Since 2010, a significant amount of the American interest in geocriticism 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 editor of ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment), writing approvingly of Bertrand Westphal’s approach and encouraging the integration of his work into the ecocritical canon. 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. 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 is 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 space and 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 spatial representations and the dialectical nature of the relationships between texts and their real-world referents.

What follows, then, is an attempt to examine areas of overlap between these two complementary approaches to literary studies. After a brief introduction to the main tenets of Westphal’s geocritical approach, I turn to a consideration of some of the ways in which ecocritical approaches to literature might build on Westphal’s project, and vice-versa. Although the differing objectives of these two movements lead them to advance different, and sometimes incompatible, arguments about the relationship between literature and the environment, there are areas of overlap on which a healthy and mutually beneficial dialogue can take place. Indeed, it is precisely because these two approaches come at the question of human spatiality from such different angles that this encounter can be valuable. These differences enable them to shed a kind of transversal light on each other, revealing lacunae and blind spots that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The attempt to work through and reconcile such differences can lead to new insights and make possible the construction of a stronger foundation on which to build going forward. Such, at least, is the enabling premise of this essay.

**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 Jean-François 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 *terrae 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 (e.g., in the work of David Harvey, Derek Gregory, and 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. 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, and 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. In a somewhat different way, humanist geographers in the tradition of Yi-Fu Tuan have been highly attuned to the quasiliiterary 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 Doležel, 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 distanciation 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.

This quasifunctional view of art is as old as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but Westphal’s use of possible worlds theory and fictional pragmatics illustrates the ways in which these mechanisms can be brought to bear on the places we inhabit and/or visit. Moreover, he pushes this logic one step further, suggesting that fictional representations of place can have a powerful performative function, changing the ways we view the places through which we move, including, and perhaps especially, the places we thought we knew, whose characteristics and “meaning” had seemed to be settled once and for all. Because fictional representations of place are unconstrained by the demands of documentary veracity and scientific falsifiability, they can help to bring about real change in the world, fostering the emergence of new kinds of places. Fictions, in this view, are not simply distractions from the real world (entertainment), nor objects meant to be judged in purely aesthetic or formal terms (art), but performative operations, which have the ability to bring about change in the world (action, praxis).

In keeping with this performative, enactive understanding of literature’s value as a mode of thinking that works through indirect reference, Westphal formulates his theory of geocriticism in pragmatic terms, emphasizing the interface between fictional representations of real-world places and the places themselves. These relationships are highly variable, ranging from what he calls “homotopic” depictions of place (in which the fictional place is compatible with what we know of the place, as in Honoré de Balzac’s Paris or James Joyce’s Dublin) to “heterotopic” representations (which explicitly diverge from the facts as we know them, as in David Foster Wallace’s Great Ohio Desert). Westphal also recognizes the importance of purely fictional places (Trantor, Middlemarch, and Poldévie), but what interests him above all is the interface between fictional representations of real world places and the textual dynamics that enable these fictions to work
their magic on our understanding of those places. (Symptomatically, Westphal sometimes uses the term “real world,” complete with scare quotes, in order to emphasize the extent to which he sees places in the real world as being shaped by textual representations.)

Building on these theoretical considerations, Westphal sets forth his account of geocriticism as a distinct academic subfield in a chapter titled “Elements of Geocriticism,” which sets forth in programmatic fashion his understanding of the specificity of geocriticism as a mode of literary criticism. The central tenets of Westphal’s theory of geocriticism can be summed up in four propositions: geocentrism, multifocalization, polysensoriality, and stratigraphic perspective.

First, for Westphal, geocriticism is a geocentered or geocentric mode of criticism, by which he means that the primary object of study for the geocritic is not literary texts, authors, or genres, but places. A typical geocritical study would focus on a single place (say Paris or Venice or the Mediterranean) and then look at as many textual representations of that place as possible, putting the emphasis on the referential relationship between those texts and the place in question. This entails a significant reversal of the traditional approach to the literary study of place. Rather than using the thematics of place to better understand the works studied (say Venice in Proust or Mann), the texts are taken as part of a body of evidence that will lead to a better understanding of the place. Questions of textual mechanics, aesthetic value, and the author’s world view are considered, of course, but considered in light of their referential relationship with the real-world place, how they shape our understanding of that place.

This shift in emphasis—from works to their geographical referents—gives rise to the second principle of geocriticism, which Westphal calls multifocalization. In order to escape from the perspectival limitations of a single author or interpretive community, the geocritic will consult as many texts, and as many different kinds of texts, as possible, emphasizing especially the juxtaposition or confrontation of texts written from different perspectives, be they cultural or identitarian or disciplinary. The goal is to develop a polyphonic or dialogical understanding of the place in question, one that incorporates the widest array possible of perspectives and allows the geocritic to get at what Westphal calls the “identitarian essence” (188) of the place in question.

This emphasis on multifocalization, combined with the geocentric emphasis on the referential relationship between texts and the places they describe, is no doubt the key element of Westphal’s approach.
to the study of place in literature. Before developing this point further, however, we need to touch on the third and fourth principles of geocriticism—polysensoriality and stratigraphic depth—which are probably best understood as corollaries or extensions of the first two.

Westphal uses the term stratigraphic to emphasize the extent to which a given place is composed of an accumulation of past moments, an archeological layering of successive historical phases. In a city like Paris, these can be observed as we move from neighborhood to neighborhood and building to building, but in cases where these layers are not so visible, observers may fall victim to the fallacy of presentism (i.e., the belief that the current state of a given place is its natural or true state, or, in the case of natural environments, the sense that the place has always been in something like its present state). Conversely, an insufficient attention to the dynamism of place (i.e., the ongoing nature of the “social production of space,” to borrow Lefebvre’s term) can give rise to the nostalgic fallacy, the more or less arbitrary choice of some previous state of the place as its most authentic or true state, or the desire to freeze a place in its current state, a temptation that Baudelaire understood well (“La forme d’une ville change plus vite hélas que le cœur d’un mortel”). Westphal emphasizes the fact that literary representations provide precious evidence of the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments in their history, making it possible to get a sense of the transversal path cut by the place through history.

As for the polysensorial dimension of geocriticism, this recommendation is meant to combat the visual bias of many studies of place, reminding would-be geocritics to be open to the auditory, olfactory, and tactile dimensions of place.

If we put these four principles together, it becomes clear that the overarching goal is to pick a place and study it from every conceivable angle: over time, across cultures, using multiple senses, and without prioritizing any single perspective, least of all that of the geocritic. Thus, Westphal writes that “The main principle of geocritical analysis resides in the confrontation of several outlooks which correct each other” (187). For Westphal, in other words, the comparative method is at the heart of the geocritical approach. The goal, again, is to get at a kind of dialogical understanding of the chosen place, one that is not, to be sure, objective (since absolute objectivity is an epistemological impossibility), but that is able to transcend the limited (because subjective, ethnocentric, or self-interested) perspectives of individual authors and the interpretive communities to which they belong, enabling us to deterritorialize the stereotypical views of place.
and the illusion of permanence suggested by received wisdom and hegemonic discourses.

**Geocriticism, Ecocriticism, and Postmodern Epistemology**

From a literary and theoretical standpoint, there is much useful food for thought here, especially the strategies that Westphal puts into place as part of the effort to overcome the perspectival limits of subjectivity and ethnocentrism, his careful treatment of the complex referential relationship between literature and its geospatial referents, and his demonstration of the performative potential of literary representations of place and their ability to inflect the social production of space and shape the ways we inhabit the world.

From an ecocritical perspective, however, there is one surprising thing that Westphal has left out of his account: the role of direct experience in shaping our understanding of the spaces and places we inhabit. At no time does Westphal consider the role that direct observation and fieldwork might contribute to the geocritical enterprise, even if only as one point of reference among others. To be sure, he does not deny that it might be useful to visit the places studied, or that personal affection for or interest in a place might be the underlying driver of geocritical research—he simply doesn’t address such issues; they don’t even come up. This is understandable to some extent in what is after all a book of literary theory, but given the fact that he insists so strongly on the relationship between texts and their real-world referents, it seems odd that he shows so little concern for going out to make contact with those real-world referents without textual mediation. How can we explain this surprising omission?

The answer, I think, is that Westphal’s approach is conditioned by a specifically postmodern sensitivity to the difficulty of gaining any sure sense of what the world “out there” is like. Sharing Lyotard’s “incredulity with regard to meta-narratives,” as well as Guy Debord’s and Jean Baudrillard’s awareness of the highly mediatized world we live in, he refuses to accept any simplistic understanding of the world as something that is simply “out there.” For Westphal, it seems a true understanding of any given place can only come from the confrontation of different texts, using the techniques of “multifocalization” to create a “network of literary representations” that “correct and complete each other.” This, he tells us, shall be one of the “methodological invariants” of geocriticism (187–188).
In other words, despite his insistence on the referential function of literature and the interface between fiction and the real, Westphal seems to be leaving us with an interface between some texts and other texts. Or, to put it another way, Westphal’s theory of reality amounts to a theory of intertextuality. This leads him to make statements that seem to fall back into a form of *textolatrie* not too far removed from the structuralist and poststructuralist “segregationism” he had decried in the chapter on referentiality. This becomes apparent in statements like the following Calvino inspired assertion.

As soon as the city ceases to produce text, according to Calvino, it ceases to exist. Like Scheherazade? It is the same for all places, urban or otherwise. Which suggests the following disturbing question: what happens to this city that no one is putting down on paper at the moment I write, or that you read? (234)

For Westphal, then, our access to the real is always mediated by various forms of textuality. And in this he seems to remain beholden to the French structuralist tradition that his theory of performativity and possible worlds semantics was meant to overcome. On the one hand, he agrees with Thomas Pavel that it is necessary to break “definitively with structuralism and its autotelic logic” (156), which gave rise to the “textolatrie” of the structuralist and poststructuralist moments, and deconstructionist dogma on the nonexistence of any kind of *hors texte*. On the other hand, he is equally sensitive to the need to avoid falling back into what, quoting Brian McHale, he calls “the nostalgia for a non-problematic mimesis” (156), and this latter concern leads him to fall back into some of the structuralist patterns he is trying to contest.

It is on this point, I believe, that the ecologically oriented epistemology promoted by ecocriticism, which emphasizes the place of humans within nature, may be able to offer an important corrective to Westphal’s theory, enabling him to overcome the ontologepistemological conundrum that makes it so difficult to break with the textualist *parti pris* of the structuralists and their deconstructionist avatars. A few words on the nature of this problem will help to understand how ecological thinking can help, without denying the vital role that textual representations play in shaping our understanding of the world around us.

Westphal finds himself confronted with what is essentially a postmodern variant of the problem of radical doubt, a problem that goes back through Kant and Descartes to Plato and that is itself rooted
in the problem of subject-object dualism. How do I know that the world around me is as I believe it to be? Without a convincing answer to this question, one finds oneself subject to all of the aporia of radical doubt that questions our ability to gain reliable information about the world. But, as most ecologically oriented thinkers recognize, if human subjectivity is rooted in the brain, which is in turn integrated into the extended sensorimotor apparatuses of the body, which are in their turn engaged in constant exchanges with the body’s environing milieu, then the aporia of dualism and radical doubt tend to disappear. This is why the concept of *embodiment* plays such an important role in phenomenologically inflected theories of human consciousness like those of Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas, Francisco Varela, and others.\(^\text{10}\) The human subject is not separable from the world around it, as the mirror image of the subject/object formulation seems to suggest, but a *member* of the world, whose perceptual and cognitive structures belong to and are shaped on every level by the encompassing structures of that world.

How exactly does this conception of embodied consciousness help us to address the problem of radical doubt? Why does it allow us to have greater confidence in the accuracy of our beliefs about the world than traditional phenomenological models would suggest? In a word: evolution. Rather than relying on notions of absolute being like the Kantian *noumenon*, the Platonic idea, or the Cartesian Cogito, the ecological outlook emphasizes that our minds, like our bodies, are the result of a long evolutionary success story. There is a tendency for philosophers in the tradition of radical doubt to jump from the observation that we are mistaken about many things to the conclusion that we can’t be sure of anything. But the evolutionary principle of natural selection reassures us on this point by reminding us that our beliefs about the world necessarily correspond well enough to the world as it actually is, or else we could not survive. This kind of knowledge, which Steven Pinker has called “ecological rationality” and “situational knowledge,” is never perfect, but it does not have to be. Situational knowledge does not have to satisfy the requirement for universal validity of the kind that philosophers like to demand. As Pinker puts it, “our brains were shaped for fitness, not for truth.”\(^\text{11}\) Indeed, it may be that the kind of thinking that philosophers like to do is the aberration, an inessential by-product of natural selection (or spandrel, to borrow Stephen Jay Gould’s widely cited metaphor). As Pinker, with his characteristic cheekiness puts it: “Natural selection [...] did not shape us to earn good grades in science class or to publish in refereed journals. It shaped us to master the local environment.”\(^\text{12}\)
Researchers in the biological sciences have long emphasized this foundational aspect of natural selection, and cognitive scientists have built on this foundation in their epistemological theories, emphasizing the extent to which the principle of natural selection requires a complete reworking of the dualist principles that had guided the philosophy of mind in the Cartesian and Kantian traditions.

This evolutionary “corrective” to traditional rationalist epistemologies is not ecocritical in any strictly literary sense, but it enables us to build a bridge between the kind of naturalistic assumptions on which most ecocritical studies are founded and the textual or intertextual assumptions that inform Westphal’s account of the relationship between texts and the world “out there.” If applied to the epistemological and ontological problems that lead Westphal to dance so carefully around the expression “real world,” it could add a significant new dimension to the geocritical project that would not undermine its account of textual representation, but enable it to advance more confidently in its pursuit of “the identitarian essence” of places. It could do so, moreover, in a way entirely compatible with Westphal’s insistence on the importance of literature as a way to subject our habitual representations of place to a Deleuzian process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Indeed it is on this point that the field of ecocriticism, *proprement dit*, comes into play, since it tends to build on this kind of naturalistic, evolutionary account of human consciousness in its attempts to incorporate literary representations of nature into its activist agenda.

**Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, and the Agency of Nature**

One of the underlying tenets of ecocriticism is that human subjectivity is something that is disseminated throughout the larger order of nature and is in turn fully penetrated by it. A quick perusal of *The Ecocriticism Reader*—which, published in 1996, provided the first major definitional moment in the nascent field of ecocriticism—yields a number of statements emphasizing the interconnectedness of human consciousness and its environing milieu. Neil Evernden, for example, quotes Northrop Frye in support of his argument that this sense of the human participation in the great chain of being is at the very heart of what aesthetic experience strives to achieve.

The resident is, in short, a part of the place, just as the fish is a part of the territory. And his involvement with that place is, I think, an aesthetic one in the sense that Dewey and Cobb use the term. And perhaps also
in the sense in which Northrop Frye uses it when he claims that the goal of art is to “recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man.”

SueEllen Campbell makes a related point in her effort to find common ground between deep ecology and poststructuralism, both of which relativize the autonomy of the human subject by representing it as enmeshed in encompassing material and social networks.

Always we are part of systems larger than ourselves. As Fritjof Capra explains in *The Tao of Physics*, the world is “a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole” (71). Finally we arrive at what I see as the most comprehensive and most important shared premise of post-structuralist and ecological theory. Both criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative center of value or meaning: both substitute the idea of networks.

Scott Slovic, to cite one last example, emphasizes the permeability of the boundaries between self and world, albeit in a way that tends to reinforce rather than contest the language of subject-object dualism.

The facile sense of harmony, even identity, with one’s surroundings (a condition often ascribed to rhapsodic nature writing) would fail to produce self-awareness of any depth or vividness. It is only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who they are and what’s what in the world.

Finally, lest we give the impression that this outlook is a recent or exclusively North American phenomenon, it is important to recognize that the emphasis on the interconnectedness of man and nature, and its consequences for the study of textual representations of place, has a longstanding pedigree. We might mention in this regard the Renaissance idea of the great chain of being (as described, e.g., by E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World View*), the Spinozist concept of immanence summed up in the expression *Deus sive Natura*, or, more recently, the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* and the use that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari make of notions like the rhizome, molecular exchange, and the plane of immanence. This conception of the human/natural nexus as an indivisible unity has motivated the work of contemporary European writers like the Scottish poet Kenneth White, whose conception of *geopoetics* is strongly influenced by Deleuze.
Even more recently, French literary critics of a geocritical bent have begun to emphasize this dimension of the human/nature nexus. Thus, in a recent issue of the French online journal *LHT* (*Littérature, Histoire, Théorie*), Christine Baron emphasizes “ce rapport dialectique de l’homme au monde qu’il habite et qui l’habite,” quoting Olivier Lazzarotti on “la consubstantialité de l’espace habité et de l’habitant,” and emphasizing that “cette conception de la géographie…semble aujourd’hui incontournable dans l’épistémologie de la discipline.”

Michel Collot concurs, arguing that this outlook “ne signifie donc pas nécessairement une déshumanisation ou un objectivisme radical. Elle peut être au service d’une redéfinition du sujet lyrique ou du personnage, devenus inséparables du paysage qui les entoure.” He adds that this outlook “pourrait déboucher sur une poétique, une théorie de la création littéraire [où il] s’agirait de comprendre pourquoi l’espace peut être source non seulement d’inspiration, mais d’invention de formes nouvelles.” And on this point—the importance of developing new “forms” or modes of representation able to foreground the interpenetration of self and world—we come back full circle to Westphal’s project. Once such a perspective begins to manifest itself in literary representations of the world, it begins to have an effect on the way the reading public understands its own relationship to place. It is on this point, I would argue, that the convergence between the geocritical and ecocritical endeavors can be seen most clearly.

Ecocriticism has typically had an activist focus, one that often, although by no means always, emphasizes thematics at the expense of the textual mechanics of representation. But to the extent that ecocritics want to change the way people think about the environment, they will need to promote modes of representation that exemplify the vision they seek to promote. It is, of course, important to talk about the environment, and to militate for a healthier attitude toward the environment, but such activities will serve little purpose unless the public learns to represent their relationship with the environment in new ways. Just as the rise of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of capitalism required the invention of new modes of representation that coalesced into the conventions of nineteenth-century realism, “the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits,” as Cheryll Glotfelty puts it, will require the development and dissemination of modes of representation that convey the environmental principles required to react productively to such a situation, beginning with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, that “Everything is connected to everything else.”
Conceiving of such a relationship between the human and natural orders is not difficult, at least not for those of us who have devoted serious attention to the relationship. It has long been the consensus position in the natural sciences, and has become, as I argued above, central to fields like cognitive science and phenomenological philosophy. But understanding how to fully incorporate this understanding into literary representations intended for the general public, and to do so without relying on the more familiar but only approximate (and therefore falsifying) language of subject/object dualism, has remained an elusive goal. The familiar conventions of literary realism, inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tend to marginalize such modes of discourse. But this is precisely, I think, where Westphal, with his emphasis on the performative, world-creating dimension of literature, has the most to contribute to ecocritical theory. Because what Westphal is ultimately trying to do, I think, is to remind us that the medium is the message, that any attempt to modify the way members of the general public understand their relationship with the world of nature will require finding new modes of representation adequate to that vision.

What would such a mode of representation, which we might call “ecological realism,” look like? It would be a mistake to imagine that there could only be one. But we can get a sense of what a perspectival shift from a dualist conception of subject and object to an ecological conception of the subject-object would imply from the kind of ecological writing that the great Guyanese writer Wilson Harris developed in order to communicate a sense of his bond with the Guyanese jungle. Consider, for example, the following passage from Harris’s *Heartland*, which highlights the intuition of what such a perspectival shift entails, as well as the anxiety that it generates in those unused to such a perspective.

What an extraordinary and impulsive idea. Stevenson grew ashamed and afraid, not of Kaiser in truth but of his own unreliable senses—if one looked at life in this dubious way—which were capable of playing exceptional tricks upon him, or if he looked otherwise—with religious fear—of invoking a sensibility akin to a phenomenon of all-inclusive agency and humility, vindicating and confirming past, present and future lives and therefore pointing to a community of conscious fulfillment in existence.

This kind of perspectival anxiety—the spontaneous intuition of a decentered awareness of “all-inclusive agency and humility,” followed by a troubled recoil from its destabilizing novelty—recalls Jean-Paul
Sartre's evocations of existential nausea, but transferred to an ecological register that relativizes human agency by explicitly setting it within the context of an “all-inclusive agency” akin to Buell’s notion of the agency of nature and Deleuze’s conception of immanence.

This newly discovered awareness gives rise to a series of experiences that lead Harris’s protagonist to an increasingly advanced sense of identification with and understanding of the landscape. “His eyes, however, were beginning to grow sharper than a needle [...] and in the process his emotions fell into step within him upon a meaningful thread of being.” This spiritual progress, however, also has the effect of making his personal and professional goals seem increasingly pointless (which is, no doubt, the primary danger of the ecological point of view pushed to its logical limit). But it is presented in the novel as a liberatory gift.

If indeed this emanation was a guide leading to the spectre of place he was beginning to glimpse, or to the creation of the watch he was beginning to read—if indeed it was all these, then this was a natural true gift he possessed after all, the evocation of visible proportions, however delicate. And such proportions turned the frailest outline in space into the lineaments of the quarry of the muse, something larger than pure spirit.

It is to just such a gift, I would propose, that ecocritical approaches to literature seek to sensitize us. And Westphal’s theory of geocriticism—with its incorporation of possible worlds theory, its Lefebvrian insistence on the social production of space, its postcolonial foregrounding of borderlands and contact zones, and its Deleuzian emphasis on molecular thinking and deterritorialization—provides tools that can help to promote this vision and show how it might, however gradually, shift the tenor of public discourse on the relations between humans and nature. Is it possible to imagine a time when such modes of representation will have become commonplace, penetrating into the worldview of the populace at large? If so, then one of the central goals of ecocritics should be to put these kinds of representations front and center so often that they become as transparent to us as the representational conventions of the nineteenth-century novel.

Notes


12. Ibid., 302.
24. Ibid.
25. An early version of this essay was originally solicited for a panel on “New European Contributions” at the 2011 ASLE conference in Bloomington, Indiana.