

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Literary Geography and Spatial Literary Studies

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In an article recently published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Alan Bradshaw and Stephen Brown include ‘a little history of literary geography’ in which they emphasise its disciplinary origins as a subfield of human geography, explaining that ‘geographers have long regarded novels and analogous cultural artefacts as valuable sources of spatial information’ (2018: 332). For Bradshaw and Brown, geocriticism and spatial literary studies are ‘semisynonymous descriptors’ for literary geography. Published in the same year, Robert T. Tally Jr.’s editorial introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* (2017), meanwhile, takes literary geography out of its human geography context to incorporate it into the ‘growing body of work in spatial literary studies’ (Tally 2017: 2). For Tally, spatial literary studies includes ‘almost any approach to the text that focuses attention on space, place, and mapping’ -- whether it ‘operates under the banner of geocriticism, geopoetics, literary geography, the spatial humanities, or something else along those lines’ (3). It seems to me that neither Bradshaw and Brown nor Tally have got it quite right: significant differences in disciplinary origins, aims and methods distinguish spatial literary studies from literary geography, and as a result the two fields are neither ‘semisynonymous’ nor can one be configured as a subfield of the other.

The defining characteristic of literary geography, and the feature which most clearly distinguishes it from spatial literary studies, is its double interdisciplinarity: the ‘literary’ of literary geography refers both to literary texts and to literary studies, while the ‘geography’ of literary geography refers not only to real and imagined geographies but also to human geography as an academic discipline. Literary geography’s concern with the aims of human geography and the attention it pays to new work in geographical theory and practice is

evident in its contemporary citation practices, which typically include not only primary literary texts and related work from literary studies but also work published in social science journals.¹ Similarly, in order to sustain its literary/geographical interdisciplinarity, the journal *Literary Geographies* typically sends submissions out for review to one reader from literary studies/the humanities and another from geography/the social sciences.

‘Spatial literary studies’ is one of the newer terms used to describe the kind of spatially-oriented criticism that has emerged in literary studies in the wake of a relatively recent expansion of interest in geographical themes and concepts. Robert Tally’s volume on *Spatiality* for the Routledge New Critical Idiom series, published in 2013, provides an overview of the ‘spatial turn in literary and cultural studies’ and discusses the ‘geocentric approach to literary studies’ but does not refer to ‘spatial literary studies’. That term seems to have come into use a year or so later, initially as part of the general title for Palgrave Macmillan’s series on *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*. Nevertheless, Tally’s introduction to the Routledge *Handbook of Literature and Space* presents this new subfield in literary studies as an overarching category able to include not only geographically-oriented work in literary studies but also a tradition of geographical work with literary texts dating back at least as far as the 1920s (Wright 1924). First termed ‘literary geography’ in the 1970s (Dhussa 1976; 1981) this geographical subfield has been ‘following the main epistemological and theoretical turns within the fields of human and cultural geographies’ throughout its history (Ridanpää 2013). In other words, geographers engaging in this line of work have been (and still are) ‘doing geography with literature’, and while it may be true that ‘geographers have become increasingly sophisticated readers of literary texts’ (Alexander 2015: 4) this is not to say that they are now primarily interested in producing literary criticism.

Although the thematic combination ‘literature and space’ sounds (to a literary geographer) as geographical as it does literary, the *Handbook of Literature and Space* was developed and published at Routledge as a literature title. So it is possible that the introduction’s annexation of literary geography as a subfield of literary studies derives from publisher categories. Nevertheless, despite this disciplinary positioning, several chapters were commissioned for the *Handbook* from geographers, and as a result, as published, a volume presenting ‘the wide range of critical practices available to spatial literary studies’ (Tally 2017: 4) ended up including work by geographers doing geography with literature alongside work by literary scholars employing geographical themes and concepts in their critical practice. In order to present the volume as a whole as an overview of work in spatial literary studies, the introduction has to skate over the geographical grounding of these literary geography chapters.

The resulting disciplinary awkwardness becomes immediately clear in the first chapter of the *Handbook*, a summary of ‘new perspectives in literary geography’ contributed by Marc Brosseau (2017), a professor of social and cultural geography and a leading figure in the field of literary geography since the early 1990s. Brosseau establishes the disciplinary orientation of his chapter immediately with the remark that ‘geography’s relationship with literature is no longer a disciplinary oddity (9)’ with ‘geographers’ use of literature’ now ‘normalized as a

disciplinary practice'. While Brosseau makes it clear that he does not go as far as Michel Collot in defining literary geography specifically as 'the study of literature by geographers' his evident disciplinary orientation does emphasise the importance of the human geography component in contemporary literary geography. As a result, while the collection's introduction emphasises the way in which the volume's thirty-two chapters represent 'the diversity and breadth of spatial literary studies in the twenty-first century' (2), its first chapter leads off in quite a different direction with the clear explanation that 'not all geographers working with literary texts are interested in making a contribution to literary studies' (23). 'It is a matter of perspective, of course,' Brosseau adds, 'whether it is literature or geography itself that constitutes the ultimate object of inquiry when geographers turn their attention to literary works' (23). The various chapters contributed to the *Handbook* by geographers do in fact tend to leave open the question of 'the ultimate object of inquiry.' The primary focus of Juha Ridanpää's (2017) chapter on regions, for example, is the question of how regionality and regions as spatial units come to be imaginatively understood. Ridanpää is not using the concept of the region here to produce a critical reading of literary texts but employing literary texts as part of his investigation into regionality.

Twelve of the *Handbook's* thirty-two chapters were contributed by editors or editorial board members for *Literary Geographies*. Because these chapters are scattered throughout the various thematic sections of the *Handbook*, what they have in common – and what might distinguish them as literary geography rather than spatial literary studies – is not immediately evident. Read as a group, however, it becomes clear that it is not just the chapters contributed by geographers that stand out as something other than 'spatial literary studies': the literary geography chapters contributed by critics working in English departments are also clearly practicing a literary/geographical interdiscipline. The literary critic Neal Alexander, for example, one of the founding editors of the journal *Literary Geographies*, opens his chapter on 'Senses of Place' by remarking that the idea of a sense of place 'occupies an important position at the intersection between literary studies and human geography' (2017: 39). He sustains this double focus through to his conclusion, in which he summarises his intention as having been 'to identify and distinguish between the various layers of meaning that [the concept of a sense of place] has acquired in the discourse of literary criticism and human geography' (47). David Cooper, another founding editor and literary geographer also working in an English department, specifically acknowledges in his chapter on 'Digital Literary Cartographies' the critique to which digital literary cartographies have been subjected from 'both literary critics and cultural geographers' (2017: 144). Both of these chapters, in other words, are clearly works of interdisciplinary literary geography because of the way in which they make explicit reference to current and ongoing work in both literary studies and human geography.

While literary geography today increasingly incorporates theory and methods developed in literary studies, actively encouraging and valuing the input of literary critics, it nevertheless retains a strong orientation toward geographical and, more generally, social science aims and methods. The appropriation of literary geography into the emerging field of spatial literary studies not only disregards a century of human geography historiography,

it also strips the interdiscipline of the geographical component of its aims and methods. While some individual pieces of work in literary geography might be practically indistinguishable from individual pieces of work in spatial literary studies, the underlying differences in aims and methods separating the two fields mean that they cannot be regarded as almost the same thing. Furthermore, the emergence of spatial literary studies as a new literary approach to text cannot justify the reconfiguration of an interdiscipline grounded in a long tradition of geographical work as a subgenre of literary studies.

Notes

¹ For example, *Cultural Geographies, Social & Cultural Geography, Society and Space*, and *The Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.

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