

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Empty Rides and Freezing Cold: Finding Ligotti in Coney Island

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On January 2nd, 2014, I found myself setting foot in New York for the first time just as an extreme cold wave episode was hitting the south of Canada and the North-East of the US. Because of an unusual shift in the North Polar Vortex, record-low temperatures were recorded in those areas, heavily disrupting all activity. As I walked through an almost-deserted Central Park, I discovered the normally bustling places I had seen in photographs now mostly silent and empty. It was truly a manifestation of what Mark Fisher defines as the eerie: the eerie 'is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something' (Fisher 2016: 27). On the afternoon of January 4th, I visited Coney Island, with its famous beach and amusement park. Every year, the park and attractions are closed for the winter, and the cold wave made the location even more deserted than usual (Figure 1). As I walked through the empty alleys, the grinning faces of characters painted on the closed shutters of shops and the bright colours felt distinctly out of place on this sunny yet very cold day, and I suddenly had the impression I had walked into a Thomas Ligotti short story (Figure 2). In the work of the American horror writer, characters often find themselves confronted with disturbing clowns or live mannequins, and the author favours abandoned towns and dilapidated circuses as the settings of his plots. Walking through the alleys, I almost expected to see a sign inviting me to some sideshow in a deserted amusement park as in 'Gas Station Carnivals', and I imagined that strange mannequins looking uncannily human—as in 'Dream of a Mannikin'—were exposed in the shop windows behind the shutters (Figure 3). Upon looking at the closed-off Ferris wheel, its steel skeleton rising in the



Figure 1. Photograph taken on January 4th, 2014 (copyright Deborah Bridle).

sky, I even had a taste of Ligotti's understanding of the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* expounded on in 'My Work Is Not Yet Done', in which the narrator relishes visiting abandoned and desolate buildings, savouring the '*sabi* of things utterly dejected and destitute' (Ligotti 2009: 38).

But this experience remained anecdotal for me. As a literary studies scholar, I am not used to thinking about how literature can seep into extra-literary spaces. My main focus has always been the text itself and my analysis of the world outside the text did not go further than the reader, or possibly the influence that the actual world could have had on the writer. Hence my initial puzzlement when I was invited to submit a piece on the intermingling of textual and extra-textual geographies for this themed section of *Literary Geographies*. I had read James Thurgill's work on the spatial hinge (2021), and Thurgill and Lovell's analysis of the collaborative nature of space and text (2019), and I knew that this concept was rich and



Figure 2. Photograph taken on January 4th, 2014 (copyright Deborah Bridle).

promising and could help me and my work. Similarly, Sheila Hones's volume *Literary Geography* demonstrates the benefits that literature and geography scholars can reap by expanding their methods of research and adopting new modes of thinking exchanged from one another (2022). However, I initially struggled with this work. The main obstacle was finding an adequate subject to which I could apply the concept of the spatial hinge. My heart always dictates me to think of Thomas Ligotti—whose work I have read, analysed and translated extensively—whenever a new research project opportunity presents itself. And yet, I found it difficult at first to find anything worthy of study for the notion of the spatial hinge. I was constrained by the theoretical and methodological limits that my disciplinary field had imposed on me and my mode of thinking—since Ligotti's work does not primarily focus on space, at least not from a literary studies perspective, there were two things hindering my thought process:

1. Ligotti's stories take place either in unidentified, mostly urban settings, or in fictional places (like the town of Nolgate in 'The Frolic', or the dead town of Crampton in 'The Shadow, the Darkness'), and most of those settings barely evoke modern-day Western cities or towns, even in the most generic of ways. According to Marc Brosseau, this 'ageographical' dimension of the text is inherent to the short story genre (see Hones 2022: 81).

2. I had never fully taken into account the spatial component in those stories because space does not, in my reading, appear to play a major role in them. I had previously analysed the humanisation of objects, including architectural elements, in an article on the objectification process in Ligotti (Bridle 2020), but I had never sought to study anything more spatial than that.



Figure 3. Photograph taken on January 4th, 2014 (copyright Deborah Bridle).

I was re-reading ‘The Last Feast of Harlequin’ for a translation project when an epiphany took place. The story is set in the fictional town of Mirocaw but, since the story is dedicated to Lovecraft and can be read as an homage to him, Ligotti had Mirocaw founded by New England settlers (Lovecraft was a native of New England, and he used the region as either the setting of his stories, or the inspiration for the fictional places in which he set his stories). An actual-world region lost in the midst of Ligotti’s nightmarish provincial towns! Against all odds, it appeared that the fictional geography and its associated history imagined by Ligotti carried more weight than it would seem to at first. By rooting Mirocaw’s past in the folklore-heavy area of New England, Ligotti signals that the settings of his stories are not as unimportant as one might think. Even putting aside the Lovecraftian New England heritage of this particular story, the fact remains that Ligotti’s fictional places are worth being taken into account. His towns are mostly deserted, or in economic failure, or unattractive. At best, they are uninteresting. Those abandoned or underprivileged areas are, precisely because of their status, prone to various weird phenomena: dark and occult carnivals, transformations, esoteric experiments, to name but a few of the dark horrors unravelling in Ligotti’s stories. In most of them, recognisable economic and social circumstances lead to—or at the very least encourage, feed or facilitate—fictional weird events. Suddenly, my 2014 trip to New York resurfaced in my mind, and I found myself mentally walking through the bitter-cold alleys of Coney Island while expecting to hear the mad laughter of the dummy from ‘Dr.Voke and Mr. Veech’, or to witness the unexplainable apparition of the life-sized marionette from ‘The Clown Puppet’, a perfect example of the spatial hinge that I had been desperately looking for. The air of abandonment that floated in the atmosphere was like the desolation invariably found in ‘Gas Station Carnivals’, which ‘consisted of only the remnants of fully fledged carnivals, the *bare bones* of much larger and grander entertainments’ (emphasis original. Ligotti 2008: 187). I had experienced the ‘affective mechanism’ which allowed my reading to ‘extend the geography of the text into actual-world places’ (Thurgill 2021: 153) without ever conceptualising it. I searched for the pictures I had taken during that visit and the atmosphere came back to me as vivid as it was experienced on that day.

The next step is therefore to understand what to make of that concept in the framing of my research. How can the spatial hinge help my understanding of the stories I work on, but also enrich the way I see the lived world? The particular aspect that my experience of the spatial hinge brought to the fore is the philosophical dimension that is at the core of Ligotti’s writing. While many of my articles examine the author’s philosophical pessimism, my analysis had always been grounded primarily on the literary texts and on the author’s interviews and non-fiction treatise. It is clear, however, that Ligotti’s pessimistic worldview is derived from his experience of the actual-world and is not something that he has created for his stories in isolation of lived geographical experience. His descriptions of derelict towns and abandoned neighbourhoods (‘In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land’, ‘The Town Manager’, ‘The Chymist’, etc.) are better understood when taken as images of what someone with Ligotti’s pessimistic outlook might very possibly experience when confronted with the world as it is. And as I walked through Coney Island on that bitter-cold January day, I was overwhelmed with precisely that same dread that I feel when reading those descriptions. I felt the ‘shadow’

and the ‘darkness’, the ‘nonsense’ behind it all (‘The Shadow, the Darkness’. Ligotti 2008: multiple locations), but I could also experience the ‘repose of ruin’ (‘Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech’. Ligotti 2015: 174) as I gazed at the snow-covered beach and the immobile Ferris wheel. I even felt like the narrator from ‘My Work Is Not Yet Done’ upon one of his explorations of places ‘utterly dejected and destitute, alone and forgotten—whatever was submitting to its essential impermanence, its transitory nature, whatever was teetering on the brink of non-existence that was the fate of everything that had ever been and awaited everything that would be’ (Ligotti 2009: 38). The silent amusement park was the very image of Ligotti’s circuses, carnivals, puppet shows, warehouses and ghost towns. More than that, the silent amusement park *was* all of those places come to life. In that particular moment, it was impossible for me to imagine that, a few months later, this place could be alive again.

I cannot know if I will ever experience the spatial hinge again as intensely as I did that day, but my mind and my senses will be ready for it, and I look forward to another encounter with Ligottian existential dread and poetic meaninglessness.

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