

Aberystwyth University

On Literary Geography

Alexander, Neal

Published in:
Literary Geographies

Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):
Alexander, N. (2015). On Literary Geography. *Literary Geographies*, 1(1), 3-6.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

THINKING SPACE

This is the first in a series of short (c. 1500 words) position papers on key terms and concepts for literary geography. Cumulatively, these accessible and wide-ranging pieces will explore the scope, parameters, and critical vocabulary of the field, clarifying important issues and stimulating discussion and debate.

On Literary Geography

Neal Alexander

Aberystwyth University

Literary geography is an emergent interdisciplinary field of research situated at the interface between human geography and literary studies. It derives much of its energy and dynamism from a specific convergence of thought across otherwise divergent disciplines. On the one hand, literary geography is one of the more striking manifestations of the ongoing spatial turn in the arts and humanities, which has been gaining momentum since the 1980s (see Warf and Arias: 2008). As early as 1967, Michel Foucault remarked that ‘today’s anxiety concerns space in a fundamental way, no doubt much more than time’, and the implications of this claim remain to be fully worked out (Foucault 2000: 177). On the other, literary geography might be regarded as one specific articulation of the cultural turn in human geography, which had its beginnings in the early 1990s (Philo 2000: 27). This cultural turn has seen geographers engage closely with film, dance, sculpture, and the visual arts as well as literature in an exploration of the specific modes of geographical thought that cultural texts afford. It is the coming together of these two distinct but related intellectual currents that has created the conditions necessary for literary geography to thrive.

Human geographers have long been interested in what literature can teach them about the relationship between humans and the non-human environment; and a well-established strand of literary criticism considers the role of place, region, and landscape in literary texts. However, until relatively recently these two groups have often seemed to be talking at cross-purposes and, with a few notable exceptions, have tended to remain firmly within the bounds of their own disciplines. For instance, although humanist geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Douglas Pocock did much to establish the significance of literature for geographical thought during the 1970s and 1980s, their conceptions of literary texts as repositories of universal truths about the human condition ignore contemporaneous developments in literary theory, which foregrounded the implication of literary texts in history and politics. Similarly, although Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973) can be regarded as a seminal text for literary geography, and has had a significant influence on cultural geographers, Williams makes almost no reference at all to relevant studies of rural, urban, and regional geography. There are, however, clear signs that this situation is changing, moving decisively in the direction of more thoroughly interdisciplinary and collaborative research. Over the past two decades, geographers have become increasingly sophisticated readers of literary texts – Marc Brosseau's reading of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* is a pioneering example (Brosseau 1995), following his excellent critical survey of work of this kind in human geography (Brosseau 1994). Similarly, literary critics are more than ever aware that if they are to examine fully what Edward Said calls the 'geographical articulations' of literary texts it is essential to read the work of actual geographers (Said 1993: 61). It is as a forum for such innovative, exploratory, and interdisciplinary research that *Literary Geographies* has been established, combining the rigour of a full peer-review system with the reach and accessibility of an electronic, open access format.

The term 'literary geography' has a long and rather complex history. It was first coined by the novelist and journalist William Sharp (aka Fiona Macleod) and used as the title for his 1904 book, *Literary Geography*, which includes chapters on 'Dickens-Land', 'Scott-Land', 'The Brontë Country' and 'The Literary Geography of the English Lakes'. The following year, Virginia Woolf borrowed Sharp's term for her review of two books in the Pilgrimage series: Lewis Melville's *The Thackeray Country* and F.G. Kitson's *The Dickens Country*. For both Sharp and Woolf, literary geography means little more than the particular places, landscapes, or regions associated with individual writers, although it can also refer to the various ways in which those geographical entities are reimagined in their texts (Thomas Hardy's Wessex, for instance). This kind of literary geography continues to manifest itself in the form of literary tourism ventures and coffee-table books, though it has largely been superseded in an academic context by more sophisticated critical formulations. What is striking about these newer versions of literary geography, however, is their variety, if not their incommensurability. For instance, in Franco Moretti's influential account, literary geography reveals the 'place-bound nature of literary forms', using maps and other visual diagrams to explore the internal logic of narrative (Moretti 1998: 5). Andrew Thacker shares Moretti's interest in the ways in which space and geography condition literary forms and style, but he criticises Moretti's faith in the objectivity of maps and places the emphasis on what he calls 'textual space', where spatial forms and social space interact in the written text (Thacker 2005: 61, 63). In turn, Sheila Honess critiques Thacker for ignoring the work of human and cultural geographers, going on to offer a model of the literary text as a 'spatial event', produced 'at the intersection of agents and situations scattered across time and space'

(Hones 2008: 1307, 1302). Some of these conceptual and methodological differences might be thought of in terms of the broad distinction that Miles Ogborn makes between ‘textual geographies’ and ‘the geographies of texts’, where the former entails detailed readings of the meanings of texts, spaces, and their conjunctions, whilst the latter offers a materialist study of the geographies of literary production, circulation, and reception (Ogborn 2005: 149). It remains unclear, however, how Moretti’s practice of literary mapping – and more recent experiments with Literary GIS (see Cooper and Gregory 2011) – would fit with this binary schema.

That there is currently general disagreement over what literary geography means, as both paradigm and practice, is not necessarily cause for despondency but may in fact be a sign of vitality. Like ecocriticism – with which it has some loose affiliations (as well as important differences) – literary geography is often carried on under other names: imaginative geography, literary cartography, geocriticism, geopoetics, geohumanities. For some critics, literary geography is about generating maps from quantitative data as a means of correlating genre with geography or charting the lineaments of a narrative trajectory. For others, the nature of the relationship between material and metaphorical spaces is paramount. Recent work attends to literary representations of places and spaces; the histories and characteristics of specific genres, such as landscape writing; and to the spatial properties of the text itself as a material object. Literary geographical readings of early modern drama, realist novels, modernist poetry, and contemporary science fiction have all been undertaken. Much of this research is theoretically eclectic, synthesising ideas drawn from phenomenology, historical materialism, structuralism and poststructuralism, art history, urbanism, anthropology, and gender theory, as well as geography and literary studies. The plural form of this journal’s title, *Literary Geographies*, is intended to accommodate and encourage such diversity. Moreover, we are keenly conscious of the fact that literary geography has its own spectrum of geographical articulations, as it is pursued in contexts that are at once local and international by scholars from a range of disciplines located all over the globe.

Works Cited

- Brosseau, M. (1994) ‘Geography’s Literature.’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 18(3), pp. 333-353.
- Brosseau, M. (1995) ‘The City in Textual Form: Manhattan Transfer’s New York.’ *Ecumene*, 2(1), pp. 89-114.
- Cooper, D. and Gregory, I.N. (2011) ‘Mapping the English Lakes: A Literary GIS.’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36(1), pp. 89-108.
- Foucault, M. (2000) ‘Different Spaces.’ *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Faubion, J. (ed). London: Penguin.
- Hones, S. (2008) ‘Text as It Happens: Literary Geography.’ *Geography Compass*, 2(5), pp. 1301-1317.
- Moretti, F. (1998) *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*. London: Verso.
- Ogborn, M. (2005) ‘Mapping Words.’ *New Formations*, 57, pp. 145-149.
- Philo, C. (2000) ‘More words, more worlds: Reflections on the “cultural turn” and human geography.’ In Cook, I., Crouch, D., Naylor, S., and Ryan, J.R. (eds). *Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns: Perspectives on Cultural Geography*. Harlow: Prentice Hall, pp. 26-53.

- Said, E. W. (1993) *Culture & Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Sharp, W. (1904) *Literary Geography*. London: Pall Mall.
- Thacker, A. (2005) 'The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography.' *New Formations*, 57, pp. 56-73.
- Warf, B. and Arias, S. (eds) (2008) *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1973) *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Woolf, V. (1977) 'Literary Geography.' *Books and Portraits*. Lyon, M. (ed). London: Hogarth Press.