HSUAN L. HSU


Reviewed by Patrick Vincent

This book’s title will appeal to all those who are passionate about American literature and landscape, yet underwhelmed by the mass of ecocritical studies published in the wake of Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination (1996). By the last page, however, even the greenest of critics will appear as a blessing. Published as part of the strongly historicist and revisionist Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture series (with an advisory board including—among others—Sacvan Bercovitch, Wai Chee Dimock and Walter Benn Michaels), this book belongs to a breed of criticism antithetical to green literary studies: “wilderness” is always bracketed and goes hardly mentioned, nature independent of history does not exist, any sense of place or of a bond with one’s region is sceptically debunked as essentialist, and even the currently trendy affect of cosmopolitan humanism is dismissed as retrograde. As the author himself states, “I wish to complicate critical accounts of spatial feeling” (8). For someone who teaches at UC Davis, once known for a Nature and Culture Program in which ecocriticism became something like a religion, such an approach is both refreshing and quite bold. Indeed, Hsu’s study is both original and well researched. Yet it is also dogmatically anti-romantic and anti-humanist, making us wonder whether literature (American or otherwise) can be justly assessed by means of a theoretical approach imported wholesale
from another academic discipline, in this case cultural geography. Moreover, in borrowing the jargon of cultural geography and mixing it with the translatese of literary theory, it often makes for painful reading.

Hsu’s Introduction, entitled “Scales of Identification,” begins promisingly with a gloss of Thomas Cole’s *Titan’s Goblet* (1833), featured on the cover, as a way to highlight the idea of geographical scale. Lifted from cultural geography, “scale” (in its geographical sense) is a word that appears again and again in a wealth of nineteenth-century texts (thanks, “Google search”!). “Titan’s Goblet,” writes the author, “expresses anxieties about place-based identity brought on by the awareness of their interconnectedness with larger geographical scales” (1). Having thus anticipated the argument of his whole book, Hsu sets out to show how literary texts map the spatial scales of the home, region, city, nation, and globe, and how those texts register the transnational connections made by territorial and commercial expansion (1). Given the fascination with geography as well as the rapid globalization of capital in nineteenth-century America, this is certainly a worthwhile project. In particular, Hsu seeks out texts that express the nation’s urge to export its contradictions. “The USA,” he writes, “always seems situated beyond itself, in unknown, elusive, and potentially limitless spaces” (33). Consequently, he argues, any emotional identification with a domestic place is suspect because it conceals the ongoing process of globalization: “scale stands in for ideological obfuscation itself” (13). Luckily for us, however, literary works can also critically re-examine and reshape scales, thus becoming “instruments of resistance” (13).

The United States’ fascination with geography and the concept of literature as resistance have both been central ideas in American studies. Since at least the publication
of D.H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature (1923), Americanists have defined their field by the interrelated discourses of exceptionalism and place. But Hsu seeks to thoroughly revise this classic interpretation of American literature. First, he leaves out most of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors central to canonical studies of literature and place: Crévecoeur, Cooper, Bryant and the Fireside poets, Emerson, Marc Twain, and above all, Thoreau, whose essays and journals might have fit so interestingly into Hsu’s argument. Second, as the title indicates, he bases his argument on a Marxist-inspired cultural geography: chiefly on Henrí Lefebvre’s The Production of Space (1974), which argues that space reproduces social hierarchy, and on David Harvey’s theory of uneven development, a phrase which, like “‘scale,’” very quickly grates on the reader. In a footnote, Hsu remarks that since space can be found everywhere in literary texts, Lefebvre himself was wary of studying them. Hsu promises to circumvent this problem by focusing on literary subgenres as “historically sedimented points of intersection between spatial scales and literary form” (211). Yet besides slighting the work of many important writers from the nineteenth century, his chosen period, Hsu examines a number of books published either before or after that period. Furthermore, he defines literary subgenres such as the domestic tale and the regional novel in an overly rigid, even sedimented way, in order to create a straw man for his own critical readings.

The problems with his approach begin to emerge in Chapter 1, where he examines Charles Brockden Brown’s novel Wieland (1798). Published in the post-revolutionary era, when “the relationship between domestic and foreign geographies was a particularly urgent question” (28), Brown’s fiction—Hsu argues—“stages the failure of
expansionist schemes” despite the author’s advocacy of national expansion in several non-fiction texts. After ably explaining America’s “democratic space” and its way of abstracting and homogenizing existing geography (by means, for instance, of Jefferson’s spatial grid), Hsu finds this space appearing in the beginning of *Wieland* (1798) only to be undermined. Although I expected him to argue that it was undermined by the novel’s constant back and forth movements across the Atlantic, he instead seeks to show—with the aid of Ludloe’s map in Brown’s unfinished story *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist* (1803-05)—that the “geographical projection” of *Wieland* reaches out to the Pacific and Asia. Having drawn an unlikely analogy between Louisiana and New Holland, Hsu then tackles one of the novel’s central problems, the meaning of Carwin’s ventriloquism. Combining Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a deterritorialized voice with a nice reading of Auden’s “Ariel,” he concludes that in Brown’s novel, the stability of Jeffersonian space is unsettled by “geographical unease”: an unease “posed by the mobility ascribed to the indigenous voice and body, or by the associated volatility of the new nation’s boundaries” (53). Obviously, the uncanny overdetermination of *Wieland*’s plot and symbols eludes any single historicist reading. But Hsu’s complex and well-researched chapter might at least have acknowledged the novel’s more obvious subgenres, including the sublime, the picturesque, and the sentimental, and might also have considered its literal geographies alongside its spectral “Pacific settings” (57).

Turning-- in Chapter 2-- to the representation of cities in the work of Poe and James, Hsu dissects the relation between metropolitan centers and distant spaces. “The international and urban geographies of migration and commerce,” he argues, “underlie the unsettling deformations of the bourgeois interior in Poe’s tales of detection and
James’s writings”; both writers express their ambivalence by using “narrative techniques of anamorphosis—or the deliberate distortion of space and scale” (58). His argument best applies to Poe’s “The Sphinx,” a story that shows how “distance can enlarge as well as reduce perceived objects” in ways analogous to the uneven development produced by the expanding democracy. But Hsu’s reading of the Bornese orang-utan in “Murders in Rue Morgue” skirts the fact that this story takes place in Paris: rather that seeing it as “proleptically” dramatizing the explosive increase in U.S. urban populations (60), I would first view it as a critique of European imperialism. In the second half of the chapter, Hsu takes his cue from the serendipitously encountered word “scale” in James’s *The American Scene* (1905-1907). In a close, slightly painstaking reading of “The Jolly Corner” (1908), he argues that James seeks to provide a “global, multinational” vision as a “more promising alternative to privacy” (77).

Chapter 3 is anomalous. Although its focus on missionaries is original and potentially fascinating, it has no obvious place in the book. Since it does not explore spatial issues and instead examines missionary literature written outside the United States, its stated aim—to map “the intersections between domestic fiction and missionary discourse”—is very unclear. Furthermore, the collection of stories that occupies Hsu in the second part of this chapter—Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*,—was published in 1912, which makes us wonder again what this chapter is doing in a book on nineteenth-century literature.

The most useful and satisfying chapter in this book is the fourth, on two authors best adapted to its overall thesis: Whitman and Melville. After first explaining how the Pacific islands helped the United States to “jump scales,” i.e. expand from the national to
the global stage, Husan argues that Whitman and Melville experienced a “cosmopolitan despair” over this (again!) “uneven geographical development and capital accumulation” (131), or what Melville more poetically calls “the checkered globe.” Whitman sounds less despairing than Melville; in a passage (from an 1881 essay) that could nicely serve as an epigraph for the whole study, he declared: “If we are not to hospitably receive and complete the inaugurations of the old civilizations, and change their small scale to the largest, broadest scale, what on earth are we for?” (qtd. 135). But as Hsu nicely shows, the poet’s rhetoric of “rondure” dissimulates the more concrete struggles that were taking place in the Pacific. In the work of Melville, who strikes a less optimistic note, his Pacific islands stand, writes Hsu, for the immobilization of the “colonial subjects and laborers situated in the margins of conventional views of global unity” (150). Here as elsewhere in the book, despite the quality of the argument, an excessive reliance on abstract jargon and on often imprecisely used verbs—such as “excavates,” “dramatizes” and “allegorizes”—obscures the prose, of which this is a sample: “However, if cosmopolitan despair highlights the contradictions beneath the rhetoric of global interfusion, it may also provide the emotional impetus for imagining translocal relationships between sites affected differently by global processes” (131)

Chapter 5 examines globalism in the light of regional American literature. “Despite the increasing importance of global economic, environmental, and migratory networks,” he contends, “the local increasingly serves as an object of nostalgia and a privileged site of geographical feeling” (164). But neither the chapter nor the book as a whole tries to explain why and how globalization prompts the privileging of the local. Emphatically rejecting models of global empathy built on the local (165), Hsu argues
that regionalist literature masks global transformations as well as the emotions generated by such changes. In his reading of what is probably the best-known regionalist tale (and a favourite of eco-critics), Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, he faults Captain Littlepage for ignoring black and immigrant sailors in his yarns of cosmopolitan travel (168) and then makes much of the fact that Mrs. Todd’s herbal practice, a metaphor for rootedness, has a foreign origin. Even the trees in Dunnett landing, which are used to build ships and thereby support imperialism, are said to “allegorize” the community’s transnational connections (172). Yet it would be unfair to claim, as Hsu does, that regionalist literature--itself a highly contested label--limits itself to the local: Jewett’s novella in particular invites the reader from the very first page to question any privileging of the region over other geographical scales. A similarly rigid interpretation of genre weakens Hsu’s argument about Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), a novel neither regionalist nor published in the nineteenth century. If, as Hsu complains, Norris ignores “the contribution of Chinese and Mexican American laborers to railroads and large-scale agriculture” (182), does he thereby exclude from his novel the world at large? Clearly the San Joaquin valley in this novel is not a place that stands alone, and the book is so evidently about globalization and worldwide networks that to argue so smacks of the obvious.

In conclusion, Hsu states: “This book has shown how the privileged settings of the nineteenth-century subgenres were destabilized by and rearticulated with transnational forces” (197). Yet I am not certain it has shown this. Beyond foregrounding these forces, which nineteenth century American writers were keenly aware of, this book sheds little new light on the literary texts it examines. In his epilogue, Hsu briefly
surveys a few twentieth-century works, such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, which—he says—represent globalized scales more faithfully than earlier works do. Yet to expect such twentieth-century works to have been written in the nineteenth century is clearly to misunderstand that period and fail to appreciate it for what it was. I would have enjoyed this book more had it relied less on theories of forcible expropriation and uneven development, and more on primary documents from the period to better contextualize its argument. To judge by the length of his quotations, Hsu often gives equal importance to theory (e.g. 43, 93), basic historical facts (e.g. 60), and primary texts. Though the spatial orientation of much theory obviously makes its use tempting, a more traditionally historicist study would ultimately have been more useful and convincing. Tellingly, the book ends on a highly ideological but also unpoetical note, quoting Lefebvre’s expression of his hope for a literature that can “realize ‘the mobilization of differences in a single movement’” (206). I wonder what Thoreau would have had to say about that.

*Patrick Vincent* is Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland.