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Literature Proper: Genre Problems in an
Early American Literature Survey

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“Literature Proper”: Genre Problems in an Early American Literature Survey

As the author of many *books*—of several absolutely bound volumes in the ordinary “novel” form of auld lang syne, Miss Sedgwick has a certain adventitious hold upon the attention of the public, a species of tenure that has nothing to do with literature proper ...

Edgar Allan Poe¹

Poe’s offhand remark about Catherine Maria Sedgwick reveals a tension between writing fiction and producing literature. Contrary to the expectations of many students today, the former activity does not presuppose the latter. By 1846, Sedgwick was certainly a well known and highly regarded novelist, whose works Poe acknowledges as having a great deal of merit. Yet Poe also believes that her work lacks the elements of true literature, which occasions this amusing remark contrasting mere books (“absolutely bound volumes”) and literature proper.² For Poe, *literature proper* involves originality, creativity, imagination, and innovation. Without these, the writing will not be essential, but rather *adventitious*. In a wonderfully ironic ruse of history, perhaps, a similar criticism would be used nearly a hundred years later when—in explaining why Poe’s work is unworthy to stand alongside the masterpieces of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—F.O. Matthiessen would say that “his stories, less

¹ Poe, “The Literati of New York,” in James A. Harris, ed., *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 15 (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 112.

² This is not entirely a joke, however. Poe was also noting that, for want of money and of enforceable copyright protections, many authors were condemned to having their works published as pamphlets, so “bound volumes” were to be desired.

harrowing upon the nerves than they were, seem relatively factitious when contrasted with the moral depth of Hawthorne or Melville.”³

The fine distinction Poe had drawn between writing mere books and writing literature, a distinction that informs Matthiessen’s foundational study of American literature as well, was somewhat new in the United States in the 1840s. Jonathan Arac’s recent history of narrative forms in nineteenth-century America reveals that the kind of writing which is today valued as literary did not really flourish at the time; indeed, the very notion of literature in its modern understanding was just coming into being. Early in their careers, at least, writers like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, or Sedgwick herself most likely had very different notions about the meaning and function of “literature.” In making his distinction, Poe himself was a key figure in changing the definition of literature, drawing that term away from the realm of the familiar and commonplace. Citing the passage quoted above, Arac observes that “Literature proper apparently will be innovative, recognizable from its difference from, rather than resemblance to, what has gone before.” Arac notes that this conception of literature will require a special reader, one who can “understand that the work in question is not a failed example of an old form but rather a uniquely innovative accomplishment.”⁴ *Literature proper* will require readers who are, in a way, educated. They must know how to read a text and, eventually, know what texts to read in what way. Thus the institution of literature comes into contact with the institution of the classroom.

³ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), xii, n.3.

⁴ Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 122.

As professors of literature—that is, of literature proper—we foster an appreciation for the subject, while helping to provide our students with the interpretive skills necessary to recognize and understand it. By our choices of texts, we also display examples of what counts as literature. One of the things that we may also do, as I will discuss below, is to investigate the origins and nature of the institution of literature. That is, rather than merely proffering examples of literature, we may also examine what makes these offerings literature; we may also point out the ways in which certain texts are not “literature proper,” thus introducing the various roles writings play within the nation and culture. The introductory survey course, which functions at many colleges and universities as both an introduction to literature and a core requirement that might constitute many students’ only exposure to literature, seems a perfect occasion for exploring the literariness of literature.

A Tale of Two Courses

Traditionally, introductory surveys of American literature are divided into two courses, with the Civil War marking the historical dividing line. The second course might begin with Dickinson or Twain and move, in a roughly chronological way, towards the present. The first course, usually beginning with texts from the early British settlements (Jamestown, the Plymouth Plantation, or the Massachusetts Bay colony) but sometimes starting earlier (with Columbus’s letters or pre-Columbian oral traditions), often lurches ahead chronologically as well, although without the seeming smoothness of its successor course. Depending on how it is approached, the early American literature course often has a rough and awkward trajectory, with fits and starts, whereas the later one seems flow serenely from masterpiece to masterpiece. A key difference here involves the types of writings covered. Although it may not always be in the foreground of

our pedagogy, the early American survey course presents a number of texts representing wholly different kinds of writing, many of which do not fit neatly into what our students commonly understand as “literature.”

Indeed, in addition to the obvious difference in historical periods covered, a chief distinction between the two courses is the understanding of *literature* itself. This is inherently a generic question: What *kind* of writing constitutes “literature”? Notoriously difficult to define—perhaps impossible to define in any lasting way, satisfactory to all—*literature* has come to mean those works that are viewed as *literary*.⁵ This tautological definition has an advantage in addition to brevity; it allows us to take for granted that the works included in a course on early American literature are in fact literature. To a certain extent, introductory survey courses must assume that the objects of study—the texts—are literature. A definite (if not always satisfactorily defined) idea of literature informs the multiple institutional practices that must go into play in order to have a literature course at all. Moreover, the readings in the introductory survey course may be the first, and in some cases *only*, exposure many students have to literature. The question, “What is Literature?,” thus has additional significance.

The notion of literature that we have in the twentieth and twenty-first century was not the same as it was in the eighteenth or nineteenth. In the late eighteenth century, the word *literature* did not refer to peculiarly imaginative, creative, or original writing, but was applied to nearly any form of culturally valued writing—including poetry and some prose fiction, yes, but also history, philosophy, scientific works, and so on. As Terry Eagleton has noted, when used in a more exclusive sense, to distinguish “polite” letters for instance, the term *literature* actually excluded

⁵ See Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2.

many forms that we now take for granted as inherently literary—notably novels.⁶ The change in meaning occurs during the early nineteenth century, influenced strongly by transnational and trans-Atlantic Romanticism as well as by historical events. The early nineteenth century was a site of contestation for our modern notion of literature. The role of literature, the value of “fine” writing, and the relationship between writing and the world at large, became matters for intense debate, as the sensibilities that later became concrete were still in the process of being formed. These issues shaped the literature and the history of the United States, especially during the period covered by the early American literature survey. As Arac has argued, the central event in the literary history of nineteenth-century narrative is the emergence of works like *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby-Dick*, works that “still count as ‘literature’ for many readers” today; other forms of writing during that era “often trouble today’s readers because there is no clear conceptual category into which these works fit.” Arac asserts that understanding the emergence of literary narrative “requires acknowledging the problem of ‘genre,’ that is, the problem of different kinds of writing.”⁷ As I will discuss later, the generic distinctions between literary and non- or extra-literary forms of writing may inform our understanding and teaching of early American literature.

This distinction also helps to explain why the first and second half of an introductory survey of American literature look so different. The postbellum course generally includes works whose literariness—i.e., whose status *as* literature—is beyond question. For the most part, all of the readings will be understood as literature, usually falling into readily accessible categories: poetry, plays, and short stories. The desire for coverage and the constraints of time usual

⁶ See his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 15.

⁷ See Arac, *Emergence*, 2.

conspire to keep novels off the list, although certain short works (*The Turn of the Screw*, for instance) might make it. Compared with its predecessor, the postbellum course includes much less nonfiction, and this actually relates to the modern definition of literature. Once literature is defined as imaginative, original, creative writing, then a great deal of nonfiction will not be considered literary, although it might remain highly valued in other areas (politics, history, the sciences, etc.). Although there may persist questions of relative merit—e.g., Is Faulkner really superior to Hemingway? Does Wallace Stevens improve on Emily Dickinson?—there is no real question in the postbellum course of *whether* something is literature or not. To be sure, canon debates arise, rage, subside ... then flare up again. But canon debates largely revolve around matters of evaluation (is this literary text worth as much as that one?) rather than taxonomy (is this text “literature” or not?).⁸ Genre does not present itself as a major problem in the second of the American literature survey courses, largely because the issue was resolved by the time the period it covers had begun.

The antebellum side of American literature survey courses presents a different story altogether. Even the most traditional courses, using strictly “canonical” texts, will usually study such extra-literary works as Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, Jonathan Edwards’s sermons, Thomas Paine’s political pamphlets, Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia* or The Declaration of Independence. These works occupy genres that undoubtedly still exist: narratives of personal ordeals that wind up teaching spiritual lessons, theological and ethical musings, sermons, political tracts, scientific and legal documents are certainly as prevalent today as they were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The key difference is that these kinds of writings are no

⁸ Of course, these issues cannot be separated entirely, since value judgments are inherent in any determination of whether a text is literature. The fact that it is being taught in a literature course, that it is included in an anthology designed expressly for such courses, indicates that—at an institutional level, at least—the works are considered literature. But these facts are also the results of various evaluations.

longer viewed as literary; they may be artfully crafted, rhetorically powerful, and elegantly presented, but they do not really count as literature. Once the survey course arrives at the nineteenth century, this genre problem would seem to disappear, since many key texts begin to look more like short stories (of Irving, then Hawthorne and Poe), poetry (Bryant, Longfellow, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson), and novels (Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville). But, as Arac's study shows, these works did not always embody the norms of properly *literary* writing. Moreover, the survey will include other canonical texts and writers that do not even fit into these conventional genres, such as Douglass's autobiographical narratives, Emerson's essays, Fuller's philosophy, and Thoreau's odd ensembles of personal narrative, nature writing, philosophy, and political polemic. Some of these writings do count as literature for us today, though the subgenres they represent would not always be taught in twentieth-century literature survey courses.

To illustrate this point further, consider the contents of the two-volume, William E. Cain-edited *American Literature*.⁹ Volume 1 begins with two letters of Christopher Columbus and ends with an excerpt from Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. Bookended by these nonfiction (though very different) personal accounts of events and places in the New World, the literature of the first volume covers all manner of written genres, including several mentioned above. In contrast, Volume 2, which covers writers from Mark Twain to the present (poet Sherman Alexie), includes only three pieces that fall outside the categories of poetry, drama, or short fiction—selections from Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁰ A key selling point of the Cain anthology is its conciseness, and it's editor readily concedes

⁹ Cain, William E., ed., *American Literature*. 2 vols. (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁰ That each is an instance of African American literature is itself curious, but there is not room in the present essay to address the question of why extra-literary minority writing might be valued in an anthology that otherwise omits

that much therefore must be omitted, but the phenomenon I am discussing is similarly apparent in such comprehensive anthologies as the *Norton* or the *Heath*, although the latter includes a great deal of nontraditional works, especially by ethnic minority authors (e.g., poetry written on walls by Chinese immigrants).¹¹ By their selections, these commonly used textbooks implicitly acknowledge that the very idea of literature changed sometime after the Civil War and that this must affect the way we—as teachers and students—approach American literature.

By calling attention to this, I do not mean to suggest that twentieth-century American literature anthologies *should* include more nonfiction or more extra-literary genres. Rather, my point is that the phenomenon reveals the degree to which literary genres have become firmly established by the twentieth-century, so much so that relatively comprehensive anthologies can ignore whole libraries of extra-literary writings. This phenomenon seems so well established as to be taken as nearly “natural.” That is, few really question whether what we are reading *is* literature; we take for granted that the works we are reading are literary. This attitude, while reasonable enough in the second course, tends to rub off on the antebellum course as well. Even though the texts themselves do not fit into the recognized literary categories, we often teach them without asking what make them literature (or not). It is not surprising that we should take literature—that is, the literariness of the writings—for granted in the second, postbellum half of the American literature survey, since the works covered in that course were largely written after

such narratives and speeches. Undoubtedly the prominence of race in the social history of the United States merits the inclusion of numerous works expressly interested in maintaining a crucial connection to the nonliterary, “real” world; but this rationale is also expressly nonliterary, and shows the degree to which aspects of what Arac calls “national narrative” still inform the institutional practices of American literature.

¹¹ These larger anthologies include several late nineteenth-century selections that do not fall into the poetry-drama-short story categories, including Native American oration, personal narratives like Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, or the generically uncategorizable *Education of Henry Adams*. The editors of the Heath Anthology, in particular, are expressly interested in expanding the canon. However, making the category of literature more capacious does not necessarily call into question the nature of the category (although, as noted above, the one will certainly affect the other).

the current notion of *literary* writing had become more-or-less established. It is surprising, however, that we would do so in the early American literature survey, since so few of the texts studied would have been self-consciously literary. Indeed, it often seems as though the circular logic obtains: because these texts are in an American literature book, they are literature. In many cases, I believe we teach the texts (and teach them well), but without looking at how the texts relate to the development of literature itself, specifically to the evolution of the literary aesthetic. I believe that, particularly in the early American survey, this development is the key issue for literary studies. Since the very notion of literature, in the specialized sense in which the term is used in university curricula, only becomes concrete during the nineteenth century, we might examine this phenomenon to gain a better understanding of the texts in their time and how they relation to the institution of literature in our own.

Teaching “Literature”

What I am proposing involves a kind of meta-analysis of literature. That is, it involves not only teaching the texts—engendering an appreciation for, and facilitating the interpretation of, individual works of literature—but teaching the text-ness of the text, the literariness (or non-literariness) of the literature. The aim is not merely to examine the literature of this place at that time, but to show how the varied writings of the places and times came to be “literature.” What role does this text play in the literary history of which it is a part? What function does it have in relation to other texts? What kind of text is it? How do different kinds of texts get written and read? What different purposes do they serve?

Undoubtedly, many of these questions are raised in most early American literature surveys.¹² They might spring from the text themselves, especially as so many of the works covered in such courses directly speak to their “writteness.” For example, the Declaration of Independence famously begins by setting forth the reason it is being written. Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative includes a preface (apparently by Increase Mather) explaining why it was written and how the reader should receive it. Even such straightforwardly fictional works as Hawthorne’s romances include prefaces explaining what type of work we are dealing with and urging a certain type of reading appropriate to it. This rhetorical situation, in which the author feels the need to position his or her text in a certain way, is tied to historical conditions. Literature undoubtedly speaks to its own place and time even as certain works strive for transcendence. Regardless of whether one’s teaching method involves historicism directly, the early American survey course is by definition historical. Many teachers find themselves teaching history—with its economic, political, religious, and social aspects—as much as the literary works themselves. What is perhaps less common is the way that literature has its own history, relatively independent of these other spheres. Arac has characterized this as the “relatively internal history” of literature. As he puts it, “the production of narratives in a culture may be seen not only as a function of other institutions and structures but as an institution that has a history and structure of its own.”¹³

Since Arac’s study of narrative forms offers insight into the different ways narrative operated in the United States during the nineteenth century, it might be useful to summarize his findings briefly. Arac notes that, while twentieth-century readers can admire the power of

¹² See, e.g., Kristina Bross, “Antinomian Impulses in the Undergraduate Survey.” *Early American Literature* 40.1 (2004), 343–349.

¹³ Arac, *Emergence*, 1.

Hawthorne's or Melville's literary works, literary narratives had but a brief moment to flourish in the nineteenth century. The dominant narrative form in the early to mid-nineteenth century was what Arac calls *national narrative*, which was told through both fiction (such as the historical novels of Cooper) or nonfiction (such as Bancroft's *History of the United States*). At the time, there was no operational national culture in the United States. With the wearing off of the initial patriotic high of the early national period (1776–1820), most citizens were less likely to think of themselves as distinctively “American” as they were to think themselves Virginians or Methodists or lawyers or what have you. National narrative was one of the means by which the nation formed itself; that is, national narrative did not just reflect the national culture, it actually helped to create it. It did so, in part, by connecting readers directly to the events of daily life, while advancing a program for a recognizably national culture. Thus, the reader's personal life was connected to the nation's public life through national narrative. By contrast, *literary narrative* is defined in part by its turning away from this sort of engagement.

Arac identifies two other narrative forms that rivaled national narrative in the nineteenth century. Most powerful was *local narrative*, which undermined any effective notion of a unified national culture by expressly pointing out the regional or local differences. Such works included the sketches of Irving, the tales of Hawthorne, Southwestern Humor, or the grotesques and arabesques of Poe. Often, such works also satirized local differences, thus making it less likely that a reader would want to identify with the characters presented. As such, readers could not imagine a representative American subject, one who could stand in for all Americans, but rather various oddballs or idiosyncratic characters from the scattered regions of the country. The other form, *personal narrative*, involved the autobiographical, first-person account of an individual's experience, usually in an exotic locale. Examples include Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*,

Douglass's *Narrative*, Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*, and perhaps Thoreau's *Walden*. Unlike the Puritan personal narrative or twentieth-century autobiography, these accounts rarely delve very deeply into the psyche of the narrator; rather, they present a straightforward account of events and places. They are external accounts, not really giving voice to who "we" might be, but showing the exotic "they." The "they" might include foreign cultures (the Marquesans in *Typee*), lower classes (sailors in Dana's narrative), or unfamiliar ways of life (slave society for Douglass's readers or "life in the woods" for Thoreau's). By representing foreign locales, these narratives might serve the purposes of national narrative, but they do so through a form of representational colonization—depicting the Other in order to understand better the Self. In any event, the personal narrative form did not have the same aims and effects as national narrative.

Literary narrative, in Arac's account, emerges amid these others, drawing imagery from them even as it attempted to transcend them. For literary narrative, the elements of daily personal, local, and national life could provide useful details, but these elements also had to be subordinated to the intellectual and artistic abilities of the author. As with Poe's distinction, a crucial aspect of the modern understanding of literature is its close connection to imaginative, original, and creative powers, usually expressive of the author or of the culture that produces it, but rarely drawing directly from such a culture. Put another way, literature in its modern sense separates itself from the quotidian. This does not, of course, mean that the literary text cannot be realistic or will not evoke the details of daily life. It means that the work will distance itself from the restraints of the actual in order to let loose the fancy or the imagination. As Hawthorne had put it in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, the romance-writer "wishes to claim a certain latitude" and be free to create circumstances of "the writer's own choosing or creation."¹⁴

¹⁴ Quoted in Arac, *Emergence*, 124.

Arac notes that a marked effect of the newly emergent understanding of literature, an understanding that emerged during the nineteenth century and that continues to hold sway today, was the way that “it is now expected that literary culture and national culture will stand at a tense distance from each other.”¹⁵

Take two examples from the 1850s. *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are both valued works of fiction, novels (or romances) that speak to their readers and to their time. Until quite recently perhaps, but most likely continuing today, *Moby-Dick* was considered the superior literary work. This is not merely a matter of personal or professorial opinion, but relates to the idea of what great literature should be. *Moby-Dick* speaks to and from the national culture of its time, but it does not directly weigh in on the issues of the day. It keeps its distance from the everyday realities of life in order to carve out a space for the imagination. This also has the effect of making its “meaning” either unclear, thus inviting readers to actively interpret and reinterpret the text. “There’s another rendering now, but still one text,” as Stubb famously says of the doubloon.¹⁶ The celebrated indeterminacy of meaning in the novel, and in literature generally, removes it from the sphere of direct political action or commentary. As noted in a library’s worth of Melville scholarship, *Moby-Dick* does respond—often in fascinating ways—to major issues of its time, such as slavery. But unlike *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the average reader has no way of knowing from the text what Melville’s position on the issue is. Nor will readers be able to say what Ishmael’s position is, and having Ishmael as an intermediary already displaces the author from the content of the novel. A work like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* actively encourages the reader to identify with the narrator (and to identify the narrator with the author), who has

¹⁵ Arac, *Emergence*, 2.

¹⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 434.

taken a decisive position on a matter of national importance.¹⁷ The reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has no doubt as to where the author stands on the question of slavery, whereas the reader of *Moby-Dick* must remain, almost by necessity, uncertain. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains a treasured novel, wildly popular in its own time and appreciated by many today, it—like Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*—probably would be excluded from Poe's understanding of *literature proper*.

Arac has recounted how, after presenting his findings at various conferences, some had accused him of favoring the overtly political or social form of national narrative over the aesthetics of literary narrative; others charged him with just the opposite, accusing him of championing an apolitical *belles lettres* over the more socially relevant writings of the time.¹⁸ In fact, Arac is not interested in whether one narrative form is superior, politically *or* artistically, to another; rather, he is interested in how the two forms developed, how they spoke to one another and to the culture. Arac shows how, during the nineteenth-century, these two forms (along with local and personal narratives) contested for the hearts and minds of American readers. Literary narrative was unable to sustain itself amid the great national crisis, but once that crisis had passed—in part because of a powerful consolidation of national energies during the Civil War—it was national narrative that faded away, or moved into the B-genre realms of the Hollywood Western or the hackneyed political stump speech. By the early twentieth century, modernism brought literary narrative a far higher authority and prestige than it had ever won in its first decades, the time of this study. In its own time, however, literary narrative could not maintain its separate realm against the crises that from *Uncle Tom's*

¹⁷ Arac, *Emergence*, 181–183.

¹⁸ See Arac, “What is Literary History?” *Modern Language Quarterly* 54.1 (1993): 105–110.

Cabin through the end of Reconstruction again brought to the fore national narrative.

Hawthorne and Melville incorporated in their literary narratives the emphasis on experience of personal narratives and the keen observation and complex tonal modulations of local narratives; in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* they also subdued national narrative to their purposes. They created a kind of narrative that was new to the United States and that is now known through much of the world and valued as a living heritage.¹⁹

Arac's contribution to the literary history of the United States reveals how fragile, how uncertain, and how brief the literary moment was in antebellum American literature. Although its outlines are visible in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, its full form emerges in Hawthorne's and Melville's romances in the 1850s. Yet, with the onset of the Civil War, literary narrative practically disappears. It reemerges by the end of the century, just as the formerly dominant national narrative recedes into history, that is, becoming the object of historical study rather than the very substance of lived history. The story of literature in the antebellum United States is, in part, the story of how the institution of literature comes into being, but with much trouble and only briefly. What can be taken for granted in the postbellum half of the survey course is very much still in question during the antebellum period.

Conclusion

This brings me back to my early American literature survey. Too often, I believe, we present each work as an example of the literature of its time and place without examining what constitutes it as such. The story of American literature before 1865 is not just the story of

¹⁹ Arac, *Emergence*, 241.

America told through its writings, nor is it the story of Americans writing literary works. It is also the story of the development of literature in America, of how the very idea of literature comes to take shape in the United States. This tale is not continuous and progressive; it does not begin with the non-literary works of early colonists and improve, generation by generation, until it culminates in the flowering of the American Renaissance. Rather, it proceeds in fits and starts, lurching between writers whose intentions vary, between those who want a robust national image and those who would prefer a literature removed from the hurly-burly of everyday life. As a Hawthorne or a Poe is establishing a literary theory that carves out a separate sphere for the imagination, a Frederick Douglass is showing how the use of writing can and ought to be the way to achieve real results in the real world. The legacy of both, and of many others as well, is given to us as teachers. An early American literature survey course provides an exemplary site for exploring how the literary emerges in the United States, as well as how that emergence was often at odds with the culture itself. This, it seems to me, provides a richer, more nuanced view of the role of literature in American life, and it provides a stronger foundation for appreciating and interpreting the literature that students may study in the future.

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