

Spatial Memories and Spectacularities in Hungarian Turn-of-the-Century Poetry*

ABSTRACT

The so-called “spatial turn” in literature, especially in poetry, usually refers to a new way of interpreting texts. Spatial poetics claims that spatiality is beyond or before meaning, so it can initiate fundamental changes in literary criticism. Space is not a mere function or an addition to verbal or visual composition of the works of art, but has a transgressive potential of articulation. Different arrangements of texts (e.g. space between and after lines), as well as various modes of representation emerged as a result of new issues in spatial studies. Space, however, functions not only as a frame or *a priori* or *chora* (Plato), but a possibility to signify or refer to different worlds, and also makes a counterbalance to signification according to its “outside” quality in Foucauldian sense. The paper gives some examples of how Hungarian memorials and poems made remembering accessible to spatial interests.

Legends discuss images which explain what the world we belong to looks like from a viewpoint we can never choose. They also point out where we really are, how to find our ways to achieve our goals, and which is the easiest or shortest path home (wherever it is or should be). Legends are symbols that help us mark out territories we are not familiar with. Legends belong to maps; they explain to us how to understand signs that enable our orientation in geographical fields. Maps are accurate significations of space but offer no real experience of presence; therefore we regularly have to alter our perspectives between the map and the landscape. Cartography uses legends, scales, and projections to construct a three-dimensional area in a two-dimensional display; hence the representation of space should always be seen as mathematically exact transformation of the world around us, with a lot of inevitable rough estimation. Generally speaking, maps resemble literary media. They are similar in production and pattern, and are exposed to the same threats (the GPS, or some new metaphorical transpositions such as mapping certain phenomena). Both can be translated into visual and electrical environments, arranged by signs, or experienced as a stream of effects, so to speak; both are semiotic, medial, and phenomenological. In order to understand them, one can describe the other. They both have a connection to communication through a

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word which denotes “speaking,” “traffic,” “travel,” or “interchange.” Map resembles a medium, according to Sybille Krämer (2015: 209–210), they both have (visual) transparency and traces to be detected owing to their signification. But understanding space in literature could mean more than that. It has to do with avoiding some well-known schemes of meaning in order to make an event, arranged by effects of presence (Lefebvre 2004: xi). Depicting landscapes in literature is different from cartographic representations because of their readings. Poetics of space points out where we can find a way to non-existent legends, however a legend on a map cannot be read without reference to the environment. Both belong to the worlds that are true, only their signification (or use of their signs) differs.

Nowadays criticism convinces us to take these issues seriously. We are well aware of spaces we belong to and places that should be remembered. The “spatial turn” questions our conventional notions of the time-space continuum and points towards spatialized memory. Time by means of numerous kinds of memorabilia has always been an issue, not just for historians, but for laymen, as well. Dealing with memories through buildings, works of art, public places, or landmarks in the landscape brings about new ways of being related to spatialised past. When spatial considerations are taken phenomenologically the mere place of memory obtains a meaningless character, which cannot be delivered only by signification. Walking by or through memorial sites provides us with an opportunity for physical experience of historical time. Moreover, since at present time topographical ways of thinking made the modern temporal structures suspicious, the application of map-like semiotic codes derived from literary discourse reduced “the space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it the status of a *reading*” (Lefebvre 1991: 7). Michel de Certeau also deals with spatial operations. For him, the distinction between space and place is based on practical actions which require the roles of signs:

A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). [...] space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, that is, a place constituted by a system of signs. (1984: 117)

Therefore if experiencing space is phenomenological through actions, one can also maintain that these operational renderings of space are still in connection with the linguistic, so to speak, understandable element. For de Certeau, names and symbols orient everyday practices of experiencing places, so acts and significations do not exclude each other. Memory is a special kind

of handling time, not just in terms of what has to be told, but also in terms of what we remain silent about:

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. (ibid.: 108)

Although memory is usually connected with time, spaces and places of remembrance were more important in cultural history, than the time-concepts of the nineteenth century made us believe.

Space has always been an abstract framework for temporal consciousness, the final frontier that cannot be crossed. Many scholars have studied these terms since the last decades of the twentieth century. Aleida Assmann pointed out that recollection is not about preserving the past, but about the need for multiplying it:

We have witnessed that far from automatically fading and ceding to historical scholarship, memory has been sharpened and reshaped in historically new ways. We are currently facing, reconstructing, and discussing new forms of memory that open up an access to the past that is distinct from and complementary to that which is provided by historical scholarship. Living memory thus gives way to a cultural memory that is underpinned by media – by material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives. While individual recollections spontaneously fade and die with their former owners, new forms of memory are reconstructed within a transgenerational framework, and on an institutional level, within a deliberate policy of remembering or forgetting. (2001: 5–6)

Making memory official means connecting it to spaces which regulate time. In order to preserve something so worthy of recalling, lots of external material has to be employed which has nothing to do with active or individual memories. As for Pierre Nora, the real environments of memory (*les milieux de mémoire*) had to be replaced by sites of memory (*les lieux de mémoire*), that is, by the tension between history and memory arisen (1989: 7–9). If history provides, but does not build on temporal perspectives, memory unties its time-related aspects. What remains are the hardly communicable sites of memory that are material and performative, those which belong to the realm of the production of presence, and not of inventing the past.

According to the theory of the sites of memory, the “spatial turn,” as one of the paradigm shifting elements of the cultural turn, makes us reconsider our notion of time-space relation. Historians, who were interested in the theory of history, claimed that metaphors usually arrange historical recollection. Therefore literary criticism also has to take this issue seriously. Literary history is well set in metaphorical or metonymical constructions, such as before and after, beginning and end. “Spatial turn” tries to convince us that

these constructions can be overcome (cf. Döring, Thielmann 2008: 23). Additionally, literary recollection has already used spatial experiences. Literary celebrations always happen in actual locations. We have a lot of memorials, museums, and thus the temporally oriented, that is, intellectual literature, demands its spatial, material carriers, as well. In addition to closed locations, open structures offer the possibility of emerging literary spaces, as well; for instance, the Ulysses tours of Dublin or Imagine Budapest thematic sightseeing programs through the Hungarian capital revealing its hidden or forgotten memories. In the digital era, moreover, it is possible to use the augmented reality in order to load real places with additional meanings to enhance spatial experience and expand historical knowledge.

In the nineteenth century historical sites and memorials became places of memory intertwined with national identity. Spectacular displays of places serve the goal of strengthening the patriotic character of a nation. Places were given special importance through new construction, cutting out routes from the bodies of cities, or giving new life to old sites: the meaning of belonging to people who not only inhabited these places, but who gained their identity by residing in them. National belonging of Hungarians is, among other elements, the result of their affinity with Hungarian place formed in the everyday usage. It is also connected with linguistic signification. Thus actual places turn out to be symbolic spaces that could be easily accessible for communicative approaches, and thus also, for literary portrayal.

Monuments to victories, statues of historical persons or depictions of events are general characterisations of collective identity. As our identities are bound up with particular places or localities, these specific memorial sites had to develop a common relation to the past. But these specific places where nobody has ever lived turned out to be places of collective recollection of a past that could be as fictitious as literature itself. A special kind of such historical monuments is a public sculpture of a literary figure. Thus for example, the statue of the famous nineteenth century poet János Arany in the garden of the Hungarian National Museum erected in 1893 portrays not only the sitting figure of the writer, but two protagonists of his narrative poem *Toldi's Love*, as well. The figure of Miklós Toldi, a well-built man who became (due to Arany's epic trilogy) a national hero, was modelled on a sportsman owing to his athletic built.¹ The female figure is the heroine of the same epic, but her portrayal is rather symbolic: she was formed as a Hungarian maid who is simultaneously noble and simple. Such monuments construct collective memories by evoking literary texts, by appraising their author, and through memories that are as much fictional as they are bound to actual historic episodes or legend-forming tales.

¹ Gyula Pekár was a sportsman, and a later unsuccessful writer, and successful politician, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Ablonczy 2016: 89–90).



János Arany was a poet who became a central figure of Hungarian Romanticism and, at the end of the nineteenth century, the chief bard whose works were paradigmatic in Hungarian literature. His epic works were praised as role models of national poetry, while his lyrical poetry remained rather unacknowledged. One of the lyrical poems, ironically, juxtaposes the romantic view of nature and the city life that threatens this view. The “wilderness” (sic) of City Park satisfies the need to re-connect with nature in an artificial environment. Arany’s poem, the *Song of Park in Pest* (1877), is an emblematic piece of work of art of making a connection between people and nature based on the symptom they share:²

I went to the park again
After long absence
To see: how its grass, bushes, road
could affect me.
I found it as it really is
(Have looked it up for ages, and a lot),
We form a pair together:
Worn-out man, worn-out park.³

Arany, however, liked to visit the City Park for recreational reasons, and honouring his attitude toward this piece of landscape inside the city, in 1932, fifty years after his death, Budapest authorities decided to erect a stone memorial bench (destroyed during the Second World War). The poem and the legend, connected to both, the poet and the thematic self of the poem, come together as one memorial site where nature is accessible through human practice; and yet people seek the lost wilderness in the park as a recollection of countryside within the city:

And, yet, park is attractive to me,
It somehow touches my soul
When I wander away, far
From the bustle of the *masses*.
[...]
Freedom – as I touch land
Safely, it affects me, for from this little
Park (although it makes me exhausted)
I can go to the Tisza!...
To East like the wind between bushes
That finds its way through the boughs,
To East like the cloud

2 All prosaic translations of this poem herein are mine.

3 „Kimentem a ligetbe újra / Hosszacska távollét után, / Hogy lássam: füve, berke, útja / Minő hatással lesz reám. / Annak találtam most is, ami, / (Régóta búvom, s eleget), Úgy összeillünk mi: / Kopott ember, kopott liget.”

That settles down on a nice grave.⁴

The park, as a place which invokes the romantic image of the Hungarian countryside (according to its representative river, Tisza) provides a feeling of freedom by connecting the artificial landscape to the poetically arranged picture of desired nature. Although the City Park belongs to Budapest with all its downsides, Arany makes it admirable through the personal and symbolic connection to the lyrical self. This connection becomes more intense with the development of park formation. The park as a piece of nature not only reminds us how landscape in its wilderness shows connections with the romantic appraisal of the countryside in Hungarian poetry, it also presents its becoming which never ceases:

The sky is not just a few square yards:
It is easy to forecast confidently
The weather for tomorrow
(I remember, it once succeeded).
There are reeds, mounds, swamp, –
That is why I like it
As it becomes prettier, by wiping,
I have been following it for 20 years.

Because it was not built instantly
Like that island over there,
I have been watching how it became neater,
With all of its changes.
And a trimmed or wiped
Path, cultivated fallow
Was all new joy for me –
But it took time to happen.⁵

There are historical monuments which have acquired their cultural value by representing events from the past, while also functioning as parts of a city, namely, forming collective spaces. The Heroes' Square in Budapest was constructed to commemorate the millennial anniversary of the foundation of the

4 „És mégis, a liget nekem szép, / Valahogy a lelkemhe' szól, / Ha elbolyongok földre, messzebb / A köznép tolongásától; [...] Szabadság – és hogy biztos szárazt / Érzek, hat így rám; hogy e kis / Ligetből (bár maga kifáraszt) / *Mehetnék* a Tiszáig is!... / Keletre, mint a berki szellő, / Mely a lombok közt rést talál... / Keletre, mint az égi felhő, / Mely ott egy kedves sírra száll.”

5 „Az ég itt nem pár négyszeg ölnyi: / Holnapra könnyű az időt / Nagy-biztosan megjövendőlni, / (Emlékszem, egyszer már betölt). / Van nádas itt, van bucka, posvány, – / S talán azért is szeretem, / Hogy amint csinosul, / kimosdván: / Húsz éve már, hogy követem. // Mert nem varázs-ütesre épült, / Mint túl ama pompás sziget: / Ott lestem, amint lassan szépült, / A változást mindeniket; / S egy megnyesett, vagy megporondolt / Ösvény, beültetett ugar, / Nekem az mind új-új öröm volt – / De ez nem történt oly hamar.”

Hungarian state at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The construction of the statues and the colonnades began a few years after the National Millennium Exhibition in 1898, and was finished only in 1906. As a memorial it is an appraisal of history by means of symbols of the Settlement of Magyars in Hungary and the main characters of Hungarian history (for example, the Seven chieftains or Hungarian kings). However, being located on a square it becomes more significant. The Heroes' Square is a transportation hub with a station of the first underground train on the European continent. Additionally, it is situated at the far end of the Budapest Boulevard, in the Andrassy Street with a column of Gabriel visible from the beginning of the street. Two museums frame the square; the Hall of Art (built in 1895) and the Museum of Fine Arts. And, for us here and now, the most important thing to mention is that there is also the monumental entrance to the City Park which lived to see many spectacular moments at the turn of century. These different functions come together as an alloy for the senses: walking, remembering, learning, speaking, observing, relaxing, entertaining both, in built environment and in the recreational area, make this place unique. History, arts, sports, and recreation are bound together.

Before the years of the millennial celebration, a National Exhibition took place in the City Park in 1885. The Exhibition was an industrial-agricultural-economic show and a cultural display. It was rather spectacular, a kind of diorama or circus with artificial and real buildings. After the decision the organizers made, the City Park needed to be landscaped and reorganized. New buildings were erected, but only three of them have remained functional. It is worth mentioning that for two well-known critics of spectacular culture in the nineteenth century it was the viewpoint of decadence that "kill[ed] existing capacities for action, for living, but at the same time it was an essential precondition for the emergence of new forms of life and invention" (Crary 1999: 124). The second event in the Park was the Millennial Exhibition which was much more cultural than the previously mentioned one. Transient buildings, pavilions assembled for different purposes all served a single goal: to show off and entertain. In the Exhibition Village, for example, the visitors could see ethnographical displays of the life of Hungarians and people of other nationalities.⁶ Such exhibitions emerged as Potemkin villages without any hope of remaining. Transition was the main component of this spectacular culture. The contemporary City Park (with its controversies about the new functions and buildings) does not recall those exhibitions, but provides new forms of city life with relation to culture, history and urban development. Skateboard-

6 The most unusual show was the African village with 250 black people who lived in their huts and could be visited for 50 Hungarian coins. There was also the Ancient Castle of Buda from the Ottoman era with a mosque: its muezzin accidentally died after drinking medicine for his leg pains.

ers, tourists, travellers are like visitors of the turn-of-century exhibitions, they all consume the space through their actions, they discover it as they invent it.

The question is whether literature reacted to these ephemeral events or not. Understanding poetry on behalf of establishing a new structure of reading is not self-evidently related to spatial terminology. There are numerous media that use this terminology in dissimilar meanings or for different purposes. Symbolic, rhetorical, or scientific approaches see the representational efforts of spatially oriented poetry in their own ways, but mapping is usually a common concept which describes such geographical, sociological, psychological, and literary endeavours. One can, of course, refute this approach according to de Certeau's distinction between the map and the tour. The tour is a social practice, the everyday narration of movement, whereas the map is a scientific representation which erases the itineraries that produced it (cf. de Certeau 1984: 116). Modern memorials and modern literature share this character of inhabitation: they are phenomenological and hermeneutical at once. Hence, spatial notions are not obviously applicable to literary fields; they can help us, however, to make the signification in literature more accessible. In semiotics, signs are understood according to their verbal affiliations. Spatial perspective can overwrite this verbal connection by means of different signs which keep their material aspects, too.

Baudelaire was not only the poet of the modern metropolis, but also provided a keen example of how to connect memory and topography. In the second Spleen poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the recollection is really a collection of objects and their containers, however, it is so metaphorically, not by means of mimesis or representation: "I have more memories than if I'd lived a thousand years."⁷ Lyrical self contains more memories than there are places mentioned in the poem: the chest of drawers or even the room is not enough to keep items from the past, therefore the self has to transform into strange memorials: pyramid, burial vault, old boudoir, cemetery, or sphinx: „It is a pyramid, a vast burial vault / Which contains more corpses than potter's field. // – I am a cemetery abhorred by the moon, / In which long worms crawl like remorse / And constantly harass my dearest dead. / I am an old boudoir full of withered roses.”

Spatial areas connected with the past and passing away do not strive for remembrance as a mere recollection, but also lead to forgetfulness. Although the sphinx as a memorial is a strange place of memory (because of the enigmatic secrets it keeps), it becomes forgotten and obsolete: the lyrical subject according to the identifying mechanism of similes which produces allegories loses gradually his identity, until he turns out to be an allegory of forgetfulness (cf. Jauss 1991: 846): “An old sphinx ignored by a heedless world, / Omitted from the map, whose savage nature.” And just as in the map, the

7 English translation by William Aggeler.

self (identified with the sphinx – or its absence) cannot be found in its topographically adequate semiotic space. Furthermore, this self by means of poetic arrangement is inscribed to paper as a legible, but undecipherable subject, whose only task is – instead of keeping secrets and memories – to proclaim its own meaningless monumentality: “He is the grammatical subject cut off from its consciousness, the poetic analysis cut off from its hermeneutic function” (de Man 1986: 70).

The first book of the modernist Hungarian poet, Dezső Kosztolányi’s, *Among Four Walls* (1906) includes a cycle of poems dedicated to Budapest. The writer was not born in the city, but has lived there since his university years. According to these poems, Budapest has to be worshipped and adored because of its social practices. In the *Trees of Üllői Road* Kosztolányi shows the possibilities of reclaiming elements of nature into city life:

May the heavens be with you,
trees of the Üllői Road.
May they cover your leaf-crowned heads
scented, flowery tempest.
one thousand blooms white.
You gave me pleasure, mettle,
in you youth was embodied,
trees of the Üllői Road.

To others thus too open,
trees of the Üllői Road.
Let them breathe the sweet perfume,
the sleep-inducing balsam swoon
across the evening hours.
Let them not see the sad cypress,
believing youth forever lasts,
trees of the Üllői Road.⁸

The trees mentioned in the poem do not exist anymore, but the literary signification makes them accessible to commemoration. This collective memory is constructed via Kosztolányi’s text, as the road leads not only to the city centre, but to the feelings conjured up by the nature of these trees. That is why the poem makes a connection (much as at the end of Arany’s poem which mentions an enigmatic tombstone with the inscription “Fuit” from the City Park) between natural elements and aging (or even death), so the refraining

8 „Az ég legyen tivéletek, / Üllői-úti fák. / Borítsa lombos fejetek / szagos, virágos fergeteg, / ezer fehér virág. / Ti adtatok kedvet, tusát, / ti voltatok az ifjuság, / Üllői-úti fák. // Másoknak is így nyíljatok, / Üllői-úti fák. / Szívják az édes illatot, / a balzsamost, az altatót / az est óráin át. / Ne lássák a bú ciprusát, / higgyék, örök az ifjuság, / Üllői-úti fák.” (Translated by Otilie Mulzet).

invocation of the trees not only reiterates and evokes non-existent past but, as an incantation, makes this past accessible even to the reader's practical life:

The yellowed confines are dying,
trees of the Üllői Road,
The day of my pleasure is at rest,
the breeze murmurs its sad distress,
whilst every seedling slaying.
Whither is Youth flying?
Answer me, o gloom-leaved trees,
trees of the Üllői Road.⁹

Poetry not only represents environmental moods, but makes them comprehensible for the senses by means of poetical competence. Kosztolányi's poem has of long been used as a model of remembrance of things past. The trees have vanished much like the youth, but they have a common experience, both are accessible to understanding and practice of walking in the nowadays Üllői Street remembering and missing the natural environment.

Cultural memories through memorials and places form historical recollection of the people. The love towards the city evolves through interactions and empirical contacts. Crucially, it can be identified through language. The interplay between spatial memories and verbal understanding is not shaped by discrepancy of experience and meaning. Remembering to spaces is available through remembering spaces: literary signification can be modeled by the phenomenality that is set by poetry. Space and time are revealed as a potential of poetics, rather than its boundaries. If we would like to interpret time through space, we should not forget that these interpretations are exposed to the diversity of time. Literature can be a great area to test these theoretical methods, because it is always the language itself that comes into play, and not meanings or arguments – or even battles of interpretations.

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9 „Haldoklik a sárgult határ, / Üllői-úti fák. / Nyugszik a kedvem napja már, / a szél busan dúdolván jár, / s megöl minden csirét. / Hova repül az ifjuság? / Feleljetek, bús lombu fák, / Üllői-úti fák.”

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