Chapter 2

Symbol, Situatedness, and the Individuality of Literary Space

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The aim of this chapter is to examine some of the ramifications of implicit or explicit references to space, place, or displacement in works of narrative literature, and to consider some of the ways in which this may help elucidate the depth of the significance of such references in terms of our experience of life in general. It is suggested that a specific focus on space can enable us to see how spatiality and the related concepts of entity, location, and movement play a major role in the constitution of the self.

In The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard reminds us that place can eclipse time, surprisingly, in relation to something as quintessentially temporal as memory, claiming that “[f]or a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.” This statement highlights the important role played by spatiality in the human imaginary. It suggests there is an essential link between the materiality of spatial phenomena and mental processes, so that memories are identified as being linked to whereness. Not only does it matter where we are when we recall something and not only is the nature of what we recall affected by location, but it may also be the case that mental representations are fundamentally spatial in nature, rather than temporal. If this is so, then the mental appropriation of meaning that our contact with a literary text facilitates is constituted as much by our own sense of the spatial as it is by the temporal. Of all the (traditional) types of artistic expression available
to us, it may be that narrative literature exemplifies this more than others. In contrast to the plastic arts, and in contrast to more social uses of language or even lyrical poetry, the typically private experience of the construction of a narrative in a short story or novel reminds us of the essentially nonmaterial nature of the meanings we make. In the case of modern nontraditional arts, including digital arts, the “non-materiality” of the medium simply reinforces this: engaging with the cybernetic space in which we encounter digital material, we are similarly challenged to make the mental leap from those “marks on the screen” into an invented world, a space we concoct and inhabit in our imaginations. There, the distinction between narrative and other literary forms is no less one of mode of representation than in the case of print, since the narrative depends crucially on our individual willingness to engage in the same process of creation of spatial reality.

That subjective appropriation of verbal utterances entails an encounter with the self at the moment when mind meets text, and the degree of engagement of the self with the material being read is likely to relate to the extent to which the text has an impact on our own sense of “location,” that is, the mentally constructed experience of a “where” and a “when” with which we can identify. We are, then, exercising an imaginative appropriation of an invented space, and the development of the narrative affords us an opportunity to explore that space, to savor it and to apprehend the multiple meanings that the contingent locatedness we invent can have in that context. And, while the invented spaces also bear some relationship to the social and the concrete—as hinted at by the quote from Bachelard above—the experience in question is always ultimately an individual and an abstract one, and we desist from our reading with the realization that, on some level, it has all been only “in our head.”

In what follows, we explore this through a consideration of some key works by two twentieth-century Latin American authors, the Mexican Juan Rulfo and the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, both of whom exemplify these phenomena well, albeit in starkly contrasting ways. The Rulfo novel and the Borges stories we discuss below enable us to better appreciate both the ultimately subjective impact of the spatiality of narrative literature and the crucial fact of the intersection of the two Kantian parameters of time and space.

Juan Rulfo (1917–1986) manages to evoke the arid plains and bereft villages of central Mexico in terms that make them not just a background setting for the actions of the characters who populate his novel Pedro Páramo (1955), but a fundamental component of an imaginative inquiry into the relationship between self and universe.