

Representation and Production of the *genius loci* in Literature

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This paper focuses on the problems that lie at the intersection of cultural geography, literary studies, and ecocriticism. It is concerned with the relationship between human creativity and the physical world that we all live in and pass through. Space is not merely a physical notion, but also largely a cultural construct. This double movement of representing and creating, or constructing, a specific place is a continuous process in which the arts and literature play an important role.

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Since Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" and his introduction of the concept of heterotopia, and since Soja's *Thirdspace* and his conceptualization of the Thirdspace (see Foucault and Soja, respectively), one cannot speak about any phenomena in the human world anymore without taking into consideration a specific understanding of the rather vast and vague notion of space. The main effects of spatiality, a concept that recently received recognition in the form of a book by Robert T. Tally (see Tally), have been examined by cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, human geography, cultural geography, and ecocriticism, but interest in the spatial turn has also been reflected by the arts, especially literature. The implications of the spatial turn in literature could be registered at different levels. In this paper, I examine only some of them.

In the internal world of a literary work, spatial elements can be traced in the narrative strategies of simultaneity, juxtaposition, *mise en abyme*, *trompe l'oeil*, and so on, as well as in common spatial metaphors such as the labyrinth, the carpet, the garden, the web, the spiral, and the invisible city. The travelogue as a genre is also incorporated into this stream of understanding and absolving the enigma of space. Interdisciplinary works on the cultural palimpsest of specific regions, seas, or rivers, such as Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, Neal Ascherson's *Black Sea*, Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape Breviary*, or Claudio Magris' *Danube*, are clear signs of the fact that human curiosity is strongly geographically oriented. The geopoetics of Kenneth White, his nomadic spirit, and his influ-

ence on a wider circle of writers (e.g., Vladislav Bajac and his *Geopoetika* press in Serbia), and, say, a wide spectrum of poetics of exile worldwide also speak of the emphasized interest in the symbolic, ideological, and political meanings of space. Doubt as to the Euclidian concept of space grows enormously with the new horizons of virtual reality and cyberspace.

The euphoria of visualizing, measuring, and conquering space, or spaces, of their mapping and interpreting, has had an impact on literary studies as well. The most significant examples of interpreting the relations between real and imaginative spaces in literary works are the projects of geocriticism and geohistory (for some key studies, see Tally, Westphal, Moretti, and Piatti).

My own contribution to the ongoing debate on the spatial turn in the humanities focuses on the problems that lie at the intersection of cultural geography, literary studies, and ecocriticism. It is concerned with the relationship between human imagination and the physical world that we all live in and pass through. If physical and mental spaces work simultaneously, as Soja's concept of "thirdspace" implies, then space is not just a geographical notion, but largely also a cultural construct; that is, "natu-*reculture*." This circular movement of representing and at the same time creating, or producing, a specific place is a continuous practice in which the arts and literature play an important role.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (see Bachelard) has shown how meaningful and symbolic the spatial categories that are encountered in private, intimate space (such as houses, corners, cellars, or roofs) can be for literary creation. Following the same line of thought, the Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has explained that people are emotionally connected to particular geographic spots in the wider world as well as places or localities towards which they develop relationships of topophilia or topophobia. In this way, those spots are turned from geographical spots to places to which meaning is attached with certain values. Tuan draws a very precise distinction between space and place: "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan 3). The distinction between space and place is one of the crucial premises in spatial preoccupations in the humanities, in which spatiality is often approached from the perspective of oppositions between the global and local, the general and the particular, and the mutual and the personalized.

Place is a portion of space with its own identity, its special local color, smell, sound, climate, legends, and history. The uniqueness of place is conceptualized from the early stages of human history through, say, the mythology of the ghost-guardians of particular places popular in Asian cultures, or the *genius loci* in Roman tradition. *Genius loci* and/or *spiritus loci*

are Latin expressions used to show that places have their particular destiny, personality, soul, and eroticism. The encounter with the *genius loci*, or the sense of place, is an individual and subjective experience and a matter of relation, dialog, and interaction between man and the environment.

The sense of place is an inspiration for many artistic practices. The most common manifestation of its creative representation is landscape. According to the Landscape Convention, which took place in Florence on 20 October 2000, landscape is “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.” This is the place seen and remembered through the eyes of writers, painters, and photographers, and subsequently expressed in their artistic works. It is the content of a human gaze from a given standpoint during a particular moment of time. In other words, it is a visual and very subjective appropriation of land and space. The controversies, however, of landscaping are perhaps best expressed in poetry. The Icelandic poet Johann Hjalmarrsson has written a poem titled *On Landscape*, which reads:

On Landscape (Johann Hjalmarrsson; trans. Sigurður A. Magnússon; emphasis added)¹

We were given this landscape
and as we become part of it
it no longer exists.
We become free:
glittering and free thought
outside every landscape.
*Landscape is not the land,
but an idea of a land
waiting to be settled
by an alien dream.*
The land sleeps in a poem about a bird
flying above river and shrubs
rejoicing at the wind
that lifts it higher and higher.

The representation of nature and of the *genius loci* in literature is always a problematic issue. This is so mainly because of the non-mimetic elements in literature, and because of a certain fundamental doubt in poetry’s possibility to refer to the specific qualities of place. In poetry, for example, landscaping is much more a general topos of nature-land-Earth (to refer to the literary criticism of Curtius) than a representation of a specific geographic entity. This can explain the growing popularity of haiku worldwide. Haiku is a mode for landscaping poetry, but it can be applied

to many different geographic areas, not only for the Japanese one. Even when a poem is directly referring to a “soul” of a particular place (a village in the poem of the Romanian poet Lucian Blaga, for example), it refers to the sense of any village, to the “soul” of village life in general; therefore, one cannot recognize its real geographic coordinates.

The Soul of the Village (Lucian Blaga)

Child, rest your hands on my knees.
I believe eternity was born in a village.
Here, all thought has slowed down,
And your heart throbs more slowly,
As if it didn't beat in your chest,
But deep under the ground, somewhere.
Here is where your thirst for redemption is cured
And if your feet have bled,
You sit on a mound of clay.
Look, it's evening.
The soul of the village flutters above us,
Like a bashful fragrance of freshly cut grass,
Like smoke tumbling down from thatched roofs,
Like kids playing on tall tombs.

The representation of place in poetry is based on a cognitive, affective, and ethical attachment, which means that the poem is far more concerned with the poet's inner world than it is with the world as a whole. It is more perception than representation, more affectation than description. Some landscapes in poetry can be read as a joy of being, as a celebration of life.

Landscapes (Gaia Gallotta; trans. Gaia Gallotta)

Intimate perceptions of my country,
Sodden with history and boundless been,
Of ancient trees, green soporiferous tracts,
Seas sweet-smelling of battles or handsome sunsets,
Unlimited hills, rose coloured mountains,
Squares of duchy, bundled up villages,
Dreams of a past still living in the present,
Descriptions of melancholy, anger, chaos,
Of metropolitan centres,
Descriptions of enchanting picturesque splattered with aesthetical order or art,
Landscape, flash back passages, memories,
Reflected in the astonished eyes of who
Lives, loves or simply looks at them.

Landscapes in poetry are not localized (even when they are marked by a particular toponym), and the representation of the *genius loci* in them is placed in question. *Locus amoenus* and *locus horridus*, the literary phenomena from classical poetry (best known from the works of Virgil and Ovid), are the most vivid example of the idealistic, affective, and non-mimetic character of the landscape ekphrasis in poetry. Those terms are not connected with beauty or ugliness; rather, they denote places such as “pleasant” or “fearful”; they focus on the human affective response to nature, not on nature itself. In this context, Adorno’s view on the representation of natural beauty is very provocative. Adorno argues that natural beauty is unrepresentable: “[N]ature, as something beautiful, cannot be copied [*abbilden*]. For natural beauty as something that appears is itself an image [*Bild*]. Its portrayal [*Abbildung*] is a tautology” (Adorno 105). Can such a statement automatically refer to the *genius loci* as well? Not only nature, but also the cityscape, much discussed after Benjamin’s work on *flannery*, is irreducible to representation; it is an artistic transformation of the sense of place. All the dwelling through the urban sites is a matter not of geography, but of literature and the arts.

The sense of place is much more a cultural (social, political, and ideological) phenomenon than a natural (urban or rural) one. This is perhaps why it is less present in poetry (where landscaping reigns dominant) than in prose genres such as novels, stories, essays, and especially in travelogues. The spatial turn in literature itself is emphasized by the growing popularity of these literary genres, which are often devoted to local identities. For example, one prestigious literary award, the Ondaatje Prize, is defined as an annual literary award given by the Royal Society of Literature in the United Kingdom for a work of fiction, non-fiction, or poetry that evokes the “spirit of a place.”

Therefore, if one speaks of the literary attitude toward the sense of a place, evocation seems a more suitable notion than mimetic representation. *Genii loci* are something that cannot be represented in literature mimetically, but merely evoked subjectively—but how do literary works evoke “the spirit of a place”? They tell stories that are connected with a local culture at any level: they use landmarks and historical events, involve the biographies of locals, describe the sensations, and so on. However, is that enough for readers to feel as though they have experienced the place themselves? Is this setting, or atmosphere of the local, so important for the quality of the literary text? One must admit that there is a certain enjoyment in discovering a place through a literary work, but this is a special imaginative experience that at the same time is very different from real traveling as well as from travels in virtual reality.

Rural or urban, landscape or cityscape, artistic transmissions of geographical locations have their own limitations and principles that are defined by their particular literary provenience. On the other hand, literature can provide a strong impetus for producing a sense of or for a place. Every literary work that evokes a real, geographical place becomes involved in the network of signs, legends, stories, qualities, and values constantly attached to that place. Those segments of literary works that provide geographic matrices enable connections between the imaginative world and the real one. The sense of place is shaped mainly by its historical palimpsest, but also by the literary and artistic interpretations of it.

In this context, one can understand the astonishment of the physicist Niels Bohr, when, during his visit to Kronberg Castle in Denmark, he posed a rhetorical question to his companion: "Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here?" Literary works influence the construction of a unique character of a place; they attach a special "aura" to it with different connotations and meanings. It is interesting that literary allusions and references to geographic places, landscapes, and cityscapes are not just the privilege of readers and literary fans; they become common cultural heritage, and are even commercialized; for example, in tourism. Literary tours, walks through the cities, visits to houses and other sites that have been used as settings for popular novels, and biographical spots of famous writers have been proliferating, rendering these places so many mixtures of real and literary experiences. Hence, relations between geography and literature become increasingly intense because, as soon as a place is invoked in literature, it potentially gains popularity and becomes involved in new personal and literary stories.

On the contrary, some places remain anonymous or mute, without stories, even without native stories. In order to enter art and particularly literature, geographical spots have to become inhabited by, or otherwise familiar to, writers. Certainly, there are nuances in their natural expressiveness (they can be beautiful, "sublime" in a Kantian way, fearful, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on). Finally, the more geospaces are used as literary settings, the more they become more involved in the literary world. Perhaps these are some of the possible answers to the question posed by Barbara Piatti and Lorenz Hurni in the context of their project on the atlas of European literature: "Why are some landscapes overly covered by literature while others remain blank spots?" (Piatti and Hurni).

The constructed identity of place in literature turns back in the physical world and writes itself into the local diversity of the world. This justifies the concept of place as something continuously changeable, relative, and unstable, as Doreen Massey says: "[P]laces ... are processes"; they "do not

have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts.” Massey calls for such a perception and interpretation of place that considers all the dynamism of relations, experiences, and understandings in their intersection. In the age of what David Harvey calls “time-space compression,” she says: “What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place” (Massey 29).

The encounter between literature and geography shows its usefulness in the building of such a “global sense of place,” which respects and enriches the diversity and uniqueness of the *genius loci* of different spots on the globe seen as nexuses in complex webs, and at the same time develops a common positive attitude toward the only compact home of mankind in space, planet Earth. The question “Where is literature set?”—which is the more or less explicit starting point of most projects on literary geography—seems to necessarily remain without a definite answer, but it certainly makes sense to pose it in the context of cultural diversity and richness of identities. Research on literary settings/zones, and particular places introduced in literary works, facilitates understanding the impact of human creation on the writing and rewriting of the identities of places. Moreover, it helps decrease the number of physical spots on the planet that are without identity; that is, spots that Mark Augé conceptualizes as non-places (see Augé) and that are deprived of a relation to the land and a positive attitude to the environment. The *genius loci*, constructed partly by literature, stimulates affection for the planet and thus helps preserve the rich sense of the Earth’s local diversity.

NOTE

¹ All of the poems are cited from a special issue of *Naturopa* devoted to *Landscape through Literature* (see *Landscape*).

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Reprezentacija in produkcija *genius loci* v literaturi

Ključne besede: kulturna geografija / prostor / literarna pokrajina / *genius loci*

Kraj je edinstvena lokalna točka splošnega prostora. Krajina je kraj, kakor ga vidijo in se ga spominjajo pisci, slikarji, fotografi in kakor je izražen v njihovih umetninah. Je torej vsebina človeškega pogleda z določenega gledišča v določenem času oziroma vizualna in nezvedljivo subjektivna apropiacija pokrajine in prostora. Krajina je izraz partikularnih *genius loci*, proizvod partikularnega izkustva občutenja kraja. V kulturnih študijih krajina dobiva tudi številne druge ravni pomena po zaslugi problematizacije vizualne, kulturne, ideološke in politične sfere. Tudi predstava o povezavi med identiteto in lokalno krajino dobiva vse več zagovornikov ter postaja teoretsko orodje za razumevanje mentalitet, etnij in nacij. Naj bodo ruralne ali urbane, imajo umetniške reprezentacije geografskih lokacij svoje omejitve, načela in posebnosti. Kot vrsta fikcije je literarna krajina vselej subjektivna in dovzetna za imaginacijo. Je eno najučinkovitejših sredstev ustvarjanja posebne atmosfere literarne umetnine in pogosto zrcali psiho literarnih likov. Zakaj je vsak kraj edinstven in ima svoj kulturni značaj? Od kod posebni značaj kraja? Je dejansko povezan z identiteto in je res tako pomemben za ustvarjalno energijo avtorjev?

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