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book review of

Soil and Stone: Impressionism, Urbanism, Environment by Frances Fowle and Richard Thomson, eds.

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Frances Fowle and Richard Thomson, editors
Soil and Stone: Impressionism, Urbanism, Environment
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003
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The dynamic interaction of city and country now occupies a central place in most accounts of nineteenth-century French art. The history and cultural meaning of this complex dialectic have, however, come into clear focus only in the last thirty years or so. Beginning with Robert Herbert's "City v. Country: the Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin," the city/country concept has, as Richard Thomson puts it, "formed a sub-stratum in art historical scholarship of this period (p. 1)." One need only think of T.J. Clark's analysis of the Parisian reaction to Courbet's paintings of the countryside in 1851, or Nicholas Green's account of the relation of the Parisian art market to the style of Barbizon paintings, to register how productive this line of inquiry has proved.^[1]

Soil and Stone: Impressionism, Urbanism, Environment is a welcome attempt to return the historical and conceptual interrelation of city and country to center stage, and to rethink its implications in broader terms. Originating as a symposium in 2001, the book consists of ten brief essays on various subjects from Barbizon to Brittany. Though superficially disparate, all ten essays offer what might be called a geographic approach to art and visual culture. Together, they map an artistic interchange between artists and writers, responding simultaneously to the specifics of a place, whether Paris or the provinces, and a specific cultural milieu, whether it's the art market or folk traditions. This shared interpretative strategy may prove to be the book's most interesting and potentially influential quality.

The essays are arranged in more or less chronological order by subject. John House's "The Viewer on the Beach" offers a broad overview of the mythological and social-historical status of the sea. Borrowing from Jules Michelet's *La Mer*, House sees "two key themes...the sea as danger and foe, that man sets out to conquer, and the sea as bountiful and fecund, a source of love, not fear (p. 6)." He tracks these themes in the paintings of Courbet, Monet, Boudin, and others, finding in them a problematic gendering of viewing. For instance, Boudin's paintings can be seen as staging the social interchange of sexualized looking for urban tourists on the beach. Such social forms are paralleled by the heavily mythologized images of Venus that were so popular in the 1860s, and which might be understood as coded

and sexualized metaphors for the health of the sea in counterpoint to the negative effects of the city.

"Courbet's Touch," by Paul Galvez, offers a thoughtful and compelling account of bodily metaphors in realist painting. In puzzling out the peculiar effects of immersion in some of Courbet's landscapes—the sense, for instance, that a painting might threaten to envelop the spectator—Galvez is led to compare the way some of the painter's nudes offer not so much a view of a body as the imagination of touching a body, or touching the world that that body occupies. "Courbet's great achievement," he writes, "was to fuse the genres of the regional landscape and the academic nude, not simply to combine them, but to use that combination to re-define what it means to have a deep tactile experience of reality (p. 27)." This line of thought suggests that the representation of the country was, for Courbet, a way of thinking through the relation of one's self to the world in materialist terms. This is, as Galvez concludes, closely related to T.J. Clark's reading of Cézanne's late bathers, but the whole essay also seems to be responding to the logic of Michael Fried's account of Courbet's quasi-corporeal merger of painter-beholder and painting.^[2] It is unfortunate that Galvez does not acknowledge this latter work more directly, as this essay offers new connections and comparisons that complement and expand Fried's conception of Courbet's Realism.

Simon Kelly's "This Dangerous Game': Rousseau, Diaz and the Uses of the Auction in the Marketing of Landscapes" and Bradley Fratello's "Footsteps in Normandy: Jean-François Millet and Provincial Nostalgia in Late Nineteenth-century France" are both explicitly concerned with the relation between city and country. Kelly discusses how Diaz and Rousseau adopted the strategy of organizing auctions of their work in Paris, the sophistication of which contradicted these painters' self-professed social marginalization, and artistic anti-urbanism. "Both men used the auction house," Kelly writes, "to promote landscapes that studiously screened out all signs of the modern and in doing so articulated their outsider mentalities (p. 44)." For Fratello, Millet's *The Sower* evinces a "nostalgic yearning" for Normandy, explicitly tied to the artist's recovery of childhood sensations. Millet's association with Normandy—posthumously emphasized by his biographers—has deepened modern perceptions that both the artist and the pictorial image of the region were profoundly French but not Parisian. Fratello's essay, however, demonstrates effectively that the image of the true, healthy, peasant France could only be constructed by constant comparison to the urban center.

David Hopkin's "Legendary Places: Oral History and Folk Geography in Nineteenth-century Brittany" and Anna Green's "'Rivers of Lemonade and Mountains of Sugar': Representations of country and city in nineteenth-century French children's literature" perhaps constitute the two least art historical essays in the book, but they are also the two most explicitly geographical. Using maps and a close reading of texts, Hopkins demonstrates the geographical specificity of Breton folktales collected by the art critic and painter, Paul Sébillot. Hopkins' assertion that "(t)here is an unexplored connection between the practice of landscape painting and folklore collecting in the nineteenth century (p. 71)" is well worth further consideration. Green's essay explicitly concerns geography, or rather "geographical literature" for children, published by Hetzel and others. Not only was this literature a tool for a child "learning about the soil and stone with which it is surrounded (p. 89)," but it also enacted a metaphoric journey towards wisdom and adulthood. For nineteenth-century

bourgeois audiences, this necessarily entailed ideological constructions of gender-specific space that tended to correspond to the already gendered geography of Paris.

In "Promenades et plantations: Impressionism, Conservation and Haussmann's Reinvention of Paris," Clare A.P. Willsdon adds to our understanding of the transformation of urban spaces and its correlation to artistic practice. She proposes that, in addition to the well-established correspondences between painting and the modern city, "there are aspects of the Impressionist vision of Parisian 'soil and stone' in the period 1860-1900 that suggest a concern also to 'conserve' and 'preserve' (p. 110)." Specifically, Willsdon presents a convincing account of how certain paintings are concerned with remembering a pre-Haussmannized Paris. She notes, for instance, how a painter like Renoir generally avoided Haussmann's new gardens and constructions in many of his early works, favoring instead views that bracketed or marginalized recent transformations. Willsdon suggests that such artists saw Paris through the eyes of their own pre-Haussmann childhood, in turn embedding within their paintings of the new city a sense of nostalgia and loss. Although clearly related, as Willsdon argues, to contemporaneous critiques of Haussmannization, the politics of such memorialization, to say nothing of its relation to other accounts of Impressionism's "presentness," remains to be fleshed out. Indeed, given the extensive art historical work on the politics of Haussmannization, it is disappointing that Willsdon does not explore more explicitly the possibilities of pictorial nostalgia as a form of resistance to the city's transformation into a spectacular image of political power and class privilege. Nonetheless, this an evocative and original account of Impressionist Paris, one which will have to be considered carefully in the future.

The next two essays form a pendant pair. Michael Pakenham's "The Insatiable Appetite of Paris: Zola's Claude Lantier before *L'Oeuvre*" examines some of the descriptions and metaphors in Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris*, focusing in particular on the modernity of Les Halles. The market functioned as a nexus between country and city, but it was also an inspiration for the modern art dreamed of by Lantier, the young painter modeled, in part, on the author's childhood friend, Paul Cézanne. Frances Fowle's "Painting like a Provençal: Cézanne, Van Gogh and the Secret of Monticelli's 'alchemy,'" however, suggests that the origins of Cézanne's painting are to be found in Provence, not Paris. Notably, the heavy impasto technique developed by Adolphe Monticelli, and adopted by Cézanne in the 1860s and 1870s, was seen by critics as pictorially analogous to the crudeness and earthiness of Provence and its culture. Van Gogh's debt to Monticelli is more explicit, but the juxtaposition with Cézanne effectively demonstrates how much all three painters sought to realize a pictorial style appropriate to the unique geography, space, and culture of Provence.

The final essay, Richard Thomson's "Monet's 'Rouen Cathedrals': Anarchism, Gothic Architecture and Instantaneous Photography," is somewhat at odds with the general drift of the book; Thomson's focus is not space, but time. He suggests that Monet's concern in the series paintings of the 1890s was, at least in part, to pursue "instantaneousness" in pictorial terms that were explicitly differentiated from the too-fashionable photographic equivalent. While the pictorial concept of the "instant" was becoming popularized in photography in the 1880s, it was also becoming synonymous with the seemingly accurate record of visual sensation associated with Monet and the Impressionists. The Rouen cathedral paintings suggest one way that the painter shifted his practice in response to changing conceptions of

observation and the instant. The paradoxical relation between the pursuit of the instant, and the production of timelessness in Monet's paintings, has been discussed by Andrew Forge, John House, and others, but the social and theoretical contexts behind what I would call the dialectic of instant and duration are in need of further analysis.^[3] Thomson opens some potentially fruitful avenues of inquiry. Although the brief analysis of the anarchist celebration of the Gothic cathedral seems like an afterthought in Thomson's account, the overarching focus on temporality illustrates how much a discussion of the temporal dimension might aid our understanding of the historical and political significance of the geographic patterns mapped out in the other nine essays.

If the essays in *Soil and Stone* lack something, it is precisely the sense of an historical engine driving transformations in representation. Larger questions of nation and class, or modernism and artistic medium, remain oddly marginal in virtually every chapter. Perhaps this is indicative of the state of art history (or visual studies), or merely the result of the original symposium format. In any case, the volume does contain many suggestive new ways of thinking about city and country, and as such constitutes an important contribution to scholarship on nineteenth-century art and culture. As a whole, the book offers new methodological possibilities as well. The study of art and visual culture in the nineteenth-century might benefit enormously from what Franco Moretti has called "artistic atlases."^[4] Art history might then concern itself not merely with the pictorial production of space, but with more broadly historical and geographic conceptions that underlie artistic production occurring both in, and between, spaces: the space of the city, the studio, the market, the body, the land, the canvas. It is a real strength of this anthology that it proposes new ways of mapping such spaces.

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[1] See T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), and Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth Century France*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

[2] See T.J. Clark, "Freud's Cézanne," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 139-167, and Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

[3] See Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *Monet*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), and John House, *Monet: Nature into Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

[4] See Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*, (London and New York: Verso, 1998).