

**Joseph Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800-1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 286. \$59/ £52. ISBN 9780812247343.**

This welcome and carefully-argued book combines the interest in the concrete conditions of the early nineteenth-century book trade that one would expect in a series on Material Texts with a long-range account of one of the many threads in the emergence of the idea of the 'literary' as a distinctive and 'exalted' – a favourite word of Rezek's – sphere of human endeavour. Very briefly put, Rezek's thesis is that the transatlantic book-trade was a key spawning ground of the idea of the aesthetic, or, more accurately, of what Rezek calls '*the belief that literature enjoys an exalted role in human affairs*' (italics in the original, 15). The history of this process has been told many times, often assuming – probably unwarrantedly – an achieved hegemony for the idea of the autonomy of the 'literary', but rarely has it been told by attending to the production of books and the circulation of material texts between London and the provincial literary centres of Dublin, Edinburgh, and Philadelphia. The methodology offers a refreshing shift from assumptions about the emergence of national literatures. Instead, Rezek questions accounts based on quasi-colonial relations with his emphasis on 'the uneven distribution of cultural capital' (64).

'Provincial' in Rezek's argument names a relational position of literary production from the margins oriented towards the power of the metropolitan book trade. His book identifies the early nineteenth century with the appearance of a 'provincial aesthetics' (6) that made Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, for instance, among the most widely reprinted authors of their time. American literature, he contends, begins with the absorption of these literatures and the creation of a transatlantic provincialism designed to cater for this metropolitan taste. In this account, the 'literary' is identified primarily with the 'waves' (37) of provincial fiction starting with the Irish national tales of Edgeworth and Owenson, proceeding to Scott, before coming to Washington Irving and, especially, James Fenimore Cooper's American versions. Within this broad historical narrative, there are some arresting readings of familiar romantic way stations, including (144-5) Scott's famous review of Jane Austen's *Emma*. For Rezek, Scott's account of Austen's ability to provide the reader with 'correct and striking representation of what is daily taking place around him' is a marker of the Scottish novelist's sense of his own 'distance' from the metropolitan centre. In terms of Rezek's broader picture, this provincial self-consciousness is the source of a compensatory logic of cultural exchange that redefines the 'literary' precisely by its 'distance' from the everyday.

Methodologically, Rezek stakes much of his argument on the close reading of editorial variations that orient a given text towards an effectively dematerialized reader – what he calls 'transatlantic revision' (86) – and away from the cultural location of the stories within the text. So, for instance, he provides interesting detail on the way the Bentley edition of Cooper's *The Pioneers* reorients its reader to the aesthetic appreciation of the landscape operating as a mask for an incipient national allegory in the resolutions of its marriage plot. 'Mask' is the wrong word here, perhaps, as Rezek's claim is that far from smuggling something subversive into the metropolitan book trade, these authors willingly exchange their deficit in cultural capital for credit at the bank of the aesthetic. The book ends in Chapter 6 with the emergence of a confidently American literature, using *The Scarlet Letter* as its case history, where it is precisely Hester Prynne and the novel's home-grown status that is offered as the central pillar of its authority.

Rezek is aware of the risk of deriving his larger historical claims from evidence drawn primarily from developments in the (canonical) novel, but this awareness does not entirely save his book from a tendency to undervalue the extent that the 'literary' named a diversity of

practices in a scattered domain. The book does some very useful work in identifying the implications of the word ‘provincial’ (4), not least in the way it comes – in the eighteenth century – to name a lack in relation to various forms of expressive behavior (primarily manners, dress, and speech), but most of his examples in this general discussion relate to eighteenth-century Scotland, most obviously Boswell and Hume. His novel-based account of the compensatory emergence of aesthetic autonomy ignores any discussion of the role this Scottish context may have played through different media, most obviously history, literary criticism, and the periodical press. In one sense, Rezek settles for a rather common sense idea of the ‘literary’ as fictional prose that may be in danger of assuming the hegemony of distance from the everyday. This kind of assumption might have difficulty accounting for emergent nineteenth-century usages of the word, often with provincial origins, that insisted on an awkward relation to categories like ‘useful knowledge,’ ranging from biographies of inventors and scientists to the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell.

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