

CRITICISM IN AN IRONIC MODE:
ON ARNOLD KRUPAT'S *THE VOICE IN THE MARGIN:
NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE CANON*

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Abstract

If as Arnold Krupat observes, the power of ironic discourse and its central rhetorical figure—“*aporia*, or doubt”—lies in the “ability to warn and to undermine but never to state or affirm,” we might as well say that his attempt in the recent book is doubly ironic: not only does he try to “undermine” the traditional American literary canon, he also tries to “state” and “affirm” the value of native American literature and extend his affirmation through national and “inter-national” [sic] literature to a cosmopolitan level.

Given the fact that the center is often equated with voice and presence, and the margin, silence and absence, the naming of this book as *The Voice in the Margin* highlights the author's deliberate gesture to oppose the “mainstream” American literary canon dominated by the WASP male writers of the east. This voice in the margin, as “a return of the repressed,” attempts to become another voice in the heteroglossia or polyphony. The author avails himself of dominant contemporary literary/cultural theory to demonstrate the characteristics of native American literature and its significance in American literature as a whole with the purpose of revising and even subverting the hitherto dominant discourse in American literary history. In other words, the author affirms the power of dominant critical discourse in order to undercut the existing hegemony in American literature.

Commenting on the relationship between the American literary canon and native American literature, Krupat emphasizes the importance of inclusion, not adoption. In his critical practice, however, he intentionally adopts concepts

which can serve his strategic purposes. We have good reasons to suspect that the excluded and repressed ideas might form another voice or voices in the margin to challenge and even subvert Krupat's argument.

Krupat scrupulously distinguishes two types of Native American autobiography—"autobiographies by Indians" and "Indian autobiographies." But the very acceptance of the misnomer "Indian" (a name highly representative of cultural, political, and historical hegemony) is self-defeating in a book expressing the native American's voice in the margin. This ambivalence reduces the author's polemical force, especially when placed side by side with his interrogation of the arbitrariness, artificiality, and superficiality of the grammatical conventions of the English language and the inherent patriarchal hegemony. This specific rhetorical strategy, which can be seen both as a polemical and as a performative act, serves to subvert the dominant ideology. Some convergence exists between patriarchal hegemony and the existing American literary canon. And the very fact that Krupat challenges the former while leaving the term "Indian" intact is an irony in itself.

A polemical critic asserting that "there is no such thing as American culture or its history as a totality," Krupat nevertheless entertains the utopian idea(l) of a cosmopolitan literature. We have been inculcated by the author that the concept of literature as "the culture of letters" is quite foreign to native American literature and that different motives might produce different "Indian autobiographies." To use the author's own metaphor, "Indian autobiographies" have already been "translated" and mediated by the English language before they enter into the simultaneous translation system in the Tower of Babel. After this "pre-translation" and simultaneous translation, we wonder how much mutual intelligibility can be achieved, and thus the feasibility of the "cosmopolitan literature" envisioned by the author.

Furthermore, whereas Krupat tries hard to historicize native American literature in the American literary context,

his judgment of the American literary canon as “the most powerful of first world literatures!” is ironically inappropriate and unhistorical.

Seeking the convergence between the long-standing study of native American culture and the thriving contemporary theories (especially cultural materialism), demanding for native American literature a position in the American literary canon, and marching toward a cosmopolitan literature and canon, *The Voice in the Margin* is itself “a voice in the margin.” Although the author’s attempt at canon-reformation by combining theory, history, and practical criticism is laudable and his position as a representative critic of native American literature is established, so that he can somehow utter a voice for and from the margin, yet a critical reading of his ironic mode reveals that much remains to be done.