

Philology

On Construction and Functioning of Narrative Space in *The Persians* by Aeschylus

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ABSTRACT. The paper aims to examine general artistic-semantic principles of narrative space constructing and functioning in *The Persians* by Aeschylus. The research is conducted in two directions. One is the study of the spatial layers of the tragedy and the main narratological device employed by the author for the space presentation in the dramatic discourse. The second one is concentrated on the functioning of the narrative space in the drama text. In this regard we base upon M. Lotman's theory on spatial models of a text, which is grounded on binary oppositions. According to the scholar, in different kind of narratives spatial structures are conceived as organizing elements, around which completely non-spatial characteristics of a text are built. So in the paper we raise the following question: do the narrative spatial structures of *The Persians* have the semantic significance and are they conceived as a building material for the cultural model of Aeschylus narrative world reconstructed in *The Persians*? The research showed that the tragedy represents a narration of not only one specific historic event (the Battle of Salamis and Xerxes' defeat) or an attempt of generalization of this story at a mythical level but it encompasses the entire epochal, mythical world vision knowledge of the universe, the first realization of the European-Asian dichotomy at the literary processing level. These two different, opposing systems of values are first of all based on narrative spatial oppositions, which are constructed and represented through the textual level of the tragedy. Thus we conclude that the research of verbal/narrative space in *The Persians*, and in ancient Greek tragedy in general is essentially important as it allows us to have a deeper insight into the author's poetic conception and into the paradigmatic issues represented and elaborated in the drama texts.
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Key words: tragedy, narrative, space, structuralism, myth

From the second half of the 20th century study of the literary texts actively began by spatial parameters. In this aspect, research of ancient literature, in particular, ancient Greek tragedy allows making rather noteworthy conclusions. The objective of the article is to show the main artistic principles of narrative space

modeling and functioning in *The Persians* by Aeschylus.

First of all it should be defined what is implied by the concept of narrative space. Despite the fact that space together with time category is the main characteristic of writing and represents the central component of the fictional reality, it has not yet

become possible to provide its accurate definition in humanitarian sciences. We assume that literary space is a constituent of fictional reality, which exists independently from the real space existing beyond the text and belongs to the aesthetic category. Within the presented article, we share the definition offered by modern narratology according to which space in narratives is defined as the environmental background where the characters act and move, so-called narrative setting or frame [1].

Among different kinds of literary spaces (epic, novel, roman) dramatic space provokes special interest. It is a more or less complex, synthetic space, implying the comprehensive presentation of several levels of space: a) real, stage and audience space (e.g. performative spaces); b) imaginary/textual spaces, i.e. the space where the dramatic action takes place. Unity of these two components represents the most noteworthy peculiarity of the tragedy genre. Within the article due to the complex nature of the research question we delimitate the dramatic-performative and dramatic-textual levels of space and are limited to discussion of only textual space and its organization in *The Persians* by Aeschylus.

The Persians by Aeschylus is the earliest survived tragedy (472 B.C.) which deals with actual historic events: Xerxes' invasion of Greece, his defeat at the naval battle of Salamis (480 B.C.) and his disastrous return to Persia, Susa. Thus tragedy on the plot level comprises a huge amount of real geographical spaces starting from Asia reaching to Europe. Before we start analyzing the spatial structure of the text several theoretical issues regarding space representation in the verbal Medias should be underlined.

In the narratives on the macro level spatial information is arranged according to two basic artistic/narrative principles: topographic planning e.g. "mapping" and "tour" strategy. The first implies presentation of space panoramically, from the perspective of a narrator standing on an imaginative, elevated place. In this presentation

type, space is divided into segments which are covered by texts in systemic sequence, for example: from the left to the right, from the north to the south, from the front to the back and etc. On the contrary, "tour" strategy represents the space dynamically, by means of a moving vision point. In this case, a house will be described according to dynamic alteration of rooms; the narration follows the route of movement of the character/narrator [2].

In parallel to textual planning of narrative space on the macro level, several spatial layers are formed on the internal textual level. As there are not special, strictly defined terms to denominate spatial layers of the texts belonging to the tragedy genre, we decided to develop our definitions. We define the local spatial area or topological givenness where the scenic action takes place by the term "conventional real" and the entire spatial area located beyond the real area as "conventional imaginary space". The latter can be defined as an external/distance space as well. Conventional imaginary space includes both the really existing topos from geographic point of view and nearly unreal spaces which are presented in *The Persians* in the form of the underworld and dream spaces. There is a controversy in connection with the conventional real/scenic location of *The Persians*. It is mentioned in the hypothesis that the scenic action takes place in Susa, in front of the tomb of Darius. As it is known, the deceased king is buried in Persepolis, however it is mentioned in the text for several times that the queen and the chorus are in Susa, the capital of Persia, in front of the royal chamber (*The Persians*: 15, 65, 761). This slight ambiguity in connection with the actual place of the scenic action accentuates the absolute conditionality of the internal spatial layer of the narrative. It is essential for Aeschylus not to thoroughly show the exact topographic or socio-cultural image of the Persians, but to focus their attention on Greece, on the space which is remote, and on the main event which happened there, the naval battle of Salamis. Thus Aeschylus moves the

actual narrative action from the conventional real spatial environment and places it to the second, absolutely imaginative level of the spatial structure of the tragedy. Such organization of the spatial layers creates an effect of formal statics and internal dynamism of the tragedy.

In the scholarly literature it is mentioned several times that Aeschylus in *The Persians* creates an overpowering vision of vast landscapes and events. We assume that such an effect is created by using "mapping" technique at macro level of narrative space constructing. As mentioned above, the essence of "mapping" implies adjustment of the narrator's vision to a static point existing at a certain distance and narrating the events from this point of view. This type of space modeling in most cases implies the possibility of narrating events simultaneously as narrator stands above during the narration process and owes the opportunity to view several events happening at the same temporal interval and therefore comprehend vast area of spatial environment. When talking about narratives of this type, J. Frank mentions that the author wants the plot to be perceived spatially, in one specific moment of time and not sequentially [3]. Thus, such kind of narration creates an illusion of textual statics and increases the possibility of „seeing“ a clearly expressed spatial form of the narrative and the narrated events. Helen Bacon in her famous research "Barbarians in the Greek Tragedy" in which the scholar studies the geographic information represented in ancient Greek tragedy exactly formulates the essence of "mapping" in the tragedies by Aeschylus. "He (Aeschylus) writes as if he has a map in front of him, when he mentions places, he does this with exact geographic sequence, as if he sees them on the map which is in front of him" [4]. Indeed, every essential narrative scene of the tragedy: Triumphant movement of the Persian Army in the direction of Greece/Europe (*The Persians*: 1-65), the battle of Salamis (*The Persians*: 353-432/446-471), disastrous retreat of the defeated army (*The Persians*: 480-515), Darius

scene (*The Persians*: 681-851) is narrated by the respective internal narrator applying "mapping" as major textual strategy for spatial environment representations, e. g. space constructed within the above mentioned sections is total and unified as it is seen on the geographical maps and not fragmented or scrutinized. Aristotle calls this type of plots "eu'sinoptic" (in English translation: good viewable at one glance). The philosopher first used this term in *Poetics*, in respect to Homer's *Iliad* to denominate good spatial perceptibility of the epos. Good spatial perceptibility of the narrative according to Aristotle is equivalent to the plot, which aims for organic unity, visual clarity and has size that can be taken in with one glance from the readers' side [5]. We assume that the same term, "eu'sinoptic", can be freely used in the respect to the text of *The Persians*. Aeschylus, as well as Homer, organizes and represents the overall narrative space of the tragedy in that way that by means of it the plot (narrative events) is equally well visible for spectators/readers from both visual and conceptual point of view.

The narrative space of *The Persians* on the level of semantic organization and functioning is based on the horizontal and vertical model of the Universe. The main character of the tragedy, Persian king Xerxes on the plot level acts and moves in the really existing geographic spaces located on the horizontal axis. In the beginning of the tragedy his movement vector is directed from the east to the west e.g. from Asia/Persia to Europe/Greece, while in the end – in the opposite direction. A significant spatial opposition of the tragedy such as sea/land is placed on the same axis. At the level of the unreal spaces, i.e. distribution of three worlds (heaven, the earth and the underworld), the space is arranged on the vertical axis. Darius (Xerxes' father) moves and acts on the vertical axis. In the beginning of the necromancy scene his movement is directed from down upwards and by the end vice versa (*The Persians*: 681-685/849-851). Such model of narrative space

distribution shows direct relation to the archaic, mythical world vision of the temporal-spatial organization of the universe. E. Cassirer mentions that there is no cosmogony in which confrontation of four main directions of the universe would not represent the most important means which would not be used for realization and explanation of the universe[6]. At an everyday level the desire to utilize such primitive space such as fields to be cultivated, laid grounds for discovery of four geographic sides. In the same period, a human had to realize the simplest oppositions such as forward and backwards, up and down, from the left to the right etc., define the north and the south, the east and the west. The thinking of archaic society was based on existence of opposing couples located vertically and horizontally to each other. Therefore, it became possible to move and act in vertical as well as horizontal direction. The universe is perceived as an integral unity of ideal structure, based on four coordinates, which has a clearly outlined center [7].

Arrangement of the overall narrative space on archaic-mythical principle allows Aeschylus to semantize the narrative space according to the same principle. Mythical world vision of the Universe perception implies distribution of the space into known/own and unknown/foreign spaces. The space unknown for archaic people might have been populated by kind as well as evil forces. It gradually became an equivalent of different lifestyle, social-cultural reality and the transient space between these two became a certain border whose crossing is associated with breaking the integrity of the universe for an archaic human. We assume that this basic structural spatial opposition of the archaic Universe in the narrative schema of *The Persians* is represented by the binary spatial couples: Persia (=Asia)/Greece (=Europe) on the horizontal axis, and on the vertical axis: underworld/upper world. In the spatial continuum of the tragedy arranged in this way movement begins as the basic impulse for the plot to be "formed". As J. Lotman mentions:

"The plot can be minimized to one basic episode: crossing topological border in the spatial structure of the narrative"[8]. According to this structural schema the main character of the tragedy, Xerxes leaves the local spatial center of the plot (Susa) and crosses the border between the two opposing spaces, Asia and Europe. These two continents coexist peacefully but never intersect with each other and are strictly demarcated according to the archaic mythical worldview of the universe. On topographic map of *The Persians'* narrative, Hellespont Strait serves as a typological border between these spaces. Xerxes whipped and yoked the pure flaw of Hellespont Strait, when he entered the continent existing opposite Asia. This shocking scene is narrated several times in the tragedy by the Queen, the chorus and Darius in various semantic contexts (*The Persians*: 67-72, 128-131, 722-723, 734-736). All the characters evaluate the violent act of the king as the pinnacle of irrationalism. This disturbing behavior is explained as the result of excessive "hubris" (pride). The latter in ancient Greek tragedy is considered as a highest crime, failure of the hero, which is undoubtedly, is followed by the harsh punishment from the gods. Thus, we assume that Aeschylus sees the reason of Xerxes' defeat at Salamis not in the specific military strategy developed by the Greek Coalition but in breaking the natural border between the continents in a forceful manner by Xerxes, in the desire of the hero to invade and conquer the foreign space, the space that does not belong to him. Proceeding from the mythic vision of the universe it is inadmissible to break the established spatial borders. In other case, such action will be followed by a physical, spiritual, moral catastrophe of the hero. Indeed, in the final scene of the tragedy we see lonely, defeated Xerxes, ripping all over his royal rags as a clear visual and spatial metaphor of absolute and tragic failure of the king and the whole Persia Empire in general.

Thus, *The Persians* represents narration of not only one specific historic event or an attempt of generalization of this story at the mythical level but it models the entire universe, its spatial arrangement, and represents the first realization of the European-Asian cultural dichotomy at the literary processing level, perception of controversial integrity of this ancient binary spatial opposition. The cultural model of the Aeschylus world reflected in *The Persians* which implies existence of Hellas and Persia as two

different, opposing systems of values is first of all based on the spatial oppositions constructed on the narrative level of the tragedy. Therefore, the latter really represents an organizing element around which absolutely non-spatial features of the text are formed.

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ნარატიული სივრცის კონსტრუირებისა და ფუნქციონირებისთვის ესქილეს „სპარსელებში“

ა. ცანავა

ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, კლასიკური ფილოლოგიის, ბიზანტინისტიკისა და ნეოგრეცისტიკის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. გორდუზიანის მიერ)

წინამდებარე სტატიაში განხილულია ესქილეს „სპარსელებში“ წარმოდგენილი ნარატიული სივრცის მოდელირებისა და ფუნქციონირების ძირითადი მხატვრული პრინციპები. ანალიზი, ერთი მხრივ, გულისხმობს ტრაგედიის შიდა ტექსტუალური სივრცული დონეებისა და იმ ძირითადი თხრობითი სტრატეგიის კვლევას, რომელიც გამოყენებულია დრამაში ვერბალური სივრცის პრეზენტაციისათვის, ხოლო, მეორე მხრივ, სივრცის სემანტიკური ფუნქციის ჩვენებას. ამ მიმართულებით, ჩვენ ვიზიარებთ ნარატიული სივრცის კვლევის ი. ლოტმანის მიერ შემოთავაზებულ მოდელს, რომლის მიხედვით, ტექსტებში სივრცე თხრობითი ფუნქციით იტვირთება მაშინ, როდესაც სამყაროს კონკრეტული ტოპოლოგიური მოცემულობა კონკრეტულ სემანტიკურ მნიშვნელობას იძენს და, ამდენად, ავტორისეული სამყაროს კულტურული მოდელის საბაზისო სტრუქტურულ ერთეულად გაიაზრება. კვლევამ აჩვენა, რომ ესქილეს „სპარსელები“ წარმოადგენს სამყაროს ეპოქალურ ცოდნას, რომელსაც სივრცის აღქმისა და მოწყობის არქაული, მითოსური პრინციპი უდევს საფუძვლად. ევროპა-აზიის

სივრცული ოპოზიციის ლიტერატურული გააზრების ამ პირველ ბრწყინვალე ნიმუშში, ეს ორი განსხვავებული კულტურული სისტემა, უპირველეს ყოვლისა, ნარატიული სივრცული ოპოზიციების საფუძველზე იგება. ამდენად, ტექსტუალური სივრცის კვლევა არსებითად მნიშვნელოვანია, რათა უფრო ღრმად ჩავწვდეთ ტრაგიკოსის მსოფლმხედველობასა და იმ პარადიგმატულ პრობლემატიკას, რომელიც წარმოდგენილია ტრაგედიაში.

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