

## On topobiography; or, how to write one's place

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**Abstract:** In topobiography there is a triad of place, memory and self at work. The self is a narrating self and to narrate is to try to organise experiences into a meaningful whole. In a narrative the meaning of each event is produced by its position in this comprehensible whole. What is of interest in this paper is how the meaningful whole is spatially constituted. In this respect the sensuous human embodiment is seen as always taking its place, or happening somewhere. Thus, the lived sense of time becomes the lived sense of place. In this way, time and place coincide.

**Keywords:** topobiography, place, memory, narrative

*Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future.  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.*

*T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, Burnt Norton*

Let us imagine that we live at the intersectional point of time and space. Just at that point time splits into the past and the future. And just at that point space settles in between the arrival and the departure. We arrive at this place from the past, and from this place we will depart for the future.

The intersection or origin of time and space – an absolute and abstract here-and-now – is a kind of density from which the scattering to time and space happens. This is because we are never just now but also no more and not yet, and because we are

never just here but also elsewhere. Spatio-temporal transcendencies at work!

This is a way to topobiography. Biography, literally, refers to the description in words or otherwise of one's course of life. Topobiography is the expression of the course of life as it relates to the lived spaces. This very view stems from the fact that human life is a topocentric reality. There's no way out!

Biographical places have an existential stress. Everyone has her or his own biographical places. How to describe and show them? These places cannot be mapped completely. Strive for completeness would be a futile task. This is because of the nature of biographical places: they are deeply personal and uniquely memory-laden.

We all remember differently. And in different situations each one of us recollects anew. Autobiographical memory is situated understanding. As life goes on,

new situations shape our memories. As a corollary, there are no two places absolutely alike, and no two persons have ever seen the same place.

In topobiography there is a triad of place, memory and self at work. The self is a narrating self. To narrate is to try to organise experiences into a meaningful whole. In a narrative the meaning of each event is produced by its position in this comprehensible whole. What is of interest here is how the meaningful whole is spatially constituted. The sensuous human embodiment always takes place, or happens somewhere: the lived sense of time becomes the lived sense of place. In this way, time and place coincide.

Leena Krohn writes as follows:

*"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).

Lived time and lived in place make up a texture, and no strand of it can be released without the totality losing its cohesive power and tending towards disintegration. Finally, because nobody else but I – my particular self – can have precisely these memories, each one of us has his/her own intimate textures.

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*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.*

*Bo Carpelan, Homecoming*

To illustrate the points made above, I will introduce a few features from Bo Carpelan's novel 'Urwind' (Carpelan 1993), in which the techniques of narrative writing 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 Harvard, USA. In the diary form of narrative there is a complex criss-crossing of experience, past and present. The novel has 53 chapters, one chapter 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' can be read as a description of the process of identity shifts, 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)

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. ‘Urwind’ is very much about memory and place, and in this sense it is about intimate sensing, in the existential 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 will read it from three specific angles, each revealing a different aspect of Daniel Urwind’s desire to find his way. I call these readings mimetic, hermeneutic and textual. Their means and ends can be characterised 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 a degree the author possibly reproduces the essential features of the landscape and by so doing makes the work a source of documentary value. We can assume that because of the fictional (artistic) nature of the world he/she is describing, the author may have modified reality, the real situations and sites. However, after noticing the mechanism of the modification we can see the connection between the fictional and the real, and thereby are ready

to make the map. 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 one's life. 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, or rather, to a dialogue between the outer and inner realities. 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 the life in one's place arouses.

In both the mimetic and the hermeneutic reading, a 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 the textual mode of reading the text and the reader live in a symbiosis. When I read the text, I am reading at the same time about my own self, 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 is 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. Berman (1988: 176) says that "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. Inter-textual connections, or the motion of creative associations between the texts, are here an essential feature of the artwork. In 'Urwind' there is an innumerable amount of inter-textual connections ranging, for example, from the Bible via Bach and Mozart to Musil and Klee.

It is now possible to apply the three modes of reading discussed above to Bo Carpelan's 'Urwind'. Where the map of the territory refers to the natural and cultural features of the environment, the map of the mind encloses the various ties that connect a person with the elements of his/her living surroundings. So far everything is all right: the first two maps are relatively easy to produce. The third one, the mapping of the dance of meaning, is much more challenging. This is because

the limits of representation will be faced. How, in fact, can we write – or think, paint or film, for that matter – in a way that allows the endless dance of meaning free space for movement without obstacles, without limiting boundaries and predisposed conceptualizations? First of all, writing must be anti-canonical: the protection of any conceptual structure 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 to something not capable of being described (cf. Olsson 1980: 11). In some way or another we need to make the invisible visible, and hence describe it after all.

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This time I only discuss the third map, the dance of meaning. It has to do with various kinds of texts and textual meanings. 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 that of deconstruction: an authentic, fully self-reflective and fully self-conscious subject is impossible (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, in which no

meaning always remains the same, but in which everything is continuously changing, now this, but instantly becoming another. As Daniel comes to know, “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 (Steiner 1989: 123), a loss of the signposts, the vagueness and dimness of the map, the non-passable way to go, the dead end in which the text (life?) gets into trouble, becomes conflicting, the meaning unanticipated, without a formula. This is to go astray, to see the firm boundaries and fixed points vanish, to see the identity (identities?) fade away. Daniel knows the feeling:

*“I wipe my tears with the arm of my pullover, Viktoria sits on a stool watching me, I am a grown man after all, an experienced secondhand bookshop owner, a heavy and stubborn bookworm, what am I doing here,*

*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 to rise above but only the writing. There is only the text, and only a wanderer in the text. What does the wanderer look for? He, Daniel Urwind, only tries to preserve the directions, to be on a readable map! But the process of language will never sit still, and the wanderer will never find the ultimate place, the ultimately true map: there is always something waiting around the corners. Reflections in the storm-centre called life, 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).*

The wor(l)d is written . . . the life is not the word . . . there is no last word. What about the self? Is the self a trace of all that happens? How to know it, how to capture it? The images show all around, like shadows sometimes hiding the whole scene, while at other times flashing it wonderfully:

*"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)*

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Gunnar Olsson (1980: 126) writes about longing: "To yearn for home is to experience a double bond. It is to be torn between irreconcilable identities, sometimes enjoying the illusory freedom of swinging with the wind, sometimes missing the real subjugation of being fettered to the ground." Daniel Urwind wanted back to the origin, the starting point, the ultimate place. He wanted to fly only to be bound to the earth. He wanted to know himself, and he wanted to make others know him.

He lived in writing only to come to sign his name in the wind.

Daniel came to understand that in one's life there are no final explanations. He must go on, have his ways ahead as they are to him in his memories, perceptions, and expectations...

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 halls of mirrors and the chambers of echoes in which the images tell about other images (textual place). And from here we, in some winding humane ways, touch the mimetic again and feel again the hermeneutic and again imagine the textual. And so on, until the end, my friend.

In 'Urwind', Bo Carpelan writes about the human condition, or about the state of affairs from which there cannot be access to the abstract Archimedean point.

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**Postskribo:** Mi volas al Anselmo Ŝtonego prezenti miajn korajn gratulojn (en la lingvo internacia sen borderoj). Persone mi scias, ke estas komforta havi 60 jarojn, kaj eĉ pli multe. Bonvenon!

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