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Patrick Colm Hogan’s *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* is an exemplary addition to the growing interdisciplinary field of cognitive cultural studies, whose proponents examine literary and cultural artifacts through the lenses of neurobiology, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, philosophy of mind, evolutionary psychology, and related disciplines within the biological and social science spectrum. Hogan himself is one of the leading theorists of cognitive cultural studies, thanks to groundbreaking books such as *The Mind and its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (2003) and *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (2003). These works have emphasized universal narrative structures and patterns of thinking which undergird literary and cultural artifacts.

*Understanding Nationalism* continues in this vein, beginning with three full chapters on recent cognitive science which provide useful backgrounds for the chapters that follow. These later chapters identify three narrative prototypes that characterize nationalist thinking, describing how and why various cultures adopt one or more of these prototypes at specific historical moments. Hogan first explains that he has chosen to focus on nationalism because of its increasing relevance to a modern world fractured by
territorial, political, and ethnic conflicts. He then delineates three narrative prototypes through an exhaustive, cross-cultural survey of nationalist fiction and political writings (to get a sense of how wide-ranging Hogan’s survey is, see the list of literary works on pages 198-99, n18).

The most important of these prototypes is heroic narrative, which Hogan describes as the “default form for nationalism” (16). Heroic structure involves “a sequence of events bearing on the usurpation of in-group authority and … threats posed by an out-group” (12). The typical conclusion of such a plot is the triumph of the national in-group over its opponents, though the details vary considerably across cultures. In chapter five, Hogan links together three different heroic nationalist plots from widely disparate contexts. First, he examines the King David story in the bible and shows its importance for Israeli nationalism, especially the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Hogan then analyzes the blockbuster American film *Independence Day* (1996) in order to highlight its distinctively American features. He suggests that American heroic nationalism depicts the United States as a protector of world freedom, even when invasion of other nations is involved (as in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). The transition between Israeli and U.S. nationalisms meshes because the King David story briefly surfaces in *Independence Day* (a Jewish character named David helps defeat the aliens using a humble laptop computer, in a neat parallel with the David and Goliath story).

Hogan shows how patriotic films like *Independence Day*, combined with George Bush’s martial rhetoric in his September 11 speeches, primed Americans for two wars in the Middle East. Bush’s speech achieved cognitive resonance through its use of heroic
emplotment, pitting freedom-loving Americans against a vaguely defined but malevolent enemy. Hogan shows how ostensibly non-narrative works like speeches often fit predictable narrative patterns. The chapter exemplifies a distaste for politicians who manipulate citizens’ patriotic sentiments while secretly harboring their own reasons for going to war, including “control of oil, establishing a right to invade enemy nations, etc.” (187n). Insofar as Hogan implies that a nation’s reasons for going to war are rarely compelling enough to justify the killing of innocents he may be undermining the scientific neutrality that ostensibly underwrites the cognitive approach.

A second nationalist prototype, the sacrificial narrative that emerges during times of famine, military defeat, or devastating plagues is the subject of Hogan’s sixth chapter. Fundamentally religious, this kind of narrative involves national sacrifice to placate an angry God. In the “purgative” form of the sacrificial plot, a nation identifies an internal enemy supposedly at fault for the country’s problems (304). In the most extreme cases, this enemy is targeted for extermination as in Nazi Germany’s “final solution.” Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf (1925-6) is, thus, a particularly devastating example of a purgative sacrificial plot. By contrast, Mohandas Gandhi’s lectures on the Bhagavad Gītā (1926) exemplify such a “penitential” sacrificial plot enjoining practices such as fasting, chastity, and non-violence to further nationalist aims, rather than resorting to violence. The juxtaposition of Hitler and Gandhi in this chapter is unsettling, to say the least. Gandhi suffers somewhat in the comparison, turning out to be more eccentric and militaristic than most people would imagine.

The next chapter concerns the nationalist resonances of romantic emplotment. According to Hogan, Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” from Leaves of Grass (first
published in 1855) furthers nationalist aims. Whitman depicts a “pansexual” love between the poet and various different types of Americans -- male, female, black, white, northern, southern -- in order to unite a United States riven by Civil War (312). The second half of the chapter turns to anarchist Emma Goldman to show how a romantic plot can alternatively further anti-nationalist aims. Goldman’s writing figures the government as a blocking parent who gets in the way of its citizens’ individual interests, particularly their search for romantic love. Goldman also rejects heroic emplotment and militarism in general.

This engrossing book reads more like a good novel than an academic tome, despite being formidably well-researched. But Hogan’s fascinating interdisciplinary approach seems likely to generate controversy, as demonstrated by the responses to a panel on “Cognitive Cultural Studies” at the 2011 Modern Language Association annual convention in Los Angeles. At this event, Hogan, Lisa Zunshine, and other panelists spoke about recent work in the field, addressing such questions as “is cognitive historicism possible?” More skeptical audience members questioned why panelists turned to the sciences when literary studies has its own theoretical approaches, including psychoanalysis, deconstruction, etc. (never mind that these theories originated outside of literature departments).

But skeptics have also voiced more serious objections to the methods of cognitive criticism. For example, some note the potential anachronism of applying current scientific models to texts that are decades or centuries old. Others justly question whether universal theories of mind can adequately address cultural and historical variation. To be sure, Hogan argues here and elsewhere that attention to universal cognitive patterns is a
necessary complement to historicist criticism and that historicist and cognitive approaches to literary works need not be mutually exclusive (see pages 5-8). In practice, however, it remains unclear how this balance between historical sensitivity and cognitive universalism should be achieved. The most serious objection to cognitive criticism is that it is only as useful or accurate as the most recent scientific discoveries. Historians of nineteenth-century science have revealed numerous errors that only became evident in hindsight. Take, for example, now-defunct diagnoses like hysteria and racist practices like craniometry, which were once embraced by the scientific mainstream.

*Understanding Nationalism* is so engaging that I temporarily put aside these reservations and marveled at what Hogan could do with the imperfect tools at his disposal. His ideas about human thought patterns and nationalist movements -- although overwhelmingly pessimistic – felt intuitively correct to me because they matched my own informal, unscientific observations of human behavior during times of war (I regret not having a more objective means of testing Hogan’s conclusions). For this reader, the segments on twentieth- and twenty-first-century American film and politics, particularly in chapter five, are more compelling than the sections on Gandhi’s *Bhagavad Gītā* lectures and the King David story. Perhaps twenty-first-century Western science can tell us more about contemporary U.S. film and politics than about ancient or non-Western texts. Alternatively, this unevenness may reflect Hogan’s political preoccupations, which center on twenty-first-century wars and their causes and consequences.

Overall, *Understanding Nationalism* is an excellent volume for anyone interested in why people go to war. It should be of interest to Romanticists and Victorianists examining British imperialism and its consequences: for example, Irish nationalist
movements, the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, and the Anglo-Boer wars. Although Hogan
does not address these phenomena at length, his analysis of the cognitive structures that
undergird nationalism could usefully be applied to historical and literary studies of the
nineteenth century. Hopefully, non-academics will read this book as well: especially
policymakers, the general public, and anyone else who plays an important role in
deciding for or against war. Hogan’s sensible, highly readable, and scientifically
supported arguments about nationalism deserve to be heard by the widest possible
audience.

Biographical Notice:

Anne Stiles is the author of Popular Fiction and Brain Science in the Late Nineteenth
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