

Writing Geography as Literature

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Abstract

The idea of writing geography as literature was inspired by history. The question was asked, why is it some historians – Thucydes, Barbara Tuchman, Robert Hughes – have been able to write great histories that are also good literature? This essay examines how in *Geography and the art of life*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2004, I attempted to do a geography that might also be literature, specifically a geosophy. The miscues and cues are examined during the evolution of the book, as well as the methodology that was involved. Geographic concepts and evolving landscapes perceptions were presented and interpreted in the light of personal experiences of war and exile. The varied and often ambiguous and contradictory meanings of home and road served as the leitmotifs. The method was inductive, with each chapter an exploration through the process of writing. Strict adherence to the principle of always favoring the geographic story over a chronology insured that the work was neither an autobiography nor a history. However, it also meant the sacrifice of some dramatic material that would have illuminated more completely the personal story.

Key words: literature, home, road, geographic sensibilities, landscape perceptions.

The inspiration

The direct inspiration for writing geography as literature came during a conversation with Tim Unwin (a cultural geographer at the University of London at Egham) on board a small mail boat on the Norwegian Sea. It was 1998 and we were on the final leg of a field trip during a conference on European rural landscapes. It was an animated and far-ranging debate about geography, especially the intellectual freedom provided by its situation in both the arts and the sciences, but also its limitations as far as anything artistic is concerned. Why is it that some historians have been able to write great histories that are also great literature, we asked, but not geographers geographies? Thucydes' *The Peloponnesian war* is still read today not only as history but also literature. There are my own favorites: *The guns of August* by Barbara Tuchman (1962); *The price of glory* by Alistair Horne (1962); and Dudley Pope's *Decision at Trafalgar* (1960). Robert Hughes' *The fatal shore: A history of the transportation of convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (1986) and Geoffrey Blainey's *The tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australian history* (1968) are good histories and good literature. To be sure, histories of wars, exploration, and settlement can make for great story telling. As for geography, we could only think of Humboldt's *Aspects of nature* (1849) as an outstanding example of good, evocative writing in geography. The irony is that, however much Humboldt is regarded as one of the founders of modern geography, it is his science that is tapped into, not his lyric, artistic evocations and perceptions.

In the end we made a pact that each of us would write a book on geography that could be read as literature. Soon thereafter Tim was selected for an interesting high-level job by the British government and thus has not been able to work on such a book. I, however, was able to set to work almost immediately. This is the story of the trials that were involved and the methods employed in writing *Geography and the Art of Life* [Bunkse 2004]. In the end the book turned out quite differently from what I had originally envisioned.

Roots of the idea

Roots of the idea of writing geography as literature reach much further back into my past than a conversation on the Norwegian Sea. They are discernible only in hindsight. As a child I had marveled at Jules Verne's landscape evocations in *Kapteina Granta berni* (A translation in Latvian of *The children of captain Grant*—no date). Selma Lagerlof's *The wonderful adventures of Nils Holgerson* (1920) was a captivating story and a lesson in geography about a miniscule boy traveling across Sweden on the back of a goose. Although I paid little heed to the specifics

of that geography lesson, the story left a deep impression. A novel about a Dutch boy and the dykes of the Netherlands is lost in memory, as is a novel about an icebreaker captain, but these and many others were riveting reads with landscapes as powerful elements in the stories. A good deal of Latvian literature that I read as a child, adolescent, and adult incorporated landscapes, not only as scenes for story lines, but as profound, often active actors in the stories. Stories set in snow-covered landscapes, on ice on the sea, on lakes and on rivers left indelible imprints on my psyche. They contained not only action, but were bound up with moral issues and questions of being, life, and death. Rightly or wrongly, in a short story about a kid's snowball fight [Poruks 2002], I learned of the painless death by freezing of a boy in a snow-laden spruce forest.

Years later, when I had begun graduate studies in geography, I came across tantalizing bits of thought by Carl Sauer that hinted at the possibilities for imaginative perceptions and evocative writing in landscape geography. In "The morphology of landscape" (1963, 320) Sauer writes that geography's task is to embrace "the phenomenology of landscape, in order grasp in all its meaning and color the varied terrestrial scene." Although Sauer denies artistic endeavors in geography as idiosyncratic and thus undesirable to achieving systematic knowledge [Sauer 1963, 331], later in the essay he avers that, "The best geography has never disregarded the esthetic qualities of landscape, to which we know no approach other than the subjective." Indeed, Sauer observes that in the final analysis "some of the best... believe, that having observed widely and charted diligently, there yet remains a quality of understanding at a higher plane that may not be reduced to formal process" [Sauer 1963, 344-345].

At the time that I read Sauer's essay I was just beginning master's studies and had no confidence that I would ever become a professional geographer, let alone explore human relationships with landscapes and with nature subjectively. But Sauer's ideas stayed with me. When somewhat later I came across Ralph H. Brown's *Mirror for Americans: Likeness of the Eastern Seaboard* (1810) [Brown 1943], I was excited, for I believed that here would be a subjective, imaginative book. It was a disappointment—Brown had written a solid work of historical geography, based on observations made at the time in question, but it was not literature.

But major changes were afoot in geography in the sixties and seventies. Perception and literary studies were emerging. David Lowenthal's "Geography, experience, and imagination: Towards a geographical epistemology" (1961) was a seminal essay that made me think differently about culture, not as something monolithic and easily labeled, but instead as made up of a wide spectrum of perceptions and attitudes of different people within a particular culture group. David Lowenthal's and Hugh C. Prince's literary essay on "The English landscape" (1964), as well as Lowenthal's "English landscape tastes" (1965) and "The American scene" (1968) all showed how literary evocations can be the basis for understanding and evaluating landscape perceptions and attitudes within a particular cultural milieu. In her "Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld" Anne Buttner (1976) brought in the idea of studying the lived geographies of people. Of course, with his numerous articles and books, Yi-Fu Tuan literally threw the doors wide open to the study of human emotional and intellectual relationships with landscapes and environments. And then there was John Kirtland Wright's profound essay on geography and imagination, written much earlier but republished in 1966 [Wright 1966], which seemed to tie together all these different strands of thought and sanctify the exploration of geography within a particular human being.

The references just cited are not meant to be exhaustive. Nor do they include a much greater volume of literary and poetic works that have guided me, from those of Camus, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Rilke, Atwood, Siegfried Lenz, Neruda, and Czeslaw Milosz, to Barry Holstun Lopez, Ivan Doig, Annie Dillard, and many others. Lopez was perhaps the most inspirational, in his fiction and non-fiction. His *Arctic dreams: Imagination and desire in a northern landscape* (1986) in particular made me wish to write substantially about the experience of landscapes, not necessarily emulative of Lopez, but in my own fashion.

The first real venture came in the fall of 1983 at Lund University in Sweden. I was there on a sabbatical, investigating twentieth century literature as a source of culture-nature attitudes, intending to ultimately write a book on such attitudes. I was inspired to do so by my mentor,

Clarence J. Glacken and his *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967). At the end of the stay at Lund I presented my research findings to Thorsten Hagerstrand's "Theoretical Seminar." The theme was the poet Sylvia Plath and her perceptions of culture—nature relationships. This was followed by the publication of an essay on Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1990). I was diverted by Latvian independence, which inspired me to publish on Latvian landscape themes and also to write a book (in Latvian) on the so-called "Berkeley School of Landscape Studies" [Bunkse 1998]. But then I set out in earnest, and, along the way, with the help of some very sage advice from two anonymous reviewers, I dared to write *Geography and the art of life* [Bunkse 2004], a book that, for better or for worse, I wrote as literature. The rest of this essay tells the story of its making and examines the methodology involved in writing such a work.

The Story

To write a book on geography as literature has meant stepping outside the norms of the field of geography; to go outside the given culture of geography into which we are domesticated by our teachers and by the practices that we learn from within the field of geography.

The leitmotif of the book is how a human perceives and makes sense of his or her situation in landscapes and places; and literary-poetic expression of such sensibilities. It is, quite literally, an exploration John Kirtland Wright's idea of "Geography that is found in the mind and heart of every human being" [Wright 1966, 87-88]. As organizing principles I used two archetypal human realities: home and road. (Geographers abstract home and road into what Vidal de la Blache called "patterns of civilization" and circulation –Buttimer 1971, 5). As in my earlier research on Sylvia Plath, I intended to use literary and poetic sources in order to develop a kind of phenomenology of home and road. Gaston Bachelard's *The poetics of space* was a major guidepost [Bachelard 1969].

Exploring the human realities of home and road seemed a good plan. I recognized that I was getting into vast arena with many different meanings and viewpoints, often ambiguous and contradictory. (A secure home may turn into the most insecure and awful road; a road-literally or metaphorically – may become a secure home for some individuals.) It was my intent to have a rough plan of chapters, but to explore the themes of home and road inductively, in the process of writing. In hindsight, this was a most fortunate procedure.

In this manner two chapters were written and duly submitted for anonymous review. In order to set the stage, the front part of the first chapter (on geographic sensibilities) was written entirely from personal experience, with little or no references to secondary sources. The review came back with a positive evaluation, with the advice to base more of the material on my own experiences and perceptions, with literary citations as secondary sources. The reviewer also helped me steer clear of the well-trodden path of didactic moralizing about environmental issues.

Thus encouraged I proceeded to write three more chapters, drawn on my own experiences, but still relying heavily on secondary literary sources. I was clearly reluctant to let go of the security provided by following the accepted practice of geographic scholarship. Again the manuscript was sent out for anonymous review. This time the reviewer was truly enthusiastic, except for chapter four, which had too many well-known literary sources. Why not jettison them and write entirely from personal experience, which, in this reviewer's opinion, had produced some memorable results? Finally convinced of the merit of my own thoughts and literary sensibilities, I wrote an entirely new fourth chapter, filled out the other chapters with personal experiences and observations, and wrote an additional sixth chapter, which was required by the new structure of the work. In the end it is a book that largely researches and expresses the geographies within myself, with citations from other sources serving as backup material.

Methodology

Geography and the Art of Life is the author's self-geography. Home and road provide the organizing principles. Under these rubrics the development of the author's geographic sensibilities is observed: during WWII in Latvia and Germany, in exile in Germany and the USA, and during the return to the homeland (Latvia). The themes of the book (chapters) are as follows: (1) geographic sensibilities; (2) learning about landscapes; (3) you cannot go home;

(4) wonders of the world and knowing oneself; (5) searching for home; (6) the poetics of house and home.

As said before, the method was inductive with discoveries made in the writing of the manuscript. There was an overall plan for each chapter, but this was flexible. Chronology was less important than experiences and perceptions in particular landscapes and places. Fearing tangents and dissipation of thematic material, I imposed a strict discipline in this, even if that meant excluding a number of major events (such as the escape of our family from a Nazi labor camp in Szczecin in 1945 during a Russian bombing raid). I believe I thus ensured that the book did not turn into a history or a memoir, but stayed firmly in geography. Each geographic theme that I pursued has a temporal dimension, however the overall structure is geographic.

Renewing the torn connections with the Classical Era and the Renaissance

In the history of ideas the Renaissance was a return to human life in the present, especially life of the individual human being, and the variegated philosophy of humanism was the result. That also meant a return to the Greek and Roman classics, for the thinkers and writers of that era established humanism as a distinct, if nebulous philosophy that addresses human problems in the proverbial “here and now.” During the Renaissance writings of a geographic nature were also humanistic, recording not only facts of explorations but being also “reflective and rhetorical” [Cosgrove 2003, 854]. In short, art and science were unified in geographic writings. With the rise of modern geography that unity was essentially torn apart. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was the last to practice such geography. Every effort was made to establish geography as a rigorous, scientific discipline. The life of the individual human being became of little interest to geographers. Geography lost its ties to the Renaissance. Its practice came to be firmly situated in a humanism known as scientific and technical.

Obviously modern writers and artists never lost interest in the lives of human individual beings. Ties to the Renaissance and to the Classical World are implicit if not always self-evident. For many each human being is a distinct world. Homer’s *Odyssey* can still speak to a contemporary consciousness, as can Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, Benjamin Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*, Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane*, the self-portraits of Pierre Bonnard. Marcel Proust’s *In search of lost time* is still regarded as perhaps the penultimate exploration of an individual’s life world [Bunkse 2004, 4].

Why do these works interest us? As I write in *Geography and the art of life* [Bunkse 2004, 4], The lives depicted in ...[the above] works interest us not only because they are works of artistic genius but also because they speak to us of universal human joy and pain and the mysteries of life at particular times and in particular places.

Such traditions are largely absent from geography. But could it not be otherwise?

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