

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Angharad Saunders (2018) *Place and the Scene of Literary Practice*. London: Routledge. 172pp, £105 (hardback), ISBN 9-871472-417640.

Literary geography has, in its recent maturation as an (inter-)discipline, had much to say about how texts can be understood as ‘spatial events’ (Hones 2014) centred around the spatially-contingent interactions between texts and their readers. But what insights can literary geography offer into the composition of the text, and the spatiality of writing? This is the question from which Angharad Saunders’ study of the geography of literary practice proceeds. Noting that attention has tended to fall on ‘the agency of the reader and their interaction with the text as a finished product’ (xiv), Saunders proposes a turn towards ‘the world before the text’ (xiv), applying the same relational geographical thinking that underlies Hones’ approach to the creation rather than the reception of literary texts. But Saunders is not concerned with pinning acts of composition to particular locations; rather, she is interested in writing as a process that ‘also escapes such placing’ (xii), happening as it does in much broader and less easily-plotted contexts of social and spatial interaction. The conceptual framework Saunders proposes for this approach to literary practice is the ‘scene’: the broadly-conceived structure of habits and relationships in which writing is enmeshed and whose invocation, Saunders contends, ‘draws our attention to both the place and process’ of literary practice (xxi) while also reminding us that this practice is ‘so much more than the physical act of writing’ (xxii). Through this approach, and alternating between studies of the literary practice of Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and Anthony Trollope, the book enacts an important widening of the current scope of literary geography, drawing attention to the previously under-examined compositional side of the geographical life of the text.

The book is organised into three parts, the first of which further develops the notion of the ‘scene’ by testing its application at different scales. Chapter 1 presents an account of Bennett’s careful construction of the domestic interiors in which his writing took place. Rather than seeing these interiors simply as containers for textual composition, Saunders draws attention to ‘how these spaces are themselves produced and through what kinds of social and spatial relationships’ (5); particularly arresting is her argument that the furnishing of these spaces involves a ‘relational aesthetic that is based upon an imagined version of the self and its inhabitation within a community of praxis,’ geared specifically towards ‘gaining access to the imagined community of aestheticism’ (11). The chapter concludes with a reading, albeit rather brief, of a passage from Bennett’s *A Man from the North* (1898), through which Saunders argues that ‘the representation of...interior spaces was bound up with the development of character’ (17).

Chapter 2 expands the focus to the scale of the neighbourhood; specifically Holland Park in London, home to Galsworthy from 1905. Using contemporary maps, guidebooks and census data to reconstruct the social, cultural and political atmosphere of this space, the chapter works towards a more developed reading of Galsworthy's *Fraternity* (1909), suggesting that the novel's formal experiments derive partly from 'the way it registered west Kensington's lived world' (38). Chapter 3 broadens the scale to that of the nation, examining Trollope's composition of *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847) as a negotiation between Trollope's experience of travelling and living in Ireland and his awareness of the expectations of his intended English audience. Caught between writing for an audience whose expectations he knew to be bound up with colonial attitudes and 'participating in Ireland's production of its own narrative of space' (50), Saunders points to Trollope's simultaneous deployment and undercutting of colonial voice and epistemology. Persuasively, she suggests that these features of the text form an embodiment of the conflicted geography of its composition.

Part 2 builds on these opening investigations to develop the idea of the 'writingscape,' the set of habits and routines that contain but also exceed 'the putting of pen to paper' (57). Chapter 4 attempts to build this notion through an account of the habit of walking within Bennett's 'writingscape.' The chapter argues for a development in Bennett's walking practice over time, from goal-orientated geographical 'fact-finding missions' (60) to a more open-ended form of 'thinking-in-motion' (63). Chapter 5 adopts a more empirical angle, closely examining the work plans Trollope drew up for his novels in progress. In a distinctive and fruitful approach, Saunders considers the material spaces of page and text as micro-geographies, looking first at how Trollope's spatial arrangement of his plans involved an attempt to structure the temporal patterns of his writing. She also looks at how these page-spaces intersected with his real-world travels. Concluding, she shifts focus to the material text-space of the 'triple-decker' novel, arguing that the physical, spatial form of this genre 'conditioned a particular kind of narrative development,' encouraging the creation of 'multiple nodes and hubs within the story to facilitate all sorts of socio-spatial interconnections and possibilities' (79). Chapter 6 reads the composition of Galsworthy's *The Man of Property* (1906) as a process of 'writing-through,' which Saunders defines as 'the practice of writing the world in the moment of its experience' (85). The chapter explores the stylistic and formal techniques that Galsworthy adopted as means of negotiating both his lived familial experience and the politics of writing gender and class in the early twentieth century.

The final part of the book examines the concept of 'en-route writing,' derived from histories of scientific practice, an idea that emphasises the centrality of movement to Saunders' notion of the 'scene' (103). Chapter 7 takes Trollope's travel diaries, and reflections on his fieldwork for the Post Office, as evidence for a spatial epistemology in which 'place as a series of networked sites, of relationships' is privileged over 'place as a site of activity and meaning making' (108). Neatly, Saunders demonstrates how this approach 'in turn became encoded in the spatial imaginary of Trollope's fiction' (108). Chapter 8 takes letters between Galsworthy, Edward Garnett and Joseph Conrad as suggestive of the 'relational making' (118) of Galsworthy's *Fraternity*. Exploring the advice these other writers provided and the revisions that Galsworthy subsequently made to his novel, Saunders argues that the letters evidence a process of 'reception-in-creation' that is key to the 'spatial event of the novel's writing' (126, 118). In moving between social worlds, Saunders suggests, the

letter ‘sparks discussion and disquiet’ within the writing process, becoming an active component of creative practice (127).

Saunders’ use of the term ‘literary practice’ might raise the eyebrows of more literal-minded literary scholars. There is – quite deliberately – little attention to actual practices of drafting, revision and editing here; instead, Saunders’ main interest lies in the ‘compositional nature of lived experience’ (xxii). Her shift of focus from actual acts of text-making to the wider ‘scene’ of creation ensures that she steers well clear of simplified or deterministic assumptions about the relationships between sites of composition and fictional spaces. But such an approach does, by her own admission, require ‘a degree of expressive and inventive researching’ (xxvii). This isn’t to say that she ignores empirical evidence; indeed, the book is consistently grounded in close attention to material sources, though Saunders eschews drafts and notebooks (typical fodder for scholars of textual practice) in favour of more marginal and perhaps surprising textual traces: letters, journals, work plans and the like.

The balance between expressive and empirical approaches is struck most consistently in part 1, where close attention to formal features of the texts also allows Saunders to justify her choices of subject by clearly linking the ‘scene’ with the products of literary practice. But there remains the question of how far from the text we can profitably wander in pursuit of the scene. Chapter 6, in particular, moves away from Bennett’s actual writing practices and contains no sustained treatment of his texts, with the result that the significance of his walking to his writing recedes from view; the chapter’s concluding argument that his walks, in their combination of routine and unfamiliar experience, ‘could have unpredictable effects on Bennett’s creative labours’ (68) is suggestive but thinly evidenced. There is an opposite danger, too: chapter 6 does pay close attention to Galsworthy’s compositional process and the text produced by it in order to trace his ‘writing-through,’ but strays somewhat from the specific question of the role of place in this process, and loses sight of the spatiality of his practice. As literary geography expands its analytical horizons, there is a need to keep both text and space in the picture – a task Saunders does not uniformly accomplish here.

If these are missteps, then they have to be taken in the context of a book that is original and exploratory in its approach, whose distinctive methodology bears fruit more often than it raises problems, and which represents an important addition to the existing scholarship. As a first sustained step into the geography of literary practice, it is certainly a promising start.

Works Cited

Hones, S. (2014) *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let the Great World Spin*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

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