The Experience of Space in Lore Segal’s *Other People’s Houses*

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Literary accounts, both fictional and autobiographical, have traditionally been subject to the authority of time. However, all chronological progression exists in space, and only through space does time attain its meaning within the narration. In Lore Segal’s novel *Other People’s Houses* (1964), space not only functions as a frame-structure, but carries great symbolical weight both from a psychological as well as from a sociological perspective. This paper aims to explore how space influences the construction of literary figures by examining aspects such as the perception of distance, the feeling of oppression, the notion of discontent with one’s surroundings or the need to find a ‘room of one’s own’.

Since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, literature has primarily been thought of as a plot occurring – as cohesively and consistently as possible – in a timeline. The division between diegesis and mimesis – narration and description – has traditionally condemned the contextualization in space of the actions taking place in time to being a ‘mere auxiliary of narrative’.

The description of spaces assists the narrative because it increases the plausibility of events by situating them in recognizable or conceivable surroundings. In the literary tradition, space has often been perceived as static and referential, as a mere container of a narrative which in theory could convey all literary significance by means of a temporal context. However, space not only contains chronological progression and structures the rhythm of the events; it also bestows the narration with more subtle nuances for interpretation. Spatial structures, furthermore, exist in the text even if no spaces are directly mentioned or described, as merely a minor part of its existence is signaled by ‘direct description’.

Space is also an essential factor when trying to recover images from our past in order to represent them in the literary sphere. Surprisingly enough, in spite of the studies conducted by major philosophers (among them Gaston Bachelard or Otto F. Bollow) and the impact of Pierre Nora’s theories with regard to the ‘lieux de mémoire’ as the site of collective memories which, in turn, contribute to establishing collective identities, the relevance of the individual perception of space has not yet been sufficiently examined by the theorists of memory. In his *Poetics of Space* (1969), Gaston Bachelard
explores the relevance of spaces in the construction of literary subjectivities and he states that spatial contextualization is loaded with meaning and therefore a key factor in literary analysis. The author presents in his work the method of ‘topoanalysis’ which he defines as ‘the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives’ and he examines the role of spaces in the retrieving of images from the past. In this regard, Bachelard maintains that memories are located in spatial structures, so that it proves impossible to evoke or depict past images in a spatial vacuum. According to Bachelard’s thesis, the memories which help to constitute our identities are established via local and not temporal ‘fixations’, making the analysis of space therefore essential in the study of the narratives of memory.

At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to “suspend” its flight. In its countless alveoli, space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.

In addition, the perception of space also determines the remembrance of certain life events and affects their literary depiction. The feelings of fear, affection, nostalgia or anger which are linked to recollected images of spaces determine the perception and subsequent description of such places. Thus, in narratives of memory space is not merely described, but rather interpreted in accordance with the feelings which are conveyed by certain memories. Literary space is therefore not merely a physical context, but rather constitutes an emotionally loaded framework, which in turn allows memories to exist and contributes to defining identity in autobiographical writing. In this respect, spatial structures have a greater significance within literary accounts of exile and migration. In such narratives, the representation of space serves to compose a metaphor for a person, whose life – and, most probably, identity – are detached and dismembered as a result of not being able to reconcile the diverse spatial fragments in which their existence has been structured.

In the childhood memoir Other People’s Houses by Lore Segal, space also contributes to defining the evolution of the child protagonist from the moment she leaves Vienna in 1938 as part of the Kindertransport until she finds her own space among the other exiles in New York of the 1960s. The reader is confronted here with an example of a ‘space oriented plot’, in which the narrative is structured