

## **Imaginative Regions**

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### **Abstract**

This essay introduces how literature works as a sociocultural institution inducing people to imagine and comprehend both abstract and lived spaces as certain forms of regional systems. Understanding regions as imaginative is approached here from two perspectives. Firstly, it considers how the human imagination generates a regional form as an outcome of social processes connected with power and otherness, and secondly, it looks at how regional narratives, as descriptions of local cultures, lifestyle and habits, blur the conventional (e.g. administrative) ways of structuring space as a specific kind of region system. In addition the chapter briefly exemplifies how literature is used, at the local scale, as a resource for region-building processes in which local heritage and culture are maintained.

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### **Introduction**

To distinguish fact from fiction was for a long time the essential motive for geographers interested in literature. Indeed, literature, as a global institution, contains vast amounts of information on the environment and material surroundings within which we live. However, measuring the value of studied material in terms of its factual accuracy was a twisted viewpoint from its very beginnings, and in contemporary literary geography the focus has been more directed at the narrative structures of textual worlds and their inter-relations with the world outside the covers of the book.

To comprehend the world as a multi-dimensional system of regions, demands imagination. The concept of 'imaginative geography', first used by Edward Said in 1978,<sup>1</sup> has been widely recognized by human geographers.<sup>2</sup> Imagination does not refer to fictitiousness, to something which in material terms is non-existent, but instead to an idea that humans are simply unable to understand spatial layers and their connections to society and the environment without imagination. Imagination is not a counterpart to facts, but 'fact' together with 'fiction' are abstractions between which the human imagination slides and which allow things to become meaningful. For that matter, regions, as spatial units, are more or

less abstractions that cannot be directly observed through senses, and which thus require imagination in order to exist. By that means, imagination is a resource with which social, political and cultural processes are mobilized and maintained (see Said 1989). This essay discusses how regions and regionality were approached by the literary geographers of 1960s, how imagining regions is ultimately a matter of someone's power to imagine something on behalf of someone else, how this has been utilized by critical literary geographers, and finally how regions and narrativity are connected.

## **Regional literature**

*“The regional novels differ greatly in scope and in treatment, but all, or almost all, have one thing in common. The theme underlying the delineation of their characters is man and his work on the land; and the story unfolds through the medium of the everyday life of a locality.”*<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand what the imaginative nature of regions means in practice, it is enlightening to first take a look on how regions were approached in the literary geography of 1960s. For the regional geographers of the 1960s regions were ‘real’, concrete, mappable constituents in our empirical reality. In the same way that in contemporary regional geography regions are commonly approached as administrative units, as parts of wider societal (or sociospatial) machinery, in the regional geography of 1960s regions were conceived as ‘individuals’, each having their own ‘personalities’ and humanlike characteristics. Literary authors were considered to have special skills in identifying these characteristics, as masters who could produce a synthesis of a region as an individual through their art.<sup>4</sup> With skillful use of literary expressions novelists were capable of identifying and describing the personalities of regions for those who had never even visited the place/environment,<sup>5</sup> while the responsibility of regional geographers was to learn from these artists more cultivated methods of describing regions.<sup>6</sup> The demand for geographers to learn from art was for example claimed by Barry N. Floyd, who insisted geographers, in terms of style, structure, and grammar, to be more ‘literary’.<sup>7</sup>

It would be misleading to argue that the regionalist approach to literature was a trend in the 1960s only. In fact, regionalist literary geography was already present for example in H.C Darby's classic text ‘The Regional Geography of Thomas Hardy's Wessex’, from 1948, one of the best (early) examples of how fictive descriptions were interpreted by comparing their content to the ‘real’ world, an attempt to find facts from fiction. Wessex is, according to Hardy, a partly real, partly imagined (that is ‘fictional’) region, which derived its name from English history.<sup>8</sup> Identifying cartographic accuracy from fiction was essential: Darby claims, “although this church, or that farm, or some particular architectural feature

cannot be identified with certainty, the main features of the landscape, the hills and vales and downs and heaths, are faithfully produced”.<sup>9</sup> In order to be of any interest for geographical study of literature, ‘faithful producing’ was a necessity for studied material, for ‘topographical novels’, as Darby himself named them.

It was characteristic of geographical studies of literature in the 1960s that novelists were considered unique in possessing special skills in construction of regions and regional identities – although in the 1960s regions were of course not approached as sociocultural constructions. Paterson, for example, writing about Sir Walter Scott, defines three criteria according to which authors can be identified as regional novelists, all (implicitly) underlining the unique role of the author in the process of constructing regions and regionality: Firstly, Paterson states “although his work was not so localised as that of Hardy or Webb, he has been credited by many admirers with the self-same ability as the later regional novelists—the ability to add, by his descriptions, what has been called ‘a new dimension, in the imagination of the observer, to the landscape itself...’”<sup>10</sup> Secondly, Paterson continues, “Scott was a writer who paid great attention to the details of his scenery, even when it served only as the simplest background to his story”, and thirdly “Scott deserves a place among the regional novelists because, for thousands of people during his lifetime and after his death, it was his writing which provided their introduction to the Scottish landscape”.<sup>11</sup> Other issue exemplified by Paterson’s note is how the key spatial connection between literature and region here is the concept of landscape. As Hones has argued, the ‘visual landscape approach’ still dominates the popular understanding of how literature is approached by geographers, displacing several other optional perspectives on spatiality.<sup>12</sup> As a curiosity, it is interesting that in Swedish the concept of ‘landskap’ refers both to physical surroundings and to administrative provinces. By that way novelists in Sweden have connected the aspects of ‘landskap’ as scenery and as inhabited province, and have in this way had an important role in the creation of national identity narratives.<sup>13</sup>

Although regionalism, according to Karjalainen and Paasi, can be perceived as an artistic counterpart to the politically charged manners of approaching regionality, Karjalainen and Paasi also emphasize how regionalism must be understood “as one expression of a political principle that aims at certain purposes and the creation of a collective consciousness”.<sup>14</sup> As regional consciousness is thoroughly conditioned by social circumstances,<sup>15</sup> regional literature functions as an active participant in the processes where regional identities are socially constructed and mediated into people’s consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Regionalist literature conditions the ways how regions are socially remembered, shared and narrated.<sup>17</sup>

## Imaginative geography and Orientalism

The spatial nature of the human imagination, as well as the imaginative nature of space, is embedded in multiple ways in socially and politically charged processes. At this point I take a look back to Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism* (1978), in which it is illustrated how literature, as a socio-cultural institution, functions as a powerful political tool in the processes of writing our histories. Said's definition of the term 'Orientalism' starts out from the interesting observation of Giovanni Battista Vico that human society must always make its own history. Said translates this into the language of geography and points out how all geographical and cultural entities are also man-made. Said's main argument concerns how the Orient, as an imaginative region, exists only by courtesy of the Western power to imagine the history of Eastern world in order to fulfil its own imperialist needs.

From a geographical point of view Said's work has been particularly interesting since his main argument relies on the idea that in geographical terms no such spatial entity as 'The Orient' would exist unless it had been imagined/constructed by Western man as a colonialist and imperialist endeavour. In Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) this turns into a question of how different cultural practices are maintained artificially and how regions come to have cultural and social features attached, which should not have anything to do with them.<sup>18</sup> Said underlines the arbitrary nature of Orientalism: "this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary".<sup>19</sup> Orientalism is thus a process in which fictiveness, reality, artificiality and the representativeness of space interconnect through the (artistic/political/scientific/...) creativeness of the human mind.

According to Mohnike 'imaginative geography' is for Said a concept which unites the idea of a poetics and a politics of space.<sup>20</sup> From the viewpoint of literary geography, Said's approach is particularly interesting since he considers literature as one of the key practices through which the imaginative geography of Orientalism has been constructed. Said stresses how famous nineteenth century novelists such as Gustave Flaubert, Gérard de Nerval and Walter Scott, for example, were often severely constrained in giving descriptions of the Orient. In fact, their cultural way of understanding what the Orient was actually all about was, according to Said, politically determined. Although Said emphasized the wider institutional role of literature, at the same time he also underscored how even a single book can make a difference: "I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism."<sup>21</sup>

Orient-like imaginative regions can be found basically everywhere. In a similar manner 'the North' can be approached as an imaginative region, a spatial abstraction, which has attained its regional essence, not through institutionally legitimized shapes and boundaries, but rather as a hazy imaginative discourse taking its spatial form 'somewhere out there'. And also, in a similar manner literature has played an elementary role in the process of imaginative conceptions based on myths and stereotypes becoming legitimized and naturalized.<sup>22</sup> Orient-like imaginative regions can be found basically everywhere since, as mentioned, without imagination understanding the layers of spatiality would be highly difficult. This is often exemplified through another classic argument concerning the power of imagination from Ben Anderson, the argument that the existence of the state depends on a shared social imagination and that although the members of a nation will never know most of their fellow-members, they still have a shared sense of belonging to the same (spatial) community.<sup>23</sup> In recent postcolonial readings of literature it has also been emphasized how the world can be considered 'fictionable', open to multiple interpretations and perspectives.<sup>24</sup>

### **On being critical**

As Paasi has emphasized, all regions find their identities by making distinctions from other regions, but if this process means distinguishing 'supreme' from 'inferior' with strict categorical distinctions, it turns into a question about the exercise of social, cultural and political power.<sup>25</sup> As Said emphasized, literature has played huge role in the process of how world history has been written and its (imaginative) maps drawn, which has also meant that literature has worked as an institution through which the spaces of otherness have been established and maintained. On the other hand, literature can also be used as 'a tool' to arouse people's regional self-consciousness, a vehicle helping to make socially critical arguments. In this context local, national or global political circumstances may also function as an impetus for regionalist writing, and, the other way around, regionalist writing can function as a tool for social criticism.

In regional geography there is a tradition of perceiving spatial and narrative identities through power-relations.<sup>26</sup> The history of socially critical approaches in literary geography goes back to the 1980s, starting as criticism of humanistic geography. When the humanistic approach emerged in the 1970s, it had its own critical statements too, which were directed against the 'naïve realism' of the regional geography of the previous decade.<sup>27</sup> In similar fashion the critical approach of 1980s was against the 'naïve subjectivism' of humanistic geography. By mirroring slightly Marxist statements, literature was

conceived of as a reflection of social ideologies, while geographical research into it offered a tool for criticizing ongoing processes and for providing utopian visions of what society could/should be like.<sup>28</sup> Concepts such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘structure of feeling’ were brought up, since literary meanings of place were understood as being embedded within the social and political dimensions of cultural production.<sup>29</sup> In similar fashion literature was perceived as a means for discovering covert socially charged moral values.<sup>30</sup>

In socially critical readings literature was not considered to be depicting reality as such, but rather the hypothetical possibilities of what it could be, and thereby literature could work in favour of a more equal society in the future; although literature was not perceived being able to change reality as such.<sup>31</sup> On an idealistic level research was obliged to create a basis for a struggle against the bourgeois ideology of capitalist society and to offer a voice for counter-ideologies such as communism, anti-fascism, anti-racism, separatism, nationalism, feminism, as well as to certain forms of regionalism.<sup>32</sup> It is thus obvious that the research held within it a strong ideological agenda. Alongside the label of ‘critical’ literary geography, the stance was also referred to as ‘radical’ literary geography.<sup>33</sup>

Socially critical readings of literature have branched out in several directions within geography, but the shared argument about how language and power are thoroughly entwined has remained. Writing is a matter of social power, as, in similar vein, social power is a matter of producing narratives that sustain and naturalize particular spatialisations of the world.<sup>34</sup> Literature is a practice or tool with which commonly shared social memories, as well as social power-relations are sustained.<sup>35</sup> Although in the socially critical studies in literary geography it has been constantly emphasized that literature is an institution through which the structures of spatial inequality are maintained, literature can also function as an emancipatory tool through which the processes of othering, such as regional marginalization, can be contested. Literature maintains the potential to wake readers up and acquaint them with socially crucial matters.<sup>36</sup> Through literary narratives, normative values, stereotypic conceptions and hegemonic myths and codes of behaviour can be contested, either unconsciously or in a goal-oriented manner.<sup>37</sup> For instance in South Africa literature has been used as a means for attempting to struggle against apartheid politics.<sup>38</sup> Thus, literature operates as an intervention into systems of “being different”.<sup>39</sup>

### **Regions and narrativization**

As regions are often conceived as humanlike individuals, it is natural that their characterization is often turned into a question about regional identity. According to Paasi “regional identity refers to the

uniqueness of regions and/or to the identification of people with them".<sup>40</sup> The definition of 'identity', as a theoretical concept, has generally been considered highly ambiguous,<sup>41</sup> and in geographical research the term has been often approached from the perspective of how identity becomes constructed in the process of difference-making, in everyday practices, and performances in which 'self' is refined through making categorical distinction to 'the other'.<sup>42</sup> This spatial process of differing, the 'politics of self', often leads to social and cultural marginalization and, in fact, the debate over spatial identities has been regularly approached through discussing the problematics of minority identities. A topic closely connected to this is how identities change through mobility and migration.<sup>43</sup> It has been argued that mobility contests cohesive links between space and people, and that in the case of national minorities it shapes the sense of belonging, especially emphasising negative impacts.<sup>44</sup> That said, space and identity are co-constitutive products of interrelations; they are not unchanging and stable, but relational, constantly in flux and, importantly, open to the future.<sup>45</sup>

Regional identity is collective, a shared feeling of spatial belonging, maintained through various cultural institutions. The premise of identity building lies in human communication. Language has a key role in the process of how spatial identities are constructed: it has been argued that, along with its instrumental and communicative roles, a primary function of language is to maintain group identity.<sup>46</sup> For instance ethnic identities are constructed through language and everyday actions,<sup>47</sup> while identity narratives function as performances of spatial belonging.<sup>48</sup> The term 'narrative identity' is commonly used to refer to the ways in which individuals construct their personal stories in certain social circumstances, as well as how communities construct their spatial identities through stories, and also how national and regional representations function as overlapping meta-narratives.<sup>49</sup> In the case of place identities, narratives rely on miscellaneous elements, such as ideas about nature, ethnicity, dialects, periphery/centre relations, marginalization and stereotypic images of a people/community, and are intrinsically linked with how they are used in different forms of social practices, rituals and discourses.<sup>50</sup> Narrativity is thus a social 'performance' in which spatial processes and discourses of inclusion and exclusion become 'storied' and also rationalized. Brace, for instance, considers the construction of regional identities, in which regional literature has played fundamental role, a process through which an imaginative, ideal version of England has been implemented.<sup>51</sup> Similarly in the research of border literature the focus has often been on narrations through which the essence of nation and national identities become demarcated. This has been specifically usual in case of literary narratives focused on US-Mexico border.<sup>52</sup>

An interesting example of how imaginative regions become narrated is Bengt Pohjanen's 'Meänmaa project', in which art, mostly literature and folk opera, is used to catalyze the institutionalization of regional identity.<sup>53</sup> The concept of 'Meänmaa' (Our land) originates from the revitalization work aimed at saving the endangered language of Meänkieli (Our language), a minority language spoken in the Swedish-Finnish border area. As language works as an elementary facet of the development of nationalism (Anderson 1983), being linguistically marginalized effectively means a hindering of belonging to the state.<sup>54</sup> The Meänkieli language along with the local cultural traditions forms the thematic basis on which an author constructs a narration of a harmonious, coherent and shared borderland, a region which has been divided by an 'artificial' state border. Pohjanen has done substantial cultural work, including the first novel to be published in Sweden that uses a mixture of Finnish, Swedish and Meänkieli, *Kasaland* (1984), the first novel to be written entirely in Meänkieli, *Lyykeri* (1985), a textbook of the language, *Meänkielen Kramatiikki* (1996), a three-part folk opera (2004–2009), and so on. Since 2008 it has been possible to buy a (symbolic) Meänmaa Passport and acquire 'citizenship' in a 'country' which also publishes its own 'official' newspaper informing about and reporting on various activities and events in the region. These are the cultural symbols through which the imaginative region of Meänmaa becomes a part of (local) people's everyday lives. However, Pohjanen's Meänmaa does not possess an established role in the (administrative) national region systems, and although a map of Meänmaa with its hazy territorial shape has even been published, the region does not have fixed boundaries, a prerequisite for common institutionalized regions such as the provinces of nation-states.<sup>55</sup>

## Concluding remarks

In recent discussion concerning non-representational theories and geography it has been emphasized how in regional narratives the most essential aspect is the process of writing and creative inspiration, not its results, such as books.<sup>56</sup> However, as I have underlined here, there is no need to understate the 'power' of printed (and distributed) words, in terms of the institutional status and impact of a published work. For Said literature has played its own unique part in the history of Orientalism, while we've also seen how, especially in peripheral regions, literature can work as a practical tool for economic purposes.<sup>57</sup> Although in recent literary geography more emphasis has been paid on how text 'happens',<sup>58</sup> how literature is "not just a finished product awaiting interpretation, but is equally a set of spatial practices that combine in different ways to bring the text into being",<sup>59</sup> it remains highly important to take into account the institutional nature of literature, and imagination in more general. Understanding regionality and regions as spatial units simply requires imagination. Through imagination



and writing regions attain their (bounded or hazy) territorial shape, and turn into administrative units or units around which human history and heritage become narrativized and storied.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Derek Gregory, "Imaginative geographies," *Progress in human geography* 19 (1995); Sarah Radcliffe, "Imaginative geographies, postcolonialism, and national identities: contemporary discourses of the nation in Ecuador," *Ecumene* 3 (1996); Rob Kitchin and James Kneale, "Science fiction or future fact? Exploring imaginative geographies of the new millennium," *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2001); Juha Ridanpää, "Laughing at northernness: postcolonialism and metafictional irony in the imaginative geography," *Social & Cultural Geography* 8 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> H. C. Darby, "The Regional Geography of Thomas Hardy's Wessex," *Geographical Review* 38 (1948): 426.

<sup>4</sup> E. W. Gilbert, "The Idea of the Region: Herbertson Memorial Lecture," *Geography* 45 (1960): 168.

<sup>5</sup> See J. H. Paterson, "The novelist and his region: Scotland through the Eyes of Sir Walter Scott," *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 81 (1965): 146.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, "The idea," 158-9.

<sup>7</sup> Barry N. Floyd, "Toward a More Literary Geography," *Professional Geographer* 13 (1961).

<sup>8</sup> See Desmond Hawkins, *Hardy's Wessex* (London: Macmillan Hawkins, 1983), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Darby, "Regional," 430.

<sup>10</sup> Paterson, "The Novelist," 146.

<sup>11</sup> Paterson, "The Novelist," 147.

<sup>12</sup> Sheila Hones, "Amplifying the Aural in Literary Geography," *Literary Geographies* 1 (2015): 80.

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