

6. “The Original Romance of America”: Slave Narratives and Transnational Networks in Theodore Parker’s American Literary History

David Watson

English, Uppsala University

Theodore Parker’s August 1849 address “The Position and Duties of the American Scholar” is perhaps best remembered today for the proclamation that “all of the original romance of America” is in its slave narratives, which he identifies with what appears to be “indigenous and original” in American literature.¹ This declaration is a pivotal statement within the antebellum period of 1820–60. With it, Parker declares that the emergent genre of the slave narrative, which usually focuses on a slave’s flight to freedom, is endowed with literary and not just political value—the first such recognition to come from the literary culture of New England transcendentalism, which included such canonical figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. He indicates implicitly as well that his abolitionist, anti-slavery work cannot be divorced from a consideration of the African American expressive vernacular culture growing

¹ Theodore Parker, “The Position and Duties of the American Scholar”, in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, vol. 7, ed. Frances Power Cobbe (London: Trübner & Co., 1864), 245, 244.

How to cite this book chapter:

Watson, David. ““The Original Romance of America”:
Slave Narratives and Transnational Networks in Theodore Parker’s American Literary History”. In *World Literatures: Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange*, edited by Stefan Helgesson, Annika Mörte Alling, Yvonne Lindqvist, and Helena Wulff, 59–69. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bat.f>. License: CC-BY.

out of the institution of slavery. In effect, the statement links the transcendentalist literary culture to which Parker belonged to an emergent African American literature, even while proclaiming the importance of the latter for the future of American literature. But while the significance is indisputable of Parker's statement to a national literary history of the antebellum period, his address resists a reading of it as solely offering a national literary history. Instead, as I will show, it frames its remarks concerning the slave narrative within a world literary context, and asks of its audience to imagine the vernacular cultures of the antebellum period in relation to various cosmopolitan networks, even while asking of us to interrogate what we mean by the vernacular and cosmopolitan. In other words, Parker's address, as I will show, asks of us to engage with the historical specificity of his understanding of the vernacular and cosmopolitan, and how he mobilises this distinction in surprising ways.

Parker's claim concerning the slave narrative genre is, of course, informed by the debates within the United States during this period. His proclamation echoes that of Ephraim Peabody—the Boston Unitarian minister and abolitionist. A month earlier, Peabody began his review in *The Christian Examiner* of slave narratives by Fredrick Douglass, William W. Brown, and Josiah Henson by claiming that “America has the mournful honor of adding a new department to the literature of civilization—the autobiographies of escaped slaves”, which, for him, resembled the Homeric epic more than any other literary genre.² While Parker by 1849 has resigned from his Unitarian parish in West Roxbury, Massachusetts and was preaching in an independent Boston pastorate, he, like Peabody, was firmly committed to the cause of abolitionism—he wrote the scathing “To Southern Slaveholders” in 1848, and helped finance in 1859 the abolitionist John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid. In “John Brown's Expedition”, a public letter written after Brown's execution as a result of the raid, Parker argues in favour of violent resistance to slavery, and for the rights

² Ephraim Peabody, “Narratives of Fugitive Slaves”, *The Christian Examiner* 47 (July 1849): 61.

of slaves to kill slaveholders. Parker's original address occurred at a volatile historical moment of increasing tension between anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces, which would soon result in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and, ultimately, civil war. Like Peabody's review, it recognises in the slave narrative the emergence of a new African American expressive cultural form, and seeks to adjudicate this vernacular form's relation to American literary culture more broadly. Already over-determined from the outset by its entanglements with literary historical developments and the history of slavery, Parker's "American Scholar", as I will argue, raises questions as well concerning transnational comparison, translation histories, and 19th century conceptions of the long history of world literature. In other words, its engagement with the emergent genre of the slave narrative is embedded within an account of antebellum American literature that seeks to grasp this literature within a world literary framework.

By 1849, the terms whereby debates concerning American literature are to be conducted were well established. On the one hand, the so-called "Knickerbockers" such as James K. Paulding favoured a more cosmopolitan, or rather Anglophile, literary culture that would be reserved for a cultivated cultural elite. On the other hand, the "Young America" movement of Evert and George Duyckinck, and others favoured a more democratic and nationalist literary culture, with Herman Melville's exhortation that "men, not very much inferior to Shakespeare, are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio" perhaps best capturing the movement's vigorous celebration of American democratic values and their cultural promise.³ Initially, in his address, Parker appears closest in spirit to the "Young America" movement even though he decries the materialist and imperialist inclinations of the period. Emphasising the democratic qualities of America's literary culture, which he sees as creating a definitive break with Europe, Parker assigns a particular kind of debt to the scholar. Arguing that the national community produces the scholar, he insists that

³ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et.al (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 248.

it is the duty of the American scholar to repay this investment, so to speak, by representing back to the nation “higher modes of human consciousness”.⁴ Comparatively historicising his country’s literary output by comparing it to European literary production, Parker concludes however that American literature falls short of deserving entry to the world literary stage. Much of this literature appears to be imitations, he argues, of works by authors such as John Milton and Walter Scott. Adding nothing new, and nothing American to the literature of the world, this literature is cosmopolitan in a pejorative sense, taking both its form and content from abroad without giving anything of the “individuality of the nation” back to world literature—the hallmark of a successful national literature for Parker.⁵ Arguing that all national literatures begin through a series of imitative gestures, Parker identifies a problem of coevalness within American culture: in comparison to European literatures, American literature is attempting belatedly to enter the world literary stage.

It is tempting to understand Parker’s lament concerning American literature as a complaint concerning the preponderance of cosmopolitan literary influences in the United States, and a national failure to establish a properly vernacular culture. It may be though that such a reading would amount to an anachronistic mistranslation of his argument. Rather than subdividing American literature into cosmopolitan and vernacular strains, he offers instead two temporal categories whereby to classify his country’s literary production:

First comes the permanent literature, consisting of works not designed merely for a single and transient occasion, but elaborately wrought for a general purpose. This is literature proper. Next follows the transient literature, which is brought out for a particular occasion, and designed to serve a special purpose.⁶

Taking this division as a schematic whereby any literature can be mapped, Parker offers temporal categories—the transient and

⁴ Parker, “American Scholar”, 224.

⁵ Parker, “American Scholar”, 239.

⁶ Parker, “American Scholar”, 238.

ephemeral, the permanent and enduring—as a way of understanding the different parts of a literary culture. Coming perhaps closest to a vernacular conception of literature, the transient mode includes “speeches, orations, state papers, political and other occasional pamphlets, business reports, articles in the journals, and other productions designed to serve some present purpose.”⁷ Notably not including the slave narrative—a form understood to have an political purpose during this period—amongst his examples of the transient mode, Parker is expanding the sphere of what counts as literature by aggregating together forms of production that address historically-specific matters. Not quite, or rather exclusively, cosmopolitan in form, the permanent mode should on the contrary be at once universal as well as particular to the nation and author, the “private bottle”, or bottles, into which should run the “public wine of mankind”.⁸ This literature gains its permanence via its synthesis of the general and particular, and it provides a model for other literary cultures as it circulates across the globe. Offering a synthesis of the arguments of the “Knickerbockers” and the Young America movement, Parker seems to be arguing that a universal literature is at its most worldly when national, and a national literature at its most national when it refers back to the universal.

The slave narrative occupies a privileged yet awkward space within this taxonomy of American literature. Superior to the “white man’s novel”, it is a mode of literary production that could only be written within the United States given its relation to the systems of slavery.⁹ Yet it is ranked alongside, even while differentiated from, accounts of the “lives of the early martyrs and confessors... the legends of saints and other pious men... the Hebrew or heathen literature.”¹⁰ Parker writes as if all of these literatures belongs to a long, global literary tradition uniting Christian and non-Christian writing across epochs. This insistence on both the American particularity of the slave narrative and its position within

⁷ Parker, “American Scholar”, 245.

⁸ Parker, “American Scholar”, 241.

⁹ Parker, “American Scholar”, 245.

¹⁰ Parker, “American Scholar”, 244–5.

a long world literary history, in which secular and non-secular modes of writing are inter-linked, underwrites Parker's argument regarding its permanence. Yet, as Russ Castronovo has pointed out, this judgment does not lead to the full inclusion of the slave narrative in the body of American literature.¹¹ The fugitive slave is not sufficiently cultured, according to Parker, and the slave narrative does not make the necessary down payment on the debt produced by investment of the nation in its scholars. At once writing the exemplary form of American literature, yet not admitted fully to the ranks of the American scholar, the fugitive slave appears to be producing a literature that is American yet not. Is Parker, in the final instance, resisting the full association of American literature with the slave narrative, or is he acknowledging the difficulties in applying terms such as debt, which is overtly associated in the address with democratic opportunities for education, to the fugitive slave? He certainly appears to be doing both, at once resisting the miscegenation of the American literary field, and showing an awareness of the unevenness produced by the material realities of slavery. Despite this awkwardness, Parker's declaration concerning the slave narrative situates it within both a national and a transnational continuum, a world literary space stretching across deep time as well as a national sphere inflected by the on-going realities of slavery.

There are very few antecedents for Parker's mapping of the American literary field. It conforms to neither of the positions articulated in the debates between the "Knickerbockers" and the Young American movement, opting instead for a perhaps unstable synthesis of the terms they take to be antithetical to one another—the universal and the nation. Earlier national literary histories such as Samuel Lorenzo Knapp's *Lectures on American Literature, with Remarks on Some Passages on American History* from 1829, the first American literary history, focused on the progressive development of American literature and how it has been shaped by events such as the War of 1812 between the United

¹¹ Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 158–60.

States and the United Kingdom, in which Knapp fought. In this history, American literature is identified overtly with the literature of New England to the detriment of writing from Southern states and what Parker would term “transient” modes of literary production. Parker’s scope and his world literary reach makes for an obdurate comparison to such histories.

But we find a more persuasive antecedent for Parker’s “American Scholar” in his own writing on religion. In fact, his mapping of the American literary field draws directly on this writing. It is in his then-controversial sermon of May 19, 1841, “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity”, that Parker introduces the divisions that would assist him eight years later in organising the American literary field. He argues in the sermon that

[i]n actual Christianity... there seems to have been, ever since the time of its earthly founder, two elements, the one transient, the other permanent. The one is thought, folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notion, the impiety of man; the other the eternal truth of God. These two bear the same relation to each other that the phenomena of outward nature, such as sunshine and cloud, growth, decay and reproduction, bear to the great law of nature, which underlies and supports them all.¹²

Noting that particular forms of worship and elements of Christianity change over time and even disappear, Parker argues for an historicising approach to religion that would distinguish between transient forms and beliefs, and enduring, or “permanent”, religious truths. Advocating elsewhere a reading of the Christian Bible as a set of “conflicting Histories which no skill can reconcile with themselves or facts”, Parker includes not only different forms of worship under the rubric of the transient, but the belief in miracles including the Christian resurrection.¹³ What remains as permanent is “one Religion which is absolutely true”

¹² Theodore Parker, *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (Boston, 1841), 8.

¹³ Theodore Parker, *A Discourse of Matter Pertaining to Religion in The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, vol. 1, ed. Frances Power Cobbe (London: Trübner & Co., 1876), 217.

but which finds expression within “numerous systems of theology or philosophies of religion” whether Christian or not.¹⁴ In other words, Parker, as in the “American Scholar”, seeks to enlarge the category of the “permanent” to include both the general and the particular, articulating thereby a theological argument that particularise Christianity. As Barbara Packer has described, Parker’s religious sermons and writings were controversial and contentious, leading ultimately to his break with the Unitarian church and the founding of his independent Boston pastorate.¹⁵ I am less interested though in Parker’s work on religion, or its consequences, than with his transposition of a classificatory system designed to distinguish between different modes of religious discourse onto the literary field of antebellum American literature. In this odd blurring of the secular and non-secular, religious discourse is transformed into a worldly phenomenon while literary production verges on becoming sacralised, especially once the slave narrative is linked across time to the “lives of the early martyrs and confessors... the legends of saints and other pious men.” It may very well be that in Parker’s discourse on religion and literature the alliance between secular modernity and the nation-state together with its literature is put under pressure until they disappear into a long history within which distinctions between the secular and sacred no longer appear to be functional.

The background to Parker’s “American Scholar” becomes even more complex once we take into account that his religious discourse is sourced, in fact, in the German Biblical higher criticism of Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette and Johann Eichhorn. This scholarship takes as its central premise the historicity of the Bible—it treats sacred scripture as a potentially secular script that often reflects its period rather than divine inspiration, which shows itself intermittently in both the Bible and other writing. Parker began producing in 1836 a paraphrastic translation of De Wette’s *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* as *A Critical and Historical*

¹⁴ Parker, *Transient and Permanent*, 10.

¹⁵ Barbara Packer, “The Transcendentalists”, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. 2 ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 346–48, 414, 420.

Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament, which would take him seven years to complete. De Wette writes in his preface to the volume that his aim is to reconnect biblical scripture to the history of its production—a claim that shaped Parker's own thinking. During the period in which he was translating De Wette, Parker would also write an extensive review of David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined* or *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* in which the author sought to distinguish between the mythical and factual parts of the New Testament. Parker's own *A Discourse of Matter Pertaining to Religion* would testify to the impact of German philosophy and higher criticism on his thinking—the text is saturated with references to Kant, Hegel and Fichte, in addition to Eichhorn, Strauss and De Wette. There is little doubt about the importance of translation work and German philosophy within Parker's milieu.¹⁶ Almost all of the New England Transcendentalists were translators and readers of German writing including Margaret Fuller, Frederic Henry Hedge, and James Freeman Clarke, who translated de Wette's *Theodore; or the Skeptic's Conversion*. Prominent New England intellectuals such as William Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother, Edward Everett, George Ticknor and George Bancroft all went to Germany to study with Eichhorn and learn about Biblical higher criticism. Parker's translation work, his reading in German philosophy, and investment in the assumptions of Biblical higher criticism are all in strict continuity with the concerns and practices of the rest of the New England intellectual community. But Parker's translation of De Wette and his other engagements with German writing provide him with the coordinates whereby to map American literature. He turns to the historicising methodology of higher criticism to articulate a transnational history of American literature within which the slave narrative is central. To put this otherwise: Parker's elevation of the slave narrative to a privileged place within the American

¹⁶ Cf. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Translating Transcendentalism in New England: The Genesis of a Literary Discourse", in *Translating Literatures, Translating Cultures: New Vistas and Approaches in Literary Studies*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irscher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 81–106.

literary field depends on transnational engagements with European discourses and translation work invisible within the “American Scholar” address itself.

The complications abounding around Parker’s “American Scholar” address are suggestive as to why it may very well be premature to associate antebellum America with the history of the emergence of American literary narrative, to paraphrase Jonathan Arac.¹⁷ It is not only a matter of deciding what should be included and excluded in such a history—a question framing Parker’s awkwardness concerning the slave narrative. An account of the antebellum period would have to take into account the diverse and often conflicting models of a national literary history and world literature informing such texts as Parker’s address. It would also call for a reckoning with questions concerning the boundaries of the literary, whether to include what Parker terms “transient” literary expressions, and what to make of the porous relation between the secular and non-secular in his writing—a problem perhaps confronting all literary histories indebted to models of deep time. Moreover, it has to take into account the frequently invisible histories of translation, transnational comparison, and foreign influence shaping accounts of American literature. In other words, a history of American literature in the antebellum period may very well have to take as its starting point that we cannot take for granted what was meant back then, or even today, by “American”, “literature” or even “literary history”. More immediately, Parker’s address shows that in mapping the cosmopolitan and vernacular tendencies of the period we need to attend carefully to their historical specificity and strange shapes.

Bibliography

Arac, Jonathan. *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Castronovo, Russ. *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

¹⁷ Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005).

- Melville, Herman. "Hawthorne and His Mosses". In *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, edited by Harrison Hayford et.al, 239-53. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989.
- Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt. "Translating Transcendentalism in New England: The Genesis of a Literary Discourse". In *Translating Literatures, Translating Cultures: New Vistas and Approaches in Literary Studies*, edited by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irmischer, 81-106. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Packer, Barbara. "The Transcendentalists". In *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 2, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, 329-604. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Parker, Theodore. *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. Boston, 1841.
- . "Position and Duties of the American Scholar". In *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, vol. 7, edited by Frances Power Cobbe, 217-56. London: Trübner & Co., 1864.
- . *A Discourse of Matter Pertaining to Religion. The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, vol. 1, edited by Frances Power Cobbe. London: Trübner & Co., 1876.
- Peabody, Ephraim. "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves". *The Christian Examiner* 47 (July 1849): 61-97.