

SPATIAL TURN IN LITERARY RESEARCH, ANALYSIS AND READING PRACTICES: PERSPECTIVES AND LIMITATIONS

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Abstract

A turn toward critically rethinking and theorizing space, has received a wide scholarly attention, noticeable in multitude of recent publications on this topic throughout the humanities, especially in social sciences. Over the last several decades works in the fields of sociology, cultural geography, anthropology, political science, history and recently also literary studies have grown increasingly spatial in their orientation. However, despite these developments the potential of space as a new heuristic platform for the field of literary studies has not been thoroughly explored until recently.

The following paper serves two purposes: first of all it aims at presenting the broad spectrum of scholarly contexts for spatial reorientation in the field of literary studies; second, it is designed as an attempt to critically assess the value and potential applications of the «spatial turn» in literary studies. The first section of the paper charts briefly the general context of spatial turn in the humanities, presents an overview of conceptual orientations that influenced spatial thinking in literary research and refers to some specific theoretical solutions that appeared within the field over time. In the second section the author discusses different possible applications of spatial thinking in literary studies, in relation to their advantages as well as their limitations. The paper concludes with a reflection upon one of the possible new research fields, where the spatial turn may be of great significance in relation to literature, providing new insight into the interdependencies between space and literary texts.

Keywords: spatial turn, literary research, space, place, identity.

1.

A turn toward critically rethinking and theorizing space, has received a wide scholarly attention, noticeable in multitude of recent publications on this topic throughout the humanities, especially in social sciences. Over the last several decades, works in the fields of sociology, cultural geography, anthropology, political

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science, history and recently also literary studies have grown increasingly spatial in their orientation – in the substantial sense aiming at reworking of the notion of spatiality and rethinking its significance for both the hermeneutical practices of the disciplines and for the general understanding of the temporary human condition. As early as in 1967 Michelle Foucault, in his critical essay «Of Other Spaces» proclaimed the beginning of «the epoch of space»².

Since the Foucauldian famous dictum, space and place have been theorized across a broad terrain of cultural discourses and academic disciplines throughout the last three decades. Initiated by critical tendencies within the field of social science and geography this emerging interdisciplinary formation centered on new «spatialized» approaches gradually called into question the 19th century notion of space as an objective, homogenous and empty container, a mere «stage» for social action. Critical evaluation of space in social thought and discursive analysis – introduced in the 1970s mainly by Marxism inspired works of Henri Lefebvre³ and by Foucault's narrations of history of modernity⁴ – repositioned the understanding of space from *a priori* given and neutral, to produced and deeply power-laden, concurrently calling attention to its creational aspect in transformation of social relations. This line of thought was picked up by researchers in the field of critical geography, who set out to question its traditional quantitative and static approach to space and drew growing attention to its social and subjectivity forming dimensions.

The intuition of the profound conceptual reorientation in the humanities was articulated with the term «spatial turn» for the first time by the geographer Edward Soja, who in his groundbreaking study *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989)⁵ diagnosed the repression of spatial reasoning as a landmark of modernity, tracing its reemergence in the critical thought of the post-modern, including that of Foucault. He thus argued, along the lines of Foucault, that spatial turn heralds the end of modern historicism, understood here as a paradigm privileging time over space, and marks the shift towards postmodern spatialized thinking, capable of providing richer and more contextualized understanding of human experience, social relations and the production of culture.⁶ In his later works, in-

² Foucault M. *Of Other Spaces // Diacritics*. 1986. Vol. 16(1). P. 22–27.

³ Lefebvre H. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blacwell, 1991.

⁴ Foucault M. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1977.

⁵ Soja E. *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. New York: Verso, 1989.

⁶ Although by some he is considered the founding father of the contemporary «spatial turn» – mainly for the coinage of the term and formulating manifesto of the reassertion of place in the critical agenda – Soja has been also criticized for his to a large extent superficial analysis based on integration of various space theories and for his overly simplified opposition of time and space. See for example in: Döring J., Thielmann T. (Hg.) *Spatial Turn: das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*. Bielefeld, 2008.

cluding the widely discussed *Thirdspace* (1996), where he elaborated further on the notion of space as landmarks of postmodern thought, he repeatedly insisted on the spatial as an important dimension of human existence, not reducible to the temporal and the social. Soja summarized the «transdisciplinary spatial turn» as follows:

«Contemporary critical studies have experienced a significant spatial turn. In what may be seen as one of the most important intellectual and political development in the late twentieth century, scholars have begun to interpret space and the spatiality of human life with the same critical insight and emphasis that has traditionally been given to time and history on the one hand, and to the social relations and society on the other».⁷

Despite the developments in social theory that formed a centerpiece for a critical reevaluation of space in the humanities already in the 1970s and laid the foundations for the recently advocated «spatial turn», the potential of space as a new heuristic platform for the field of literary studies has not been thoroughly explored until recently. That is of course not to say that the spatial dimension of literature and its research have been omitted entirely – the attention to it had been developed gradually in a growing conversation with the work being done in the broad range of other disciplines and directions. The notion of the produced and producing space – both shaping and shaped by a range of social phenomena, deeply political in its nature, influencing the ways of a human being in the world – entered into literary studies from a number of directions. First of all, through the mentioned critical revisions of Marxism and the Anglo-American cultural studies informed by post-Marxist thought. Seminal works in theorization of space stemming from this tradition, Henri Lefebvre's *The production of space* (1974, 1991 Eng. ed.) and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989)⁸ dismiss the purely materialistic approach to space and emphasize its dynamic nature. Both authors assert that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena in capitalistic society. Since, as it is argued, the organization of space is central to the functioning of capitalism, space must be thus understood not simply as concrete material object, but also as an ideological, embodied and subjective entity – that both creates meaning and is already imbued with it. Space is thus defined by Lefebvre and Harvey less by structural determinants than by human usage.

From this point of discursive production of space as well as subjective experience of it conceptual reorientations toward spatiality within the field of cultural and literary studies depart. The critical emphasis on space as representation of the embodied cultural experience of the subject marks the transition of focus in literary research – from time, the domain of the plot and characters' psychological development, to the production and perception of space as reflection of social relations.

⁷ Soja E. *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. New York: Verso, 1996.

⁸ Harvey D. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

The new approach, drawing upon Lefebvre's concept of a «lived space» (*espaces vécus*) and Michel de Certeau's⁹ understanding of space as constantly socially practiced and dynamic environment, brought about interest in the way literary representations of space reflect diverse models of subjectivity and changing social relations. Attention to subjective spatial practices, experiences and strategies of place-making depicted in literature allowed for new subversive views on the ways text utilizes space and for rethinking spatial assumptions that have been taken for granted. As the political aspect of space rose to the fore together with the awareness of the reciprocal nature of the relation between space and subject, increased attention has been dedicated to the ways literary text can reflect upon the subjectivity formation process in relation to space and, in the wider sense, function as both expression and commentary on society's spatial relations.

These perspectives have been taken up and advanced in the field of postcolonial and gender studies that influenced both culture and literary research to a great deal. They contributed mainly by the strategy of reading cultural phenomena in their simultaneous embeddedness in a number of different contexts, linked closely to space in its practiced, or «lived» aspect: body, home, community, sexuality, national and local identity, gender, race etc. Colonial and postcolonial analysis of literary works, such as this conducted by the founding figure of postcolonial theory Edward Said in his collection of essays *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)¹⁰ brought into the focus the issues of domination over space, invasive and deeply ideological character of spatial practices and the effects of migrations and interaction of different populations. Said showed, how power relations, connected closely with the spatial practices of European imperialism manifested in the most important literary works of the period. The postcolonial and race-based readings of literature and cultural phenomena drew attention to the process of, to a great deal spatial in character, construction of «otherness», which served the exertion of power and subordination practices. Following this argument not only the analysis of literary work but also the general view on the literary history started to change. The way every national literature negotiates its global spatial context stopped being perceived as neutral and taken for granted and started to account for the structure of the society in a given period and to reflect deep-rooted power relations governing it.¹¹

Gender studies on the other hand – where the issues of the body, sexuality and social norms defining and limiting the subject have long been of a central importance – brought to the fore the gendered character of the embodied experience of space. The assumption underlying

⁹ De Certeau M. *Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

¹⁰ Said E. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993.

¹¹ Phillip E. Wegner in his concise but very informative article concerning the place of spatial criticism in literary research elaborates on some of these points in relation to rich bibliography, see: Wegner P. *Spatial Criticism // J. Wolfreys (ed.) Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*. Edinburgh: University Press 2002. P. 179–202.

the gender interest in spatial relations is that of Lefebvre's – that space emerges by living and governing it and thus not only reflects social relations, but also actively produces and reproduces them. The starting point for this kind of analysis is exploring the discursive interactions of space and gender, as declared by a feminist geographer Doreen Massey in her landmark work *Space, Place and Gender*:

«...spaces are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood»¹².

As Alexandra Ganser wrote¹³, fundamental for the development of the notion of gendered space is the awareness of how the dominant discourses – including mediums reproducing or undermining them, such as literature – develop strategies of inclusion and exclusion by means of organizing structures of social space, assigning certain «domains» to the sexes. Following Michel de Certeau's description of subversive strategies that can be undertaken by subaltern groups through spatial agency, gender analysis of the spatial explores the ways in which certain discursive practices can modify the social relations embedded and formed in space. Thus, analyses of literary works of this strand address the notion of space in literature not only as the area of discursive reproduction of gendered reality but also as a potential niche where this reality may be contested and called into question. In this view, gender studies introduced into the literary research explorations not only how literature reflects these dominant and subversive discourses, but also to what extent it can be agent itself in transformation of the spatial relations towards a more egalitarian society. As Ganser aptly puts it, the aim of these studies would be to see spatial relations represented in a literary text as: «indicative of, building on and dialectically intervening in dominant discourses about social relations»¹⁴.

These developments that led to the recent profound rethinking of literature in terms of space on the wave of the «spatial turn», reflect an increasing impact of cultural studies on literary criticism and a diminishing influence of formalist and structuralist approaches that prior to this shift have mainly theorized space in the context of literature. The first approach, with its canonical texts by Yuri Lotman, Gegard Genette and Jeffrey Smitten written in the 1960s and the 1970s, aimed mainly at examining of space in the context of its semiological character, as a realm of signifiers that in turn stand for cultural constructs. Structuralists on the other hand – like Carl Malmgren and Elisabeth Bronfen – writing about space in literature mainly in the 1980s, focused in the first place on linguistic and aesthetic mechanisms creating spatiality in a text and delivered detailed analyses of the spatial structure of literature. Only

¹² Massey D. *Space, Place, Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. P. 179.

¹³ Ganser A. *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility In American Women's Road Narratives, 1970–2000*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2009. P. 62–72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

in the following decade the first studies appeared, challenging the notion of space prevailing in literary research and reading practices – space understood as a steady, objective and unchanging container, filled with human activity, signs and *a priori* given structures. It was marked by the appearance of works (for example Caren Kaplans's *Questions of Travel. Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*¹⁵) delving into circulation of space-related figures and metaphors in theoretical and critical literary discourse, inquiring into their allegedly neutral and fixed character and thus giving literary research a decisive spin towards the new «spatial» directions outlined above.

2.

The contemporary research directions within the field of literature studies, drawing upon the conclusions and strategies worked out in a dialogue with other disciplines for the past three decades correspond to some of the general conceptual reorientations brought along with the recently acknowledged «spatial turn» in the humanities. Elżbieta Rybicka pointed to some discernible tendencies in literary research marking contemporary thought about place in the context of literature after the cultural turn.¹⁶ Among them she enumerated: emphasis put on local practices and regionalism in literature; interest in hybrid spaces and borderlands; intensive exploration of the political aspect of place and space (literary ideological and mythical landscapes); emergence of new analytical categories such as displacement, diaspora or heterotopias and a general shift in stress from the poetics of imaginary spaces to the interactions of literature with real places. Pamela K. Gilbert¹⁷ on the other hand dismisses the real/imaginary opposition, diagnosing two directions of literary studies in relation to place – its concern with creation and representation of actually existing or strongly culturally embedded locations on the one hand and the description of specific topographies, like city, home etc. on the other. Gilbert also shares the assumption that the new challenge posed before literary studies consists not as much in the poetics of space – how different understandings of space operate at the level of plot and poetic structure, but in grasping literature's creational role – how it structures spatial experience, creates space and imbues it with meaning, processed and decoded in the act of reading. The spatial analysis of literature can thus enhance our understanding of how literature is engaged in the process of cognitive mapping – how it can contribute to the better understanding of the political process of imagining spaces and forming collective identities, by illuminating the ways

¹⁵ Kaplan C. *Questions of Travel. Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. Duke University Press, 1996.

¹⁶ Rybicka E. Od poetyki miejsca do poetyki przestrzeni. Zwrot topograficzny w badaniach literackich // *Teksty Drugie*. 2008. № 4. P. 21–38, at 33.

¹⁷ Gilbert P. Sex and the Modern City. English Studies and the Spatial Turn // B. Warf, S. Arias (eds.) *The Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London – New York: Routledge. P. 102–121, at 105.

in which space is being written and read by different groups and individuals. Moreover, the reassertion of space into literary research offers a new view on the canon, calling into question the criteria of its constitution and changing the ways we think about literary history.

Indeed, productivity of the new findings and perspectives brought to focus by «spatial turn» in literary research is indisputable. On the other hand however, «spatial turn» in general, and its applications in literary research in particular, draw also some criticism. As it has been rightly argued in some reconstructions of the origins of spatial criticism and critical reactions to it¹⁸, the recent interest in space in various disciplines in the humanities, including literary research, is as multifaceted as vague in its theoretical formulation. The first serious point of doubt here is the discursive origin of the term «spatial term» and the consequences of its analytical application. The clear cut distinction along the lines of Foucault between the «despatialized» modern consciousness – consistently subordinating space to time and emphasizing a solely temporal character of human existence – and the post-modern sudden discovery and rehabilitation of space seem to be overly simplified. The first reservation brought to the fore by Steffen Günzel¹⁹ is that, along these lines of thinking, one may be caught up in the same contradictions one intended to solve. In other words, underscoring only one aspect or category that may have been undervalued in the course of research while disregarding the others entirely, may lead to trivialization of analysis. Günzel himself turns to a term «topological turn» instead of «spatial turn», and «spatiality» instead of «space» willing thus to draw attention to the most important, according to him, finding of the conceptual turn – the understanding of space as a cluster of relations that can change within a set framework. Hence, the main challenge posed before contemporary «spatialized» critical theory would be to explore, how such spatiality is conditioned, modified from within and processed. In terms of literary and cultural research this approach would translate into rendering spatiality as a main venue of subject constitution and this being so, examining the poetics of spatiality, that is exploration of the relations constituting it in a text.

In a similar manner also Doreen Massey tends to conceptualize space, in particular when it comes to literary and cultural studies. She argues against the overly simplified opposition of time and space, insisting on a bounded definition of space, that in its «lived», subjective dimension is always inseparably intertwined with time within which the social relations evolve. In her book *Space, Place and Gender* she advanced a concept of space-time, recognizing that the subjective experi-

¹⁸ See for example: Dünne J. *Geschichten im Raum und Raumgeschichte, Topologie und Topographie: Wohin geht die Wende zum Raum // Dynamisierte Räume. Zur Theorie der Bewegung in den romanischen Kulturen.* Potsdam, 2009. S. 5–26.

¹⁹ Günzel S. *Spatial Turn – Topographical Turn – Topological Turn. Über die Unterschiede zwischen Raumparadigmen // Döring, Thielmann, *Spatial Turn*, op. cit., s. 219–237.*

ences of space are always locked in temporal framework. Thus, space-time is defined as

«...a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power, meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is an as evershifting social geometry of power and signification»²⁰.

Moreover, in her research Massey addresses the third problematical issue connected to conceptualizing space in literary and cultural research. Since within these fields the terms «space» and «place» can be defined in many different ways or not defined at all and since both of them have an ambiguous ontological status, as a symbolic and material entities at the same time, there can be no clear cut distinction between space and place. Hence, their characteristics and function within a given text should be rather orientation points that can turn out to be congruent or to some extent overlap. Doreen Massey argues thus for non-essential thinking about place and space and calls for abandonment of this opposition, that tends to render space as dynamic structure and place as static location with essential, unchanging characteristics:

«Indeed, in much of the debate today about globalization, about migration and cultural shifts, about the reorganization of time and space, there's often a background motif which is unquestioning about the nature of "places", which holds – probably implicitly – to a notion of essential places. There are a number of aspects to this. It includes the idea that places have essential characteristics, that it is possible somehow to distill their intrinsic nature. Very often moreover, that intrinsic nature, is seen as eternal, unchanging».²¹

According to Massey, in literary and cultural studies place can be defined rather as a set of variables, a dynamic configuration that is intertwined with temporal dimension. It is only in this way that the link between place and identity can be effectively explored.

3.

As it was shown above, it seems that there are multiple ways to think space and place in the contexts of literature. The first and most obvious dimension (but at the same time demanding some modifications in perceiving literary texts) is the spatiality of text itself, stemming from its materiality. Second, space in literature is the space depicted in the text, where the plot unfolds and the activities of the subject take place. Third, the entire world of literature's creation, production, reception and research may be seen in its spatial dimensions – geographic, social and

²⁰ Massey, op.cit., p. 3.

²¹ Massey D. Double Articulation // A. Bammer (ed.) *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Bloomington – Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. P. 110–122, at 117.

ideological coordinates of literary milieus gain importance in the light of awareness about the deeply political nature of places. The last, but maybe the most significant facet of spatiality in literature, indicated by some of the afore-mentioned contemporary spatial critics, lies in the creational role of the text – how it interacts with culture and intervenes in it to produce new understandings and configurations of space.

These views on space in relation to literature are by no means to be read in separation – the survey serves only for showing how diverse the direction of research may be. Furthermore, as the overview above has shown, the majority of the problematic has been present in literary research in different contexts before the recent proclamations of spatial turn. Even on the rhetorical level, the tradition of drawing upon the *topos* in literary studies – exploring different *topoi* depicted in literature or mapping out *topographies*, textual descriptions of space – has a long and well-established tradition. Hence, the «spatial turn» in literary research, analysis and reading practices does not thus imply a mere substitution of «the temporal» by «the spatial», nor does it mark any radical paradigmatic shift in methodological approach to literary texts. Application of some of its premises aims more at broadening the perspective and bringing to focus aspects of analysis that have previously been omitted. As Karl Schlögel aptly argued:

«Der *turn* ist offenbar die moderne Rede für gesteigerte Aufmerksamkeit für Seiten und Aspekte, die bisher zu kurz gekommen sind, zufällig oder aus systemisch-wissenschaftslogischen Gründen». («The “turn” is equivalent of increased attention to these points and aspects that have previously been understated, accidentally or for systematic research-related reasons».)²²

According to this view, «spatial turn» in literary research can be understood as a manifestation of more general tendencies in critical thought in the last decades. It can be set in a broader context of the prior «turns» – linguistic turn, cultural turn, performative turn or a turn to the body – discernible in critical practices in a broad spectrum of disciplines. However, they did not form a decisive shift of paradigm, but rather a new heuristic platform for analyzing cultural phenomena and navigating the terrain of new cultural situation, by some labeled as the post-modern. In a general perspective, the recent turn to the spatial, with its renewal of interest in this aspect of human existence, undoubtedly diagnoses need for new analytical solutions that hold the promise of fresh insights into the contemporary human condition. Within the field of literature – the medium that constructs, maintains and circulates meanings ascribed to space and place – investigation of literary topographies, exploration of spatial poetic strategies, reading anew of the ways experiencing space is being textualized and ascribed with meaning, can

²² Schlögel K. Kartenlesen, Augenarbeit. Über die Fälligkeit des spatial turn In den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften // H.D. Kittsteiner (Hg.) *Was sind Kulturwissenschaften? 13 Antworten*. München, 2004. P. 261–283, at. 265.

bring new appreciation of some aspects and refresh traditional reading strategies.

Nevertheless, the spatial turn in literary research gains considerable significance in the light of contemporary social and cultural developments, that in the face of globalization manifest the growing focus on the regional and the local – on these dimensions of human existence, that originate in the primordial experience of being-in-place, the localization of the subject, its changes, interdependencies and an emotional strain attached to it. It appears that the renewed interest in space and place in the field of literary and culture may have been actually partly induced by the recent revival of «literature of the place» – of the texts that are deeply immersed in the notion of the place and movement in space and that for their main subject take the subject's existence in and interdependency with space and place. Travelogues; accounts of a journey; narratives of travel, migration or return; novels of development based on experiences of displacement, border-crossing, discovery of new territories etc. – they all seem to reappear periodically, in different configurations, in literary history bringing to focus every time anew the questions about the role and nature of place and space and its relation to the subject. As the 19th century national literatures mirrored fascination with *genius loci* and its impact on the history of imperial and subdued nations, the post-modern counterpart tends to be more interested in exploring the notions of identity and memory in connection to subject's «being-rooted» in place. The new literature of migration and return for instance, in contrast to the traditional travel literature, focuses on human attachment to «their place» as a key factor in identity formation and thus raises questions about the sense of belonging in the contemporary world. In depicting the «construction of the self» in space, this literature poses anew the vital questions about the role of space and spatial differences in the production of national, local, regional and personal identities, in correspondence to the unstable character of post-modern condition.

Texts, in which space and place are the main means of conveying meaning and of defining such categories as border, uprootedness, memory, identity, power, trauma and possibility of transgression, are the main subject of critical inquiry for literary studies, where the «spatial turn» promises to have practical, and hopefully fruitful, applications.