

Narrative and Space

Across Short Story Landscapes
and Regional Places

Alda Correia



Peter Lang

These eight texts deal with different perspectives on the relation between the regional short story, modernism and space. Seven of them concentrate on short prose (the short story and chronicle) and one deals with the novel. Four of them consider canonical pre modernist and modernist Anglo-American authors and the other four, Portuguese rustic and modernist short story writers. Their common point of departure, is the notion that the representation of the world cannot be separated from its spatial context, and the effort to understand how space and landscape influenced the structure of narratives and were represented in some of them, mainly in short fiction. They draw attention to the importance of the underestimated regionalist short prose narratives, essentially from a comparative literary perspective, but also considering certain aspects of their social and cultural connections and dissonances.

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Alida Correia Narrative Story Landscapes and Regional Placenames

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Introduction

The eight texts that follow deal with different perspectives on the relation between the regional short story, modernism and space. Seven of them concentrate on short prose (the short story and chronicle) and one deals with the novel. Four of them consider canonical pre modernist and modernist Anglo-American authors and the other four, Portuguese rustic and modernist short story writers. Far from constituting an absolutely homogeneous whole, they consider space from different angles. What unites these texts (written in different moments), their common point of departure, is the notion that the representation of the world cannot be separated from its spatial context, and the effort to understand how space and landscape influenced the structure of narratives and were represented in some of them, mainly in short fiction. They draw attention to the importance of the underestimated regionalist short prose narratives, essentially from a comparative literary perspective, but also considering certain aspects of their social and cultural connections and their dissonances.

In the interplay between space and representation, a distinction should be made between the wider notions of “space” and “place” and the more limited notions of “landscape” and “regionalism”, both used as a starting point of texts 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8. De Certeau (1984: 117–118) points out that, “space” is associated with movement (direction, velocity, time); “place” is associated with the delimitation of a field, where elements have a definite position and location. Tuan (1977: 6) explains that “space” is more abstract than “place” and “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value”. Another important distinction must be made in the concept of “space” in connection with “relations of production” and “social relations of reproduction” (Lefebvre, 1991: 32). Taking as a point of departure a philosophical and sociological Marxist point of view, Lefebvre (1991: 26) postulates that “(social) space is a (social) product” that

enhances control of thought and power; he establishes a difference that can be applied in literary analysis to interrelate the literary field with two other levels of experience. The conceptual triad he proposes is: 1. spatial practices (the perceived) – it embodies an association between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (routes and networks, private life and leisure); 2. representations of space (the conceived) – conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, social engineers, identifying what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived; 3. representational spaces (the lived) – space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, the space of ‘inhabitants’ but also of artists, writers and philosophers, who describe but where the imagination seeks to change and appropriate (*Ibid*:38–39). Because they are centered on representational spaces, some of the texts in the volume endeavor to reveal the dialectical relation existing between these three levels, particularly texts 3, 6 and 8. As Lefebvre emphasizes, the relation within the triad is dialectic and full of effects such as echoes, repercussions, mirror effects. Representational space, whose only products are symbolic works, have their source in the history of a people or individuals belonging to that people. It is an alive space, it speaks, “it has an affective kernel or center: Ego, bedroom, dwelling, house; or square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations and thus immediately implies time” (*Ibid*: 41–42). Lefebvre also highlights the uniqueness of the products of representational spaces and the fact that they set in train aesthetic trends. The narrative construction of the short story cycle *The Country of Pointed Firs* in text 3 is a good example of the dialectic between spatial practices perceived by Orne Jewett, representations conceived by a specific narrator and a representational space, where a symbolic work mirrors the lived history of individuals. In the three types of landscape (idealized, decadent and marked by oppression and rebellion) that serve as background for the short stories in text 8, the social construction of a space is shown, that is to say, it is shown how a certain type of society (Regeneration, Republic and Estado Novo), based on certain spatial practices (the everyday life of rural communities), and representations of space (conceptions of natural simplicity, conceptions of regionalism, manipulation of cultural

conceptions of space, popular- erudite relation) created a representational space in literature (short stories), full of ambivalence in itself. To this representational space we could, then, call “place”.

From the point of view of literary theory, “place” may be present as an idea through the social and intellectual experiences of the writer, and as form, in the way the author uses them to build events, suggest themes and define characters (Lutwack, 1984:12). The construction of “place” is quite different in drama (where the unity of place was a very important category for centuries) and in fiction, where it is necessary for rendering the action, creating a setting and presenting detail, real or symbolical. Related to “place”, the concept of “landscape”, although still referring to a definite location, is more specific. “Landscape” refers to all that can be seen from a certain point; it positions us as observers, at a distance before a view to be observed. It implies “separation and observation” (Williams, 1973: 120), a certain way of looking, artistic representation and an effort at detachment. It initially referred to painting, as happened with the related concept of “picturesque”, developed by William Gilpin in his *Essay on Prints* (1768) and *Observations on the River Wye and several parts of South Wales, etc. relative chiefly to picturesque beauty; made in the summer of the year 1770* (1782)¹ (cf. text 2). Landscapes are cultural representations, works of art associated with aesthetic discourses. In the specific case of the short story and regionalist literature in focus here, there are other questions to be considered as the discussion of their aesthetic value. I will refer to them shortly. The initial meaning of “landscape” was extended by cultural geographers such as Carl Sauer and since the 1980s by the “New Cultural Geography” group of scholars, whose thinking and analysis developed mostly from the Marxist economic, social and cultural perspective (cf. text 7). This new perspective on the field may include unseen things as culture, a series of conditions, or psychological traits. Broadly speaking, three nuanced forms of thinking “landscape” have been contemplated as an evolution from the ‘distance’ stance (Wylie, 2007) and are implied in the texts in this volume.

1 On the literary development of the concept of “picturesque” see Andrews, 1994.

One of them expands the relation between “landscape” and its inhabitants or the level of integration of inhabitants and “landscape”; it highlights the qualities of “landscape” as an environment for meaningful cultural practices and values. This is, in some measure, shown in the description of the contradiction between regionalist thematics in Portuguese short stories and the Portuguese reading public, with the cultural gap that existed between the peasantry and the more cultivated social and political elite who lived in the cities and was able to manipulate rural symbolism; it is also revealed in Fialho de Almeida’s position towards the beauty of the village, always from a distant perspective and the evidence of its ugliness, lack of charm and faults when we are inside it (cf. text 5, p. 112). A reference for this perspective is Carl Sauer’s “cultural landscape” (cf. text 7), W. G. Hoskins’s study of local landscape history, emphasizing locality and rurality (Hoskins, 1955), and J. B. Jackson’s “vernacular landscape” – landscape transformed by individuals and common people in their everyday lives (Jackson, 1984).

Another one centers in the way of looking at “landscape”, the ‘how’ we look and its dependence on cultural values, ideologies and expectations; it tries to understand how arts and humanities interpreted “landscape” in the course of different historical circumstances and how this way of knowing served the interests of one group or another; Cosgrove (1985; 1998) and Cosgrove and Daniels (1988) (cf. texts 3 and 7) are reference authors from this perspective; in the actual volume, the work of Washington Irving (cf. text 2) is an example of how the traditional European literary and physical “landscape” influenced the birth of a new literary genre, the short story; and, as can be seen in text 8, in Portugal the repressive Estado Novo used philosophical naturalism in the interpretation of “landscape”, to deter progress and manipulate information. In this case, it is helpful to refer to W.J.T. Mitchell’s (1994: 1–2) model, that aims to show what landscape does or how it works as a cultural practice, an instrument of cultural power and a focus for the formation of identity. Mitchell’s work focuses on landscape painting, but what he writes can be applied to literary texts:

Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing

an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus, landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which “we” (figured as “the figures” in the landscape) find – or lose – ourselves. (Mitchell, 1994:2)

A third form centers on the role of landscape in the interaction culture/nature in which both shape and are shaped; this can be explored from the point of view of phenomenology and embodiment, as is suggested in the first text (cf. text 1) or from the point of view of the evolution of ancient community practices as happens in Jewett’s *The Country of Pointed Firs* (cf. text 3) and, under different forms, in all the authors of texts 7 and 8. Diverse regional landscapes are expressions of human feedback; society and changes in the objective material world modify nature, culture, landscape and their aesthetic representation, as is shown in text 8 and was already referred to in connection with Lefebvre’s concept of social space.

It is in the context of landscape phenomenology, that text 1 should be understood. Although it does not deal with short stories (despite the fact that they are mentioned because of the narrative-criticism connection in Woolf), its relation to space is built mainly through Heidegger and secondarily through the thematization of place and space in Woolf’s novels. Heidegger, in “Building Dwelling Thinking” (which complements *The Origin of the Work of Art* referred to in text 1, concerning space) writes:

Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man. To say that mortals *are* is to say that in *dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locales. [...] Man’s relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially. (Heidegger, 1993: 359)

Space is, then, essential in human beings’ being and dwelling in the world, and the writing of a novel contributes to the same end. As Hillis Miller argues, in a long and quite critical chapter on Heidegger, the writing of a novel and its reading, play a part in the activities of building,

dwelling and thinking, helping in the construction of landscapes, which they apparently presuppose as already finished (Miller, 1995: 16). This means, in Virginia Woolf, that with her novels she builds a mental mapping, a space of consciousness, a human topography where spaces become inter-corporeal, where, departing from physical spaces (in *To the Lighthouse*, the summer home and the lighthouse of the Isle of Skye in Scotland) she leads the characters, through dwelling and thinking, to interrogate existence. Besides, for Woolf as a writer, this construction was also an answer to illness.

Moreover, Virginia Woolf gives evidence of the important role of space in the modernist, changing world she endorsed; in 1905 she wrote in *TLS* the review "Literary Geography", warning the reader about the disillusionment caused if he or she tried to recover the authors' spirit in the places they had lived in or visited, and stressing that "a writer's country is a territory within his own brain" (Woolf, 1986: 35). She wrote many other essays on London streets, monuments, houses, squares, and other places, where she used to stroll around, to explore and to escape, letting her imagination flow and create an interrelation between the real and the imagined (see Woolf, 2006; Squier, 1985; Wilson, 1987), as she explains in the famous "Street Haunting: a London Adventure" (Woolf, 1970). Place is an essential element in the writer's novels. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is from the topography of the city (and the hours struck by Big Ben) that the characters constantly start to explore their thoughts, remembrances and anxieties, their interior territory, as can be seen in the short story referred to in text 6, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" (1923), which was probably conceived as the first chapter of the novel. In *The Waves* (cf. text 1) Woolf intersects, in parallel, the complexity of inner spaces and outer natural spaces, and in *Between the Acts* (cf. text 1) the spaces of the play and real life/narrative are constantly colliding, being built and destroyed. Beyond this perspective, but also embedded in all her writing, is the conflict between the conservative, traditionally female private space and the habitually male public space, a gendered conflictual space ideally overcome in art through the "androgynous artist" theory (see Thacker, 2003; Snaith/Whitworth, 2007).

Resuming the initial distinctions between “space”, “place”, “landscape” and “regionalism”, I would say that, as referred to in text 7 (p. 141), the concept of region is defined as a homogeneous area with physical and cultural characteristics, distinct from neighboring or surrounding areas, but this is also a definition of the mind. Beyond the character of landscapes, their continuity and the culture and identity of their peoples also differentiate and define regions. In literature, (literary) regionalism designates a narrative subgenre that has developed, more consistently from the mid- nineteenth century onwards and has been aesthetically undervalued by literary historians and critics. A distinction should be made between “regional” and “regionalist”. “Regional” refers to the topographic location, the geographic situation of the narrative; “regionalist” implies a literary or cultural intention of defending and valuing a certain social or cultural perspective, a particular view of a culture, often from the perspective of marginalized persons. Snell (1998: 1), for example, writing about Britain and Ireland, and being a little ambiguous in the second part of the quotation, defines “regional” as

fiction that is set in a recognizable region, and which describes features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people. [...] In such writing, a particular place or regional culture may perhaps be used to illustrate an aspect of life in general, or the effects of a particular environment upon the people living in it.

Marjorie Pryse (1994: 48–50), writing about “regionalism” in American literature, characterizes it as an approach that represents the lives of women, older persons, impoverished groups or marginalized people that deviate from the traditional perspective; it leads readers to consider the “peculiar”, promoting a different reading of ‘difference’; it also shows the way the dominant culture creates and maintains hierarchies in the name of region. The difficulties of reading regionalist texts have to do with cross-cultural interaction, with the reader’s own expectations, the parameters within which he or she has been taught to read and his or her ability to get into the text worldview; part of the difficulty, then, is situated outside the text (cf. Lefebvre). In this volume, regionalist features

are noticeable, in different aspects of texts 8 (ambivalence between reality and its representation, between the facts and their interpretation by readers) and 3 (uncommonness of the communities of *The Country of Pointed Firs* and *Winesburg, Ohio*). Yet, “regional” and “regionalist” are not always separable designations. In many short stories, both features are present and the reader’s role is fundamental as Umberto Eco clearly explained. The concept “regionalism” is used in texts 5 and 8. In both, it refers to regional texts; some of them have regionalist intentions, others do not. A different perspective is Aquilino Ribeiro’s view of regionalism (cf. text 8): he considers that we should not speak of “regionalism” in Portugal because there are no linguistic differences that justify this position in such a small country; besides, this literature demands depersonalization of the author and simplicity of themes and this does not make for good art.

The question of aesthetic value in regionalist texts has also been a subject of debate (cf. text 5 and text 8, pages 205-206). One of the points in question is the intention or purpose of the text: what is the relation between fact and fiction? Should the text be a faithful document, as T. Hardy defended? How can one differentiate it aesthetically from naturalism? How, being nostalgic, can it be innovative? Is it meritorious to represent regional characters and regional life as objects to be viewed from the perspective of the non-regional outsider, for entertainment purposes, as happens in “local-color” fiction? An enlightening discussion of these and other themes and a reconsideration of the new possibilities of the field are developed in David Jordan’s *Regionalism Reconsidered* (Jordan, 1994).

Another distinction to be made here bears upon the relation between the short story genre, on which the majority of the texts of this volume concentrate, and regional and landscape literature. It is accepted by most short fiction critics that the short story genre developed throughout the nineteenth century, from different sources (humorous and character sketches, allegorical tales, oriental tales inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, among others), became a recognized artistic literary genre in modernism (May, 1995; 2013; Head, 1992; Reid, 1991; March-Russel, 2009; Goyet, 2014; Winther, 2004)