

TOWARD A MORE PERFECT UNION

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David Wyatt. *Secret Histories: Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. vii + 400 pages. Notes, works cited, and index. \$35.00.

Jennifer Rae Greeson. *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010. vii + 356 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, and index. \$39.95.

At the end of a semester of teaching, I felt fortunate to come across David Wyatt's *Secret Histories* because Wyatt so clearly delights in American fiction. Gently encouraging readers to listen and to participate in the intimate relationships revealed by American writers, Wyatt is most like Leslie Fiedler, who famously calls out to readers in the assumed voice of Mark Twain's Jim to "come back to the raft agin, Huck honey" (the title of Fiedler's 1948 article).

Jennifer Rae Greeson also urges readers familiar with American literature and literary tropes to anticipate intimate encounters. In *Our South*, Greeson uncovers an intranational consciousness at work in the United States. She shows how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century U.S. writers represent the South as "an enemy within," as she titles one of her chapters. Both Wyatt and Greeson place family romance at the center of American history. While these two writers cover different periods in American history and, for the most part, approach fictional material with different methodologies, each reflects in some way a spatial turn in American Studies. Each argument hinges on the question of how national spaces have been imagined by American writers. Greeson refers explicitly to connections among geography, literature, and social forms. Wyatt employs spatial vocabulary more sparingly and most often within his discussions of gender and race in American fiction.

Early in his wide-ranging argument, Wyatt makes the tantalizing assertion that "the history of the novel could be said, in fact, to constitute the secret history of the origin and course of love" (p. 20). He perceives twentieth-century American writers as continuing the struggle toward union that began with the nation's founding documents. Although connected by a fundamentally American preoccupation with how and to what extent disparate peoples can share one

national identity, the writers in Wyatt's study respond to distinct political and personal concerns. Some search for a balance between work and relationships, some struggle against the incorporation of America, and some represent war as a force that dehumanizes even as it creates new possibilities for empathy (p. xi). The chapter titles refer to familiar concepts that Wyatt groups under the umbrella term "love"—among them "Double-Consciousness," "Pioneering Women," "Performing Maleness," "The Depression," "The Postmodern," and "Slavery and Memory." These descriptive headings signal Wyatt's goals: to offer a collection of arguments that leads readers back to the books themselves and to uncover the conversations, actual or intertextual, among these seemingly disparate writers. Thankfully, we have come to a moment when there is "no longer any way to read the greatest white American novelists of the twentieth century except through the greatest black American novelist of the twentieth century" (p. 333), and our intertextual reading need not stop with William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Their interrelationship suggests to Wyatt a way of reading all of American literature.

In one of the most interesting chapters, "Love and Separateness," attentive readings link Eudora Welty, Mary McCarthy, and John Steinbeck to Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*. Citing the "decline in the power of women in the public world" after World War II, Wyatt reads Steinbeck's Cathy Trask in *East of Eden* as a modern woman who defies the "temptations" of an ideology of femininity (pp. 210–11). Yet he is a reluctant champion of this character because she cannot balance love and separateness. In this, she is different from Welty's prewar female characters who, like men, can run away from home. Perhaps more so than men, Welty's women tend to return, and many of these returns constitute a kind of reconciliation to the idea of what Wyatt, quoting Mary McCarthy, calls "the *otherness* of a separate being" (p. 192). In examining what constitutes this separateness, Wyatt briefly considers the spatial dimension of gender roles. He emphasizes the "space, which we cannot see" in Welty's "A Still Moment": the houseboat where the main character, Jenny, has been secured by a group of fisherman. Jenny's experience and the space that contains her are represented only by the "harsh human sounds" of the fishermen who "come in to her" (Welty quoted in Wyatt, p. 193). It is represented only by what escapes. Not seeing, in Wyatt's estimation of Welty, affords readers and writer the freedom "to structure the nature of our own response" (p. 193). Spaces of intimate encounter hidden from sight become opportunities. As appealing as this reading of Welty as an exemplar of a kind of prewar female liberation may be, it elides the horrors found in Welty's homes and avoids the real issue of whether or not women's experiences, particularly experiences of sexual injustice, can yet be represented. Wyatt reads Welty's depictions of rape and violence against women as given "a lightness that disarms them of their stigmatizing power" (p. 190). This reading is supported by several Welty

characters who express a belief in the countervailing power of response to determine the meaning of an event. In emphasizing response, Welty shifts the story away from a male consciousness and away from male control, but she never successfully elaborates a female consciousness. The experience of rape is spatialized and auditory rather than embodied. So, as much as Welty places rape on a continuum of "things done to the self," as Wyatt puts it, she also points to the absence of women's bodily response in her stories, a problem that Wyatt cannot recognize. Instead, he turns to Hemingway as a lens through which, briefly, to see Welty's women. Beginning a paragraph with an isolated, unexamined quotation from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—"Nothing is done to oneself that one does not accept"—Wyatt distracts us from the focus on Welty and suggests a connection that he does not explain (p. 194). This example reveals a simultaneous strength and weakness of Wyatt's style of argumentation. The wonderful interweaving of authors sometimes leads to tantalizing juxtapositions—like Hemingway and Welty—that are left for the reader to unpack.

This habit of leaving the structure of the argument open to readers occasionally leads Wyatt to miss the opportunity to analyze how history has been constructed. Historical events and legal or political actions—ranging from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Vietnam War, from the 1863 draft riots to postindustrial capitalism—provide context rather than parallel text. For instance, Wyatt mentions the Chinese Exclusion Act as a framework for Edith Maude Eaton's "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," a short story published in 1912 under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far. Politics breaks through this otherwise domestic narrative when, in one sentence of dialogue in the middle of the story, the husband of the title character reveals that his brother is being held in detention in California. We never learn what happens, as Wyatt points out. Instead, the narrator follows Mrs. Spring Fragrance on her journey to private happiness, happiness achieved "within the ongoing and glossed-over pain of an unresolved political conflict" (p. 38). Wyatt reads this as a "profoundly American solution" that is at the same time exemplary of modern and modernist women's fiction. He argues that Far can only "imagine a partial adjustment in the province of the 'real.'" She shows how sexual politics has begun to be addressed within the home in early to mid-twentieth century America, but racial politics "remain unredressed" (p. 38). Men like Mr. Spring Fragrance begin to listen to their wives. No similar audience is offered for the political prisoner, so his story remains untold.

Far's story is haunted by the unseen and unrepresented space of the barracks on Angel Island, San Francisco, where Chinese persons seeking entry into the United States were held as prisoners in the early twentieth century. Wyatt reminds us that "over the decades, the walls of these barracks filled up with poems, protests against having dreams of a new country end with

confinement" (p.38). Soon after this lyrical description of walls that tell fragmented stories, Wyatt jumps to a discussion of Gertrude Stein, but he leaves it to the reader to make the connection between Stein's verbal camouflage and these imprisoned poems. He observes that "Stein does not conceive of language, then, as a prison-house by which we are constrained. It is more like Conrad's destructive element in which we must immerse ourselves. Then the deep, deep sea will keep us up. Like water, like air, language precedes us and makes life possible" (p. 43). From Stein he draws the conclusion that "we live in a vale of collective language-making." Placing Far and Stein so close together may suggest that both tend to avoid the overtly political in their pursuit of more domestic forms of liberation. Wyatt simply includes them both under the category "Pioneering Women," and he surrounds them with the reassurance that twentieth-century men are learning to listen to women and that male writers like William Carlos Williams believe in the "renovating effect of a passionate love" for place. Rather than linking Cather to Stein and Far through their shared awareness of how words become "marked by place," as his own evidence suggests, he connects Cather and Stein by their "shared sexual preference," and relies upon Williams to articulate Cather's tie to the West as distinct from the expatriate Stein or the immigrant Far (p. 44).

For Wyatt, American history is so bound up with the concept of union that literature cannot help but become dominated by this metaphor. Love ultimately defines the effort of reading or what Wyatt calls an "attempt to achieve empathetic union with a text" (p. xi). Wyatt celebrates an ever-changing American tradition and emphasizes the responsibility of the reader to learn through literature to move toward the future by listening to the past. If Phillip Roth and Elizabeth Bishop both ultimately offer a hopeful vision, as Wyatt argues in his final analysis, it is through their shared willingness to embrace the lessons of a contradictory history and thus to prepare readers to do the same (p. 330).

Jennifer Rae Greeson reflects a similarly contradictory history more directly in her methodology. Interested in how fantasy precedes social reality and predicts certain kinds of political bodies, Greeson assesses images of the southern United States that "emerge in national literature decades before the rise of North/South political sectionalism" (p. 11). She writes as a cultural historian. She analyzes newspaper stories, private correspondence, political tracts, and fictional texts to show how literary work both reflects and reforms other discourses. This literary emergence of the South suggests to Greeson "a great deal about how imaginative literature can set the horizons of possibility for a culture" (pp. 11-12). There is no "real" South, according to Greeson—which is not to say that there is no material place. Rather, the South makes sense only if we understand how our idea of it has been constructed out of a Western imperial "ordering of the globe" (p. 10). Greeson proposes three versions of the South and three corollary epochs in the development of the

United States, and she divides her argument along these lines: The Plantation South and Nationalization; The Slave South and Industrialization and Expansion; The Reconstruction South and the Question of Empire.

Paradigms familiar to American Studies scholars are given greater depth through Greeson's analysis. Like David Reynolds in his classic work *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), Greeson reads "beneath" canonical literature to find how popular culture and literary culture intertwined; how newspapers, textbooks, and fictions echoed and altered one another's language. She takes up the concept of the American farmer, the emergence of the antislavery narrative, the question of republican manhood, and what she calls "the imperial romance" of Reconstruction. The subjugation of the South is "a matter of the heart," Greeson wryly declares in one of her final chapters (p. 282). She has prepared us to accept this reading by her careful tracing of the rise of national literature as a geographic narrative, structured by "the founding juxtaposition" between the new modern republic and an aristocratic and primitive South (p. 13). In crude terms, the South is figured again and again as the body in relation to the developing Northern mind.

As one of the best examples of the unfolding of this geographic fantasy, Greeson offers the antislavery narrative and a compelling reading of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper and Lydia Maria Child's confrontation with the contradictions of modernization. More a rupture than an evolution, antislavery rhetoric growing in popularity in the 1830s represents "the Slave South" as violent and licentious, borrowing the exposé mode employed by reformers determined to reveal "pervasive hidden vice" in new urban environments (p. 124). The form of the city suggests the form of the exposé: It is more spatial than temporal, organized as a catalogue of vignettes that together form a coherent whole. This is an apt description of a didactic text as a kind of social scientific monograph; and indeed, Greeson concludes that the creation of the Slave South in antislavery tracts also marked the "beginning of a new novelistic mode, characterized by an omniscient narrator who functioned as moral geographer for the reader" (p. 144). This formulation is an elegant extension of Raymond Williams' insight, in *The Country and the City* (1973), that new urban spaces necessitate a new literary form (p. 134).

The question of form intersects a question of gender, as Greeson shows in her discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Again, Greeson recalls familiar American Studies paradigms—in this case, republican manliness. She offers a careful textual analysis and generates a web of connections from the literary to the popular and political. Greeson turns to Emerson to further explore the troubled U.S. republic of the mid-nineteenth century in terms of its "disastrous want of men." When Emerson identifies this problem in his 1844 address on "Emancipation in the British West Indies," he ties gendered behavior to the

as-yet-unrealized goal of abolition, ascribing the moral weakness of the U.S. to what he describes as effeminate political representation. In contrast to the "very amiable and very innocent representatives and senators at Washington," Emerson imagines a more manly expansion of the English imperial model (Emerson quoted in Greeson, p. 156). He imagines a government both centralized and dislocated, and, as Greeson observes, he "calls for New England to assert 'mastery' over its enduring South as the solution to the untenable sectionalist stand off between the Industrial North and the Slave South" (p. 159). He represents metropolitan Boston as the inheritor of benevolent imperial governance, defining it temporally—as progress more than place.

Greeson recasts Emerson as a moral imperialist who seeks to transcend sectionalism by asserting the necessary supremacy of New England over the South (p.159). She also decenters Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement, to some extent, by recalling a counterargument made by self-identified Southern writer Edgar Allan Poe. Analyzing Poe's satires, Greeson reveals his skepticism about Emerson's centralizing vision. Poe sees the dangers of expansionism because he recognizes that the subjugation of the South provides a model for global expansion—that this impulse is imperial even though its proponents claim to be liberators. Yet Greeson acknowledges that Poe had little impact on his contemporaries. While she questions Emerson and others who offer moral sanctions for domination of the South, her argument moves away from the skeptics and toward imagery of union. Her geographic fantasy culminates in a third stage: the Reconstruction South imagined as global South at the turn into the twentieth century. Demonstrating the pervasive presence of an alternative story to U.S. exceptionalism, Greeson's concluding pages cover the plantation novels of Thomas Nelson Page and Pauline Hopkins, Henry James' travelogue *The American Scene*, W. E. B. DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk*, and two popular films—the notorious *Birth of a Nation* and the nostalgic *Gone with the Wind*—that each provoke a reaction to the U.S. South on the eve of American involvement in a global war. These disparate works demonstrate "a story of a nation that has emerged out of the ideological and material matrices of New World empire" (p. 289). Whether critical or celebratory, twentieth-century representations of the South participated in the same conversation and revealed the persistent parallel existence of U.S. empire and U.S. republic. By the early 1900s, the U.S. was assuming global power as the European empires crumbled, and Greeson argues that this "American century" is continuous rather than a break with American history. Visions of American empire are "routed back through understandings of the domestic past," particularly the historical struggles to come to terms with the internal other, "our South" (p. 276).

Both Jennifer Rae Greeson and David Wyatt read fictional romance as offering the possibility of real reconciliation. Wyatt's capacious collection of

disparate writers gains additional clarity when paired with Greeson's imagined South. Greeson's argument also gains by association with Wyatt's twentieth century. Greeson leaves her readers with a turn-of-the-century problem—W. E. B. DuBois' image of the color line as a national and global divide—and the solution imagined in the mid-twentieth century by Frantz Fanon—"a white and a black man *hand in hand*" (Fanon quoted in Greeson, p. 289). The intimacy of U.S. geographic fantasy is surprisingly hopeful. Whereas Wyatt finds value in simply continuing the work of understanding the American canon as an ever-expanding whole, Jennifer Rae Greeson reflects a more embattled contemporary literary critical tradition when she calls her argument "a brief for the real-world importance of literary history" (p. 11). Behind Greeson's formulation lurks some anxiety about the current moment of declared crisis in the humanities. She and Wyatt both invite us to consider the possibility that literary scholars engage in important future-oriented work when they reveal what was possible to imagine in the past.

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