The Phenomenology of Space in Literary Representation: The Experience of Presence and Perception

Many influential accounts of literary experience involve the representation of space either as a scenario constructed in the reader's mind (see Zwaan 1999; Speer et al., 2009) or as imagery 'the story will paint in the mind's eye' (Cicekoglu 2003:1). The first account implies that the mental representation of literary space will be three-dimensional, contain sensorimotor detail, and approximate online-experience closely enough to enable readers to simulate “presence” in the narrative, through use of stored perceptual resources (Zwaan 1994, 2004; Speer et al., 2009). While Cicekoglu does not suggest that literature produces only two-dimensional mental images, the phrasing of this second account implies that literary space resembles pictorial space, which is two-dimensional and experienced primarily through visual perception. This essay argues that these are complementary rather than mutually exclusive accounts of the phenomenology of literature. Probably, any given experience of a text will include alternations between feeling “presence” in a literary space and feeling “perception” of a literary space.

In online-experience, experiencing a situation and looking at a painting would be phenomenologically distinct events, yet both necessitate a body, or “presence”, in which perceptions can be grounded. This essay begins by suggesting two hypotheses for why literary texts may evoke feelings of “presence” and “perception”:

1. Literary descriptions of spaces a body can occupy, such as a street, should produce a phenomenological effect of a three-dimensional scenario (“presence”).
2. Literary descriptions of spaces a body cannot occupy, such as a painting, should produce a two-dimensional phenomenological effect (“perception”).

However, since literature does not necessarily approximate a ‘coherent concept of a body’ (Jajdelska 2004, unpublished) or online-experience, hypotheses that depend on the online contrast between three-dimensional and two-dimensional spaces may be problematic when applied to a literary text. I focus specifically on extracts from My Name is Red (Pamuk 2001) (MNR) - because it contains scenes where characters navigate spaces (the streets of Istanbul) and observe representational paintings (Islamic miniatures) - to discover if there are any salient differences or similarities in the descriptions of these two types of events. I conclude that the contrast between three-dimensional and two-dimensional spaces in online-experience does not necessarily hold true in literature. Instead, a third hypothesis emerges: that literature manipulates our perceptual faculties so that two-dimensional spaces (in which we should feel “perception” rather than “presence”) may convey a sense of three-dimensionality, and three-dimensional spaces (in which we should feel “presence”) can be rendered indeterminate and, consequently, encourage “perception” and reflection and not just immersion.

If literary space encourages feelings of “presence” through approximating the spaces we navigate in online-experience, it might develop spatial awareness in ways similar to how spatial awareness is developed online. Merleau-Ponty suggests that to develop spatial awareness and, thus, achieve an “optimal grip” on the space we occupy (Merleau-Ponty 1964), we need sensorimotor detail, interaction with other bodies or objects (Merleau-Ponty 1962), and an appropriate level of distance (neither too close or too far from an object to see it distinctly). In Zwaan's theory that a
feeling of “presence” in literary texts is due to readers creating 'situation models' (1999), he agrees that texts that contain 'propioceptive, motor, optic flow, and haptic information' (1999:82) – information necessary to developing the spatial awareness we need to successfully navigate our online environment (Dorsch 2010:1) - are more likely to create fine-grained situation models. Similarly, Dreyfus argues that 'telepresence' differs vastly from actual presence, yet the simulation of presence in virtual contexts requires ‘visual as well as aural and tactile information […]', and a consistency of information between these' (2001:57). Consistency would seem to derive from egocentric spatial representations, in that objects and locations are represented according to the perspective of a body (Klatzky 1997:2) in which the multi-modal experience of depictions of spatial properties can be integrated. Consequently, it is possible to hypothesize that literary descriptions of space that involve these three elements – sensorimotor detail, interaction between bodies, and a sense of motility (navigating distances) – would produce a feeling of “presence” in a three-dimensional scenario.

I will now examine whether these three elements that should evoke a feeling of “presence” are evident in the passage below, where Black, a central character in MNR, navigates his way through Istanbul.

I didn't know whether it was the melodious sound of a lute that compelled me to follow, or if in the muddle of my memories and desires, I could simply no longer endure the virulent pickle seller, and seized upon the music as a way out of the conversation. I do, however, know this: When you love a city and have explored it frequently on foot, your body, not to mention your soul, gets to know the streets so
well after a number of years that in a fit of melancholy, perhaps stirred by a light
snow falling ever so sorrowfully, you'll discover your legs carrying you of their
own accord toward one of your favourite promontories.

This was how I happened to leave the Farrier's Market and ended up watching the
snow as it fell into the Golden Horn from a spot beside the Suleymaniye Mosque:
Snow had already begun to accumulate on the rooftops facing north and on
sections of the dome exposed to the north-easterly breeze. An approaching ship,
whose sails were being lowered, greeted me with a flutter of canvas. The colour of
its sails matched the leaden and foggy hue of the surface of the Golden Horn. The
cypress and plane trees, the rooftops, the heartache of dusk, the sounds coming
from the neighbourhood below, the calls of hawkers and the cries of children
playing in mosque courtyards mingled in my head … (Pamuk 2001:8-9)

While we experience space primarily through the sight-modality, tactile and auditory perception
is also important to developing spatial awareness (Dorsch 2010:4), as they help us isolate objects
‘from the mass of available data’ (Pepperell 2012:4). However, tactile information in this passage
revolves around the narrator’s body rather than the spatial orientation of the narrator’s body in
relation to objects. For example, the tactile effect of the snow is not evident as an object on the
surface of another object (the narrator’s body), but as interacting with his subjectivity, stirring
melancholy within the narrator. Chen claims that in perception of the motion of objects, ‘topological
discrimination should occur earlier and determine motion perception’ (2005:556), yet here Pamuk
manipulates our perceptual resources through a linguistic ordering in which the body in motion
precedes description of the objects that spatially orient the body’s movements, ‘your legs carrying you of their own accord’. Thus, the text reorganizes the resources used for online perception for different literary effects. Similarly, auditory information helps develop the spatial features of the narrator’s environment: the ‘sound of a lute’ is located at a distance in front of the narrator (it ‘compelled me to follow’); the conversation of ‘the virulent pickle seller’ is uncomfortably close; the ‘calls of hawkers and the cries of children’ sound from below, but it is unclear how sounds can be integrated into a sense of orientation in space because they are experienced as continuous only insofar as they ‘mingled in my head’. Because ‘hearing space differs from seeing it in that the localisation of sounds is far less determinate than that of visible objects’ (Dorsch 2010:5), though aural information may contribute towards a feeling of three-dimensional space as the narrator orients himself towards or away from the noises he hears, its primacy in this passage causes the description of space to remain relatively unspecific. Reading this extract in conjunction with the findings of cognitive research shows that the phenomenology of the text depends on how the author manipulates perceptual resources to create a sense of three-dimensional space - space that remains, however, indeterminate in comparison to online-experience.

In discussing the online experience of space, Merleau-Ponty also suggests that interaction with bodies is necessary to spatial orientation (1962). If so, a better optimal grip should be established in the marketplace where the narrator could access spaces by interacting with bodies or objects, for example by walking into the barber-shop or bakery (Pamuk 2001:8). However, the space described in greatest detail is Black’s view onto the bay, a space he cannot occupy. This description recruits perceptual resources, as it dwells on colour ('leaden and foggy hue'), the distant object of the ship
and the narrator’s imaginative interaction with it (the ship’s sail ‘greeted me with a flutter of canvas’) but remains too abstract to evoke a simulation of “presence”.

Though this passage describes motion from market-space to promontory-space, it does not focus on how the narrator finds his way but simply leaps from one space to another, so that there is no sense of the optical flow that accompanies motility in online-perception. The objects that he perceives (‘cypress and plane trees’ ‘rooftops’ ‘mosque courtyards’) are listed in a way that could reflect eye saccades, glancing up and down, left and right. Objects converge together in this sentence but they also decelerate apart through this listing technique, making their relative properties easier to isolate (Cutting 2000) as they do not tend to be isolated in online perception.

Additionally, readers cannot compensate for the lack of detail given to these objects through investigation, as they would in online-experience, so the claim that they can derive a three-dimensional scenario from this sketch of the environment, remains problematic. It would seem, then that Zwaan’s ‘situation model’ (1999) must differ significantly in clarity and specificity from the spatial-modelling we use for our environments in online-experience. This reveals how an author can use only specific features from online perception while removing others, and yet readers may still derive an impression of a three-dimensional space. It must be the case then, that the effect of scenes likes the one above is not ‘fidelity’ to online-experience but ‘evocation’ (Cutting 2000:637)

It is less clear how literary descriptions of pictures could evoke feelings of “presence” because pictorial space may depict interaction between bodies, motility and action sequences, and may stimulate sensorimotor activity (Gallese 2007), but the observer is always aware that the picture is
two-dimensional. For example, in viewing a picture of someone eating an apple, our mirror neuron system may activate the brain regions involved in eating an apple (Carr et al. 2003; Gallese 2003); stored perceptual resources regarding how apples taste, smell and feel may also be activated during recognition (Reddy et al., 2010). However, the primary modality through which we experience pictorial space is sight which conveys the information that the object we are looking at is flat.

Again, the flat surface of a picture does not invite tactile interaction; it depicts spaces, bounded by the edges of the canvas, which a body cannot occupy because they are clearly two-dimensional.

Thirdly, while online-experience involves much motion and perception of motion, the changes that occur in online perception when the viewer moves, such as objects becoming interposed upon one another, appearing progressively smaller and closer together in distance, etc. (Hochberger 1984:845; Dorsch 2010:2-3), do not occur when the viewer of a picture moves because the images in the pictorial space are fixed. In online perception objects may seem two-dimensional from a specific viewpoint, yet ‘our brain also appears to calculate an estimate of the ‘unseen’, real three-dimensional shape of the object’ (Melcher & Cavanagh 2011:364). Therefore, though seeing a ship and seeing a picture of a ship certainly vary in some salient ways, representational paintings must operate by cues that encourage imaginative attribution of depth, or marks on flat two-dimensional surfaces could not represent three-dimensional scenes (Hochberger 1984:841).

Consequently, observing pictorial space involves ‘visual awareness of something ‘absent’ (i.e., what is depicted), it has to involve some sort of visual imagining ... [of] the depicted entities’ (Dorsch 2010:6). This ‘visual imagining’ is aided by depth cues, such as linear perspective (Grignon 1996:46), occlusion contours that separate an object from its background (Todd 2004:118), or interposition (Hochberger 1984:850). Representational paintings try to produce a sense of three-
dimensionality despite their two-dimensional nature by evoking impressions of depth through specific cues (Hochberger 1984:844; Melcher & Cavanagh 2011:368), much as literature uses different techniques to suggest a three-dimensional impression of space. However, Islamic miniatures do not utilize the depth cues used for naturalism in Western representational painting. Accordingly, literary depictions of this two-dimensional pictorial tradition should support the second hypothesis that a space a body cannot occupy should evoke a feeling of “perception” rather than “presence”.

The narrator of this passage looks at a miniature depicting a murder:

… Imagine that the intruder wields a dagger in one hand as he strangles you with the other. Every detail, the finely wrought wall, window and frame ornamentation, the curves and circular designs in the red rug, the color of the silent scream emanating from your clamped throat and the yellow and purple flowers embroidered with incredible finesse and vigor on the magnificent quilt upon which the bare and vile foot of your murderer mercilessly steps as he ends your life…

(Pamuk 2001:18)

In this passage, visual perception is recruited above other sense-modalities by an extended focus on the visual properties of the surface of the painting: colours (‘red rug’, ‘yellow and purple flowers’), shapes (‘curves and circular designs’, and ornamentation. Grignon notes that the emphasis on patterning and floral compositions in Islamic miniatures ‘stress the surface without suggesting any depth’ (1996:53). However, because this passage draws attention firstly to the larger
elements that frame the scene – ‘the finely wrought wall, window and frame ornamentation’ –, progresses towards the rug and quilt and finishes with a description of the murderer’s foot on “you”, its structure simulates the process of “zooming in” from large-to-small and thus, creates an impression of depth. The spatial organization here is distal-to-proximal, if we take it that the reader/observer occupies the position of ‘you’ as the narrator entreats her to do. Although we know the picture is two-dimensional, this distal-to-proximal linguistic ordering of space has the same effect of depth as the artistic technique of ‘the vanishing point’ (Melcher & Cavanagh 2011:370): all the right angles of the frame that surrounds the depicted scene project to lines that converge toward the centre of the painting – the elusive murderer and his victim.

In the extract where Black walks to the promontory we do not have a sense of action, or the action commands that produce movements, because the movements of his body seem to occur below the level of consciousness. Here however, the passage not only creates a sense of optic flow from the dagger to the victim’s body, but is replete with action words in the present tense, the ‘intruder wields a dagger’ and ‘strangles you’, and ‘steps’ on the quilt. These actions all have to do with the violent interaction of bodies, an interaction that is less evident in the passage with Black, who experiences his space primarily through aural and perceptual faculties, and discusses tactile effects, such as his feet on the pavement, in an abstract manner. Reading action words elicits activation of motor areas in the brain; Gallese and Freedberg note that ‘the same neuron not only codes the execution of’ goal-directed ‘motor acts but also responds to the visual features that trigger them, even in the absence of overt movement’ (2007:200). Hence, it is possible that we are able to have an impression of “presence” in the text through motor simulation of perceived acts, as well as
the emotional resonance that accompanies these simulations, while remaining aware that the actions we are simulating are static depictions on a two-dimensional surface.

Because of the phenomenological difference between walking down a street (involving presence) and looking at a painting (involving perception) in online-experience, it would be easy to hypothesize that when these two different experiences are depicted in literary texts they would evoke different “feelings”. However, this hypothesis does not hold up when applied to the two extracts here considered. The first passage contains sensorimotor detail, interaction between bodies, and a sense of motility but it is doubtful whether these elements can amount to an impression of “presence”, as the passage deviates significantly from online-experience. The second passage, because it deals with paintings that do not utilize depth cues, should evoke “perception” and not “presence”, yet it still evokes a circumscribed impression of “presence” and three-dimensionality, by its linguistic ordering of space and by recruiting both visual perception and our sensorimotor faculties. A better hypothesis then, is that literature manipulates our perceptual system, so that two-dimensional objects sometimes appear three-dimensional during reading (evoking feelings of presence rather than perception) and what is three-dimensional may appear two-dimensional (evoking feelings of perception rather than presence).

For example, in this passage Black looks up and sees Shekure in the window:

... I saw my beloved’s stunning face among snow branches, framed by the window whose icy trim shone brightly in the sunlight… I thought how my visit to her at the
window on horseback closely resembled that moment, pictured a thousand times, in which Husrev visits Shirin beneath her window… (Pamuk 2001:35)

Black’s perspective from below does not allow for optimal grip because his current perceptual field is not conducive to accurate perception of Shekure in the window, and as a result her three-dimensional body is reduced to a two-dimensional view of the face, with no depth cues to suggest the nature of the room behind her. The centre of the gaze that Shekure occupies is given minimal detail, but the short description, 'stunning' is vivid because it exploits the ‘holistic nature of face perception and recognition’ (Jajdelska et al., 2011:438), a gestalt-like image in which the total of the face is greater than the sum of its features (Verstegen 2005:2). Conversely, the boundary that the ‘icy trim’ of the window frame imposes on Black’s sight is emphasized, as the frames of miniatures are emphasized (Grignon 1996). Consequently, Black describes this scene in terms of other miniatures, relating Shekure in the window to figures in paintings, who also occupy a two-dimensional space his body cannot share. However, though his limited perspective omits the detail and depth cues that would enable him to perceive Shekure as three-dimensional, it produces other effects of vividness, encouraging him to utilize imagination and memories of other depictions of love to “flesh out” a two-dimensional perspective.

Literature manipulates our perceptual resources to both recall and undermine the conceptual contrast between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space evident in online-experience. The literary depiction of three-dimensional objects, when perspective is manipulated by linguistic cues, may evoke perceptions of two-dimensional pictures and literary depiction of two-dimensional objects may seem three-dimensional to the extent where readers feel great immersion in text. This
inconsistency is actually fruitful ground for reflection, because it reveals that it is not fidelity to online-experience, but linguistic cues which suggest depth and encourage feelings of “presence”. While the first extract examined shows that sensorimotor detail, interaction with bodies, and motility do not amount to “presence”, they do evoke it when used differently in the second extract. This shows that literature can produce feelings of “perception” and “presence” through cues, which may be a better explanation of feelings of “presence” than the reader simplistically appropriating the narrator's body as a proxy (see Jajdelska 2004, unpublished for a critical discussion of seeing narrators as proxies) and his description of a scene as a ‘situation model’ (Zwaan 1999). The artistic manipulation of these perceptual cues may help readers conceptualize the events of the story as existing in a space and recognize how the narrator is oriented within that space, while also reflecting on the pictorial nature of the described space. If literature is an ‘experience which is both perceptual and conceptual’ (Dorsch 2010:6), it may allow for a closer examination, and an imaginative re-working, of what it is to “see” and what it is to “be there”.
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