

Joanna Piwowarska

The Category of Space in the Gothic Novel: The Italian by Ann Radcliffe

Spatial construction is one of the fundamental components of a literary work. Space is related to other elements of the fictional world: characters, plot, narrator, time, since particular characters, events and situations are always located somewhere. Hence space appears to be the principle organizing the literary vision of the world, but it is also to a certain degree determined by other categories. In the last few decades the category of space as well as the category of time has evoked great interest of literary critics.¹

The present paper concentrates on the problem of space functioning in the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, focusing on *The Italian* (1797). This novel, representing the sentimental type of Gothic fiction, displays an interesting mutual relationship between

¹See: G. Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: 1957); G. Matoré, *L'espace humain* (Paris: 1962); M. Bachtin, "Czas i przestrzeń w powieści," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1974); R. Gullón, "On Space in the Novel," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1975); J. Lotman, "Zagadnienie przestrzeni artystycznej w prozie Gogola," *Semiotyka kultury*, ed. E. Janus and M.R. Mayenowa (Warsaw: 1975); J. Lotman, "Problem przestrzeni artystycznej," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (1976). See also Polish theoreticians M. Głowiński and J. Sławiński in: M. Głowiński, and A. Okopień-Sławińska, eds., *Przestrzeń i literatura* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1978); B. Bałutowa, *Spatial Complex. A Study of Spatial Problems in Fiction Illustrated with the Examples from Representative Works of English Short Fiction 1900-1925* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1979).

space construction and other elements of the fictional world. The discussion will be concerned with the typology of spatial forms and the relation between space arrangement, hero creation and plot structure. The aim of the present paper is to show the specific association between the category of space and the general idea of the novel. As regards the methodology of the discussion, it has been inspired by the model presented by Janusz Sławiński.²

Most of Radcliffe's novels seem to repeat the same plot pattern: a beautiful innocent heroine faces many dangers, suffers persecutions, has to overcome various obstacles before she is able to marry the man she loves. Those novels combine "all contemporaneous genres of fiction, like the sentimental novel, the story of a damsel in distress, a sentimental journey following Sterne and anticipating Wordsworth's and Byron's poetic travelogues or pilgrimages etc."³

There is a stock of recurring conventional space forms which are identified as characteristic of the Gothic fiction, namely: castles, convents, secret vaults and passages, ruins, mountainous landscapes. Radcliffe's romances follow this highly conventional "canon" of space structure, typical of the Gothic tradition.

In terms of plot structure the novel can be divided into three parts which correspond to particular space ranges: first Naples, then the travel through the Apennines, and finally the return home to Naples. Space arrangement on each of those levels seems to be based on the principle of antinomy. Thus a few dovetailing contrasting types of space can be distinguished: closed vs. open space, static vs. dynamic, friendly vs. hostile, internal vs. external.

The first and third parts of the novel show the closed, static space of home as the cozy, safe and friendly place, the main space

²Głowiński and Okopień-Sławińska 9–22.

³W. Ostrowski, "'The Mysteries of Udolpho.' A Gothic Novel and Much More," *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici* 319 (1997): 161–174.

ranges being here the house of Ellena (villa Altieri), the palace of the Vivaldi family, Santa Maria della Piéta as the model of an ideal convent, and – in a broader sense – Naples as the home town of the protagonists. The only hostile and terrifying spatial element is here connected with the darkness and mystery of the ruins of the Paluzzi fortress. The setting of the second part is dominated by the vast, open, free space of the Apennine landscape suitable for the motif of travel, which reflects the dynamic aspect of space. The motif of travel and the route line are the central factors organizing the space structure in this part: particular places of destination representing the type of closed, static space seem to be, as it were, “threaded” onto the main line of travel through the Apennines, the particular constituents of which are: the monastery of San Stefano, the Ursuline convent on the lake of Celano, a lonely house on the shore of the Adriatic, the ruins of the old Camprusca villa, the chambers of the Inquisition.

The motif of travel is semantically rich, it covers various overlapping meanings: exile, wandering, sentimental journey, escape and pilgrimage. On the literal level the journey starts with the exile of Ellena (doomed to imprisonment in the San Stefano monastery); then Vivaldi sets off (together with his servant Paul) in search of his Beloved and they both try to escape various dangers and persecutions. The route Vivaldi takes while searching for Ellena in different monasteries crosses the route of the devotees, the pilgrims going to the shrine of our Lady of Mount Carmel in the convent of Carmelites:

When Vivaldi understood that this shrine was in the church of a convent, partly inhabited by nuns, and that it was little more than a league and a half distant, he determined to accompany them, for it was as possible that Ellena was confined there as in any other cloister. (I, 115)⁴

⁴All quotations in the paper come from the following edition: A. Radcliffe, *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents: A Romance*, ed. F. Gar-

Thus Vivaldi's quest acquires also a quality of a personal pilgrimage.

Each journey carries the sense of wandering through certain space, where the traveller may learn to contemplate and interpret the surrounding world. The scenery is introduced in the novel by numerous detailed descriptions of natural objects and buildings incorporated into the narrative: Naples, Rome, the Convents of San Stefano and San Sebastian, the forests, mountainous landscape, the lake of Celano:

From the summit of a mountain, the morning light shewed the travelers the distant lake of Celano, gleaming at the feet of other lofty mountains of the Appennine, far in the south. Thither Vivaldi judged it prudent to direct his course, for the lake lay so remote from the immediate way to Naples, and from the neighbourhood of San Stefano, that its banks promised a secure retreat. (I, 149)

the dwelling at the shore of the Adriatic:

They descended to the shore, and presently came to a lonely dwelling, which stood so near the margin of the sea, as almost to be washed by the waves. (II, 210)

The novel is set in Italy, a Catholic Mediterranean country, which in many respects appeared exotic, mysterious and fascinating to the English readers. Radcliffe, who never visited Italy herself, based her knowledge of the country on various historical sources and travel books.⁵

A fragment of space – generated and visualised by means of description – does not exist in literature as a separate, autonomous

ber (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1981), pages and volume given in the brackets.

⁵See: F. Garber, notes, *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents: A Romance*, by A. Radcliffe, ed. F. Garber (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1981) 417.

construct but assumes the functional role of the setting for plot and characters. Therefore, in accordance with the theoretical model applied in the present interpretation, it is possible to distinguish three levels of space manifestation in a work of literature: description, scenery and the metaphorical level.⁶ B. Bałutowa discusses still another important aspect of the category of space, namely the function of aesthetic appeal.⁷ It should be remembered that the romances of Radcliffe – called by Walter Scott “the first poetess of romantic fiction” – contain passages of impressive poetic prose.⁸

The landscape in the novels of Ann Radcliffe functions first of all as the background and setting for plot sequence. Moreover, there is a peculiar relationship between the characters and their immediate environment. Landscapes seem to correspond with their thoughts and emotions (hope, joy, or sorrow, anxiety and suffering). Searching for his captured Beloved Vivaldi realizes that the wild Apennine scenery is “in harmony” with his mood:

He sometimes rested to gaze upon the scenery around him, for this too was in harmony with the temper of his mind. Disappointment had subdued the wilder energy of the passions, and produced a solemn and lofty state of feeling; he viewed with pleasing sadness the dark rocks and precipices, the gloomy mountains and vast solitudes, that spread around him. (I, 116)

Nature appears to reflect the confusion of feelings experienced by Ellena Rosalba before her clandestine marriage to Vivaldi:

The scene appeared to sympathize with the spirits of Ellena. It was a gloomy evening, and the lake, which broke in dark waves upon the

⁶Głowiński and Okopień-Sławińska 16.

⁷Bałutowa 50.

⁸J. Raimond, ed., *A Handbook of English Romanticism* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 126.

shore, mingled its hollow sounds with those of the wind, that bowed the lofty pines, and swept in gusts among the rocks. (II, 183)

The narrative emphasizes the parallels between powerful, stormy emotions of the characters and states of nature, as in the scene where Schedoni plans the assassination of Ellena on a dark, stormy evening. With regard to this specific relationship in Radcliffe's novels it can be stated that her characters become a part of nature rather than its observers and space can be regarded as another protagonist of her novels.⁹

The moods and emotions of the characters are projected onto natural landscapes and nature seems to acquire human and spiritual quality. This intimate relation between the characters and their environment, so characteristic of Radcliffe's novels, "may be regarded as drawing close to the Romantic–anthropomorphic concept of nature which attributes to it emotions of the human soul."¹⁰

The association of human experiences with the states of nature and weather – known as "the pathetic fallacy" – gives the impression that "natural environment sympathises with human tempers."¹¹ The heroes and heroines in Ann Radcliffe's romances tend to seek refuge from the misfortunes and oppression in majestic mountainous regions that offer them consolation and fill their hearts with hope and joy. The sight of the wild Abruzzo Mountains surrounding the San Stefano convent becomes the source of consolation for the captured Ellena:

If I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these, than amidst the tamer landscapes of na-

⁹M. Błaszak, *Ann Radcliffe's Gothic Romances and the Romantic Revival* (Opole: Wydawnictwo WSP, 1991) 57–59.

¹⁰Błaszak 63.

¹¹Błaszak 63.

ture! Here, the objects seem to impart somewhat of their own force, their own sublimity, to the soul. It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works! (I, 62–63)

The heroine contemplating the beauty of lofty summits through the window of her prison experiences the spiritual tranquility and the presence of *sacrum*:

Here, gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her, looking, as it were, beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures, dwelling as with a present God in the midst of his sublime works; with a mind thus elevated, how insignificant would appear to her the transactions, and the sufferings of this world! (I, 90–91)

The scene seems to indicate the relationship between the image of sublime nature and the spiritual, sacred, divine world.

In her descriptions of landscape Radcliffe turns to the motifs already present in classical and sentimental literature: mountains, forests, sea, ruins. She seems to employ methods akin to sentimental poetics. However, the type of nature presented in the Gothic romances is slightly different from the sentimental landscape: here nature is not only ascribed emotional qualities, does not only reflect the feelings and experiences of the heroes but also creates the general atmosphere of mystery and terror.¹² Therefore the description focuses here not on the idealized, idyllic images of nature but on the gloomy, vast, monumental and majestic scenery.

The mountains, the picturesque, magnificent, monumental setting for contemplation and spiritual experience, and the sea, the symbol of the infinity and transcendence, of the movement and

¹²A. Kowalczykova, *Pejzaż romantyczny* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982) 28.

freedom, became the favourite motifs characteristic of the Romantic landscape in European literature and painting.¹³

Apart from natural elements of Pre-Romantic space interacting with the heroes the Gothic fiction also includes “artificial” elements of landscape, the most important being the gothic castle or the ruin. In *The Italian* this element is represented by the ruins of the villa of the Barone di Camprusca:

A few moments brought them to the spot, where, retired at a short distance among the woods that browed the hill, they discovered the extensive remains of what seemed to have been a villa, and which, from the air of desolation it exhibited, Schedoni would have judged to be wholly deserted. (III, 260)

In England the cult of ruins originated with the Gothic revival and the interest in the Middle Ages. The ruin appeared frequently as a conventional and meaningful motif of the Gothic novel. It functioned as a picturesque element of the landscape, reinforcing the atmosphere of terror, and sometimes being the omen of menace. The aesthetic quality of the ruins is connected with their symbolic aspect: ruins as the witness of the past appeal to imagination and emotions, disintegrating buildings come closer to nature, no longer useful for everyday purposes they start a “mystical” existence. The noble and sad beauty of the ruins rests with their being the symbol of transitoriness and instability.¹⁴ In *The Italian* the desolate ruin of the Camprusca villa performs the aesthetic and metaphorical function: it not only provides the location of the novel’s dramatic events but also arouses the feelings of fear, sadness, melancholy, respect and stimulates contemplation over the past. The heroes learning the story of the villa’s owner realize the transience and vanity of all the earthly things and values.

¹³Kowalczykova 95.

¹⁴Kowalczykova 33.

It can be observed that particular space forms in Radcliffe's novel not only function as important elements of the fictional world but also convey axiological and metaphorical contents. Generally love and freedom are connected with the vast, dynamic open space whereas the closed, static space (the convent, the lonely cottage and Inquisition dungeons) is associated with the idea of imprisonment, emotional death and sorrow. This opposition is reinforced throughout the novel by contrasting space types. The motifs characteristic of the closed space of prison, such as the vaults and passages of the San Stefano monastery, the dungeons, the stairs and the chain of chambers in the lonely house can be perceived in terms of a labyrinth. The application of the metaphor of labyrinth reinforces the impression of hostility and strangeness of a particular space form.¹⁵ However, closed space may be also friendly, especially within the Naples space range (the protagonists' houses, Santa Maria della Pieta), and during the journey (the Ursuline convent of San Sebastian). On the other hand, nature – generally friendly and sympathizing with the heroes – can also be wild, gloomy, frightening and hostile:

Beyond the margin of the coast, as far as the eye could reach, appeared pointed mountains, darkened with forests, rising ridge over ridge in many successions. Ellena, as she surveyed this wild scenery, felt as if she was going into eternal banishment from society. (II, 209)

Still another structurally important space range is the sacred space of a church or chapel. It acquires an important role in the development of the plot. Many crucial events take place within the framework of the sacred space. It is the church that usually brings the lovers, Ellena and Vivaldi, together: they meet for the first time

¹⁵For the detailed interpretation of the metaphor of labyrinth see: M. Głowiński, *Mity przebrane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994).

and fall in love with each other in the church of San Lorenzo at Naples, Vivaldi finds and recognizes the imprisoned Ellena in the chapel of the San Stefano convent, their secret marriage ceremony is broken in the chapel of the Ursuline convent at the lake Celano, and finally they are united forever in the church of the Santa Maria della Piéta in Naples.

The central spatial construct responsible for the unity of the second part of the novel is the road as the line of travel. It is the road that orders and integrates particular space ranges, enables the heroes to cross the boundaries of those ranges, locates events and situations, creating a specific coherent plot sequence. The dynamic line of the road constitutes both a linear and a circular space construct. It is linear because particular space ranges and points (Naples, Rome, the countryside, the mountains, forests, convents, the cottage, the ruins) appear in a sequence along the heroes' road and it is also circular – because the route resembles a loop; in the end the protagonists come back home to Naples i.e. to the place from which they have set off.

Since the arrangement and functioning of space in *The Italian* seems to be based on antinomies, it is worth noting that Radcliffe tends to emphasise the existence of a borderline between particular space ranges. This borderline, manifested in the form of such elements as a window or balcony in villa Altieri, the grate in the convent or prison, symbolizes various oppositions extending beyond the spatial level: the distance between the lovers in terms of social and material status, the antithesis freedom – imprisonment, or the mountains functioning as cultural and territorial borderline.

On the basis of the above short discussion of *The Italian* it can be concluded that the category of space is a significant structural and semantic component of the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe. Space, related to other elements of the fictional world, assumes different functions within the artistic structure of the novel. Apart from its basic role, which consists in providing the setting for the

plot, the Gothic space is assigned also metaphorical, symbolic and aesthetic functions. The space tends to be shown through the eyes of the characters and subjected to lyrical expression. The specific role of space forms in *The Italian* reflects the peculiar vision of the world, determines the Pre-Romantic character of the novel and contributes to the breaking of the canon of the rational aesthetics.