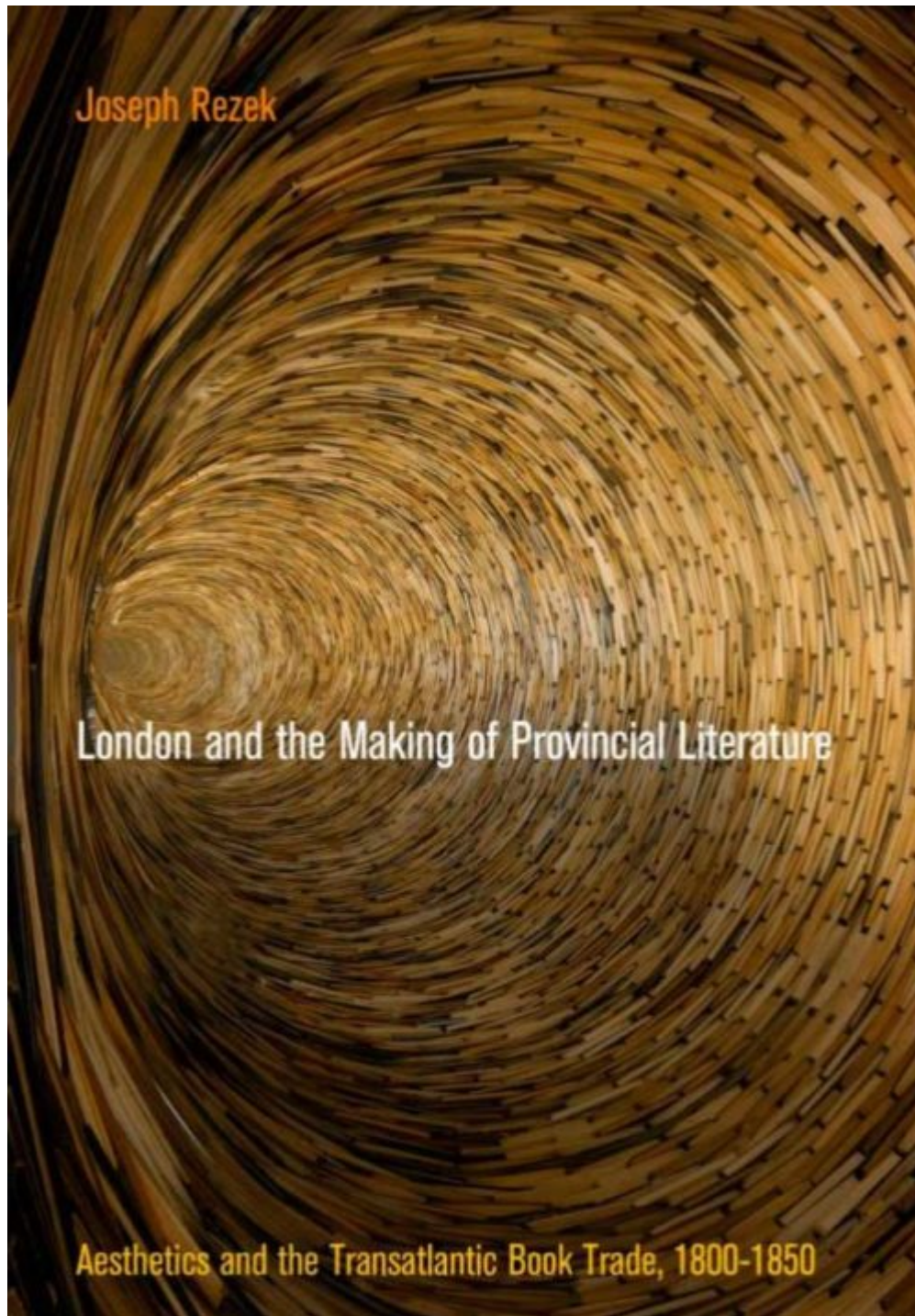
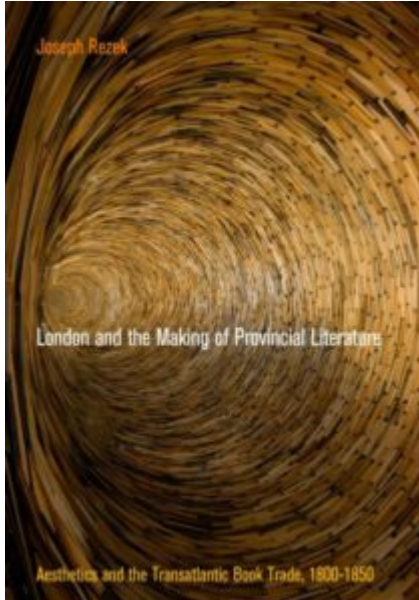


London's Peripheral Vision



What is “American” about American literature? The question was once posed rather often, in the heady days early last century when scholars undertook the work of establishing canons. Then, the question’s answer was most often thematic: American literature was literature “about” America. Such arguments were made, for example, by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, which linked the ruddy wildernesses of the North American continent with the romance genre, and distinguished it from the European novel of

manners. Another thematic reading stands at the heart of F.O. Matthiessen's enduringly influential *American Renaissance*, which unfolded masterful readings of five authors by locating what in their works reflected the democratic spirit of their nation.



Joseph Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800-1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 296, \$59.95.

It is not themes, however, but material texts that animate the national literary concerns of Joseph Rezek's *London and the Making of Provincial Literature*. This monograph revisits older questions about national literature, but revises their answers substantially by homing in instead on the historical conditions by which books are produced. The study's point of departure would appear simple enough: some of the most celebrated national Anglophone literary works—American texts by Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also Irish texts by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson and Scottish works by Walter Scott—were all printed in London. For each of these authors, the London marketplace—the dominant seat of Anglophone publishing in the world—provided a foreign point of access by which their nations and regions could, somewhat paradoxically, find self-representation. The contribution of this remarkable book, then, is to explore that paradox. Contravening received wisdom, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* avers that “Irish, Scottish, and American literatures must be located within the cross-cultural procedure of distinction only London could perform. These literatures were not born within the nation through an insular process of organic unfolding, nor did they develop as symptoms of nationally delimited historical contexts. They were made in the transatlantic marketplace through an uneven process of struggle and triumph” (3).

Clearly stated and convincingly argued as this thesis may be, its implications are explosive. For one thing, the comparative frame of this study considers different national literary traditions working in the same language, and discovers in that comparison not so much national differences as analogous social positions vis-à-vis London. The job of comparative literature, despite its name, is often to contrast, to distinguish; but in Rezek's view, the national literatures of the U.S., Ireland, and Scotland look less like the pure reflections of their respective cultures or peoples than, collectively, like a set of provincial riffs off a metropolitan literary standard. One might immediately object that, to choose only the U.S. example, a provincial identity is exactly what scholars, no less than the writers of the 1830s and 1840s themselves, have told us early national literature was trying to slough off. But this nationalist consensus understands antebellum literature in terms of *what* it achieved, not *how*. Restoring some of that *how*, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* suspends the nationalist conclusion that made so much sense between the Civil and Cold Wars. In its place, the book supplies the careful plotting of a metropolitan-provincial antagonism between literary London and the much smaller literary centers that radiated around it. Doing so, this work defies the nationalist parameters that organize the study of nearly all literature, whether British, American, postcolonial, or comparative. Scholars simply do not tend to think in these terms. *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* accordingly shines a bright light onto one of our critically blindest spots.

Rezek's study arrives at such counterintuitive conclusions in part because it's working with book history. Joining the growing number of scholarly monographs that draws on this interdisciplinary field, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* sifts through authorial correspondence, reconstructs publication records, and collates editions (turning up some fascinating details along the way—who knew, for example, that there was no single first American edition of Irving's *Sketch Book*?) The study is also peppered with smart and detailed close readings, of the kind that grant more traditional literary critics their professional chops. But this study's real project is to coordinate such thematic close readings with interpretations of the historical and sociological conditions under which the texts on which we perform those readings were first brought into the world as books. The study effectively uses more than one method and, indeed, uses each to cross-check the conclusions of the other. *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* accordingly provides coordinated and truly interdisciplinary insights—no small feat in a world where “interdisciplinary” is too often a polite way of saying “eclectic.”

Another way in which this study achieves its conclusions has to do with its relatively tight historical focus. The argument of *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* is deeply bound to the historical terrain between 1800 and 1850 in which it works. Fifty years does offer a slightly wider swath of time than some of the other book-history inflected studies in other periods—such as Jonathan Beecher Field's wonderful *Errands into the Metropolis* (2009), which covers about 1642-1662, or Meredith McGill's indispensable

American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting (2003), with its narrow focus of 1834-1853. At the same time, however, in *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* one wonders about the portability of the argument beyond the first half of the nineteenth century. Is what Rezek calls “aesthetics of provinciality” (14)—an ideological position that absorbs and accommodates the Romantic-era paradox by which great literature is expected to be both universal and particular—something that obtains beyond 1850, when this study leaves off? While I am convinced that we who read and study Anglophone literatures live with the legacy of such a paradox, I am left with questions about whether it begins or ends at precisely the points that *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* identifies. Thus, a circumscribed historical focus, which enables Rezek to bring forward his evidence and his claims with extraordinary clarity, also presents one of the few potential limitations of this study.

However, the book’s larger argument stands. Scholars who take this study’s conclusions seriously will have to reconsider whether the nation—British, American, Irish, Scottish, or otherwise—can really continue to be the organizing principle for the teaching and study of literature. At the very least, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* makes clear that the nation is not a uniform field. Nation-ness does not saturate its territory evenly, and some corners of the national domain may be working much harder to materially produce and mediate the nation than others. Our literatures can seem now to be inescapably national, but another world was once possible. If we adopt the implications of this work in all its challenge to critical orthodoxies, another world may be possible again.

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