LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Literary Geography at the National Scale

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Why study literary geography at the national scale? The interdiscipline is now remarkably mobile and borderless (Sheller and Urry 2006; McLaughlin 2016; Adey 2017). Not only is it practised around the world, it encompasses an expansive – and expanding – range of approaches and methodologies, from the 'geographies of literature'– that is, those that examine the various geographical contexts of literary dissemination and reception – to 'geographies in literature': the examination of the real and imagined geographies represented in literary works (Collot, translated in Brosseau 2017: 11). Furthermore, literary geography's two main areas of focus are themselves exceptionally mobile phenomena. Literary texts are profoundly unfixed objects: in a material sense, they can be picked up, carried, shared and read across territories and borders. In a more abstract sense, all literary texts are to some degree 'heterotopic' (Foucault 1986): they confound, de-territorialise, and reimagine settled political, economic and cultural orientations. Moreover, the spatialities within and across which works of literature imaginatively manifest are by no means fixed or static. Places and spaces are also perpetually mobile phenomena: plural and processual (Massey 2005), created and co-created through ongoing dialogue and interaction, as well as contest and struggle (Cresswell 1996), between – to a lesser or greater degree – mobile humans, ideas and objects.

This restless mobility within and across ever-shifting physical, ontological and epistemological terrains has meant that relational approaches have recently found traction as means of capturing these diffuse phenomena. Rather than conceive of texts as immutably fixed representations of real, imagined, or real-and-imagined spaces (Soja 1989), relational

literary geographies enable us to understand them as 'spatial events' (Hones 2008), 'processes' (Bushell 2009) and 'practices' (Saunders 2018) that connect and co-create the ways we experience an always unfinished, 'unfinalisable' world (Renfrew, after Bakhtin: 2015: 36). From this bearing, literary geography has itself become 'a process', one that 'identif[ies] the causes, products, and consequences of these many-to-many relations' (Saunders and Anderson 2015: 117). Literary geography is perhaps itself best understood as an agile plurality of approaches, traversing a range of methods and concepts in a multitude of locations. In Sheila Hones' figuration, its practitioners, like Phillipe Petite, dance a tightrope across 'the space between the tower of geography, on the one side, and the tower of literary studies, on the other' (Hones 2014: 4).

While celebrating the intellectual and methodological advances enabled by such agile mobility, this paper asks whether, at the same time, we ought to keep in mind Edward Said's observations on the matter of 'traveling theory'. In a 1982 essay of that name, Said argued for the importance of employing a critical reflexivity when applying abstract theories across heterogeneous spaces and contexts:

> if fields like literature or the history of ideas have no intrinsically closing limits, and if, conversely, no one methodology is imposable upon what is an essentially […] open area of activity – the writing and interpretation of texts – it is wise to raise the questions of theory and criticism in ways suitable to the situation in which we find ourselves. (Said 1991 [1982]: 161).

In other words, while literary texts, readers, writers, spaces and places should certainly be understood to be in relational, ongoing, 'dynamic interaction' (Hones 2014: 14) with themselves and one another, these (inter)relations are nevertheless enacted through specific, identifiable, material relationships within lived spatial and political contexts. Recent global events, from the migrant crisis, to Brexit and the new coronavirus, have thrown into sharp relief the blunt fact that while people and their ideas are perpetually mobile, we nevertheless live in the material domain of national polities, politics, and state jurisdiction over space and mobility. The mere origin of our passports, or even our place of legal residency, can have profound implications on the way we experience the social and biological environment. Given the weight of such forces, this paper considers whether reading literature through the lens of the national scale might be one way of keeping the key 'dynamic interactions' of literature and space in reflexive focus.

Literary analysis at the national scale became somewhat unfashionable in the 1980s and 1990s. Informed by poststructuralist de-territorialisations of essentialist notions of fixed identities and boundaries, and further bolstered by Marxist critiques of the constructed, bourgeois-industrial-capitalist origins of the 'imagined' (Anderson 1983), 'invented' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) nation, new readings from, in particular, postcolonial and comparative literary studies set out to disrupt the notion that literature could be straightforwardly located within given, bounded national contexts. Such readings formed part of a broad (and welcome) effort to problematise and disrupt Anglo- and Euro-centric 'cultural

imperialism' (Said 1993; Bhabha 1994). Around the same time, and for related reasons, this opposition to national boundaries and boundedness became a key feature of human geographical and social scientific enquiry. As Arturo Escobar notes, in the 1990s, place-based methodologies across the arts, humanities, and social sciences became increasingly 'linked to reactionary politics' for the understandable reason that 'not infrequently, boundaries authorize a politics of fixity and interdiction which in practice leads to exclusionary goals' (Escobar 2001: 149-50). Added to this was the fact that this was a period in which political borders and boundaries, particularly across Europe, were rapidly, conspicuously, and sometimes violently, shifting.

By the 2000s, new theories of literary studies were taking shape around the concept of 'world literature', a revision of Goethe's (1827) and, later, Marx's (1848) notion of *Weltliteratur*. These approaches ostensibly disposed of the idea of fixed canons of nationally-located texts in favour of 'a mode of circulation and of reading' (Damrosch 2003: 5) based on the celebration of literature's capacity to '[circulate] out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin' (7), and to be enjoyed by readers anywhere in the world. Certain versions of this argument explicitly viewed world literature as a means of 'loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation' in order to work towards the notion of a 'global civil society' (Dimock 2006: 4). Others attempted to keep in view the ways the political economy of the global capitalist system powerfully enables the circulation and success of certain, dominant national literatures and their writers over other, less powerful ones (Casanova 2004 [1999]). More recent work in the field has examined the ways in which literary texts, through their use of particular formal and representational strategies, register the uneven power dynamics inherent to global capitalism (Warwick Research Collective 2015).

While each of these approaches is characterised by sharply differing political attitudes to the effects of a globalized, free market, flexible accumulation capitalism, all share a similar aversion to the notion of national 'boundary making'. This was perhaps most influentially articulated by Franco Moretti in his 'Conjectures on World Literature', an article that outlined the benefits of an upscaled, 'distant' approach to literary studies (Moretti 2000). There have since been numerous replies to Moretti's claims about the supposed superiority of 'distant' over 'close' readings of culture (Arac 2002; Tally 2013). However, while Moretti clearly advocates 'distant' approaches, he does concede that there must be a 'division of labour between national and world literature' (2000: 68), given that there is always a 'degree of oscillat[ion] between the two mechanisms' (67) of local influences and global cultural trends. Nevertheless, the upscaling logic of this approach has prevailed. For Moretti, world and comparative approaches should present themselves as 'a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures' (68).

It should therefore be understood that one of the vectors of literary geography's agile mobility is its capacity to 'oscillate' or 'scale-jump' (Smith 1992) up and down a nest of analytical scales, with contemporary studies encompassing approaches from the local to the global, the particular to the universal, the local to the international. Literary geography, in its methodological agility, has not firmly attached itself to any one scale or space, and neither should it. Indeed, in the context of an imminent climate catastrophe tied to the excesses of

global capitalism (Klein 2014), it seems problematic for any (inter)discipline to argue for what Raymond Williams once called a 'militant particularism' (Cooke 1984) that focuses on one particular scale or space in a way that overlooks broader global networks and relations of power.

That said, it is notable that many existing studies remain unreflective about the power relationships at work in the production and reception of literature (Andrew 2017: 34). One aspect of these power relations that is conspicuously absent is a reflection on national scale and dimension. Given literary geography's concern with matters of space and place, this seems a significant omission. For instance, the recent useful *Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* (Tally 2017), although organized under sub-sections with titles such as 'Work sites', 'Spatial theory and practice', and 'Maps, territories, readings', contains no sustained critical engagement with the issue of the nation or national literature beyond a small mention in Hsuan L. Hsu's excellent chapter on scale. Similarly, Angharad Saunders' otherwise innovating *Place and the Scene of Literary Practice* (2018) posits a 'British literary canon' (xiv) that contains only English writers, and neglects to consider the scope of its national framing, specifically the question of whether the 'British' canon contains, or should contain, writing from other nations of the UK.

Contemporary relational approaches to literary geography are enabling a wider focus not only on the representational connections between text and space, but on the people – readers and writers – who enable and enact those relations. This being the case, it is surely necessary to commit to a degree of reflexivity regarding the material political and national conditions that condition space and the social experience. All spaces are, for better or worse, national constructs located and imagined discursively within national borders; there are, after all, no spaces on earth that are not under the jurisdiction or claim of some national state – legitimately or otherwise. As Tim Edensor has argued, 'at a practical and imaginary level, national geographies continue to predominate over other forms of spatial entity' (2002: 39). This is, emphatically, not to suggest that literary geography should privilege 'nation-ness' as the only or even the primary scale to emerge from and enable the 'spatial event' of the literary text: as Hsu rightly notes, 'literary texts explore and traverse a range of spatial scales […] including individual experience, sense of "place," urbanisation, the formation of supra-national regions, and the effects of global capitalism and climate crisis' (2017: 127). But it is to remind us to avoid what the Warwick Research Collective describe as an 'even less plausible analytical framework', one that falls foul of the inverse limitations of a 'militant particularism': 'a militantly idealist transcendentalism that glories in literature for its civilizational […] capabilities, across, athwart and, indeed, in defiance of the boundaries (historical as well as geographical) of any actually existing order' (2015: 42). Phrased in a slightly less antagonistic way, we might view this as the task of making the best use of our agile, reflexive mobility. In Said's terms, this means being attentive to the 'situation[s] in which we find ourselves', and looking more closely at the material and political contexts in which we live, read and write.

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