Literary Geographies and the Work of David Ireland - An Australian Atlas

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On the 26th of July 2022, the Australian literary firmament lost a giant when David Ireland passed away at the age of 94. A three-time Miles Franklin prize winner, Ireland's literary career spanned six decades and produced a body of work which is perhaps unrivalled in the panoramic vision it offers of the economic, political and cultural life of post-World War II Australian society. In a powerful obituary, Ikin (2022) noted that Ireland 'left us an intricate mosaic of Australian existence in his time.'

To understand the power of this mosaic, and the animating essence of this book, I must relate a personal story about my experience of Ireland's work. Several years ago, a colleague and I had a vague plan to study representations of Australian industrialisation in literature. As part of our initial sweep of reading, someone encouraged us to read Ireland's (2013) *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (his first Miles Franklin prize-winner), which we duly did. I found reading *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* a profound experience. As a lifelong resident of Wollongong, a blue-collar city to the south of Sydney, there was a depth and sincerity to Ireland's depiction of industrial life that resonated with me strongly. Most significantly, I recognised in Ireland's novel a hyper-awareness of the spatiality of Australian industrial capitalism, of its unique network of spaces and places that together constitute its fabric. Ireland represented aesthetically the tension between the abstract space of capitalism and the struggle of the working class to transform that space into meaningful social place, a tension that, due to its affective dimension, is especially potent in the literary form.

My 2021 book *Space, Place and Capitalism: The Literary Geographies of The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (Heino 2021) represented a first cut at using the spatial knowledge embedded in Ireland's work to deepen our understanding of the spaces and places of Australian capitalism. Reading more broadly, however, it was clear that *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* was no flash-in-the-pan; rather, Ireland's entire corpus represents a veritable treasure trove of spatial representations and knowledge. The goal of this book is to draw this knowledge to the surface and craft out of it a type of Australian atlas. In this endeavour I had harboured some hazy notion that I might be helped directly by Ireland; although I never got around to taking any concrete steps, I was considering reaching out to him to organise an interview. The press of work, the logistical difficulties, and a broader conceptual quandary as to whether such an interview would help or hinder the project, combined to stymie first efforts. Now, I will never get the opportunity to let Ireland speak to

the spatialities of his texts. This book is thus not just simply an account of space and place in Ireland's work. Rather, it is designed to show the enduring significance of Ireland's literature and hopefully be part of an effort to stimulate awareness of his work to modern audiences.

This desire to stir interest in Ireland's novels and poetry is not primarily a matter of aesthetic taste. Rather, I will argue in this book that the knowledge of space and place embedded in these texts is a key entry point into understanding the spatiality of post-World War II Australian capitalism and its constituent economic, political and cultural structures. This is not merely a matter of academic curiosity. In 2025, the world is facing profound social dislocation, due to a confluence of causes, including conflict in Europe, the ever-escalating growth of nationalism and far-right political movements and, overarching everything, the increasingly apparent breakdown of climate systems. This multi-faceted crisis is always-already being experienced as a crisis of *space*. The spatial organisation of economic, political and cultural life; the interaction between local, national and international spaces; conceptions of nationhood and the utility of "spatial fixes" (Harvey 1989) to capitalism's woes – all have been problematised in unique ways in the current conjuncture.

Australia's experience of this constellation of forces, and thus its own unique share in the spatial crisis, is highly complex. In common with other settler-colonial societies, questions of geography have always been keenly felt in the Australian context, often in the form of a series of spatial contradictions: vast physical size is counter-balanced by a population heavily concentrated on the south-eastern seaboard; fabulously rich endowments of material resources has simultaneously undergirded our wealth yet locked us into highly volatile articulations with the global economy; historical senses of belonging to an imperial family have always existed uneasily with domestic attempts to carve out a distinctly Australian identity. These geographical tensions (and others) run throughout Australian history, and their contradictions have been particularly exacerbated by the current spatial crisis. Never perhaps has it been as difficult as an Australian to answer the question of where and how we fit into the spatial structure of the modern world.

How then to make sense of this complicated, and complicating, spatial picture? As a first step, we must understand the constitution, reproduction and functions of space and place in a modern capitalist society. The "spatial turn" in cultural studies sought to do exactly this, generating new forms of geographic knowledge through the extension of extant disciplines to questions of space and place. One of the most exciting and vibrant products of the spatial turn

is the field of literary geography, a burgeoning area of research premised on the idea that literature 'knows things' (Saunders 2009: 439–440) about the spatial framework of the world it is born into. Tally (2013: 2) notes that literature 'functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live.' In the face of an infinitely complex reality, material spaces must be grasped, at least in part, discursively and imaginatively (that is to say, ideologically). Literature, perhaps the most powerful and revealing working of the perceptual and symbolic forms of a society's ideological structures (Eagleton 2006), is one extremely important method by which people can create the complex "cognitive maps" (Jameson 1991) that allow them to conceive, perceive and live the spaces of their society. I have previously coined the term *spatial unconscious* to crystallise the specific geographic value of literature – it represents the 'inherent imprint of the spatiality of the society into which they [texts] are born which we can mine for spatial knowledge' (Heino 2021: 178).

Literary geography thus represents a promising entry-point to understanding the spaces and places of Australian society, generating unique forms of knowledge in the process. Against the backdrop of a fertile literary tradition which is already rich in spatial understandings (Leer 1990), I argue that David Ireland stands out as perhaps the pre-eminent Australian novelist of space. His landscapes stretch from gritty factories and working-class urban enclaves to idyllic coastal and rural communities, and are populated by an amazing array of characters, including workers, managers, prostitutes, welfare recipients, artists/writers and even literate dogs and sentient animals. Their stories, told through a unique literary style composed of distinct structures, themes and motifs, register the very contradictions at the heart of the spatiality of capitalism: the impress of the class struggle between labour and capital on space and place; the colonisation of Nature by a regime of abstract space, producing and reproducing a Nature that is internalised within, and subservient to, capital accumulation; the crucial role of the state in simultaneously constituting abstract space yet having to manage its deleterious effects; and the deeply gendered character of spaces and places. In short, in the work of David Ireland we have an almost unparalleled vantage point on the spatial structure of post-World War II Australian society. Each of his texts possesses a spatial unconscious that can be mined for geographic knowledge, a spatial unconscious that speaks not only to its time but to its past and its future. Having produced a body of work over a span of nearly fifty years (1968-2016), we can trace the evolution of the spatial unconscious of his texts over

time, identifying recurring perspectives on space and place as well as radical departures and about-faces.

Importantly, it is my argument that this study of Ireland's work is as much a matter of looking forward as backward. His corpus gives us crucial insights into spatial forces and ideologies that are active in the fabric of modern-day Australia. It gives us some means by which we might orient ourselves, both positively and negatively, in the maelstrom of the spatial crisis described above.

Structure of the book

The analysis commences with Chapter 2. This chapter is devoted to an exploration of the tradition of radical geography, which has been a vibrant perspective on the spatiality of capitalism since the 1970s and 1980s. We shall explore the contributions of notable scholars including Lefebvre (1991, 2013), Harvey (1989, 1996, 2006, 2010), Smith (2008) and Merrifield (1993), who all argue in their own way that the social relations of capitalism matter in terms of understanding how the spaces and places of capitalism are produced and reproduced. Employing in particular the insights of Lefebvre, it will be posited in this chapter that the logic of capitalism is towards the production of a *regime of abstract space*, a specific structure for perceiving, conceiving and living space that has at its core the fragmentation, homogenisation and hierarchisation of that space. This abstract space acts to erase distinctions as it colonises other spaces and subordinates them to its logic. However, capital often meets resistance in this project, as workers seek to crystallise their own political economy of concrete connection, meaningful work and the suspension of competition in social places (Lebowitz 2003). Also vital in this struggle against abstract space are women, indigenous peoples and members of the lumpenproletariat, whose experience of oppression results in unique patterns of placemaking. The complex interplay between these different relationships to space and place inscribes itself in concrete spatial forms, producing the landscapes of capitalism. At the conclusion of this chapter, therefore, we will have developed one half of the theoretical matrix through which the works of David Ireland will be analysed.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to unfolding the second half of the book's theoretical lens in the shape of literary geography. Using the insights of structural Marxist literary theory, in particular the work of Eagleton (2002, 2006), Macherey (2006), Rodríguez (2002; 2008) and Jameson (2002), we can specify exactly the nature of spatial knowledge in texts; namely, that it is

knowledge crafted through putting the ideology of a social formation to work. The raw material of literature is ideology, expressed in classed languages and discourses (Bakhtin 2021), which are then worked into a textual product through literary forms which are themselves ideological. This chapter will argue that the spatial unconscious is the potent concept born of the organic fusion of these literary geographic and radical geographic understandings. The spatial unconscious signifies that literary texts contain an intrinsic imprint of the spatiality of the society into which they are born, an imprint that is all the more valuable given that it registers in the text the same ideologies that are key in the constitution and reproduction of a spatial regime. Through putting these ideologies to work, authors can explore spatial structures, tease out their contradictions and provide creative symbols demonstrating their inner logic. With the spatial unconscious in hand, we are thus armed with the concept that will serve as the touchstone for analysing Ireland's corpus.

Chapter 4 begins the substantive analysis through situating us in the capitalist production process, the engine room of the regime of abstract space. We will focus here on *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, Ireland's most industrial novel. Set in Sydney, the fictional Puroil oil refinery operates as a fount from which the fragmentation, homogenisation and hierarchisation of abstract space flows. Through a complex process of aesthetic capital subjectification, workers are reduced to passive objects through being stripped of their individuality and life force, whilst capital itself becomes the dominating subject. This is a process occurring across a number of scales, including the strictly local operation of the plant itself and the global configuration of capitalist relations of production, with the latter ensuring that the Australian experience of abstract space is always-already an experience of foreign domination. We will explore how Ireland manages to push the ideology of capital rationality and efficiency guaranteeing these processes into open contradiction at the conclusion of the text, a process of aesthetic rupture that reveals both the radical vulnerability of this ideology and the means by which capital can attempt to plug the hole thus rent in its ideological cover.

Chapter 5 is premised on a key insight of Lefebvre's (1991), that the state is inextricably intertwined in the spatial structures of capitalism and that, in a very important respect, abstract space is also the space of the state. Given that the state is one of the most consistent objects of representation across Ireland's corpus, we can track the evolution in his handling of it across time. In particular, I will argue that his treatment of the state can be periodised into three epochs: a left-nationalist phase, a neoliberal phase and a post-neoliberal

authoritarian phase. In each of these periods, the relationship between the state, the nation and abstract space is formulated in different ways, and to radically different political effect.

Chapter 6 seeks to explore the spatial unfolding of capital's political economy across the natural and built worlds. Using Smith's (2008) understanding of first/second nature and Lefebvre's (2013) concept of rhythmanalysis, we will explore how Ireland imposes the abstract rhythms of a second nature built on exchange-value over a first nature of use-values. Whether through the environmental effects of the capitalist labour process, the marginalisation of concrete use-values, the penetration of the urban, suburban and rural forms by the commodity and/or the forms of bourgeois scientific knowledge and representations of space, we will see how capital imposes the fragmentation, homogenisation and hierarchisation of abstract space onto landscapes. This package of spatial techniques and processes is exceptionally powerful, with a potent capacity to subject meaningful social places to its logic.

Chapter 7 marks a turning point in the analysis in shifting to the perspective of those subject to the depredations of abstract space. In this chapter, we will focus on how the working class lives, socialises and reproduces itself in Ireland's two great proletarian texts – *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Glass Canoe* (Ireland 2012a). In two remarkable working-class places, the Home Beautiful and Southern Cross Hotel respectively, Ireland opens a literary space within which a working-class political economy of concrete connection, meaningful work and the suspension of competition can at least partially work itself out. We will explore the promises and pitfalls of these places, and the 1970s Australian working-class ideology they are forged from. Heavily localised, guarded by a complex set of physical and ideological sieves, linked aesthetically to the struggles of indigenous peoples against colonisers and watered by alcohol, these two locations are simultaneously incredibly strong yet profoundly brittle, evidence of the capacity of the working class to dominate place yet not command space (Harvey 1996).

Whereas Chapters 6 and 7 explore how the two great social classes of capitalism create space and place across Ireland's landscapes, Chapter 8 asks similar spatial questions of the lumpenproletariat, the long-term unemployed and criminal elements of a capitalist society that, not finding engagement within it, exist at its margins and in its pores. We will centre here on two of Ireland's texts, *The Chantic Bird* (Ireland 2015) and *The Flesheaters* (Ireland 1972). Seen through the eyes of the narrators of the two texts, the lumpenproletariat is

simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, a position of seeming exteriority to the central capital-wage labour relationship of capitalism that is generative of a number of highly fertile insights into the constituent features and contradictions of abstract space. However, the exteriority of both narrators will prove to be illusory, and in that fact we see Ireland capture the essential tragedy of the lumpenproletariat; whilst it may have spatial effects, it has no distinct spatial project. To the extent that lumpenproletarians gain one, it is through shedding that identity and internalising the political economy of another, such as capital.

Chapter 9 tackles the articulation Ireland forges between gender and spatiality. In the earlier, more realist texts, such as *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, *The Glass Canoe* and *The Chantic Bird*, Ireland's female characters find themselves encoded along the lines of the (in)famous "damned whores" and "God's police" stereotypes Anne Summers (2016) situated at the heart of capitalist patriarchy in Australia. As such, they are subjected to a crushing spatial confinement, exiled from the capitalist production process, spaces of male working-class reproduction and the public sphere more broadly. However, this more-or-less realistic depiction of the nature of post-World War II gender relations in Australia is radically subverted in *A Woman of the Future* (Ireland 2012b) and *City of Women* (Ireland 1981). In these magical realist texts, Ireland creates a space within which a liberal feminist ideology can work itself out, tightly allied to the question of the nation. Whilst productive of radical insights into the nature of gender and abstract space, we will see how Ireland leaves us skeptical that anything less than a challenging of the capitalist mode of production can durably alter the landscape of patriarchy and the gendered dualisms in which it traffics.

In the Chapter 10 conclusion, I shall summarise my main findings and demonstrate that the central thesis is correct – David Ireland's corpus can be read as an Australian atlas, an ideological map of the spaces and places of Australian society from the end of World War II on. His work knits together a legion of diverse themes into a living tapestry, a tapestry that aesthetically captures the articulations of class, state, gender and environment that produce the landscapes of Australian capitalism. We will conclude by suggesting that Ireland's Australian atlas might give us a map by which we might try to find ourselves in the crisis of space with which we opened our account.

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