LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Dialogues with the Dead: Literary Geography's Absent Authors and Distant Voices

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Thinking and writing never take place in a vacuum; rather they are shaped by all manner of interactions – *conversations* – with other thinkers and writers, as well as other beings, places, objects and ideas. As a dynamic and constantly evolving discipline forged in the space between human geography and literary studies, drawing inspiration for its theory and practice from both fields of study to varying degrees, literary geography emerges from conversation; its essence is dialogic. But the dialogues of literary geography are rarely conversations between two equally present speakers: most of its engagements are with the dead and the absent, distant voices located in other dimensions by way of their historical geospatial origin, remote geographic setting, or language of expression. The conversations of literary geography are, then, often one-sided: one speaker or writer engaging with a spectral other through reading and interpretation, or imaginative projection.

This short article identifies two distinct yet frequently inseparable aspects of literary geography's spectral discourse: 1) the way in which literary geographers reanimate, use, and recycle voices which can only be accessed in the texts that they work with – conversations with absent or distant authors; and 2) in the literary geographical analysis of ghost stories, folk narratives, and the writings of Spiritualists, psychics, and parapsychologists – a textual body of work which both initiates and is the result of conversations between authors, readers and ghosts or other absent figures, some of which are imagined and some of which are actual. The entangled natured of these two aspects of (spectro-)literary geography is mirrored in the

writing of *this* discussion, which weaves together different strands of literary geography's haunted dialogue(s) with the imagined conversations between the dead and the distant with which it often works.

In his *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida (1994) urges us to listen to ghosts, to let them speak. But how exactly do these ghosts speak? My contention is that, for the most part, as scholars we enter into dialogues with the dead as soon as we start reading, thinking, and writing, connecting with absent authors in distant times and distant places. As literary geographers our role in this process of spectralisation occurs in manifold ways: not only do we need to look back and recuperate the history of our rapidly evolving discipline, but we must do so by returning to theoretical and methodological shifts of more than one academic field – a complex history of both geography and literary studies/criticism is reflected in our contemporary practice. In this sense, the dialogues and conversations of literary geography are multifarious: this article, for example, represents a spectral conversation not only between its author and a temporally and spatially remote audience located sometime in the future and somewhere other than where I now sit writing this (and where you are now reading it), but also includes a complex spectral network of writers, many of whom are long dead, speaking from a distant historio-geographic dimension.

Some of literary geography's dialogues are, of course, more haunted than others. Recently, due to an ongoing research project based on folk narratives, my attention has been drawn to the importance of historical dialogues between geography and folklore and how my own academic practice is, in a way, 'haunted', often necessitating a conjuring up and giving voice to the revenant figures of these two disciplines. Tracing the historical connections between academic folkloristics and human geography demands archival work, forging a discourse not only between two seemingly disparate fields of study, but also between the present and the past, the living and the dead – a connecting of absent authors and distant voices.

Having spent the last four years researching and writing on Yanagita Kunio's *Tōno Monogatari* – a 1910 volume which records the regional tales of a rural settlement in northeast Japan – I've found that entering into spectro-dialogism is inescapable: the author, contributors, and each of the generations of storytellers from which the narratives have been transmitted are all dead, each and every one of them consumed by a distant but ever-expanding past. Many of the individuals on which Yanagita's tales are based had been dead for decades before *Tōno Monogatari* was commercially published, meaning that the conversations introduced in the work were already spectral before they appeared in print. Reading the text now, more than a century later, not only have the author and narrators long disappeared from the corporeal realm, but the once anachronistic socio-spatial setting of Tōno, the remote Japanese village in which the tales take place and which Yanagita describes, is also locked within a distant spatial past; still geographically remote today, but no longer the cultural oddity that Yanagita described in 1910 as improved transport connections and a rapidly evolving communications network have brought widespread cultural and technological change to the region over the last hundred years.

In literature, a tradition of engineering dialogues with the dead emerged around the second century AD, made famous by the writings of Hellenised Syrian satirist Lucian of Samosata whose fictionalised conversations between deceased social figures gave presence to imagined spaces, spectral interactions, and absent speakers. Among Lucian's most famous works is Dialogues of the Dead (Νεκρικοὶ Διάλογοι), a series of thirty short conversations with and between dead philosophers set in the Greek Underworld (Traill 1884) which sees the author imagining, quoting, and inventing conversations with the distant and absent. Lucian's narratives form a spectro-literary-geography which merges imagined and lived worlds, and in doing so gives voice to the long dead in a way that allows them to speak through the author…or, perhaps, more appropriately, allows Lucian to speak through the dead. Lucian's dead are not, then, truly absent; they are lively, given form and, moreover, presence through his invented dialogues with the deceased. Nineteenth-century writer and poet Walter Savage Landor (1883) evoked the spirit of Lucian's writing in his *Imaginary Conversations*, producing almost one hundred and fifty fictionalised conversations between writers, philosophers, state leaders and politicians. The format introduced in these phantasmic dialogues allowed for the fabricating, manipulating, and reimagining of absent figures and their interaction on the page, and saw Landor summoning the voices of spectral agents to generate a disembodied critical discourse on the Western political and literary canon.

Spectro-literary space is also generated in the vast textual archive which documents encounters with actual ghosts. Spiritualist narratives, which seek to describe actual-world conversations with the actual-world dead, are present in the many reports, records, and documentations of séances that have taken place since the religion's emergence in the 19th century. Literary figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, and E.F. Benson are all known to have experimented with Spiritualist communication, each of them channelling their enthusiasm for the supernatural into their fictional ghost stories (Dickens 1843, 1866; Doyle 1899, 1922; Benson 1928). The literary ghost story, often referencing or parodying extra-textual folk narratives already in circulation, conjures a multitude of ghosts onto the page, initiating and articulating all manner of spectral conversations. Imagined conversations with ghosts forms a second layer in the textual body of work documenting haunted dialogues. For example, in his short story 'Spinach', a satirical take on Spiritualism, E. F. Benson (1928: 74-75) has his two main protagonists, Ludovic and Sylvia Byron, gather a textual record of messages from the dead as they take part in séances to commune with the ghost of the absent-present Thomas Spinach, a spirit who claims to have murdered his own uncle:

> Ludovic, accustomed as he was to spirits, felt an icy shudder run through him. But he waited in silence, the pencil looked as if it had something more to write. Then, great heavens! it came.
>
> "I will tell you all," it wrote. "I killed him, and I can't remember where I put him."

While Benson is poking fun at Edwardian society's fascination with the supernatural, records of spectral missives are commonplace in the pages of paranormal investigation; these,

too, form a body of work which brings the voices of distant and absent figures into conversation with those of the living and present, producing a third layer of spectral dialogues to which literary geographers might attend. Take, for example, the psychic archaeology of Frederick Bligh Bond, who documents more than a decade's worth of textual exchanges with ghostly entities in his excavation of Glastonbury Abbey. Bond's *The Gates of Remembrance* (1918) records in detail the messages, maps, and measurements which transpired through automatic writing exercises and spirit communication undertaken while he sought to locate the lost Edgar Chapel in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey. Of course, readers, too, can be drawn into such haunted discourses. I entered into a spectral dialogue with Bond almost fifteen years ago when, as a doctoral student, I purchased a first edition of *The Gates of Remembrance*, which, by sheer coincidence, happened to contain site photographs of the abbey grounds prior to the excavation. These images had been taken from Bond's personal collection, some of which featured the eerie spectral figure of Bond standing in the abbey grounds. (Writing this now attends to another kind of spectral work – communication with some other version of myself, in a distant time and a distant place, both of which are irretrievable in the here and now, preserved in memory alone.)

Simply by working with literature, literary geographers enter the open graveyard of deceased authors whose words we survey as sites of meaningful geospatial production. We channel the voices of writers and thinkers who are no longer able to permit us to use them. But, even the distinct contexts in which the words and ideas of living authors are formed and put into circulation within the academic community occur at a distance; we cite, paraphrase, and analyse through a discourse that is often beyond context or purposefully decontextualised.

Literary geography, both in practice and regarding the textual body of work it attends to, forms a continuous dialogue with the dead and absent; a discourse inhabited by departed, distant and spectral figures. We must listen to ghosts, lend voice to their words, but we must do so with caution. Entering into dialogues with absent authors presents us with a certain risk as it is we, the living, who are responsible for ensuring that the ideas and imaginings of those no longer able to advocate for themselves are portrayed with accuracy. Literary geography's reliance on words, works, and ideas, many of which exist only in textual reproduction and often outside of their original context, means that much of what we do involves speaking on behalf or in lieu of absent figures; we frame their voices and thoughts in citation and parentheses, presenting them alongside our own as if they were part of a continuous dialogue, one into which the absent author has agreed to enter. Literary geographers must, then, attend to the dead in their academic practice by necessity, but they must do so with care, lest the voices channelled, the spirits invoked, become misused, miscommunicated, and misdirected.

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