

Topobiography: remembrance of places past

Pauli Tapani Karjalainen
Department of Geography, University of Oulu

“All this I do within, in that huge court of my memory.”
(Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 96-97)

“The present time of past things is our memory; the present time of our present things is our sight; the present time of future things is expectation.”
(Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 252-253)

Pure chronological time means endless duration. In the same way, pure chorological space means limitless expansion. Existentially, in connection with human life, the situation is different.

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 departure for the future.

The intersection or origin of time and space – an absolute 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.

I am a cultural geographer. What on earth has a geographer to do with these things? A lot, I would like to say. The thing in the world that geography takes as given is knowledge of the world as it exists in places. Knowledge of place is a fact of all human life. And to the question of place I will here add a necessary dimension, that of the lived time.

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 places.

To underline the lived places may sound trivial. But how can anyone exist without a place? As embodied beings we have no possibility other than to live somewhere. Human life is a topocentric reality.

Places may take various shapes: physical, sensuous, emotional, social, economic, and cultural. These all exist simultaneously, and each of them is conditioned by its own way. Biographical places have an existential stress. Everyone has her or his own biographical places. How to describe and show them? Biographical places cannot be mapped completely. Strive for completeness, in this very case, 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.

To sum up, 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.

To illustrate the way topobiography can work out I'll make a reference to literature. In his novel *Urwind*, published in 1993, Bo Carpelan takes topobiography to its limits. *Urwind* is a poetic text in which the techniques of narrative writing are developed in the most imaginative way. At first the story seems to be a simple one. Daniel *Urwind*, a 53-year-old antiquarian bookseller, writes a diary to his wife who has left him for a year to do scientific work at Harvard, USA. The restless criss-crossing of experience, present and past, makes the diary form of narrative a matter more of inner than outer experience, an autobiography without a clear beginning, middle and end.

In the novel there are 53 chapters, each making up a weekly report. In sum this makes up the whole year plus the first week of the next one. Daniel muses: "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?" (Carpelan 1996: 1-2). In the modernist sense, *Urwind* can be read as a playground of identity questions in which the process of writing is the main medium. Writes Daniel: "I sit and write, to whom? (...) I try to capture the intangible in words as though I were looking for something, someone, to remember." (ibid.: 5)

From the very beginning it shows up that the writing self lives in the spaces of fading identities, in the rooms continually shifting from one image to another. *Urwind* is very much about place and memory, about intimate sensing. The scene is an old apartment house, its inside: stairways, flats and rooms, cellar and attic, and outside: courtyard, streets, the whole city. The old house is the stage of life, an arena of the total range of human concern. The reports Daniel writes make up a retrospect put together with highly spiritual constituents, with deep sensuality, perception and thinking.

'*Urwind*' is a versatile word. It means both the primordial wind and primordial attic. And '*Urwind*' is 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!" (Carpelan 1996: 3)

Like every novel, *Urwind* is open to diverse interpretations. In my reading the intention is not only to discuss place and city as represented in literature but also to question the possible ways of writing places. In this respect *Urwind* is rewarding. It is an artistic creation touching the myriad aspects of life running freely outside the categorical limitations of the scientific world.

To have a traditional map based on *Urwind* is impossible. The novel contains little material for the purposes of factual place-description. The location of the apartment house can be deduced from some references always interwoven with the mindscapes in an almost surrealistic manner. There are but few landmarks or proper names naming Helsinki:

"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 the 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 boom. The city rattles past like a railway yard, and the heart skips like playing ducks and drakes along June's waves, and suddenly sinks, seven steps towards the unknown." (Carpelan 1996: 89; translation modified by author)

However, the scarcity of physical determinants of the city in no way means that it is not very concretely present, just vice versa. The house, the rooms and the city not only have visual but also auditory, olfactory and tactile meaning. The map of territory always fuses with the map of mind. With Aunt Viktoria once again:

"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 (...)" (Carpelan 1996: 179)

Existentially, the question in *Urwind* concerns the ways in which the autobiographical writer tries to collect and recollect his thoughts and thereby create a shape of identity. It is a question of how the writer, the writing self within his words, makes sense of his being a finite self; a person who acknowledges his own image; and eventually a person who knows himself as an image of the multitude of images.

But this does not happen definitely, within some inflexible framework. It is just the other way round. What we learn is that the identity is wavering, that it does not sit still. When the self is here it is already elsewhere; when the self has these features it has already other features. Identity is a play of the sameness and difference in which no meaning is fixed, always remaining

the same, but continuously changing, now this, but instantly another. Daniel realises that, “I contain many ‘I’s’ at once, can see them, they go past me like strangers.” (Carpelan 1996: 53)

The process of writing (or, rather, bringing out the self by means of writing) will always remain unfinished, that is, it will never reach the definite end. This is because the context is unbounded. There is always something to be added, always something else to be said. The regression is infinite. And infinite is the progression, too.

Here there are no possibilities other than our own discourses, our own wandering paths despite the fact that *aporia* is facing us, the loss of the signposts, the dimness of the map, life without an easy formula: to go astray, to see the boundaries and fixed points vanish, the just found identity fade away. Daniel asks: “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 (...)” (Carpelan 1996: 19).

But you cannot do it. It is a desire not coming true. There is no origin, no final place. Just listen to what Aunt Viktoria, whom Daniel loves so much, has to say: “Live your life, that is the answer. Don’t forget to remember, it leads you forward.” (Carpelan 1996: 20)

For Daniel Urwind the house and the city is a state of mind. Sometimes it is most clear like the geometry of the streets, at other times most confused like the fuzziest map. The house in the city is a place of dwelling. The house is of anxiety, sadness, hope and delight. It is the whole spectrum of human sensing, both past and future. The house

and its rooms, and the city and its streets, are upholders of memory. In the house and in the city life goes on. One lives in the middle of everything. Life may be what it is, but the picture of life is like a cracking fresco, or a map with unknown areas. There remains events not understood, images not made clear, places not found.

References

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