

**JAMES JOYCE'S DUBLIN AND LARS SAABYE CHRISTENSEN'S OSLO.  
GEOCRITICAL READINGS**

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***Abstract:** This paper analyzes the literary representations of Dublin and Oslo in the novels of James Joyce, respectively Lars Saabye Christensen. The methodology derives from concepts introduced by Bertrand Westphal in his books on geocriticism, with a special emphasis on the performative nature of literature in relation to space production.*

***Keywords:** Dublin, geocriticism, Oslo, space and place, space production writing the city.*

## **1. Introduction**

"Writing the city" is an endeavor many authors have engaged with and it has thus become a fascinating research topic, especially since the spatial turn has been announced and established by theoreticians such as Michel Foucault, Edward Soja or Bertrand Westphal. The study of space in literature may be approached by applying different theoretical frameworks, but the present paper will focus on geocriticism and aims at analyzing the role of literature in the perception, representation and production of space. The analysis will revolve around the case of James Joyce's Dublin and of Lars Saabye Christensen's Oslo. Ultimately, the question asked in this paper is whether it is really possible to separate the real city from the fictional city. If this separation is not possible, may we pinpoint the place where the two intersect? Referentiality is defined by Bertrand Westphal as "the relation between reality and fiction, between the spaces of the world and the spaces of the text." (Westphal 2011:6) Similarly to Foucault who draws attention to "the fatal intersection of time with space" (Foucault 1986:22), Westphal does not argue for a study of space which ignores time, however, he does not hesitate to point out that time and history have for too long monopolized the attention of theorists and strongly advocates a necessary reweighing, where space is no longer perceived as an add-on to the dominant approach.

The relations between those theorists who prioritized time or history and those for whom space or geography was the principal coordinate for writing in the world were irregular and sometimes heated. To the chagrin of the geography theorists, history has strongly monopolized attention. (Westphal 2011:23)

Westphal adopts interdisciplinarity in his research and places literature next to disciplines that were not traditionally considered, such as geography, urbanism or architecture. This approach is not a breakthrough, but Westphal's innovation is that he believes that not only literature should borrow from these other disciplines but also that these disciplines can make use of the research performed in literary studies. Therefore, Westphal insists on the performative nature of literature and the production, representation and perception of space in literature which influence our perception of real space.

## **2. Literature and Space. Geocriticism.**

The close connection between the city and literary works is very well analyzed in Richard Lehan's book *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* where the author sets out to give an exhaustive account of the history of the city, focusing on its literary representation. He argues that the history of the Western civilization is actually contained within the history of the city. The postmodern city is conceived as both a physical reality and a state of mind: "The city takes on the meaning of pure text, to be created by each individual and then read." (Lehan 1998:287) Lehan further stresses how closely connected literature and cities are: "The city and the literary text have had inseparable histories, and reading the city is only another kind of textual reading." (Lehan 1998:289)

Richard Lehan embarks on his cultural and intellectual analysis of the city in literature by acknowledging the fact that "The city has determined our cultural fate for the past three hundred years -has become inseparable from our national and personal destiny" (Lehan 1998: 3). According to him the city is also inseparable from various kinds of literary movements, describing the three concentric circles that usually form a city: the history of the city, the way that cities have been represented and a connecting circle that involves literary and urban movements. Lehan further presents the three different ways of conceptualizing the city, out of which, the city as a state of mind is closer to this research.

Questioning the place of literature in the world and its relation to other disciplines which claim space as their object of study, Bertrand Westphal's programmatic work *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* was first published in 2007, in French, and it synthesizes the author's view on the study of literature from a geocentric perspective. The study itself is aligned to the postmodernist view of the disruptions and shifts that the concepts of space and time have gone through ever since the World War II. The English translation of this book, published in the USA in April 2011 has been done by Robert T. Tally Jr. who is an Assistant Professor in English at Texas State University. Tally is actually not only a mere translator of this work but he has also practised geocriticism in his own research, publishing in 2011 as editor, *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), a study in which Bertrand Westphal contributed with an article. Drawing from Westphal's theory of geocriticism, Tally introduced his own concept, that of literary cartography. Mapping

and spatial analysis applied to literature have been a long lasting research field for both authors, with Tally conceiving the author as a map-maker and the critic as a map-reader.

Throughout the book, the reader will detect two main influences, Michel Foucault's reassertion of space as central to our understanding of the world and the theory of the "Thirdspace" introduced by the American critical geographer, Edward Soja. Thus, Geocriticism builds on the foundation provided by the influential article, "Of Other Spaces" written by Michel Foucault in 1967 and published in 1984 where he stresses that the present epoch will be above all the epoch of space since the anxiety of our era is fundamentally concerned with space, perhaps more than with time. Foucault pays tribute to Gaston Bachelard and the work of phenomenologists which is fundamental to the study of internal space. Introducing the concept of topoanalysis, Gaston Bachelard sets out to analyze how humans experience intimate spaces and how these spaces become the receptacles of memory, the space that protects. Topoanalysis is defined as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives." (Bachelard 1998:8) The author argues that it is false to believe we know ourselves in time and that we actually need the stability of space to anchor ourselves. According to him, memory is motionless and it needs to securely be fixed in space. "In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for." (Bachelard 1998:8) Foucault draws the attention to the need of analyzing external space, the space which is undoubtedly heterogeneous: "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws at us (...)" (Foucault 1986:23).

It is this idea, initially ignored in the 1960's, that made it necessary for a study on space, place and literature to be published, a need which Bertrand Westphal has managed to meet through his book on geocriticism, where he is first and foremost concerned with the literary representations of spaces and places. He uses the expression "space strikes back" in order to summarize the various theories that led to the spatial turn in the field of humanities.

The spatialization of time was one of the means of „counterattack” or „striking back” of space against time, or of geography against history. In certain cases, at issue was not the balance between the coordinates of time and space, but the assertion of temporal rule without giving space its fair share. (Westphal 2011:23)

Edward Soja's theory of the "Thirdspace" has also greatly influenced the view on spatiality's role in the humanities. While "Firstspace" corresponds to the physical and "Secondspace" to the mental, "Thirdspace" encompasses simultaneously both the real and the imagined space. What Soja proposes is a re-balancing where historicity, sociality and spatiality stand together on equal grounds. With the introduction of Thirdspace, one might say that geography's privileged role as the master discipline in the study of space is being questioned. The spatial turn is a term introduced by Edward Soja in the 90's and has since then influenced the debate around space and its place in cultural studies. What Soja sees emerging is "a more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history, with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies." (Soja 1989:11)

Bearing the influence of Bertrand Westphal's theory of geocriticism, Robert T. Tally introduces literary cartography as a method of analysis which can generate fresh approaches to the study of spatiality in literature by comparing narrative to a form of mapping:

Narrative is a fundamental way in which humans make sense or, give form, to the world. In that sense narrative operates much as maps do, to organize the data of life into recognizable patterns with it understood that the result is a fiction, a mere representation of space and place, whose function is to help the viewer or mapmaker, like the reader or writer, make sense of the world. Literary cartography as I call it, connects spatial representation and storytelling. (Tally 2009:17)

An important clarification that needs to be made is related to the two concepts of "space" and "place", very often used interchangeably. Yi-Fu Tuan, a humanist geographer, has devoted extensive studies to this topic. He defines the difference between the two as follows: "Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values." (Tuan 2001:54). Interested in the way humans perceive spaces and places, Tuan analyzes what he calls the sense of a place, the way in which humans give meaning to places. One way to award meaning to places is undoubtedly through literature, which proves again that literary works have the power to influence reality:

But the "feel" of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones. (Tuan 2001:184)

In his introduction to Westphal's book on geocriticism, Robert Tally also stresses the importance of how we make sense of a place, using a personal example. His first encounter with London was shaped by his literary encounters with the city:

After all, a *place* is only a place because of the ways in which we, individually and collectively, organize space in such a way as to mark the topos as special, to set it apart from the spaces surrounding and infusing it. Our understanding of a particular place is determined by our personal experiences with it, but also by our reading about others' experiences, by our point of view, including our biases and wishful thinking. (For instance, on my first trip to London, I remember being disappointed at landing at Heathrow on a bright and sunny summer morning; steeped as I had been in Dickens and others, I felt it was somehow wrong that London wasn't rainy and foggy- happily the rain and fog soon came. (Westphal 2011:X)

Yi-Fu Tuan also begins his analysis of the identity of spaces and places by giving the example of the Kronborg Castle in Denmark and how its perception is influenced by knowing that this was the place where Hamlet lived.

What is a place? What gives a place its identity, its aura? These questions occurred to the physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg when they visited Kronborg Castle in Denmark. Bohr said to Heisenberg: Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. (Tuan 2001:4)

### **3. Dublin and Oslo. City of Bricks and City of Words**

So why Dublin and Oslo together? Joyce's Dublin has captivated the attention of critics for over a century now and it still has the power to do so in the future. Regarding his connection to Dear Dirty Dublin, James Joyce has made a very famous statement: "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book." (qtd. in Budgen 1989: 69) This statement has been analyzed by critics and it became of great interest to all those engaged with research on Dublin as represented in Joyce's literary works. Hugh Campbell offers the following interpretation:

Joyce's famous boast, that if Dublin were destroyed it could be rebuilt entirely by reference to the pages of the novel, was really about recognizing that the version he had reconstructed might in fact prove to be more enduring than the real city on which it was based. (Campbell 2009:9)

Mapping Joycean Dublin is a project that many have set to undertake. Walking Ulysses, for instance, a project belonging to Boston College (led by Joe Nugent) is a very good example of this endeavour. On June 14, based on Walking Ulysses, an iPhone app has been released, JoyceWays, the result of three years of work invested by the students of Boston College. Whether one is sitting at home in their armchair or walking the streets of Dublin, this guide works both as a tourist guide and as an introduction to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Dublin has become a tourist attraction with tours of pubs represented in Joyce's works or tourist brochures advertising "Top ten Joycean things to do in Dublin." The case of Dublin is without doubt one of the best examples which can illustrate Westphal's theory on the performative nature of literature in relation to the representation and production of space. Literature has crossed the border and the city of words mingles with the city of bricks in a fascinating manner. The fact that such places as David Byrne's Pub or Glasnevin Cemetery can still be visited today and are easily recognizable in Joyce's *Ulysses*, makes the novel an interesting research topic for all those interested in geocriticism and its concern with referentiality in literature. Westphal reflects on this topic arguing for the power of fictional discourse:

Less clearly on the margins of reality than it was in the prewar era, fictional discourse has gained the power of persuasion. And if credibility in fiction has always been measured in terms of the reference to the "real"

world, in the postmodern era one can no longer say the world of cement, concrete, or steel is more real than the world of paper and ink. (Westphal 2011:3)

What about Oslo in literature? The topic is perhaps rather obscure to most, except for maybe, Knut Hamsun's representations of the city in the modernist novel *Hunger*. The research I am conducting is set to analyze the way in which "the city" is "present" and "represented" in the works of the contemporary Norwegian writer Lars Saabye Christensen. The city and the text write each other. The former functions as a space of memory, so that, when it is revisited, it can narrate the histories it witnessed. Memories and feelings are anchored on its streets, which are then accessed in the attempt to recover a time and the people that belonged to it. Lars Saabye Christensen was born in 1953 in Oslo, the city which will become the set for most of his literary works. Being half Danish, he holds only Danish citizenship but writes in Norwegian. He made his debut in 1976 with a collection of poetry and being very prolific as a writer, he tried various genres during his literary career: poetry, novels, short stories, though he is mainly known for his novels. His affection for his hometown, Oslo, is visible all throughout his work and *Beatles* (1984) has become the book of a generation in Norway thanks to the powerful evocation of the city. Yi-Fu Tuan writes about the power of objects to rescue our past and his statement suits very well what Lars Saabye Christensen has managed to do with Oslo in his works:

Objects anchor time. They need not, of course, be personal possessions. We can try to reconstruct our past with brief visits to our old neighborhood and the birthplaces of our parents. We can also recapture our personal history by maintaining contact with people who have known us when we were young. (Tuan 2001:187)

Just like in the case of James Joyce's Dublin, Oslo has become in its turn a literary character and the fictional city extended its fascination to the real city. One will not find the same projects aimed at mapping Oslo based on Christensen's novels, though Cochs Hostel in Oslo is presented on websites as the place where Christensen has set his novel *The Half Brother* after having been fascinated by it as a child. Far from being a metropolis, Oslo is portrayed as a warm place, constructed from feelings and intimate experiences.

The feel of the pavement, the smell of the evening air, and the color of autumn foliage become, through long acquaintance, extensions of ourselves- not just a stage but supporting actors in the human drama. (Tuan 1979:418).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper tackled Dublin and Oslo as both cities of bricks and cities of words in order to show that the boundary between the real space and the fictional space is always shifting. As Bertrand Westphal pointed out, literature has gained the power of persuasion and it is actively

involved in the production of space. James Joyce and Lars Saabye Christensen shape our understanding of Dublin and Oslo through their literary representations of the real city and this works as an argument to support the performative nature of literature.

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