

Robert T. TALLY JR., *Topophrenia. Place, Narrative and Spatial Imagination*, Indiana University Press, 2019, ISBN 978-0-253-03770-1, 210 p.

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Over the past decade, Robert T. Tally Jr. has been one of the most prominent scholars in the emerging field of spatial humanities. His contributions to this plethora of new spatially-oriented disciplines range from revising pre-existing concepts like *geocriticism* and *literary cartography* in his own writings to coordinating collective volumes on these topics and to editing studies penned by his fellow researchers. After translating Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces* in 2011, Tally was invited to edit a book series at Palgrave Macmillan that would inquire into the relation between space, place, and literature. Since then, "Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies" has been exploring the ways in which space and place are represented in different types of narratives.

Robert Tally's academic activity is often described as pioneering work in its pursuit of establishing some basic ground for other spatial literary studies researchers to build upon. Reading his essays, one can see clearly that he attempted to develop a theoretical framework for spatial literary studies. Yet Robert Tally is not necessarily an innovator. He often utilises concepts that were coined by other, more famous, thinkers. However, what sets Tally apart from other researchers in his field is that he alters the meaning of these concepts in order to broaden their understanding and their use. That was the case with geocriticism, literary geography and, more recently, with *topophrenia*. The last is the central concept of Robert Tally's latest book, which bears the very term as its title: *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative and Spatial Imagination*.

The first and foremost observation that ought to be made is that this book does not contain previously unpublished content. Nonetheless, one should not perceive this volume as a mere collection of diverse studies that have been previously made available in different journals. All the essays included in this book have been "revised, expanded, or otherwise modified" (xi) to better fit the purpose of this book – to offer an understanding of the *place-mindedness* that characterises human existence. In the

spirit of a true *bricoleur*, Tally assembled these fragments that he has used earlier in his career to create a new whole that “may be more useful, if not greater, than the sum of its parts, as the chapters trace a certain, more or less logical trajectory through the literary, critical, and theoretical territories to be explored” (xi). The outcome of this new arrangement is described by Tally using a spatial metaphor. The previously mentioned trajectory is the path that the reader must follow in order to grasp the intricate relation between human beings and the environment they inhabit and how this is reflected in literature. Therefore, the critical method used in this book is also a form of *cartography*. By doing this, Tally underlines that even the cognisant critic cannot evade *the cartographic imperative* – another essential concept in his writings.

The volume is divided into three parts, each one made up of three chapters. The gradual transition from the more general topic of space in geocritical theory to the specific case of *spatial imagination* in fantasy literature, through the issues of mapping within the limits of novel theory, mirrors the spatial exploration that Tally discussed. In other words, the author practices what he preaches, in the sense that not only the writer, but the critic himself is becoming a *mapmaker*.

The starting point on this map is the notion of *topophrenia*. In the first chapter, simply titled *Topophrenia*, Tally describes the concept’s origin and his own use of it. As mentioned before, Robert Tally has the habit of adapting certain ideas in order to make them into useful critical tools. In this case, topophrenia is his own term, but it is based upon *topophilia*, a concept proposed by the distinguished Chinese-American geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan. Tally defines topophrenia as “a certain identifiable ‘place-mindedness’ that informs our activities and thinking.” (23). While topophilia in Yi-Fu Tuan’s usage points to a “joyous phenomenology” (20), topophrenia is intended to include the opposite aspect of the matter. This is Tally’s main improvement made to the definition of the link between the subject and the environment that he reflects and projects at the same time. More exactly, topophilia must coexist with *topophobia*. Drawing upon Martin Heidegger’s *Angst*, Tally properly identifies a “spatial anxiety” (1) embedded in human experience, hence the *phrenia* suffix – this affix is often associated with mental dysfunction. In his own words, “the pervasive place-mindedness infusing our subjective experience in and apprehension of the world is characterized by a profound sense of unease, anxiety or discontent.” (23) One does not need to be in some kind of dangerous place to experience these types of feelings. As Tally puts it, “even when we are ‘at home’, we maintain our awareness of the

unfamiliar, the *unheimlich*, and a subtle, yet visceral feeling of a spatial anxiety subtends our thought and action.” (23) This is not the first time the author has used existentialist ideas (see *Spatiality*, 2013), but if before they were only exhibited in a genealogy of literary geography, in this case they are deployed to support a specific theory. In the second part of the first chapter, Tally puts topophilia into practice by showing how an uneasy relationship with space is a sign of the spatial undetermination from which the cartographic imperative develops.

The next two chapters, *Introducing Geocriticism* and *Geocritical Situations*, deal with the work of the author that Tally dedicates this book to – Bertrand Westphal. Essentially, these essays incorporate texts that accompany the English translations of Westphal’s books and other interventions that Tally has made on geocriticism. However, these chapters are not redundant because the section about geocriticism from Robert Tally’s 2013 volume, *Spatiality*, was a mere introduction into this new and exciting discipline. In *Topophilia: Place, Narrative and Spatial Imagination*, geocritical theory finally receives the attention it deserves. It is worth mentioning that Robert Tally makes the distinction between Westphal’s geocriticism and his own usage of the term – as a form of criticism that engages with space and is more author-centred, without losing its interdisciplinary formula. Overall, these two chapters are a valuable introduction to the problems of geocriticism.

Compared to the first part of the book, the second one, titled *Spatial Representation in Narrative*, engages in more close-reading and uses more literary examples to support the concepts that are being put forward. Literary cartography seems to be the theoretical core of these three chapters. The first essay, *The Mise en Abyme of Literary Cartography*, is a reflection on the limits of the spatially-oriented concept used in the title. More precisely, Tally is investigating the strength and the weakness of the representative character of literary cartography. Before going further, we must reveal what Tally is referring to when he covers literary cartography. We avoided selecting a definition from his writings because he has not provided a precise one. In this essay, Tally is reminding his readers that “like the cartographer, the storyteller creates a representation of the world presented in the work, but this representation cannot be a simple reflection of the ‘real’ world in a more figurative form” (76). In other words, by literary cartography, Tally understands the process through which the writer builds his fictional world and its relationship with the “real” world (also see Edward W. Soja’s concept of *Real-and-Imagined Places* that greatly

influenced Robert Tally). The main concern of this essay is the impossibility of a *mimetic* representation of literary cartography hinted at by Tally in the previous quote. Using the allegory of a map with a one-on-one scale that was eventually destroyed, with its remains scattered around the territory that it once tried to duplicate, present in a Borgesian short story, Robert Tally claims that literary cartography produces some kind of *mise en abyme* effect in which “any reflection will presuppose further reflections, and the effort to describe the persons, places, events and so on will inevitably shape them” (76).

Moreover, the fictional world leaves its mark on the history of the real place with which it shares a connection. In Tally’s words, “the territory is not necessarily the map or vice versa, but the maps and the territories disclose themselves to be constitutive of one another” (76). As mentioned before, this idea echoes the concept of the *thirdspace* as theorised by Edward W. Soja, but it is centred on the literary text. Unfortunately, Tally does not provide examples of how Borges’s allegory materialised. An interesting precedent is that of the Illiers-Combray commune in north-central France, initially called Illiers. After Marcel Proust fictionalised the settlement in his famous *In Search of Lost Time* under the name Combray, the residents of this commune decided to rename it as a tribute to Proust on the occasion of the first centenary of his birth in 1971. In the same essay, Tally proceeds to debate these reflections on literary cartography through “three exemplary scenes from world literature” (77) which coincide with the three odysseys that were, according to the poet Charles Olson, “the three discontinuous stages of the development of ‘Western man’ the ‘central quality’ of which is ‘search’ ” (qtd. in Tally 77). To be more exact, Tally uses as examples Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Commedia*, and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. He acknowledges that these three works can be replaced or complemented with many other great books, not only sourced from the Western canon, but from every other area of world literature. Indeed, Robert Tally traces the development of the spatial imagination and of the cartographic imperative of the “Western man,” but fails to stress how these works, seen as maps, are intertwined with their apparent referent.

The next two chapters, *The Space of the Novel* and *Theatrum Geographicum*, explore the relationship between the novel as a literary genre and space. In the first essay, Tally skims through different authors and literary texts, from Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, in order to validate his belief that the novel is “perhaps the most important narrative genre for

literary cartography” (10). What is more important here is that, by using different theories from Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said, Tally manages to give his readers a concise history of the process through which the novel both reflected and contributed to great social upheaval, all of this through its intrinsic inclination towards mapping. In the last chapter of the second part of this volume, Robert Tally achieves a balance between the preceding texts. In *Theatrum Geographicum*, the author illustrates how literary cartography shapes the reality from which it originates through comprehensive readings of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Daniel Kehlmann’s *Measuring the World*. In other words, this chapter compensates for the shortcomings of the previous two essays. Using *theatrum geographicum* as a world system model, Tally demonstrates how fictional devices like the novel and the map can be vehicles for understanding the world and - why not? - to change it.

The last part, as indicated by the title *Fantasy and the Spatial Imagination*, deals with the popular genre of fantasy, a real interest for Robert Tally for quite some time. In the first essay, *Adventures in Literary Cartography*, the critic approaches “the adventures in literary cartography by examining the ways that adventure stories illustrate and enact the project of narrative mapping” (127). The most important aspect to be taken from this essay is Tally’s assertion that literary cartography has an intrinsic utopian and fantastic dimension. This idea is pursued further in the next chapter, *In the Suburbs of Amaurotum*. Examining the spatiality of Thomas Morus’s *Utopia*, Tally advocates for the inclusion of utopian and fantastic criticism into spatial literary studies. Going a step further, the critic argues that the fantastic is more than a genre or a dimension of literary cartography; it is a manner of thinking and seeing the world. This is the main thesis of the last essay, one that bravely proposes the speculative nature of fantasy as a way to distance literary criticism from national, often reactionary, reflexes and to move towards a wider understanding of literature and space, one that is more receptive to alterity. This last section of the book is a discrete, but bold, attempt to improve spatial literary studies in order to be a more inclusive and more effective discipline in the field of spatial humanities.

Overall, *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative and Spatial Imagination* is, at the same time, a conclusion and a new beginning for Robert Tally’s research. This volume is an evocative account of a productive decade-long activity in the field of spatial humanities, revisiting all the main ideas that Tally has used in his previous books, from

literary cartography to cognitive mapping, all of his interests – from authors like Melville to literary genres such as fantasy – and reinterpretations of other concepts, while reinforcing the great influence that spatial and critical thinkers like Fredric Jameson, Edward W. Soja, Bertrand Westphal, and Edward Said had on Tally’s own thinking. In some respects, *Topophilia: Place, Narrative and Spatial Imagination* can be used as an introduction to Robert Tally’s spatial literary studies, but if one pays attention, the reader can also sense the subtle changes that anticipate new explorations of the intimate link between space, place, and literature. In the conclusion of the volume, Tally reasserts his wish that “spatial literary studies will continue to expand, increase in complexity and nuance, and chart new direction for further inquiry in the future” (176). We think this is already happening as it can be seen in one of Tally’s latest essays, “Spatial Literary Studies versus Literary Geography?,” in the *English Language and Literature* journal (vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 391-408), where the critic responds to Sheila Hones’s call for a clearer delimitation between spatial literary studies and literary geography, perceived as different disciplines. Despite its flaws, Robert Tally’s latest book is a first step towards a better understanding of all of the new ways we can approach literature and spatiality.

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