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LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Literary Space Uncut

Marcus A. Doel

Swansea University

m.a.doel@swansea.ac.uk

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What is literary space, how is it defined, and how does it relate to the extra-textual world? (Call for Participation, Literary Geographies Conference, 20 March 2017)

Deconstruction is first and foremost a suspicion directed against just that kind of thinking—'what is…?' (Derrida 1989: 73)

The space of what I am calling the *test drive* is circumscribed by an endless erasure of what is. (Ronnell 2005: 10, original emphasis)

On 20 March 2017, in an otherwise genteel corner of England, literary space and the extra-textual world were once again *put to the question*: 'What is...?' As one of the Inquisitors I witnessed this edifying ordeal, but I shall not rehearse here what truths were drawn out under sustained extortion nor reveal the twisted instruments that were needed to extract them. If Franz Kafka's (1999a) harrowing apparatus for penal inscription were to spring to mind, then so much the better. Meanwhile, at this very moment in the disquisition, literary space and the extra-textual world are being put to the question once more: 'What is...?' This is why a scalpel of sorts (pen, pin, cursor or suchlike) is making another tortuous/torturous incision, excision, and decision, spilling its inky entrails all over the flimsy partition that screens this world from the next. This—right here, right now—is that space (McGuire 2014; Perec 2008). Space—cut. For space: cuttings, clippings. Such is the heap of disseevered corpses/corpuses that gather beneath the taxonomist's inky scaffold on the cutting-room floor: literary, extra-textual, worldly, other worldly, etc. We shall return to them all in due course. In the meantime, on the threshold of one of the partitions between this world and

the next, I imagine a billboard rising above a briar patch: '*Literary Geographies: The Home of Literary Space – Twinned with the Extra-Textual World. Population: Plus d'un.*'

As the taxidermic scalpel inscribes, describes, and above all cuts through the seriated tissue of signs a hook pointedly juts through one of the linear partitions between this world and the next to pose once again this thorny question: '*What is literary space, how is it defined, and how does it relate to the extra-textual world?*' This question was billed 'as the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion about current and future literary geography theory and practice' (Call for Participation, Literary Geographies Conference). How in deed and in fact should one *stake out*, *pin/pen down*, and *cut up* so-called 'literary space' and the 'extra-textual world'? How should they be clipped and sliced, skewered and basted, bitten and consumed? How should one perform a taxonomy and taxidermy of a space that is always already perforated and lacerated through and through? Several things struck me at once upon being snagged by this harrowing question, which made me hesitate whilst reaching for my trusty surveying instruments, Inquisitorial equipment, and writing accoutrements, but before drawing on them I should perhaps mention my interest in an exemplary cutting machine: the guillotine, from its improbable invention in 1792 as a humane, egalitarian, and enlightened beheading device—'Holy Guillotine,' 'Saint Guillotine,' 'Sword of Liberty,' 'National Razor'—to its final obsolescence in the late twentieth century. Thereafter, slicing up subjects and skewering them with identities has been a rather different (although no less bloody) affair, but without the surgical precision, so to speak, of Dr Guillotin's eponymous machine.

Given my long-standing affection for structural Marxism, dialectical materialism, deconstruction, schizoanalysis, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and similar 'postisms, parasitisms, and other small seismisms,' as Jacques Derrida (1990) sarcastically dubbed them, my theoretical practice has always been drawn towards the cut up, the dissevered, the dismembered, and the morcellated, as well as the fragmented, the dispersed, the pulverized, and the splayed out, not to mention the dialectically slashed (/), the semiotically barred (—), the deconstructively barbed (*X*), and the differentially unhinged (– –) (e.g. Doel 1999, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Once attuned to the dissonance of these various forms of laceration, you may begin to appreciate why I treat space and spacing as slicing and splicing. There is nothing sedentary and genteel about space and spacing. Their gape holds together and sets apart. They splay open and 'splace' out. They slit, split, and crack open (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). For space: read its constitutive and disadjusted scission (*différance*) as a labyrinthine, supplementary *And* double-crossed by a labyrinthine, subtractive *But* (Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Derrida 1982). Imagine William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1986) spliced with Franz Kafka's *The Burrow* (1999b), or Jorge Luis Borges' *Garden of Forking Paths* (2000) spliced with Robert Coover's *Playing House* (2005). Space—crazed. Crazy spacing—a 'chaosmos' (Guattari 1995, 2013). Accordingly, whilst space and spacing have often been regarded as dull and dreary affairs—'Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile,' whereas 'Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic,' as Michel Foucault (1980: 70) famously put it—, space and spacing have never seemed humdrum to me. A layout, an arrangement, a spread, a backdrop, an expanse, an interval, a relation, a

void, a bare surface, an empty volume, etc. are all violent accomplishments of incision and excision. Writing and reading—which I am tempted to render as 'inscription' and 'description,' were it not for the fact that such a distinction is not only reversible, but ultimately indiscernible (Blanchot 1995)—take place on a surface or within a volume that is always already punctuated, perforated, and lacerated through and through. The stuttering and stammering of *And … And … And … But … But … But …* reverberate through every joint of the text, dislocating each and every one of its forms of articulation and expression. Space and spacing tremor. Geography—'earth writing'—quakes. Space—quakes and bursts.

Having become perhaps unduly attuned to the brutality of reading, writing, and other forms of inscription, description, articulation, expression, incision, and excision, I was once rather forcibly struck by Derrida's (1986: 204) recourse to a 'dredging machine' as a 'good metaphor' to convey the 'operation' at work in his book devoted to Hegel and Jean Genet: *Glas* (Derrida 1986). 'From the dissimulated, small, closed, glassed-in cabin of a crane, I manipulate some levers and, from afar, ... I plunge a mouth of steel in the water. And I scrape [*racle*] the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift up in order to set them down on the ground while the water quickly falls back from the mouth' (204). Such an operation is well suited to the 'swamp of signs' between this crazed world and the next (Doel 2018). Reference and sense are dredged up from an unfathomable context that is destined to overwhelm it, not least because 'we can call "context" the entire "real-history-of-the-world," if you like' (Derrida 1988: 136). 'There is nothing outside the text' [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (Derrida 1976: 158) means there is nothing outside context. No text without a spillage of context and a dispersal of reference and sense. Dredged out of context, citations and quotations, for example, leak in all directions. But what always fascinated me most about Derrida's dredging operations was the indecision of its incisions and excisions—its generation and promulgation of undecidability, iterability, and dissemination. All of the seemingly settled, securely staked out, and firmly pinned/penned down cut-outs, cut-ups, and partitions of yesteryear were made to slide about, drift around, and tremble afresh, as if space itself—the cut, the gape, the opening, the burst—and the various slicing, splicing, splacing, splaying, and dredging machines were wavering, flickering, and trembling in eternal suspense: 'Dissemination endlessly opens up a *snag* in writing that can no longer be mended, a spot where neither meaning, however plural, nor *any form of presence* can pin/pen down [*agrapher*] the trace' (Derrida 1981: 26, original emphasis). Hereinafter, those put to the question—'what is...?'—are destined to be given over to a Kafkaesque form of indefinite postponement.

'What is literary space, how is it defined, and how does it relate to the extra-textual world?' That was the clipping with which we began, and, whilst cast adrift with little more than a few dredgers, splicers, scalpels, nibs, and incisors to hand, I couldn't help but recall Jean-François Lyotard's (1989: 214) suggestion that 'Landscapes could be classified in terms of how easily they can be nibbled, BITTEN.' Whose teeth, I wonder, will have had the pleasure of tearing into literary space and the extra-textual world; into this world and the next? And what of the dismembered carcasses, corpses, and corpuses from which these juicy morsels were torn off? Are the morsels digestible? Are the carcasses, corpses, and

corpuses biodegradable? Will their stench linger once our groundwork, earthworks, and landscaping are done and dusted? Surely you didn't imagine that literary space would smell like a rose garden: an abattoir more like! Meatpacking and 'sense-packing' have much in common, from the disassembly line to the rendering plant. Space—splayed out, disassembled, and rendered. The 'swamp of signs' oozes reference and sense.

Now, what struck me most forcefully about posing the question concerning literary space as a '*starting point*' is that it thereby calls for a movement (trajectory, itinerary, journey, peregrination, etc.) rather than an answer. The question '*what* is literary space?' is always already overtaken by the question '*where* is literary space?' Such a displacement, 'from the off,' is itself an effect of spacing and distancing—and also of temporalization, of relative speeds and slownesses. The '*what*' and the '*is*' in the phrase 'what is literary space' are swept up and away by the spatial and temporal play of a tremulous relativity and a crazed iterability. Hereinafter, reread '*what is*' as *And … And … And … But … But … But …* Neither space nor spacing will ever have been staked out and pinned/penned down, least of all by a taxonomic or taxidermic operation. Space—cut—slips away. No matter how rigidly and tightly the partitions and the seams are drawn, space and spacing will have spilt out and leaked away.

Once the question 'what is literary space, how is it defined, and how does it relate to the extra-textual world?' has been *set in motion* as a starting point, then the pliable effect of spacing and distancing is itself redoubled—twice over. For the '*where*' of literary space qua starting point is self-evidently not '*here.*' The call of the question is a double summons. First, we are summoned to join a space hunt. We are summoned to track down and ferret out literary space and the extra-textual world, if we can. A pack of scent hounds and a hound master are no doubt on hand. Even so, I wager that our prey will prove elusive. Second, we are summoned to *come here* (to the starting point) in order to *go there* (the interim destination: literary space) so as to *get there* (the final destination: the extra-textual world). With these commands—*Come here. Go there*—space bares its teeth and lays down the law (Lefebvre 1991). I cannot help but recall Louis Althusser's (1971) pithy encapsulation of the interpellation of the subject—*Hey, you there!*—and a snippet of the closing dialogue in Robert Coover's *A Night At the Movies. Or, You Must Remember This* (1989):

> "We gotta get back into the goddamn world somehow. If we don't, we'll regret it.
> Maybe not today—"
> "What? We'll forget it?"
> "No, I said—"
> "What?"
> "Never mind." (Coover 1989: 186)

The second thing that struck me was the distancing of 'literary space' from the 'extra-textual world.' Like Ferdinand de Saussure's (1959) depiction of language as the conjoining of two distinct planes—the 'floating realm' of thought and the 'plastic substance' of sound—, even if 'literary space' and the 'extra-textual world' turn out to be coterminous and isomorphic

they will forever remain alienated and estranged from one another. Conceived in these terms, the relation between the one and the other will always be characterized by misrecognition and ex-communication. I am reminded of an exchange in Robert Coover's *Ghost Town* (1998):

> As he watched, the stars began to slide about, to realign themselves upon the black canvas of the sky as though to spell out some message for him. … Whut do they say, oletimer? he asked. Whut do the stars say? … After a long silent time, the Indian said: They say the universe is mute. Only men speak. Though there is nothing to say. (Coover 1998: 83)

The final thing that struck me was that the attempt to cut out, cut off, and co-relate literary space and the extra-textual world will surely have been in vain. At this very moment in the text, where space itself—agape—vacillates with chattering teeth, I am reminded of an episode in Hideo Furukawa's *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale That Begins With Fukushima* (2011), in which an ostensibly fictional character—Inuzuka Gyūichirō, from Furukawa's 2008 novel *Seikazoku* (*The Holy Family*)—appears in our world, on *this side* of the flimsy partition between this world and the next. This uncanny incident occurs during Furukawa's road trip with three companions (dubbed Young S, Ms. S, and Y) to the Hamadōri section of Fukushima Prefecture in the wake of the devastating Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011, and the nuclear disaster unleashed by the stricken Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

> Young S was already in the driver's seat with his hands on the wheel. Ms. S was in the passenger seat punching an address into the car navigation screen. Y was in the backseat. And there, tightly squeezed into that space where one expects the armrest, I saw him. …
>
> It was him.
>
> There is the command: "Write." OK. I will write this. I am writing: Inuzuka Gyūichirō was there. A fifth passenger. The fifth person in our party. "Write": The oldest brother of *The Holy Family*, the one with "dog" in the family name and "cow" in the given name, was in the car with us. But if I write *that*, I have got fiction, and this essay turns into a novel. But I have my integrity to preserve in this; there has not been a single fabrication in what I have written thus far. …
>
> "Write!" It was definitely him.
>
> "I have seen him." There, I put it in writing. He is there, in the back seat of the rental car, the fifth in our party. Inuzuka Gyūichirō, there in the car with us. This is how I

start writing a novel. For example, with the sound of a voice saying. "Go there." And
then, "Come here." (Furukawa 2011: 66-8, original emphasis)

At this very moment in the disquisition, all of our interloping/interpolating inscriptions and
incisions take flight *between* this world and the next, *between* literary space and the extra-
textual world, *between* the splices and the cuts, *between* the gaping and the quaking, *between* the
crazy paving and the signifying ooze: *And … And … And … But … But … But …*
Meanwhile, over in the Real, so-called, the same spatial vacillation with chattering teeth had
already ravaged Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear
Power Plant long before its ravaging by the tsunami. For not only were almost all of the
latter's catastrophic twists and turns regarded as 'impossible' on this side of the screen—and
yet the impossible happened: again and again and again (Lochbaum et al. 2014)—, but also
ostensibly fictional characters and mirror people were living and acting amongst us:
'TEPCO, like Japan's other nuclear utilities, erected elaborate visitor centers that resembled
theme parks, filled with animated characters extolling the wonders of nuclear power.
TEPCO's mascot, Genshi-chan, or "Lil' Atom," promoted the company to the younger set'
(107).
      'Write!' It was definitely him: Inuzuka Gyūichirō in the garb of Genshi-chan, bent
over double, gnawing away at the ink-stained partitions separating the stench of this crazed
world from the next. Hereinafter, those who would wish to pin/pen down literary space and
the extra-textual world are in for a shock. Space ineluctably slips out of place. It puts
everything out of joint and sets everything in motion. Its in-scription is a de-scription. Here
as elsewhere, spacing splays out. Space *takes* place. It sweeps or spirits place away. Space—
cut—unfolds. Space—levelled—falls. But it does not so much fall short as fall over. For
rather than falling short of the world, literary space spills over into the Real world, so called,
and vice versa. Between slippage and spillage, between this world and the next, space—
always agape—foams at the mouth, like a rabid dog lured by the stench of the disassembly,
rendering, and packing of reference and sense.
      Since 'we never know, and never have known, how to *cut up* a subject' (Derrida 1995:
285, original emphasis), what if we were to leave 'literary space' and the 'extra-textual world'
uncut? What if we were to leave them spliced together, halved together, and splayed out
together, bleeding sense, meaning, and reference into and onto one another? What if they
were to be spared the question: 'what is...?' For space, then: 'a hinge-logic, a hinge-style'
(Lyotard 1990: 123). *And–But.* Leave every space uncut—all the better for it to be unfolded
and refolded. 'One does indeed find folds everywhere' (Deleuze 1995: 156). When all is said
and done, literary space is neither a cut-out nor a stitch-up, but rather an unfolding and
refolding of the laminated bodies cast adrift in the swamp of signs. Here as elsewhere, space
is a double (*plus d'un*) articulation: splayed and splaced (Doel and Clarke 2018).
      Now then, where were we, at that very moment in the disquisition when the literary
machines were still drowning out the howling and rabid dogs in the field adjacent to the
abattoirs of this crazed world and the next? Was that the question? Was that put to the

question? Never mind. Just write. Chop. Chop. Ready or not—'Let us space' (Derrida 1986: 75).

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