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Binary Spaces in the Short Story: Beach and Sea in Graham Swift's "Learning to Swim"

Narratologists in recent years have become more attentive to the construction of space. In more traditional models of storytelling, place description was understood as an impediment to the temporal succession of narrative. Against this earlier view critics nowadays agree on a concept of fictional topography not as an inert container, where story happens, but rather as an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes its plot (Friedman 2005, 194). On this view, narrative continually marks out boundaries and bridges them, creating a complex and dynamic network of differentiation and combination. The following argument is based on the assumption that these spatial frontiers, borders and trajectories should be perceived not just as textual properties, but as part of the "psychodynamic, interactive, and situational nature of narrative processes" (Friedman 2002, 225). I rely on an experiential understanding of narrative, focusing on the act of reading, a process which is determined partly by the verbal strategies of the text, partly by interferences with relevant information from outside the text. Cognitive mapping of narrative space is part of the experiential process of reading, and in the following interpretation of Graham Swift's story "Learning to Swim" I will try to connect textual design, contextual semantics and experiential effects.

As Suzanne Ferguson points out "setting is a more significant factor in the modern story than in the nouvelle and novel in terms of proportion of discourse space allotted to it" (Ferguson 1994, 226). It is immediately apparent, however, that elaborate descriptions of places cannot be the short story's particular domain. Why, then, should space be such a determining factor? I think the reason has something to do with the difficulties a short text has to leave a lasting impression on the reader's mind. I want to extend Ferguson's argument to apply not only to setting but to narrative space in the sense of thematized space, metaphorical space and imaginative space; all these variants are versions of interaction between text and reader or in other words constructed by the reader along the lines determined by the text. My approach presupposes an understanding of literary works as aesthetic experience along the lines of what Wolfgang Iser called the triadic relationship of the interaction:

A piece of fiction devoid of any connection with known reality would be incomprehensible […] the act of fictionizing is seen as a constant crossing of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. By transforming reality into something which is not part of the world reproduced, reality's determinacy is outstripped; by endowing the imaginary with a determinate gestalt, its diffuseness is transformed. (Iser 1993, 3)
As I explained elsewhere, projection and visualization, two basic categories of reader-text-interaction, are central to the reading experience of short stories.\footnote{The views on the specificity of the genre expressed here are taken from my monograph (Brosch 2007).} The disadvantage of stories, i.e. the fact that they have less room for the depiction of a fictional world than longer narratives, causes them to rely more on different strategies for capturing the reader's attention and then suspending it. One of these strategies is to activate the reader in some way so as to summon his or her further participation in the constitution of meaning. Shorter narratives cannot create and sustain narrative authority to the same extent as longer ones. Instead of offering large views of the world, which contain their own value and belief systems, they can speak to the reader's need to make connections, to discover similarity in difference. Whereas the novel can create a large intratextual system, understanding a short story therefore must have greater recourse to contextual supplementary knowledge, i.e. short stories depend more on extrinsic ways of constituting meaning (Hanson 1989, 23). Like the anecdote, a proximate genre, they have to presume the cultural currency of their larger framework. Because they do not have room to elaborate on the determining factors of their fictional worlds and values they demand a dual understanding in the reading experience, one in which one's own perspective is constantly co-present with, projected onto and interactive with those of another fictional one. This sort of projection or blending of textual material with exterior knowledge takes place, needless to say, in any literary reception, but in short stories there is proportionally less given in the text for projective elaboration. Their comparative dearth of fictional information makes greater demands on the reader's supplementary imagination and hence places greater weight on the semantization of each textual element. Obviously then, narrative space is a textual element that plays a more important role in terms of receptive projection than in longer narratives. Because certain spaces contain multiple cultural semantizations they can function allegorically or symbolically to expand the meaning of the narrative.

Like any narrative, short stories respond to the primary interest of readers in character and plot development; but since their own curtailed space does not allow large development of either, they make amends through other apppellative strategies (such as mood and atmosphere which is conveyed through setting). The other strategy common in short stories which I suggested above is their appeal to visual imagining, an ancient mnemonic device. Setting is an appeal to visualization, as any narrative element that evokes external reality is easily imagined and therefore makes an effective appeal to the reader. The mention of heavily coded places, established topoi and iconographies not only helps readers to understand narrative spaces symbolically, but it also aids visualization.\footnote{I use the term “visualization” for the visual imaginings accompanying the reading process (Brosch and Tripp 2007, 2).} Moreover, conflict, which is a primary means of producing suspense and heightening attention, can be effectively and economically presented via spatial semantization. It follows that the construction of narrative space can in several ways make up for the disadvantage of shortness.

An illusion of spatial depth helps to create the famous \textit{effet du réel} which is the mainstay of the classical realist novel, a mode of writing which seduces readers into identification and forgetfulness of outward reality (cf. Lobsien 1975). By contrast,
writing that rejects classic realism for a more subjective and abstract composition tends to employ a “flat” imagery. Assuming, as several critics have argued (cf. Ernath 1983), that an illusion of spatial depth organizing the fictional world according to the geometric homogenized space of classical perspective encourages an immersive reading for illusion, we need to make a crucial distinction between novels and short stories. In short stories a flat design of space is the rule. Short stories generally favour a composition that can easily suggest or symbolize conflict and its solution. There seems to be a generic predisposition for a relatively static arrangement of contrasting or opposed narrative spaces which are then resolved into a third space as an “emergent blend” at the end.

This frequent spatial design in short stories is most effective when several textual aspects collude: firstly, proportionally extensive treatment concentrating on a particular binary of setting, secondly, “spatial form” of the narrative in which the formal structure, for instance verbal parallelisms and juxtapositions, mirrors the spatial setting, and thirdly, symbolic or allegorical semantization of places so that the spatial dichotomies reverberate with wider meaning.

In Graham Swift’s work each narrative “establishes its own habitat,” in Adrian Poole’s use of a term from natural history that pays tribute to “Swift’s sense of human being as an animal occupation of space” (Poole 1999, 155). The story “Learning to Swim” is exemplary for this emphasis on narrative space. It has an enigmatic open ending that most critics fill with a more or less unsurprising psychology of the family relations depicted. Daniel Lea for example writes: “The act of learning to swim is contrasted against the emotional drowning that Mr and Mrs Singleton […] undergo” (Lea 2005, 65). It is in many ways a story typical of Swift’s “unrelenting cynicism about the motivations behind human relationships” and his “deep-rooted conviction that individuals are weak and cowardly in isolation and cruel and spiteful in collusion” (61). David Malcolm also concludes that Swift’s primary interest is in emotionally disturbed families. For him, Swift’s stories are only minor preparatory work for the novels (Malcolm 2003, 77). Though the psychological reading is not incorrect, it subjects the story to an interpretive paradigm taken from Swift’s novels.

A spatial reading can discover more interesting layers of meaning: In terms of the material quantity of the text, almost half the story describes places, either in the fictional world or in imaginary landscapes which metaphorically enlarge the meaning of the relations between the characters. A coastal setting with the cyclical movement of the sea is supposed to provide the perfect background to characters establishing connections between past and present (Hanson 2006, 5) and, indeed, in “Learning to Swim” the characters’ play of memory and desire takes us into contrasting spatial relations: water on the part of the husband, firm ground on the part of the wife.

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3 The term “flatness” is used by Mieke Bal in a commendatory way for Proust’s depictions which emphasize the disappointing and deceptive nature of fiction’s mirage of depth (Bal 1997, 3-4).

4 According to Mark Turner, blending is a concept that designates something that is going on all the time, whenever we process information. We are constantly blending the old with the new, alternative viewpoints with previous ones, adjusting our opinions and modifying them to accommodate alterity with prior belief and knowledge systems. In processing sophisticated literary text like the short story, blending means not a complete fusion of images and ideas, but a simultaneous awareness of different possibilities, from which a “blend” results with “emergent properties that are not possessed by the input views” (Turner 2006, 96).

5 These distinctions follow the categories proposed by Werner Wolf for the interpretation of narrative landscape: extension of treatment, spatial form and thematized space (Wolf 2001, 325).
On beginning the story, the first thing one notices is a minor rearrangement of ordinary word order in the first sentence: "Mrs. Singleton had three times thought of leaving her husband" (Swift 1992, 9). The phrasing stresses the number three, and its increased import anticipates the triadic structure we are about to encounter on every level of the composition: The story presents three characters, an unhappy couple with the telling name of Mr. and Mrs. Singleton and their child Paul. Perspectives alternate between husband and wife, giving us their separate fantasies during married life, a life polluted by their habit of reciprocal blame. We shift attention from one to the other while they displace their bitterness into a proprietorial tug-of-war over their son Paul and, at the moment of story time, into a destructive contest about teaching the child to swim. Only at the last moment does the perspective shift to the third figure, little Paul, who is terrified of water and painfully conscious of his parents’ diverging expectations, unwilling to learn yet reluctant to disappoint. Throughout we juggle past and present because the story’s brief narrated time is constantly broken up into recollections by either parent when an omniscient narrator recalls their desire to be rid of the other. But with the story’s last sentence the deadlock of interwoven past and present is exchanged for a concern about the future.

The setting likewise repeats a triadic structure. The fictional world is composed into rigorously separate realms symbolizing the couple’s excessive fear of agency and anxiety about the risk of failure. Even though the primary setting is a sunny holiday beach, the composition makes entrapment the dominant motif of the story, so that the reader comes to share the marriage’s claustrophobia. We are on an unnamed beach in Cornwall, which is divided into separate spheres associated with female and male perception. Throughout the time span of the story Mrs. Singleton remains firmly on land, enjoying the feel of her body on the soft ground, scooping up sand with her fingers and imagining herself as a Greek statue. Mr. Singleton, the swimmer, is in the water all the time with Paul. Mr. Singleton’s endeavour to teach his son to swim is in itself an act of appropriation as he has been a strong competition swimmer in his youth. Mrs. Singleton, by contrast, hopes Paul will not learn to swim and stay the small child she can pamper.

Rather conventionally, the woman is connected to the earth and the body, and the male figure is associated with water and air in his lofty denials of sensuousness. These connotations shift, however, as soon as the flashbacks take us into the past. It becomes clear that the mother also stands for a life of the imagination with her daydreaming and cultural pretensions, while the father is also concerned with the real as an engineer and builder. On the beach these oppositional as well as complementary figurations are shaped into a dramatic conflict which is not resolved for the two main contestants but which shapes itself into a resolution beyond both of them when the boy remains in the water breaking free into the unknown.

In a manner reminiscent of the "cubist" narratives by Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, the constricted setting is presented as a series of juxtaposed views: from beach to sea and back again. This repetitive pattern is relieved by temporal disarrangement through a series of flashbacks in the memories of both mother and father Singleton. These flashbacks are each definitively located in certain heavily coded places: a Greek island, a concert hall, a building site, a hotel room and a delivery ward. Each of these places contains an individual recollection reminding one of the partners how long they have wished to be rid of the other. That these recollections are acts of fictionizing becomes clear in the disturbing disparity between their memories. In an
attempt to reconcile the two versions of the past, an educated reader will have recourse to meanings which these places have attained in cultural memory, thus blending character psychology with knowledge of the cultural coding of space.

The juxtaposition of the couple's memories of joint life, each in itself composed of interwoven past and present, is also presented in bipolar spatial terms. While Mrs. Singleton appreciated the beach on a Greek island on their first holiday, Mr. Singleton "only liked the milk-warm, clear blue sea, in which he'd stayed most of the time as if afraid of foreign soil" (Swift 1992, 9). Mr. Singleton feels comfortable in water and on the vertiginous heights of his bridge constructions, he seems to almost fear the firm ground his wife stands for. When he dreams of swimming or stepping into the air, these fantasies offer a release from the sexual demands of Mrs. Singleton's sensuousness. Both characters fetishize symbolic fixity, both are bound to symbolizations which represent polar opposites. Neither, at any point, communicates with the other partner, but both signal indirectly through their communication with Paul their mutual aversion and disrespect. The story underscores the shifting associations of both protagonists with rapidly shifting perspectives which foreground binary oppositions:

She stood on the sand like a marooned woman watching for ships. The sea, in the sheltered bay, was almost flat calm. A few glassy waves idled in but were smoothed out before they could break. On the headlands there were outcrops of scaly rocks like basking lizards. The island in Greece had been where Theseus left Ariadne. Out over the blue water beyond the heads of bobbing swimmers, seagulls flapped like scraps of paper.

Mr Singleton looked at Mrs. Singleton. She was a fussy mother daubed with Ambre Solaire, trying to bribe her son with silly ice-creams; though if you forgot this she was a beautiful, tanned girl, like girls men imagine on desert islands. But then, in Mr. Singleton's dreams, there was no one else on the untouched shore he ceaselessly swam to.

He thought, If Paul could swim, then I could leave her.

Mrs. Singleton looked at her husband. She felt afraid, the water's edge was like a dividing line between them which marked off the territory in which each existed. Perhaps they could never cross over. (Swift 1992, 26)

The panoramic perspective of the first paragraph not only distances the character from our emotional empathy but merges into a wider intertextual panorama which transforms potentially psychological character into a reincarnation of ancient myth. The allusion to the figure of Ariadne, recalls the moment of betrayal when Theseus left her sleeping on the beach. This is the scenario poets and artists preferred to portray: a voluptuous female body asleep on the shore of Naxos. In the passage above Mrs. Singleton has raised herself briefly from this position in order to try and entice her son Paul into a return to the beach. In the same passage, her husband is like Theseus contemplating abandoning her; and Mrs. Singleton, like Ariadne who wins Dionysus, invites the desiring gazes of more sensuous men. Thus the intertextual references feed into a readily recalled cultural iconography. This appeal to ancient topoi is an aid to visualization because of the frequency of this image in the cultural imaginary. But the mythological reference also provides clues towards an allegorical reading which suggests that betrayal is and has always been part of male-female relations.

In trying to make larger statements about the world, short stories often favour a reading which allows us to project meaning beyond the particularities of the text. The characterization frequently encourages a metaphorical or allegorical reading with regard to more general human traits (cf. Brosch 2007, 110-111).
The complex shifts of the second paragraph in the quotation given above juxtapose the husband's irritated view of his wife in a sentence of free indirect discourse with that of a hypothetical observer addressed in the second person singular, again a shift in perspective to make readers distance themselves from his particular emotional reactions. The single sentence marked to stand out by itself represents the third time Mr. Singleton wishes to leave his wife, thus matching her key separation fantasies in number, and reminding us of the significance of "three" at the beginning of the story as well as in that mythical ancestor of short stories, the fairy tale.

Mrs. Singleton's point of view then takes over in a way which creates suspense and reinforces the spatial construction of the marital struggle. Since neither of the two protagonists particularly engages the reader's affections, attention is inevitably drawn towards the figure who does not take any part in the mutual resentment: little Paul, whose safety is beginning to seem imperiled. The tension in the story grows through the increasingly conspicuous silence of Paul, the figure of the third who is caught between the marital hostilities.

Paul's predicament is exacerbated by his father's pedagogical technique which involves a step backwards whenever Paul is on the point of reaching him, forever suspending the moment of arrival and denying the pleasure of achievement. This cruel act of deferral is a parallel to the postponement of action on the part of Paul's parents, both of whom have fantasized about separating but hesitated from want of courage and resolve (Lea 2005, 66). While the child is desperately struggling not to drown, his parents are unable to overcome the deadlock of mutual blame which has become impossible to resolve. The strict binary dichotomies of narrative space functioning to represent this conflict leave a margin, however, for reading the story in terms of the liberating potential usually attributed to liminal spaces like the beach.

The beach as an insubstantial barrier between land and sea provides a setting replete with cultural meanings. It has long figured as an ambivalent space in the cultural imaginary: Traditionally, in-between spaces like the beach serve as locations for initiation and passing from one stage of development to the next. Recent cultural geographies tend to emphasize the subversive potential of such liminal spaces, attributing to them carnivalesque licence or subversive or heterotopian functions (Walton 2000, 3-4). But besides such liberating aspects, an uncanny and threatening quality is retained in the cultural memory of the sea-side from the early days of dangerous seafaring (Corbin 1994, 18). These connotations of liminality and danger which are attributed in cultural memory to the insubstantial borderline between land and sea reverberate in the story as well. It stresses danger and mystery in the mounting suspense that builds up around Paul's act of learning to swim. The tension between the two contrasting connotations of the beach as a space of freedom and a space of danger reflects the marital power struggle. However, in spite of its pessimism about gender relations, the story allows us readers to form a notion of a third space as an emergent blend at the end. This is possible not so much via reference to a real location but by shifting the analysis from the design of the fictional world and its descriptive values and symbolic meanings towards a cognitive mapping performed by the reader in processing the text.

The strictly separated and conflictual spheres of the main characters are grounded in and interdependent with a momentariness which is achieved by means of several formal devices. The reader's experience is shaped by the way the narrative exploits
dichotomies in the changing positions and figurations of husband and wife, where the spatial inserts of their past life present shifting connotations, attributing to each a penchant for the real and then changing it to a preference for the imaginary. Since there is no movement besides the incessant back and forth between these alternatives, the atmosphere becomes one of vertiginous entrapment.

The claustrophobic atmosphere is further underscored by the construction of narrated time. The story whose action takes place within a few minutes is cut loose from chronological time to suggest how the seemingly random events of the past have conspired to produce the final moment, in which both the story and the conflict crystallize around Paul's decision, realized in the final sentence, to strike out to sea alone (Gorra 1985, 12).

"There," said his father as he realized. "There!" His father stood like a man waiting to clasp a lover; there was a gleam on his face. "Towards me! Towards me!" said his father suddenly. But he kicked and struck, half in panic, half in pride, away from his father, away from the shore, away, in this strange new element that seemed all his own. (Swift 1992, 28)

The insistent repetition of the word "father" with its possessive pronoun marks the sudden transition of focalization to the boy, who has been the missing third element in the deadlock of opposing vistas so far. Having had no textual room or voice until the very last, he then becomes a childish redeemer figure receding from the embattled space of the adults (Mecklenburg 2000, 128). As readers we cannot be immediately certain whether to rejoice or grieve about this ambiguous ending. More than the fighting parents, the silent figure of the child appeals to our emotional engagement. Put very crudely, we do not want Paul to die or suffer and therefore we learn to value the ambiguous state of neither swimming nor drowning. At the same time, we are aware of the severe strain on the child. For Paul, learning to swim or not both have serious ramifications. Each outcome will alienate him from one of his parents; for him, success is failure since he is bound to disappoint one of them. The boy is held hostage not only by the competing parents but also by the anxieties both options involve; it is only in the inconstant space of learning that the pressures of expectation and appropriation recede. Suspensefully, the story holds his success or failure in paralyzing simultaneous co-existence. But the final sentence opens up an escape route out of the story's contested spaces. Since Paul's swimming out to sea is an act of liberation only in a completely unrealistic and utopian understanding, it also offers us readers a potential escape route into a different text, harnessing a fantastic imagination for transcending the conflict and leaving behind the pessimistic universalities concerning gender and family relations which Swift's story suggests.

The story creates a complex chronotope, integrating narrative time and setting into an idea of liminal space (Bakhtin 1981, 84). The juxtaposition of opposing views of the past forms an intricate mosaic of parallel and contrapuntal flashbacks which is inserted into the short narrated present. The effect is momentariness or "spatial form" accomplished through a textual sublation of narrative time. Momentariness is further realized grammatically in the progressive form which features prominently in the title. In reading the story and building hypotheses on possible solutions, the progressive form of the title becomes remarkably and increasingly meaningful, because the bitter, but unavoidable implication of the progressive form "learning" lies in describing a
state that cannot persist: One will ultimately swim if one learns, just as one will arrive when one travels (Lea 2005, 66). Thus the eponymous process is itself indicative of in-betweenness; it suggests a hiatus between two affiliations for the child character, and between two modes of being for the reader, who acknowledges the symbolic temperaments of the parents. The presentism of the linguistic form "learning" artificially retains indefinitely the in-between state of the not-yet, while its semantic aspect denotes a process of suspended acculturation. It makes clear that the suspended moment realized in "spatial form" is an artificial construction of a third space that exists in the imagination only and cannot be occupied in real life.

Textual structure and reading experience interact to suggest that hope lies in deferral. Against the couple's regressive fixations, the story as a whole offers a reconciliation in an acceptance of ongoing, unfinished formation. It produces an abstractly conceptualized interim position, the in-between as the only space of liberation from the pressures of being caught in conflict. It thus privileges a transient space created by means of language and its imaginative concretization where an indefinite prolongation of the ongoing progressive can be realized and where a refusal to take sides can be prolonged indefinitely. Only the elusive space of the in-between and not-yet is a refuge from the harmful human relations depicted. Yet in shifting the idea of refuge from the fictional to the linguistic, and from fictional thematized space to mental map, the story also displays the limitations of fiction. While the two main characters present various stages of failing communication and insufficient imagination, the act of denial which Paul performs by swimming away may be read as something more than just a pessimistic assessment of family relations. Radically poised between an act of self-assertion and defeat, it becomes a symbol of the act of fictionizing itself which, like the ability to swim, is a source of creative energy helping us readers to escape the controlling influence of circumstances. Before it fulfills this function for the reader, it has done so for the writer; and the fact that this was the author's first attempt at fictional narrative suggests that he has shaped the symbolic chronotopes deliberately, while himself learning to swim in the literary medium, as it were.

We have seen that the narrative is structured on a binary opposition of spaces which is gradually undermined by the emergence of a third textual space whose hybrid status is realized in terms of grammatical structure, descriptive appeal to cultural memory and experiential effect for the reader. The triadic pattern so common to short story space in this case achieves unusual significance in a metafictional allusion to the tripartite relationship which, according to Iser, is always involved in any encounter with a literary articulation. It is the middle position in this relation between the real, the fictive and the imaginary that is celebrated here. In performing a metaleptic reading of the ending, we can leave the embattled fictional space behind for a textual space offering the comforts of creativity.

Works Cited:


