LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Texts (Un)hinged and Unfolded: Fantastical Narratives and Unrelated Spaces

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The intercity train between Helsinki and Jyväskylä is filled with stories. To be on time for seminars that require in-person attendance, I travel in the early hours; there are only a few fellow passengers and it is relatively quiet. As we leave the capital and travel north, the scenery outside the train windows changes. The city centre with the older districts disappears from sight, followed by industrial buildings and blocks of flats, followed by forests and lakes and small towns passing by, and – depending on the season – by wetlands and mist or by snowy fields and frozen rivers. Three and a half hours on the train is dedicated to reading fiction on my phone, looking out of the window and – occasionally – napping. In the evening, with the events concluded, another three and a half hours of travel awaits me.

Trains and stations are among Augé's *non-places* (1995), presumably the same everywhere, lacking individuality, with few exceptional features to remember them by. Today, an intercity train in Finland is basically the same as an intercity train in South Korea, if *Train to Busan* (2016 South Korean film about a zombie virus outbreak) is anything to go by. I cannot say I missed the train trips during the pandemic, but the time and space the commute offered turned into a peculiar interplay of extra-literary experiences.

In the first year of my regular commute during my PhD studies, I reread short stories by Oscar Wilde, which I found easy to 'situate' in Helsinki where I lived at the time. Next was Sheridan Le Fanu, whose stories also resonated with the Nordic capital's gloominess but could just as well be placed in a countryside manor. Solitary old houses glimpsed from the train window supplied a suitable enough setting for the latter.

After that, landscapes of Central Finland turned into Skyrim – the northern province on the fictional continent of Tamriel from Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* (1994–) game series. The games are known for their in-game books which serve many purposes, providing insights into the lore and describing the lives of rulers and heroes through original narratives that can rival traditional short stories in length. Such books are encountered in the game world and also available in an online archive *The Imperial Library* (n.d.). The experience of reading in-game books is intertextual and intermedial on several levels, as the reading experience is supplemented by my geographical 'knowledge' of the game world and the lived geographies. My familiarity with sceneries from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and the actual experience of traversing the Nordic landscape resonates with the narratives of the in-game books, connecting with what I see outside the windows, and with what I feel when rain or snowstorm greets me as I step out to the platform and trudge across the town. Not only do I lay out the holds of Skyrim, with biomes matching Finnish geography, upon the surroundings, but the sensory experience of gameplay and the actual-world mimic each other. Walking through a snowstorm in *Skyrim* doesn't give me frostbite but provides an almost complete visual experience of what it's like. These sites and sensory experiences supplement the reading, becoming a part of what it is to be in Skyrim, despite of occurring in an entirely unconnected extra-literary space.

In an article previously published in *Literary Geographies* (Amey 2020), I reflected, with a similar autoethnographic approach, on how my hometown, a bleak post-industrial city on the Arctic coast, became seen through Joel Lane's novels and short stories set in Birmingham. Although at the time I didn't consider it through the concept of 'spatial hinge,' the instances of reading the text into spaces where one resided or visited, based on the perceived similarities, echo Thurgill and Lovell's (2019) and Thurgill's (2021) proposed ideas of unrelated texts becoming 'hinged' to spaces and places unassociated with texts, which then become part of the narrative.

I encountered these notions again when analysing interview transcripts for a study of media travel and spatial engagement with fiction, undertaken before the pandemic impacted travel. Several occurrences of 'spatial' reading of texts, described by the respondents, indicated a more nuanced reader-text relationship than simply the act of travelling to extra-literary locations described in the books. Below, I will look at some excerpts from textual interviews, reframing them through the idea of the 'spatial hinge' to offer a new way to conceptualize the experiences described by the respondents.

The three interviewees (given pseudonyms in this paper) are self-identified fans of fantasy genre and are introduced here with excerpts from responses to the questions posed during my research. Two of them are avid readers and remark that they often used to 'situate' the narrative they read in familiar places when reading during childhood and adolescence. Both offer a possible explanation for this: as they lacked extended personal geographical experiences in their youth, familiar locations became 'stand ins' for the fictional or fictionalized ones described in the books they read. In adulthood, however, the experiences of these two readers differ greatly.

Emilia (in her 30s, from Finland), who used to map fictional geographies onto her surroundings and name places after fantasy locations as a child, has travelled extensively in adulthood. With a rich geographical experience under her belt, including visits to several literary places, Emilia continues to connect her favourite texts to unrelated locations and admits to thinking of the world through fiction. Among the examples she gives is her experience of working at the university library in Leuven during her research visit: "I started calling it 'Hogwarts' in my head (and in my social media postings). I've never seen a library that looked so much like a fantasy castle!"

Based on her experiences, she also questions whether certain places 'fit' better as a setting of the story than the 'actual' setting (i.e., the one indicated by the author):

> Edinburgh is a very 'storious' kind of place, even though I don't think I've ever read a novel based there. All the old stone buildings, steep alleyways and stairs are really quite something in the dark and the rain. Whenever I have to think of a darker, more Gothic version of Victorian London, I've come to think of Edinburgh.

For Emilia, texts seem to 'unhinge' themselves from London, and instead 'happen' in Edinburgh. Although in some cases, the connection actually exists, as she explains the suitability of R. L. Stevenson's stories to Edinburgh by the fact that he 'lived in Edinburgh, so perhaps his Jekyll and Hyde does really have a more 'Edinburgh-kind-of-vibe' to it - even though it's really supposed to be set in London'.

Unlike Emilia, who had wished to travel ever since she was young, the second respondent, Catherine (in her 40s), as a child was generally content being where she was, turning places she knew into locations she encountered in fiction, with narratives becoming 'hinged' to familiar places in her hometown, Haapsalu, Estonia. Among her favourite authors at the time was Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren, and several examples she offers are related to her books: '…when I read Lindgren as a child and she was describing the ruins kids were playing in, I saw the only ruins I knew from my town and the imagined place became fitted to the story.'

Catherine further describes how for her the old castle ruin becomes part of the literary landscape of one of the *Master Detective: Kalle Blomkvist* mysteries:

> there was a door from the yard inside the walls leading into a dark circle shaped empty room. The door, always locked, was made of metal bars so you could see into the dark room but not much. Even though it didn't match the description of the book (no metal bars, no circle shape, clearly not just one room but connecting tunnels that formed a labyrinth), for me this always locked door in the ruins and the not quite visible shadowy room became the place I saw when reading. And the book came into my mind whenever I passed the place.

She also indicates that her view of a fictional setting was affected by Ilon Wikland's illustrations of Lindgren's books. Wikland, who is also from Haapsalu, used familiar places

for inspiration, making them 'official' representations of places described in the books. Illustrators, editors and translators are mentioned by Sheila Hones (2008) as being among the agents who affect and co-contribute to the 'event' of the text. For Catherine, the illustrator being from her own hometown directly connects to the 'hinging' of the texts.

Catherine admits she 'would have enjoyed visiting Sweden to see the settings to many [Lindgren's] stories' as a child, but also says that based on her childhood reading experience and the way texts were linked to familiar places, 'Sweden was not completely irreplaceable'. This resonates with Nicola Watson's observation of how her young daughter dismissed literary tourism as an endeavor, seeing no reason to find the 'actual' place mentioned in the book nor being 'inclined to ascribe the origin of the book to place' (Watson 2006: 2).

While for Emilia adding extra-textual spaces to the texts and having the texts 'spill over' into the places she visits is a habit, Catherine says that such instances no longer happen in connection with her reading. She notes that when reading as an adult, 'the description of some place might adjust in my head to a place I know', but on the other hand, unassociated places don't become linked to fiction. She ponders over the reason why it only happened in her childhood and jokingly comments: 'now I feel my world is poor'.

The third respondent, Jakob (in his 30s, from Finland), connects his experience of a nature trip to sceneries of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, where his fascination with the surroundings and the atmosphere evoked the same feeling he had when reading Tolkien's books:

> One trip to the lake country in the south of Finland, we were driving the family boat through a channel. It was pretty narrow and straight with a forest of birch trees on both sides of the channel. The leaves were shining in the light like gold and I thought to myself this could be what the forest of Lothlorien was like, from *The Lord of the Rings*. […] The fact that I had just read the book again was probably a bigger factor than anything else, as the setting and story was still swirling inside my mind.

Regarded through the concept of the 'spatial hinge', these excerpts offer insights into moments of unintended and spontaneous 'hinging' of narratives to space and space to narratives, and also demonstrate that associations with texts can be tied to a process of spatial recollection, with literary texts folded into the mix of personal knowledge and geographical experience. There are wider possibilities of utilizing the 'spatial hinge' for further studies of the 'spatial event' (Hones 2008) and incorporating it with Sheila Hones' recently put forward idea of *interspatiality* (2022) which, as a combination of *spatiality* and *intertextuality*, proposes a conceptual merging of 'imagined' and 'lived' geographies into a single 'literary-geographical dimension' (2022: 16) and offers a new vocabulary for literary geographers.

Acknowledgements

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