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The poetics of geographical knowledge: For a genealogy of geographical aesthetics in history and philosophy of geography

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ABSTRACT

This short reflection on forty years of the UK's History and Philosophy of Geography group reflects on the poetics of geographical knowledge. Whilst histories of geography have diverged from philosophies of geography over recent years, the intervention proposes that a useful avenue of enquiry for future work is to develop fuller historical and philosophical accounts of the forms and poetics of geographical writing. This includes: philosophical reflection on form and space; historical studies of the varying forms, styles, and poetics of geographical knowledge; and active experiments with formal aspects of writing. Through a short reflection on the ethics of Jean-Marie Guyau (a sociologist whose naturalist and vitalist ethics had an important influence on anarchist geographers) the paper proposes an approach to the authority of geographical texts that is animated by an anomic ethos that is: genetic; affirmative; and generous.

Forty years after the founding of the UK's History and Philosophy of Geography working group, confidence in its guiding assumption that histories and philosophies of geography are united and aligned in critically interrogating the 'current condition of their own discipline' appears to have frayed.[1] In fact, this common purpose has never gone unquestioned.[2] If one marker of the ongoing relationship between history and philosophy in geography is found in the series of reports on history and philosophy of geography in *Progress in Human Geography,* then it is apparent that philosophies of geography tend to receive less attention than history of geography.[3] Yet few could deny that philosophical thinking is flourishing within human geography. A plausible argument could be made, then, that philosophies of geography have become increasingly separated from histories of philosophy. So, what potential futures might lie in store for histories and philosophies of geography? What intellectual projects might bring them into fruitful new relationships?

One key factor is philosophical movements in the discipline posing profound challenges to the nature (and value) of histories of geography. Non-representational theories, for example, and related fields such as Deleuzian geographies, new materialisms, and speculative materialisms, all criticise historicizing forms of reasoning. For example, in many non-representational ontologies, emphasis is placed on *virtual* temporalities over chronological histories, using embodied and creative methodologies and theory in order to attend to the 'affective swash of the present' and to 'virtual' (as opposed to chronological) events and temporalities.[4] Such virtual events exist 'on a plane of consistency that is prior to the rigid, state-regulated historiographies of successive states of affairs'.[5] Related post-humanist moves in the philosophy of

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[1] Felix Driver, 'New Perspectives on the History and Philosophy of Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 18 (1994) 92–100 (p. 97).

[2] For example, see Clive Barnett, 'Awakening the Dead: Who Needs the History of Geography?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 20 (1995) 417–419.

[3] This point is made by Philip Conway, 'The History and Philosophy of Geography: A Meta-Report (of Sorts)', in *Circling Squares* (2018) http://circlingsquares.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-history-and-philosophy-of-geography.html, last accessed 26 May 2024; see also Innes M. Keighren, 'History and Philosophy of Geography III: The Haunted, the Reviled, and the Plural', *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (2020) 160–167.

[4] For example, Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 26. J.-D. Dewsbury, 'Performativity and the Event: Enacting a Philosophy of Difference', *Environment & Planning D: Society and Space,* 18 (2000) 473–496.

[5] Jay Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 2.

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geography, meanwhile, pose other challenges to historicizing approaches: for example, (how) can historical research amplify non-human perspectives, attend to chaotic non-linear temporalities, and avoid reducing the world to punctual chronologies, anthropocentric models of action, and individual biographies?

If one of the key epistemic virtues of histories and philosophies of geography is their capacity to *pluralise* the discipline – to point out the existence of, and to conceptualise the possibilities and potentials of, different ways of doing geography – then perhaps what is at stake here is two different approaches to thinking about plurality. Histories of geography aim to reflect on the conditions of the discipline, and thus to help pluralise it, by investigating the complex movements through which the discipline came to be the way it is. Non-representational and post-humanist philosophies of geography aim to pluralise the discipline by opening it up to new kinds of non-linear, non-chronological, and non-human spatialities and temporalities – temporalities that are arguably best known through embodied and affective practices. Is this split between two different ways of pluralising the discipline irreconcilable? Is it helpful? The speculative possibility I wish to explore in this short intervention is that histories and philosophies of geography, despite their diverging paths, might still find common cause: not so much through reflection on the current conditions of the discipline, but through critical, creative, and genealogical work pluralising the forms and poetics – and hence the authority – of geographical writing.

A key issue underlying much work in histories and philosophies of geography is how geographical writing stakes a claim to authority. Any geographical scholarship makes claims upon reality – it typically aspires to the status of knowledge, truth, and/or social or political relevance or impact. As with all forms of authority, the authority claimed by geography is partly staged through the other authorities it appeals to. For example, it claims authority through reference to certain kinds of evidence, modes of analysis, theories, and/or politics. A less commonly analysed appeal to authority comes through geography's forms of writing: its style and poetics; its form and genre; the kinds of subject-position that it creates for the figure of the 'geographer'. This question of form, genre, and style is a key factor in the broader epistemological question of whether and how unruly, worldly experiences and events can be translated into the singular form of an authoritative written text.[6]

Acknowledging the importance of style, genre, and form in the authority of geographical knowledge, as well as the changing forms of geographical writing over time, raises fundamental historical and philosophical questions around the diverse aesthetics of geographical scholarship. This is an area, I suggest, where histories and philosophies of geography may play a valuable role in pluralising the discipline, and hence pluralising the kinds of authority it stages and reproduces. What I have in mind here, drawing on Rancière's *The Names of History*, is a historical-philosophical, genealogical emphasis on the poetics of geographical knowledge: the formal or literary devices through which geographical discourse gives itself the status of authoritative text.[7] We could think of this as a question of how geographical writing finds a place for itself in the conflictual space between three dominant kinds of authority: scientific authority (appealing to rigour, evidence, validity, predictability, objectivity); literary authority (appealing to the capacity to evoke and express meaning, experience, emotion, and affect); and political authority (appealing to the capacity to have a positive impact on society, or to mobilise political or social change). Modern authority, according to Rancière, is beset by this tension between three incompatible 'contracts', or sources of authority: a scientific contract, devoted to uncovering hidden order beneath the visible order; a narrative contract, commanding that the structures of this hidden space are inscribed in the form of a story; and a political contract, which ties what is invisible and what is readable to the constraints of modern political forms.[8] Geography, often claimed to have a unique capacity to bridge humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, occupies a fascinatingly diverse set of positions within this tripartite field of authority. As many key issues in geographical research become tangled up in deadening 'culture wars' – from climate change to migration and asylum to gender politics to the '15-min city' – how geographical knowledge stakes a claim to authority has become a hugely important (and politicised) issue.

What role might there be for histories and philosophies of geography in understanding and perhaps transforming geography's poetics of knowledge? One useful avenue of enquiry for future work in this field might be to develop fuller historical and philosophical accounts of the *forms and poetics* of geographical writing, including philosophical reflection on form and space, historical studies of the varying forms, styles, and poetics of geographical knowledge, as well as active experiments with formal aspects of writing. Contemporary human geography is seeing a wave of interest in stylizing new forms and genres, which claim (or refuse) epistemic authority in innovative and often radical ways.[9] Nevertheless, much geographical research published in academic journals is still remarkably homogeneous in its form and genre. But how did this form develop? What implicit claims to authority does it make? How does it connect to broader trends in social, political, and spatial processes and structures?

More than thirty years ago, David Matless made a compelling appeal for a Foucauldian genealogy of the aesthetics of geographical writing.[10] Yet much is still missing from such a genealogy. This kind of genealogy requires a form of scholarship that is *simultaneously* historical and philosophical, critically analysing the intersections of aesthetics, authority, form, and geography. As Matless reminds us, 'whether declared or not, all geography works an aesthetic'.[11] If we do not acknowledge and reflect on this, we risk allowing all sorts of unquestioned forms of authority to insinuate themselves into our writing.

Form and genre, as the fields of literary criticism and cultural theory have long established, are important vectors of authority. Histories and philosophies of geography are particularly well placed to perform the work of making this aesthetics of epistemic authority explicit, bringing it into question, and in doing so, making visible possibilities for *pluralising* the kinds of authority that geographical writing draws on and reproduces. Caroline Levine identifies several ways forms convey authority.[12] First, form is a kind of enabling constraint: it is a limit that establishes an enduring

[6] James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Authority', *Representations*, 2 (1983) 118–146.

[7] Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MA: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

[8] Rancière, *The Names of History*.

[9] For example, Eric Magrane and others (eds) *Geopoetics in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2019); Carl Lavery, Deborah P Dixon, and Lee Hassall, 'The Future of Ruins: The Baroque Melancholy of Hashima', *Environment and Planning A* 46 (2014) 2569–2584; Phillip Vannini and April Vannini, 'What Could Wild Life Be? Etho-Ethnographic Fables on Human-Animal Kinship', *GeoHumanities* 6 (2020) 122–138; Julian Brigstocke, 'The Aesthetics of Sand: Reclaiming Hong Kong's Unsettled Grounds', *GeoHumanities* 7 (2021) 370–390; James Ash, 'Post-Phenomenology and Space: A Geography of Comprehension, Form and Power', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45 (2020) 181–193.

[10] David Matless, 'An Occasion for Geography: Landscape, Representation, and Foucault's Corpus', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10 (1992) 41–56.

[11] Matless, An Occasion for Geography, p. 53.

[12] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

structure that does not immediately collapse in on itself. Thus, inventing new forms can be (and often is) a political act, contesting authority by challenging patterns and rhythms of constraint. Second, form partly defines an experience of time and space, through literary qualities such as rhythm, frequency, duration, focalization, and structure. The temporal form of writing is one way in which the spatio-temporality of the world is framed, implicitly or explicitly - improvisational forms, for example, construct and reflect upon a world that is open, contingent, and unfinished. Third, forms are historically and geographically situated: their political work varies across time and place. Form reflects and responds to contemporary political conditions, and experimenting with new forms is always an implicit commentary and critique upon those conditions. Fourth, form is not only a question of representation, but also of affect: non-representational affects and dynamic, visceral, embodied experiences themselves *have* form and *generate* form.[13] Finally, forms claim authority through how they overlap and intersect with one another. (A poem published in a geography journal, for example, claims and commands authority in different ways to a poem published in a literary journal). Forms, Levine argues, are portable, multiple, and usually overlapping.

An important tradition of geography explicitly stretches and experiments with the forms and aesthetics of geographical representation. Clever use has been made of the montage form in historical geography, for example, from Pred's *Recognising European Modernities* to Cresswell's *Maxwell Street.*[14] We might also think of the renewed interest in storytelling as a way of stretching the forms of historical geographical research.[15] Relatedly, we see an increased interest in speculative and imaginative counter-factual forms of historical geography.[16] We also see new links being made between geopoetics and historical geographies.[17] Various artistic collaborations have used geopoetics, creative nonfiction, and other artistic forms to bring the past to life in new ways.[18] Increased attention is also being paid to affective and non-representational aspects of historical geography, as well as more-than-human historical geographies.[19] Finally, there is widespread interest in developing inventive new ways of animating, enlivening, or expanding archives.[20] Yet it is important to remember that creativity claims an authority that can itself be problematic.[21] As Crang observes, transformations in the styles, genres, and forms of academic writing involve a reconfiguration of authority, but 'a reconfiguration where authorship and its authority continue to exist but in new forms'.[22] Nevertheless, experimenting with new forms remains a vital method for pluralising the kinds of epistemic authority that geography produces and reproduces.

To help think about how histories and philosophies of geography can find common cause in a genealogy of the poetics of geographical knowledge, I wish to turn to a relatively neglected figure in the history of social scientific thought: the sociologist Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–1888). Guyau's empiricist and anomic ethics had an importance influence on thinkers including sociologist Emile Durkheim, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and anarchist geographers Piotr Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus.[23] Kropotkin, in particular, drew on Guyau's ideas at length in his work on ethics.[24] Guyau's vitalist account of morality and authority was an early inspiration for a distinctively anarchistic ethics where authority is not linked to transcendent foundations, stable hierarchies, or objective knowledge, but is anomic and emerges out of the intensities of life in all its different forms. Guyau's ethics also anticipated some aspects of Freud's theory of the unconscious, although Guyau's emphasis on heredity can be contrasted with Freud's greater interest in environment as forcing an individual's norms on them from the outside.[25]

Guyau's approach to authority owed an important debt to Herbert Spencer's evolutionary ethics, as well as Alfred Fouillée's argument that moral obligation derives from experience itself not from any transcendent source.[26] Guyau's main innovation was linking moral experience directly to biological life. Guyau imagined a new form of social authority, emerging without punishment or obligation, that would be based wholly on experiential life. A genuinely social morality would only evolve, he argued, through an intensification of life. The sympathy of feeling that is required for a socially harmonious society 'is explained to a great extent by the fecundity of life, the expansion of which is almost in direct ratio to its intensity'.[27] Thus, Guyau argued, 'It is from life that we will demand the principle of morality'.[28] Guyau sought to address the vacuum of social authority that many feared would emerge out of the decline of religious authority. Far from leaving a moral vacuum, Guyau insisted, '[e]nfeeblement of religious instinct will set free, for employment in social progress, an immense amount of force hitherto set aside for the service of mysticism'.[29]

Anticipating Freud, Guyau viewed the subject as a composition of diverse, conflicting, evolutionary forces and powers. Every self is a composite of multiple powers: 'Our ego is but an approximation, a kind of permanent suggestion. It does not exist, it is in the process

[13] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. xiv.

[14] Allan Pred, *Recognising European Modernities: A Montage of the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Tim Cresswell, *Maxwell Street: Writing and Thinking Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[15] Hayden Lorimer, 'Dear Departed: Writing the Lifeworlds of Place', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44 (2019) 331–345; Fraser MacDonald, 'The Ruins of Erskine Beveridge', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39 (2014) 477–489.

[16] David Gilbert and David Lambert, 'Counterfactual Geographies: Worlds That Might Have Been', *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010) 245–252.

[17] Aya Nassar, 'Geopoetics as Disruptive Aesthetics: Vignettes from Cairo', *GeoHumanities* 7 (2021) 455–463.

[18] Adeola Enigbokan and Merle Patchett, 'Speaking with Specters: Experimental Geographies in Practice', *cultural geographies* 19 (2012) 535–546.

[19] Uma Kothari, 'Seafarers, the Mission and the Archive: Affective, Embodied and Sensory Traces of Sea-Mobilities in Melbourne, Australia', *Journal of Historical Geography* 72 (2021) 73–84; Hannah Awcock, 'Handbills, Rumours, and Blue Cockades: Communication During the 1780 Gordon Riots', *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (2021) 1–9. Maan Barua, 'Ratzel's Biogeography: A More-Than-Human Encounter', *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018) 102–108.

[20] Sarah Mills, 'Cultural–Historical Geographies of the Archive: Fragments, Objects and Ghosts', *Geography Compass* 7 (2013) 701–713; Joanna Mann, 'Knitting the Archive: Shetland Lace and Ecologies of Skilled Practice', *cultural geographies* 25 (2018) 91–106; Merle Patchett, 'Archiving', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44 (2019) 650–653.

[21] Thomas Osborne, 'Against 'Creativity': A Philistine Rant', *Economy and Society* 32 (2003) 507–525; Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (London: Verso, 2018).

[22] Philip Crang, 'The Politics of Polyphony: Reconfigurations in Geographical Authority', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 10 (1992) 527–549 (p. 530).

[23] Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'Free Spirits and Free Thinkers: Nietzsche and Guyau on the Future of Morality', in *Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Philosophy of the Future,* ed. by Jeffrey Metzger (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 102-24; Marco Orru, 'The Ethics of Anomie: Jean Marie Guyau and Emile Durkheim', *British Journal of Sociology* (1983) 499–518; Julian Brigstocke, *The Life of the City: Space, Humour, and the Experience of Truth in Fin-De-Siècle Montmartre* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

[24] Petr Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and Development* (New York: Lincoln MacVeagh, 1924).

[25] See C. W. Maris, *Critique of the Empiricist Explanation of Morality: Is There a Natural Equivalent of Categorical Morality?* (Dordrecht, Springer, 1981), p. 129.

[26] Herbert Spencer *Principles of sociology* (New York: D. Appleton and company, 1882); Alfred Fouillée *Critique of contemporary moral systems* (Paris: Baillère, 1883).

[27] Jean-Marie Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*, trans. G. Kapteyn (London: Watts & Co., 1898), p. 70.

[28] Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality,* p. 70.

[29] Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality,* p. 235.

of making, it will never be complete'.[30] These powers have developed slowly over time as individual or collective habit.[31] Habits, and hence powers, arise after organisms successfully adapt to a certain environment. Thus, to speak of 'power' is to speak of an organism's 'pre-established, constitutional adaptation, an aptitude ready to be awakened and translated into actions'. This enabled Guyau to argue that every voluntary act is the product of a kind of internal, unconscious struggle for life: 'There is no completely voluntary act – or what comes to the same thing, no completely conscious act – which is not accompanied by the sense of victory of certain internal tendencies over others, and, consequently, of a possible struggle between these tendencies, and therefore of a possible struggle against them'.[32] The will, therefore, is a simply an expression of the strongest, most vigorous, power.

Guyau's vitalism was distinct in important ways from those of theorists such as Bergson and Nietzsche. His theory of will as power enabled Guyau to argue that obligation or duty should not be conceived as a constraint on action, in the manner of religious morality. Rather, the feeling of obligation is a positive experience of a compulsion to act. Obligation is a form of intensely lived 'volition', a volition which, far from being freely chosen, is the product of an intense conflict of internal, unconscious, vital powers. This enabled Guyau to make life the principal source of a radical new form of anti-authoritarian social authority. If this sounds very Nietzschean – and Guyau was often referred to as the 'French Nietzsche' - Guyau's account departed strongly from Nietzsche, taking a more sociological direction, in the stress he placed on moral fecundity, the energetic expansion of an individual's life in the direction of their fellow men and women.[33] Guyau also departed from Bergson in viewing time, not as a metaphysical condition, but as an experiential outcome of evolutionary spatial practices (indeed, Bergson specifically criticised Guyau for spatialising time).[34] According to Guyau, an authority is possible that is self-grounding, based on the intensity of life. For life, he wrote, 'is a kind of gravitation upon itself'.[35] This emphasis on generosity and moral fecundity made Guyau's theory of ethics deeply attractive to Kropotkin, who wrote at length on Guyau's ethics, whilst also critiquing Guyau's anthropocentrism (since, according to Kropotkin, a similar spirit of self-sacrifice for the good of the family or group is common in the animal world).[36]

Guyau's vitalist writing on ethics, authority, and self-sacrifice played an important role in the history of anarchist geographical thought that would merit further study. For now, I can only reflect briefly on what might result from apply this kind of anti-authoritarian vitalism to the history and philosophy of geography. Guyau's ethics can be summarised as an approach that is simultaneously: genetic; affirmative; and generous. It is genetic, in that authority is constituted through evolutionary history and struggles for life; understanding it requires exploring how it acquired its powers as the unstable outcome of a contest between multiple dynamic desires and forces. It is affirmative, in that understanding authority requires experimenting with intensifying its forces and amplifying its potentials. Finally, it is generous, in that intensifying its vital forces will not lead to a Nietzschean impersonal will to power that resists altruistic drives and affects, but to an expenditure of life that lends itself to generosity and fecundity.

Reactivating an approach to authority and the poetics of knowledge inspired by Guyau, perhaps we might find a productive space of intersection between history and philosophy of geography through a revived genealogical study of the forms and aesthetics of geographical writing. To understand geography's diverse positions within the conflicting field of scientific, literary, and political authority in contemporary society, a Guyau-inflected vitalist encounter with geographical texts would not (only) organise them into chronological sequences, but would instead re-singularise or counter-actualise them through tracing their unruly, divergent, conflicting forces. Such a non-representational, vitalist counter-history would explore emanations and interactions of potentials that are found in the forces, forms, and experiential life of geographical concepts.[37] It would concern itself less with mapping chronologies, influences, and disputes, than with intensifying forces, powers, and potentials. This would be a genealogy that is at once genetic (exploring how the life of geographical concepts emerged out of specific contexts, debates, and politics), affirmative (adopting an aesthetic approach to intensifying the vital forces and energies of concepts), and generous (aiming not to judge concepts, but to pluralise them).

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[30] Jean-Marie Guyau, *Education and Heredity: A Study in Sociology* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), p. 65.
[31] Guyau, *Education and Heredity*, p. 47.
[32] Guyau, *Education and Heredity*, p. 61.
[33] See Ansell-Pearson 'Free Spirits and Free Thinkers'.
[34] John A. Michon, Viviane Pouthas, and Janet L. Jackson (eds) *Guyau and the Idea of Time* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1988).
[35] Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality*, p. 81.
[36] Kropotkin, *Ethics*, p. 281.
[37] Ivan Marković, 'Where is the past? Time in historical geography', *Journal of Historical Geography* 84 (2024) 27–36.