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Review of Jonathan Arac: The  
Emergence of American Literary  
Narrative, 1820-1860

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**Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Harvard UP, 2005), 288 pp., \$15.95 paper.**

**T**he literary history of a nation is not the same as the history of that nation as seen through literature. Literature does offer a vista into history, a point of entry for discussing the social, political, and cultural issues that the literature emerges from, responds to, or simply reflects. But literature is also an institution in its own right, with a history that may be related to other histories, but cannot be reducible to them. In the United States, for instance, the nineteenth century witnesses the rise of literary forms that would come to be valued as masterpieces of world literature, even as the country was struggling amid the turmoil of slavery, secession, continental and overseas expansion, problems associated with emergent industrialization and urban growth, and so on. Unquestionably, the writers of the antebellum period had these salient matters in mind

when they were writing. But many writers also made a conscious effort to develop and produce certain forms of literature that would operate somewhat apart from these matters. Indeed, a literary history of the period would need to examine the institution of literature itself, not just the ways literature spoke to other institutions. This “relatively internal history,” as Jonathan Arac calls it, is the subject of *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860*.

Originally published as a contribution to *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1995), Arac’s study of narrative forms casts the relationship between formal techniques and historical content in fresh perspective. “The central event in the literary history of mid-nineteenth-century American prose narrative is the emergence, around 1850, of works, preeminently *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*, that still count as ‘literature’ for many readers” today (1–2). Yet, Arac notes that many other valuable works cause problems for today’s readers because the conceptual categories into which they fit are not always clear. Arac tackles this problem by recourse to genre, recognizing that there are different kinds of narrative that do not comport with the rules and expectations associated with “literary” narratives. Arac identifies three other narrative forms – national, local, and personal – that competed with, and helped to define, literary narrative. As Arac shows, the emergence of literary narrative in the antebellum United States was fraught with difficulties that ultimately rendered the form a brief, evanescent moment in the literary history of the era.

It is important to note that the distinction between literary narrative and the other genres is not the same as that between fiction and nonfiction. While it is true that literary narratives were largely fictional, and that a type of imaginative creative writing would come to define the form, the rival narrative forms often combined fact and fiction. National narratives could be told through romances like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or through the historical account of *The Conspiracy of the Pontiac*. Local narratives, following from Washington Irving’s lead, included fanciful tales like Rip Van Winkle while also including painterly, detailed

sketches of actual places and people. Personal narratives, by and large, were nonfictional accounts of individual experiences, though many writers supplemented their narratives with fictional elements. The fact versus fiction divide is simple not determinative of the difference between literary narrative and the other forms. The difference lies in the form's relationship to the world outside of it.

Today the term *literature* refers to a kind of writing, often poetry or creative fiction valued for its originality, but the word did not carry its specialized meaning at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Literature then referred to any kind of cultural valued writing, poetry and prose, factual and fictional, often including works of philosophy, science, and history. As Arac points out, "nineteenth-century prose narrative was a crucial place for this change in meaning" (2). Because of the change, the writing valued as literary no longer seems to relate directly to the concerns of local or national life. Unlike its rivals, literary narratives appeared to turn away from the problems of everyday life.

The dominant narrative form during the period covered by Arac's study is *national narrative*. National narrative "told the story of the nation's colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as a model for the world" (2-3). This story was effective whether told through fiction or nonfiction, and major figures working in this genre in the 1820s and '30s included the novelist James Fenimore Cooper and the historian George Bancroft; later writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Francis Parkman would also produce national narratives of great power. Arising alongside the profoundly patriotic rhetoric of Andrew Jackson's presidency, national narratives helped create a unified idea of the nation. "National narrative was part of the process by which the nation was forming itself and not merely a reflection of an accomplished fact" (3). Salient images of nineteenth-century national narrative include the rugged individual (like Cooper's Natty Bumppo) who helps the pioneering community even if he cannot settle there; also the democratic community, suffused with ideals and struggling to establish freedom and equality, pervades the story of America's colonization and eventual

independence from Europe (in Bancroft's history). Such imagery still maintains power today, although more in popular culture than in high culture. The Western, in particular, seems to keep the national narrative alive, especially through its rugged individuals and pioneering communities. National narrative also exerts considerable rhetorical power in political discourse, notably electioneers' stump speeches, but it is no longer the stuff of literary culture for the most part.

National narrative would remain the dominant American narrative form until the late nineteenth century, but part of its appeal was that it provided an image of a national culture that could not yet be taken for granted. Perhaps it seems odd to say that national narrative was dominant just as the nation was about to split apart in the Civil War, but the opposite is true: national narrative was so powerful precisely because the nation was in crisis. It was not clear that the nation would be whole. National narrative's rhetoric of national unity and sense of purpose was often belied by the diversity and competing interests of its "people," some of whom did not readily identify with all the others. *Local narrative*, especially, exploited the notion of distinct regional voices, often presenting them to comic effect, but clearly undermining the idea of a homogeneous American people, unified in purpose and ideals.

Washington Irving established the conventions that would define the local narrative form. Irving's often humorous sketches and his quirky Dutch characters seem a foil for any idea of a representative national scene or subject. Rather than showing a microcosm of what America is, and should be, Irving presents a caricature. Ichabod Crane might be the representative American type, but Crane is ridiculed and run out of town by the very figures (the odd Dutch culture) doomed to fade away once the nation becomes fully formed. The point of local narrative, after all, is not to present people with whom we (the readers) identify, but rather to show the oddballs. In the work of the Southwestern Humorists (like Augustus Baldwin Longstreet and George Washington Harris), characters are clearly objects of ridicule. Typically told from the point of view of an educated observer, the tales depicted a way of life both

foreign and risible to the readers. Certainly the backwoods rubes were not meant to be representative of America, although the conventions would later be used by Mark Twain to produce more representative American types such as Huckleberry Finn.

More respectful in tone perhaps, but no less local in geographical and ideological scope, Hawthorne's short stories depict a way of life that also turns away from any national culture. His haunted Puritans, with their inward-looking brooding and secret sins, did not fit with the image of the rugged individual or the democratic community. Most often in Hawthorne's tales, the plot revolves around an individual whose personal ghosts prevent him from forming relationships with his fellows. For Hawthorne, the breakdown of communities, rather than their formation, often serves as the moral of the tale. In any event, the national culture does not emerge from Hawthorne's local narratives, even if – in their Puritan origins – they shared some of the content of national narratives. If Hawthorne's haunted characters stand as foils to a national figure, how much more so do Poe's. Arac notes that Poe's career exhibits another novel aspect of American life: the rise of cities. Not only does Poe's peripatetic career take him to nearly all the major American cities of his day – Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston – but Poe's stories disclose an urban atmosphere, whether set in an actual metropolis (like "The Man of the Crowd" in London) or cloistered in some seemingly remote locale (as with "The Fall of the House of Usher"). Poe's dark and dreary settings resemble the cityscapes of Dickens and Balzac, revealing the power of atmosphere. Unlike other writers of local narrative, Poe does not limit his geographic purview to a particular region. His work remains local in effect, however, as it carves out a small part of human experience and localizes the structure of feelings.

Whereas local narratives partake of place, "personal narratives arise from and depend on displacement" (76). The personal narrative form, prominent in the 1840s especially, presents a first-person account of adventures in some exotic or foreign locale. Unlike the later modern

autobiographies or the earlier Puritan narratives, these narratives rarely delve into the psyche of the narrator; rather, they serve as relatively impersonal reports from the periphery of polite society. Although the narrator may speak his own feelings, more often the narration deals with description of external event and place rather than with one's feelings about them or lessons learned from them. Examples include Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*, Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Each of these works reveal to the reader a "low" social strata – working-class sailors, Polynesian or American natives, slave society, the wilderness itself – that then becomes part of the reader's knowledge base. As Arac notes, personal narratives thereby serve to colonize kinds of experience that may then be appropriated into national narratives. The authority of personal narratives rested on their being true. As with Douglass', personal narratives were often overtly political documents designed to persuade readers to adopt a particular position on matters of significance. Poe's utterly fantastic *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* was nevertheless published as nonfiction, and continued to be advertised as a work of travel for years. The same publisher initially rejected Melville's *Typee* – a book at least based on the author's experience – on the grounds that "it was impossible that it could be true and was *therefore* without real value" (my emphasis). The value of personal narratives lay in their ability to provide accurate reports.

Arac argues that the Compromise of 1850 opened a narrow window for literary narrative to flourish with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*. Marked by a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward real-world concerns, literary narratives created a space outside of the national culture and populated it with creatures of the imagination. Drawing from the Romantic tradition, these works celebrated individual genius, creativity, originality, and novelty; this in turn meant looking down on the common, familiar, or popular. Unlike personal narratives, which demanded to be taken as true and which were even vouched for by witnesses, literary

narratives wanted to be left alone. In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne writes that the romancer “wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material,” and that the romance has the right to present its truth “under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation.” Hawthorne self-consciously turned away from the social world to create a freely imaginative space. Literary narrative would transcend, and thereby implicitly criticize, the world of everyday experience. But by transcending the everyday, it also moved outside of the sphere of the common man, becoming an élitist enterprise, requiring a special kind of reader as well as a special kind of writer. Once the writer became an artist, the relationship between the writer and the public forever changed. Literary narrative, as theorized and practiced by Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, courted subtlety, ambiguity, even obscurity. These authors were most interested in exploring the psychology of their characters, presenting abstract problems for which no solutions readily presented themselves and leaving open questions for the reader to contemplate. It is not that these narratives refused to speak to local or national concerns outright, but they insisted on doing so in a language that many readers would have found coded or indecipherable. (For instance, *Moby-Dick* may tell us a great deal about the conditions of the working classes or slaves, but it will not tell us how to vote in the next election.)

Not in spite of, but precisely because of its imaginative power, literary narrative could not survive the crisis of an impending Civil War. In the years just after *Moby-Dick*, a powerful national narrative with a straightforward, first-person narrator holding strong and unambiguous views on issues of national importance would appear that would shake up the world outside of *belles lettres*. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* left no doubts where it stood or where it wanted its readers to stand. In the wake of the Civil War, once the nation-state had been reformed and its power consolidated, literary narrative reemerged and, by the turn of the twentieth-century, triumphed. In its own time, however, “literary narrative could not maintain its separate realm against the crises that

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from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the end of Reconstruction again brought to the fore national narrative" (241). With the advent of modernism, the "literary" achieved far greater status, but Arac's study shows how the institution of literature developed within the United States, tentatively and often without success, competing with other narrative forms for attention within a diverse reading culture. This is an insightful history of how certain kinds of writing emerged, flourished, and receded. *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative* should be essential reading for students of nineteenth-century American literature.

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