

# Geocriticism Meets Ecocriticism: Bertrand Westphal and Environmental Thinking

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This has been a good year for geocriticism in the United States. A translation of Bertrand Westphal's 2007 monograph, *La géocritique: réel, fiction, espace*, was published this year, followed closely by a volume of essays titled *Geocritical Explorations*, which could serve as a companion piece to the Westphal book<sup>[1]</sup>. A significant amount of the American interest in Westphal's work has been coming from ecologically minded literary critics, with Scott Slovic, founding President of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) and current editor of *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment)* writing approvingly of Westphal's approach (Slovic, « Editor's Note, » 245) and encouraging the integration of his work into the ecocritical canon<sup>[2]</sup>. Given their mutual interest in issues like place, space, landscape, and nature it is not surprising to find this kind of convergence between ecocriticism and geocriticism. Westphal's book argues forcefully for the adoption of a « geo-centered » or « geocentric » approach to literature that has much in common with the ecological/environmental preoccupations of ecocriticism. Nonetheless, the differences between *geo*-criticism and *eco*-criticism, like those between geography and ecology, are significant and worthy of close examination. Although the two approaches are clearly complementary, the questions and goals that shaped them differ in important respects. The purpose of this essay, then, will be to examine some of the zones of overlap between the two fields in order to consider some ways in which the two approaches can complement, correct, and inspire each other.

Westphal's primary interest is in the literary representation of *place*: environmental politics and nature writing are secondary concerns for him, a subset of his topic about which he has relatively little to say. Thus, although Westphal pays tribute, in passing, to ecocritical studies as one possible form that geocritical thinking can take, and although he shows an occasional interest in nature writing, he is silent on questions of environmental activism and on ontological questions about the place of man within nature. He is clearly much more interested in the cultural history of cities than in natural history and in exploring questions of literary semiotics than in promoting sound environmental stewardship. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, has a strong activist bent, motivated by an acute awareness of the impact that human cultures have on the environment. But it sometimes underestimates the complexity of the referential relationship between text and world and on this point, Westphal's work has much to offer ecocritics, as his approach is especially good at teasing out the semiotic complexity of place and the dialectical nature of the relationships between texts and their real-world referents.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I will offer in the following pages a straightforward introduction to Westphal's theory of Geocriticism, emphasizing areas in which it could contribute to the ecocritical study of literature, followed by a consideration of some of the ways in which ecocriticism could complement Westphal's project.

## **I. An introduction to geocriticism**

Perhaps the first thing to notice about Westphal's approach is that he frames it in specifically postmodern terms, as an attempt to understand the changing meaning of space and place in our era of « incredulity with regard to meta-narratives » (to borrow Lyotard's well-worn phrase). For Westphal, the postmodern world is a world that is fully available to us, in the sense that humans have fully explored its surface and brought all but the most remote corners of the Earth into an all-encompassing informational and economic system. Nonetheless, the meanings of the places through which we move have been subject to unprecedented levels of instability. Although there may be no virgin territories or *terra incognitae* waiting to be discovered and colonized (short of outer space and the deepest depths of the ocean), there is nonetheless much work to be done at the interstices between established domains, whose borders are constantly being called into question. Westphal argues, therefore, that it is « transgression » (defined, etymologically, as a crossing of borders) that provides the best model for spatial thinking in the postmodern era. Like Gloria Anzaldúa and Homi Bhabha, Westphal emphasizes the importance of thinking in terms of borderlands, interstitial zones, and hybrid identities, those spaces that occupy the margins between established domains and call into question the legitimacy of established borders. For Westphal, it is this kind of postcolonial theory—along with radical geography in the tradition of Henri Lefebvre (David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Edward Soja) and the Deleuzian philosophy of deterritorialization and reterritorialization—that provides the surest guide for the kind of spatial thinking he has in mind. Why? Because they are concerned with showing

how spaces once thought to be self-contained and autonomous, defined in stable, self-evident ways, are in fact in constant flux, loosely delineated by borders that are shifting, permeable, and always open to question<sup>[3]</sup>. As the borderland metaphor favored by Anzaldúa suggests, it may be in the domains that straddle official borders that the most interesting and significant cultural and social activity is taking place.

There is a disciplinary corollary to this geographical thesis: like the borderlands between established spatial domains, the energy generated at the points of contact between established scholarly disciplines has given rise to the contemporary emphasis on interdisciplinarity in both the human and physical sciences. It is in fact the productive potential of this kind of encounter between disciplines that has given rise to fields like geocriticism. By asking geographical questions of literary texts and asking literary questions of geographical representations, geocriticism brings together in a productive way the social sciences and the humanities. Many in the social sciences have been asking similar kinds of questions. The radical geographers mentioned above (Lefebvre, Harvey, Gregory, Soja) are highly attuned to the postmodern instability of representations of geographical spaces within the social sciences, making it necessary for social scientists to take into account the mechanics of representation in ways that owe much to literary theory (Nicholas J. Entrikin's *The Betweenness of Space* develops this point at length). In a somewhat different way, humanist geographers in the tradition of Yi-Fu Tuan have been highly attuned to the quasi-literary aspects of spatial representations in the social sciences. They emphasize the personal, subjective or phenomenological, side of geography, which had been largely repressed during the height of the « quantitative revolution » in the social sciences in the mid twentieth century. Meanwhile, phenomenological philosophers like Edward Casey and Jeff Malpas have stressed the reciprocal nature of the relationship between human perceptual and cognitive structures and the material and spatial structures of the physical world, adding depth and richness to the inquiries opened up by the humanist geographers.

Westphal, and those of us working in his wake, build on this cross-disciplinary effort to bring together humanistic and social scientific modes of inquiry by asking what, precisely, the literary study of space and place can contribute to work being done in the social sciences and vice versa. To what extent, for example, do fictional depictions of place enrich our understanding of real-world places? More specifically, do they contribute something that other modes of representation do not? Or, given the fact that literary texts are not subject to the constraints of veracity and falsifiability, should they be considered to have a weaker epistemological status than scientific or documentary representations of place?

Westphal's answer to this last question is an emphatic *au contraire*. For him, literature has a crucial role to play in this process of breaking down borders and exploring the spaces between established sites. Central to Westphal's conception of literary criticism is the conviction that literature not only *represents* the world around us but participates actively in the production of that world. As he writes:

I will never get tired of repeating that fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces... fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real, knowing that these folds have not been temporalized. (171)

In support of this thesis, Westphal turns to possible worlds theory, as exemplified in the work of Thomas Pavel and Lubomír Doležal, as well as related efforts like Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* and the fictional pragmatics of Kendall Walton, all of which provide important correctives to the structuralist and poststructuralist emphasis on textuality and autoreferentiality. This is not the place to go into a full-blown discussion of these theories, but they share the conviction that fiction (and other hypothetical modes of thinking), by creating alternative realities that overlap in various significant ways with the world as we know it, has a powerful referential function, getting us to think about the real world in ways that would have been impossible without this hypothetical distancing from the world in which we live. They emphasize the extent to which fiction provides a way for ordinary people to better understand the world around them and to think through the problems they may encounter in their practical lives. Fictional texts, in this view, provide not only aesthetic pleasure, but also serve as an aid in the discernment of important features of the real world that would not have become apparent without them.