Bjarne Thorup Thomsen

Location in Hamsun's Turn-of-the-Century Short Stories

I

In his illuminating study of Hamsun's novels of disillusionment, *Luft, vind, ingenting* (Air, Wind, Nothing), the Norwegian literary scholar Atle Kittang has suggested that the typical Hamsun hero is the *wanderer*, the man without a home whose favoured mode of existence is the restless moving or drifting through places. This type of hero is engaged in the crossing of boundaries and belongs, Kittang argues, to a permanent symbolical borderland.[1] Kittang's observations are interesting, among other reasons, in that they so firmly interlink person and place – landscape and characterisation – in Hamsun's literary work. Although they are made within the context of a study of novels, Kittang's reflections would seem of relevance also to Hamsun's short fiction.

In recent years, a good deal of critical emphasis has been placed on examining the meaning of topography – the writing of the place – in narrative fiction.[2] The majority of such studies have referred to or selected their cases from the genre of the novel, highlighting, among other aspects, the 'thickness' and 'interiority' which are seen as characteristic of the

novel's space.[3] Within this critical debate the treatment of place in the short story genre has been rather less appreciated. Whereas for obvious reasons short story space cannot match novelistic space in terms of depth and particularity, it might be argued that its very sketchiness constitutes a useful language for the conveying of both literal and non-literal meanings. In the following, I shall attempt to make a brief contribution to the criticism of short story 'landscape' by discussing aspects of location as used in the short stories Hamsun published around the turn of the last century. It will soon emerge that, in the universe these texts establish, geographical space seems almost inseparable from an interpersonal space. Location and characterisation go hand in hand, as Kittang's observations suggest.

II

The short stories with which we shall be dealing appeared in two collections, *Siesta* (Siesta, hereafter S) and *Kratskog* (Thickets, hereafter K), from respectively three years before and three years after the turn of the century: 1897 and 1903. These are texts, in other words, which belong to a period in Hamsun's production that is traditionally characterised as transitional. In spite of their obvious literary qualities, these stories do not appear to have been admitted into the narrower Hamsun canon.

Are there, we might begin our investigation by asking, any common denominators to be found for the representation and treatment of place in these, if we accept the concept, transitional texts? It would, as an initial response, be tempting to answer the question in the negative. What seems to characterise the locations used in the stories is precisely their diversity. Of the twenty-six shorter or longer pieces which constitute the two collections and which are symmetrically distributed with thirteen texts in each volume, sixteen contain settings which to varying degrees could be classed as authenticised. These authenticised locations span, firstly, South, Mid and North Norwegian settings such as the streets of Christiania in 'Damen fra Tivoli' (The Lady from Tivoli, in S) or 'På gaten' (In the Street, in S), the town of Drammen in 'På turné' (On Tour, in K), Bæverdalen in 'Julegilde' (Christmas Party, in S), a vicarage in Nordland in 'Et spøkelse' (A Ghost, in K), the waters around Ofoten in 'Reiersen av "Sydstjærnen"' (Reiersen of the "South Star", in S). Secondly, the stories include Scandinavian locations: the better part of Southern Sweden in 'Dronningen av Saba' (The Queen of Sheba, in S), Copenhagen in 'Hemmelig ve' (Secret Pain, in S) and 'Livets røst' (The Voice of Life, in K). Thirdly, they employ European settings: Paris in 'Litt Paris' (A Little Paris, in S) and 'En gaterevolution' (A Street Revolution, in K), the railway line between Hamburg and Bremerhafen in 'Secret Pain'. Finally, and primarily in the second collection, the stories reach over to American locations

such as the Red River Valley in 'På prærien' (On the Prairie, in K), Wisconsin and the small prairie town of Madelia in 'Rædsel' (Horror, in K), New York in 'Secret pain'. One story, 'På bankerne' (On the Banks, in S), is almost programmaticly set on a fishing boat 'on the same spot, in the middle of the ocean, on the border between two worlds, Europe and America.'[4] ('på samme plet, midt på havet, på grænsen mellem to verdener, Europa og Amerika.'[5])

Likewise, if we briefly consider the non-authenticised locations employed by Hamsun, these also display a considerable degree of variation: they range from the everyday in 'Småbyliv' (Small Town Life, in K) via the abstract in 'Ringen' (The Ring, in S) to the distinctly 'exotic' settings of 'kafé Maximilian' in 'Kjærlighetens slaver' (The Slaves of Love, in K) or the markedly southern and mysteriously anonymised place of D* in 'Far og Søn. En spillehistorie' (Father and Son. A Gambling Story, in K), which begins: 'Last autumn I made a journey to the south, far to the south, and arrived early one morning by river-boat at the village D*, a small town, a strange town, hidden away and forgotten' ('Jeg gjorde siste høst en reise sydover, langt syd, og kom tidlig en morgning med flodbåten til landsbyen D*, en liten by, en forunderlig by, bortgjæmt og bortglemt'[6]).

Thus, a summary cataloguing of Hamsun's short story landscapes on the one hand confirms the disparateness of place in these texts. Even several individual texts map out a sequence of very diverse locations. On the other hand, it could

be argued that the stories taken together, as reflections of a gargantuan topographical appetite, constitute a macro tale of wanderlust, restlessness, even homelessness – a tale governed by centrifugal forces. Therefore, at least a negative common denominator could be established for the depiction of place in these texts, in that the home, any zone of real domesticity, in the great majority of stories is conspicuous only by its absence. The stories are set in outdoor public or semi-public zones such as the street, the park, the cemetery; they are located in means of transport – trains, ships, carriages; or, if they venture indoors, it is either into cafés and casinos or into pseudo-private or pseudo-intimate zones such as hotels, dormitories or brothels. In short, the stories favour locations in which a random collective of strangers, living or dead, converge.

It should be stressed, however, that these settings are 'homeless' in a technical rather than a spiritual sense. The stories, including the few which contain depictions of childhood, do not posit any original or authentic locus which has been lost or fallen from. There is no reference to or memory of any 'enchanted' world whose disenchantment the texts deplore. It would seem no coincidence that the one text, 'A Ghost', which marks itself out as a childhood story is also a horror story. The only sites the stories seem to know are those where strangers meet.

III

To sum up, Hamsun's short story settings are in the main not constructed to create any real sense of interior depth, hailed as a hallmark of novelistic treatment of space. Instead, the texts are occupied with movement and positioning in a flatter, more exterior landscape. As positioning involves character, let us now briefly address the question of how topography and characterisation interact in our text corpus.

Whereas the majority of locations used in Hamsun's short stories are, as we have seen, 'known', that is authenticised and minutely named, the people who populate such places tend, in contrast, to be 'unknown', that is anonymised or nameless. Such naming strategies reflect the fact that the main characters of the stories in general are outsiders to the places they manoeuvre within and in a sense secondary to these. Thus, the composition of the texts is typically centred around how characters, often character narrators, arrive at, drift within, travel between and depart from locations. Almost always, this traversing of places also involves the temporary touching or crossing of boundaries *between* people. The stories constitute route maps in a geographical meaning, but also in the sense that they outline how characters like magnets are attracted to or repelled from each other – or both. Much more than focusing on more conventional depiction of individual characters, Hamsun's stories are concerned with a relational or positional game with and between character

pieces. This game is more often than not governed by desire. In this respect and in what might be termed their 'geometrical' qualities several of the texts are reminiscent of a Kierkegaardian discourse as found, for example, in 'Forførerens Dagbog' (The Diary of a Seducer, 1843 – a text which tracks Johannes tracking Cordelia through the streets of Copenhagen). Hamsun's stories also resemble Kierkegaard's famous document fiction in that they tend to end in a void, in departure or death.

To illustrate this and other of our observations, let us now attempt a somewhat closer reading of a text which seems to encapsulate central aspects of the poetics of the Hamsun short story, but which also contains atypical features.

IV

The hopefully titled story 'The Voice of Life' is the eleventh text in the collection *Thickets* (an arresting name, incidentally, for a volume of texts of which very few are set in a nature space). The story opens in a de-populated, but elaborately specified street environment in Copenhagen, a setting in which the avenue seems to take on the human attribute of loneliness that no-one else is yet around to carry: 'There is a street called Vestervold down by the inner harbour in Copenhagen, a new and lonely avenue. There are few houses, few gas-lamps and hardly any people to be seen.' ('Nede ved den indre havn i Kjøbenhavn er en gate som heter Vestervold, en ny og ensom

boulevard. Der er få huser, få gaslykter og næsten ingen mennesker å se.'[7]) In this twilight zone, the narrator, the author H***, one evening encounters a lady whose facial features he cannot distinguish but who later turns out to be wearing a long veil. The female protagonist is thus doubly disguised, both by the darkness and by her garment, and the continuation of the story could be said to be about the unveiling of the woman. A powerful tool for expressing this process of unveiling is, interestingly, what might be termed a language of location, a strong spatial symbolism which permeates the story.

After having walked up and down the avenue several times and thus carried out the initial positioning, the protagonists establish contact and begin, as the text has it, to wander at each other's side ('Vi drev ved hverandres side', p. 92). The gradually growing closeness between the two is hereafter mirrored by the changing locations they pass through or penetrate into and, unusually within the context of Hamsun's short story poetics, the text does not stop short of either the innermost zones of domesticity or of claiming the fulfilment of desire. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this progression towards fulfilment.

As the protagonists leave the initial darkness behind and cross over into the illuminated streets of the city, this happens hand in hand and is highlighted by one of those time shifts which are so typical of Hamsun's prose style: 'Arm in arm we walk into the lit-up streets.' ('Vi går arm i arm ind i de oplyste

gater.' p. 93) Similarly, the crossing of another borderline, the threshold of the woman's flat at Gamle Kongevei, is followed by increased intimacy: she kisses him and unveils herself and reveals her first name. Finally, when, in what might be expected to represent the inner sanctuary of the story's setting, the bedroom of the flat, the protagonists simultaneously make their final approach towards each other, the text verges on rewarding a stereotypical erotic fantasy: 'I took a step towards her, she gave a little gulp and came towards me at the same time ....' ('Jeg gjorde et skridt imot hende, hun gav et lite klynk og kom mig i samme øieblik imøte ....', p. 94).

If the story had finished here, it could justifiably be argued that it had developed into a cliché. However, the text does not end here. Rather, through invoking the reader at this particular point, it foregrounds the fact that it does not: 'This was last night .... [...] What else was there that happened? Be patient, there was more!' ('Dette var igåraftes .... [...] Hvad som videre hændte? Giv tål, det hændte mere!', p. 94). Indeed, the continuation of the story specifically mocks the erotic idyll which the text itself has so far postulated.

On the following morning, the awakening and the emphasised arrival of daylight – 'The day became lighter and lighter' ('Dagen blev lysere og lysere', p. 94) – is, paradoxically, accompanied by the narrator's experience of what the text clearly marks out as a form of nightmare: 'Now I am experiencing something that still, at this very moment, is shuddering through me like a horrible dream.' ('Nu oplever

jeg noget som endnu i dette øjeblik rykker som en grufuld drøm gjennem mig.' p. 94). The nature of this dream is made manifest when the female protagonist, who has entered a hitherto un-mentioned adjoining room, 'sideværelset' (p. 94), opens its door from within and the narrator faces the following scene of the macabre:

> in the middle of the floor, on a long table, I see there is a corpse lying. A corpse, placed in the coffin, dressed in white, with a grey beard – the corpse of a man. His thin knees stick up like two angry fists clenched under the sheet and his face is very yellow and frightening. I see everything in broad daylight. I turn away and say nothing.
> (midt på gulvet på et langt bord ser jeg at det ligger et lik. Et lik, lagt i kisten, hvitklæt, med gråt skjæg, liket av en mand. Hans magre knæer står op som to rasende næver som er knyttet under lakenet og hans ansigt er meget gult og rædselsfuldt. Jeg ser alt i fuldt dagslys. Jeg vender mig bort og sier ikke et ord. p. 94)

Again, we note Hamsun's effective use of the present tense and also the significance of the motif of light in a text which contains an ironic undermining of the conventional connotations of night and day.

And here the story ends more or less. The couple take leave of each other with an agreement of meeting not the following day, when the woman is due to attend a funeral, but the day after. What is left for the narrator to do is only to complete some basic detective work. In Café Bernina he consults the public directory of addresses and ascertains the surname of the woman, a piece of information which, interestingly, is

withheld from the reader to whom the woman thus remains an unknown. It is also noteworthy that the narrator needs to rely on a publication in order to establish the full identity of a person to whom he has come so close. Hamsun's texts invariably express this kind of tension between intimacy and strangeness, closeness and distance. Finally, when the morning papers arrive, the narrator turned investigator discovers the last remaining piece of relevant information: an obituary stating the recent death of the woman's husband.

Thus, to conclude, it would be difficult to find a text which juxtaposes desire and death more literally than 'The Voice of Life' does. Its use of location, its symbolical spatial construction, exemplifies that there is no inner sanctuary in the topography of the Hamsun turn-of-the-century short story, not even in a seemingly hopeful text which penetrates so far. In Hamsun's stories there is always, if not literally then metaphorically speaking, an adjoining room in which threatening corpses and rivals reside. There is typically a third person ready to destroy the erotic idyll or the fantasy of it; and what resembled a straight line between two character positions is suddenly re-drawn into an ominous triangle. Thus, Hamsun's short stories depict and engage in a permanent positional play which seems to constitute life within modernity in these texts – a play, it should be added, in which the texts find considerable pleasure.

Notes

1 Atle Kittang, *Luft, vind, ingenting. Hamsuns desillusjonsromanar frå Sult til Ringen sluttet*, Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1984, p. 25, 123 *et al.*

2 An enlightening example of this crtical trend is J. Hillis-Miller, *Topographies*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995.

3 See for example Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels. Ideology and Fiction*, New York and London, Methuen, 1987, p. 53: 'novelistic spaces must have dimensions and depth; they must have byways and back alleys; there must be open rooms and hidden places; dining rooms and locked drawers; there must be a thickness and interiority to the mental constructions that constitute the novel's space.'

4 I am very grateful to my friend and colleague Peter Graves for having translated into English all quotations from Hamsun's short stories used in this contribution.

5 Knut Hamsun, *Samlede Verker*, vol. 3, Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1963, p. 64.

6 Knut Hamsun, *Samlede Verker*, vol. 4, Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1963, p. 73.

7 Knut Hamsun, *Samlede Verker*, vol. 4, p. 92. In the following, page references to this edition of the short story are given in the main text.