

Opening Up

S Everyday Life Practices and
the Work of Piotr Paziński

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Marta Mizuro suggested in her review of Piotr Paziński's *The Boarding House* that the residents of the Jewish rest home visited by the main character, supposedly his old friends, might in fact represent creatures of his memory, ghosts who haunt that place, rather than fully embodied characters. That interpretative ambiguity can help us to look at all of Paziński's prose as a way of opening up a space that today no longer exists, but yet continues to form one layer of its former location, its vanished character.

In order for that interpretative ambiguity to achieve the status of a coherent reading, certain preliminary assumptions need to be clarified. Performative space, in keeping with Erika Fischer-Lichte's thesis, is understood here as fleeting and ephemeral, not existing before, outside of, or after the performance, taking form during the performance and through its agency. Perform-

mative space, furthermore, should not be confused with the space in which the performance takes place.¹ For the sake of clarity, I will refer to all the activities of the main character as performance. He constitutes the third element in the equation – the character defined as a dynamic performative subject, self-creating through his actions as the initiator and agent of change.² Focusing our attention on the question of agency enables issues relating to practice and action to enter the discussion; I will primarily address the theme of space and all of the subject's actions in relation to space.

The destination of the main character and narrator's journey is a boarding house near Warsaw where most of the guests are Jews and where he used to stay with his grandmother as a small child. He sets off as a wanderer in two senses: firstly in the physical and geographical sense, leaving the city to visit the provincial vacation setting where he first went hiking, explored the nooks and crannies of a strange building, and met a lot of old people. He now wants to check whether the place's former life has been restored, and that is the second layer of his journey: into memory, imagination, discovery, and, finally, creativity.³ The man opens himself up to the otherness of the place, and the result is a wandering exile from the present and from the reality of the space. Only then can he bring back what today is absent from the familiar place;⁴ that absence is the source of his sense of alienation, a certain inadequacy, and pessimistic awareness that what is passing away is old and has no chance of continuing.⁵

The most problematic aspect of *The Boarding House* remains the protagonist's position in captivity to the past, his inability to break away from the world of his forebears and simultaneous desire to remain among them. The nameless man is the "last in a chain of generations, attached at the very end" (p. 134), and his actions are to some extent brought about by necessity and by his lack of self-reliance. He must live the life of the dead, "with its imprint of what was and what, at the moment when they left, fell back into nothingness. Their life and mine," he says, "among the shadows, among ghosts and with ghosts in place of the fresh sun's rays" (p. 74). Toward the end of the story he tries to escape, but cannot, held back by his ancestors in a steely embrace that keeps him rooted to the ground and joins him to his grandmother's generation by force. Condemned to remain mentally stuck inside the boarding house, he attempts to bring the abandoned building back to life: "everything that I'm doing here is an archaeology of memory that has fallen into darkness" (p. 73); a way of dreaming about the place. Lack is connected here with subjectivity everything that appears on the stage of memory has a distinct hallmark of individuality. Paziński has an awareness of the fact that the places where we live are presences of absence, so what he needs to do is show something invisible.⁶

¹ See E. Fisher-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetic*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain, New York 2008, p. 107.

² See E. Domańska, " 'Zwrot performatywny' we współczesnej humanistyce" (The "Performative Turn" in Contemporary Humanities), *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2007, 5, p. 56.

³ See Ł. Najder, "Z pamięci" (From Memory), *Tygiel Kultury* (The Crucible of Culture) 2010, 4/6, pp. 169-170.; M. Olszewski, "W gabinecie figur woskowych" (In the Cabinet of Wax Figures), *Akcent* (Accent) 2010, 4, p. 114.

⁴ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1984, pp. 107-108.

⁵ See P. Paziński, *Pensjonat* (The Boarding House), Warszawa 2010, p. 103. All quotations are taken from the same edition.

⁶ See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 109.

But in order to do that, he must find a point of departure, explore the texture, define the status of the space as it exists now. Here is the protagonist's reaction when he arrives at the boarding house:

The front door is closed. The buzzer probably doesn't work. Anyway nobody came when I rang it. The whole building seemed to be in a deep sleep. The windows latched firm, nobody on the porch, balconies empty. (p. 10)

Throughout the novel, there are many signals that the building has been abandoned: "the hall and the cafeteria remain vacant" (p. 26), "it's quiet here (...). Dead" (p. 29). Finally, the boarding house's manager, the only living person the narrator encounters (not counting a certain Jakub towards the end), observes that "everything was asleep here" (p. 70). The narrator also has his doubts and asks, "but is anybody still here?" (p. 104); his intuition intensifies the ever-present darkness that rules over the vacation house.⁷ The dead-end finality of the boarding house stands opposed to nature and its vital forces, which "want to take revenge on its old walls for their abjection and decrepitude and swallow them up entirely, leaving not even the faintest flicker of memory in their wake" (p. 127).

The narrator's encounter with the building itself elicits a reaction; the empty rooms are still filled by words spoken there in the past. Perhaps due to its very decrepitude, everything that the narrator has experienced comes back to him, the past surprises him and overtakes him at every turn. He increasingly feels bitterly aware of the transitory nature of his heritage, the sense that it will only exist as long as he is alive. The space of memories and phantoms, that whole spectacle, takes shape in the intersection between his memory and the artifacts he discovers in the building. The story told, or rather played out on the pages of *The Boarding House* is that of the last moment of presence before annihilation. The man is taking advantage of the opportunity to experience that, because restoring the place in its previous incarnation is— if only in the theater of the imagination — something he needs in order to preserve continuity, weighed down as he feels by the obligation to bear witness for the benefit of succeeding generations. He realizes too late that he should ask questions about things, and there is nobody left, everyone has gone. The essence of continuity lies in the fact that each element fits inside the space between what came before and what comes later. Found photographs from the previous era, ancient newspapers, even an outdated telephone book with the names of Jewish city-dwellers must remain available, someone must be able to explain them, to save them from anonymity and oblivion. That is precisely why the ghosts of the former residents of the boarding house appear, characterized not by presence, but by mere appearance, being apparitions. These figures from a bygone era become activated when the protagonist decides to restore the old reality of the boarding house. The state in which they dwell is one of potentiality. According to Michel de Certeau, a place exists when it is haunted by various ghosts hidden within it, who can be summoned forth. This "young man" as the ghosts in the boarding house refer to the main character— takes advantage of the different layers of space in the house, its palimpsest quality, and finds passageways leading to the previous reality of the place. He feels that "right near, beyond the wall, they are hiding" (p. 101), that they are living in secret.

⁷ See P. Paziński, *Pensjonat*, pp. 70, 89, 106.

Creative work and the work of memory require movement, stamping the impression of one's own presence in an existing space, and that is why Paziński's protagonist is a dynamic character, first traveling to the boarding house, then moving through its corridors, walking around the surrounding forest. Through his dynamism and engagement with his memories, he makes the place become real. The vacation home he creates through action, wearing the space into reality, truly comes into existence and becomes visible; we no longer have before us a deteriorating, abandoned building. Foremost among the criteria defined by de Certeau as signs of individual agency is walking; because of it, spatial elements become transformed, are given a chance to develop, and create spatial "expressions."⁸

Space is created in a much more sophisticated procedure in *Bird Streets*, consisting of four mutually interconnecting stories; it should be read as a novel in four acts. Here, the dominant themes are absence, disappearance, the search for traces and getting lost in the labyrinth of memories and of sweeping historical change seen through the prism of an individual life. Paziński describes the Jewish world that, because it no longer exists, is hidden at the margin, at the intersection of things, where stitches and fractures are more visible. It is a world of shadows penetrated by streams of soft light that appear wherever reality has imposed itself, where the conviction that a new beginning is possible has only triumphed on the surface. He opens up or perhaps creates worlds that as they mutually exclude each other reveal secret passageways, narrows that let us see more, assembling a whole from the scattered traces of postwar Warsaw. The places he describes, secret alcoves and networks of back-streets, are not stuck to the ground. The conceptual city produced by theory, rational functionality and history, as encountered in de Certeau's work, is opposed to the place experienced in practice present though invisible, erased from maps, emanating an afterlife so intense that contemporary reality pales and dwindles, giving life back to phenomena; the personal, metaphorical city in this way penetrates the comprehensible text of the planned and readable city.⁹

Footsteps, according to de Certeau, create and shape a space; here again, he reminds us of the importance of movement.¹⁰ In *Bird Streets*, movement occurs across a much bigger space than in *The Boarding House*: the landscape of Warsaw, with old streets named for birds such as Orla (Eagle), Gęsia (Goose), Kacza (Duck), where movement allows elements excluded from urban planning to surface:¹¹ in the book, the "refuse" rejected by the functional administration, these streets' Jewish past, returns from exile.

The return of the past becomes particularly clear in the story "Izaak Feldwurm's Manuscript"—an interesting example of how text and action can intersect, appearing in juxtaposition but simultaneously creating a continuum of cause and effect. In the story, each year the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is marked by a ritual remembrance of Izaak Feldwurm and his manuscript, a lost and possibly nonexistent novel of world history: "the book ... presented

⁸ See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 99, 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

an incomparable panoramic view of an era, even several areas. Wars and revolutions, uprising and periods of prosperity, birth and death everything flowed together” (p. 112).¹² There was no escape from Feldwurm, he was a shadow, not clearly visible, but an almost tangible reflection of the fates of Jews in bygone times. His story was transmitted orally, and the continual changes to his pregnant legend led to his importuning presence. Not ready to give the world up to the living, he disturbed everyone without exception, appearing in distant parts of the city, haunting places and vanishing.

The main character of the story decides to trace the presence of Feldwurm in present-day Warsaw, running after him through the whole city, following the footsteps and activities of the Jewish writer. The correlation between walking around the city and the act of speaking generates the space, as the manuscript and its ritual remembrance accompany the wanderings of Feldwurm and the nameless protagonist. de Certeau has shown that the act of walking is for a city what speech is for language, that is, a process whereby the pedestrian *takes possession* of the topographical system;¹³ in Paziński’s case it is a spatial actualization of Warsaw. In other words, walking around the city in search of Feldwurm and moving along the same paths as he traveled, the character creates a space that derives half from the current face of the city, half from fantasies, memories, and documents. It becomes a fissure, a tunnel connecting the current with the vanished.

One rambling stylistic device connects both of Paziński’s books: the synecdoche, which de Certeau claims elongates a part of space by making it portray something bigger and put itself in the place of that bigger whole.¹⁴ The space created by Paziński reveals its palimpsest essence as it chooses one form of embodiment among all the potentialities available. The space in *The Boarding House* and *Bird Streets* is elongated, the whole is replaced by fragments, the carefully gathered remnants of memory. Synecdoche adds density to them, enlarging each detail and at the same time reducing the whole. That means that the space created has global ambitions, and becomes here, in this moment, in this performance of memory and imagination one complete embodiment.

Paziński’s work proves that the performative turn can encompass more than human agency. The performative space the space of spectacle is created by both subjectivity and geometrical space that acts as a container for momentaneous actions. But performativity also presupposes repetition, as Ewa Domańska has written, since only repetition guarantees that phenomena can come into existence.¹⁵ In Paziński’s case, repetition assures a new iteration of the protagonist’s reading of space. What he offers the reader, on the other hand, is a portrayal of a place becoming fragmentary and convoluted histories, pasts offered to the reader, accumulated ages, capable of developing, but appearing here as potential stories, riddles to be solved.¹⁶

¹²P. Paziński, *Ptasie ulice* (Bird Streets), Warszawa 2013. All quotations come from this edition.

¹³See de Certeau, p. 99.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁵See Domańska, p. 49.

¹⁶See de Certeau, p. 109.

The language of Paziński's work is shaped in such a way that it not only presents reality, but also produces changes in it. History is recreated and repeated. Furthermore, as Anna Krajewska writes, in literature, "dreams, whether real or illusive, slow down, transforming events, manipulating sequences of images, and also experienced physically as fear, desire, horror, bliss, or rapture."¹⁷ In the act of reading, the created space is liberated, no longer restrained by the material text; that is a good point of departure for putting the viewers in the state experienced by the protagonist, juxtaposing memories with the real shape of a place. Particularly since each act of reading begins the representation of creating space anew, giving the reader his share in the process and making him a co-author, since it offers material for arranging on one's own. That is precisely why each of Piotr Paziński's novels can be read not as a whole but as a collection of fragments that can be set in a different order each time.

¹⁷A. Krajewska, "'Zwrot dramatyczny' a literaturoznawstwo performatywne" (The "Dramatic Turn" and Performative Literature Studies), *Przestrzeń Teorii* (The Space of Theory) 2012, 17, p. 49.

KEYWORDS:

subjectivised

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Piotr Paziński

ABSTRACT :

The text, concerned with the prose work of Piotr Paziński, focuses on the performative activities of his characters, who acquire the ability to create spatial meanings, situated at the intersection of historical events and individual experience. The causality of character becomes joined with everyday life practices as theorized by Michel de Certeau. The interactivity of characters and space expands the category of the performative turn to include not only the causality of people, but also geometric space, which – acquiring subjectivity – becomes an active participant in the creation of meanings.

space

performativity

causality

NOTE OF THE AUTHOR:
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Polskiej i Klasycznej Uniwersytetu im. Adama
Mickiewicza w Poznaniu. Do jego zainteresowań
badawczych należy najnowsza proza polska,
zagadnienie starości i przestrzeni w literaturze.
Jako krytyk literacki współpracuje z „Nowymi
Książkami” i „Odrą”. Niedawno ukazała się jego
książka *Ocalić starość. Literackie obrazy starości
w polskiej literaturze najnowszej*.