

PHILIP F. GURA, *Truth's Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 352 pp.

When Philip F. Gura, the author of *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (2005) and editor of *Early American Literature*, publishes a book subtitled "The Rise of the American Novel," this marks an event in Early American Studies. And when the dust jacket tells us that this book presents "a comprehensive and original history of the American novel's first century" that "paint[s] a complete and authoritative portrait of the era," expectations run high. In what ways, the expectant Early Americanist asks, does Gura challenge and revise the accounts bequeathed to us by the groundbreaking revisionist studies of the 1980s by Jay Fliegelman, Emory Elliott, and Cathy N. Davidson, the challenges posed to these seminal works by, among others, Larzer Ziff, Grantland S. Rice, and Michael T. Gilmore as well as the more recent transnational turn in American Studies?

What is most irritating about Gura's latest book is that he does not even attempt to provide an answer to that question. Instead, he understands his own contribution as a response not to these studies but to "Alexander Cowie's 1948 history *The Rise of the American Novel*," which, Gura tells us, "still remains, along with Richard Chase's 1957 classic *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, one of the most thorough and well-regarded studies of its kind" (xviii-xix). In building on this scholarship from the 1940s and 1950s, Gura's "hope is that bringing women and African American novelists into the discussion will result in the fullest understanding yet of the early American novel" (xix). Reading large parts of *Truth's Ragged Edge*, one is led to believe that the last thirty years of literary scholarship on the early American novel never happened. What Gura does here is not just contribute to the 'trade gap' diagnosed by Eric Slaughter (that literary critics read and cite historians but not vice versa); it constitutes an all-out boycott.

This has palpably negative consequences, which already become apparent in the first chapter ("Beginnings") of the first part (which covers the years 1789 to 1850). There, Susanna Rowson's sentimental novel *Charlotte Temple* is described as nothing but "a simple morality tale" (21) that apparently lacks the internal tensions and antipatriarchal undercurrents identified by Fliegelman and Davidson

a quarter century ago. Equally disappointingly, Gura's discussions of novels here and elsewhere all too often amount to little more than biographical sketches of their authors, plot paraphrases, and attempts to pin down the "message" (13) or "point" (22) of each literary work. When he does go beyond these, for instance in his concise discussion of the combination of religious enthusiasm and psychological pathology that precipitate disaster in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (cf. 33-37), he adds little new to already existing Brown scholarship on these issues by, again among others, Frank Shuffleton and Steven Watts (whom Gura does not cite).

Gura's second chapter ("Glimmering of Change") deserves more praise in that it focuses on writers that made their mark in the 1810s and 1820s but have indeed received less attention: John Neal, Sarah Savage, Catharina Maria Sedgwick, William Gilmore Simms, and Robert Montgomery Bird (the last of which, I confess, I have never heard of). Yet again, apart from briefly situating their writings in their historical contexts (Neal and Jacksonian democracy; Savage and religious tract writing; Sedgwick and Unitarianism, liberalism, and the discourse on the 'vanishing Indian'; Simms and urbanization; Bird and the liberal self), Gura races through their lives and works, devoting at most a couple of paragraphs to plot summaries of each of their novels, liberally adding more famous contemporaries' appreciative assessments (Poe, Hawthorne, William Cullen Bryant) and some of the writers' own accounts of their works' reception—which in Neal's case are peppered with characteristic hyperbole ("like a lighted-thunderbolt, dropped into a powder magazine" [44]). In this chapter, too, there is very little engagement with recent scholarship on these writers. To give but one example: the rich body of recovery work on Sedgwick's sentimental negotiation of nationhood, women's social roles, and Native American rights, much of which has been published in the 1990s and 2000s, is almost completely ignored even though these are precisely three of the social and political issues in Sedgwick's work that Gura focuses on.

Things begin to improve with chapter three ("Preparing the Ground"), which begins with a lively and learned account of major changes in the American publishing world around the mid-nineteenth century and the rise of literary nationalism in rivaling magazines such as

*The Knickerbocker*, *Arcturus*, and the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Then, the chapter charts the lives and works of a variety of writers of the 1840s that engaged with the social ills brought about by the country's industrialization and urbanization: from the sensationalist, lurid Georges (Lip-pard and Thompson) to the transcendentalist utopian novelists Sylvester Judd and W.S. Mayo, to James Fenimore Cooper's anti-egalitarian, antimodern utopian fiction *The Crater; or, Vulcan's Peak*. The chief virtue of Gura's book shows itself most clearly in this chapter, in its inclusion of a host of largely neglected writers and texts.

The second part of Gura's book is devoted to the novels of the late 1840s and 1850s. Chapter four ("The Conventions of Sentiment") starts off with a solid account of the extent to which not only bestselling sentimental novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* but also lesser-known city mysteries such as Ariel Cummings's *The Factory Girl; or, Gardez la Coeur* are steeped in the evangelical "theology of the feelings" (111) and influenced by religious treatises on Christian education. Even the controversial writer Sara Pyson Willis Parton ("Fanny Fern") continued to draw on the formulae of sentimentalism while she challenged some of its pieties and patriarchal constraints. The last quarter of the chapter is taken up by presentations of more explicitly daring and controversial writers such as the reformist-feminist novelist and autobiographer Mary Gove Nichols, whose *Mary Lyndon; or, Revelations of a Life: An Autobiography* Gura calls "the most radical women's novel of the pre-Civil War period" (141), and Caroline Chesebro, whose *Isa, a Pilgrimage* tells a tale of female self-determination that is influenced by the social and political commentary of transcendentalists and first-wave feminists. Gura's decision to focus on lesser-known writers gives us new insights as it puts figures who have received quite a bit of revisionist attention recently (Warner, Cummins, Fanny Fern) in perspective vis-à-vis more socially and politically radical writers such as Nichols and Chesebro.

Chapter five ("On the Color Line") focuses on various novelistic treatments of pre-Civil War race relations: from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* over William Hill Brown's *Clotel* to Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*. The selected novels and the topical ter-

rains traversed by them (southern slavery, the Fugitive Slave Law, racist discrimination in the north, miscegenation, African repatriation) are too familiar to leave this reader satisfied with Gura's author biographies and plot summaries. In the book's sixth chapter ("Discovering Self-Consciousness"), Gura turns his attention to some of the most securely canonized and critically surveyed novels of the nineteenth century, among them Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence Man*. Considering the vast body literary and historical scholarship devoted to these writers and their works, Gura's by now familiar disregard for the work of other scholars is outright offensive. My point is not that Gura cannot do this to the 'greats'; my point is that he should not do this to his colleagues in literary studies, especially if it impacts the quality of his own readings, which amount to little more than plot paraphrases enriched by a host of quotations from author's letters and contemporary book reviews. After all, these culminate in the less than original observation that, even more so than Hawthorne's work, it was Melville's who fully registered that "subscribing to Transcendentalist egotism required abandoning the principles of good citizenship and the commonwealth upon which the nation had been founded" (215).

Gura's third part begins with an exploration of those women writers who entered the publishing world in the 1850s by way of new middle-brow magazines such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. To discuss this more secular, less sentimental, more realist and skeptical, and in several cases openly political generation of writers—Alice Cary, Lillie Devereux Umsted Blake, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, and Rebecca Harding Davis among them—under the heading of "A Neglected Tradition" in a monograph published in 2013 rings partially false, both in term of the relatively broad distribution of their work in the mid-nineteenth century (which Gura emphasizes) and the attention devoted to these authors by late twentieth and early twenty-first century scholarship (which Gura again mostly ignores). Even a quick search of the MLA Bibliography shows that two of these four authors have received ample critical treatment: from 1980 to 2012, no less than seventy-two monographs and articles were published on Stoddard, and ninety-nine on Davis. Once

more, Gura ignores many of the trailblazing publications of a great number of critics, including, to name but a few, Sybil B. Weir, Susan K. Harris, Joanne Dobson, Sandra A. Zagarell, Susan Belasco, Jennifer Putzi, Julia Stern, Charlotte Goodman, Tillie Olsen, Jean Fagan Yellin, Kristin Boudreau, Cecelia Tichi, and Ruth Stoner. And thus, the title of Gura's seventh chapter reminds this reviewer of a second "neglected tradition" here: the invaluable recovery work that has been done mostly by female critics since the 1980s. To be fair to Gura, he does cite some of those critics (Ellery Sedgwick, Judith Fetterley, Nina Baym, Grace Farrell, Sharon M. Harris, and Jean Pfaelzer), but his engagement with their work hardly ever goes beyond a single-sentence quote or a bibliographical reference.

In his short final chapter, "From a Theology of the Feelings to an Ethics of Love," Gura surveys three rather different writers, Henry Ward Beecher and his liberal Protestant fiction *Norwood*; or, *Village Life in New England*, Oliver Wendell Holmes and his engagement with contemporary science in *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's fictional inquiries into spiritualism, science, social inequality, and the ills of modern life. The chapter ends with a coda in which Gura reiterates an ethics

that informs most of the novels he discusses in his book. His final sentences read: "Making the mind aware of itself is not enough; it must become aware of and concerned with others. Trying to encourage such awareness and concern was the burden of American fiction in its first century. It remains ours" (281).

By way of concluding my rather critical review, let me say that I admire Gura's courage to paint with broad strokes. He never gets bogged down in critical skirmishes and provides a refreshing account of the first one hundred years of the American novel. *Truth's Ragged Edge* also introduces us to many a little-known literary work. These are achievements in themselves that testify to Gura's admirably broad knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history and culture. The problem I have with this book is that, in largely refusing to engage with previous literary scholarship and opting for plot summaries, author biographies, and surveys of contemporary reviews instead, Gura gives us a book that may appeal to a lay audience but, quite apart from implying that literary scholarship can safely be ignored, too often adds too little to what we already know about the novels he discusses.

Basel

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