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**Page and place: ongoing compositions of plot** by Jon Anderson

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Literary geography is not new. In 1904, William Sharp – the *nom de plume* of Fiona Macleod – famously collocated these two words to describe the practice of surveying the writers and texts associated with particular places and landscapes. Then, in the following year, Virginia Woolf recycled Sharp's term in her review of two books in the Pilgrimage series: Lewis Melville's *The Thackeray country* and F. G. Kitson's *The Dickens country* (Woolf 1977). Further on in the 20th century, literary geography emerged as a scholarly sub-discipline when humanistic geographers such as Douglas Pocock and Yi-Fu Tuan emphasised the richly complex contributions literary texts can make to the shaping of geographical thought. Yet, while it is vital to acknowledge this relatively long tradition, it is equally important to note that literary geography has become an increasingly prominent and dynamic field of interdisciplinary study since the late 1990s. During this period, many literary scholars have responded to the 'spatial turn' across the arts and humanities by examining what Andrew Thacker calls – in an influential article on the need for a 'critical literary geography' – 'the textuality of space and the spatiality of texts' (2005/6, 56). At the same time, a diverse range of geographers have drawn on their own disciplinary practices and procedures to open up new thinking about the geographies of literature including, for example, Sheila Hones' work on 'the novel as a spatial event' (Hones 2011, 247). The result has been the emergence and evolution of a protean field of scholarly enquiry characterised by both methodological experimentation and the unsettling of disciplinary conventions (Hones *et al.* 2015, 1–2).

Jon Anderson's critical monograph, *Page and place: ongoing compositions of plot*, feeds off and back into these wider literary geographical contexts. In this book, Anderson – a cultural geographer whose previous research includes innovative work on the spatialities of surfing – turns his focus to what he describes, via Angharad Saunders, as the slippery ways 'geography pervades creative writing, whilst creative writing also penetrates geographies' (p 14). More specifically, Anderson focuses on contemporary writing about Welsh places and landscapes to explore his hypothesis that 'fictional writing [...] is inherently geographical in nature' (p 13). *Page and place* begins in customary fashion with a theoretical chapter in which Anderson demonstrates his familiarity with the historic and recent development of literary geographical thinking and practices. His monograph is then organised into four parts – 'Capital Cardiff', 'Kaleidoscopic Aberystwyth', 'Nations' and 'Borderlands' – with each of the 11 chapters, after the introductory chapter, concentrating on the work of a different contemporary writer. The result is a book that explores four distinct literary topographies and that offers concentrated examinations of the work of individual writers. By extension, then, one of the cardinal

strengths of *Page and place* is the way Anderson's critical gaze oscillates between major contemporary creative practitioners (including Iain Sinclair, Owen Sheers and Gillian Clarke) and some less familiar names (such as Lloyd Robson and Grahame Davies). Yet, in spite of this geographical and authorial heterogeneity, several key themes emerge over the course of the book, including the palimpsestic nature of the Welsh landscape and the politics and poetics of devolution. The recurrence of such interpenetrating themes ensures that each of the 11 main chapters is not simply a discrete, self-contained investigation into the work of an individual contemporary author. Instead, Anderson constructs a layered and nuanced understanding of how his chosen writers variously present contemporary Wales as 'a "Janus" state': 'One of Wales' Janus faces looks inward and to the past, whilst the other looks outward and to the future' (p 30).

To read *Page and place* as a traditional work of critical exegesis, however, can be a frustrating experience. To the literary critic, Anderson's habitual practice of offering only minimal reflective analysis of (invariably lengthy) extracts means that the knotty complexities of the primary texts remain unpicked. That is to say, there is a sense that we are constantly skimming over the surface of the literary geographies Anderson presents. Yet, over the course of the book, it became apparent that this frustration was predicated on a fundamental misreading of Anderson's intentions: a misreading that was attributable to my own disciplinary preconceptions and prejudices as an academic trained exclusively in literary studies. The monograph does frequently gesture towards further thinking about the schizophrenic literary imaginaries of contemporary Wales. For the most part, though, the exposition of contemporary writing about Welsh topographies is of secondary importance to the self-conscious exploration of new ways of doing literary geography: a privileging of the procedural over the geo-specific that is reflected in the absence of any mention of Wales or Welsh writing in the book's title. Once I managed to wriggle out of my disciplinary shackles, therefore, I was able to read Anderson's book on its own terms rather than as a work of conventional critical explication.

Read as an experiment in literary geographical practice, then, *Page and place* makes a useful and timely contribution to the interdisciplinary field. In the opening chapter, 'Crossing the breach between page and place: illuminating the relations between location and identity', Anderson introduces two cardinal concepts that serve as theoretical threads running throughout the book. First, Anderson draws on the work of Joanne Sharp *et al.* to propose 'the spatial metaphor of "entanglements" to suggest 'how the literary plot of the story and the literal plot of location are always implicated in, and constitutive of, one another' (p 16). Second, and following on from this, he offers the concept of the 'plotline' to encapsulate 'the infinite variety in every reading of page and place', which, in turn, problematises the possibility of a positivist, objective mapping of literary texts (p 27).

Over the course of *Page and place*, Anderson builds on these interlinking ideas to test a diverse range of methodological

strategies for the practice of literary geography. Crucially, for example, Anderson takes the investigation of literary geographies outside as he interviews a series of writers while walking through the landscapes they have represented in textual form: a physical and imaginative (re)tracing that raises wider questions about the relationships between reading, embodiment and geographical situatedness, as well as authorial intentionality. Anderson's conception of literary geography as something other than the straightforward application of spatial theory to literary texts is further illustrated by his discussion of Owen Sheers' *The gospel of us*: a novella based on *The passion* that 'remade the streets of Port Talbot into an open air theatre in Easter 2011' (pp 272–3). Here, Anderson's instinctive response is not to offer a detailed reading of Sheers' text but, rather, to foreground how *The gospel of us* 'became an active agent in affirming the identity of Port Talbot and contributing to community building' (p 273). In reminding us how all literary texts remain inextricably embedded within the material world in which they are brought-into-being, Anderson opens up further critical thinking about the geographical contexts and socio-spatial effects of creative writing. Moreover, *Page and place* is punctuated with Anderson's own creative interventions as he photographs literary landscapes and draws a sequence of illustrative maps. As a result, Anderson demonstrates an admirable openness to a suite of methodological procedures; and, crucially, his book is informed by the fusion of creative and critical practices which is a key emerging trope within much (literary) geographical research.

Yet, although an acknowledgement of my own misreading reveals the book's strengths, *Page and place* is not without its flaws or weaknesses. In mapping out the theoretical contexts for his own excursion into literary geographical terrain, for instance, Anderson misleadingly over-emphasises the originality of his project: does literary geography traditionally assume 'that there is a clear distinction between "real" geographies on one hand, and "imagined" fiction on the other'? (p 12). Alongside this, the author under-theorises his own scholarly practices so that the wider

implications of his novel procedures – the walks with writers, for instance – remain implied rather than explicitly articulated. In addition, there is a problematic imbalance between the male (nine) and female (two) creative practitioners discussed: an unfortunate unevenness that, at the very least, needs to be acknowledged and justified. There is also scope to demonstrate greater sensitivity to the relationship between landscape and literary form as, too often, the noun 'fiction' is used as a generic term to describe markedly different types of creative writing.

In spite of these issues, however, *Page and place* consistently sheds light on the spatial practices and geographical imaginaries of an original selection of contemporary creative practitioners writing about Wales. Perhaps more importantly, Anderson's book, through the adoption of a series of innovative and creative strategies, implicitly poses salient questions about what literary geographical practice might be and do: a disciplinary making-strange which lies at the heart of this not-entirely-new but recently reinvigorated field of difficult-to-define enquiry.

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