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## Sailing from Illness to Health: Spaces in Gaute Heivoll's *Kongens hjerte*

This article reflects on the issue of spatiality in Gaute Heivoll's novel *Kongens hjerte* [*The King's Heart*] from 2011, and analyzes how different descriptions of space interplay with illness metaphors in the text, contributing to a literary imaging of illness as "a road to health." *Kongens hjerte* is a historical novel set in the second half of the eighteenth century, telling the story of a father and his ill daughter traveling from Norway to Copenhagen in order to seek treatment. The girl suffers from *radesyke*, a mysterious and lethal disease whose etiology remains unclear up to this day. After a theoretical introduction and outlining the context, the paper suggests possible lines of analysis of the spatiality aspects in the novel and moves on to a detailed reflection upon two categories: the presence/absence of the father and daughter in the same space, and the horizontal/vertical orientation of the protagonists' bodies. The conclusion of the study is that constructions of space and spatiality are a coherent and immanent component of the illness images in Heivoll's novel, enabling a wide range of reading alternatives and supplying additional contexts for possible interpretations of the text.

**Keywords:** Gaute Heivoll, *Kongens hjerte*, *radesyke*, spatiality, illness as metaphor

### Introduction: The combined notions of illness and spatiality

Per Krogh Hansen, in his article from 2018, "Illness and heroics," reflects upon alternative metaphors in the discourse of cancer, arguing that the metaphor of "war," "fight" or "struggle" might be stigmatizing and perceived as a burden for the patients themselves. Analyzing different counter-metaphors, he concludes that the second most used metaphor of cancer and its treatment is "the journey," as it allows for discussions of goals, direction, and progress (Hansen 2018: 221–222).<sup>1</sup> Illness can indeed be perceived as a "road to health" the patient embarks on. In her classical text *Illness as Metaphor* from 1978, Susan Sontag points out: "To be cured, the patient has to be taken out of his or her daily routine. It is not an accident that

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen bases this notion upon, among others, articles by Semino et al. (2017) and Reisfield and Wilson (2004).

the most common metaphor for an extreme psychological experience viewed positively – whether produced by drugs or by becoming psychotic – is a trip” (1978: 36). Being taken out of a daily routine, metaphorically “leaving home” with its safety, as well as uncertainty constitute inevitable elements of both traveling and experiencing illness.

The notion of space seems therefore essential in constructing images of illness as a journey. Leaving a safe haven, making progress, pursuing a goal and reaching a destination all imply changes in space. And, since “[e]very story is a travel story – a spatial practice” (de Certeau 1998: 115), the combined notions of illness and spatiality may constitute an interesting starting point for analysis of a literary text. As Kristina Malmio and Kaisa Kurikka point out in the introduction to the volume *Contemporary Nordic Literature and Spatiality*, literary fiction is deeply embedded in the idea of space: “Fiction does not merely narrate spatial stories nor offer poetic spatial dimensions, it also sets spatiality into motion by stratifying spaces and places in multiple layers of meanings: spaces become literally storied – and stored – in fiction” (Malmio and Kurikka 2019: 2).

This article reflects on the literary constructs of illness and space in Gaute Heivoll’s novel *Kongens hjerte* [*The King’s Heart*] from 2011. The book has already been the subject of a literary analysis conducted by Linda Nesby, who published a paper on *radesyke* (the illness described in Heivoll’s novel) as a literary and a medical practice (2017). The aim of the present study is to adopt a different approach and analyze how different aspects of spatiality presented in the text contribute to creating illness images and metaphors.

## 1. Context: Gaute Heivoll’s novel and *radesyke*

*Kongens hjerte* is a historical novel – the events described in the book take place in the second part of the eighteenth century. It is a story of a father and his ill ten-year-old daughter (whose names remain unknown for the reader) who embark on a journey from a village in southern Norway to King Frederik’s hospital in Copenhagen, where the girl can be treated. It turns out that the Danish doctors are indeed able to help the child and, after a successful course of treatment, the father and the daughter are to return home. However, on the way back, the father becomes ill and dies. The novel ends with the German doctor<sup>2</sup> – who took care of the Norwegian group of patients throughout the journey – inviting the girl to his cabin, thus taking her under his care, while the father’s body sinks to the bottom of the sea.

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<sup>2</sup> The character is referred to as Deegen in the novel. Dr. Heinrich Deegen was an actual historical figure, a physician who treated Norwegian *radesyke* patients in the period 1776–1778 (see for example Bjorvatn and Danielsen 2003).

The illness the patients in Heivoll's novel suffer from is *radesyke* – a mysterious disease affecting large numbers of inhabitants of the southern regions of Norway during the course of about 150 years in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The illness manifested itself with symptoms such as rash and ulcers, leading to purulent wounds, tissue decay, fever and eventually, in a large number of cases, death. The etiology of the condition remains unknown, but different theories suggest it could have been a form of syphilis, leprosy, or scurvy (see for example Bjorvatn and Danielsen 2003; Lie 2003, 2007, 2008). As Nesby points out in her article (2017: 204) the name of the illness most probably derives from the Low German word *rate*, meaning “rotten” or “rot.” It is, however, also possible that the term has its origin in the Old Norwegian term *rada*, meaning “ugly,” “poor,” “shabby,” or “bad.” Nevertheless, one can conclude that the name is closely connected to the gruesome symptoms accompanying the condition, often leading to disfiguration of the patients' bodies.

The illness was endemic, that is, it affected a limited geographical space (Nesby 2017: 204). According to Sontag, a literary image of an epidemic can be used in constructing a metaphor of illness as social disorder and evil:

Epidemic diseases were a common figure for social disorder. From pestilence (bubonic plague) came “pestilent,” whose figurative meaning, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “injurious to religion, morals, or public peace – 1513”; and “pestilential,” meaning “morally baneful or pernicious – 1531.” Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world (Sontag 1978: 58).

This constitutes a good starting point for the reflection upon how the concept of spatiality is used in creating the images of illness in Heivoll's novel – the story of a journey from a space affected by “evil,” towards the space of social order and medical knowledge.

## 2. Different aspects of space in *Kongens hjerte*

The ambiguity of the space the novel's plot takes place in is suggested already in the book's introduction, outlining the historic context of the events, as well as giving the reader a rough description of the journey the characters embark upon: “[...] twelve patients from Lister and Mandal county [...] were to be transported with a ship over Skagerrak, and the entire way to King Frederik's Hospital not far away from Amalienborg in Copenhagen [...]” (Heivoll 2011: n.p.).<sup>3</sup> This description of the novel's geographical reality is accompanied by the following statement:

<sup>3</sup> “[...] tolv pasienter fra Lister og Mandals amt [...] skulle fraktes med skip over Skagerrak, og hele veien fram til Kong Frederiks hospital ikke langt fra Amalienborg i København [...]” All excerpts from the Norwegian original are quoted in my own translation.

“*Kongens hjerte* is based upon what really happened, but at the same time written in the clear air between reality and dream” (Heivoll 2011: n.p.).<sup>4</sup> This sentence suggests that the entire story presented in the novel might be perceived as, at the same time, real and not real, literal and symbolical. This ambiguity suggests possibilities for numerous different readings of the text, as well as adapting different analytical approaches. It also opens for the possibility of perceiving the illness and travel images constructed in the text as symbolic.

When it comes to the different physical spaces the novel’s protagonists (the father and the daughter) operate in, their number is limited to (1) the makeshift Norwegian hospital they arrive at in the beginning; (2) the cabin of the ship taking them to Copenhagen; (3) the interior of King Frederik’s Hospital; (4) the cabin of the ship taking them back to Norway. The characters occasionally leave those spaces (for example, to go on shore when the ship is waiting for the weather to change before crossing Skagerrak, or to go up on deck of the ship), but they are more or less confined to them. There is a number of analytical possibilities connected to the construction of the images of each of those spaces.

Firstly, the protagonists have to leave the safe space of their home and embark on a journey, a fact the ill child needs time to come to terms with. Her mother and sister died of the same illness she is suffering from and her father hides this fact from her during the first period of their travel. He claims that his wife and older daughter remained in the village they come from:

“Where is Siri?”

“She is not here.”

“Is she home?”

“Yes,” he said. “She is at home.”

“Where is mother?”

“She is at home. They are at home” (Heivoll 2011: 20).<sup>5</sup>

Categories such as home / not home and here / not here play an important role in the girl’s perception of the space she finds herself in. “Home” (not here) is a well-known space of safety. “Here” (not home) on the other hand, is unknown and dangerous. It takes some time before the ill child gets used to the thought of embarking on the journey and understands that it is necessary for her to travel in order to receive treatment. At first, she is uncertain and afraid:

<sup>4</sup> “*Kongens hjerte* er basert på det som hendte, men samtidig skrevet i den klare luften mellom virkelighet og drøm.”

<sup>5</sup> “Hvor er Siri?

Hun er ikke her.

Er hun hjemme?

Ja, sa han. Hun er hjemme.

Hvor er mor?

Hun er hjemme. De er hjemme.”

“Are we far away from home?”  
 “We are not going home,” he said.  
 [...]
 “Are we going down to the sea?”  
 “Yes,” he said. “We are going to the sea” (Heivoll 2011: 26–27).<sup>6</sup>

She even fantasizes about her older sister Siri being in the same space as her. This enrages the desperate father, who explains in no uncertain words that Siri has passed away. In their conversation, both of them use the categories described above, “here” and “not here”:

“Where is Siri?” she asked.  
 “Siri is not here.”  
 “But I just saw her. She stood right there.”  
 “You know that Siri is not here,” he said.  
 “She is,” the girl answered. “She is here.”  
 “She is not here,” he said, in a hard voice. “Siri is not here. You know that” (Heivoll 2011: 126).<sup>7</sup>

The girl eventually comes to terms with her new spatial status. She internalizes it and understands that she cannot return to her village, no matter how much she wants to:

[...] I want to go home,” she said.  
 “Yes,” he answered. “I know.”  
 She lay silent for a long time.  
 “But we cannot?” she said suddenly.  
 “Yes,” he said. “We cannot” (Heivoll 2011: 71).<sup>8</sup>

The protagonists’ entire voyage is characterized by a permanent sense of spatial confusion and uncertainty. The child asks her father numerous times where they are

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<sup>6</sup> “Er det langt hjem?  
 Vi skal ikke hjem, sa han.

[...]  
 Skal vi ned til sjøen?  
 Ja, sa han. Vi skal til sjøen.”

<sup>7</sup> “Hvor er Siri? sa hun.  
 Siri er ikke her.  
 Men jeg så henne jo. Hun sto der.  
 Du vet at Siri ikke er her, sa han.  
 Jo, sa hun. Hun er her.  
 Hun er ikke her, sa han hardt. Siri er ikke her. Det vet du.”

<sup>8</sup> “[...] Jeg vil hjem, sa hun.  
 Ja, svarte han. Jeg vet det.  
 Hun lå lenge stille.  
 Men vi kan ikke? sa hun plutselig.  
 Nei, sa han. Vi kan ikke.”

(during different stages of the journey); however, he is not able to define the space they are in for her: “Are we here?” she said behind his back. / ‘No,’ he said. ‘I do not know where we are’” (Heivoll 2011: 59).<sup>9</sup> This confusion and lack of understanding regarding space is also accompanied by a similar uncertainty concerning time: “How long are we going to be here?” said the girl. / ‘I do not know’” (Heivoll 2011: 57).<sup>10</sup> This time and space precariousness is parallel to the precariousness regarding the girl’s condition and its outcome. While on board the ship to Copenhagen, the protagonists find themselves in a spatially paradoxical situation: they are moving in an uncertain direction, but, at the same time, remain confined in the limited space of their cabin.

This confinement<sup>11</sup> might remind of the biblical “Jonah in whale’s belly” motif: “He thought that they were in the whale’s belly. They slid under water, the sea closed itself around them and they continued to go down in the depth, down in the darkness no one knew about. They continued downwards, downwards and there was no end and there existed no bottom [...]” (Heivoll 2011: 35).<sup>12</sup> The ship seems to be a small vessel of life sailing through the sea of death, where the voyage from illness to health has a horizontal dimension, but at the same time the vessel and its passengers are threatened by “the depth” they have to cross, pulling them downwards along a vertical axis. This metaphor is completed at the end of the novel, with the father dying and his body sinking to the bottom of the sea. The confinement in the ship’s cabin is accompanied by another spatial aspect: it seems that, during the ship’s voyage, the father and daughter’s entire universe shrinks and becomes limited to that one room, and the world beyond it ceases to exist:

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Nowhere.”

“You cannot go.”

“I am not going to go,” he said. “Where would I go?” (Heivoll 2011: 48).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Er vi framme? sa hun bak ryggen hans.

Nei, sa han. Jeg vet ikke hvor vi er.”

<sup>10</sup> “Hvor lenge skal vi være her? sa jenta.

Jeg vet ikke.”

<sup>11</sup> Being trapped, confined or being in prison is another common illness metaphor used in literature. Susan Sontag (1978: 34) suggests that the entire history of Thomas Mann’s *Hans Castorp* is based on this idea. At the same time, the concept of isolation in a ship cabin has been widely used in many literary texts not necessarily in connection to illness, for example by Witold Gombrowicz as a metaphor for distancing oneself from the potentially threatening world and other people (Jakowska 2014: 199).

<sup>12</sup> “Han tenkte at de var i hvalens buk. De gled under vann, sjøen lukket seg svart over dem, og de fortsatte ned i dypet, ned i et mørke ingen visste om. De fortsatte nedover, nedover og det var ingen ende og det fantes ingen bunn [...]”

<sup>13</sup> “Hvor skal du? spurte hun.

Ingen steder.

Du må ikke gå.

Jeg skal ikke gå, sa han. Hvor skulle jeg gå?”

This applies also to the description of the space inside King Frederik's Hospital in Copenhagen the protagonists eventually arrive at. The father and the daughter become separated and it is impossible for the worried parent to find his child in a maze-like structure<sup>14</sup> of corridors and rooms (Heivoll 2011: 169). The sense of confusion is, once again, accompanied by the feeling of confinement and the realization that there is nowhere else to go. When the father returns to his room after having unsuccessfully looked for his child, he has the following conversation with his fellow patient:

"Where have you been then?"

"Nowhere," he answered.

"I do not believe this. You have been gone for a long time."

"It is impossible to get anywhere," he said. "All the doors are locked" (Heivoll 2011: 170).<sup>15</sup>

When the father wanders the empty corridors of the institution, he concludes that he is situated "in the heart of King Frederik's Hospital" (Heivoll 2011: 169).<sup>16</sup> This scene is one of the keys to understanding the novel's title (*The King's Heart*),<sup>17</sup> as well as another possible reference to the "Jonah in whale's belly" motif.

There are two aspects of spatiality in Heivoll's text that seem particularly interesting for the possible readings of the novel and that I have decided to concentrate on in this analysis. Those aspects are: (1) the presence/absence of the father and daughter in the same space and (2) the horizontal/vertical orientation of the protagonists' bodies. I have focused on those aspects as they seem to govern the construction of the illness representations in this book and prove that illness and health

<sup>14</sup> A maze-like space is a commonly used motifs in works of fiction. Its function is to amplify the character's feeling of being lost and confused. As Elżbieta Sidoruk writes in her analysis of a novella by the Polish author Sławomir Mrożek, "The protagonist loses his orientation in space which takes on a shape of a centerless maze, depicting his lack of the feeling of self-identity" (Sidoruk 2014: 216); all excerpts from the Polish sources are quoted in my own translation.

<sup>15</sup> "Hvor har du vært da?"

Ingen steder, svarte han.

Det tror jeg ikke på. Du har vært borte lenge.

Det er umulig å komme noen steder, sa han. Alle dører er låst."

<sup>16</sup> "i hjertet av Kong Frederiks hospital."

<sup>17</sup> At the same time, one can remark that the title is a biblical reference. In the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 1, Verses 1 to 4, we read: "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; he directs it wherever he wants. Everyone's path is straight in their own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart. Acting with righteousness and justice is more valued by the LORD than sacrifice. Proud eyes, an arrogant heart, and the lamp of the wicked are all sinful" (Common English Bible). Those words can be interpreted in two ways when it comes to Heivoll's novel. Firstly, one can interpret the father's death and the girl's return to health as an act of God, where the father sacrifices himself to save his child. Alternatively, one can perhaps interpret the father's illness as a punishment for his sins (possibly even abusing his daughter, see Nesby 2017).

in Heivoll's novel are "spatial constructions," significantly relying on to the orientation of the human body in space – both in terms of its placement on the map and in relation to the horizontal and vertical axes.

### 3. "I am not going to go": The presence and the absence

The spatial precariousness described above and the ill girl's continuous, nervous questions regarding where she is, force the father to create new criteria for the definitions of space. He shifts the focus from merely geographical circumstances to the aspect of his presence by the child. This shift is already suggested at the first stage of the journey, when the protagonists reach the makeshift hospital in Norway: "Where are we?" she said. / "This is not dangerous. I am here" (Heivoll 2011: 17).<sup>18</sup> The space, though impossible to define, is recognized as "not dangerous" merely because of the fact of the father's presence. The same rule applies at the next stage of the protagonists' journey, when they are about to board a ship and sail in an unknown direction:

"Where are we going?" she said.  
 He did not answer.  
 "I do not want to go," she said.  
 "I am going with you," he said (Heivoll 2011: 25).<sup>19</sup>

The father reassures the child numerous times at this stage of their journey, stressing the fact that he is with her and that his presence implies safety and comfort for the ill girl:

"It is a ship," he said.  
 "A ship?"  
 "Yes."  
 "I am afraid," she said.  
 "I am going with you," he answered (Heivoll 2011: 29).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Hvor er vi? sa hun.  
 Det er ikke farlig. Jeg er her."

<sup>19</sup> "Hvor skal vi? sa hun.  
 Han svarte ikke.  
 Jeg vil ikke dra, sa hun.  
 Jeg skal være med, sa han."

<sup>20</sup> "Det er et skip, sa han.  
 Et skip?  
 Ja.  
 Jeg er redd, sa hun.  
 Jeg skal være med, svarte han."



The space the protagonists occupy in the ship's cabin (sharing it with other patients suffering from *radesyke*) is confined and uncomfortable; the "furniture" consists of patients' beds, a bucket used as a toilet and another bucket containing fresh drinking water. The smell in the cabin is also very unpleasant (Heivoll 2011: 34). However, the father chooses willingly to confine himself in this limited space, just to be with his daughter. On one occasion, he leaves the ship and goes on shore to help find food for the crew and the patients, and returning to the cabin proves to be a difficult experience for him: "After a whole day outside in the fresh air the stench was paralyzing when he came down into the dark room. He was not prepared, he stood still with his eyes closed and did not know if he would be able to proceed" (Heivoll 2011: 78).<sup>21</sup> The redefinition of space and disregarding geographical criteria in favor of the presence/absence aspect is not merely a strategy used by the parent to comfort his ill child, but also a process he himself has to go through, coming to terms with the fact that he is in a limited, uncomfortable, and precarious place: "He closed his eyes. He thought: I am here. I am here. I am here" (Heivoll 2011: 109).<sup>22</sup> During the course of the journey, he also realizes something else: he is the only healthy person in the cabin, everyone else is ill and no patient other than his daughter was allowed to bring any companions. He asks the German doctor for the reason for this decision: "[...] 'I...' / 'Yes?' Deegen stopped instantly. / 'Why did you let me come along?'" (Heivoll 2011: 29),<sup>23</sup> but receives no answer.

The father and daughter share the same bed and are generally very close physically. So close, in fact, that certain interpretations of Heivoll's text raise the question of possible incest (see Nesby 2017: 206). It seems that the father comes to believe his presence by the child is essential for her to get better and that his absence somehow worsens her condition. When he returns from his brief trip to the shore, he finds the girl in a worse state than he left her in:

The girl lay on the bunk like before with all the blankets on top of her and it hit him that she had lain motionless the whole day, up to the moment when she turned to him.

"You were gone so long."

"I am here now."

"You were gone so long," she repeated.

[...]

<sup>21</sup> "Etter en hel dag ute i friluft var stanken lammende da han kom ned i det mørke rommet. Han var ikke forberedt, han ble stående med øynene lukket og visste ikke om han klarte å fortsette."

<sup>22</sup> "Han lukket øynene. Han tenkte: Jeg er her. Jeg er her. Jeg er her."

<sup>23</sup> "[...] Jeg ...

Ja? Deegen stoppet straks opp.

Hvorfor lot du meg bli med?"

“I am here now,” he said.

[...]

“I am here now,” he repeated (Heivoll 2011: 78–79).<sup>24</sup>

He then refuses to leave his daughter again and insists on being in the same space as her, even if it means having to fight other crew members or even getting physically hurt in order to remain with the child. He believes he has found a “rule” the mysterious illness (the “evil,” as he calls it) works according to:

“The evil,” he said, “she has it inside of her. It came back when I was at shore.”

[...]

“It comes back when I am not here,” he said.

[...]

“I cannot go on shore,” he said. “I must be here” (Heivoll 2011: 82).<sup>25</sup>

After arriving in Copenhagen, the girl and her parent become separated in King Frederik’s Hospital. The father panics, not only because he is afraid that his absence in the near proximity of the child will worsen her condition, but also due to the fact that he has already gone through the process of recalibrating his identity and the presence by his daughter’s side became an important factor defining who he is. At first, he looks for the girl frantically, trying to define the space she is now situated in:

“Where is she?”

“Is she not here?” said the woman.

“She is gone.”

“I have just seen her.”

“Where?” (Heivoll 2011: 152).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> “Jenta lå som før på sengebrusken med alle teppene over seg, og det slo ham at hun hadde ligget urørlig hele dagen, helt til dette øyeblikket da hun snudde seg mot ham.

Så lenge du ble.

Nå er jeg her, sa han.

Så lenge du ble, gjentok hun.

[...]

Nå er jeg her, sa han.

[...]

Nå er jeg her, gjentok han.”

<sup>25</sup> “Det onde, sa han. Hun har det i seg. Det kom tilbake da jeg vær i land.

[...]

Det kommer tilbake når jeg ikke er her, sa han.

[...]

Jeg kan ikke gå i land, sa han. Jeg må være her.”

<sup>26</sup> “Hvor er hun?

Er hun ikke her? sa kvinnen.

Hun er borte.

Jeg så henne nettopp.

Hvor da?”

He then becomes feverish from an infected wound (a result of his fight with the crew members when he refused to leave his daughter's side on board the ship) and spends some time in a hospital room away from his child. Eventually, Deegen comes to him and announces he can see the girl again, as she has been cured. The father and daughter become reunited:

The girl sat upright on the bed and he saw that it was her.  
 "Are you here?" he said.  
 She nodded her head.  
 "Where have you been?" she said (Heivoll 2011: 188).<sup>27</sup>

The common space defined by the presence of the father and the daughter in near proximity to each other is reestablished. But it seems that something has changed. When the protagonists embark on their journey home and are confined to the ship's cabin again, the father starts to feel his child is close to him, and yet, very far away, as if she was slipping away from him:

He stretched his arm, but she was just a little bit too far away for him to reach her.  
 "What is it?" she said.  
 "You are so far away."  
 "But I am here" (Heivoll 2011: 200–201).<sup>28</sup>

Once the father himself begins to show symptoms of *radesyke*, he starts reacting nervously to the girl leaving him. It seems the journey home is a symmetrical opposition to the journey to Copenhagen in this aspect: the parent feels that he has to share the same space with his daughter, but now it is him "the evil" comes back to when she is away. He disciplines the child when she leaves him while he is asleep:

The girl came down right after, he looked at her, but she crawled under the blankets without a word.  
 "Where have you been?" he said.  
 "You must never again go anywhere without waking me up," he said coldly (Heivoll 2011: 211–212).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Jenta satt oppreist i senga, og han så at det var henne.  
 Er du her? sa han.

Hun nikket.  
 Hvor har du vært? sa hun."

<sup>28</sup> "Han strekte ut armen, men det var akkurat litt for langt til at han kunne nå henne.  
 Hva er det? sa hun.

Du er så langt unna.  
 Jeg er jo her."

<sup>29</sup> "Jenta kom ned like etterpå, han så på henne, men hun krøp under teppene uten et ord.  
 Hvor har du vært? sa han.

Du må aldri mer gå noe sted uten å vekke meg, sa han kaldt."

When he eventually allows the girl to go on deck, she comes back telling him what she has seen. This report can be read as a gloom prophecy concerning the father's fate:

“Are you already back?” he said.

“Yes.”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Nothing?”

“Just the sea” (Heivoll 2011: 219).<sup>30</sup>

The nothingness and the sea (which, as it already has been established in this paper, might be a symbol of death) the girl mentions suggest that there does not exist any other space for the father than the cabin he is in. As the symptoms worsen and death becomes imminent, he tries to venture outside and it is the girl's turn to try to stop him from leaving: “‘You have to be here,’ she said. / ‘I am not going to go,’ he said” (Heivoll 2011: 227–228).<sup>31</sup> Those are the last words of the father, who dies shortly after having uttered them. They may suggest acceptance and coming to terms with his fate.

The spatial presence/absence aspect seems to be crucial in creating the illness images in Heivoll's novel. The father's inexplicable presence by his daughter's side does indeed seem to influence her health and well-being. The question of why he was allowed to accompany his child on the journey is never answered. Perhaps, one might think, because the only way to cure the girl was for the illness to be transmitted onto the father? One of the more interesting features of the presence/absence aspect in Heivoll's text is the symmetrical mirror image of the two journeys, with the father accompanying his ill child on the way to Copenhagen and the cured daughter accompanying her ill parent on the way back. This symmetrical construction plays a similarly important role in the other spatial aspect of the narrative this paper concentrates upon, that is, the vertical/horizontal orientation of the protagonists' bodies in space.

<sup>30</sup> “Er du allerede tilbake? sa han.

Ja.

Hva så du?

Ingenting, sa hun.

Ingenting?

Bare havet.”

<sup>31</sup> “Du må være her, sa hun.

Jeg skal ikke gå, sa han.”

#### 4. “I am not able to get up”: The vertical and the horizontal orientation of the body

As Malmio and Kurikka point out, “bodies, whether human or non-human entities, are affected by their situatedness in space and vice versa” (2019: 11). Hana Voisine-Jechova, in her article on spatiality in one of the novels by the Polish author Stefan Żeromski, uses the concepts of verticality versus horizontality as two main criteria in the analysis of literary images of three-dimensional spaces (2014: 41). Those criteria can be applicable as very adequate categories in analyzing health and illness images.

Whereas a healthy person’s body is usually vertically oriented in space (the person is standing, walking, or sitting up), illness is inevitably connected with horizontality, that is, lying down. The interplay between those two categories is very prominent in Heivoll’s novel. Whereas the father is able to shift his body’s orientation in space, the girl mostly remains static – she is exclusively lying down. The constant shifts between verticality and horizontality in the alignment of the father’s body represent his ambiguous status and role on the ship: he is the patient’s only companion in the cabin, with an unclear identity of being both healthy and ill: “He lay down together with her, letting the soul stand there until it cools down. Then he stood up and ate with his back turned to her. [...] He lay down next to her again, so close he felt her warmth against his stomach [...]” (Heivoll 2011: 23).<sup>32</sup> A large part of his interaction with his daughter and other patients is based upon him getting up or lying down. He is also, unlike the other passengers in his cabin, able to walk up to the porthole and look outside, in order to at least make an attempt at defining the space of the outside world. This dynamic is stressed several times in the passages describing the journey to Copenhagen: “He stood up and went to the porthole to look out numerous times” (Heivoll 2011: 50),<sup>33</sup> “He got on his feet quickly and looked out” (Heivoll 2011: 140).<sup>34</sup>

The girl, who remains in a horizontal position, initially refuses even to sit up, thus marking the fact that the world of the healthy is inaccessible to her. Instead, she asks her father to join her in the horizontal space of the ill:

“Should I help you up?”  
She shook her head slightly.  
[...]

<sup>32</sup> “Han la seg ned sammen med henne og lot suppa stå til den kjølnet. Så reiste han seg og spiste med ryggen mot henne. [...] Han la seg ned ved siden av henne igjen, så nær at han merket varmen hennes mot magen [...]”

<sup>33</sup> “Flere ganger reiste han seg, gikk til gluggen og kikket ut.”

<sup>34</sup> “Han kom straks på beina og kikket ut.”

“Should I lie down?”

She did not answer for a long time. Then she said, with her eyes still closed:

“Yes. You should lie down” (Heivoll 2011: 49).<sup>35</sup>

A rapid change comes suddenly one morning, when the father wakes up and sees the child sitting up on the bed. The girl immediately defines this sudden ability to adapt a vertical position as a sign that she has overcome the illness:

He supported himself on his elbows, grey from sleep, while the girl was already sitting in the bed with the hospital gown stretched over her knees.

“What is it?”

“I am well,” she answered (Heivoll 2011: 58).<sup>36</sup>

She is even able to accompany her father when he goes on shore, and keeps commenting on the fact that the vertical world of the healthy has become accessible for her: “Look at me. I am able to walk” (Heivoll 2011: 63).<sup>37</sup> However, a new onset of the illness comes shortly thereafter, forcing her body back to its initial horizontal alignment.

The change of roles between the parent and the child comes, not unlike the shift in the previously discussed presence/absence aspect, when they arrive at King Frederik’s Hospital in Copenhagen. They are separated and the father becomes feverish from the infected wound. He is aware that the change in his spatial position symbolizes the illness. He is forced into the horizontal alignment of the unwell and auto-defines his new status while talking to Deegen: “Do not go. I am not able to get up’ [...] / ‘I am not able to get up,’ he whispered” (Heivoll 2011: 153).<sup>38</sup> After the girl has been cured, it is her who operates in the vertical dimension, whereas the father experiences considerable difficulties keeping his body in an upright position: “‘I thought you were going to fall down,’ she said. / ‘Now we are going to sail again,’ he said” (Heivoll 2011: 200).<sup>39</sup> His condition worsens on board

<sup>35</sup> “Skal jeg støtte deg opp?

Hun ristet umerkelig på hodet.

[...]

Skal jeg legge meg ned?

Hun svarte ikke på lenge. Så sa hun, med øynene fremdeles lukket:

Ja. Du skal legge deg ned.”

<sup>36</sup> “Han reiste seg på albuen, grå av søvn, mens jenta allerede satt i senga med sykehuskittelen stramt over knærne.

Hva er det?

Jeg er frisk, svarte hun.”

<sup>37</sup> “Se på meg, sa hun. Jeg klarer å gå.”

<sup>38</sup> “Ikke gå. Jeg klarer ikke å reise meg.

[...]

Jeg kan ikke reise meg, hvisket han.”

<sup>39</sup> “Jeg trodde du skulle falle, sa hun.

Nå skal vi seile igjen, sa han.”

the ship. He has trouble walking, but initially refuses to come to terms with his new spatial status, as it would mean accepting the fact of his illness and eventual death: “He tried to walk, he made two, three steps towards her bed, where she was sitting on the edge. / ‘Are you not able to walk?’ / ‘Yes I am,’ he said” (Heivoll 2011: 215).<sup>40</sup> Eventually his symptoms become so severe he is no longer able to deny the truth: the vertical dimension has become fully inaccessible for him: “He tried to sit up, but the pain was too big” (Heivoll 2011: 223).<sup>41</sup>

One of the last things the father does before his death, is try to stand up. This is a typical example of a phenomenon whereby a dying patient experiences a swift improvement in his or her condition and a surge of strength and energy in his or her final hours: “He made an attempt. He supported himself on his elbows. It went fine. He swung his legs from the edge of the bed. This also went fine. He put his feet on the floor and rose up. He was standing. Suddenly, he felt strong” (Heivoll 2011: 227).<sup>42</sup> The father dies shortly thereafter and his body sinks to the bottom of the sea, while his daughter is taken into Deegen’s care.

This analysis of the vertical/horizontal special aspect shows a symmetry in the father’s and the daughter’s condition, where the roles change in the hospital in Copenhagen – the girl arrives as an ill, horizontally oriented person, her father – with a healthy, vertically aligned body. When they leave, they have changed places in this spatial order.

## 5. Conclusions: The transfer of illness and its meaning

The analysis of the two chosen spatial aspects of the illness images in Heivoll’s *Kongens hjerte* proves that the novel is not only a metaphorical depiction of illness as a journey. It is also a story where the two main characters change places – the voyage to Copenhagen is necessary so that the girl can be cured and the father can become ill, almost as if her illness was transferred onto him. This gives the journey described in the novel a somewhat mystical aspect and allows one to perceive the mysterious German doctor Deegen as a sort of magician, or even a Mephistophelian figure, who allows the father to accompany his daughter out of the safety of the space of their home, so that the supernatural ritual can be performed. The parent sacrifices his life so that his daughter can be healthy. Heivoll’s depiction not only presents illness as a journey, it also suggests that, in order to be cured, the illness

<sup>40</sup> “Han forsøkte å gå, han gikk to, tre skritt bort til senga hennes, der satte han seg på kanten. Klarer du ikke gå?  
Jo da, sa han.”

<sup>41</sup> “Han forsøkte å sette seg opp, men smertene var for store.”

<sup>42</sup> “Han gjorde et forsøk. Han reiste seg opp på albuene. Det gikk. Han svingte beina utenfor sengekanten. Det gikk, det også. Han satte fotbladene i golvet, reiste seg. Han sto. Han kjente seg plutselig sterk.”

has to leave the space of the patient's body and transfer itself onto another being. This somewhat mystical and mysterious imaging of illness and space contributes to creating the atmosphere of a story set in the "clear air between reality and dream," as the author defines the literary premises of his novel (Heivoll 2011: n.p.).

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