

Ladislav Vít

The Landscapes of W.H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes

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Ever since the second half of the 20th century, literary theory and criticism have been turning more and more of their attention to representation of space and place, which gradually gained the significance which time and temporality had enjoyed for centuries. This focal shift, drawing on the premise that “[t]here is no unspatialized social reality” (Soja 46), emerged from the acknowledgement that the relationship between human beings and their environment is reciprocal and highly interactive: not only do the spatial properties of our existence shape who we are and how we perceive ourselves and the world around us, our perception and interpretation of space also determine the character and significance of our living environments. Once endowed with meanings – social, political, aesthetic and emotional – such spaces enter the network of signs through which we attempt to grasp and make sense of the world around us and our place within it.

That human beings live in space-time, and both dimensions considerably determine our existence and are equally fundamental for the formation of our identity, opened to theorists a fruitful field of interest that culminated in what can be called the postmodern spatial turn. Its immediate consequence is that space “is now considered as a central metaphor and *topos* in literature, and literary criticism has seized space as a new tool and stake” (Peraldo 1). As a result, a number of often interdisciplinary critical approaches investigating representations of space and place have been developed, and subsequently employed, by scholars and critics for their examination of a range of literary works. Ladislav Vít's *The Landscapes of W.H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes* is a fine specimen of spatial-oriented scholarly studies, by far not only because it is the first book-length analysis of W.H. Auden's spatial sensibility.

The monograph is concise in the best sense of the word: it focuses on the poet's attraction to and profound sense of specific environments, which

he viewed as his “good” places of admiration, inspiration and attachment, namely his homeland England, the North Pennines and Iceland. It pays close attention to Auden’s spatial representation and the literary topography of these specific places and their landscapes, both real and imaginary, instigated primarily, though not exclusively, by his topophilic sentiment towards them. The Editorial note praises the book as written in a “scholarly but engaging way”, and I cannot but agree with this statement as Ladislav Vít consistently demonstrates not only his remarkable knowledge of Auden’s life and work, as well as of various branches of Auden scholarship, but also an ability to intelligibly present his findings. His text is thus knowledgeable yet readable without being verbose, descriptive or self-referential. The book’s line of argument is also elaborate, logical and coherent, which is why it can be enjoyed even by those who are not perfectly familiar with all the discussed Auden works.

The pivotal point of the book is the concept of Auden’s “landguage”, which is an organic amalgam of his spatial sensibility, topophilia and the particular linguistic and stylistic devices he uses to render them in his poetry. The key components of this concept are the notions of border, local identity, insularity, escapism and the interaction between people and places. However, the poet’s approach to place is neither systematic nor abstract, as it rather stems from his own spatial preferences, personal experience and emotional attachment. Accordingly, the author’s choice of humanistic and experiential geography as his study’s principal theoretical methodology, particularly that of Yi-Fu Tuan and Doreen Massey, is absolutely appropriate and understandable. It is the combination of Tuan’s traditionalist approach, drawing on stable, homogeneous properties of places, and Massey’s insistence on their dynamic heterogeneity, incoherence and changeability – the roots and the routes – that provides the author with a sufficiently complex analytical and interpretive instrument for his close reading of Auden’s texts. He additionally draws on the ideas of a number of other related philosophers and theoreticians of space and its aesthetic properties, such as Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling, Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of place and Mircea Eliade’s notion of centre and periphery as areas of “sacredness” and “profaneness”.

The first chapter introduces Auden’s understanding of topophilia as an inherently spatio-temporal and humanistic concept, including his two immediate “topophilic” poetic models – Thomas Hardy, his “poetic Father”, and John Betjeman. It also elaborates on Auden’s mythical geography, that is on the humanised properties of the landscapes and cultures of the North

Pennines, Iceland and England, stressing the notions of perennality, border and boundedness in the first two, and those of insularity and cultural diversity in the latter. The second chapter then proceeds to in-depth analysis of the portrayal of the Pennine region in Auden's late 1920s and early 1930s poetry. The contradictory character of these spatial renderings, which presents the area as flawed and deficient rather than sacred, stems from the juxtaposition of the natural and man-made aspects of its landscape. Chapter three discusses the motifs of England's insularity and boundedness in Auden's 1930s poetry, yet from the different perspective of a patriotically inclined poet, whose engagement in public issues inevitably affects the construction of his poetic landscapes. It assesses the poet's rendering of England and its national identity as a dilemmatic balancing between the positions of a coterie poet on the one hand, and a public artist on the other. Focusing on *Letters from Iceland*, Auden's travel book in verse and prose based on his 1936 visit to the eponymous country, the fourth chapter demonstrates that this text, despite its mixed critical and scholarly reception, proves crucial for understanding and assessing Auden's poetics of place, since it offers a uniquely outspoken insight into his "landguage" that cannot be found in his poems. The aim of the final chapter is then twofold: in the first place, it summarises the preceding analyses and draws conclusions based on their findings, in particular concerning Auden's tendency to see places as heterogeneous entities, due to which his spatial imagination is "routed towards contexts" rather than "rooted in isolation" (Vít 141, emphasis original); secondly, it discusses Auden's poetic work within the tradition of English topographical poetry as well as with regard to the recent theoretical discourse of imaginative spatial representation.

Being well-structured, comprehensibly written, theoretically informed, methodologically sound and thorough in its analytical and interpretive passages, *The Landscapes of W.H. Auden's Interwar Poetry: Roots and Routes* represents a valuable and enriching contribution to the body of recent investigations into literary representations of space, as well as to existing Auden scholarship. It is a high-level scholarly work, recommendable not only for experts in and enthusiasts for Auden's poetic work, but also for scholars and advanced-level students of English literature interested in modern British poetry.

Petr Chalupský

Works Cited

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PETR CHALUPSKÝ is Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Czech Republic where he teaches courses in English Literature, Literary Studies and Literary Theory. His research and publication activities focus on contemporary British fiction, particularly on the representation of place and space. He is the author of the monographs *The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night: The Image of the City in the Works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan* (2009) and *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* (2016).
petr.chalupsky@pedf.cuni.cz