

Eric Prieto
University of California, Santa Barbara

Bertrand Westphal, *Géocritique; réel, fiction, espace*, (Paris: Minuit, 2007), 278pp.
Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. Robert T. Tally (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 192pp.

Although not specifically focused on ecological themes, Bertrand Westphal's *Géocritique: réel, fiction, espace* intersects with the ecocritical concerns of this journal on at least two distinct fronts: through its aggressive promotion of literature as a medium capable of effecting real change in the ways we think about the environments around us, and through its theoretical exploration of geospatial concepts like place, which feed directly into the ecocritical concern for the preservation of meaningful local environments. On this geospatial level, Westphal brings together a variety of competing approaches--postcolonial, Deleuzian, Lefebvrian, semiotic--that enrich considerably our understanding of spatial concepts like place. On the literary level, Westphal adopts a comparative approach to the literary representation of place that enables him to avoid the parochial outlook that mars some regionalist approaches to the literary study of place, while also emphasizing literature's ability to inflect our attitudes towards the places around us through the projection of hypothetical (fictional) alternatives. Possible worlds theory, as set forth by Lubomír Doležal and Thomas Pavel, is of particular importance on this front.

Readers of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* will be interested to learn that Westphal is one of a small but growing group of French critics who take postcolonial criticism seriously. And admirers of Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* will appreciate the ways in which Westphal's theory contests localist notions of place that underestimate the interconnectedness of the modern world. Like Heise, Westphal relies heavily on notions like deterritorialization and relationality to emphasize the extent to which the local environment is always linked into larger, and ultimately global flows of people, products, information, and risk.

Westphal ranges widely and knowledgeably through a variety of European literatures, from Homer to Dante to Pécerc and Pessoa. Moreover, coming, as he does, out of the field of Mediterranean studies, he seeks to promote a sense of the Mediterranean world as a single region, emphasizing the importance of recognizing contributions to Mediterranean culture from around the basin, from Tangiers to Tel Aviv and Tripoli to Trieste. His perspective may be European but his intention is to undo Eurocentric assumptions about the region, with the comparative, geocentric study of literature proposed as a powerful way to overcome such attitudes.

Westphal's application of postcolonial theory to European texts is of particular interest here. His treatment of Odysseus, for example, reminds us that the Mediterranean was a zone of intercultural contact and conflict long before the notion of

Europe as a unified civilization had arisen, suggesting that it is subject to the kind of transgressive "borderland" dynamic studied by Gloria Anzaldúa. And although Westphal shies away from the overtly political tendencies of much postcolonial criticism, he retains from it an emphasis on literature as a referential medium that has the potential to intervene powerfully, albeit indirectly, in world affairs, notably through the ability of literary representations to make us see the world around us in new and unsuspected ways.

Throughout his book, Westphal emphasizes the importance of the comparative method. This has important consequences for the way he conceives of his theory of literary spatiality. Indeed, for Westphal the specificity of the geocritical approach is its use of the comparative method. The typical geocritical study, in his view, will pick a single place and seek out what he calls the "identitarian essence" of that place by comparing as many different representations of that place as possible. Westphal, being a literary critic, emphasizes literary representations of place, but he is quick to argue that the geocritic should also take into account other kinds of texts, including insider accounts, historical or anthropological studies, geographical surveys, and travel guides. This emphasis on "multifocalization," with analysis organized "geocentrically" around a single place, is at the heart of his method. It is buttressed by his more general emphasis on the importance of bringing into play as many different perspectives as possible, including not only different texts and cultural perspectives, but also representations that leverage the entire range of human faculties (via the principle of "polysensoriality"), as well as an archeological or "stratigraphic" view of the history of the place in question.

Again, Westphal's account of geocriticism is not particularly concerned with ecological/environmental matters, but it includes an implicit call for an ecocritical perspective on place that would participate in and complete the other dimensions of comparative analysis. (Environmental considerations are clearly unavoidable if we are to develop a truly multifocal account of any given place.) Conversely, Westphal's approach clearly suggests an important corrective to some of the more ideological modes of ecocriticism, since his emphasis on multifocalization requires a sense of balance between the various perspectives in play. Westphal is not a proponent of deep ecology. For him ecological concerns must always be considered in the context of human needs, the natural world in relation to the world of culture.

Perhaps the most important service that Westphal's approach can provide for ecocritics is its careful theorization of literary referentiality. Some modes of ecocriticism, in what might be called its "realist" branch, have a tendency to underestimate the complexity of the relationship between literary representations and their worldly referents. On this point, Westphal's book offers a particularly rich trove of critical tools. His approach is especially good at teasing out the semiotic complexity and dialectical nature of the relationships between texts and their real-world referents, demonstrating some of the ways in which literary texts can have powerfully performative effects, with real-world political consequences, while also emphasizing the indirectness and subtlety of such effects.

There are, naturally, some points on which we might want to question Westphal's program. For example, Westphal's insistence on a geocentric outlook leads him to assume that the typical geocritical study will be organized around a single place, like a city or geographical formation that can be located on a map. And while this is a perfectly reasonable way to organize a geocritical study, we might ask why he doesn't also consider other kinds of geocentric organizational principles, including more general categories of place that are not limited to a single location (ie. "the suburb" or "the wetland"), or, alternatively, geographical principles and aptitudes of various kinds. Think, for example, of the literary (but also psychosocial) implications of the Guugu Yimithirr language of Queensland, Australia, a language that does not use egocentric directions like "left" and "right" to indicate location, but cardinal directions: Guugu Yimithirr speakers always situate themselves in relation to the absolute reference points of the compass, not the subject-centered reference points that most other cultures emphasize. There is clearly much work to be done on subjects like this--involving the relationship between language, representation, and spatial aptitudes--that would be just as useful in its own way as the place-bound conception of geocriticism that Westphal emphasizes. Another curious feature of Westphal's book is that, despite his insistence on the absolute priority of literature's referential function, and his adamant rejection of the French tradition of auto-referential *textolatric* (summed up in the Derridean formula *il n'y a pas de hors texte*), Westphal accords little attention at all to non-textual sources of knowledge. Like many French critics of the post-1968 generation, Westphal is engaged in a kind of Oedipal battle against the textualism of the previous generation, and yet he maintains an almost exclusive focus on intertextual relations, with few references to the importance of non-textual experience, as if he were unable to break free of the gravitational pull of the very logic he seeks to contest.

These are, however, minor quibbles in a book that has much to offer ecocritics and other spatially oriented scholars. They take nothing away from what may be one of the most important contributions of Westphal's book, which is its insistence on furthering the dialogue between the Anglo-American and continental traditions. And few are better placed to start such a conversation than Bertrand Westphal, who is able to bring postcolonial theory, analytic philosophy, and radical geography to the table in a way that will appeal to French audiences while also (since the recent translation by Robert Tally) bringing this distinctively French mode of thinking to English speaking audiences that might otherwise have resisted French Theory on principle.

Given all this, it is no surprise that geocriticism seems to be having its breakthrough moment in France, as recent special issues of the French online journals *LHT* [*Littérature, Histoire, Théorie*] and *Epistémocritique* suggest. And now, with the help of Tally's translation of Westphal's *Géocritique*, it is poised to have a similar breakthrough in the English speaking world.