

Occasionally too, the writing falls flat, particularly in parts translated from a French original; the interesting survey of resistance literature ("1940-1944") is really quite poorly written. And it is a constant irritation that the abbreviation *Mme* should be given a superfluous period every time it occurs. Misprints are however astonishingly few (a wrong date on 273, "definite" for "definitive" on 387, "realist" for "realistic" on 1041—though that might be a mistranslation—the implication on 667 that thirty years elapsed between 1835 and 1857, the date 1761 for 1671 on 449, a word missing in the middle of 952 and again at the bottom of 979, and the description of the sonnet form on 172 which seems to have lost lines 9 and 10).

Under the date 1895, Antoine Compagnon writes a most penetrating assessment of Lanson's famous *History of French Literature* (coming some way to atoning for the curious attribution, in "1734," of a famous remark of Lanson's to a school-room anthology that, like many others, quotes it). Here the New salutes the Old, and enables us to see the interest, and importance, of understanding the history of Histories. When such a history comes to be written, this Harvard New History should have a distinguished place in the panorama.

Homi K. Bhabha, ed.
Nation and Narration
London: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 333
Reviewed by A. Knoenagel

The most significant political development of the last few years, the disintegration of the former East Bloc, has led to a surprisingly vigorous and violent re-suscitation of nationalism. The concept of "nation," which seemed so outdated in a world of proletarian or capitalist internationalism, suddenly emerged as one of the prime motivating factors in people's self-images but remained largely innocent of the insight that its very vagueness and arbitrariness renders it at least partially a fictional construct and hence problematic as an evaluative basis. Literary studies, even on the post-secondary level, have for decades been dominated by the concept that a nation-state generates, among other things, a specific literature characterized by national idiosyncrasies. Our literature departments are usually divided by countries, and even the progressive discipline known as Comparative Literature frequently debates texts as examples, even representations, of national literatures.

Nation and Narration, published shortly before the upsurge of nationalism, attempts to explore difficult territory: the fiction of "nation," the national fiction, the fiction of a national fiction. "If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'" (2).

To this end, Bhabha has collected fifteen essays which attempt to deconstruct the sphere in which the notions of "nation" and "narration" interact. The book begins with Ernest Renan's classic essay, "What is a Nation?," and then presents several attempts to approach this question from a contemporary point of view which normally locates itself deliberately on the margins. The first third of the book is taken up by such contemplations which sometimes strain the patience of the reader interested in both aspects of the book's title. Positive exceptions in this part (although not officially subdivided, the book falls into several parts) are Sneja Gunew's critique of the politics of multiculturalism using the example of Australia and Doris Sommer's exploration of the national concepts that influenced the shaping of nineteenth-century Latin American fiction.

The last six essays of *Nation and Narration* do what the book's title had made the reader expect: they attempt to discuss narratives (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*; *Bleak House*, novels by Woolf and Achebe) by deconstructing their locations and functions in their respective "national literary environments." The range and quality of these essays also varies greatly. Some of the contributors seem to have forgotten the context in which their papers were to appear, and on occasion one wonders whether the same arguments have not already been put forth elsewhere. The latter is especially true of Francis Mulhern's otherwise good analysis of Leavisite literary criticism. The best essay of this section is "European pedigrees/African contagions: nationality, narrative, and communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed" in which James Snead demonstrates the insufficiency of the national literatures model for the study of African texts and the resulting inability of established Eurocentric literary criticism to do justice to such texts. Also very noteworthy is Gillian Beer's reading of several of Virginia Woolf's novels as texts that are concerned with the end of British insularity (geographical as well as mental) as a consequence of the invention of the airplane.

Nation and Narration ends with a long essay in which Homi K. Bhabha attempts to formulate "the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and make them the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives" (292). "DissemiNation" is an apt summary of the book and also quite representative. Bhabha goes over a lot of ground (Fanon, Rushdie, Benjamin, and others), but in spite of all his efforts, the text remains somewhat inconclusive. Located in the middle of an ongoing, important debate, the book can of necessity not present any eternal truths (though they then exist in the field of literature) or ultimate conclusions, but the way the book presents itself, it is so strongly characterized by apparent randomness that it is difficult to consider it an account of the present state of the critical debate. Interesting as some of the individual contributions are, taken as a whole, the book leaves one waiting for more—and more substantial—insights.