

*English, Department of*  
*Faculty Publications-English*

---

Texas State University

*Year 2008*

---

Geocriticism and Classic American  
Literature

Robert T. Tally  
Texas State University - San Marcos, Dept of English,  
robert.tally@txstate.edu

Dr. Robert T. Tally Jr.  
Department of English  
Texas State University  
San Marcos, TX 78666  
(512) 245-3016  
[robert.tally@txstate.edu](mailto:robert.tally@txstate.edu)

## **Geocriticism and Classic American Literature**

D.H. Lawrence famously begins his Studies in Classic American Literature with a discussion of "The Spirit of Place," a notion that the literary and cultural products of a given people (no less than the economic or agricultural ones) may be said to derive from their geographic conditions of possibility. "Each continent," says Lawrence, "has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like, but the spirit of place is a great reality" (5-6). In the specifically American context, the spirit of place is bound up with the notion of space itself, as Charles Olson indicates in his Call Me Ishmael, another foundational text in early

This paper was originally presented on November 8, 2008, at the annual meeting of the South Central Modern Language Association, in San Antonio, Texas.

American Studies. Using all caps to make his point, Olson opens by saying, "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (11). Space, as the central fact of the place, would appear to be a key concept in American Studies.

For the most part, however, space has not been central to studies of nineteenth-century American literature. Elsewhere, space has had a timely reemergence in literary and cultural studies in recent years. The discourse of postmodernism has especially emphasized the importance of space, geography, and cartography, as the hyper-hurly-burly experience of the postmodern condition calls for the orienting and reorienting efforts of mapmaking. Also, excellent work on cartography and literature has been, and is being, done in early modern studies, especially in Spanish literature and the history of the colonization and conquest of the Americas. Right in the center of these two historical moments of modernity, the early and the post, the mid-nineteenth-century United States faced critical changes to its imaginary and real social spaces, typified by industrialization and urbanization, the emergence of a world market, the breakdown of traditional communities,

westward expansion, extraterritorial adventures, and a looming national catastrophe. As in the Baroque and postmodern eras, these developments and crises called for new ways of seeing the world and of representing oneself in it. It called for new narratives, new maps.

The critical approaches to the texts of this period also might benefit from recognizing the degree to which spatial practices influenced their production and consumption. The narratives crafted in the mid-nineteenth century help to map the spaces of the United States and elsewhere, to give shape to a conceptual or imaginary geography that would allow individuals and communities to orient themselves with respect to the changing social sphere. The narrative maps formed by American writers functioned, as fictions do, to make sense of and give form to the world in a recognizable way. Criticism has a different function. The critic does not so much make sense of the world as make sense of the ways we make sense of world. In focusing on the narrative maps of nineteenth-century American literature, I believe a geocriticism offers a productive approach.

Both sides of the transaction, loosely speaking writing and reading, allow for an emphasis on space and on

the spatial practices. Elsewhere I have discussed what I call "literary cartography," a term I use to describe the ways in which writers map the social space in order to make sense of the world. On the flipside is what I call "geocriticism," an approach to reading that examines the fundamentally cartographic aspects of fiction, while also offering productive trans-disciplinary opportunities for further inquiry. A critical framework that focuses on the spatial representations within the texts would also explore the overlapping territories of actual, physical geography and an author's or character's cognitive mapping in the literary text.

Although my use of the term is not identical to his, Bertrand Westphal has suggested that "geocriticism" explores the inter-relations between the "geography of the real" and the "geography of the imagination" [my translation]: "Drawing on theoretical insights that tend to reduce the distance between the referent and representation, geocriticism aims to explore the interface between these two dimensions - the real and the fictional - that we had thought to divide, in short to bring the library to the world" (274-275). Geocriticism thus invites us to examine the ways in which literary cartography

engages the representation of the so-called "real world" as well.

Traditionally, time rather than space, was the category that dominated criticism, and temporality was frequently the more interesting aspect of fiction and poetry. Frank Kermode registered this emphasis on time aptly his magisterial little book, The Sense of an Ending, in which he notes that

"Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' in medias res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7).

For Kermode, the need to create fiction, to make sense of and give form to the world, derives from our condition "in the middle." Kermode discovers the soul of narrative in the form-giving fiction that organizes time: the tick-tock of a clock is the simple model of a plot, where the infinite and everlasting tick-tick-tick-ticking of time can be reorganized and humanized as having a distinctive beginning, middle, and end. TICK-pause-TOCK: and in that

pause, we who live in the midst can craft a narrative with a distinct beginning and end to make sense of our own condition.

But the existential situation, including its inherent angst, is no less spatial than temporal. The things - the res into which we are in medias - are as much objects in space as events in time. The poet or writer thus makes sense of, and gives form to, the world with respect to the spatial relations among persons, communities, nations, natural phenomena, and so on. Georg Lukács had suggested as much in The Theory of the Novel when he referred to the task of philosophy as the creation of "an archetypal map" that would restore the happy condition in which "the starry sky is a map of all possible paths [...] The world is wide and yet it is like a home" (29). This "happy age" is the age of the epic, for Lukács, but in a "world abandoned by God," in the age of the novel, man's condition is one of "transcendental homelessness," and the goal of the novel is to create a map, to orient oneself and others. In response to the alienation of modern life - an anxiety Heidegger specifically notes is a form of homelessness, as the unheimlich directly implies a not-being-at-home in the world (Heidegger 233) - one must figuratively map one's

place in relation to the world. Just as the fictive tick-tock creates a plot to make sense of our condition in the midst of time, a plotting (and here I recall that the word plot also means plan, chart, or map) of our spatial or geographic condition provides a system of meaning to allow one to understand one's world, to be at-home-in-the-world, if only provisionally. This is, among other things, the function of narrative: literary cartography.

Returning to the properly American context, we can see the writers of the nineteenth-century United States specifically addressing the spatial or geographic anxieties of the era. Notoriously, a symbolic geography attached to the earliest stages of colonization, for example, with respect to the Puritan's New Jerusalem or the Edenic-innocence-mixed-with-benighted (hence perhaps diabolical)-wilderness of the "New" World - not to mention the complicated political geography involved in squaring the circle of being both British (or French or Dutch or Spanish) and American at the same time. In the Early Republican Period and into the mid-nineteenth-century, geography becomes a decisive factor in determining the cultural dimensions of the American experience, as Crèvecoeur and others determined that the encounter with

the physical geography of North America transformed Europeans (and, in a much different way, Africans) into Americans. Cooper, as well as Sedgwick, reinforced the notion and helped to create a properly national space out of the dialectical interplay of the spaces of settlement and wilderness. Irving and Poe, among others, thwarted such a geography by reinscribing a defiantly unique, sometimes otherworldly, space within limits of the national, as if to show that the spaces of America were not necessarily American. And these examples do not even require the profoundly cartographic writings of Parkman with his westering movement, of Douglass's detailed descriptions of Baltimore and the Eastern Shore as he follows the North Star to freedom, or of Melville's transnational space of the circumnavigating Pequod and the global project of the whale, to name just a few canonical figures (see, for example, my forthcoming Melville, Mapping, and Globalization).

As Charles Olson suggests, the central fact of SPACE is at the core of the American experience - "It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning" (11).

But such space is also the problem. I think of the little geographic allegory that Hawthorne includes in his House of the Seven Gables. In the opening chapter, he describes a map of a region to which generations of the Pyncheon family have laid claim; the map, we are told, was "the handiwork of some skilful old draftsman, and grotesquely illuminated with pictures of Indians and wild beasts, among which was seen a lion; the natural history of the region being as little known as its geography, which was put down most fantastically awry" (33). Over the course of the novel, we find that this physical map hides the key to the treasured land, but that, in the clear light shed by Phoebe and without the distortions of Maule's curse, the map and the space it purports to represent no longer hold their value. The domestic sphere and the wilderness come together to negate the phantasmagoric in favor of the real. (Phoebe, who we are told who has the "proper gift of making things look real, rather than fantastic, within her sphere" [297], is the avatar of this idea.) One might say that the resolution of the novel lies precisely in its geography being at last "put down" aright.

The symbolic and the real spaces of nineteenth-century American literature are mapped in innumerable ways. A

geocritical analysis would, of course, necessarily examine both, and perhaps more pointedly look at the ways in which the two overlap, resist one another, or form new spatial practices altogether. As Lukács, Lawrence, Kermode, and Olson would all acknowledge, the representation of the world in fiction - what I call literary cartography (see, e.g., my "'Spaces that before were blank'") - also has the effect of transforming that world, for writers and for readers. The map not only helps us understand and navigate the spaces it purports to represent, but actively makes the space what it is (as critics of mapping practices are quick to note). The tumultuous "moment" of nineteenth-century American literature - when social spaces and literary narratives were undergoing profound transformations as people, in the midst, sought to make sense of a changing world - provides a perfect occasion for a project of geocriticism.

**Works Cited**

- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The House of the Seven Gables.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie  
and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Kermode, Frank. The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the  
Theory of Fiction. Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
1966.
- Lawrence, D.H. Studies in Classic American Literature.  
New York: Viking, 1964.
- Lukács, Georg. The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna  
Bostock. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.
- Olson, Charles. Call Me Ishmael. San Francisco: City  
Lights, 1947.
- Tally, Robert T., Jr. Melville, Mapping and Globalization:  
Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer.  
New York: Continuum, 2009.
- . "'Spaces that before were blank': Truth and  
Narrative Form in Melville's South Seas Cartography."  
Pacific Coast Philology 42 (2007): 181-98.
- Westphal, Bertrand. La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace.  
Paris: Minuit, 2007.