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PLACE AND INTIMATE SENSING

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Prelude

Place is a fluid concept, and to study place is to explore a contested terrain. The question of place cuts across the disciplines and the arts. Humanistic geography defines place as a centre of meaning constructed by experience. In existential terms, place becomes realised as a bunch of environmental relations created in the process of human dwelling. Place is internally connected with time and self, so that place, time and self make up a triangle drama of which the plot is written by intimate sensing, the individual's direct and deep personal meeting with the world.

Examples of how intimate sensing works out in the many layers of place realities can be drawn from creative literature. Bo Carpelan's novel 'Urwind' offers a roomy world in which to wander. The novel can be read from three perspectives: mimetic, hermeneutic and textual, and the 'maps' thus produced reflect different realms of place, ranging from the realistic depicting of territory via the interpretation of experience to the inter-textual 'dance of meaning'.

The three perspectives used in my reading of the novel at the same time reflect the facets of place in geographical studies at large. By way of 'literary geography' we will thus take a look at different geographical methodologies.

Theme: place in (humanistic) geography

For a long time past the field of formal knowledge that has place as its topmost question has been geography, for it is the concern with place that gives geography a vision of its own. In fact, it is the concepts of place and region that form the basis for the view held by the general public with regard to geography. The thing in the world that geography takes as given is knowledge of the world as it exists in places. Following Lukermann (1964: 167), we may say that the study of

place is the subject matter of geography because consciousness of place is an immediate and apparent part of reality, not a sophisticated thesis. Knowledge of place is a simple fact of experience.

In my discussion place becomes an experiential phenomenon, something that at the very start is a vital part of human existence. Place is incorporated into the ontological anatomy of all human experience; places are locations of experience. As Walter (1980-81: 162) says:

“We call locations of experience ‘places’. Experience means perceiving, doing, thinking, and feeling. Every event happens some *where*, but we don’t often locate an experience by its latitude and longitude. We say this experience happened to me in Manchester, or I felt this way in New York, or I did such and such in Boston. A place has a name and history, which is an account of the experience located in that position.”

In phenomenological terms, the essence of place “lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence” (Relph 1976: 141). The quality of place, Walter (1980-81: 141) adds, depends on “a human context shaped by memories and expectations, by stories of real and imagined events, that is, by historical experience located there.”

Understood in this way, places are not neutral, objective segments of the physical terrestrial reality but sites of concrete human involvement. The notion of place thus provides an organising principle for what we may term a person’s engagement or immersion in the world around him/herself. In a more definite way, places are those ‘pieces’ of terrestrial-spatial reality that have been claimed by human intentions. Yi-Fu Tuan (1975: 151) proposes the following definition:

“Place is a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is known not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification. To know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another. At a high theoretical level, places are points in a spatial system. At the opposite extreme, they are strong visceral feelings. Places are seldom known at either extreme: the one is too remote from sensory experience to be real, and the other presupposes rootedness in a locality and an emotional commitment to it that are increasingly rare. To most people in the modern world, places lie somewhere in the middle range of experience.”

What Tuan is referring to is a continuum from the relatively centred views of pragmatic everyday life to the relatively de-centred views of theoretical science (cf. Entrikin 1991: 14). As a concrete term for the lived environment, place is a qualitative phenomenon grounded in the act of referencing and born out of a living context. As qualitative phenomena, places are not encountered in an objective manner, but are lived through. Metrical points on maps, for instance, are abstracted expressions for the convenience of measurement, and as such they are estranged

from the living context. The objectivity of cartographic place is related to the specific mathematical system in question. In the end, whatever system used, the determination of place will remain abstract. By contrast, the 'placeness' of a living context is not universal and abstract but concrete and particular, something that resides in and wells up out of the pulse of life situations. "When considering place in its most objective sense of location," Entrikin (1991: 16-16) writes, "each such place is distinct simply because of its relative location. No other place has the same location, and in this sense each place is unique." But in concrete living the specificity of place is "associated with unique experiences of places and the meanings that we associate with these experiences" (Entrikin 1991: 18).

Analytically, the situation can be described in the following way:

PLACE AS MEASURED

Cartographic: unique location

54.03 N ; 02.48 W = Lancaster

in the form of co-ordinate indices

PLACE AS LIVED

Existential: unique experience

Being at home = Lancaster

for a permanent dweller

Paying a visit = Lancaster

for an occasional visitor

We can think of people living in a given town (e.g. one of the ten 'Lancasters' listed in the Atlas of the World I have on my bookshelf) and people who are just visiting it. With regard to the physical attributes, the site is exactly the same for both, but due to their different life situations the place character that the locality obtains can differ considerably. The dwellers in a town know its streets intimately: they are familiar with their home environment because it is a habitual part of their daily living. But visitors have their homes elsewhere and they are outsiders in this town. Many a time the dwellers may see visitors consulting a map in order to find their way about.

A further step towards the existential ontology of place can be taken by examining the nature of a house as a dwelling place (Karjalainen 1993: 68-69). In this capacity a house takes on a special character. A 'mere' room becomes a workroom through the tools and equipment present in it and the intentions of the worker. In the same way the house can be said to form an instrumental complex'. Armajani (1991: 26) writes about a farmer's house in a Heideggerian tone:

”The farmer has made room for the house. He has cleared the place, so there is room within which the house can be met, can be encountered. (...) We enter the house, not as a thing between four walls, in a geometric spatial sense, but as a tool for sitting, eating, talking, reading and sleeping. Each structure as a tool is in a line of reference from one another: from roof to arch, arch to wall, wall to chair, chair to table, table to porch, porch to fence, fence to location and location to places near and far from the house. Each one implies the other.”

A house as a dwelling place is a referential whole, a system of assignments which receives its specific nature in the encounter with the dweller. The 'placeness' of the house is generated in the things the dweller points out, locates and makes specific. In one's own house (or flat, for that matter), because of the close familiarity, one can walk from the bedroom to the kitchen in the dark without difficulty - provided that everything on the way is in its proper place, that is, that the positions of all the things (doorways, thresholds, furniture, etc.) are the same as one has learned. In this sense, a house as a building for habitation is lived in in a habitual way.

Interlude: from remote to intimate sensing

Italo Calvino tells about Mr. Palomar, who, after tiring of observing the constellations in the sky, comes down from the observatory mountain and begins to construct a model to tackle the most entangled human problems taking place in the shapeless reality of human society (Calvino 1985: 108). The model Palomar intends to create is to be the model for all models, containing first the principles from which, by logical deduction, one can develop lines of reasoning as neat and strict as those employed by physicists and astronomers to explain the structure of matter and the universe. In a well-constructed formal model every detail must be conditioned by the others, so that everything holds together in absolute coherence. So first the principles, then the deductions and finally the logical conclusions. But as Palomar soon observes, there is a contradiction here:

”A model is by definition that in which nothing has to be changed, that which works perfectly; whereas reality, as we see clearly, does not work and constantly falls to pieces; so we must force it, more or less roughly, to assume the form of the model.”
(Calvino 1985: 109)

Delicate adjustments are required to make the model workable. But Palomar soon realises that reality cannot be imprisoned in a fixed model. Even if ”all the lacerations and contortions and compressions that human reality has to undergo to confirm the model were to be considered transitory, irrelevant accidents” (Calvino 1995: 109), the serene harmony of the lines of the pattern proves to be an illusion. At the interface of form and content the imprisoning form breaks down and the imprisoned content springs out in all directions. In the invisibly thin surface one cannot make a difference between what is still reality and what is already the model. The boundary is decisively distorted: the model of reality has become a reality; or rather, reality lies in the model of reality, and no-one can tell which of these, the form of reality or the content of

reality, is the original.

By quoting the Palomar case I wish to refer to the fact that we cannot do without categorising, without models of some sort (even without any claim to Palomarian absoluteness). The dilemma, however, is that in categorising we always imprison, but if we do not categorise, the world soon runs into incomprehensibility and breaks asunder (Olsson 1980: 11e). The fact remains that the aspects making up the human reality can never all be captured; there will always be traces, shadows and penumbrae that no formal model can imprison. Palomar, too, finally turns his eyes in the other direction. He understands that:

”The only way still open to him is self-knowledge; from now on he will explore his own inner geography, he will draw the diagram of the moods of his spirits, he will derive from it formulas and theories, he will train his telescope on the orbits traced by the course of his life rather than those of the constellations. ’We can know nothing about what is outside us if we overlook ourselves,’ he thinks. ’The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves.’” (Calvino 1985: 119)

This satirical figure imagined by Calvino paves the way to the recesses of intimate sensing, in which one finds the world to be untidy rather than neat. I have borrowed the term ‘intimate sensing’ from Porteous (1986: 250), who sees it as a necessary counterpart to remote sensing, the latter being “the examination of, the obtaining of information about, an object or phenomenon at a distance from it, without physical contact with it (...) The information obtained from remote sensors orbiting the earth in this way has greatly advanced the understanding and knowledge of the earth’s surface” (Clark 1985: 525). In remote sensing, observation and measurement of the object is conducted without touching it. Intimate sensing, “the appraisal of land and life at ground level” involves “not only visual sense but also sound, smell, taste and touch, body and soul as well as mind” (Porteous 1985: 250). Remote sensing is clean, cold and detached; intimate sensing is rich, warm and involved.

In his comment on intimate sensing, Pocock (1993: 11) writes that “geography, as the study of person-environment relations, begins with our bodily senses, for they provide the fundamental point of contact for terrestrial beings.” In the geography of intimate sensing “the world can be taken as an experience to be described, not an object to be explained. In such an approach, reality is mediated by, and not independent of, human experience” (Pocock 1993: 11).

In my usage, intimate sensing widens out from “the nature of our sensory engagement with the world and of the role of the senses in structuring space and place” (Pocock 1993: 11) towards the existential questions forming the basic grounds for human beings to find their way. The focus is again on the senses, but they are essentially tied up with a deep personal meeting with the world, in the process of which the human memory, a key existential factor, plays a vital role. “Life is more than separate events; it incorporates the quality of duration, of passage through time. Buffeted by change, we retain traces of our past to be sure of our enduring identity” (Lowenthal 1975: 9). In intimate sensing, there is ultimately a triad of time, self and body at work:

”As much as my body, I am my memories. Place is another attribute of my very self. As much as my body, I am its environment. How could it be possible for anything to exist without its time and place? Environment gives us our body, the earth our feet, the light our eyes. Time allows us to remember. I am the one who is here; I am the one who is now.” (Krohn 1993: 213; transl. ptk)

Time, place and self form a texture, and no part of the triad (‘tribar’, the impossible triangle) can be released without the triplet losing its morphogenetic structure and tending towards amorphism. Finally, because nobody else but I - my particular self - can have precisely these memories, each one of us has his/her own intimate textures. Speak, memory, speak! Let the images emerge!

Variations: in a place dreamt and real

There are inside the gateway
disconnected images - a memory
like a relic,

a dark negative, finally developed
that day I take my leave -

Memory is what in the present
makes the future visible.

(Carpelan 1993: 60)

In order to illustrate and develop further some of the points discussed above, I will now discuss a specific way of articulating complexities of place. My examples come from creative literature. I will introduce a few features from Bo Carpelan’s novel ‘Urwind’ (Carpelan 1993; hereafter referred to as UW), in which the techniques of narrative writing and poetry are brought together in a prolific and imaginative way. ‘Urwind’ is a very poetic text of strange depth and self-revelatory intensity. On the surface, the story is a very simple one. It tells of a 53-year-old antiquarian bookseller, Daniel Urwind, whose wife leaves him for a year in order to do research work in the USA. There is a complex layering and criss-crossing of experience, past and present, that makes the diary form of narrative a matter more of inner than outer experience (McDuff

1993: 273). The novel has 53 chapters, one letter for each week of the year plus one more, the first of the next year. “I am writing a diary for you, you will receive it as a part of me when you come back. (...) Or is it to myself that I write, this unfamiliar I that dodges off round each windy corner, letting the wet snow lash me in the face?” (UW: 1-2) In the modernist sense of literature, ‘Urwind’ could be read as a description of the process of identity formation, the medium of which is writing: “I sit and write, to whom? (...) I try to capture the intangible in words as though I were looking for something, someone, to remember.” (UW: 5)

‘Urwind’ is a versatile word. It means, most notably, both the primordial wind and primordial attic. ‘Urwind’ is irrational and unpredictable:

“I play with the interpretations of Urwind. It is the original primordial wind from the universe, the one that blows out of nothing into nothing, hurling stars into that storm-centre that is called the soul. (...) It has no pattern, it has the blue colour of space. If you capture it, it alters form, becomes (...) the primordial attic, with its forgotten treasures, its yellowed bundles of newspapers, its tattered prams, its dark cupboards of rumbling voices!” (UW: 3)

In the novel, place becomes a text of what it means to be a writing self in the rooms of fading identities, in a world continually shifting from one image to another (“images penetrate behind my eyes”; UW: 2). ‘Urwind’ is very much about memory and place, and in this sense it is about intimate sensing, in the wide sense of the term. The concrete scene of the novel is an old apartment house, its inside (stairways, flats and rooms, cellar and attic) and outside (courtyard and streets). The old house, which from the few hints given in the novel can be perceived to be in Helsinki, is the stage of life, an arena of the total range of human circumspection. In the house, Daniel writes, “every stairway (...) is a stepladder from hell to heaven, or at least to the primordial attic full of remnants, boxes, trunks, worn-out bicycles, skis and sticks and the faint but clear smell of overripe apples” (UW: 60). On the whole, living in the old house is like a retrospect put together with extremely spiritual constituents, showing domains of deep sensuality, perception and thinking, all connected with the place of dwelling.

Like every novel, ‘Urwind’ is open to various interpretations. I have studied the text from three specific angles, each revealing a different aspect of one’s life in a place. These readings are mimetic, hermeneutic and textual, their means and ends being characterisable by listing the relevant key words:

MIMETIC

Transcribing reality

Objective / physical

Map of territory

HERMENEUTIC

Interpreting experience

Subjective /sensuous

Map of mind

TEXTUAL

Producing/deferring meaning

Inter-textual

Dance of meaning

The mimetic reading seeks for the correspondence between the actual and described (written) territories. The question is to what degree the writer has been able to reproduce the essential features of the landscape and by so doing has made the work a source of documentary value. We can assume that because of the fictional (artistic) nature of the world he is describing, the writer may have modified reality, the real situations and sites, but after noticing the mechanism of the modification we can see the connection between the fictional and the real, so that we are ready to make the map of the territory. The assumption here is that even though the objectively referential landscape is distorted in one way or another, it still exists in an undistorted form. It is in this way that the work has instrumental value for geographers; in regional geography in particular, regional novels have been used for the purposes of obtaining geographical information.

In the hermeneutic reading the interest is not so much in the 'real' landscape as in the ways in which the place is experienced, interpreted and valued in the life-world. The presupposition here is that an author has a special ability to capture experience; that literature is a transcription of experience grounded in the life-world. What takes place here is a transition from the objective landscape to a subjective one, from the outer to the inner reality, or phenomenologically, to a dialogue between the inner and outer worlds. Ultimately, of course, the hermeneutic reading also includes a mimetic view of literature. What is at stake now is not the objectively referential territory but the subjective images (or the experiential field as a whole) that that territory arouses.

In both the mimetic and the hermeneutic reading, a certain kind of a priori geographical scheme is, at least implicitly, projected upon the literary work. In other words, when the work is analysed geographically, its possible worlds are reflected in a meta-linguistic context, the essential content of which, in this particular case, is composed of place intimations which the geographer has theorised beforehand. This has to do with the instrumental view of literature. As Brosseau (1994: 347) writes, "most geographers' accounts consider poetic language and forms in strictly transitive terms that rest on an instrumental conception of literature whose relevance, therefore, is to be found outside itself." Geographers just throw their conceptual nets into the waters of literature and take whatever catch they are prepared to accept. This sort of instrumentalism, in the final analysis, always serves one's own cause: "in all cases we know exactly what to look for, and we find it" (Brosseau 1994: 347).

In the textual mode of reading the text and the reader live in a symbiosis. When I read the text and write or speak about it, I am writing and speaking at the same time about myself, in that my self is constituted in the very process of reading. So ultimately what is important is not the work as a more or less stable source of reference, but the text as a semiotic field of associative complexes of signification in which the meaning continuously taking on new shapes. The interplay between the reader and the text is essential: meaning is not contained in the text itself but is created by this confrontation. As Berman (1988: 176) says, “meaning is not discovered *in* the text, but is effectuated by reading it.” The reader is wandering about the text, and also in the context, because there is no text without a context of other texts. Barthes (1975: 36) tells us what inter-text is: “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text - whether this text be Proust or the daily newspaper or the television screen: the book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life.” Inter-textuality, the motion of creative connections between the texts, is essential. Claude Simon, in his Nobel speech, expressed his understanding of writing and living in language in the following way:

”Writing is possible only because of all those who have written before us, for otherwise we would not know anything, and because of the language itself, which has spoken before us through its images and metaphors. Writing is to cause the language spoken before us to speak anew, to activate it. This is because language is not a gift from the gods but a crystallisation of human knowledge.” (Claude Simon; cit. Mannerkorpi 1993; transl. ptk)

* * *

It is now possible to apply the three modes of reading discussed briefly above to Bo Carpelan’s ‘Urwind’. Where the map of a territory presents the physical features of the environment and the place-names, the map of the mind charts the various ties that connect the person with the elements of his/her living surroundings. So far everything is all right: the first two maps are logically easy to produce. The third map, the one showing the dance of meaning, is difficult, however, because in constructing it the limits of representation are ready to erect themselves in front of us. How, in fact, can we write (geographically) in a way that allows the endless dance of meaning free space for movement? First of all, writing must be anti-canonical: the protection of the conceptual structure (of disciplinary geography) should be discarded. In the end, however, even though we try to go beyond the categories to describe that which is indescribable, we are forced to categorise and to refer by means of the describable words and images to something not capable of being described, that is, in some way or another make the indescribability (invisibility) visible, and hence described after all. In the field of the modern art, Paul Klee comes to mind: Klee understood the function of art as being to make the world visible (to show the world), not to imitate it (to *represent* the world) (Klee 1987: 57).

In my readings the prime intention is not only to discuss the phenomenon of place as depicted in literature but also to question the possible forms of (geographical) writing. In this respect ‘Urwind’ is rewarding. It is a splendid example of the possibilities for artistic expression to take hold of the myriad aspects of life freely running outside the categorical limitations of the

scientific wor(l)d. The latter, as Daniel once explains to his beloved aunt, are no more than “the dying texts, than gravel of accumulated facts, the compulsion in one’s brain, the way in which the lyric and epic categories commit spiritual murder of living, bleeding words, the turning of imagination into hay, the turning of theories into cement.” (UW: 92)

Map of the territory

To make a traditional map on the basis of 'Urwind' would be a somewhat futile task, as the novel contains very little realistic material for the purposes of chorographic description. The relative location of the apartment house, for example, can be deduced only with the help of a few references, always interwoven with the landscapes of the mind in an almost surrealistic manner. The following excerpt with proper names is an example of the material available for map of the territory:

”Suburbs grow up, you can see them stretching north with television towers and rollercoasters if you stretch out of the skylight and hear the roof-plates rattling in the gale: the summer storm here! It arrives, it passes over Kronberg Bay, sweeps across rocks and shores, tears the roofs from the stalls on the square, a huge whirlpool of Baltic herring glitters in roaming sunlight, is swept up towards the dome of St Sofia’s, people creep around like ants in their carapaces, Satan himself stands on Sofiegatan raising a bottle of spirits to his mouth, June is full of cries of gulls, the smell of mash, white clouds and cranes that reach the sky. I run downstairs and outside. The gateway on the light opens with a boom. The city rattles past like a railway yard, and the heart skips like a thrown-away sandwich along June’s waves and suddenly sinks, seven steps towards the unknown.” (UW: 89)

The scarcity of physical determinants of the environment does not really mean that the city is not be very concretely present. Its presence is not so much in the objective (detached) physicality of the environment but rather in the coming together of the landscape and mindscape, manifesting itself in the signification of the lived environment. The process of signification, the meeting place of territory and mind, is what I refer to by a map of the mind.

Map of the mind

Seen from a hermeneutic point of view, the question in 'Urwind' concerns the ways in which the writer of the weekly reports tries to collect and recollect his thoughts and thereby creates a shape of identity in his world, tries to understand his world as constituting an entity that holds fast and has more or less distinguishable boundaries. It is a question of how the writer - the writing self within his words - makes sense of his existence as a finite self, a person who acknowledges his

own image (and eventually himself as an image), although in no way definitely, as enclosed in an inflexible framework.

The work can be read through various oppositions and their unity. Interesting points for a geographer are the spatial oppositions, inside/outside, up/down and here/there, and the temporal oppositions closely connected with them, present/past and beginning/end. Other relevant spatial and temporal organisers include the four seasons and the distinctions between what is real, dreamt, imagined and remembered.

The spatial scales of experience are forcefully depicted in references to the cellar (underground world) and attic (heaven). Here, of course, many metaphors and archetypes are at work. The cellar is a remembrance of the war years, when the underground part of the house served as a bomb shelter. These memories put an oppressive stamp on this part of the house. Years after the war, Daniel visits the cellar to fetch a pot of jam. This "abyss underneath the house" (UW: 51) becomes a topophobic space:

"I open the door to the cellar, it is made of iron, I tug and pull, inside a vapour of darkness hits me, the lighting goes on above aisles and compartments, and I remember dimly how the house held its breath, how black people gathered, how they sat or lay, and the bodies go into one another as with the man with the black beard, with the white woman, I am enveloped, cannot move, am only astonishment and fear, eagerness and horror, the cellar supported by fragile wooden beams, long benches of silent people. Here the world is compressed to mere listening: there are the gun-blasts, the faint quiverings, the whistling that make us bend, the dust that whirls down from the ceiling with its retaining boards. Life goes on in the underworld, in its dark caves and passages, away in the darkness a loving couple entwined in each other's arms, the soldier on leave, the pilot who has a fit, starts screaming, springs to his feet and outside, people who try to hold him back, all of it distant and silent, and filled with the smell of rotting potatoes." (UW: 51-52)

Contrary to the cellar, the oppressing labyrinth of the underground world, the attic inspires emotions of hope and freedom. The way from the cellar to the attic is a passage "from hell to heaven, or at any rate to the primordial attic" (UW: 60). A great silence prevails in the attic, the act of listening to which is one of the important themes in the novel. Flying to freedom is Daniel's big dream: "Why, really, should I be eternally bound to the earth?" (UW: 84) From the heights of the attic one can throw out one's wings:

"Pine and basswood, cane and strongest silk fabric is my body, I am Leonardo's ornithopter. I hesitate. The city out there, the wind whistling beneath the roof, it is all a mighty power made of silence. (...) Everything glides swiftly through me, spring air, fear, joy, I throw myself out, I fall through my life, I sink in the darkness, I bump against a crossbeam, I fall into an immense heap of dry hay, I am light as a child and happy as a summer memory". (UW: 84)

The environment in 'Urwind' shows to a high degree itself to be a sensuous one. The everyday objects are tangibly present: "You wake up, you see that the green lamp is burning quietly, that the simple things have formed up around you: the coffee cup, the pad, the pen, the table, the sofa-bed" (UW: 4). The objects are not indifferent or insignificant. What is sad is that we tend to forget them; the things close to us need our care: "Each object needs special attention, they turn away when they know that we do not see them, when we walk past them or thoughtlessly use them, as though they were a matter of course" (UW: 106). The house, the rooms and the city obtain not only visual but also auditory, olfactory and tactile meaning. In the stairwell:

"I sniff the air. At the Bengtssons' they are frying herring, where did they get it? Out under the door it streams, bones, spines, dead heads, dead eyes. At the Pietinens' they are listening to the news, there is the sound of Sibelius, a woman is screaming: 'If you touch me, I'll leave'." (UW: 11)

Many a time it is just the sensuous embodiment that gives an impetus to the 'chambers of memory' in which the place is made. The dark footsteps in the white snow of the yard or the smells in the staircase open up the bolts of memory ("doors and windows open on memory"; UW: 189) and call forth the stream of recollections (images). The perceptions of the sense are closely linked with memories of various events and situations. With Aunt Viktoria:

"We sat again in the familiar silence that was our common estate. We listened and heard the city. There were the metro, the harbour, the trams, the wind from the sea, the odour of fish, the smell of mash, the snow's immense water-scent, the howling of the ambulance, the tango from the radio, the creaking of the dying trees, the voices from city districts like ice floes colliding in the circulation of my blood, voices from long ago, in summer rooms (...)" (UW: 179)

'Urwind' is very much about personal feelings in a place of one's own. Emotions: sometimes good, sometimes bad. Topophilia at work: "I have felt at home in many places, but not truly at home, except sometimes in myself" (UW: 179), Aunt Viktoria says with all her lifelong experience.

The dance of meaning

Text is a field of the (endless?) chain of meanings opened up through every sign. In the textual field no one element of meaning is simply present or absent but each is already produced by the traces of all the others. The same holds true with regard to the reading self: even the subject is an outcome of the interplay of difference and trace. The perspective is a Derridean one: an authentic, fully self-reflective and fully self-conscious subject is impossible (cf. Norris 1998:

10). Identity is wavering: when the self is here it is nonetheless already elsewhere; when the self has these characters it has already other characters. Identity does not hold; identity is an interplay of sameness and difference in which no meaning is fixed, always remaining the same, but everything is continuously changing, now this, but instantly becoming another. “I contain many ‘I’s’ at once, can see them, they go past me like strangers” (UW: 53).

If we now think of the process of writing (bringing out the self by means of writing), there cannot be any point of saturation in this process. It will always be unfinished, never at a definite end. This is because the context is unbounded: there is always something to be added, always something else to be said. In the trace of the meaning and after the association there are always other meanings and associations hiding. The regression is infinite, and the progression is infinite, too.

If the meaning in any one text is not fixed, arrested and finite, the same is the case with the context: the context is not bounded. For us as searchers for meaning there are no possibilities here other than our own discourses, our own wandering paths, despite the fact that we are faced with *aporia*, a loss of the signposts, the vagueness (dimness) of the map, literally: “the unpassable path” (Steiner 1989: 123), the dead end in which the text (life?) gets into trouble, becomes conflicting, the meaning unanticipated, without a formula. To go astray, to see the boundaries and fixed points vanish, the identity fade away: “in what room of memory do I find myself now, what time is being slowly torn open, like a ripped web? It is all turning into rags and tatters. I want back to the origin, the starting point” (UW: 19).

Now there is no meta-language but only the text and the writing. Now there is no author; the author is absent. There is only the text, only the text and the reader, the reader in the text. What does the reader look for in the text? The meaning is not contained in the text but is created in the meeting of the text and the reader. A geographer as a nomad! In the same way the process of language will never end, the geographer will never find the ultimate place, the finite formula: there is always something behind the corners of these words, too.

The world is written, read, spoken . . . the world is and is not. What about the self? The self is a trace. To write about how the echoes and images emerge:

“Am I the mirror of what happens? (...) Perhaps I am not a dream at all, perhaps I am the living reality and have attained my final place, while you are still seeking, groping your way through open rooms, have no permanent place, only a labyrinth, echo chamber, the great wind that blows away names and actions, so that only a symphony, a book, a watercolour, a thing of beauty recalls the love that was. (...) The full moon slowly rises above the roofs of the houses, gets caught for a moment on the tower pennant of the corner house, tears itself dreamily free and pours its light over the communal yard. (...) That is Klee and you see his full moon, you see four trees, our wonderful hovering house, divided, but not splintered, into a dark, warm geometry, into an architecture reflected in the eye of a child. If you look there, our window, our curtain, the garden with its fruits, the mountain and paths of memory, all beneath the magnetic silence of the full moon.

Klee sits bowed over his memory, the moon is the centre, but there are three smaller, red moons, like echoes, dispersed above the angular houses, the building blocks, the cross gleaming narrow and white in the darkness, Higher, higher the moon rises, and the sky is free from clouds.” (UW: 143, 147, 129)

Postlude

So it is that the nature of place, in the final analysis (who can make one?), is not something capable of being defined once and for all. Place is a flexible phenomenon constantly showing new faces, thus ceaselessly forming ever new constellations of meaning. The firm disciplinary categories intended to make up a framework for the study of places can have only a partial power of speech.

Place is a story we tell. I have let the setting change: the object of description (mimetic place) is turned into a description of the experience of life in place (hermeneutic place). Finally, the journey has taken us to the hall of mirrors and the chamber of echoes in which the images tell about other images (textual place).

Reflections in the storm-centre that is called place. In the 53rd week:

The snow stopped falling when I came back from the airport, it brightened up. The wind is stronger, streets open in various directions. I have gone through myself, the unknown in myself, and come out into a cold gateway. (...) This incomprehensible life, it cannot be explained, only built. I have nothing more to say. (...) Each day is a little lighter than the last. In the air, in the wind I sign my name.” (UW: 189)

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