Geocritical Explorations
Geocritical Explorations
Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies

Edited by Robert T. Tally Jr.

Foreword by Bertrand Westphal
For Vancouver,
and for one who loves that place
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For a long period, time seems to have been the main coordinate—at least the main scientific coordinate—of human inscription into the world. Time was aristocracy. Space only was a rough container, a plebeian frame for time (see Kantian philosophy, for instance). Spaces were marginalia. Obviously there were exceptions, even strange ones. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, wrote his famous Spiritual Exercises (1522–1524), and there already were previous links between geography or topography and hagiography (here we might recall the medieval Irish Navigatio Sancti Brendani), but in Loyola’s Exercises the connection matched spatial representation and prayer—prayer as an elaboration of a fantasy world, a global and abstract framework of faith’s eternity. Ignatius indeed worked out the concept of compositio loci. Describing a prelude to one exercise, he said, “The First Prelude is a composition, seeing the place. Here it is also to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation [. . .] the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate.”¹ This exercise deserves a lot of commentary, but we do not have the space to develop it here. Suffice it to say that such a baroque representation could be said to announce what Gaston Bachelard terms topoanalysis—that is, “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.”²

Does this mean that there is a link between Ignatius and Bachelard, between the baroque and psychoanalysis? Why not? Anyway, for both of them, what matters is not so much the thing in itself, in se, but the idea it suggests, its composition, almost in a rhetorical and iconic sense, whether through a direct observation or through an abstract effort of reconfiguration (i.e., prayer in Ignatius’s times was a means of constructing things with the mind, and psychoanalysis in Bachelard’s was another one). On
the eve of a new reading of the world, in which the Renaissance vision is no longer considered as a global and homogeneous space, Ignatius admitted that the world’s unity, in a realm that hitherto was said to be *scriptus per digito Dei* (as Pier Damiani wrote in the eleventh century), was to be overcome. Maybe the world was still the playground of the soul, but the rules had to be rethought or at least adapted by Man—and by Woman also: we should not forget that Teresa de Avila concretely mapped her visionary projections on paper.

Yet if these considerations point out that space might have been more than a mere container, they do not imply that it was theorized in humanities, especially not in literary studies. I suppose that we had to wait for twentieth-century literature scholars to put forward spatial conceptions of literature and literary theories of space—maybe even until the second half of that century, after the end of World War II’s *decompositio loci*. The first half of last century was still dominated by temporal studies (à la Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Georges Poulet, and so on). In localized spots, here and there, maybe some isolated names might be mentioned—Joseph Frank and his notion of spatial form and then Bachelard with his poetics of space—but for the most part, we would have to wait until the 1960s to see significant changes. As I have only a brief space and little time to explore the subject here (which once more shows that time and space are closely interrelated), I refer to only three or four different approaches that emerged in that era.

In literary theory, the first systematic approach was *imagology*, which was born in the wake of a passionate debate within comparative literature. During the first congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, René Wellek accused the so-called French School (including Marius-François Guyard and Jean-Marie Carré), which had started an interdisciplinary reflection upon “images” and “mirages” of the Other, of promoting national points of view and an extrinsic approach at the expense of pure literary scholarship. Consequently, when Hugo Dyserink coined the term *imagology* in 1966, he boldly entered an already perilous field. Without going into detail, I would add that if imagology (at least as conceived by Dyserink) pays attention to questions of space, it is mainly in order to refer to the Other’s imagined territory. The location in itself, as understood by Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists, has a very little relevance in imagology. Moreover, it is only thanks to such scholars as Daniel-Henri Pageaux and Jean-Marc Moura, among others, that imagology managed to get rid of its purported Eurocentrism (which, it always seemed to me, would have been more aptly described as Western-centric). There was actually a kind of African adaptation of imagology, which Bonny Duala-M’bedy, a Cameroon-born anthropologist, formalized; his approach was
called xenology, and he tried to show how a so-called foreigner systematically gets included in a mythological scheme that stages him instead of giving him a particular identity. Like imagology, xenology consecrates the alienation of the Other without considering a possible overcoming of Otherness. Imagology, like xenology, studies the insurmountable gap between a looking subject and an observed object and presumes that their respective places cannot merge in a global human space. Mind the gap!

Two other authoritative literary and global approaches to space have been developed more recently: geopoetics and ecocriticism. Geopoetics has been elaborated by Kenneth White, a Scottish poet who has been living in France since the 1970s. Geopoetics focuses on the intertwining of the biosphere, poetry, and poetics, foregrounding these in a somewhat systematic endeavor. Geopoetics goes along with a certain ecological view of life, a certain inclusion in world culture. Obviously it has a global range, and White’s favorite references prove it: Heraclitus, Thoreau, Emerson, Stevens, Whitman, Tchouang-tseu, Matsuo Bashô, Hölderlin, and so on. White likes invoking “a geography of the poetic spirit.” However, even if geopoetics has almost become a common term, I am not sure that it rests on a clearly defined theoretical base. Frequently, geopoetics offers a hodgepodge of ideas, without the systematic theoretical framework it might have aspired to provide.

As for ecocriticism, it is even more fashionably up to date since it developed and spread beginning in the 1990s in the United States and Canada, without any named individual source (if I am not mistaken). Although there are a number of key scholars—ecocritics—who have made important contributions to the theory and practice, ecocriticism is not really associated with a founding figure—quite rightly, it seems. Ecocriticism, which also may be called ecoliterature, has proved to be a collective and progressive achievement. Allison B. Wallace, in defining the term ecoliterature, explains, “When I talk about ecoliterature, I’m talking about any writing that focuses on place, on the thousands of local landscapes that make up not scenery through car windows, not Sierra Club calendars nor slick ads for hiking gear, but rather our daily contexts, what David Quammen calls our ‘matrices for destiny.’ Writing that examines and invites intimate human experience of place’s myriad ingredients: weather, climate, flora, fauna, soil, air, water, rocks, minerals, fire and ice as well as all the marks there of human history.” It escapes nobody that ecocriticism covers the same fields as geopoetics but with much more concern for theory. And emerging after the era of structuralist dominance had ended, ecocriticism has reintroduced the question of the referent, a reflection upon the eventual links between realia and representation.
Most of those approaches allot some room for questions of space, but none directly addresses the spatial turn that has recently been pinpointed by theoreticians as different as Michel Foucault (who, alongside Henri Lefebvre, is perhaps the most influential promoter of this “turn”), Edward Soja, or Paul Zumthor. In the literary area, writing about space did not involve a rethinking of the relationship between the so-called objective referent and its artistic representation, between the real world and fictitious words. As we know, the structuralist view held overwhelming sway for more than two decades in France; it was certainly no easy task to fight back against its predominance. I believe that structuralism’s credo might be summed up in Jacques Derrida’s laconic formula: *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*. There is nothing outside the text, and a text is a text is a text. A text may be a Steinian rose, who knows, but anyway a text should have no concrete link with the actual world. In his famous and almost revolutionary *Fictional Worlds*, Thomas Pavel denounced structuralism’s worship of paper as “textolatry” and proposed to expound a logical, formalist “possible-world theory” in literature. A text was no more a mere text; a text opened a new world in a constellation of worlds, some real, some less real, some clearly fictitious—even if these adjectives were losing part of their sense under the pressure of a weakening definition of reality (see, for example, Gianni Vattimo’s notion of pensiero debole, or “weak thought”). Globality becomes a compound of heterogeneous representations in a fully postmodern meaning.

Another characteristic of spatial literary analysis refers to the status of the world’s occupants. In most approaches, one is supposed to watch and another has to be watched, according to a model that turns out to be more entomological than ontological. A subject called “One” observes an object called “Other,” taking note of characteristics that seem to delineate the outlines of his or her strangeness. The “exotic” frame is the result of a naïve attempt to rationalize strangeness and to integrate it into something that may be mastered. Traditionally, “One” is a Westerner and “Other” is not. Most imagological studies are one-way, European, or North American streets. Otherness is the hallmark of minorities according to such an approach. It would probably be fairer to say that the Other is part of a majority that is given a minor role by One or, to parody the title of a now aging movie, the Other becomes a child of a lesser god. Here, the globe looks like a halved orange with section lines running horizontal or vertical—that is, following a north/south or east/west axis. You may easily guess which of the halves has for a long time been supposed to be the better one (and I would not affirm that nowadays such a hierarchy has really been overcome). Postcolonial studies have tried to introduce new perspectives since even before the era of decolonization, and they managed to make significant changes, sometimes by running the risk of establishing another
centric point of view, the former Other becoming an ongoing One. In fact, is it possible to consider an overcoming of Otherness, an overtaking of the Other’s alienation, whoever he or she is? Is it possible to remove those multiple lines that split space and short-circuit globality? Is it possible to address globality as the target of a heterarchic focus (to use Douglas Hofstadter’s terminology)?

These issues are absolutely critical in today’s worldwide, geographically oversized society. To a large extent, they exceed literature and even culture—unless culture be viewed as ubiquitous, which seems quite reasonable to me. In any case, both literature and culture are of concern here, in a way and in a proportion that still has to be defined. In my opinion, the era when “fictitious” narrations can be definitely cut off from the “real” world is long over. Culture, the arts, and, more specifically, literature have assumed a renewed responsibility, such as they had in earlier centuries. Let us not forget that ancient Greeks did not separate history from what we call literature; they had no appropriate word for “literature” simply because they did not need it. The Homeric *Odyssey* was literature, geography, history, theology, anthropology, and something more: a book, a *biblion*, a universal topic. At the very start of a new millennium, there is no doubt that literature has to be reinstated within a discourse on the world. What we call “world literature” should imply a double openness on literary productions: first, that they be regarded as wholly universal and freed from any discrimination between supposed centers (they always have been plural) and peripheries, and second, that they be linked to “real-life” referents, a coupling that allows them to hold their own position in the global discourse about modern society.

Geocriticism is an approach whose purpose is to explore some of the interstices that until recent times were blank spaces for literary studies. Geocriticism is clearly affiliated with those theories that unleash spatial perception and representation in a nomadic perspective, which have made for a very stimulating background. In the 1970s, mainly in France, several theoretical achievements led to a new dynamic of space and reading in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology: among others, the most important might have been Foucault’s heterotopias, Deleuze and Guattari’s deterritorialization process, and Lefebvre’s production-of-space hypothesis. In the 1980s, Baudrillard’s analysis of the simulacra inspired such scholars of postmodernism as Brian McHale, who draws upon Fredric Jameson and many other earlier theorists, especially those who elaborated possible-world theories (e.g., Goodman, Walton, Pavel, Doležel, etc.). Also influential have been the postmodern cultural geography of Cosgrove, Gregory, Brosseau, and above all Edward Soja and his notion of *thirdspace*. Last but not least, geocriticism entertains a close relationship to most minority
discourses: Deleuze’s once again, and of course postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Spivak, Rabasa, etc.), gender studies (Anzaldúa, Rose, etc.) and whatnot. It is probably necessary to combine all these cross-disciplinary inputs in order to open up a truly literary approach to spaces, one that is closer to contemporary postcolonial and globalization theory than to imagology, for instance.

Having already written a book and some shorter theoretical essays on geocriticism, I will avoid going into detail here, but I can list a few of the main methodological features. First of all, as I underscored previously, geocriticism enters an interdisciplinary field. By interdisciplinarity, I do not mean a utilitarian piling up of heterogeneous notions, but a process that produces true interactions among disciplines like literary studies, geography, urbanism and architecture, with pathways to sociology and anthropology. So geocriticism expresses a comparativist concern, but it is not limited to the traditional disciplinary concepts and practices of comparative literature. As for more precise elements of definition, let me just add the following points:

1. Geocriticism is a geo-centered rather than an ego-centered approach; that is, the analysis focuses on global spatial representations rather than on individual ones (a given traveler’s, for example). Thus one may undertake a geocritical study of a city, a region, a territory, and so on, rather than studying a given author’s treatment of that place.
2. Geocriticism ceases to privilege a given point of view in order to embrace a broader range of vision regarding a place. Three main perspectives may be identified (endogenous, exogenous, and alloge
deous), and this hybridization of the different focuses (multifocalization) tends to relativize Otherness and to identify stereotypes.
3. Geocriticism promotes the empire of the senses, a polysensuous approach to places—places meaning concrete or realized spaces. Most of the time, places are perceived with our eyes, but it seems most appropriate to diversify sensing to include the sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of a place.
4. Geocriticism associates both geometric and philosophical coordinates of life—time and space—in a spatiotemporal scheme. A geocritical analysis locates places in a temporal depth in order to uncover or discover multilayered identities, and it highlights the temporal variability of heterogeneous spaces. Spatial analysis reveals that present is asynchronic: our vision of time is not necessarily the same as our neighbor’s. Globality implies polychrony.
All this is in line with three fundamental concepts: spatiotemporality (no spatial analysis may avoid temporal concerns); transgressivity (no representation is stable; on the contrary, as in Deleuze’s deterritorialization process, permanent fluidity is the characteristic of representations and, consequently, of identities); and referentiality (any representation is linked with the referential world).

Geocriticism has been theorized, certainly, but it will continue being a work in progress. This is coextensive with its very nature. This volume is a testament to the fact that more scholars are beginning to work on geocritical projects in Europe and on other continents (e.g., Robert Tally’s discussions of “literary cartography” and geocriticism), as well as in both literature and the human sciences. A geocritical approach should be particularly helpful in postcolonial and globalization studies as well. Geocriticism, like space itself, offers infinite opportunities for further examination and exploration.

Notes

Acknowledgments

Like the space of a place itself, in which the present configurations of things are shaped by what comes before and are ceaselessly reconfigured in anticipation of future developments, a book is what it is largely because of a heterogeneous mélange of textual and material circumstances. Geocritical Explorations has benefitted from many other texts and contexts. This project undoubtedly began long before it crystallized in the form of a Modern Language Association panel on geocriticism in December 2009. That panel, which featured presentations by several contributors to this volume (and had another contributor in the audience), already revealed the diversity of approaches that could be called “geocritical,” but it also reinforced my sense that a large and growing number of scholars working in literary and cultural studies were interested in geocriticism. I hope that this collection supplements and encourages current and future research in this field.

I would like to thank the contributors for their excellent contributions, and I want to especially thank my former panelists (Christine Battista, Rachel Collins, Eric Prieto, and Bertrand Westphal) for revising and elaborating their presentations for inclusion here. Let me single out Professor Westphal for special thanks. I have come to know him well through our efforts to characterize and to promote geocriticism (see his Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces), and I have found him to be generous, patient, and enthusiastic. When I first issued a call for proposals, I received a large number of excellent ones that, for various reasons, could not be included in this collection, but I am grateful to all who submitted abstracts and who are engaged in such intriguing research. I am also grateful for the well wishes from others who, while not directly involved in Geocritical Explorations, have nevertheless contributed in ways they may not themselves realize. These include Eric Bulson, Tom Conley, Peter Hulme, Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti, Ricardo Padron, John Protevi, Edward Soja, and Amy Wells. My colleagues at Texas State University, in particular Michael Hennessy and Ann Marie Ellis, have provided unflagging support. I owe a debt of gratitude to Brigitte Shull of Palgrave Macmillan, who has been indefatigable
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