reality of a declining Europe and the ideal of a Christian culture«[23], but he did it by poetic and therefore linguistic means.

Eliot's later poetry is chiefly concerned with questions of time, but introduces these time-related issues through structural meta-

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[22] Morrisette 1953, 265.
[23] Lehan 1998, 143.

phors. The first part of *Four Quartets* begins with a configuration of time but culminates in a spatial description:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose-garden. My words echo
> Thus, in your mind.

The music that is conjured by the title of the set of poems regularly returns in the text to control the flow of memories, but he time organized by musical sound is also arranged by spatial codes. If »only through time time is conquered«, why is it necessary to use spatial metaphors to measure time (»which is always present«)? As the second part of the poem, East Coker, starts:

> In my beginning is my end. In succession
> Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
> Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
> Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

Landmarks mark out the territory of time, thus the transfiguring place is always linked to temporal perspectives. Even the titles of the poems designate specific places.

Modern Hungarian poetry also creates such exclusive poetic spaces. As a prominent poet of Late Modernity, Attila József depicts »unreal« places in his poems *Winter Night, Night on the Outskirts*, and *By the Danube*. In his poem *On the City Limits* (translated by Anton N. Nyerges)*,* the spatial metaphorization operates the well-known distinction between self and world:

> On the city limits where I live
> in twilights of fallout and glow
> the soot settles like tiny bats,
> it flies on softish wings and alights
> and ossifies like guano
> hard and slow.

Although the speaker of the poem can easily be identified with its creator, this creation has more to do with the created world than with the poet, through the repetition of the same words as before. His identity is formed by the surrounding place, though this place is neither a homogeneous nor a simply identifiable one. Needless to say, self-identity requires outer markers to evolve:

> The specific dependence of self-identity on particular places is an obvious consequence of the way in which self-conceptualization and the conceptualization of place are both interdependent elements within the same structure. Our identities are thus bound up with particular places or localities through the very structuring of subjectivity and of mental life within the overarching structure of place.[24]

Even if those places that shape our identities are hardly identifiable, this interdependency prevails. In Attila József's poem, the subject of the lyrical utterance gains its identity from the signs of suburbia:

> This poem is pitched to the city limits.
> A poet – your brother, you know –
> is watching as it sifts
> the soft and lipid soot,
> and ossifies like guano
> hard and slow.

The identification provided by the engineer (that is, the poet) uses the place around him to maintain the borders between inside and outside, but these borders prove to be permeable:

> The song rattles on the poet's lip.
> But (the engineer
> of the spells of the concrete world),
> sees into a conscious future
> and creates inside of himself a harmony of chest
> as you, later, in the objective sphere.

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[24] Malpas 2004, 177.

The city limits can also be understood as the limitations of the human factor: they limit the faculties of the creative poet, but they disperse the limits that are responsible for dividing the world into inward and outward dimensions, too. The city limits its inhabitant, as he creates the city itself.

Literature still demands to be unique in connection with relating time, but draws attention to configuring time through spatial figuration. And if a theory needed to be disproved to become reliable, and literature is the area where spatial versus temporal cannot be simply reconciled, cultural topography requires literary involvement more than ever. Literature as a reading experience frequently takes unexpected turns, therefore it is strictly time-related. How do the spatial structures resolve the dilemmas emerging from the unstoppable or the revolutionary? What if space itself cannot explain unexpected changes or disruptions? How can one map out what cannot be planned? Whether these questions have remained unanswered or not, literature may be the place where readers are inhabitants, where the pathways, crossways, and landmarks belong to the reading process by means of the materiality of literary inscription, and where transformation or transposition makes the transcendental appear immediate.

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