LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

On Toponymical Regimes

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The introduction of toponyms in fiction fosters the perception that the events recounted, which we know did not really take place, find their place in real settings, at least to the extent to which these places are named or suggested in the text. Toponyms in fiction have, then, an indexical function: they point to places. We should remember, though, that this indexical capacity is in many ways deceptive. The places to which toponyms refer are not always as fixed or certain as one might suppose, and the desire to link a given fiction to a given territory, so prevalent among literary cartographers, can be misleading.

Fictional texts are often ambiguous in how they define the territory in which the events they relate occur, and equivocal as to the extent to which the spaces they describe coincide with those we inhabit in real life. In other words, the modes of fictional reference to the world are often erratic, or at least elusive and precarious. Texts themselves introduce a distancing of the referents to which they seem to refer, creating what have been termed 'spaces in movement' (Delgado 1999: 36ff.). These are deterritorialized spaces, without a solid ground, recognizable only to the extent that they are practiced or converted into scenes of practices.

Despite these considerations, toponyms are still of fundamental importance in fiction, given that they imply a horizon of spatial reference, and contribute to establishing a substantial link to the world through textual media. The use of toponyms is, in fact, the main element that allows for the extra-textual cultural practices that inscribe fictions within real geographical space. The routes of literary tourism, the use of literary sources to grant a given location symbolic capital, the contemporary eagerness for mapping the worlds of fiction, the contribution of fictional works in establishing *lieux de memoire*, and even the forms of activism that approach what is termed "cultural acupuncture" (Jenkins 2012) are

examples of how fiction is layered on geographical space, in a broad sense, in order to grant it an imaginary or cultural dimension.

It is instructive here to compare the prevalence of real toponyms in fictional works to the potentially problematic presence within them of characters or other entities that have real referents. More often than not, this presence of the supposedly real – a reality to the degree that it is marked in nomination – is reserved for the historical novel, or for secondary roles in the economy of the fictional worlds, at the risk of becoming a factor of referential instability. By contrast, the use of real place names in fiction goes without saying, even when they exist alongside place names that are fictional, or of dubious referentiality. It is perhaps for these reasons that the function of place names in fiction has received little or no direct theoretical or detailed analytical attention, save for a few exceptions such as the pioneering approaches by Nicolaisen (1975, 1979). In order to problematize these relations, I would propose the notion of 'toponymical regime,' with the double purpose of clarifying how fiction establishes links to the world through the strategic use of place names, both real and invented, and suggesting how fiction can be said to constitute its own place.

It is worth recalling here Bertrand Westphal's catalog of the different correlations of reference and representation with regard to space. Westphal suggests a distinction between *homotopic consensus,* which implies conformity between the textual and the real; *heterotopic interference*, in which there is an intended melding of referents or imprecision in the signaling of places; and *utopian excursus*, when reference to identifiable places within the world is avoided and an alternative fictional space is proposed (Westphal 2011: 101-10). Clearly identifying these correlations may be a dubious task, but in all of them toponyms play a decisive role. It is true that the referential adequacy of a place name to a real place, when used in a fiction, does not always depend on whether the place name is homonymous with its real equivalent. Nonetheless, the correlations between fictional and real places would have no theoretical significance, nor would they be relevant to the reader's experience, if we entirely ignored the capacity of fiction to point to given places, principally through the use of toponyms. As Jason Finch (2015: 10) remarks, with regard to what would seem among the most unlocatable writings of all, those of Samuel Beckett: 'Deictic indexicality of place is a feature of *all* writing.'

Beyond the changeable dynamics of these correlations of toponyms and place, it is important to at least note some other aspects of the functioning of place names in fiction: for example, the criteria for their selection and use (what kinds of places are named and how this naming is effected), the linguistic and cultural identity of the names, the lesser or greater density of place names within a given area… All of these factors are instrumental in the referential strategies adopted within a given fictional text. The choices taken with regard to the employment of place names within a fictional text imply a logic, what I term a 'toponymical regime,' which describes a certain way of organizing place names within a fictional environment and the design of what can be defined as an "interface" between the text and that which lies outside the text, between the world of the text and the world of the reader. An interface is, fundamentally, a functional connection between distinct material and symbolic domains. If toponyms are points at which the world of fiction and the world of

the reader coalesce, this means that we can describe the zone of contact between them by analyzing the varying degrees of toponymical identification in works of fiction, which are themselves related to distinct authorial strategies, genres, time periods, etc.

Toponyms cannot be taken to act with the apparent neutrality that was so often presumed. But the fact is that, despite changing conceptions of reality, we can still stress the continuing validity of the mimetic impulse of fiction, of the inevitable connection between text and world, and vice-versa. Here, a simple formulation might be of use: fiction lacks its own place because its place is that of the other. It is the place of social and produced spaces (in Henri Lefebvre's sense), of the representations of space, of the complexity and instability of the real. An observation of Michel de Certeau (1984: 105-6) is apposite at this juncture: 'By a paradox that is only apparent, the discourse that makes people believe is the one that takes away what it urges them to believe in, or never delivers what it promises. Far from expressing a void or describing a lack, it creates such. It makes room for a void.' It is for these reasons that fiction takes its distance from reality, but at the same time is illegible without it. Fiction takes indices of place and operates upon them, combining, changing, and hiding them, or calibrating them to different levels of density or transparency. It is these procedures that allow us to speak of different types of toponymical regime.

To explain this more clearly it is useful, following De Certeau, to think about the ways in which a given toponymical regime might be employed in a way that we could describe as "tactical." We might remember here the well-known distinction the French Jesuit made between the terms *tactic* and *strategy*: "a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No evidence of a proper place, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means *to keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection" (Certeau 1984: 36-7). Although De Certeau was referring to the practices of consumers, and to their astuteness, there are few formulations that allow us to better understand the meaning of fiction, and the peculiar heteronomy of fiction with regard to the real. Tactics imply action in a space and terrain that is not one's own as a way to constitute one's own agency, often with surprisingly effective results. It is in this context that we can understand the powerful influence on social and cultural spaces of fiction, a phenomenon that the pioneers of literary geography understood very well, dedicated as they were to guiding their readers through the real spaces inhabited by novelists and literary figures, which were inevitably perceived through the lens of fictional works.

A decisive question arises from these considerations: what kind of territorialisation is proper to fiction? Or, to put it differently, what are the territories that literary cartographers map? My hypothesis is that fiction lacks its own, proper territory, and that it uses that of its other, what we often term the referent. Fiction works on this other, giving it cultural and imaginary depth. This process suggests a complex conception of mimesis, which is not only bidirectional, but assumes that representation is a continual creation of spaces, gaps, and absences, into which is introduced the representable.

We should not forget that spatial mimesis is one of the most fundamental aspects of fiction and that the arrangement of toponyms within the fictional text transcends the merely functional purpose of providing a historical anchoring or an illusion of place. It is not just the inscription of the world into the work. We can think the use of place names in fiction in far more complex and provocative ways, possibilities that are only glimpsed in the maps of contemporary literary cartographies.

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