

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

What Literature is Spatial?

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As the field of literary geography moves forward, navigating the hidden complexities of creating a ‘genuinely interdisciplinary field’¹ (see Thacker 2005: 56; Hones et al. 2015: 2), it is useful to reflect upon the disciplinary stereotypes and assumptions which traditionally constrained the contact zone between literary studies and geography. In returning to the assumptions which tended to characterise attitudes to literature within the discipline of geography, for instance, and the persistent preoccupations which coloured attitudes to space within literary studies, we can better evaluate the space which the burgeoning field of literary geographies is filling. Returning to questions such as ‘what literature is spatial?’, and, concomitantly, ‘what space is literary?’, allows us to excavate the different disciplinary traditions which are brought into dialogue by literary geographies. Indeed, rather than an attempt to retrench into long-standing, separate disciplinary perspectives, or to draw territorial boundaries around this welcome site of interdisciplinary understanding, I wish to argue that in the very effort of addressing these questions we tackle the assumptions and prejudices that literary geographies is working to overturn. That is to say that in doing this important work we are able identify how far literary geography has come, exploding some of the myths which frequently constrained the understanding of space within literary studies and some of the stereotypes which restricted perceptions of the import of literature within geography. I am asking not so much what parameters might be placed around literary geography in order to better define it, then, but rather how the field is being opened up, identifying new avenues of enquiry and moving beyond disciplinary silos, in order to free it of constraints and allow it to realise its full potential. Ultimately this piece will argue that recognising the ways in which spatial power relations structure life from the micro to the macro scale, from the individual body to the globe itself, is one way for us to recognise the fundamental relevance of space to all lived experience, and hence to all textual portrayals of it. Accepting the mediated nature of reality, and the ways in which text and place co-create,

allows us to understand the extent to which literary and cultural study is of paramount importance to geography.

Let us turn first to the question: what literature is spatial? In the meeting of disciplines of the fields of geography and literature, it is clear that literary scholars interested in space and place have tended traditionally to focus on a range of key tropes and themes. Textual narrations of exile, migration and belonging, for instance, have generated long-standing threads of enquiry. Similarly, the legacies of key figures such as Benjamin and Baudelaire, fostering interest—for example—in the *flâneur* and the experience of the urban, are of enduring importance. Resonating across literary studies are investigations of landscapes and regions, of various types of literary mapping, and—of course—explorations of travel writing, in which experiences of space and place are inescapably foregrounded in the narrative. ‘Géopoétique’ and ecocriticism further bring together the spatial and the literary within richly interdisciplinary contact zones. That these flagship themes provide deep wells of expertise and interest, enriching the fabric of the study of space within literary studies, is undeniable. It is my contention here, however, that there is an urgent need for literary scholars to understand literary geography more broadly, and to look for the intersecting folds of the disciplines of literary studies and geography more sensitively.

The emergence of the new cultural geography from the 1980s onwards, bound up as it has been in postmodern thinking, is particularly helpful in shedding necessary light here. Perhaps most importantly, much food for thought is provided by the underpinning argument drawn from human geography at that time that space is not a dead, passive ‘container’ in which things happen, but rather an active force in the world that is imbued with ideology and politics (see Duncan and Ley 1993). If we recognise that space is inherently intertwined with power relations and hierarchies, we are able to move beyond the assumption that some spaces, and their literary incarnations, are ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ and therefore not worthy of analysis. We are also able to challenge the apparent invisibility of certain spaces, and—concomitantly—certain subjectivities. Accepting the agency of space in all lived experience, then, will enable the identification of new avenues of enquiry in literary study, and the location of those aspects of literature which may have been previously overlooked due to the inadequacy of our analytical tools. Looking from the micro scale of everyday experience through to the macro scale of global geopolitical forces, we can reflect upon the power relations underpinning space at all levels, and seek out how they are embedded in various literary forms. In my own work, I have sought to investigate a body-space-identity triad in order to examine the ways in which spatial power flows from the corporeal to the familial and well beyond. Drawing upon Tim Cresswell’s (1996) notion of being ‘out of place’, for instance, gives us tools to bring together close textual reading and the analysis of spatial power relations in order to understand how spaces can be used both to marginalise, and to resist, as well as a multiplicity of positions in between. This understanding is of the utmost relevance to a deep consideration of the interaction between individual and society, and many key preoccupations of literature.

Shifting position to consider the other primary disciplinary input into literary geography, it is clear that the development of interest in literature from within the field of

geography has been much more comprehensively studied and catalogued. As Brosseau explains, more than a century ago there were calls for geographers to pay greater attention to literature (Brosseau 1996: 25). Disciplinary emphasis on the importance of ‘accuracy’ and ‘objectivity’, however, led to literature being consigned to specific fields of enquiry, circumscribed, for instance, within a notion that it could illuminate matters of regional sense of place. Without seeking to rehearse discussions which have been clearly laid out elsewhere, it is clear that it is to the epistemological shifts of the 1970s onwards that we need to look in order to understand a more concerted desire to engage with literature from within the field of geography in recent decades. From poststructuralism to postcolonialism, through to postmodernism, the exclusive privileging of ‘factual’ knowledge over other kinds of knowledge has been sufficiently challenged to pave the way for a more thorough, if not universal, reappraisal of the place of literature in geography. The perception that literary narratives are composed of ‘flights of imagination’ (Mallory and Simpson-Housley 1987), which bear little more than a tangential or derivative relationship with reality, can no longer be sustained. The rich thread of work on the interdependence of ‘the work and the world’, as McLaughlin so neatly puts it, shows us clearly the growing desire to examine the ways in which ‘literatures overspill their textual boundaries and interact with the world’ (2016: 123). Literary space is not, as McLaughlin sums up, separate from ‘real space’, but is inherently bound up within it. Moreover, Hones takes us substantially closer to a genuinely interdisciplinary literary geography through her argument that ‘the writing–reading nexus’ is itself a ‘contextualized and always emerging geographical event’ (Hones 2008: 1301). In this, Hones argues that we must recognise that the very meaning of texts, both literary and academic, is created in particular social contexts, and is thereby inherently spatial. In recognising the performative dimension of texts and spaces, then, the ways in which they inform, modify and co-create, literary geography moves beyond the constraints of earlier disciplinary understandings: each literary articulation modifies the space that it portrays both for the author and for others engaging with it, and it is only through recognising the spatially grounded nature of reading and writing, that we can understand how textual meaning is created.

To return to the key thrust of this piece, then, it is clear, as Neal Alexander (2015) helpfully identifies, that there has been a ‘spatial turn’ within the arts and humanities in recent times, complemented by a ‘cultural turn’ within geography, creating opportune conditions for the emergence of a truly interdisciplinary literary geography. For pre-existing disciplines to simply turn together, however, in the sense of approaching each other with interest from distinct starting positions, can only be the first step. In order to realise the full potential of the exciting domain of literary geographies, we need a perpetually self-critical and self-aware approach to our perceptions of our own disciplinary position, at once immersing ourselves in the unfamiliar, and pushing ourselves to continually reassess our assumptions. Recognising the ways in which spatial power relations structure life from the micro to the macro scale, from the individual body to the globe itself, is just one way for us to recognise the fundamental relevance of space to all lived experience, and hence all textual portrayals of it. Accepting the mediated nature of reality, and the ways in which text and

place co-create, allows us to understand the extent to which literary and cultural study is of paramount importance to geography.

What literature is spatial, then? The answer is clear: all of it. What should be the compass of our work as literary geographers? It is my contention that we should embrace the broadest possible scope, accepting the inherent, perpetually enriching interdependence of space and literature.

Notes

¹ Whilst many scholars aim at real interdisciplinarity, it is the contention of this piece that due to the structures of academic work, what is more often achieved is a kind of ‘cross-disciplinary’ meeting of the disciplines, rather than a true interdisciplinarity. For reflection on the fundamental distinctions of these notions, see Repko 2011.

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