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Sense of Belonging Determined by Spatial Markers in Nino Ricci's *In a Glass House*[1]

Abstract

The paper discusses Nino Ricci's novel *In a Glass House* from the point-of-view of spatial representation. My aim is to illustrate that the main protagonist's relations with places play an essential role in the construction of his unstable identity. The idiosyncratic features of various houses, among other places, are analyzed demonstrating the fact that the space we encounter in this place-ridden novel is that of liminal space. My aim is to prove that here the sense of belonging is in fact determined by dislocation and displacement, hence the importance of the detailed description of spatial insecurity over the course of the narrative.

Résumé

Je me propose d'étudier un roman de Nino Ricci, *In a Glass House*, du point de vue de la représentation spatiale. Il s'agit de montrer que le protagoniste entretient avec les lieux des rapports qui jouent un rôle essentiel dans la constructions de son instable identité. Seront examinées, entre autres lieux, différent maisons, dont les traits "idiosynchrasiques" suggèrent la nature liminale de l'espace dans ce roman entièrement dominé, pour ainsi dire, par l'espace. L'étude cherche à prouver l'ideé qu'ici, le sens de l'appartenance est en fait déterminé par la dislocation et le déplacement, d'où l'importance, tout le long du récit, d'une description détaillée de l'insécurité spatiale.

My paper will follow in the footsteps of my earlier investigations of Nino Ricci's first novel *Lives of the Saints* (1990).[2] The second novel in Ricci's trilogy, *In a Glass House* (1993), certainly invites comparison with the first one despite the fact that it has received less critical attention than its predecessor, which sold over seventy thousand copies and has been translated into seven languages earning Ricci a permanent place in Canadian literature and in Italian-Canadian literature in particular. (Robertson 1) My comparison will be based upon the principle of organization in each novel; in my view, both stories are governed by the strong presence of spatial markers that guarantee the novel's narrative coherence; I disagree with Ray Robertson, who claims that the "[novel] suffers from a lack of narrative structure" (2).

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2) Judit Molnár. "Narrating the Homeland: The Importance of Places in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*." *Central European Journal of Canadian Studies* 6 (2008): 29–35.

In a Glass House opens with the main character, Vittorio – who later in Canada changed his name to Victor – encountering one particular variety of the diversified landscape for which Canada is known: the flat land in Southern Ontario. Ricci's interest in spatial orientation is present in the first long paragraph that is followed by an even longer description of the natural surroundings:

> The town of Mersea rested on a small bluff that looked out over the shores of Lake Erie; and had the waters of that lake not reversed their flow from the Mississippi to the St. Lawrence when some cataclysm of nature opened up the Niagara Gorge, the few acres of raised land on which Mersea sat might have remained an island, cut off from the mainland by ten or fifteen miles shallow lake. (1)

Vittorio and his half-sister arrive in Canada in 1961 after their mother's death while she was giving birth to her second child, later named Rita, on the board of the ship that took them to the New World from Valle del Sole in Italy to be awaited by Vittorio's father, Mario. The seven-year old Vittorio is moving from his motherland to his father's adopted land. Mario's ceaseless efforts to transform his recently acquired piece of land to become a genuine part of his ambiguous identity are described in authentic and topographic detail.

The scanty scholarship written so far on *In a Glass House* concentrates on the novel as a "narrative of pain" (Mullen 11), on the bitter tensions that develop between the family members new and old in the isolated Italian immigrant farming community who live in Mersea, Southwestern Ontario, on the shores of Lake Erie. The location is "loosely based on Leamington" ("Glass-House-Nino" 3) where Ricci was born. According to Robertson, in the novel under scrutiny "[t]he organizing narrative device" is [t]he first-person protagonist's troubled soul" (3). I would argue that the reason why Vittorio's endeavours to connect with people almost without exception end in a failure can be closely connected to his spatial insecurity; therefore, I think that analyzing his multifaceted relations to various places would add to a fuller understanding of his struggles to establish a space in his inner self. Edward Relph convincingly argues:

> The [places] are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. Indeed our relationship with places are just as necessary, varied, and perhaps sometimes just as ***unpleasant***, as our relationship with other people. (141; emphasis added)

The central trope in the novel is the house, an entity on its own and by extension a possible home that Victor is in search for right from the very beginning. It is not by accident that different houses play such an important role in this novel; they appear as distinct characters in the narrative. Ricci says:

> As a young child I had an ***obsession*** with drawing houses. ... My notion of ***house-ness*** must have drawn something from our own house, which, sitting foursquare and plain at the entrance to our farm, was about as basic and house-like as a house could be. Yet it could not be said that our house was ever more than just barely adequate to the job required of it, or that any of the fifteen-odd

> people who passed through it during my childhood … ever considered it anything more than a way-station, what would have to do until some more permanent arrangement could be made. ("Publishers" 1; emphasis added)

Throughout this richly textured book the main character, who is surrounded by the deeply troubled lives of others, tries to find a location in his new environment where he could experience a kind of fixity for his own self. His father's house, however, does not provide him with a sense of safety. On the contrary, Vittorio says: "Our house, of white clapboard, appeared to stand in those first days like an ***object frozen*** in a moment of time and then forgotten, with an air at once of abandonment and preservation" (6; emphasis added). In this house there is no negotiation of space; it is a strictly divided territory among the people inhabiting it. It is a house where family members "would sit out [their] exile" (10). Vittorio's aunt who appears shortly after their arrival also "carved a space for herself there" (39). The house is a space of oppression that has to be left behind. For Vittorio the first soothing place away from the house is the church where he says, "[a] pleasant aloneness would settle around me, make me feel for an instant as if everything inside the church existed only for me" (53). To please Rita, her stepfather, Mario, builds a doghouse for her dog but even that was "[a] tiny mirror of [their depressing] house" (93). Gaston Bachelard claims that "[o]ur house is our corner of the world" (4) and further on he adds, "The house we were born in is more than the embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams" (15). Rita was born on board of the ship, an in-between place, therefore, the house she is taken into soon after does not serve as a possible space for daydreaming at all; this is why she escapes from there to her friend's house hoping to find peace in a less troubled setting. When Victor visits her in her new home, he concentrates more on the characteristic features of the house than on Rita's foster parents: "Certain details in the Amhersts' house stuck out suddenly, idiosyncratic, the cow figures on the window-ledge in the kitchen, the crocheted doilies in the bathroom, small touches of domesticity …" (228). Mario is basically interested in the greenhouses where he grows vegetables in order to sustain his family. He builds one greenhouse after the other despite all the difficulties and obstacles he is faced with. As the story progresses, the greenhouses keep reoccurring time and again. They stand in sharp contrast with the house where the family lives; by contrast, they flourish and are full of life apart from a few unexpected accidents. And yet, they construct a unique space that is neglected and even avoided by Victor since he prefers studying to doing farmwork. However, it is not by accident that it is one of these greenhouses that he takes his first girlfriend to in secret – and not the family house – where both of them lose their virginity. Mario manages to impose order on the greenhouses and other places outside the house among them the chicken coop, the orchard, the barn, the boiler house and the irrigation pond unlike the house where they live. He sets up a new office inside the family house which is described at length but Victor remarks, "[s]oon the room had lost all sense of its first businesslike spareness and newness, become merely clutter and rude improvisation …" (140). Later, when he compares the Innocentes' house with that of the Amhersts' (where Rita escapes), he considers their own house as the manifestation of "[r]aw inelegance of [their] *immigrant disorder*" (151; emphasis added). Their house is in a constant state of deterioration: "the walls discoloured, the floor tiles yellowing and worn, the kitchen counter rotting with damp around the rim of

the sink" (226). Victor gives a long description of his aunt's newly built immensely big house which is a completely different example of immigrant existence. It is a mixture of new and old where "the upstairs remained mainly the ***idea*** of what was possible, the promise we held out to ourselves while continuing on with our ***in-between*** lives" (252; emphasis added). The possible link of the past and the present is cast away on the precincts of Mario's house; Victor finds the remnants of his father's desk close to the boiler room. The bottom drawer contains the letters that Cristina, Victor's mother, used to write to Mario from Valle del Sole. Bachelard reminds us of the fact that drawers are "hiding- places in which human beings, great dreamers of locks, keep or hide their secrets" (76). Apparently, for Mario the letters no longer had any significance. Victor hides the letters in a shoe-box only to find out later that one of his aunts has thrown them out "by accident."

Victor matures in age, and all through his growing awareness his only desire is to get away from this particular home: "In a few days I would be gone, the whole of me focused now on this ***escape*** as on some last desperate hope ..." (197; emphasis added). As Rosemary Marangoly George suggests, "Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few" (9). Victor chooses to attend the Centennial University which is located on the outskirts of Toronto. His first impressions absorb and interpret the physical layout of his new surroundings; they are much less focused on the new people he meets on campus. He tends to avoid people and he "sought out always the back corners of classrooms to be close to the ***safety of exits*** ..." (201; emphasis added). He is in search of places that would provide him with a space of security. But what he finds instead is that "[he] stepped out suddenly into empty space" (200), and therefore he is lost and is without any aims. Surely enough, the only place that he has emotional attachments to is his new friend Vincent's house where he enjoys "the placid intimacy of his [Vicent's] living room" (163), and the "whole house [seemed] to adjust itself to allow [him] a place in it" (164). This is a unique experience for him that he has never had earlier because he was always excluded and it certainly had its unfortunate psychological aftermath. George rightly asserts, "One distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions" (9). His occasional visits from Toronto back to his father's house and vegetable farmland always leave him with repeated disappointment and deep frustration. When he is in Toronto, he has "ambivalent feelings" towards the farm (Mullen 14); on the one hand, he is longing for that place, but on the other hand, he is afraid of being refused. As Wesley Kort notes, "While we also remember things as having occurred at certain times we remember more closely ***where*** they occurred. In fact, early memories are '***housed***'; they are distinguished from and related to one another more by ***space*** than time (167; emphasis added). At one point, "[Victor] had the sense [that he] had to be accommodated like a visitor ..." (224). George suggests, "Home is a desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place" (9). This observation certainly holds true for Victor Innocente's case.

The journeys Victor takes between Toronto and Mersea at random do not belong to the space of emotional indifference either. Victor will never be able to get used to the immensely flat countryside which is very different from the hilly landscape in Valle del Sole. Therefore,

I do not agree with Mullen who claims, "For Ricci these old and new environments are not represented by old and new lands, but by private and public spheres" (6). The first impression Vittorio had of the land in the New World will always stay with him and will probably never be integrated into his psyche. Years later, when he has grown up on the new land, he says, "I had lived in this flat countryside for most of my life but still entered it now like a stranger, knew little more about the lives unfolding here … than if I were entering for the first time into a foreign country" (211). George's assertion "Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels" (9) justifies Victor's case, too.

Concerning the limits of geographical levels, Victor does not exclude even a different continent for a possible place to find an adequate space for securing peace for his inner self. This is one of the reasons why he escapes to an even more distant geographical location and takes a job in Algeria where he teaches English. Earlier he admits, "[E]nglish began to open before me like a new landscape [langscape ?], and as it took shape in me it seemed that I myself was slowly being called back into existence from some darkness I'd fallen into …" (56). For him the English language is both a means of control and also a means for opening up new horizons. In Algeria he is indeed at the crossroads of different cultures and languages; what he experiences there is "an uncertain hybridity" (302). Joseph Pivato claims, "In Africa, Vittorio's alienation is total as an invisible white foreigner in a land of suffering black people" (178). Because of the closed and frightening communities he is surrounded by his yearning after a home is even stronger. He manages to establish one, more precisely, "a bungalow secluded behind a wall of hibiscus bush" (303) that only belonged to him and that at least it gave him "an ***illusion of home***" (303; emphasis added). In Africa he is certainly defined by his difference; to release the tension that he must endure he creates a new kind of home situated in "some inner dreamscape" (308). Bachelard suggests, "[g]reat dreamers profess intimacy with the world. They learned this intimacy, however, mediating on the house" (66). He feels at home in this imaginary homeland, it provides him with freedom despite his frightening social environment. As Yi-Fu Tuan asserts, "Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free. Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act" (52). Also, he is more at ease with his physical, not his social surroundings in Africa, in this idealized landscape than anywhere else. Despite his deep attachment to the land and his house when he is informed about his father's unexpected death, he immediately and without any hesitation goes back to Mersea, stays for a short period of time only to leave finally for Toronto never to return to Nigeria. Similarly to ***Lives of the Saints,*** the second novel in the trilogy leaves the reader in an open space and with a sense of an unpredicted future concerning the main protagonist's life. As Rebecca Gower suggests, "Vittorio lives a life which is shrunk tight around a competitive axis of belonging and not belonging" (1). In the end it is the lack of a tangible resolution that cannot be dislodged from the reader's mind.

In conclusion we can assert that the novel's controlling metaphor, the spatial configuration that is the glass house in which Victor has actually lived, is an extremely fragile and isolated psychological terrain. Whether the "act of migration" will "balance" (Pivato 178) his displacement remains to be seen. In the novel the main protagonist's human condition oscillates in time: past, present and future and in an idiosyncratic kind of space as well that consists of various places that for the moment can only construct the space of dislocation. Victor's

endeavours to substantiate a veritable identity and a sense of belonging have primarily been discouraged by his unfortunate relations to the places he has encountered and has been situated in.

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