

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Sheila Hones (2014) *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let the Great World Spin*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. 215 pp. £65 (hardback), ISBN: 978113741312-3.

The best analogy for Sheila Hones's argument in *Literary Geographies* that I have found comes not from academia at all, but from the playwright David Hare, who said, 'A play is what happens in between the stage and the audience' (Richardson 2015: 13). This idea, that a novel is not a thing but rather a performance, arising out of the interaction between the text and the reader, has driven Hones's work in literary geography for the past few years. In *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let the Great World Spin*, Hones provides her fullest and most convincing argument to date for this way of understanding literature, geography and reading.

As the title suggests, this book is a detailed study of one novel - Colum McCann's (2009) *Let the Great World Spin*, which tells the story of French artist Philippe Petit's famous, daring wire walk between the twin towers of the newly built World Trade Center in New York, in 1974. At the same time, Hones's book is also a manifesto for a particular way of doing literary geography: a refreshingly un-textbook-like foray into the theories and methods of geographically-attuned reading and 'text-as-it-happens'.

Hones's thesis is made of two ideas. First, that a novel is not a thing, an object or even a collection of lines on the page. It is an event, a performance, a happening in space and time. Second, that the space of fiction is not ontologically distanced from the spaces of the actual world but rather, through the performance of the novel and the relations between reader, text and author which create that performance, literary spaces are constitutive of actual world spaces. In many ways, Hones's book feels like an answer to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) call for a chronotope of the reader.

At the centre of Hones's arguments about literature and geography is the idea of the novel not as a thing but as an event. As Hones writes: 'fiction can usefully be understood as a geographic event, a dynamic, unfolding collaboration happening in time and space' (2014: 32). This is a useful approach because all writing and all reading happens somewhere and sometime, and specific wheres and whens impact on the author's creation of a text and its interpretation by readers. Understanding the novel not as a thing — the text — but as an event which 'emerges out of highly complex spatial interrelations that connect writer, text and reader' (33) pushes the conversation beyond reader response theory and into literary geography. While most literary theorists accept that readers are essential to completing a text, Hones's idea of the novel as an event reveals the spatial and temporary contingency (and instability) of readerly interpretations. Events that happen in space and time are situated in particular ways — ways which are unlikely to be repeated — which helps us

to understand that each reading of a novel, each performance, is likely to be different from the one before, even for the same reader.

The realization that the novel-as-event relies on a multiplicity of voices and experiences to give it shape and meaning, helps Hones to address a long-standing question in emerging literary geography. That is: to what extent does creative and interpretative agency sit with the author, the text or the reader? This question, as Hones notes herself, was first raised by Marc Brosseau (1994), when he argued in the 1990s that literary geography should move away from the human geography-inspired focus on texts as repositories of their author's creativity, or perhaps as records of particular attitudes to landscape, towards paying greater attention to the text itself. This, within the context of literary theory's reader-response movement and book history's sociology of reading, positioned literary geography's gaze ever more on the reader as the agent of interpretation. Hones, by repositioning the novel as an event in space-time, seeks to pay attention to both the creative agency of the author and to the situatedness of the reader as interpretive agent.

Hones's focus on the event of the novel as 'a dynamic, unfolding collaboration in time and space' (32) also enables her to address a habit of literary thought that literary geographers have long found questionable: that time is the fundamental organising principle of fiction and space is an optional extra. As such she argues against the idea that 'spatial form is the 'artificial' result of the author's organisation of the narrative', requiring readerly work to create it, 'in contrast with the seemingly more literal temporal form of the novel'. Instead, 'the dominance of temporal over spatial organisation [in] narrative theory, disappears in a literary geography for which text happens in interaction' (9).

Another key idea in Hones's book is the idea that literary space is a real space. Guided by her principle that interdisciplinary literary geography has to take seriously the contributions of each discipline, Hones rejects the idea held by 'narratology and other fields' that 'a distinction should be made between literal and metaphorical uses of the concept' of space (9). Instead, guided by geographical thinkers including Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey and Edward Soja, Hones argues that space, inside and outside literature, is not a kind of container for action, as narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan has described it (cited in Hones 2014: 73), but rather the product of interrelations between people and their environments. Given that Hones's idea of the novel as event already emphasises the networks of interactions that produce it, it is not much of a leap for Hones to then argue that, 'the literary-geographical space in which fiction happens is a real space. It is real in the same way that Soja's simultaneously material and symbolic 'third space' is real' (9).

Indeed, one of the most innovative thoughts to emerge from Hones's focus on the novel as an event, a happening in space-time is that literary spaces are not ontologically distanced from non-literary spaces. As the product of interrelations between authors, publishers, readers and other readers, all of whom are spatially and temporally situated, literary spaces are constitutive of broader constructions of space. Hones makes this clear when, in Lefebvran fashion, she argues that literary spaces are at once fragmented and whole, being visible to the literary geographer in three divisions: first, the fictional space generated in the text; secondly, 'the "unending library" of intertextual literary space': the uncontained space(s) that 'opens out from' the text with every allusion made by the author and every reference inferred by the reader; thirdly, 'the sociospatial dimension of the

collaboration of author, editor, publisher, critic and reader' (8): the network of social relations which shapes the performance of the novel. With these three differentiated but interrelated kinds of observable literary space, Hones deftly demonstrates how fictional spaces can constitute the production of space in everyday life: the fictional space of the text, for instance, is interwoven with the sociospatial dimension of the novel's creation, due to the interrelation of author and editor which led to its creation. Yet, this space also grounds the uncontained intertextual spaces which open out of the text through reading.

The value of Hones's book is that its image of reading as a spatially and temporally dynamic practice provides an alternative to two ideas which have demonstrated long staying power. The first is the notion that books are repositories of attitudes or responses to places. Geocriticism, for instance, whose adherents include Bertrand Westphal, Robert Tally and Eric Prieto, focusses on the role of literature as a source of meaning-making in the human transformation of spaces into places. Prieto, for instance, argues that the primary role of fictional representations is to 'shape our attitudes about the actual environments through which we move' (Prieto 2013: 1). The suggestion of an ontological distance between the real world (as Westphal terms it) and the literary is at the heart of geocriticism's approach. Westphal, for instance, maintains that literature's power is as an incubator for alternative ways of living which are, in Westphal's memorable phrase, 'buried in the folds of the real' (Westphal 2007: 171). For geocritics, in disagreement with Hones's novel-as-event, the representative practices of literature means that it stands outside of actual world spaces, a thing already produced, waiting for its language to be translated back into ideas and attitudes, to be enacted in the world (in Hones's thinking, of course, the novel always is in the world).

The second idea that Hones challenges is of the individual, immobile, isolated reader. Familiar from Maurice Blanchot's (1982) notion of the spaces of literature, which include the secluded writing room and the imagined space inside the reader's head, this image of the immobile reader cut off from the space and time around him or her has long been a mainstay of literary criticism. Consider, for instance, the work of sociologists of literature, such as Adam Reed (2004). Reed's pen portraits of British members of the Henry Williamson Society focused on their individual acts of reading - at home, in bed, on the sofa, on the toilet, drawn out of the world around them into silent commune with the author and his text. In contrast, Hones's emphasis on the novel as a dynamic event happening in space and time helps to bridge the apparent gap between the silent, absorbed reader and the world around them. It gives us a way to think about reading as it really is: not as a break from the world, but as a fundamental part of everyday life.

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