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FRINGES OF THE NARRATOURBOLOGICAL BELGRADE: DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE SWERVE AWAY FROM THE URBAN

Narratourbological mapping foregoes the idea of the literary as nostalgically turned towards the natural and away from the industrial in favour of the idea of the literary as historically moving toward the urban, and participating in its construal. Detective fiction, at the same time, appears a genre inherently urban, from the early modern, to the contemporary instances (from the prototypical Dupin to Auster's Quinn). Mapping and accordingly analysing Christie's popular detective's short stopover at Belgrade and its context, however, allows an opportunity for reading it as gesturing away from the urban. The plotted line of movement of Christie's fiction, though connecting urban entities, takes centre stage, drawing away from its subservient construing points. The scarce, short urban stopovers are exposed as representations not of the urban, but of leaving the urban. The excluded urban is argued to have been relegated to the role of quasi-retarding devices (foreshadowed or hind sighted) images and counterpoints of the fiction's 'grand arrest' – the fatal (and final) stop containing both the crime and its solving, outside of the urban.

Keywords: narratourbology, map, urban, rural, textual, detective fiction, Belgrade

Introduction

Narratourbology² argues that mapping of the fictional urban may change the way we understand parts of literary history (as well as change how we understand the role of narrative in the establishing of urban identities, see Bošković 2020: 17ff). It offers, specifically, to counteract the idea of the literary as increasingly turning toward the natural and away from the industrial, with the idea of the literary seeking the urban and the modern (*ibid.*). However, these dynamics of urban vs rural (or wild, uncultivated) will prove significant for the paper at hand, as the mapping undertaken focuses on charting the movements of a fictional train, naturally bringing the two paradigms in contact (and conflict).

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2 Narratourbology, as a discipline of the humanities, was envisaged and drafted by Dragan Bošković, Marija Lojanica, Časlav Nikolić and Nikola Bubanja.

Theoretically, narratourbology thinks the urban inextricably enmeshed with the textual (*ibid.*), and the proposed textual nature of experience (and existence, for that matter) reflects back on the place of literary mapping in a wider social context. The breach of the literary into social reality (penetration into the real, or, the intervention of fiction) is familiar enough: one need not go further than Juliet's balcony in Verona, or, if one is looking to sever any prior contact with "real" history, Sherlock Holmes' apartment in modern-day London³. Furthermore, the fictional will shape the real which will, in turn, shape the fictional back (reflection, or intervention of the real), as crudely shown by the extreme example of Anwar Congo, the participant of the 20th-century mass murders in Indonesia, who performed as himself (the killer) on film, reconstructing the self which was originally constituted on the basis of the fictional characters of gangsters and cowboys (Žižek 2011: 322)⁴.

It is from this perspective that the paper at hand sees the wider social pertinence of excavating and mapping the ostensibly solely literary presence on the margins of Belgrade. It is, in this context, an elaboration of an opportunity for another breach of the literary into social reality, from where it may prove a more evident component of urbanity and its relations with the non-urban (for, as will be argued below, though connecting urban focal points, the fiction analyzed tends to lead away from the urban as such). As such, it may also serve to communicate that signs, literary or biological, are all that is at the subject's disposal. For the vast majority of mankind, what is the difference, anyhow, between the 'reality' of a famous fictional detective and Galileo, or Donald Trump?

More specifically, the paper analyzes a specific literary presence in Belgrade, as well as its context. In doing so, it endeavors to add to ways of interpreting the literary by charting it, producing augmented maps, as it were – maps considering the literary alongside the geographical (including its historical, and socio-political aspects). Literary maps have been produced, of course, at least since the beginning of the 20th century (see Moretti 1999: 7). Narratourbological maps endeavored here, though, somewhat in the footsteps of Moretti (1999: 7-8; 2005: 53), use geographical signs not for simple representation, but for the interpretation of the literary. Additionally, the goal is also to infuse the maps with textual addendums that go beyond superimposed quotations

3 I owe the suggestion to Časlav Nikolić.

4 Even beyond these relatively in-the-face examples / instances, narratourbology invokes Ricoeur's concept of selfhood as a product of the continual process of self-narration (self-figuration and self-interpretation); the subject (I owe the following to Bošković, Lojanica, and Nikolić, unpublished material) cannot reach self-awareness directly, but only via mediation of narrative and cultural signs. Therefore, the (re)interpretation of narrative identity is possible only while also considering the cultural and fictional narratives of literature and culture, to which the subject belongs. Thus, narratourbology sees the fictional and the "real" city as available solely via narrativization. Roland Barthes (1998) claimed that the city was, "in fact, a language", that it speaks, and that "we speak our city". The city is a dimension of the constantly changing rhythms of signs (Nikolić 2021: 193). Because the "real" city, viewed discursively, does not exist independently, but is constituted from the perspective of diverse discourses and discursive significations, it is identified via the interpretation of what is inscribed into the city (see also Bošković & Ilić, 1998).

(something that has been underway in a few projects, like *Literary Atlas: Plotting English-Language Novels in Wales*, *Digital Literary Atlas of Ireland, 1922–1949*, *World Literary Atlas*, *A Literary Atlas of Europe – Ein Literarischer Atlas Europas*, or *Unreal City: A Map Of Fictional London*). In this way, literary analysis, and not just the original literary text, finds its place on the map as well, from which point the map should prove an additional tool of literary study.

The fictional investigator and the urban

Detective fiction seems a genre inherently urban. The city is the place of cunning (Bošković 2020) and vice; the prototypical detective, Auguste Dupin (his very name derived from dupe or deception), is as inextricably linked with Paris as Sherlock Holmes is with London; modern extensions by Auster remain firmly on urban ground, as exemplified by the *New York Trilogy* (where the detective goes so far as to literally write the city, exposing its textual nature). By inaugurating the urban labyrinth as a principal chronotope of his detective stories, Poe has thus inadvertently anticipated further development of the genre and its subsequent transformation into ontologically oriented metaphysical detective fiction (Borges, Auster, Eco, Modiano). Preoccupied with the issues of (meta)textual self-reflexivity, decentered identity structures, and semiotic fluidity of both literature and cityscapes as discursive systems, Poe's texts, primarily "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Purloined Letter", have informed the development of humanities during the 20th century, influencing a host of thinkers, most notably Benjamin, Lacan, and Derrida (Lojanica 2011).

That there is no resident literary detective of renown inherent to Belgrade may well be considered a dent in its claim to urbanity. However, a popular literary investigator, set in more modern times – Hercule Poirot – visited the margins of this city, and stepped onto its (textual) ground in the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, by Dame Agatha Christie (Christie herself traveled via Belgrade too, as stated in her (2010) autobiography).

Christie's Simplon Orient Express apparently ran a route identical to the historical line of the same name (only a crude approximation represented in the map below, scan the QR code to visit the interactive online version). The map shows the line spanning at the very least the entire European continent, arguably reaching out far into Asia, yoking the spaces together in a narrative graph readable as an umbilical cord running back from the East to the Omphalos – to London, the center of the world. Although the train-line ended at the French side of the channel, the narrative makes the journey's final destination unambiguous (just as it extends the train-line's beginning much further East, all the way to Syria). And thus, the urban–rural binary, extended to the civil–savage (with all of the colonial and post-colonial baggage), is at once represented and invoked by the act of plotting a line of fictional movement onto a map.

SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1 The Simplon Orient Express Route, ran from Istanbul to Calais via, Belgrade, but the novel's journey, by extension, stretches from Aleppo to London, though textual realization stops with the snow-drift stop. Map created and customized with Google My Maps. Scan QR code at the end of the paper for full, online map content.



Despite the line connecting cities (Aleppo and London, by extension), *Murder on the Orient Express*, tellingly, begins by moving away from the urban – from Aleppo, of which only the train station's platform is seen (7-8). Furthermore, the total anonymity of the said platform and its city is, as if deliberately, directly underlined by the comments made by the character Mary Debenham (8): “This must be Aleppo. Nothing to see, of course. Just a long, poorly lighted platform with loud, furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere.” In this sense, the mapped line helps drive home the novel's exclusion of the urban. The mapped line strikes one as important, not the dots that help construe it (subserviently, one is tempted to add): and the line's imposing appearance points out the novel's shying away from the urban. Christie's fiction, with almost unerring consistency, skirts the urban – at best, makes short stop-offs in its corners, its peripheral and anonymous fringes⁵.

Thus, mapping the novel's train line opens up a line of interpretation that follows the movement away from the urban, the persistent exclusion of the urban: the novel does not just open with a movement away from the urban (even then starting from its fringes) but it also never really reaches its projected urban goal. The fictional journey should ultimately reach London, but the text of the novel seemingly never sees the plan through: one is left to understand that, the mystery resolved, all continues as planned, with the hero-detective reaching his pre-planned destination. But no textual realization of this is offered to the reader.

In between, almost all urban places on route are only represented (if represented at all) as train station platforms: this is the case with Konya, and this is the case with Belgrade. Seemingly, the only exception is Istanbul, where there is a section of implied urban travel, though almost in complete textual darkness: short mention of the Bosphorus crossing and of Galata Bridge gets the reader expressly into the Tokatlian Hotel (presumably, the one Christie herself stayed at, though no details are offered in the novel). Still, the overall impression is again that of withdrawing, evacuating from the urban. It is not just, nor primarily, because the arrival is visually impoverished (this is arguably a general characteristic of the text); the stay at the Tokatlian even takes a few pages to unwind. But, Christie's detective, though planning to spend days

5 Overall, Poirot perhaps cuts a less distinctly urban figure, when compared with Dupin, Holmes, or Quinn.

at Istanbul, is, immediately upon arrival at the hotel, in a matter of several lines of text, called on to hurry to the train station and continue away from the city. In other words, the time spent at Istanbul's Tokatlian is, as was the case with the train station of Aleppo, time spent *leaving*, in preparation and expectation of going away. Thus, the focus can be read as being projected, pushed forward (a large chunk of the text covering the Tokatlian discusses Ratchet, which is, in hindsight, also a push forward in terms of narrative development) towards going away from the urban, which had only just been, hurriedly and blindly, reached.

The urban as structural deterrent and projection of the wild

With all the red herrings, foreshadowing and turns inherent to the genre, the relatively straightforward linearity of the train's movement exposed by its mapping comes as a small surprise: the marks *A* to *F*, designating some cities on the line, only superficially associate this electrocardiogram of Christie's narration with the really very different lines of narration of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: there are no indented curves marked *D* here, no *CCC* short airings, no meta-digressions, no devils of digression; the train's line is not the shortest line connecting two points either, of course, and thus also falls short of the lines of Sterne's cabbage planters. In other words, mapping the movements of the train invites a questioning of the relations between the practical, progressive linearity of the fictional train, and its fiction. To pervert Shklovsky's pronouncement on *Tristram Shandy*, Christie's novel might just be the most atypical in the world, in as much as it follows the plotted line of movement of its fictional train, that is.

The stops (variously marked from *A* to *F*, representing cities) that the mapped line tentatively connects, however, disrupt and disconnect the precipitating linearity of the narrative line's drive forward. The urban stops, then, act as retarding devices, holding back the linear surge of the narrative. Between these programmed stops, the precipitous linearity of the mapped line and its fiction takes precedence.

Christie's fictional train is, however, unexpectedly stopped by a snowdrift somewhere between Vinkovci and Brod, in Former Yugoslavia, today's Croatia⁶. It is precisely here (approximate location is designated on the map above by the white mountain-avalanche symbol in a red circle) that the murder and the unravelling of the murder happens: only when the train is violently stopped, against its schedule, is the life of Ratchet (and the sleep of Poirot) stopped as

6 Incidentally, in 1931 Croatian author Mate Lovrak published a once favorite novel for children (obligatory reading in Yugoslavian elementary schools) *Train in the Snow* (*Vlak u snijegu*), about a train stopped by snow in Croatia. Christie's novel followed in 1934, but I am unaware of her knowledge of Lovrak's book. She did not need it for inspiration, in any case, given her own well-documented experience.

well⁷. In fact, the train's destination, even the very continuation of its journey, is practically forgotten, as it seems the text has no further need for it⁸.

This unforeseen stop, capable of being mapped only after the fact, can be seen as a version of the well-worn device of connecting crime / murder / usurpation with its effect on society / surroundings which will stray from their normal course (for example, in *Macbeth*) or be suspended until order is restored: in *The Tempest*, the ship's voyage and complete social hierarchy is suspended by the storm / Prospero, until the usurpation had been rectified, when the ship and its society may continue their course. Similarly, from an eco-critical standpoint, the text allows the surrounding nature to be read as hierarchically subordinate to the world of the human, and therefore rendered reflective of events in the human world. Nature does not even exist beyond culture and human-invested meaning: in reigning it in for its own purposes, the text paradoxically allows it to be born: thus, it is the narrative that gives this place outside of urbanity existence and "puts it on the map", as it were.

Again, looking at the map with the added unscheduled stop, one sees that this stop is the only non-urban stop that the train has: the odd one out, as it were. The spatial anchoring of Christie's train line that is inextricably connected with the mystery and its resolution is set between stations, between civilizations, empires or colonies. The forces of nature pile snow onto the tracks and forcefully stop the train. The location is only crudely known, and nameless: somewhere between Vinkovci and Brod is for all intents and purposes equal to nowhere or "out in the wild". Ratchet himself – the murdered victim-villain – is described by Poirot as wild and animal-like: "a wild animal—an animal savage, but savage!" (13), and Ratchet is referred to as "animal" several times later in the novel (19, 40). Of course, the crime as brutal and uncivilized can all too readily be read as at home in such a no-place: after all, Foucault said that heterotopia (of the honey-moon travel, to be fair) is meant to confine the transgressive act (of sexual initiation) to, as it were, outside of the world.

And yet, reading the mapped line above, one may argue not just a dissimilarity, but a correlation between all mapped stops, including the fatal (un)anticipated one. There seems to be a correlation between all the stops in the movement of the train and the development of the plot. This is not to say that the advancement of the plot somehow depends on temporary spatial anchoring; as common as they may be, cities / stations can be construed as disruptions of a train's 'normal' kinetic being. In other words, though stopping at train stations is in no way out of joint for trains, especially in hindsight, these stops still appear smaller images, reflections, even, of the 'grand arrest' of the momentous halt.

In that sense, whether hindsight realizations or foreshadowing devices, stops preceding the train's stranding in the snow are vested with a meaning for the plot. At the very first stop at Aleppo, the possibility of the train being

7 Not at the exact instance, though – the time of the murder is one of the points the detective contests.

8 In terms of textual realization, the train, it seems, never breaks away from the snowdrift (though one is to understand that it will, of course).

snowed up is suggested (8). The stop at Konya reveals to Poirot an undisclosed relationship between Miss Debenham and Arbutnot (10), the fire-under-the-dining-car punctuates Miss Debenham's anxiety about catching the Simplon Express (11), and Poirot's stop at the Tokatlian hotel prevents him from not taking the Simplon (12). There is a similar meaning behind the Simplon Orient Express stop in Belgrade, referred to in the text as the capital of the now former Yugoslavia.

Immediate textual context in revealing Belgrade is mentioned several times in the novel, notably before the train reaches it: on Poirot's first entering the Simplon and facing the lack of free berths issue, Belgrade is quoted as an important crossroads, where the Athens coach, as well as the Bucharest coach join the composition, which will, presumably, make it possible for Poirot to find a berth in one of them (14). MacQueen mistakes this to mean that Poirot will leave the train, completely, in Belgrade (16).

Poirot did get out of the train in Belgrade, but only for a couple of minutes (21); there was no curiosity, it seems, just a thing Poirot did to pass the time (and to retard the plot and invest the stop with meaning that connects it with the climactic stop in the snow, of course). He really only descended to the platform of the railway station at around 9 o'clock in the evening (if one was to speculate an exact timing, it would probably be ten minutes before 9, cf. 21). His only impression of Belgrade was that it was "bitter cold", with heavy snow falling outside. The note, as before, reveals little about the city itself. Belgrade railway station's platform, though, was, as the fictional detective noted, protected.

Belgrade is represented on the map with the added image of the Belgrade railway station, which is now converted into a museum (a new station replaced it in 2016). In other words, the only place in Belgrade that the fictional detective graced with a visit is already isolated from the city, turned into a heterotopia, a place both real and imaginary. This fact accompanied with an exhibit might be a worthy addition to this urban archive.

Poirot's sojourn at the Belgrade railway station, however, remains primarily contextual for the 'grand arrest' – its projection. The heavy snow and the bitter cold of the Belgrade platform are little more than preparatory for the snow drift that will stop the train several hours later. And the specific mention of the protective platform is a further projection forward into the lack of protection and the heightened sense of danger of leaving the, admittedly rudimentary, easily escaped, protection of urbanity.

Conclusion

In a bid to emphasize literature's historical connection with the urban and its discursivity, narratourbology, as a new discipline of the humanities, generally endeavors to shift scholarly (and, perhaps, social) focus away from the idea of literature as nostalgically looking (back) toward nature, away from the industrial and technological; it wants to leave the urban–rural binary behind and look to urban–urban. Mapping as one of its methods, accordingly gestures towards a more modern system of signs – at least when it comes to

literary scholarship (literary maps, as artistic reinterpretations, ornaments or explanatory appendixes have been around at least a century, though). The result would not just be a paper appended with a map, but also an augmented digital map – charting the literary but supplemented by textual elements of literary research (and not just the primary literary text).

Detective fiction, it is suggested, is a genre inherently urban, dependant on urban subtlety and cunning – the urban demonic. Poe's prototypical Dupin is inextricable from Parisian urbanity, as is the case with London and Holmes – traditionally the genre's most recognizable figure. Contemporary instances, though diverging from the early modern models in multiple ways, remain firmly rooted in the urban, with Auster's Quinn – a composite, but literary writing the city.

Mapping and accordingly analysing Christie's popular detective's short stopover at Belgrade and its context, though, remain, at best, at the margins of the urban (and of narratourbological). The plotted line connects urban environments, but dominates the chart, just as its fiction relegates the urban to subservient dots whose purpose is exhausted in construing the line. The plotting thus allows a reading of Christie's novel as gesturing away from the urban. It begins with the leaving of (the fringes of) the urban, and never, in realized text, reaches neither its planned, nor projected, nor any urban destination, remaining apparently forever suspended in between, "away".

Belgrade stopover is accordingly mapped as a dot on the line of the train's and its fiction's movement, and interpreted as another representation not of the urban, but of leaving the urban. Belgrade is, together with the remaining urban environments from the text, excluded and relegated to the role of quasi-retarding device and / or (foreshadowed or hind-sighted) image and counterpoint of the fiction's 'grand arrest' – the forceful stop containing both the crime and its solving, outside of the urban.

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ОБОДИ НАРАТОУРБОЛОГИЈЕ БЕОГРАДА: ДЕТЕКТИВСКА ФИКЦИЈА И УДАЉАВАЊЕ ОД УРБАНОГ

Резиме

Наратоурболошко мапирање идеји литературе носталгично окренуте природи, преиндустријском или чак и предтехнолошком, супротставља идеју књижевности као историјски модерне, окренуте прогресу и, посебно, граду као дискурзивном оваплоћењу и чеду културе. Истовремено, детективска фикција је жанр (литературе) који се чини инхерентно, фабрички урбаним – рођеним у Паризу Поовог Огиста Дипена и еволуиралим до Остерових алтернативних фланера. Међутим, мапирањем и анализом настале мапе и семиналног текста кратке посете Београду популарног детектива Кристијеве, отвара се могућност интерпретирања читавог текста кроз визуру геста одласка или удаљавања од урбаног. Линија кретања романа уцртана у мапу, иако повезује урбане ентитете, самопојављује се на централној позицији, и ставља у други план урбане тачке које се испостављају слушкињама које су првенствено ту да би ту исту линију конструисале. Ретке, кратке посете урбаним просторима раскривају се тако пре свега као елаборације напуштања истих. Проказано урбано прогнано је у улогу псеудоинструмента

кочења перцепције (наговештених или накнадно схваћених) слика и контрапунктова „велике станке”, одсудног, присилног заустављања композиције, које је садржало, али и задржало, како злочин, тако и његово разрешење, изван урбаног.

Кључне речи: наратоурбологија, мапирање, урбано, рурално, текстуално, детективска фикција, Београд

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