

# ON GEOBIOGRAPHY

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*Intus haec ago, in aula ingenti memoriae meae.*  
'All this I do within, in that huge court of my memory.'  
(Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.8.14.)

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Pure chronological time means endless duration. In the same way, pure chorological space means limitless expansion. Existentially, in connection with human life, the situation is different.

Let us imagine that we live at the intersectional point of time and space. Just at that point time splits into the past and the future. And just at that point space settles in between the arrival and the departure. We arrive at this place from the past, and from this place we will depart for the future.

The intersection or origin of time and space – an absolute here-and-now – is a kind of density from which the scattering to time and space happens. This is because we are never just now but also no more and not yet, and because we are never just here but also elsewhere.

I am a geographer. What on earth has a geographer to do with these things? A lot, I would like to say. The thing in the world that geography takes as given is knowledge of the world as it exists in places. Knowledge of place is a simple fact of human experience (Lukermann 1964: 167). To the question of place I will here add an extra spice, that of time lived.

This is a way to geobiography. Biography, literally, refers to the description in words or otherwise of one's course of life. Geobiography is the expression of the course of life as it relates to the places lived.

Underlining 'the places lived' may sound trivial. But how can anyone exist without a place? As embodied beings, to be sure, we have no possibility other

than to live somewhere. Human life is a topocentric reality.

Places may take various shapes: physical, sensual, emotional, social, economic and cultural. All these exist simultaneously, and each of them is conditioned by its own way. Biographical places have an existential stress. Everyone has his or her own biographical places. How can they be described and shown? Biographical places cannot be mapped completely – what could completeness mean in this context? This is because of their nature: biographical places are deeply personal and complexly memory-laden.

We all remember differently. And in different situations each one of us recollects anew. Autobiographical memory is situated understanding. As life goes on, new situations shape our understanding. As a corollary, there are no two places absolutely alike, and no two persons have ever seen the same place.

In short, in geobiography there is a triad of place, memory and self at work. The self is a narrating self. To narrate is to try to organise experiences into meaningful episodes. In a narrative the meaning of each experience is produced by its position in a comprehensible whole. Now, what is of interest here is how the meaningful episodes are spatially constituted. Is it really only the temporal dimension that gives meaning to experiences? Is the temporal dimension *per se* nothing but the outward organising thread that runs through the narrative?

Such is the case, more or less. This is because the sensuously mindful human embodiment always takes place or happens somewhere: the lived sense of time is the lived sense of place. Time and place coincide.

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In his novel *Urwind*, published in 1993, Bo Carpelan takes geobiography to its limits. *Urwind* is a poetic text in which the techniques of narrative writing are developed in the most imaginative way. At first the story seems to be a simple one. Daniel Urwind, a 53-year-old antiquarian bookseller, writes a diary for his wife who has left him for a year to do scientific work abroad. The restless crisscrossing of experience, present and past, makes the diary form of narrative a matter more of inner than outer experience, an autobiography without a clear beginning, middle and end.

In the novel there are 53 chapters, each making up a weekly report. In sum this makes up the whole year plus the first week of the next one. Daniel muses, 'I am writing a diary for you, you will receive it as a part of me when you come back. [---] Or is it to myself that I write, this unfamiliar I that dodges off round each

windy corner, letting the wet snow lash me in the face?' (Carpelan 1996: 1–2.) In the modernist sense, *Urwind* could be read as a playground of identity questions in which the process of writing is the main medium. Daniel again, 'I sit and write, to whom? [---] I try to capture the intangible in words as though I were looking for something, someone, to remember.' (Carpelan 1996: 5.)

From the very beginning, it shows up that the writing self lives in the spaces of fading identities, in the rooms continually shifting from one image to another. *Urwind* is very much about place and memory, about intimate sensing. The scene is an old apartment house, its inside: stairways, flats and rooms, cellar and attic, and outside: courtyard, streets, the whole city. The old house is the stage of life, an arena of the total range of human concern. The reports Daniel writes make up a retrospect put together with highly spiritual constituents, with deep sensuality, perception and thinking.

'Urwind' is a versatile word. It means both the primordial wind and primordial attic. Urwind is unpredictable.<sup>1</sup> And like every novel, *Urwind* is open to diverse interpretations. In my reading the intention is not only to discuss place and city as represented in literature but also to question the possible ways of writing places. In this respect *Urwind* is rewarding. It is an artistic creation touching the myriad aspects of life running freely outside the categorical limitations of the scientific word.<sup>2</sup>

To have a traditional map based on *Urwind* is impossible. The novel contains little material for the purposes of chorographic city-description. The location of the apartment house can be deduced from some references always interwoven with the mindscapes in an almost surrealistic manner. There are but few landmarks or proper names naming Helsinki:

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<sup>1</sup> 'I play with the interpretations of Urwind. It is the original primordial wind from the universe, the one that blows out of nothing into nothing, hurling stars into that storm-centre that is called the soul. [---] It has no pattern, it has the blue colour of space. If you capture it, it alters form, becomes ... the primordial attic, with its forgotten treasures, its yellowed bundles of newspapers, its tattered prams, its dark cupboards of rumbling voices!' (Carpelan 1996: 3.)

<sup>2</sup> Daniel's grandma once asked what he was doing in the university. 'I try to tell her about my studies, about the bare lecture halls, about the cold light above Alma Mater, about the soporific monologues of the professors, the dying texts, the gravel of accumulated facts, the compulsion in one's brain, the way in which the lyric and epic categories commit spiritual murder on living, bleeding words, the turning of imagination into hay, the turning of the theories into cement, turning is not the right word, it suggests metamorphoses, but here it is not a question of metamorphoses – rather one of fossilization, gravestones over visions.' (Carpelan 1996: 91–92.)

Suburbs grow up, you can see them stretching north with television towers and roller-coasters if you stretch out of the skylight and hear the roof-plates rattling in the gale: the summer storm here! It arrives, it passes over Kronberg Bay, sweeps across rocks and shores, tears the roofs from the stalls on the square, a huge whirlpool of Baltic herring glitters in roaming sunlight, is swept up towards the dome of St Sofia's, people creep around like ants in their carapaces, Satan himself stands on Sofiegatan raising a bottle of spirits to his mouth, June is full of the cries of gulls, the smell of mash, white clouds and cranes that reach the sky. I run downstairs and outside. The gateway on the light opens with a boom. The city rattles past like a railway yard, and the heart skips like playing ducks and drakes along June's waves, and suddenly sinks, seven steps towards the unknown.' (Carpelan 1996: 89; translation modified by P. T. K.)

However, the scarcity of physical determinants of the city in no way means that it is not very concretely present, but just the other way round. The house, the rooms and the city not only have visual but also auditory, olfactory and tactile meaning. The map of territory always fuses with the map of mind. With Aunt Viktoria:

We sat again in the familiar silence that was our common estate. We listened and heard the city. There were the metro, the harbour, the trams, the wind from the sea, the odour of fish, the smell of mash, the snow's immense water-scent, the howling of the ambulance, the tango from the radio, the creaking of the dying trees, the voices from city districts like ice floes colliding in the circulation of my blood, voices from long ago, in summer rooms... (Carpelan 1996: 179.)

Existentially, the question in *Urwind* concerns the ways in which the autobiographical writer tries to collect and recollect his thoughts and thereby create a shape of identity. It is a question of how the writer, the writing self within his words, makes sense of his being a finite self; a person who acknowledges his own image; and eventually a person who knows himself as an image of the multitude of images.

But this does not happen definitely, within some inflexible framework. It is just the other way round. What we learn is that the identity is wavering, that the identity does not hold. When the self is here it is already elsewhere; when the self has these features it already has other features. Identity is a play of the sameness and difference in which no meaning is fixed, always remaining the same, but continuously changing, now this, but instantly another. Daniel realises that 'I contain many 'I's' at once, can see them, they go past me like strangers' (Carpelan 1996: 53).

The process of writing (or, rather, bringing out the self by means of writing) will always remain unfinished, that is, it will never reach the definite end. This is because the context is unbounded. There is always something to be added, always something else to be said. The regression is infinite. And infinite is the progression, too.

Here there are no possibilities other than our own discourses, our own wandering paths despite the fact that *aporia* is facing us, the loss of the signposts, the dimness of the map, life without an easy formula. To go astray, to see the boundaries and fixed points vanish, the just found identity fade away. Daniel asks, 'in what room of memory do I find myself now, what time is being slowly torn open, like a ripped web? It is all turning into rags and tatters. I want back to the origin, the starting point...' (Carpelan 1996: 19.)

But you cannot do it. It is a desire not coming true. There is no origin, no final place, or continuing city. Just listen to Aunt Viktoria, whom you love so much, 'Live your life, that is the answer. Don't forget to remember, it leads you forward.' (Carpelan 1996: 20.)

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For Daniel Urwind the house and the city are a state of mind. Sometimes it is clearest like the geometry of the streets, at other times most confused like the fuzziest map. The house in the city is a place of dwelling. The house is of anxiety, sadness, hope and delight. It is the whole spectrum of human sensing, both past and future. The house and its rooms, and the city and its streets, are upholders of memory. In the house and in the city life goes on. We live in the middle of everything. Life may be what it is, but the picture of life is a cracking fresco.

Yes, here is one more geobiographical note, a remark on the nature of writing the story of life:

What I am looking for lies outside what I have jotted down. The text that is closest to me is silence; it exists there behind the words, not the shadow of the words but perhaps a shadow of that silence. The important thing is not to give explanations but to point to the inexplicable that gives our existence its important antipole: so that our lives can preserve their balance. In your science, too, the irrational exists. The dream makes reality tangible, the myth makes it possible to understand, the fairytale makes it possible to be lived. Without the light of dreams the clearest facts are incomplete, lifeless. (Carpelan 1996: 184.)

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*Praesens de praeteritis memoria, praesens de praesentibus contuitus,  
praesens de futuris expectatio.*

‘The present time of past things is our memory; the present time of our  
present things is our sight; the present time  
of future things is expectation.’  
(Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.20.26.)

## References

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## Geo-biograafiast

### Kokkuvõte

Geograafia võtab enesestmõistetavana teadmist maailmast kui millestki, mis eksisteerib kohtades. Teadmine kohast on lihtsalt kogemuslik fakt. Eksistentsiaalses mõttes realiseerub koht elamise protsessis loodud keskkonnasuhete kimbuna. Koht on olemuslikult seotud aja ja minaga. Need kolm moodustavad draamakolmnurga, mille süžee kirjutab intiimne tajus, indiviidi sügav isiklik kohtumine maailmaga. Intiimne maailma tajumine seob kokku seemise ja välimise geograafia, kujutades endast seega psühholoogilise probleemi üht aspekti.

Geo-biograafia kajastab paikades asetleidvat elukäiku. Mis on aga isiklikus elus läbielatud ja kogetud koht? Missugune on koha roll inimese kordumatus elukäigus, selle (auto)biograafilises representatsioonis? Geo-biograafia pürib just selles tähenduses kaardistama elulugude ruumilisi mõõtmeid. Biograafiad on alati ruumilised, kuna elus ei eksisteeri puhtalt ajalisi, ruumiliste sidemeteta episoodide.

Autobiograafiline kirjutus on eksistentsiaalselt motiveeritud. Kirjutaja soovib oma elukäiku kujutades mõista, kes ta “tõeliselt” on. See mõistmine nõuab isiklike kogemuste mäletamist, s.t autobiograafilist mälu. Autobiograafilised mälestused on möödunud elust meenuvad episoodid. Meenutatud asjad on isikliku tähtsusega, nad kujutavad endast ehituskive, millest koosneb mina. Mina on autobiograafilise mälu jaoks nii kogemuste tootja kui nende tulem.

Artikkel käsitleb ilukirjanduslikku autobiograafilise kirjutuse näidet – Bo Carpelani romaani *Urwind*, püüdes eritleda selle mõningaid iseloomulikke tunnusoone. Romanis ühinevad viljakal ja fantaasiarikkal moel narratiivse kirjutuse tehnikad ning luule. *Urwind* on poeetiline, kummalise sügavuse ja ennastpaljastava pingega teos, kogemuste, mineviku ja oleviku keerukate kihistuste ja ristumistega tekst, mis muudab päevaraamatuliku narratiivi pigem sisemist kui välimist kogemust tähtsustavaks. Carpelani romaan pakub rikkalikku geo-biograafiliste mõtiskluste maatriksit “topotsentristliku” reaalsuse kontekstis.