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Reading (and Sliding Around On) the Maps of Poetry

Spatial Engagement with Poetry by

HEATHER H. YEUNG

Palgrave MacMillan, 2015 \$90.00

Reviewed by **DEBORAH BOWEN**

This book describes itself as spatial criticism. British sociolinguist Stephen Levinson suggests that, “just as maps stand in abstract spatial relation to real spatial terrain, so spatial relations can give us symbolic ‘maps’ to other domains” (qtd 33). And the book’s Preface claims that the volumes in this series “seek to make possible different ways of seeing literary and cultural texts” (xii), ways that are theoretically innovative and radically interdisciplinary.

But I confess I didn’t get off to a good start with the book. It seemed to state in more obfuscatory terms insights that are likely obvious to most readers of literature: “Poesis is a project of creation which . . . can radically alter the manner in which we see the world subsequently unfold” (1). Here’s hoping so. I was intrigued by the early description of the way in which “the long scrolls of Chinese literature” (3), Yeung’s second poetic heritage, escape a mimetic, narrative or representational framework; and by the notion of a poetic work as “an affective sort of map of a particular landscape in a particular time” (3); and by the parallels between Asian traditional poetics and Western postmodern poetics in terms of a “nonlinear shifting resonance of poetic sense” (3). However, the fairly frequent grammatical and stylistic errors in this part of the text undermined my confidence in the authorial voice. Thus I had trouble with

the big claims when they came: “Mapping, in fact, is poesis, and poetry is the form of literature that is closest to the development of the self as it plays host to referential and bodily language without being reducible to either” (15). I struggled particularly with Yeung’s section on the body: “The human body . . . is inherently spatial” (44) is hardly worth saying, and yet Yeung wants to say this and much more about the relationship of poetic space to bodily space. Too often, promising ideas are cut short by the plethora of other foci that Yeung wants to consider.

Yeung’s argument that poems can be approached through the trope of space is potentially productive: the poem *as* space (a visual, silent appreciation of the written poem in its space on the page); the poem *of* or *in* space (the poetic image projecting a worldview or theme by deixis—though Yeung is unclear about quite what she means by suggesting that these two prepositions are in some way equivalent); and the poem as “vocalic utterance,” which “gives way to an enunciating I [speaker’s point of view] . . . and an enunciating eye [vocalized landscape]” (9). Yeung will make much of this “vocalic space,” because she understands it to lie between representation and reality, voice embodying “the process of poetic ‘becoming’” (9), and therefore, being significant for her “theory of affective mapping” (8) or “multilayered affective engagement” (70). Her central thesis turns out to be that “the spatial nature of the poem is found as much in its privileging of aspects of voice as it is in the textual and mimetic spaces it manipulates and portrays” (47–48). She believes the three modes of mapping space must be taken together in order to avoid reductive reading: allowing dominance to the visual text or reading through the “I” of the

poem's speaker creates a "dislocating poetics" (14) which doesn't accommodate "the other life of poetry, as vocalized and vocal performance" (62). Speaking against what she calls the "detrimental forces of linear narrative, biographical interpretation, or over-dramatization" (11), Yeung privileges "the affective mechanisms at play in the process of voicing, reading, and engaging with the poem" (70); though it's not always clear how such mechanisms engage with a poetics of space, they are clearly important and worth taking time to explore.

The second half of the book is much stronger. I would even encourage readers to start here, as Yeung reads the work of four contemporary British poets—Thomas Kinsella, Kathleen Jamie, Mimi Khalvati, and Alice Oswald—attempting to allow the "I/eyes of the poems [to] generate potential ways of reading" (9) and to "trace an affective map of the poetic terrain" (10). She describes Kinsella's concern with a "dialectic of order and waste" (85) and with an "ontotopological" word-mapping, though it's unclear how these fine readings of his poetry relate to a sense of specifically spatial engagement. For Kathleen Jamie, "the body is a part of, and the means by which we can feel and express, the landscape" (128). The poetry is here counterpointed with 19th-century anatomical slides as Jamie maps what Yeung calls "the process of becoming" (121), especially in terms of the brain's physical and affective relation to the heart. Khalvati's is a "poetry of intimate perception" (150), concerned with the way in which the play of light constructs the perceived world, and often set in the borderland light of dawn or dusk; Yeung sees here a desire, echoing Virginia Woolf, to "spatialize" time and memory (134). And

Oswald's long poem "Dart" gives a "sound-map" (151) of the development of a river from source to sea, in poetry that explores multiple voices and hybrid states of being and "charts . . . the acts of inscription and enunciation, being and consciousness," using the "fluid model" (170) of the river to emphasize "the sense of becoming, of constant and continuous movement" (173).

But it's ironic that a book which is so deeply concerned for the reader's engagement with poetry—even to the extent of arguing that "voice is a part of the poem's reader" (60)—is at times so difficult to read. In part this is because Yeung's definitions of terms are slippery and seem to shift even from one page to another. "Space" is legitimately slippery in this way: space as geographical area, space as gap, space as aperture, blank space, temporal space—but Yeung's own heuristic categories should surely be less open to constant revision. The problem is also that the first section of the book starts many hares, but few of them are satisfactorily chased to ground. Passing references to Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and other heavyweights too often seem gratuitous; the invocations of psychoanalysis, feminist theory, "neuroaesthetic research," ethics, and economics are spotty and irregular, so that the reading experience is of setting off on one path of a map only to find it being erased or crisscrossed by many others. However, Yeung certainly got my mind racing in all directions, and her readings of specific poets are rewarding and original. Thus, though this is a book that is trying to do both too little and too much, it's worth exploring as an early foray into a poetically new field. Geospatial metaphor intended.

DEBORAH BOWEN is British by birth but has lived in different places and spaces in Ontario for more than half her life. She teaches English at Redeemer University College in Ancaster. She has published *Stories of the Middle Space: Reading the Ethics of Postmodern Realisms* (McGill-Queen's U P, 2010) and edited *The Strategic Smorgasbord of Postmodernity: Literature and the Christian Critic* (Cambridge Scholars P, 2007). Recently she has become intrigued by the spiritual issues implicit in cultural geography, and particularly their instantiation in poetry.