Geocriticism and the Italian Modernist Novel

Abstract

La poli-centralità suggerita dal Geocriticismo può essere applicata alle differenti letterature nazionali. Vi è un modernismo europeo, nel quale ogni tradizione nazionale può trovare il proprio minimo comune denominatore, e vi sono i modernismi nazionali, che hanno le loro proprie identità e specificità. Questo tipo di poli-centralità può essere mostrato da una metodologia geocritica e potrebbe costituire il primo passo per un nuovo modo di costruire la mappa della letteratura europea di inizio XX secolo. A questo proposito, si considerano quattro elementi: 1. Il Modernismo cittadino; 2. Centro / Periferia; 3. Modernismo / Realismo; 4. Modernismo / Avanguardia.

The *poly-centrality* suggested by Geocriticism can be applied also to the different national literatures. There is a European modernism, in which every national tradition can find its lowest common denominator; and there are national modernisms which have their own identities and specificities. This kind of *poly-centrality* can be revealed by a geocritical approach. This could be the first step for mapping the literary Europe of the beginning of the 20th century in a new way. In this regard, I think that four elements should be analysed: 1. *Township modernism*, 2. *Centre/Periphery*, 3. *Modernism/Realism*, 4. *Modernism/Avant-Gard*.

1. Geocriticism: a new discipline

During the nineties, scholars began to consider the relationship between Literature and Geography. The "spatial turn", as this change of cultural perspectives in literary studies has been termed, took place especially in France, where Bertrand Westphal coordinated a research group in Limoges, and coined the term *Géocritique*.[1] In his theory Westphal invites one to focus on a singular place, in general a city, and to study how literary texts describe it, and, more precisely, to consider the kind of physiognomy novels as well as poetical works give to the urban space.

The consequences of his approach are twofold.

First of all the real cities or places risk to disappear and become only "literary representations" created by novels and poems: for instance Paris, as a metropolis with its subways, its prisons, its restaurants, and all its concrete elements, no longer exists; it turns into an ideal construction concocted by Balzac, and then renewed first by Flaubert and Maupassant, and later by Perec and others. Literature absorbs reality, so that the world turns into a textual object, losing its own concreteness; incidentally, you may have noticed that this point of view is obviously close to some aspects of postmodernist theory.[2] Further *Géocritique* prefers a synchronous critical approach: by

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[1] Westphal 2000; Westphal 2007.

[2] Belonging to Wespthal, «c'est la littérature postmoderne qui s'adapte le mieux à cette nouvelle

focusing his attention on a single place, it shows how works of different periods can be read together. Hence the historical approach, and the history of literature in general, risk to be removed, or to become secondary.[3]

Westphal's theories were well received especially in Continental Europe: in France, for instance, where Collot published *Pour une géographie littéraire*, and in Italy with Giulio Iacoli.[4] Outside Continental Europe, however, "geocriticism" was applied to texts in a remarkably different way. Suffice here to mention Andrew Thacker, Robert Tally, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel[5]. In their works the procedure opposes (or at least works in a different way) to that followed by Westphal and others. The starting point of their critical approach is no longer the single place, but an author or a specific period. Hence the diachronic approach to the history of literature is recovered. In general the kind of geocriticism these scholars (Thacker, Tally, etc.) propose pursues three purposes:

1. Investigating the relationship between the hero and his places, and how the hero transforms the city or the town where he/she lives in his/her space.[6] This procedure is typical of modernism, whereby the subjectivity is stronger in comparison with other (literary) periods.
2. Checking the hierarchy of places and areas proposed in a novel or in a group of works: for example the relationship between city and country, or city and town.
3. Mapping the world by considering the literature of a specific era, or better investigating the cartography traced by novelists and poets in a particular period.

2. On Italian modernism

2.1. *The debate*

In 2004 Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli introduced the category of Modernism to the Italian cultural debate.[7] This concept was useful to distinguish the experimental

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version du réel, le 'réel déréalisé'; c'est peut-être elle qui offre les meilleures options de lecture du monde, en vertu de sa fictionnalité même», Westphal 2007, p. 150. About Westphal's postmodernism cfr. Ziethen 2013.

[3] It seems that Westphal confirms Jameson's theory, about the differences between modernism and postmodernism: «We have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism», Jameson, 1981 p. 9.

[4] Cfr. Collot 2014 and Iacoli 2008. About Italian studies cfr. also Sgavicchia 2003, which was the first book with this theoretical approach.

[5] Cfr. Thacker, 2009 and Brooker – Thacker 2005; Tally 2011; Doyle – Winkiel 2005. In Italy some scholars proposed interpretation closer to Thacker and Tally than to Westphal: I like to mention Fiorentino – Solivetti, 2012 and Fiorentino – Sampaolo 2009; Luzzatto – Pedullà 2010-2012; Alfano 2010.

[6] About the differences between place and space cfr. Lefebvre 1974; de Certau 1990, p. 173.

[7] Cfr. Somigli – Moroni 2004; Donnarumma 2006; Castellana 2009 and Castellana 2010; Baldi

literature of Svevo and Pirandello from d'Annunzio's Aestheticism (it is worth mentioning here that since 1936 the two areas had been wrongly considered under the same definition of Decadentismo).[8] At the same time the term «modernismo» linked up early twenty century Italian literature to a European context, where the category of modernism is largely accepted (I'm referring to English, Portoguese and Spanish literatures; for some aspects in Germany the concept of *moderne* seems to share the same perspectives as well).

Now, the geocritical approach clarifies these aspects and, at same time, tries to define the borders of Italian modernism: in particular it points out those features which are similar to the other European contexts, and which instead are a peculiarity of Italian literature.

2.2. *Italian township modernism*

Svevo, Pirandello, Tozzi, Pea are the main novelists of Italian modernism. If we analyse their setting, we immediately observe that they never choose the big city as a story setting: indeed Trieste, Sicily, Siena, Lucchesia are towns. And even Rome, already a capital at the beginning of the century, is described as a kind of popular district, where everybody knows each other, and where nothing really surprising can happen. What I mean is that even Rome appears as a little city. For this reason we can apply the category of *Township modernism*, proposed by Ian Bacoum,[9] to the Italian novel of the first decades of the century [although Bacoum refers to colonial society, whereas here we are applying his category to Western European Literature].[10]

Notably the towns described by these novelists are never subaltern, subordinate, inferior to the big city. On the contrary the metropolis is perceived as a place of alienation, where it is impossible for the hero to maintain his/her own identity, or to achieve a new one.[11] Seldom Milano and the concept of metropolis appear in Italian modernist fiction, and towns remain the only urban spaces of the novels. Obviously there is a reason for such a geographic dictatorship. For Svevo, Pirandello and the others, the town is a kind of totality, where it is possible to find everything: love, friendship, money, family, pleasure, sex, etc. In this regard, Joyce immediately comes to one's mind, when he argued: «For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the

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2010; Luperini – Tortora 2011; Luperini – Tortora 2012 (and I have to mention also Tortora 2010).

[8] I'm referring to Binni 1936.

[9] Bacoum 2005.

[10] Bacoum affirms: «Fanon, I am suggesting, understands himself to know and to see that the *modernist* zone of the present from which colonial societies will refashion themselves *is* the zone of the township, but he also understands that colonial society often fail to share that vision» (ivi, p. 233).

[11] It is easy to quote pages from Pirandello and Svevo referred to Milano: the city is marked as a «stordimento di macchine», «progresso [che] non ha nulla a che fare con la felicità», place where the protagonist is not able to «trovare sulla via chi conosceva ed incapace di non salutare tutti gli sconosciuti». And the situation is similar for Borgese's *Rubè*, for some Bontempelli's heroes, and it doesn't change when the metropolis are Rome («una città triste», «Roma è morta») or Napoli (again the example of Bontempelli). But, beside the considerations we already expressed.

heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal».[12] Joyce's words show a typical modernist approach to reality. As Lukacs affirmed in *Theory of the novel*, «men […] had lost the immanence of the essence»,[13] and that's why they are condemned to «carry the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms»;[14] but at the same time they are also condemned to retrieve and recreate such a disintegrated unity. The specificity of modernism is the awareness of this procedure, whereby all modernist art is a sort of compromise between the impossibility of restoring a lost unity, and the necessity of totality, even if it's no longer that of the ancient Greece («the natural unity of the metaphysical»)[15] but a new modern one: a «created totality».[16]

Hence, the town is chosen in modernist fiction rather than metropolis, because it can express this negotiation between loss of unit and necessity/desire of totality: the town is a small element of a bigger system (it is a fragment), but it is also complex and rich enough to give the hero all he/she needs (in a kind of "totality mode").

Furthermore, the protagonist divides his town into several areas, each related to a specific element of his life. Before being a literary concept, such idea of mapping a place according with one's need and personal experience was first suggested by geographers and city planners: in particular by Harris and Ullman, who published in 1945 *The Nature of Cities*, in which they introduced the *multiple nuclei theory*. They argued that at the beginning of the century the city was divided into multiples zones, each one had to produce the maximum of its specificity, in accordance with the Fordist idea of social organization.[17] From the literary side, Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* provides a good example. In this novel the protagonist divided Trieste into two parts, and the border is marked by the «*Giardino pubblico* [public garden]»: in his perspective, the part of the town beyond the garden is related to Carla, Zeno's lover, while the opposite side is under Augusta's jurisdiction, and it represents the ideals of family, order, bourgeois life. At the same time, however, Trieste is divided into the affair zone (Borsa, Caffè Tergesteo, etc.), that of pleasure (Carla's district), of sin (peripheries), of purity (home, Malfenti's house etc.), and so on.[18] Remarkably, all of these parts never enter into contact with the each other, indeed Zeno is at pains to maintain a safety distance among these areas. Therefore, when Carla convinced Zeno to go for a walk in the *Giardino pubblico*, the hero decided to put an end to their relationship. He clearly didn't want to risk that an area (in this case Carla's) could invade or even threat the one nearby (Augusta's), hence destroying the entire system. Only if all the areas remain

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[12]   I am quoting by Ellmann 1983, p. 505.
[13]   Lukács 1971, p. 35.
[14]   Ivi, p. 39.
[15]   Ivi, p. 37.
[16]   *Ibidem*.
[17]   Cfr. Harris – Ullmann 1945; cfr. also McKenzie 1933. About Harris, Ulmann and Fordism cfr. Farinelli, 2003, p. 186.
[18]   Kern affirms that «dense interior networks and sprawling perimeters made modern city centers impossible to determine» (Kern 2011, p. 95).

strictly separated, Zeno can be, in the same novel, a faithful and an unfaithful husband, a business man and a lazy bourgeois, rich and poor, generous and stingy, etc.[19]

Thus Trieste appears as a paradoxical town: at the same time it represents a Lukacsian totality (everything is there: wife and lover, sin and purity, legality and fraud), but it is also made of independent and disjointed fragments (different areas cannot in fact communicate). According to the geographic setting, Zeno Cosini, as far as he can play the role he prefers (lover, husband, father, ect.), seems to be an absolute and complete hero; by contrast, precisely because of such a peculiar condition, he is also a fragmented subject, condemned to choose only one of the infinite possibilities offered by the town. As a consequence diachronicity and synchronicity are both crucial elements of the novel.

Furthermore this setting leads to a new paradox. We mentioned that the modernist town is not inferior to the city, as it has not to be perceived as a satellite of a more important centre, the suburb of the metropolitan area. Trieste, Siena, Roma, Lucca, etc. are as centrals as Paris, London, Milan were in the 19th century. Indeed, we can talk of an absolute centrality of the town, only when we consider a single novel. Instead, when we analyse a larger number of novels – hypothetically all the Italian modernist works – we get a map with as many centres as the towns described in each novel (because for each novelist and for each hero the centre of the world is the little town where the story is settled). That's why we need to invent the category of *polycentric centrality*: in fact, for the reasons I've already explained, the general modernist cartography appears *polycentric*, *multicentric*, *reticular*. And even in this case totality and fragment fit together, rather than being alternative to each other. After all, this condition is another way to express the paradox on which modernism bases its poetic.

3. International cartography

3.1. *The world becomes smaller*

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world became smaller. Because of colonialism and of the First World War, events happened very far, sometimes in other continents, had consequences in terms of both European socio-economical and political response. Consequently, everything became more familiar (because citizens shared the same family/country/world) and less foreign as well. One could attempt to say that a primitive kind of globalization started precisely in the modernist era. The purpose of this consideration is to demonstrate that for a number of modernisms (especially the Italian one) what was outside – outside the town, in other cities, and outside the country or the continent – did no longer bring new events, amazing innovations, things never seen before. And because of this monotony, the modernist hero prefers to be

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[19]   On this particular element in *La coscienza di Zeno* see Palmieri 1994, pp. xiii-xliii (very importanti is the *Appendice topografica* at the end of the volume: pp. 434-439). About Svevo's novel it is possible to affirm what Claudine Herrmann wrote about *Ulysses*: «man's space» or more precisely «a space of domination, hierarchy and conquest, a sprawling, showy space, a *full space*», Herrmann 1981. For this argument see also Garvey 1995.

sedentary, and not to travel too much: for instance Zeno remains in Trieste, as well as Tozzi's protagonists, while Mattia Pascal quickly dismisses his journey in northern Italy, and devotes the majority of his narrative space to Paleari's house.[20] This is for Italian modernism, but if one gives a look to the European context we can not certainly say that Joyce's heroes travel a lot (in *Dubliners* and in *Ulysses*), or that the *Recherche* provides detailed accounts of Marcel's journeys.

   This is exactly the opposite of what happened in 19th century literature: Bel ami and Frederic Moreau must move to Paris if they want to experience what real life is; the same happens in Verga: in *Eva* (1873), or in the more famous *Malavoglia* (1881), in which it's enough for 'Ntoni to ear the story of two young men who come «da Trieste, o da Alessandria d'Egitto, insomma da lontano»,[21] to definitely leave Aci Trezza. By contrast, in the modernist era there is nothing to look for that one cannot already find at home, or even in the innermost part of the hero's conscience.

   3.2. *Italian modernism in European modernism*

The *poly-centrality* suggested by Geocriticism can be applied also to the different na-tional literatures. There is a European modernism, in which every national tradition can find its lowest common denominator; and there are national modernisms which have their own identities and specificities. This kind of *poly-centrality* can be revealed by a geocritical approach. This could be the first step for mapping the literary Europe of the beginning of the 20th century in a new way. In this regard, I think that four ele-ments should be analysed.
1. *Township modernism*. I have tried to show how Italian modernism prefers towns rather than cities. If we give a look to the Western European Literature, we notice that, although this geographical setting is not adopted everywhere, still it is quite widespread. Undoubtedly we find something similar in the United Kingdom with James Joyce (Dublin is never perceived as a big city), with Joseph Conrad (his seafaring world is a closed structure),[22] and even with Virgina Woolf (the events described in her novels occur not even in London, but in the restricted area of Bloomsbury).[23] This is also consistent with the Spanish (I'm referring to Azorin's *La voluntad*, 1902) and the German literature: if for Döblin the centre is Berlin and Alexanderplatz, Thomas Mann prefers Lübeck, Davos, Hamburg. But, at the same time, in Portugal, with Pessoa's Lisbon, and in France, the situation is different: everybody knows that Proust and *La recherche* are strictly related to Paris. Now, all these considerations tell us that there isn't only one modernism: Italian and Irish (and maybe British too) literatures prefer the township way, while in France it is

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[20]   (at most the imaginary travel can be told, as the Belluca's ones in *Il treno ha fischiato*)
[21]   G. Verga, *I Malavoglia*, Milano: Mondadori, p. xxx.
[22]   Anyhow for Conrad London isn't a positive element: for example the hero of *The Secret Agent* is «oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night».
[23]   About Virginia Woolf and urban spaces, cfr. Brewster 1959; Squier 1985. About Woolf and the technical aspects, cfr. Thacker 2009, pp. 152-191.

Paris to be the centre of the novel, as it was in the 19th century; Germany and Spain have more solutions. In general, we can say that the big city remains the referent point for those national literatures that belong to countries where the centrality (and the idea) of the State is still strong (France and Portugal). Conversely, in those countries, where there is a sort of political fragmentation (Dublin can't recognize London, in Germany the idea of Wien is still alive, Italy and Spain are "municipal" countries) the township modernism imposes itself.

2. *Centre/Periphery*. Anyhow in all literary contexts, the dialectics town/city, which was pivotal in 19th century, evaporates: the setting is always the same, and it configures itself as a totality (or «created totality»). This aspect is common to all the national modernisms: indeed we can say that it is characteristic of European Modernism. More in general what at stake here is the disappearance of the conflict and of the relationship (or even of the dialectics) between centre/periphery, which was still decisive in the second part of the 19th century (*Madame Bovary*, *Bel ami*, *Education sentimentale*, *Hard Times*, *Malavoglia*, *Il piacere*, etc.). This system has been replaced by the modernist *polycentrism* I've talked about.

3. *Modernism/Realism*. As the geocriticism initiates modernism (confirming the borders of 1900), it can also mark its end, by registering some thematic changes which perphaps suggest the birth of a new era. If we look at the Italian narrative, we note that from Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (1929) the big city (in a Baudelairian sense) reappears in the novel, in opposition to both the town and the country (see Calvino, Fenoglio, Gadda).[24] There is another evolution as well: if Trieste is an expression of Zeno (more than Zeno is a citizen of Trieste), since 1929 (*Gli indifferenti*) cities have been described in a realistic way, and places recover their concreteness. I don't want to speculate about questions I don't have sufficient competence on, but I do think that something similar happens in France (Malraux, Bernanos, Rolland, Duhamel), and perhaps even in England.[25] Anyway the consideration about recovering concreteness raises a question: is it right to oppose modernism to realism and vice versa? This is what happened in the Italian field, whereby modernism appears as a suspension of realism, proposing itself as a form of realism so new to become something different from its classical definition. It would be interesting to check whether this interpretation can be extended to other cultures too.

4. *Modernism/Avant-Gard*. In Italy the choice of the city instead of the town is typical of Avant-Gard, and in particular of Futurism, as in England the idea of metropolis was emphasised by Vorticist painters such as Nevinson, Wadsworth (and in lesser

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[24]   In Moravia it is Roma which impose itself as the eternal city (even if has more than one decadent element), while in Calvino his Liguria is a little environment in front of Milano and Torino (*La speculazione edilizia* for example), and in Gadda the opposition between Rome and country (*Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*) is evident.

[25]   If it is right what Stephen Spender suggested in *The Destructive Element* or what later Christopher Caudwell confirmed in *Illusion and Reality* (SPENDER 1935 and CAUDWELL 1936. But in the boundless bibliography on the cultural change in British literature around Thirties, I like to mention STEAD 1986).

way in Lewis' literary works). Because of this choice between city and town the Italian debate on Modernism and Avant-Gard has been kept separated. After all Svevo, Pirandello, Tozzi rejected Futurism and all the revolutionary artistic forms. Furthermore, if Futurism and Avant-Gard in general have a manifesto, reviews and official groups, modernists usually work on their own: they are individualistic.[26] For these reasons in Italy Modernism and Avant-Gard represent irreconcilable polarities. Even in this case, other countries – such as France, Eastern Europe (Russia until 1917), in part Germany – show different situations (Surrealism, for example, isn't so far from some modernist writers, while Russian Futurism represents an expression of the Slavic Modernism). Nonetheless, perhaps to draw a line between these two literary expressions (modernist and Avant-Gardist) wouldn't be wrong. And the tool for drawing this line, and marking this border, can well be geocriticism: representing as it does the way writers map and describe the surrounding space. As I've argued, geocriticism can be employed also in a more general way, drawing a new map of European Modernism, outlining a different cartography, proposing a new geography of Modernism; or more directly, perhaps, a *Geo*modernism.[27]

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[26] About this distinction see Donnarumma 2006, pp. 7-28.
[27] Obviously the term «geomodernism» derives from Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel's book *Geomodernisms : race, modernism, modernity*, which I already quoted.

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