

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* by Caroline Rosenthal

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both the significance and impossibility of repetition in the relentless march of time. Wordsworth's continuous engagement with his texts is not so much a case of revisiting the past as a foreign country, but of acknowledging and reintegrating the past as part of one's present within an even larger awareness of an evolving creative impulse. Wordsworth's own longevity accounts for the increasingly elegiac dimension to these revisitings, and in some respects Gill's textually aware and biographically informed reading revolves primarily around Wordsworth's creative response to loss. Gill's book is more revolutionary than it claims to be: it questions, in the most affirmative fashion, the nature of creativity as something which can be defined in distinct phases. Continuity is vouchsafed by habitual return, and it is entirely appropriate that two chapters on *The Prelude* are framed, like a triptych, by chapters which explore almost visceral poems of loss (*The Ruined Cottage*, the Yarrow poems, *Salisbury Plain*). The value of this book far exceeds a renewed or enhanced understanding of Wordsworth's poetry and poetics. Beyond the more obvious benefit of a creatively affirmative reevaluation of the so-called 'later', post-1805 Wordsworth, it addresses the very nature of creativity, not by the imposition of a theory on a number of separate texts, but by the careful, contextual consideration of evolving texts which end up, in a way, responding to each other. Another striking revelation, useful for our awareness of creativity as something which exceeds the individual effort, is the enormous involvement of the whole extended Wordsworth household in this creative engagement. Wordsworth's deep love of his family both sustained and motivated his creative impulse in ways that Coleridge, for instance, never quite understood. Gill's book is an example of the kind of scholarship which is becoming increasingly rare. The pressure to produce easily quantifiable research soundbites in order to meet research funding criteria often prevents sustained, long-term engagement with one particular subject; we are very, very fortunate to have access to Gill's encyclopedic, humane knowledge of Wordsworth's life, context, history, and texts through this book. Indispensable, rather than recommended.

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HEIDI THOMSON

New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban.

By CAROLINE ROSENTHAL. Rochester, NY, and London: Camden House.
2011. 313 pp. £45. ISBN 978-1-57-113489-9.

The title of Caroline Rosenthal's book signifies its ambition: this is both a comparative study of a number of New York and Toronto novels and a theoretical (re)consideration of how urban space is represented. The title also contains some (no doubt deliberate) ambiguities: does the term 'New York novel' mean a novel that is written in, or one that is in some sense about, the city? Does the phrase 'after postmodernism' imply that the fictions discussed are post-postmodernist, or that the author's conceptualization of 'the urban' will follow postmodernist discourse on space in cities, either in the sense of being influenced by it, or attempting to move beyond it? In fact, the book's scope extends even beyond these parameters, incorporating discussions of the pastoral traditions of both the US and Canada (on

the grounds that 'pastoral and urban modes are constitutive of one another' (p. 6)), of the male gaze and female sexuality, of diasporic (particularly African American) identity, and of the Holocaust. It is also interdisciplinary in its approach, situating thoughtful close readings of its key texts in conceptual frameworks derived from human geography, art criticism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and gender and ethnic studies.

This range of reference, depth of scholarship, and intellectual reach is very impressive, though it is arguably a weakness, as well as a strength, of Rosenthal's book. The book is divided into eight sections—comprising chapters on symbolic landscapes and national canons, spatial politics and difference, urban space, art and corporeality in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, the Brownstone city in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*, urban spaces in Carol Shields's *Unless*, and the poetics of urban longing and belonging in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, bookended by an introduction and a 'synthesis'—and each section is divided into further subsections that are, typically, three or four pages long. This certainly makes the book admirably reader-friendly, and indeed Rosenthal writes with great clarity and elegance throughout, but the problem is that some of the discussions seem rather undeveloped, if not perfunctory, and the book as a whole has a somewhat fragmented feel to it. It reads, in fact, like several books rolled into one. The close readings of the novels by Hustvedt, Marshall, Shields, and Brand are all compelling and original but Rosenthal simply does not have the space to do justice to her grander themes. Topics such as race, gender, the canon, and the city each have such a huge body of scholarship associated with them that they have become fields of study in their own right, and although Rosenthal is clearly well versed in these, she struggles at times to unite them all in a cohesive argument. There are threads that run through the book—notably the argument that 'Urban freedom [. . .] has as its shadow urban indifference, which produces negligence, chaos, and violence as the last measure for being noticed' (pp. 73–74), the emergence of 'a flaneuse who reverses the patriarchal and often racializing gaze and thus constitutes both other subjects and other spaces' (p. 8), and the city as a 'space [. . .] between and beyond modernism and postmodernism' (p. 31)—but there are also bits of the book which, while interesting and worthwhile in themselves, seem to bear only a tangential relation to its central concerns. Introducing one such section, Rosenthal tellingly observes that 'it may at first seem far removed from my focus on the urban' (p. 74). It is a testament to her own curiosity and versatility as a critic that she finds herself pulled in so many directions, but it does compromise the structural integrity of the book.

Overall, this is a valuable book that will appeal to a wide range of readers, from theorists of what Rosenthal calls 'the spatial turn in the humanities and the cultural turn in geography' (p. 55), to students and scholars of contemporary fiction, to anyone with an interest in the (post)modern city.

UNIVERSITY OF READING

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