

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

THINKING SPACE

Thinking Space is a series of short 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.

Literary Geographies, Past and Future

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One of the difficulties facing literary geography as it moves towards an interdisciplinary future is that until quite recently most works in literary/geographical studies have had discipline-specific projected readerships and citation horizons. Marc Brosseau's 'Geography's Literature' (1994) and Andrew Thacker's 'The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography' (2005), for example, despite both being important predecessors of current interdisciplinary literary geography, address different audiences, with Brosseau writing for geographers and Thacker for literary and cultural critics. Brosseau states that the main aim of his article is 'to propose a critical and comprehensive assessment of how literature [has been] integrated into the broader intellectual agenda of geographers' (Brosseau 1994: 335). As his title suggests, he is specifically interested in 'geography's literature.' Thacker, on the other hand, states that he is interested in 'what literary and cultural critics can learn from a fuller engagement with theorists of space and geography, rather than the reverse,' and his

“idea of a critical literary geography” explores how the ‘analysis of literary texts can be enriched by the use of geographical ideas and practices’ (Thacker 2005: 56).

Nevertheless, although their projected audiences were clearly different, neither Thacker nor Brosseau were invested in what Thacker called ‘the policing of disciplinary borders between literary studies and geography.’ Explaining that his own discipline-specific focus was a matter of ‘disciplinary background and experience,’ Thacker remarked that ‘the growth of a genuinely interdisciplinary field that studies the interface between texts and spaces is clearly an exciting prospect’ (Thacker 2005: 56). My argument here is that the emergence of such a ‘genuinely interdisciplinary field’ will depend not only on collaborations and cross-disciplinary conversations in the future, but also on a comparative understanding and an active integration of literary geography’s separate pasts.

This historiographical integration is important for several reasons. One has to do with terminology: scholars engaged in interdisciplinary collaborations have pointed out that ‘miscommunications can easily arise when key words are not used in the same way by scholars grounded in different disciplinary traditions’ (Bracken and Oughton 2006: 371). This is not just a problem for collaborations present and future: an understanding of how terms have been used in the past, along with an awareness of associated disciplinary assumptions, is crucial to an understanding of the present condition of plural literary geographies. The other reason why historiographical integration is important has to do with the way in which similar ideas have emerged independently in contemporaneous work produced within different disciplines. Reconnecting these separate developments will help to prevent previously assumed disciplinary separations being carried over into future work.

‘Critical’ is a useful example of a term that has been used by literary geographers very differently in different disciplinary contexts. One of the most influential works in the field in the literary studies tradition, for example, is Andrew Thacker’s 2005 ‘The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography,’ in which he uses the key term ‘critical’ to distinguish his suggestion for a new approach to literary geography within literary studies from an earlier, ‘uncritical’ form: the ‘effortless mapping of represented landscapes’ found in popular gazetteers and tourist guides. For his projected audience in literary and cultural criticism, what Thacker means by the ‘critical’ of his ‘critical literary geography’ would probably be quite evident. For geographers, however, the ‘idea of a critical literary geography’ might quite differently suggest work with literary texts undertaken within critical geography, a subfield of geography characterised by its push for more inclusive forms of knowledge production, for social change, and geographical critique. In ‘Beyond Geography and Literature,’ for example, John Silk argues that literary geography should be able to ‘provide a basis for intervention in the process of the “mental appropriation of the world” which combats bourgeois ideology’ (Silk 1984: 151).

Joanne Sharp uses the term differently again in her article ‘Towards a Critical Analysis of Fictive Geographies’ (2000). Working from a social science perspective, Sharp critiques earlier work on literary geography in regional, critical and humanistic geography: regional geography for its emphasis on ‘the evocative power of literary description,’ critical geography for its view of literature ‘as a material artefact that fulfils a role designated by its

position in various social and economic processes,' and humanistic geography for (among other things) its tendency to look to literary texts for universal truths (327-8). Arguing that literary texts have thus been used by geographers mainly as 'raw material to prove or illustrate various theoretical positions held by the geographer,' Sharp envisions a new direction for critical literary geography suggested by Marc Brosseau's contention that 'geographers are missing the ways in which literature uniquely creates knowledges and imagined geographies' and his insistence that it is 'not just the content of the representation which is important but also the form that it takes' (329). Sharp concludes that a fully critical analysis of literary texts in the context of human geography would have to consider the text from three different angles: critical reading, context of writing, and reception. So while 'critical' for Thacker implies 'literary criticism,' and his critical literary geography is as a result defined in contrast to the 'uncritical' literary geographies of the gazetteer, for Sharp a 'critical' approach is defined in contrast to earlier 'uncritical' geographical approaches to literary geography.

It has been possible for the term 'critical' to be used in these different ways within literary geography because during the twenty year period spanned by these three papers there was minimal exchange between literary/geographical work in human geography and in literary studies, and as a result authors were able to write for discipline-specific audiences. Thacker, for example, refers to the influence on literary critics of geographers and spatial theorists such as David Harvey and Ed Soja, but makes no reference to the longstanding human geography subfield of literary geography. Citations indicate that Sharp, meanwhile, knew the work of Silk, but was unaware of Thacker's earlier 1993 article, in which he sketches an early version of the geographical approach to literary texts he would later describe in more detail in 2005.

The disconnection between different disciplinary variants of work on literary geography is in this way marked not only by the discipline-specific connotations of a single key term ('critical') able to function simultaneously as an unexplained marker for critical geography, critical social science, and literary criticism, it also allowed closely related ideas and approaches to literary geography to emerge independently and simultaneously within the different disciplines. One of the retrospective connections that can now be usefully made, for example, would pull together two of Marc Brosseau's papers (from 1994 and 1995) and two of Andrew Thacker's (from 1993 and 2005). These four papers make an interesting group, not least because Thacker was encouraging literary critics to make use of the work of geographers and spatial theorists, while Brosseau was encouraging geographers to make use of the close reading techniques of literary criticism. But the four papers are worth connecting for a more specific reason: anyone working on literary geography today who is interested in themes such as modernism, literature and the city, or the expression of spatial concepts in literary forms would clearly benefit from the work of both Thacker and Brosseau, even though the connections between the two need to be made retrospectively.

The 'idea of a critical literary geography' described by Thacker in his 2005 paper was actually an expansion of the idea he first explored in 'Imagist Travels in Modernist Space' (1993), where he notes that although little has been done in studies of literary modernism to

connect ‘the external social space of the city with the internal spatial form of the text,’ many modernist works ‘not only depict societies in which space is being ferociously reconstituted, they also register in their own textual spaces the effects of urban modernization’ (Thacker 1993: 227). Marc Brosseau was meanwhile exploring a similar line of thought, in his case as a development of his 1992 doctoral thesis ‘Des Romains-Géographes: Le Roman et la Connaissance Géographique des Lieux,’ published in book form in 1996. In his 1995 article ‘The City in Textual Form: *Manhattan Transfer’s* New York,’ Brosseau argues that the Dos Passos novel ‘represents, in its form as well as its content, the city in its socio-spatial complexity,’ and that it gives the reader ‘the opportunity to reflect on the interaction between a certain conception of the city and the formal aspects of the discourse used to represent it’ (Brosseau 1995: 93-4) As Brosseau explains in his subsequent review article, ‘Geography’s Literature’ (1994), *Manhattan Transfer* reveals ‘how the interpretation of the city is not (only) expressed transitively but also embedded in the materiality of the text itself’ (349).

Today, a decade after Thacker called ‘the growth of a genuinely interdisciplinary field that studies the interface between texts and spaces’ an ‘exciting prospect,’ such a disciplinary fusion in literary geography may finally be appearing in the pages of *Literary Geographies* and elsewhere. The future of the field will benefit not only from present and future collaborations but also from retrospective clarifications, juxtapositions and comparisons. A sensitivity to discipline-specific use of terms, on the one hand, will enable literary geographers to become more aware of what goes (and has gone) without saying, in their own work and the work of others, and as a result to become better attuned to the variety of criteria, aims and methods which often remain quietly embedded in different approaches to literary geography today. At the same time, a broad understanding of the various pasts meeting up in the field today will enable literary geographers to effect the retrospective construction of a unified historiography as a platform for future interdisciplinary work.

Works Cited

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