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American Biography, the History of Books, and
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By

John Jude Garcia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2014

American Biography, the History of Books, and the Market for Nationalism, 1800-1855

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by John Jude Garcia

Abstract

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by

John Jude Garcia

Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Mascuch, Chair

This dissertation combines literary study, cultural history, and critical bibliography to examine the development of a specific literary genre in the early United States, from the Federalist era to just prior to the onset of the Civil War. I argue that the social and cultural impact of biography occurs not solely through literary narrative but also through the materiality of the printed book. Ideology, in other words, is transmitted through literary artifacts via what we traditionally define as the “text,” but textual meanings are mediated through paratexts, book bindings, paper, typography, presswork, page design, and illustration. Using archives, documents, financial records, and correspondence related to the early U.S. book trade, I recover the social thought of printers and booksellers as they understood the role of the printed book in fostering cultural nationalism. Combining the methods of book history and bibliography with conceptual frameworks developed by Benedict Anderson and Pierre Bourdieu—on the imagined political community and the field of cultural production, respectively—the dissertation focuses throughout on the specificities of primary source materials to make a methodological contribution to literary and cultural history.

From 1800 onwards the printed book was a media technology that could unify Americans through the collective reading of national biography, even as the specificities of book formats and the range of printed materials subtly reinforced class divisions within American society. With the rise of urban environments and the penny press in the 1840s, I further demonstrate that biographical pamphlets tied to P.T. Barnum’s American Museum helped foster a critical discourse within U.S. print culture about the rise of a culture industry. Furthermore, by 1848 many biographical texts combined narrative with illustration to shape public perception regarding the U.S.-Mexican War. Using publisher’s records along with evidence of the subscription book trade, I argue that texts about the Mexican War linked the sites of combat and military life in Mexico with American cities, small towns, and the private domain of the bourgeois home. I conclude with two investigations of how biography helped structure modalities of literary authorship in the mid-nineteenth-century. In *Israel Potter* (1855), Herman Melville wrote a literary biography that was both a meditation on the challenges and failures faced by authors in a depersonalized publishing environment as well as a coded reflection on how his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne used the genre of biography to secure political and financial success through writing the *Life of Franklin Pierce*. My second investigation of authorship involves the publication history of Evert A. and George Duyckinck’s *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1855), a literary anthology that offered authoritative capsule biographies of writers in the American tradition.

For
Zoe,
John and Cyn,
and my parents

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Chapter 1: Introduction—The Grand Treasury of Lives

*“The biographer performs the function of a side show Barker for living attractions and of a preacher of human insignificance.”*¹

In *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche defines monumental history as the activity of consecrating great deeds within a trans-historical temporal schema in which the past survives into the present; such narratives strive to propagate “the belief in the affinity and continuity of the great of all ages.”² Nietzsche’s insight connects the practice of history with its political implications, where use of the past helps instill a sense of present belonging to social entities such as the nation. The result is a view of the nation as a kind of invented tradition communicated through language, however, in this dissertation I argue that social identities such as nationalism partially ride on the back of material artifacts. “Tales of the lives of founders and saints,” writes Edward Shils on the relationship between material culture and tradition, “form a supporting system of traditions of physical artifacts, actions, and patterns of symbols” which uphold and maintain popular beliefs, including nation-ness.³ Such was the overt cultural project of American biography in the first half of the nineteenth century whenever it narrated the lives of the founders: to assert the continuity of distinguished Americans with the qualities of virtue that arose in antiquity for the purpose of establishing nationalism in the present. As I argue in this dissertation, from 1800 onwards the ideological core of American biography remained in tension with its mode of dissemination—print capitalism—which exerted a centrifugal pressure that threatened, at every moment, to expose the concept of the “distinctive” or “virtuous” American to the demands of the market. The project of instilling virtue as the didactic glue to hold together the ideological core of the early American republic through retelling the lives of exemplary political figures, in other words, was threatened by biography’s tendency to transform historical persons into figures of popular culture. In time, that threat became a premise of the genre, and popular culture became the medium through which printed lives of American nationals were disseminated to readers.

In its own way, the genre of biography represents a key site for understanding how literature interacted with the emergence of a popular culture. The genre was wildly popular in the wake of the hundreds of lives of George Washington written and published after his death in 1799.⁴ By 1815, the Philadelphia magazine the *Port Folio* would declare, “our country may be called the grand treasury of lives—or to use a favorite, though perhaps not strictly proper word—biographies.”⁵ As Scott Casper has demonstrated in his recent survey of biography and culture in nineteenth-century America, “biography could be found nearly everywhere a reader looked, and readers were enthusiastically looking.”⁶ According to another historian of the genre, more historical biographies were published in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century than any other literary genre except the novel.⁷ In magazines and newspapers, chapbooks and pamphlets, book-length monographs and multivolume collections—biography earned a massive readership in the early United States, and, despite Scott Casper’s valuable survey of the genre, we still know relatively little about biography’s particular place in early national and antebellum America, especially in comparison to the many volumes of

¹ Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (1961), 131

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (trans. 1980), 15-16

³ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (1981), 96

⁴ W.S. Baker, *Biblioteca Washingtoniana: A Descriptive List of the Biographies and Biographical Sketches of George Washington* (1889)

⁵ “Fag” (pseudonym), “A New Plan for Writing Lives,” *Port Folio* (Feb. 1815), 195

⁶ Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1999), 1

⁷ Gordon Marshall, “The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies: Three Case Studies” (1979), 29

scholarship devoted to the early American novel. Casper's *Constructing American Lives* surveys the entire nineteenth century, but in the process leaves many unexplained gaps. His book, which is foundational for my own project, admirably recovers the broad cultural norms that made the genre particularly useful for instilling morality and virtue in the early republic. Identifying a central tension between biography's didactic and exemplary functions and the genre's development of interiority and character, Casper proceeds to argue that biography by mid-century becomes increasingly defined by new protocols for historical scholarship as well as new conceptions of personhood in which individualism became central for understanding personality. But there is much more to be said about biography in the early United States.

In order to rectify this gap in literary history, the present study devotes chapter-length investigations to four specific sites in which biography played a crucial role: ideologies of nationalism in the early American republic, popular culture and urban entertainment in the antebellum period, public memory of the U.S. war with Mexico, and modalities of literary authorship at mid-century. Every chapter in my dissertation examines a site that falls beyond the scope of Casper's study or investigates, through a combination of book-historical and literary analyses, key texts worthy of closer inspection such as Melville's *Israel Potter*. In Chapter Two, I examine the material form of early U.S. biography and the modes of distribution of printed books so as to account for aspects of the genre Casper overlooks. His claim that "hierarchies within the genre" emerge in the mid nineteenth-century fails to account for hierarchies in the format and design of books that are already taking shape around 1800. Chapter Three focuses on popular culture (a topic largely overlooked in *Constructing American Lives*) through the figure of P.T. Barnum. Chapter Four establishes the link between war and popular biography through the specific example of the U.S.-Mexican War, again a topic missing in Casper. Chapter Five explains how different modes of biography inspired Melville to write a version of "biography, in a purer form" that distinguished the literary and aesthetic qualities of imaginative writing from mid nineteenth-century American biography's tropes and narrative structures. Finally, in the epilogue I demonstrate how E.A. Duyckinck used capsule biographies of famous American authors to construct a canon of American literature by mid-century.

Tying together each of these instantiations of American biography is my emphasis on the history of books and publishing as a methodology to ground literary history within larger structural frameworks of production, dissemination, and reception; furthermore, I demonstrate throughout the dissertation how close bibliographical analysis of primary sources—extending at times to the minute level of paper, binding, type, and collation—can uncover new fields of interpretation that would otherwise go unnoticed if we relied solely on modern editions or digital reproductions. In this introduction, I will proceed to introduce the main themes and primary concerns of the dissertation by way of unpacking each conceptual grouping embedded in its title: American Biography, The History of Books, and The Market for Nationalism.

1.1 American Biography

Arguably the first major project of compiling the lives of British Americans goes back to Cotton Mather, whose *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) gave capsule biographies of the important statesmen, divines, and persons of note in colonial New England, including lives of every graduate of Harvard College up to the time of Mather's writing. Over the course of the eighteenth century, many sermons were delivered and published that accounted for the lives of colonial Americans, however, book-length monographs published in the colonies are relatively rare in the first half of the century. Most notably, in 1749 Jonathan Edwards published his *Account of the Life of the Late Mr Reverend David Brainerd*, an unusual text in that it went through several editions over the course of the eighteenth century. Like Mather's *Magnalia*, which could only have been published in London due to

its ambitious length, Edwards's biography is instructive for understanding how the British publishing trade conditioned biography's mode of dissemination in the eighteenth century. In 1748, the Boston publisher Daniel Henchman first advertised Edwards's text through a subscription proposal; garnering nearly two thousand subscribers, the work sold well in colonial New England, but it gained an even greater transatlantic audience through the agency of John Wesley, who printed a redacted version of Edwards's text for British readers hungry for Brainerd's story of evangelical zeal to Native Americans. Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and other eighteenth-century biographers are part of a different configuration of books and readers than my object of inquiry; by starting with the post-national United States, I begin with an emerging national system of cultural production which drew upon English precedents even as it carved out its own techniques for distributing print in the new nation.⁸

My study therefore does not assert any continuity with these earlier biographical texts. Instead, I define "American biography" as narrative histories of the lives of specific American nationals printed in the wake of the establishment of the United States. As I explain in Chapter Two, very few lives of national figures were published in book form prior to the market for national biography that was spurred by public interest in George Washington's death in 1799. Instead, biographies of persons of note in the new nation were more likely to appear in periodicals such as Mathew Carey's *Columbian Magazine*. To be sure, volumes of biography such as Jeremy Belknap's *American Biography* (1794) did appear in the early national period, but not in response to any particular public event in the ways that the Washington biographies did.⁹ However, by 1797 the itinerant bookseller Mason Locke Weems began to recognize that a market for popular reading was emerging, and he linked readers' tastes to the opportunity to profit from the paucity of published biographies of American nationals, particularly in the South, where most books were still largely being imported directly from England.¹⁰ In collaboration with Mathew Carey and other publishers, Weems would pioneer American biography as a major category of popular literature in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Other publishers took note, and soon the *Port Folio's* joke about a "grand treasury of lives" would become a reality. By 1830, the *New York Mirror* diagnosed this reading phenomenon as "biography mania."¹¹ The genre's popularity continued through the rest of the period covered in my study. If publishers' catalogues are a reliable measure, then biography rivaled the novel in its significance; in 1853, George P. Putnam's *The Book Buyer's Manual* included more biographies (approximately 480) in its list of titles for sale than the sections devoted to fiction (approximately 380) or voyages and travels (also around 380).¹² In an earlier 1836 book catalogue Putnam had compiled for a New York bookseller, biography took pride of place as the first category listed in the catalogue. As "works of fact," publishers and readers agreed that the genre had an

⁸ As James Green has demonstrated, "the rise of American publishing was one of the fruits of independence, but paradoxically the trade was built on a foundation of British books." Green, "The Rise of Book Publishing," *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (2010), ed. Gross and Kelley, 75.

⁹ In Chapter Two, I also demonstrate how Belknap's collection was the product of a prior magazine serialization.

¹⁰ Green, "Rise of Book Publishing," 88

¹¹ *New York Mirror* (May 15, 1830), quoted in Marshall, "Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 29. Of course, one major precondition for such "biography mania" was the availability of historical documents from the American revolution and colonial era through the agency of new historical archives and societies, including historical magazines published by these societies; see Alea Henle, "Preserving the Past, Making History: Historical Societies in the Early Republic" (Ph.D. dissertation, 2012).

¹² *The Book Buyer's Manual. A Catalogue of Foreign and American Books, in every department of Literature, Science, and the Arts, with a Classified Index* (1853). Obviously, catalogues can only give us a rough estimate of publications in a given year, and they do not account in themselves for readership, however, they do point towards the prevalence of different generic classifications.

immediacy and a cultural value that “works of the imagination” could only attain through more indirect means.¹³

My discussion of American biography seeks to understand the emergence of a particular literary genre in relation to nationalism as a cultural project. In “What is a nation?” Ernst Renan understood nationalism as a “soul, a spiritual principal,” albeit one that “presupposes a past” in terms of present understanding.¹⁴ Following the work of Benedict Anderson, who argues that the newspaper and the novel helped inculcate nation-ness as an imagined political community, scholars have paid specific attention to the nation as a product of discourse, textual relations, and ideology.¹⁵ However, language alone is not sufficient to constitute modern nationality. By focusing on the material form of books and the system of relations through which print culture operates within my time period, I take issue with Homi Bhabha’s assertion that “to encounter the nation *as it was written* displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language.”¹⁶ As I will explain in the section of this introduction that focuses on book history as a methodology, Bhabha’s theoretical investment in the discursive production of the nation fails to account for the important difference between a linguistic code and what Jerome McGann has termed the “bibliographical code.”¹⁷ As objects, books themselves can signify attachment to the nation, and American publishers understood their products in exactly this way. Renan’s belief in an animating force behind any adherence to the nation emphasizes a relationship to the past, to history. Such a relationship is accomplished not only through ideology but also through concrete practices and materialities; to relate print culture to nationalism, as I do in this dissertation, requires probing the entire materiality of print, extending at times to the level of paper and binding as well as to the practices of the publishers, printers, and booksellers that make print culture possible. Along these lines Eric Hobsbawm has suggested that we understand even a national sense of “pastness” and historicity as not solely discursive, rather, the sense of heritage and tradition associated with the nation is best understood as a “set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, [these practices] normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”¹⁸ In the post-revolutionary United States, the kinds of ritualization that Hobsbawm associates with invented traditions took the form of parades, orations, toasts, and other manifestations of a festive political culture.¹⁹ Even during the early stages of the American Revolution public displays and performances of independence made the United States more than a textual phenomenon.²⁰ Print culture extended and mediated these embodied scenes of oratory and public participation, but it did so unevenly in the first decades of the new nation.²¹

In terms of literary analysis, I’m interested less in narrative structure per se than I am in those moments when biographical narratives raise to the level of discourse both (a) their own material construction and (b) the role of print culture in shaping public consciousness. This emphasis emerges from practical experience in the archive and from my own theoretical

¹³ [George P. Putnam], *Leavitt, Lord & Co.’s Catalogue of Books in the Various Departments of Literature* (1836)

¹⁴ Ernst Renan, “What is a nation?” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (1990), 19

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983); Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” 2

¹⁷ Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (1991)

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” 1

¹⁹ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (1997).

²⁰ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (1993).

²¹ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (2009).

investments. Having read a substantial number of biographies that were published in the first half of the nineteenth century, I can assert that the narratives themselves tend to not be very interesting from a purely literary standpoint—most are hackneyed accounts, and openly so. While some early national biographies did indeed function as “literary” texts—Weems’s 1809 edition of the Washington biography and his 1815 edition of the *Life of Gen. Francis Marion* certainly stand out in this regard—the majority of the Washington books and other publications of this ilk are decidedly derivative. Consider the genre of the campaign biography that became increasingly important for American political culture after 1824—most of these texts are hastily written and compiled from other published sources. Or, to take another example, consider the cheap biographical pamphlets that told the lives of P.T. Barnum’s freaks and performers; as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, many if not all of Barnum’s ephemeral texts were likely written by hack writers. In terms of the history of genres, the biographies treated in my dissertation count as “literature” according to the definition of that term in its own historical specificity: literature for my period can denote many different genres of culturally-valued writing. In our current frameworks of literary study this definition of literature usually goes by the name of cultural production.

Having read countless nineteenth-century American biographies, I feel confident in drawing a distinction between *literature* as a historical category (for authors, publishers, and readers in the period I investigate) and *the literary* as a contemporary label in our own critical moment for a certain kind of text that elicits and rewards close attention to verbal detail and aesthetic questions of form and structure. Of all the writers and texts discussed in this dissertation, the representative candidates for *literary* biography in this critical sense are Weems’s 1809 *Life of Washington*, his 1815 *Life of Francis Marion*, P.T. Barnum’s 1855 autobiography, and Herman Melville’s 1855 *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*—but my judgments for the literariness of these authors are based upon differing rationales, and another scholar might arrive at different judgments when identifying exemplary texts. For Weems, the literary emerges from his playful (and self-aware) transformation of historical persons from the American Revolution into figures of popular culture, along with his purposeful adaptation of the conventions of the novel to the biography of his two American heroes. As I demonstrate in Chapter Two (in a hitherto unknown letter written by this bookseller), by 1809 Weems consciously began to think about his biographies in relation to what he termed the “historical novel,” and incredibly he arrived at this generic term before Walter Scott became popular with American readers. On these grounds—along with the wide dissemination of his texts over the course of numerous editions—I argue that Weems is a major early nineteenth-century American author, and that he occupies a distinct position in American literary history in the period between Charles Brockden Brown and James Fenimore Cooper. And because Weems published numerous other pamphlets and moral tracts in the early nineteenth century, many of which trade on the image of the American Revolution to appeal to potential readers, he arguably inaugurates an American version of what David Brewer has claimed as the emergence of the afterlife of the literary character that took place in eighteenth-century England.²² Brewer’s study of how famous characters acquired a kind of autonomy of their own through unauthorized sequels and reader appropriations, what he terms the making of a “social canon” of recognized figures through the invention of a kind of literary commons of stock characters, has implications for how American popular culture in Weems’s day appropriated historical persons tied to the American Revolution and turned them into literary characters. Most obviously, Weems’s biographies of Washington and Marion exemplify one form of this transformation, but the phenomenon permeates many other texts written by Weems. In *God’s Revenge Against Dueling* (1821), the character of Marion enters into this pamphlet’s discussion of the

²² David A. Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825* (2005)

dangers of the dueling ritual and delivers a rousing speech.²³ Such entrances and exits from popular texts, far from merely being instances of intertextuality, are in fact evidence for an evolving social canon of characters who were one means by which I argue the nation was rendered an effect of the print market.

P.T. Barnum's many appearances in American print culture represent a later version of this fascinating history of circulation and popular reception. Chapter Three argues that this broader history of circulation lies behind the text we know as Barnum's autobiography. Though we are accustomed to think of autobiography as a self-evident literary genre, nineteenth-century Americans did not automatically think of an individual life narrative (where the "I" of discourse corresponds to the author on the title page and the subject of the narrative) in the same terms as we do today. The very word "autobiography" was a recent invention in the period that concerns me.²⁴ The first half of the nineteenth-century U.S. is therefore a period where autobiographical discourse is still *emerging* out of a more capacious generic understanding of biography. Chapter Three accordingly positions one of the most infamous—and widely read—autobiographies of the nineteenth century in the context of a culture of biography that extended beyond the printed book to include pamphlets, newspapers, and other print ephemera. *The Life of P.T. Barnum* in my analysis is best read in two ways: in the context of Barnum's career-long use of biographical pamphlets to promote his performers, and as a meditation on the rise of the culture industry in nineteenth-century America and print culture's role in constructing public identities. As I show in Chapter Three, Barnum partly gained notoriety in urban entertainment through a distinctive literary style, but paradoxically that public style could also be voiced through hack writers (most likely writers under the showman's employ). Several "pseudo-autobiographies" of the Barnum persona were published around the time of the 1855 *Life*, and the intertextual links between these texts suggest that even Barnum's autobiography may in fact be a product of a collaborative process. In the 1855 *Life*'s initial reception many reviewers wondered if Barnum had actually written the book—which he most likely did—but at least one commentator further speculated that a paid editor or "literary hack" was in charge of putting the whole text together.²⁵ By arguing that the Barnum persona is an example of what could be termed *social authorship*, a collaborative ventriloquism of a distinctive voice, Chapter Three accordingly makes the case that literary scholars and book historians interested in authorship—which often serves as an ideological screen to cover a more complicated story of collaborative cultural production—could benefit from a closer look at the Barnum archive and its relationship to nineteenth-century print culture and commercial entertainment.

For Melville, I argue that the "literary" in *Israel Potter* is partly an effect of that text's implicit critique of a campaign biography written by Melville's friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. Because *Israel Potter* opens with a meditation on "biography, in a purer form," I argue from a close reading of that text's narrative and figurative strategies for its importance as a key text in what by the twentieth century would be called the biographical novel. As I demonstrate, *Israel Potter* defines itself against the popular market for biography, against Hawthorne's sinecure, and against the conventions of the historical novel as practiced by Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper. In short, the "literary" emerges from *Israel Potter*'s negative relation to the conventions and tropes of American biography, including those used by Mason Weems. Whereas Weems's texts deserve closer scrutiny because of their reflexive and playful approach to what Anderson has termed the formation of an imagined community, Melville's biographical novel distinguishes itself as "literary" through the text's reflexive deconstruction of the canon of American national biography that begins with Weems. In this sense

²³ Mason Locke Weems, *God's Revenge Against Dueling, or, The Duellist's Looking Glass* (1821)

²⁴ Robert Folkenflik, "Introduction: The Institution of Autobiography," *The Culture of Autobiography* (1993)

²⁵ Joseph Gostwick, *Hand-Book of American Literature: Historical, Biographical, and Critical* (1856), 267

Israel Potter's critical reflection on biography as it functioned in the first half of nineteenth-century America justifies the periodization that organizes my dissertation. I find 1855 to be a convenient and reasonable stopping-point because *Israel Potter* represents an important stage in the relationship between biography's place in popular culture and the emergence of American literary narrative. At the same time, 1855 is also the occasion for Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck's *Cyclopedia of American Literature*. With this anthology, as shown in the concluding section of the dissertation, literary editors combined capsule biographies of American authors with representative literary excerpts to canonize a particular formation of American literary history. For the Duyckincks, biography was a tool for constructing the public image of authorship, while for Melville biography represented a popular literary genre whose tropes and conventions could be exploited for particular literary purposes. Biography, in other words, was both a resource for authors even as it in turn could be used to structure what it meant to be an author.

In addition to working through the "literary" contours of specific biographical texts, my project also distinguishes itself from previous scholarship in its attention to the mixed-media dimension of biography, the representation of life through texts and images. Chapter Two establishes how publishers and critics understood biography as a kind of image-making, from Charles Brockden Brown's interest in biography as a kind of verbal portraiture to Weems' insistence that printed lives must include interesting frontispieces. More broadly, my historical period requires attention to illustration insofar as the early nineteenth century represents a major shift in the circulation of images in print; between 1800 and 1855 visual texts became more accessible and more easily reproducible than ever before. Whereas Weems and Mathew Carey insisted that engravings were a crucial ingredient for their popular biographies, since the image helped sell the book, by 1815 publishers began to plan lavish book projects that essentially amounted to illustrated biographies of American statesmen. Chapter Two surveys these major projects (by Joseph Delaplaine, John Sanderson, and James Longacre) and demonstrates how the priority of the image in these texts subordinated what we would call the textual or linguistic code to a more capacious evaluation of a literary artifact in terms of its entire material structure, from the level of engravings and typography to paper, presswork, and binding.

New technologies of image making had a decisive impact on how American biography was presented in printed books. As Georgia Barnhill and others have demonstrated, the year 1825 marks a technological dividing line in the social history of images. The older engraving techniques were quite expensive in terms of the labor involved. The second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a marked shift in technology and practices; steel replaced copper in terms of the material used to produce engravings, stereotyping improved the durability of woodcuts, and new processes such as lithography and wood engraving entered the scene.²⁶ Chapters Three and Four, on P.T. Barnum and the U.S.-Mexican war, respectively, engage with this transformed visual field. In some cases, images became central to different biographical publications, and while not every book in the genre included an image of the biographical subject, most did, and the new visualizing technologies significantly enlarged the possibilities for American biography. And once daguerreotyping entered American culture, it became possible to capture life-like images of people in ways that would further shape many kinds of biographical publications.

For instance, in 1850 the famed daguerreotypist Mathew Brady issued a serial publication entitled *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*. Issued in twelve individual parts, the folio publication utilized a large format that featured lithographic reproductions of daguerreotypes of national figures such as Zachary Taylor, Henry Clay, and John Calhoun. Each issue in the series contained a single lithographic portrait accompanied by a two-page biography. As Wendy Wick Reaves and other art

²⁶ Georgia B. Barnhill, "Transformations in Pictorial Printing," *An Extensive Republic*, 422-440

historians have noted, Brady's publication was directly inspired by earlier projects by Joseph Delaplaine, John Sanderson, and James Longacre, who used steel engravings of portraits to affix an image to the biographical narrative.²⁷ Brady's introduction of photographic techniques added yet another layer of remediation into the possibilities of the genre. Since each daguerreotype was a unique object, and therefore not reproducible (unlike Henry Fox Talbot's method of using paper prints), older techniques of illustration such as mezzotint as well as the recent spread of lithography in popular prints had to be used to translate daguerreotypes into a medium that could be reproduced and sold on the print market as well as in books.²⁸ Brady's *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* therefore represents a technological advance over Longacre's use of steel engravings in *The National Portrait Gallery*. But as I argue most forcefully in Chapter Two, the construction of a national pantheon through illustrated biography involved a contradiction on two levels. First, in terms of content, the category of distinction conferred on each biographical subject began to lose its distinctiveness, as the canon of heroes expanded into a series. Critics in early U.S. magazines raised these concerns; periodical reviews of Longacre's *National Portrait Gallery* and Joseph Delaplaine's *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished Americans* argued that distinction lost its distinctive qualities when applied *en masse*. Biographical collections, in other words, ran into the problem of homogeneity on the level of narrative content, as the repetitiveness of these capsule biographies minimized the text's claim for individual distinction. Secondly, in terms of bibliographical format, distinction and homogeneity also could be set at loggerheads in terms of the prestige invested in printed books. These patriotic books addressed themselves to a unified American national imaginary even as their commodity form bespoke class differentiations. There's a disjunctive contradiction, in other words, between rhetoric and material form in texts such as Brady's *Gallery*. Although the linguistic codes in these books interpolate readers into a homogenous social entity, status and exclusion operates in the values indexed by the material form of the books themselves. Attending to the book as an artifact and comparing variations in books enables me to parse the ideological work of a genre with greater precision than a solely "linguistic" focus on the text, and by integrating the textual message into the bibliographical code my analysis adds a class-dimension to Anderson's thesis so as to show that homogenization and differentiation can occur at the same time in American national biography.

Brady's *Gallery* exemplifies these developments, as homogenization and differentiation were both at work in Brady's take on the illustrated biographical collection. Even though the daguerreotypist's medium insisted on the unique, obdurate materiality of the photographic image, the act of remediation—since the photographs were copied and redrawn onto the lithographic stone—brought the activity of the lithographer's hand into the field of vision. Once the lithograph was arranged and put to press the original image was therefore subject to a remediation that introduced subtle changes in the depicted image. Brady's series, in this sense, mixed the specificity of photography with the second-order interventions of the artist and the printer. The format and design of Brady's *Gallery* accordingly introduced homogeneity through the activity of making each portrait similar to the others in the series. As Alan Trachtenberg observes, purchasers of the series looking for distinctive likenesses would have been confronted by an unexpected homogeneity: "each image [involved] an oval medallion centered on the page, each face turned at a three-quarters angle and centered in the opening, each figure gazing toward the distance [...], and most clad in plain

²⁷ Wendy Wick Reaves and Sally Pierce, "Translations from the Plate: The Marketplace of Public Portraiture," *Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes* (2008). See also Alan Trachtenberg, "Illustrious Americans," *Reading American Photographs* (1989).

²⁸ On the use of mezzotint and lithography to reproduce early photography, see Michael Leja, "Fortified Images for the Masses" *Art Journal* (Winter 2011). "In the 1840s and 1850s," Leja writes, "daguerreotypes were at the bottom of an image food chain (not to be confused with a status hierarchy). They were consumed by ravenous media such as painting and printmaking, which sought ways to display and publicize the photographs contained within them" (82).

republican garb of dark coat, waistcoat, stiff white shirtfront, collar and scarf.”²⁹ On the level of page design, in other words, uniformity and homogeneity were the effect of deliberate stylistic decisions. The arrangement of images on the page in this sense could have their own ideological and rhetorical effects with biographical texts. In Chapter Four, I show how the use of wood engravings in printed books from the Mexican War could subtly imply violence and aggression in some actors while also deflecting attention away from other participants in the war. Drawing upon Roland Barthes’ early writings on photography, I’m interested in the ways denotation and connotation happen simultaneously, and the role of images in biography is an example of how connotative effects can occur in popular literature in ways that exceed a purely linguistic code. By focusing on the page, or on the openings in books in which two pages are displayed together, I argue throughout that the meaning of words is interdependent with questions of graphic design and arrangement.

Understood as a mass cultural phenomenon (especially as the genre develops after 1840), popular biography does more than simply reflect changing understandings of human subjectivity, rather, the texts themselves can offer their own reified images of life. In this sense my study of the genre departs from Casper’s *Constructing American Lives*, which largely charts the history of the genre in light of preexisting concepts of subjectivity and personality. To be fair, Casper is attuned to changing notions of moral agency over the course of the nineteenth century, and he synthesizes scholarship on the market revolution and other large historical factors as they form the backdrop for changing concepts of American individualism. However, the language and material form of biography may itself have shaped perceptions on what human agency could look like for American readers. In making this argument I am indebted to an older theorist of biography, Leo Lowenthal, whose work with the Frankfurt School of social theory focused more closely on Anglo-American print and popular culture than his contemporaries Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin once speculated that mass culture inaugurated a transformation in the nature of experience, particularly in urban settings. “Around the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted in the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public.”³⁰ Lowenthal applied these ideas to Anglo-American print culture. For Lowenthal, this interpretation of commodity fetishism means that biography starts to reify what it means to be a person, with deleterious effects. In popular biography, as Lowenthal writes, the individual is “nothing more than a typographic element, a column heading which winds its way through the book’s plot, a mere excuse to attractively arrange a certain body of material.”³¹ Although Lowenthal’s work rarely extended to the material dimensions of printed artifacts, he certainly pioneered critical attention to print culture and publishing as a structuring framework for the sociology of literature. I’m especially indebted to his view of the biographical subject as a “typographical element,” a figurative expression that aptly captures the ways print reifies and instrumentalizes persons for rhetorical effect; the following chapters on Mason Locke Weems, P.T. Barnum, and Melville’s *Israel Potter* all discuss versions of the reification of persons while sharing a common insistence that not narrative alone but the arrangement of printed marks on the page transforms historical persons into instrumentalized figures of popular culture. While he may have exaggerated too much in claiming American popular biography uses narrative to instill a “reign of psychic terror” in readers, Lowenthal’s attention to American biography’s canonization of the success story helps to unpack, as I do in Chapter Three, the appeal of P.T. Barnum’s biography in a

²⁹ Trachtenberg, “Illustrious Americans” 46

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (trans. 1999), 336-7

³¹ Leo Lowenthal, “Sociology of Literature in Retrospect,” *Literature and Social Practice*, ed. Desan, Ferguson, and Griswold (1988), 22

period when the market revolution had dislocated many persons and raised troubling connections between success in the market and fraud. My debt to Lowenthal's critical insight in how the genre reifies personality takes two forms in my study. First, the Barnum archive of freaks and stage performers demonstrates how norms of personality could be manipulated for profit in ways that further marginalized and maligned African-Americans, South Americans, Chinese peoples, and women.³² In this sense a specific arena of popular culture used biography in ways that relate Lowenthal's theory to issues of gender and racialization. Second, in *Israel Potter*, Melville's critique of biography and its conventions involves an increasing depersonalization of his protagonist, particularly in scenes of labor. Here the reification of personality is grounded in concrete material conditions that can only be diagnosed through literary narrative. As a counterpart to Barnum's pamphlets, Melville shows that the problem of passivity in biographical representation was decidedly less one-sided and socially determined than Lowenthal makes them seem, even as the Lowenthal's account of biography's ideological function is essentially correct when applied to nineteenth-century American mass culture.

1.2 The History of Books

"Books refuse to be contained within the confines of a single discipline when treated as objects of study," Robert Darnton explains in his field-defining essay "What is the History of Books?"³³ Alternatively known as book history, *histoire du livre*, *Geschichte des Buchwesens*, history of the book, bibliography, or print culture, this interdisciplinary field is essentially concerned with the social history of communication as mediated through writing (manuscript and scribal cultures also fit within this framework, and contemporary scholars use book-historical methods to examine born-digital documents). Though the field can be expanded in many ways, it primarily examines printed books since the time of Gutenberg, but scholars in the field have increasingly recognized that print is always part of a larger media ecology.³⁴ In the model of the "communications circuit," Darnton proposes a schematic framework for thinking through what he terms the "life cycle" of a text as it moves from author-creators (the stage of initial conception and composition) to publishers, printers, binders, booksellers, shipping agents, and readers; each node in the cycle can be isolated for the purposes of analysis, and of course larger social influences ranging from intellectual and cultural forces to economic, political, and legal spheres can shape the circuit at any given stage of the process. Familiar themes and objects of inquiry in the history of books include the histories of authorship, trade, publishing, censorship, the geography of books, copyright and intellectual property. Book history has grown increasingly influential in literary studies, and in early American literary history it has shaped a generation of scholarship in the wake of Cathy Davidson's study of the rise of the American novel, *Revolution and the Word*.³⁵

³² I discuss Barnum's racism and ideologies of gender in Chapter Three, focusing on Joice Heth, Tom Thumb, and Jenny Lind. For an example of Barnum's commercialization of South Americans, see the biography of the so-called "Aztec children," *Illustrated Memoir of an Eventful Expedition into Central America* (1860). For an earlier take on China in a similar vein, see *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese* (1850).

³³ Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" *The Kiss of Lamourette*, 135

³⁴ For early American studies, this trend is evident in *Cultural Narratives: Textuality and Performance in American Culture before 1900*, ed. Gustafson and Sloat (2010); see also *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Cohen and Stein (2012), and *Colonial Mediascapes: Sensory Worlds of the Early Americas*, ed. Cohen and Glover (2014).

³⁵ Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986). Earlier twentieth-century scholarship that attended to these issues often went under the guise of studies of the rise of authorship and publishing, most notably in the work of William Charvat; I have benefited especially from Charvat's *Literary Publishing in America, 1800-1870* (1959). Given that every chapter in the dissertation examines book-historical issues in early U.S. literature, I refer readers to the footnotes of each particular chapter for secondary scholarship that has informed my understanding of American

As I demonstrate throughout the dissertation and argue most pointedly in Chapter Two, my approach to this field departs from many studies of print culture in the dissertation's particular emphasis on bibliography as a mode of analysis. Even Darnton's communications circuit, it can be argued, tends to prioritize agents (authors, publishers, readers) over the books themselves—resulting in a curious irony in which this field-defining essay minimizes, somewhat, the object of inquiry signaled by its title. What, then, would the history of books look like if written from the point of view of the object? Every chapter in my dissertation proposes, albeit with different emphases and points of reference, that the history of books is enriched when *bibliographical* techniques are used in historical inquiry. Drawing on the insights of the great Renaissance scholar W.W. Greg, the dissertation is accordingly an attempt to put into practice what Greg once termed *critical bibliography*, the study of the material transmission of literary documents across their various instantiations.³⁶

Bibliography has itself evolved into several subfields over the course of its development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Enumerative bibliography* is the listing of books according to some system or organizing principle, such as a catalogue of every edition of Shakespeare's plays published in the seventeenth century, or a list of every title sanctioned by the Stationer's Register. *Historical bibliography*, by contrast, inquires into the evolution of printing techniques and other factors in the production and dissemination of texts, including the histories of authors, readers, and publishers. These macro-social concerns are what many scholars usually have in mind when thinking of book history. *Analytical bibliography* examines the material evidence in the books or artifacts themselves. Binding structures, collation formulas, paratextual materials (prefatory matter as well as supplementary material such as publisher's advertisements), paper and presswork, and tipped-in documents such as maps or other engravings serve in this methodological approach as the evidentiary basis for a process of logical inferences the bibliographer can make to reveal the practices and structuring constraints that go into the making of any bibliographical document.³⁷ These tiny details in the artifact can be a way to infer evidence of the broader structural formations of the trade covered by historical bibliography. Analytical and historical bibliography, in other words, are closely related: we can study how the publishing trade produces books and puts them in circulation, and the books themselves can be studied for how they bear witness to the trade and the evolving histories of technological and practical determinations involved in cultural production.

The study of books as material artifacts, along with the inferences drawn from those artifacts, enables the book historian to relate literary texts to larger social frameworks in ways that depart from Marxist theories of reflection or the New Historicism's interest in giving a thick description of a text's cultural context. I wish to emphasize that this kind of inquiry needn't reduce the significance of any literary text to its publication history, instead—as I demonstrate most forcibly in Chapter Five—understanding the specificities of particular editions and the conditions of textual circulation within a specific milieu can be a way to ground a text's significance and open up

book history. The most authoritative overview of this topic is the recently completed five-volume *A History of the Book in America*. I've relied extensively on volumes one (*The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*), two (*An Extensive Republic*) and three (*The Industrial Book*) throughout the dissertation.

³⁶ W.W. Greg, "What is Bibliography?" *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 12 (1913); idem, "Bibliography—An Apologia" *The Library* 13.2 (1932)

³⁷ This description of the different kinds of bibliography is drawn from Terry Belanger, "Descriptive Bibliography," *Book Collecting: A Modern Guide*, ed. Peters (1977). In "A New Model for the Study of the Book," Thomas Adams and Nicholas Barker offer a critique of Darnton's communications circuit that also informs my discussion; the term "bibliographical document" is theirs. See Adams and Barker, "A New Model for the Study of the Book," *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, ed. Barker (1993). For a general overview of bibliography, see Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (1972). For an overview of the methods of analytical bibliography with an emphasis on collation, see Fredson Bowers, *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (1949). On the use of inferences in bibliography, see D.F. McKenzie, "Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing-House Practices" (1969).

productive interpretive questions. Herman Melville's *Israel Potter*, for instance, has long been one of the least studied texts by this author, however, Chapter Five demonstrates that this text's peculiar history of publication and unauthorized reproduction actually contributed to its receiving a wider readership than other Melvillean texts such as *Pierre* or *The Confidence Man*. Furthermore, by focusing on *Israel Potter*'s original magazine serialization and book editions, I demonstrate how the chapter divisions in the text as it was originally published point towards the significance of a crucial passage on the thematic importance of alienated labor. In this regard bibliographic analyses could in fact contribute to a Marxist interpretation, or, to adduce a different example from Chapter Two, knowing how to "read" the paper used in John Marshall's *Life of Washington* (1804-07) can open up a new cultural context: the book as status symbol and the problem of making luxury books in the early U.S. when the aspirations of publishers exceeded their practical limitations. Or, to invoke another example that did not make it into Chapter Two, knowing the difference between an "edition" (every copy of a book printed from the same setting of type) and an "impression" (the particular number of copies printed at any one time) can be a way to prove a text's popularity and value from the evidence in the books themselves. Weems's *Life of Washington*, for instance, has long been known to be a very popular book, but the number of actual editions is unclear. Many cultural historians and literary scholars have mistakenly assumed that the book's publisher, Mathew Carey, stereotyped Weems' text sometime in the 1810s.³⁸ This is in fact not true, as stereotyping had not become part of U.S. publishing practice at this time and wouldn't become standard practice until the next decade.³⁹ Having examined nearly two dozen copies of this particular title that were published between 1809 and 1840, I have concluded—based on demonstrable inferences from small variations in the type on the page—that Carey decided to keep Weems' *Life of Washington* in standing type sometime around 1814, and he likely kept the same setting of type intact until he sold the copyright to the Pennsylvania publisher Joseph Allen in 1826; Allen, in turn, struck off many different impressions of Weems' text from this same setting of type until finally having a new setting made in 1840 (this time, the book was finally stereotyped). From 1814 to 1840, therefore, each new offering of the book was a distinct *impression*, even as the *edition* remained the same for those thirty-six years. The sheer number of editions of a title, in other words, is not necessarily a reliable barometer of its popularity, but in this case inferences drawn from the books themselves may point to different kinds of evidence and different kinds of conclusions. If I am correct in inferring that Carey and Allen kept the book in standing type for thirty six years (a practice Carey is known to have done with his edition of the Bible⁴⁰), then we know how truly significant the *Life of Washington* was for the popular literature of the early republic, since the capital investment involved in keeping an entire book in standing type would be prohibitive for most publishers unless they had reason to expect the book to be a moneymaker.

"There are not, in the whole vast Library, two identical books," muses the narrator of the Jorge Luis Borges story "The Library of Babel."⁴¹ From the bibliographer's perspective, this

³⁸ Baker, *Biblioteca Washingtoniana*

³⁹ Michael Winship, "Printing with Plates in the Nineteenth Century," *Publishing History* (1983)

⁴⁰ Green, "Rise of Book Publishing," 98

⁴¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (1962). As Roger Chartier and Peter Stallybrass have recently shown, Borges held conflicting attitudes about whether texts were fundamentally material or immaterial. In one 1978 lecture, the author expressed some interest in the history of books, only to conclude that "I am not interested in the physical aspects of books." However, as Chartier and Stallybrass discuss, Borges long valued a specific edition of *Don Quixote* for its bindings, gilt titles, engravings, footnotes, and paratextual apparatus. "For Borges," they write, "the 'real' *Don Quixote* took the irreducible form of an illustrated edition [...] that he had read as a boy. The platonic view of the text is displaced by the visceral force of memory." Ireneo Funes, from Borges' remarkable short story "Funes, the Memorious," had among his many idiosyncrasies an absorption in the details of books to the extent that he remembered

translates into the methodological imperative that viewing multiple copies of a single text, and comparing those copies with one another, can attenuate some interpretations and close readings while also opening up new fields of interpretation. For the bibliographer, the availability of multiple copies for inspection thickens literary history. This is the major difference between the focus in *textual criticism* on establishing an “ideal text” (corresponding to the author’s intention) and *critical bibliography*’s insistence that every edition, impression, state, or distinct copy of a text is itself an instantiation that is part of literary history. And because we cannot assume that every instantiation has survived in archives, it pays to study publishers’ announcements (in Chapter Four, I do this with a publisher’s letter in which he searches for agents to sell books about the Mexican War), correspondence between booksellers and publishers (as in Chapter Two), the account books of publishers and printers, and book catalogues, including library records. Analytical bibliography understands this kind of data as *collateral evidence* that points to specific editions and instantiations that we may not encounter in person. If we think back to Mathew Brady’s *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, one striking piece of collateral evidence for how the text was sold to readers occurs in a notice included in the twelfth number of the series:

We have now completed the first part of our Gallery, with the 12th No. In anticipation of a desire, which has recently been expressed, in many quarters, by our subscribers and the public, we have the pleasure of announcing that, for several months past, we have had in preparation various styles of bindings for the Gallery, from one dollar up to one hundred dollars.

Brady’s firm experimented with the idea of offering different binding styles for the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* according to what level of opulence the customer was willing to pay. The hundred dollar edition, we are told, “will embrace the most superb Turkish morocco, with illuminated title, salutation, and valedictory pages, with the covers inlaid with richly illustrated national scenes, in gold and pearl, all secured by fine gold clasps. In this way, we can furnish a binding more superb, artistic, and magnificent, than has ever yet been seen in Europe.”⁴² This range of possible binding styles, from the opulent to the drab, complicates the kinds of claims we might make about Brady’s text. In his reading of the portrait gallery, Alan Trachtenberg references how one copy of the book has “Union Now and Forever” inscribed in gold leaf on the its vellum cover. Trachtenberg reads this statement as an emblem of Brady’s ideological project: “Combining panegyric with chronicle, the words and images comprise a single composite biography of an ideal citizen.”⁴³ Here we have a variation on Benedict Anderson’s thesis that print capitalism helps foster a sense of the nation as a homogenous social entity, however, Brady’s project of offering different binding styles according to what the customer is willing to pay complicates Trachtenberg’s idea of ideological cohesion. Rather than simply arguing for national union through a stable text, as Trachtenberg presumes, the range of bindings suggests distinct instantiations that may operate differently for different reading communities. The homogeneity of an ideological message, in other words, can be accompanied by differentiation and stratification through the values and prestige indexed by the print commodity. The shape, format, and presentation of a book therefore complicates the kinds of claims we can make about a textual message. Chapter Two locates one starting point for this aspect of commodity culture in the illustrated biographies published by

“the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had only seen once” (*Ficciones* 112). See Chartier and Stallybrass, “What is a Book?” *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship*, ed. Fraistat and Flanders (2013), 201

⁴² *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* (1850), no. 12

⁴³ Trachtenberg, “Illustrious Americans,” 49, 51

Delaplaine, Sanderson, and Longacre. These impresarios of the book treated the market for civic texts as an opportunity to meet consumers at the presupposed level of their ability to pay. Studying the history of the market for sumptuous books in America, in other words, gives us a glimpse into the formation of taste and relates literary texts to material culture. Importantly, these variables in the production of books can only be accurately identified through a combination of analytical, historical, and critical bibliography.

Book history in this grain is therefore intimately tied up with Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production. At any given moment in the history of books, Roger Stoddard has explained, "there is a hierarchy of physique, a consistency between form and content, which ranks or equates text genres, establishing the home territory of every published work."⁴⁴ I take this to mean that the material examination of books can uncover hierarchies of value within a culture that may, or may not, make their way into a book's linguistic code. There were hundreds of different biographies of George Washington that circulated in the nineteenth century, but each was produced in a particular way, and some texts fall into distinct clusters that correspond to differences in class or class aspiration; in Chapter Two, I demonstrate this distinction between an expensive biography of Washington written by John Marshall and a cheap one authored by Weems. Weems sold both titles on his bookselling tours. On this basis, I use the evidence of books of unequal value to argue for the emergence of a kind of literary field in the early nineteenth-century U.S.⁴⁵

Bourdieu's field of cultural production, when articulated in conjunction with the materiality of books and the practices of authors, booksellers, publishers, and printers, enables literary history to incorporate a sociology of taste and literary production with the objects (books) that elicit judgments and themselves offer judgments of their own. As Roger Chartier has argued, "the detection of socio-cultural differentiations and the study of formal and material devices, far from excluding one another, are necessarily linked."⁴⁶ While Bourdieu himself did not attend to the book as a material object per se, his analytical framework easily accommodates the knowledge of books that a bibliographer can bring to bear on the field of cultural production. To think of culture as a restricted sphere defined by oppositions, misrecognitions, and unequal exchanges, as Bourdieu does in "The Field of Cultural Production" and *The Rules of Art*, is always also an engagement with culture's objectifications; furthermore, as I try to show, an object-oriented literary history is a way to reconstruct aspects of the field that may not be evident in the literary text. Book history therefore adds a necessary concreteness to the literary field, and the emphasis in Bourdieu on the different forms of capital in turn adds depth to book history's communications circuits. Darnton's model of print circulation emphasizes the functional role played by specific agents, but in suggesting that "printed books generally pass through roughly the same life cycle," his schema risks ignoring the unequal access to capital that engenders hierarchies within the field of print. Since, as Peter McDonald has made clear, "texts are radically situated for Bourdieu" and "the first task of any

⁴⁴ Roger E. Stoddard, "Morphology and the Book from an American Perspective" *Printing History* 17 (1987), 13.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu first elaborates his notion of the field in "Intellectual Field and Creative Project" (trans. 1969). In this early investigation he explicitly states that the field model can be adapted to different historical periods, and his own focus on eighteenth-century Britain in this essay suggests the model is adaptable to early America. The essays in *The Field of Cultural Production* (trans. 1993) expand on his theories of culture, particularly by relating fields to the habitus. The relations between habitus and field are examined at greater length in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (trans. 1990). In *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (trans. 1996), Bourdieu offers an in-depth application of his methods to nineteenth-century French culture. It is important to note that Bourdieu insists throughout that the analysis of fields only makes sense in light of the habitus, which he defines as a kind of practical or embodied knowledge that is neither fully conscious to agents while not being entirely unconscious. Chapter Three grapples with the habitus in my analysis of P.T. Barnum's creative project.

⁴⁶ Roger Chartier, "Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader" *Diacritics* (1992), 55

cultural analysis is not to interpret their meaning but to reconstruct their predicament,” a text’s predicament may be conditioned by unequal access to prestige and consecration.⁴⁷ Chapter Two demonstrates that a text’s reputation could in fact be compromised by material factors such as inferior paper and poor bindings. Those material factors, as I also show in Chapter Two, could become factors in a text’s critical reception insofar as reviewers could pinpoint these material details as a way to delegitimize a specific cultural project. As the example of John Marshall’s multivolume *Life of Washington* amply attests, the character of the publisher could be damaged by a poorly made book. And when Marshall’s publishers advise Weems to try to convince Marshall’s readers that the paper in the books was not quite so bad, we get a glimpse into the role of theatrical presentation and the power of interpretive conventions for conditioning literary reception. My analysis of booksellers and colporteurs therefore bridges aspects of Bourdieu’s field of production with the materiality of the book, since their position as intermediaries for literary culture gives them a feel for books as objects and bearers of cultural capital.

The field of culture, like Darnton’s communications circuit, emphasizes relations over individuals (for Bourdieu, this is the difference between a substantialist perspective of agents versus viewing agents as radically situated and conditioned by all of the elements at play in a given cultural formation). Mediating figures—booksellers like Mason Weems or impresarios like Barnum—can exert influence in the field insofar as they may have what Bourdieu terms a “feel for the game” that artists and authors may lack. Through such “equivocal figures,” he writes, “the logic of the economy is brought to the heart of sub-field of production-for-fellow-producers; they need to possess, simultaneously, economic dispositions which, in some sectors of the field, are totally alien to the producers and also properties close to those of the producers whose work they valorize and exploit.”⁴⁸ Colporteurs, theatrical agents, and other public exponents of popular culture do not simply transmit texts from authors to audiences, they also comment and valorize in the act of transmission, and in certain contexts may in fact produce markets and publics through their endeavors. Focusing on literary middlemen, or mediating agents (to use a less gendered term), changes the terrain of what we mean by literary culture, enabling us—in Darnton’s formulation—to “get the feel of books as artifacts.”⁴⁹ This is because booksellers have an ingrained orientation to view their wares not simply as commodities but as objects to show off and display. Chapters Two and Four especially grapple with my hunch that American nationalism may in fact be partly an invention of the booksellers. Like the notion of a public as theorized by Michael Warner, the nation could in this sense be a metapragmatic projection, an effect of specific modes of address and their material instantiations.⁵⁰ If nationalism is mediated by print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson and others have established, then it follows that the material forms of printed artifacts are an essential part of that mediation.

1.3 The Market for Nationalism

“The construction of the nation through the rediscovery of its past,” writes David Bell in a recent study of French nationalism, “animated new cultural forms ranging from the museum to the souvenir shop to the postage stamp.” “Of course,” Bell concludes, “much of this supposed rediscovery amounted to pure invention.”⁵¹ Inventing the people and the nation as mutually

⁴⁷ Peter D. McDonald, “Implicit Structures and Explicit Interactions: Pierre Bourdieu and the History of the Book” *The Library* 19.2 (1997), 113

⁴⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 39

⁴⁹ Darnton, “The Forgotten Middlemen of Literature,” *The Kiss of Lamourette* (1990), 152

⁵⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005)

⁵¹ David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (2003), 202

constitutive, integrated units did not come about naturally in the early U.S. “If they were to be a single national people with a national character,” Gordon Wood has argued with regards to the new nation, “Americans would have to invent themselves, and in some sense the whole of American history has been the story of that invention.”⁵² Geographic distance and a poorly-integrated union of states were challenges to national identity. During the period of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, the annexation of land through the Louisiana Purchase (1803) further exasperated concerns that spatial separation would undermine national sovereignty and cohesion. In response, Jeffersonian Republicans emphasized principles over adherence to a locality as the basis for national character. Such a relaxed attitude over what defined the American character, according to Wood, made “ideology a more important determinant of America’s identity than occupying a particular geographic space.”⁵³ The power and efficacy of print—newspapers in particular were lauded for overcoming spatial distance—was therefore continually asserted throughout the early national period as the glue to hold the nation together. However, as Trish Loughran has recently argued, these claims for the power of a print public sphere to act as a national medium existed more in rhetoric than in reality.⁵⁴ At the time, according to Loughran’s argument, such claims legitimized federal interests. By implication, recent scholarship on the American public sphere may have made the mistake of taking this print ideology at face value, thereby overemphasizing a Habermasian model of impersonal communication at the expense of local realities.⁵⁵

Following Loughran’s intervention, the current challenge in the scholarship of these issues centers on questions of specificity and timing. Chapter Two adds to our knowledge of early national print culture by focusing on an overlooked literary genre as it was disseminated by booksellers between 1800 and 1840, precisely the period that Loughran’s analysis largely skips over. No one would argue that the “public sphere” or “print capitalism” were unimportant for the early American republic, instead, we need analyses that are more finely attuned to how print culture actually functioned as a corrective to the abstract model of public culture proposed by Habermas. Distinguishing between biography’s ideological contents (the linguistic code) and its status as a commodified expression of labor (the bibliographical code) allows me to tell a story about how printed books were imagined by their producers as fetish items and souvenirs of national attachment. Reader marginalia from the many editions of Weems’ biographies, including German language translations of the Washington book, confirm that many valued his little books as souvenirs of their political attachments (Figure 1). Focusing on producers rectifies what I see as an idealizing tendency in Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in which a notion of simultaneity created by print, supposedly held across disparate peoples, helps bind those peoples in a kind of sociological organism. Since there is no way to establish when such a simultaneity of national consciousness actually happened, it follows that particular attention to the uneven development of print markets is a way to rethink Anderson’s thesis from the ground up. Although Anderson acknowledges that book historians are aware that behind “print capitalism” lay a whole world of printers, booksellers, and publishing firms, his analysis never reaches down to this level of specificity; as a result, print culture works as a kind of *deus ex machina* in *Imagined Communities*, a reified construct that overlooks complications within the publishing trades.

⁵² Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty* (2009), p.41

⁵³ *ibid*, p.371

⁵⁴ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*

⁵⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans 1989); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1992).

1830. September 18^{ten}
Dieses Buch ist ein Theil der
Politischen Bibel der vereinigten
Staten von Nord America, und
enthält das Leben, die Thaten
und Meinungen Washingtons
des Moses der Neuen Welt,
und gehört mir
Benjamin Schreiter.
und ist Freunde der Frey-
heit gewidmet zu lesen,
um sich zu belehren und
zu erbauen;

Figure 1. Fly-leaf marginalia to *Das Leben des Georg Washington*, a German translation of Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington* (Baltimore, 1817). Translation: "This book is a part of the political bible of the United States of North America and contains the life, deeds, and opinions of Washington, the Moses of the New World, and belongs to me, Benjamin Schreiter." Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

My argument throughout the dissertation is that historical bibliography adds a concreteness that Anderson's theory otherwise lacks, and that book history, when combined with Bourdieu's field of cultural production, accounts for how the market for print produced a variety of literary artifacts in which the nation becomes an object of attachment and desire. By focusing on biography my study

also clarifies a point of confusion in Anderson's interest in literary narrative. In the second edition of *Imagined Communities* (1991) Anderson suggests that the "inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography" are in "structural alignment" with what he terms nationalist memory.⁵⁶ But we do not get an explanation of the precise nature of this structure and the modality of the alignment between this kind of text and collective memory. In effect, Anderson presumes that biographical narrative works in the same way as the novel. In the revised 1991 edition Anderson concludes *Imagined Communities* with a cryptic section, entitled "The Biography of Nations," in which he argues that biographical narratives, like the newspaper and the novel, are "set in homogenous, empty time."⁵⁷ In the *Life of Gen. Francis Marion*, Mason Weems introduces his protagonist with the following expression of simultaneity:

One thousand seven hundred and thirty-two was a glorious year for America. It gave birth to two of the noblest thunderbolts of her wars, George Washington and Francis Marion. The latter was born in St. John's parish, South Carolina. His father was a Carolinian, but his grandfather was a Huguenot or French Protestant, who lived near Rochelle, in the blind and bigoted days of Louis XIV.⁵⁸

Here Weems seems to mix a modern conception of simultaneity (two men born in the same year, proleptically belonging to the same nation-to-be) with a kind of evangelical providentialism (1732 as America's "glorious year"). From the very first page Weems invites readers to imagine their national identity through a narrative that mixes religious fervor with Enlightenment rationality (at various points in the biography, Weems' Marion speaks with a rational authority that stands in marked contrast with the irrationality of his Tory enemies). What's missing, however, from Anderson's interest in biography's narrative strategies is an account of the mode of dissemination. In the section on "The Biography of Nations," Anderson conflates biography with the novel when it is really the *dialogic* relation between the two genres that supports, while also complicating, his understanding of literary narrative. As I show in Chapter Two, Weems understood his biographies as truthful but also deeply indebted to novelistic techniques, from narrative structure to issues of voicing, dialect, and characterization. However, the distinctive contribution that the archive of American biography contributes to Anderson's story is the materiality of the genre. Anderson's argument for biographical narrative as articulating nationalism limits itself to discussion of the linguistic code, which runs the risk of ignoring the bibliographical codes that the agents of print capitalism themselves valued in their publishing schemes. We need to pay attention to the whole book, in other words, and not just the verbal text.

American Biography, the History of Books, and the Market for Nationalism accordingly seeks to rectify the absence of a bibliographic foundation (historical, analytical, and critical) for Anderson's *Imagined Communities* by focusing on the specific example of the early United States. Because publishers seem to be especially loquacious in their shared belief that books can act as signifiers of national affiliation, it stands to reason that one origin of American nationalism could be found in the activities of booksellers and publishers, from the early republic onwards. While I in no way claim to have provided a comprehensive overview of the early U.S. book trade, my study does sketch out some of the terrain through which booksellers imagined a market for nationalism through the genre of biography. Anderson's claim that "provincial creole printmen played the decisive historic role" in

⁵⁶ *Imagined Communities*, xiv

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 204. Anderson's understanding of time is indebted to Walter Benjamin's well-known essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

⁵⁸ Weems, *The Life of Gen. Francis Marion* (1815), 7

accomplishing the task of creating an imagined community needs this kind of historical specificity to combat his conflation of the novel with biography.⁵⁹ And as my invocation of Mathew Brady and P.T. Barnum demonstrates, not just booksellers and printers but other agents such as artists and showmen (artists as showmen, showmen as artists) sold their own versions of nation-ness in the wake of the rise of the penny press and the invention of new visualizing technologies like the daguerreotype. Every chapter in my discussion argues for a medium-specific analysis of the material text as a way to draw out the intricacies of the story I want to tell; at the same time, the inherently collaborative and competitive nature of the communications circuit and the literary field necessitates a view of literary history in which authors are dependent upon other agents of cultural production for their texts to come into being and reach audiences. Even in the chapter on Herman Melville—the only section of the dissertation that focuses on a single text by a literary author—I show that publishers, unauthorized publishing firms in particular, were the condition of possibility for his text to reach a transatlantic audience, and each instantiation of *Israel Potter* thickened its meaning within literary history, making the book at once a fictionalized biography of a revolutionary war veteran as well as a kind of biography of Melville’s own frustration with the publishing industry and the ways it fashioned him as a particular kind of author against his own wishes. *The Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, a mid nineteenth-century literary anthology published by Scribner’s, closes my dissertation with a meditation on how the questions I ask about American biography offer a take on authorship as a collaborative process. This anthology’s treatment of Melville, particularly in the 1881 reprint of the *Cyclopaedia*, prove that literary anthologies in this period played a role in constructing what it meant to be an author. In a telling irony, the 1881 *Cyclopaedia* actually attributes a reprint of *Israel Potter* entitled *The Refugee* as a new novel by Herman Melville: “In 1865 he wrote *The Refugee*, a tale of the Revolution, which sketched the daring deeds of Paul Jones in the *Bon Homme Richard*.”⁶⁰ As I show in Chapter Five, Melville protested against this falsification of his authorship, but to little avail; in actuality, these reprints and misattributions circulated his writings in productive ways, broadening the scope of readers who may have otherwise not have encountered the text.

Last, a note on readers. My study emphasizes the production side of the communications circuit, with occasional attention to the role of periodical reviews in shaping literary reception. I have purposely not focused on the experiences of individual readers, although that would make for a fascinating study in itself. From an evidentiary standpoint, reading is one of the most difficult phenomena to track in book-historical research, largely because any single instance of reading (marginalia, or a diary that accounts for reading) is itself exceptional. Reading is by and large a fleeting activity which, although happening constantly, does not usually leave traces in the archive. The position I have adopted in the dissertation is to focus on the literary artifact itself—its material structure and the arrangement of marks on the page—to infer how reading may have occurred. My most interesting finding (based on publisher’s correspondence and literary reviews) is that some books in the period I study may not have needed a “close-reading” to function as important literary texts. Brady’s *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, along with the illustrated biographies that preceded it, are perfect examples of how biography operated in printed books through narrative modes that stayed on a somewhat superficial level, especially compared with the depth-hermeneutical model that literary scholars tend to impose on the novel. Though I have not engaged with this literature, some of the biographies discussed may be of interest to the recent critical turn towards “surface reading.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Imagined Communities*, 65

⁶⁰ *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1881), 638

⁶¹ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction” *Representations* 108.1 (2009)

Chapter 2: Printed Lives in the Early United States

2.1 Liberal Interiors and Elegant Exteriors

The famous bookseller and popular writer Mason Locke Weems (1759-1825) hit upon a key component of the relationship between popular literature, the ideology of American nationalism, and the material aesthetics of the printed book when he insisted to his publisher the “*eye is all, all, all*” for striking the curiosity of readers.⁶² Weems viewed the new American nation as an untapped market for patriotic books from his many travels through the South and the mid-Atlantic. “The Mass of Riches and of Population in America lie in the Country,” Weems told one printer, “There is the wealthy Yeomanry; and there the ready thousands who would instantly second you were they but duly stimulated.”⁶³ Stimulating crowds was Weems’s stock in trade, and he frequently harangued crowds in town squares and at public gatherings with speeches extolling the benefits of republican literature. He especially emphasized the pleasing appearance of the book itself. “I mean let but the Interior of the work be *Liberal* & the exterior *Elegant* and a townhouse and a country house a coach and sideboard of Massy Plate shall be thine,” he promised to the publisher C.P. Wayne, suggesting that booksellers must seize upon the moment when the buyer’s eye and hand met the seductive visual and tactile rhetoric of the book.⁶⁴ In numerous letters sent to Philadelphia publishers, Weems and his collaborators articulate how the book trade shaped American literature. In an era when booksellers were expanding the reach of the market, publishers experimented with making luxury books modeled after the achievements of European fine printing to be sold by subscription.⁶⁵ In the process republican literature ran into an intriguing contradiction wherein the ideological nationalism of American civic humanism (the “Liberal” interior of the patriotic books described above by Weems) was communicated in literary artifacts whose “Elegant” exteriors belied the new nation’s supposed rejection of the European cultural traditions they stigmatized as luxury and corruption.

Although the book historian John Bidwell once argued in an extensive publishing history of Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad* (1807) that early national printers “were too unsure of their resources, both artistic and financial, to undertake prestige bookmaking,” several did in fact attempt just that.⁶⁶ Starting with the slew of memorializing texts published after the death of George Washington in 1799, biography became a site where narratives of national heroes found expression in a variety of print formats, including ambitious works aspiring to the status of fine printing. In this regard the post-revolutionary United States offers a unique test case for the relationship between a particular

⁶² Mason Locke Weems to C.P. Wayne, 27 Sept. 1804, in Emily Skeel (ed.), *Mason Locke Weems: His Works and Ways* (1928), vol.2, 303. All citations from this collection of Weems’s letters hereafter cited as “Skeel.” Other letters not collected in Skeel written by Weems and his associates are housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, hereafter cited as HSP.

⁶³ Weems to Wayne, 10 Dec. 1802, in Skeel, vol.2, 255

⁶⁴ Weems to Wayne, 8 April 1803, in Skeel, vol.2, 264

⁶⁵ On the expansion of the American book trade in the early national period with an emphasis on Philadelphia publishing, see Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital* (1996). By 1800 publishers in the major U.S. cities were forming trade associations that explicitly linked a “national literature” to the book trade. For examples of literary nationalism in publisher’s announcements, see Mathew Carey, *Address to the Printers and Booksellers throughout the United States* (1801); Hugh Gaîne, *An Oration Delivered Before the Booksellers* (1802). As early as 1794 Mathew Carey took a nationalist position with regards to the book trade; see James N. Green, “Rise of Book Publishing,” *An Extensive Republic*, 85. On Carey’s political views, see Edward C. Carter, “The Political Activities of Mathew Carey, Nationalist, 1760-1814” (Ph.D. dissertation, 1962). For the origins of the subscription method of book distribution in colonial British America, see Donald Farren, “Subscription: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century American Book Trade” (Ph.D. dissertation, 1982).

⁶⁶ John Bidwell, “The Publication of Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad*” (1984), 338

literary genre (biography), the book trade, and the cultural imperatives of nation-formation.⁶⁷ Mason Locke Weems is central to the issues examined in this chapter because he was the most prominent book marketer in the early republic, a veritable “one-man peripatetic distribution system for the most expensive works published in America.”⁶⁸ My analysis of Weems and his collaborators addresses a major gap in Trish Loughran’s recent intervention in debates over the timing and scope of a “public sphere” in the early United States. Although Loughran makes a strong case for the absence of a national print culture in the post-revolutionary era, her account largely skips over the years between 1798 and 1830, precisely the period when Weems helped pioneer a market for print outside of the urban centers of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Taking my point of departure from Loughran’s suggestion that nationalism can be understood as “an affect that rides on the back of material objects,” I propose that shifting the frame of analysis to the activities of booksellers and peddlers helps to account for how print made the nation into an object of desire in the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹

Examining such texts in terms of their materiality as books, my thesis is that biography was a crucial genre through which nationalism was disseminated to American readers, but embedded within this generic problem is the tension between literary narrative and the book as a physical object. By incorporating some of the tools of analytical bibliography, my chapter seeks to raise the stakes for using book history as a lens to understand literary history, and along the way I show that part of biography’s importance as a carrier for popular nationalism derives from the significance that booksellers put upon their merchandise as souvenirs and mementos of national belonging. As biography moved from occasional publication in periodicals in the last decades of the eighteenth century to become a viable component of the early nineteenth-century book trade, cultural brokers such as Weems argued for the importance of the aesthetics of the material text as a primary feature of the reading experience. From 1800 to 1840 (the period surveyed in this chapter), a slew of publishers assumed the task of memorializing the American founders through biographical representation. Precipitated by an explosion of interest in Washington’s biography, publishers competed to supply a ready market for similar publications. By 1840, a range of commemorative books dedicated to the lives of the founders combined literary narrative with the book arts. These publishing schemes called forth theorizations of what made for a patriotic book, which in turn involved articulations and assumptions about what mattered most for readers when they exercised

⁶⁷ For a comprehensive survey of the U.S. book trade in the post-revolutionary period that emphasizes Weems’s contribution, see Green, “Rise of Book Publishing.” In *Revolution and the Word* (1986), Cathy Davidson discusses the origins of United States literature with regards to the practices of the early national trade, however, her emphasis on the novel obscures the popularity of other prose genres such as biography. In writing that “printers had their reasons, as businessmen and cultural leaders, for recognizing a possible market for a native literature,” Davidson articulates the importance of printers and publishers as literary intermediaries who shaped popular taste (20).

⁶⁸ Green, “Rise of Book Publishing,” 86, 87. Major studies of Weems I have consulted include: Lawrence Wroth, *Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study* (1911); Marcus Cunliffe, “Introduction” to *The Life of Washington* (1962); James Gilreath, “Mason Weems, Mathew Carey, and the Southern Book Trade, 1794-1810”; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims* (1982); Lewis Leary, *The Book-Peddling Parson* (1984); Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (1986); Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People* (1993); Hugh T. Crawford, “Images of Authority, Strategies of Control: Cooper, Weems, and George Washington” (1994); James N. Green, “The Cowl knows best what will suit in Virginia: Parson Weems on Southern Readers” (1996); Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives* (1999); Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father* (2006).

⁶⁹ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print* (2007), p.5. The peddling system, according to historian David Jaffee, ingeniously solved challenges of distribution faced by early national manufacturers by linking the industrializing Northeast region to the agrarian communities of the southern and western United States, in the process contributing to a national market; see David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (2010). On peddlers and the culture of the market, see Joseph Rainer, “‘The Sharper’ Image: Yankee Peddlers, Southern Consumers, and the Market Revolution” (2005).

their freedom to buy, borrow, handle, peruse, and (possibly) read a book.⁷⁰ Particularly in the case of the illustrated biographies I discuss in the second half of the chapter, biographical narrative would become annexed to the use of engraved likenesses and reproduced signatures. In some cases, these extra-textual aspects of the printed book held greater importance than the narratives themselves. Working closely from the evidence supplied by the archive, I argue that American biography depended upon the materiality of the book and its paratextual supplements to give readers a personal connection to the lives of the founders.

Weems' speculation about the need to stimulate readers points to a compelling contradiction. Just as the elite values embedded in the fine printing of a book potentially compromised the patriotic values of republicanism in the textual narrative, so too was the freedom to choose a book contradicted by Weems' belief in the compelling power of the book to capture and seduce its audiences. Patriotic reading, he repeated emphasized, required an "*ad captandum*" presentation, an assumption that wedded book production with the psychological power of impressions and sense stimuli espoused in Common Sense philosophy.⁷¹ Books aroused the sentiments, a lesson Weems learned from his knowledge of the English book trade that he ceaselessly tried to impart to his publishers. Furthermore, the bookseller occupied a pivotal role in convincing the reader that the qualities of paper and binding contributed to a book's value. As a result, at times the exchange of money for books could resemble a kind of confidence game, with colporteurs offering subtle nudges and insinuations to help influence a sale.

Book production in this period is part of a larger story about the development of an American consumer culture in the early nineteenth century.⁷² Popular reading was both an act of consumption and a medium for the dissemination of stories and ideas. The nationalist rhetoric embedded in American biographies has accordingly raised questions for some historians about their role in the ideology of liberalism, but in fact the element of design in these books could undermine the tenets of liberalism's emphasis on moral autonomy, particularly in the case of private reading, which throughout the eighteenth century had been understood as a psychological tool for what Jay Fliegelman has called "soft compulsion," the extrapolation of psychological response from sense events.⁷³ Weems' innovation on this familiar conceit about reading novels was to further embed the principles of soft compulsion into *the matter* of the text. As the eye and the hand engaged with the page, the material qualities of the literary object mattered for the reading experience. Weems and his customers accordingly valued the book as a physical object meant to be cherished in its materiality as well as in the pleasure of the reading, and in fact the two were not divorced, as the physical attributes of the book itself were a significant part of the experience. The material components of bibliographical format (along with the appeal of fine paper, engraved frontispieces, and typographical design) colluded towards a presentation of the physical book that amounted to a kind of reader seduction. The evidence for this theatrical element of bookselling can be found in the correspondence between publishers and colporteurs, where the latter regale the persons financially responsible for a publication with anecdotes from their bookselling tours.

⁷⁰ I say *possibly read* because, as Roger Stoddard has argued, not all books in fact need be read for the book to be a force in cultural history. Treated as commodities and as cultural artifacts designed by particular agents with specific goals and aspirations, the printed book can function as an index of larger issues in literary and cultural history. See Stoddard, "Morphology and the Book from an American Perspective" (1987). Cathy Davidson briefly considers books as status symbols in the early U.S., but without delving more deeply into the issue; *Revolution and the Word*, 29

⁷¹ Weems described his Washington pamphlet as "artfully drawn up, enliven'd with anecdotes, and in my humble opinion, marvellously fitted, 'ad captandum—gustum populi Americani!!!!'" Weems to Mathew Carey, 24 June 1799, in Skeel, vol.2, 120

⁷² On Weems's books in the context of early national material culture, see Jaffee, *New Nation of Goods*.

⁷³ See the chapter on "Soft Compulsion" in Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence* (1996), 35-62

2.2 Consuming the Civic Text

My argument about the importance of the material text for understanding patriotic reading takes issue with two tendencies in scholarly treatments of this period in cultural history. The first is a will to identify early U.S. civic texts as enabling a participatory form of liberalism. The second is what I see as a proclivity to ignore the material dimensions of books in historical analysis (of course, recent work in book history represents a move towards greater attention to books as objects, and my own work aims to contribute to these scholarly investigations). The problems associated with the first tendency (where the identification of ideology in a text overlooks the book as object as a form of mediation) can be rectified with the methodological shift that my own project seeks to contribute to. In order to more clearly delineate how my analysis contributes to growing interest in the relationship between American literary history and the history of the book, I will examine one recent analysis of Weems more closely before focusing on the particular archive of biographies that supports my major claim about biography's importance for early U.S. nationalism.

Washington's death in 1799 immediately led to a deluge of eulogies and public commemorations which inevitably became divided along partisan lines.⁷⁴ Portraits, books, and other souvenirs soon joined the fray, shifting the point of emphasis from public mourning to personalized ownership. Printed materials dedicated to Washington made up a corpus that the historian Francois Furstenberg has termed civic texts, which filtered ideas about citizenship and political life into popular reading that could reach the American public. For Furstenberg such texts were "the medium through which political ideologies were disseminated and nationalism forged." At the heart of this political message was a potent liberal strand emphasizing U.S. nationalism as the guardian of personal freedom. "Civic texts," according to this formulation, "helped to produce a nationalism that promoted consent to the constituted political authorities and a sense of mutual personal obligation." The cult of Washington codified this vein of nationalism as primarily affective, where reading about Washington's life became an act of love for the nation; "in short, by learning to venerate Washington as a common father—Americans could continually recur to the moment of founding, and *choose* to grant their consent, if only tacitly, to the nation."⁷⁵ Civic texts could therefore be understood as a way to inculcate ideas of nationalism to American readers, encouraging them to venerate the nation and, because of the voluntary nature of this veneration, to ascribe to the values of the morally autonomous individual that was the building block for the liberal order.

From a bibliographical perspective this historical analysis conflates consumption and reading with an act of political consent. From the point of view propounded by Weems, civic reading was understood as a "free" act that crucially depended upon minute instances of compulsion. This perspective articulated assumptions shared by publishers and readers. As the most important book marketer and peddler of the post-revolutionary era, Weems is a paradigmatic case for the point of contact between national feeling and popular reading, and, as my quotations from Weems's correspondence have already indicated, the materiality of the book was talked about in terms of seduction as opposed to reasoned choice. As a result, behind the patriotic message of these texts is a concerted effort to sell a commodity, a souvenir of the nation—along with an ongoing conversation between publishers about how book production appeals to patriotism. When Weems describes the need for eye-catching engravings and flashy advertisements for his *Life of Washington*, nation and polity are conceived in terms of an emerging market culture wherein the nation becomes an object of desire to be owned as memorabilia. From the point of view of the early national book trade such readers are not necessarily morally autonomous individuals but rather *consumers* following the

⁷⁴ On public celebrations as a form of political culture, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* (1999). On elegies of Washington as part of the literature of mourning, see Max Cavitch, *American Elegy* (2007).

⁷⁵ Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father*, 20-22.

pathways of desire. In this regard the relationship between liberal individualism and popular reading in the early United States is internally riven by the paradox that republican freedom, understood as “choice,” may in fact have been guided by the architects of the book. Of course, liberal ideology in this period is not necessarily opposed to consumption and could in fact accommodate popular approval of patriotic reading as a form of tacit consent, as Furstenberg admirably documents. However, there is still an important undertone of seduction and subtle appeal in Weems’s own description of his bookselling practice that contradicts the liberal principles he overtly aligns himself with. In short, the moral autonomy that is at the core of liberalism, as Furstenberg argues above, is undermined by the mode of dissemination of the civic texts that spread, and therefore anchor, that ideology.

Itinerant book peddlers like Weems helped shaped consumer desire in towns that had not yet developed a substantial print culture of their own.⁷⁶ Like other worldly goods, the arrival of new books in the hinterlands revealed the reader’s provincialism at the moment of provoking, and appearing to satisfy, consumer desire.⁷⁷ In this aspect Weems improved on the techniques of the Revolutionary-era bookseller Robert Bell, the “Providore to the Sentimentalists.” Like Weems, Bell approached the book trade as an opportunity to entertain the public; at the same time, his public displays carried undertones of seduction. In selling the literature of sensibility Bell theorized book consumption in ways that directly inspired Weems. Bell’s characterized his customers in one sales catalogue as desiring to be “enwrap’d in pleasure,” and gladly bid “Vain deceitful World adieu” to “Taste the Sweets of learned pleasure.” Sensibility, in other words, involved an abrogation of autonomy through one’s enthusiasm for literary entertainment. The seduction of the book purchaser’s literary sensibility lubricated the act of exchange and in the process blurred the difference between the exchange of money for books and the exchange of sentiments. Such “Food for the Mind,” Bell declared, “is equivalent to Money.”⁷⁸ These performative elements of Bell’s bookselling practice surely influenced Weems, who mentions Bell in several letters to Mathew Carey. “God bless me!” he tells Carey, “Who knows I may yet be the wandering Bell” of the American book trade.⁷⁹ (As in so much of Weems’s fantastic prose, here he insinuates and crafts tropes that extend his meaning: not simply more geographically mobile than Robert Bell, Weems is also a “wandering bell,” a pun that uses euphony to propose that Weems uses sound, as well as other fantastic stimuli, to draw in potential readers.) Drawing upon Bell’s sensationalism, Weems frequently informs his publishers their trade could be profitably augmented by appealing to psychological principles of shock and conditioned response. “Bold type and a flashy colour’d paper,” when used in advertising, has the power to command readers’ attention.⁸⁰ “Mankind love to be startled,” he writes to Carey in an 1815 letter.⁸¹ Fittingly, on entering any town on the occasion of a public gathering Weems would cry “Revolution! Seduction! Murder!” to prick the ears of potential customers. In Weems’ hands the mixture of sensationalism and sentimental appeals employed by Bell become a tool to fashion an American reading public.

⁷⁶ Jaffee, *New Nation of Goods*, 156

⁷⁷ I’ve adapted this locution about the peddler and consumer desire from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986).

⁷⁸ Robert Bell, *Bookseller, Providore to the Sentimentalists, and Professor of Book-Auctioneering in America, is just arrived in Philadelphia* (1778). Bell was the major Philadelphia printer in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, famous for his American piracy of Blackstone’s *Commentary on the Laws of England* as well as for printing Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. Mathew Carey purchased Bell’s printing press after his death in 1784.

⁷⁹ Weems to Carey, 5 Jan. 1802, in Skeel, vol.2, 221. As late as 1815 Weems continued to compare his ventures to Bell’s efforts; see Weems to Carey, 15 March 1815, in Skeel, vol.3, 120

⁸⁰ Weems to Carey, 13 Oct. 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

⁸¹ Weems to Carey, 6 Jan., 1816, in Skeel, vol.3, 149

Equating popular reading in this period with moral autonomy, as Furstenberg's analysis suggests, limits our understanding of readers as existing in a social vacuum. The experiences of the early American bookseller challenge this thesis and call for greater analytical precision. Weems's letters remind us that readers in the early republic were inevitably situated within a set of social relationships, as in the case of the South where personal relationships and the judgments of elites helped determine popular taste.⁸² Weems knew how to navigate these social webs to capture new readers. When he wasn't engaging purchasers directly, Weems sold his biographies of Washington and Francis Marion through intermediaries he dubbed "adjutants," influential persons whose recognition served Weems well when he made his appearances at court days or at horse races. "I am universally known," he informs Mathew Carey about Southern patterns of consumption, "and have many friends who will soon look for books only to me." As a mediating agent whose own practices had a profound effect on how books reached readers, Weems' reflections complicate—and in my estimation undermine—the argument for civic texts as a basis for the emergence of liberalism in the early nineteenth century.

My critique of the historiographical argument for popular reading is grounded in my own methodological insistence that the material text can give us insights into the relationship between literary culture and the book trade. Early United States publishers' own self-understanding of the importance of book design is one entryway into this story. Book formats, after all, carry the weight of associated values.⁸³ Format and design can imply cultural hierarchy.⁸⁴ Mathew Carey for instance argued in *The American Museum* that the large formats popular in European books were unsuited for a democratic polity. Octavos and duodecimos were democratic, folios and quartos reeked of the old regime.⁸⁵ Even the minute details of paper quality and binding mattered to readers in the early republic. Engravings such as maps and other illustrations further added to the value of a work of literature by appealing to the desires of particular audiences for sumptuous books.

Early United States biography was a literary genre situated between history and fiction whose cultural prestige rivaled both (and could even surpass both, for some readers). Unlike the novel, biography was more immediately related to the task of memorializing the heroes of the revolutionary war to the point of hagiography and propaganda. And unlike historical writing, biography could more immediately personalize readers' relationship to historical actors. This personal relation between reader and biographical subject depended upon the inclusion of engravings and other paratextual material, including reproduced signatures, to give an aura of veneration to the reading experience. Popular literature of this kind made the matter of the text of paramount importance, as Weems described to Mathew Carey as early as 1797:

Experience has taught me that small, i.e. quarter of dollar books, on subjects calculated to *strike* the Popular Curiosity, printed in very large numbers and properly *distributed*, [would] prove an immense revenue to the prudent and industrious Undertakers. If you could [sic] get the life of [General] Wayne, Putnam, Green &c., Men whose courage and Abilities, whose patriotism and Exploits have won the love

⁸² For a description of the structure of paternalistic relations that were still largely in place during Weems's bookselling trips to the South, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia* (1982)

⁸³ On book history's usefulness for identifying hierarchies of value, see David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (1996). On format, see G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Concept of Format" (2000); for a general historical overview of the meaning of format in book production see Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*.

⁸⁴ Stoddard, "Morphology of the Book"

⁸⁵ *The American Museum*, April 1791, 178

and admiration of the American people, printed in small volumes and with very interesting frontispieces, you [would] sell an immense number of them.⁸⁶

Even cheap books needed “very interesting frontispieces,” Weems argued, and elsewhere he insists that luxury productions such as John Marshall’s five-volume *Life of George Washington* (1804-1807) failed because of inconsistencies that emerged when books composed of different paper grades and binding styles were indiscriminately distributed as complete sets. Scholarship on biographical writing (as well as for personal narrative in general, including autobiography) in the early United States has tended to ignore the materiality of the book in their analyses of the cultural work of the genre.⁸⁷ By starting from the aspirations and intentions of the many agents in book history’s communications circuit, my analysis of Weems and his interlocutors reveals a publishing history of American national biography in which the book trade understood questions of format and design as essential mediations for the transmission of national stories. Beginning with the biographies of Washington, a series of publishing efforts sought to negotiate how patriotic literature could be both commercially remunerative and edifying for the public. For my purposes, the failures and mistakes made along the way by these publishers help illustrate how the printed book transmitted literary narrative in the early republic. Complaints about faulty binding or bad paper, for instance, became the occasion for booksellers to speculate about how literary artifacts might ideally gratify their publics. Although today we might find it difficult to believe that people would place so much emphasis on the book arts as a criterion for judging literary works, Weems’ customers could spot at a glance inferior paper or sloppy presswork and related these details to the overall value of a text.

2.3 Biography in Early U.S. Magazine Culture

The publishing history of U.S. biography is a subset of the larger story about the rise of the American book trade. Prior to 1800 American biography was infrequently issued in book form, and was more likely to appear in periodicals, particularly magazines. The last quarter of the eighteenth-century was in many respects the golden age of United States magazine culture. In a period when literary publishing was a risky undertaking, the magazine represented a viable format that could

⁸⁶ Weems to Carey, 22 Jan. 1797, in Skeel, vol.2, 72

⁸⁷ Scott Casper’s recent book on nineteenth-century American biography offers a “history of the book” approach to many of the same texts I discuss in this chapter. However, Casper’s use of book history in *Constructing American Lives* does not take into account the centrality of bibliography—the study of books as material artifacts—to book history. Casper’s analysis is strongest when reconstructing the tension between Samuel Johnson’s theories of biography as the account of private life and the classical republican emphasis on character as the public display of virtue. He details the popularity of biography through evidence provided by individual reader responses and through library records. For Casper, “the cultural history of a genre should involve texts, ideas, and experiences. It should include authors, publishers, critics, and readers” (3). But by not treating “texts” as artifacts, bibliography becomes the hole at the center of the analysis. Casper understands book history’s function within cultural history as the analysis of the “mechanisms of print culture” and “the conditions in which books are produced, distributed, and consumed at a given historical moment” (15). Book history indeed focuses on these concerns, but should also always have an eye to the material text.

Literary genres are in fact mediated by bibliographic format. Biographies in the early United States tended towards the octavo and duodecimo. Bindings, paper quality, and illustrations—what Weems calls the “exteriors” of the book—shaped the text and attracted readers. Publishers deliberated these paratextual features in assembling works of national biography.

My critique of Casper and other studies of American personal narrative amounts to the following: the “history of the book” approach has been taken by these American historians as a synonym for the study of “print culture,” at the expense of bibliography. As a result, these analyses tend to emphasize the structural role played by print in culture and society. Such macro-social formations, however, depend on specific material instantiations, and as a result should take into account the cultural meanings of format; see Daniel Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace* (1993); Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth* (1999); Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution* (2000).

assemble numerous occasional literary pieces, including poetry and excerpts from novels. In this respect the magazine has particular importance for recent scholarship that draws upon the work of Benedict Anderson, who emphasizes the ways print capitalism contributed to the formation of national consciousness.⁸⁸ Early American magazines were essentially anthologies. The genre's activity of assembling a whole magazine out of numerous fugitive pieces gave these periodicals their central place in early American literary culture.⁸⁹ This project of shaping a common literary culture helped make the magazine stand apart from early national newspapers, which were regarded as extremely partisan; magazines, in contrast, emphasized the disinterested position of the literary editor who stood apart from partisan activity in the higher goal of assembling the knowledge of the day.

Beginning from the premise that the early national magazine offered a model of a national literary culture that was not predicated upon the centrality of the novel, I argue that biography was a significant genre within this literary culture. Numerous American magazines included "biography" in their official titles to clearly indicate the genre's draw for curious readers. The inaugural issue of *The Columbian Magazine* began with a biography of the patriot Nathaniel Greene (written by Mathew Carey) that was "Embellished with his Portrait, elegantly Engraved." The inclusion of the portrait is doubly significant. First, the expense involved in having an engraving made expressly for the essay suggests that the magazine's editors wanted this lead essay to represent the distinction of their literary undertaking. Second, the gesture of prefixing an engraving to a biographical narrative is one that is repeated throughout the history of biography of Americans: both image and narrative are essential ingredients for a successful biography. "Interesting frontispieces," as Weems later suggested, are almost a generic requirement. The *Columbian's* representation of Nathaniel Green harkens back to early modern ideals of portraiture and self-fashioning. Greene's image is reflected, as if in a mirror, at the reader. Here the image of a life contains an implicit directive that the reader view himself in this portrait, linking the engraving to classical humanism's emphasis on the emulation of virtue. In this regard the first issue of *The Columbian Magazine* announces its project as doubly reflective: on the one hand, the inclusion of literary submissions from readers makes the periodical a reflection of its audience; on the other hand, the guiding hand of the editor ensures that this reflection is a mirror of virtue.

As Jared Gardner has demonstrated, it was not simply the magazine's anthologizing impulse that gave it cultural power. Just as importantly, what Gardner terms the magazine's "serial nature" allowed for stories to return again and again, contributing to a culture's repertoire. Fittingly, Carey's biography of Greene was published in two parts, the last appearing in the *Columbian's* second issue. We can infer from this publishing decision both a principle of expediency (making sure the second issue has continuity with the first) as well as an implicit editorial presumption that lives are stories that can be narrated serially. This latter idea would definitively shape *The Columbian Magazine* in later years. In 1788 Jeremy Belknap wrote an anonymous series for the magazine entitled "The American Plutarch" that included lives of colonials such as John Winthrop and William Penn. Although the texts were mostly written by Belknap, the *Columbian's* editors maintained the fiction that the biographies were submissions from the magazine's readers. "The merit of this part of the Magazine," states the *Columbian*:

⁸⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983); idem, *The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998). Focusing on magazines increases the historical specificity of Anderson's thesis.

⁸⁹ See Jared Gardner, *The Rise and Fall of the Early American Magazine Culture* (2012). As Gardner suggests throughout his fascinating study, attention to this periodical culture offers "a different take on early American literary history and foundations of an 'American' literary culture, one in which the novel and its rise is no longer the central story we tell" (38). My discussion of magazines also draws upon two older studies: Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (1930); Lyon N. Richardson, *A History of Early American Magazines* (1931).

gives a value to the whole work, and it must afford real satisfaction, to every class of readers, to receive so important a system of information; we confess ourselves much interested both in the subject and the arrangement, and it is with pleasure we inform the subscribers that our expectations of receiving communications, from our biographical correspondent, are, we believe, well founded.⁹⁰

In highlighting interest “both in the subject and the arrangement,” the magazine expresses its attention to seriality. The editors maintain the right to order the parts of the narrative, while also having the prerogative to slice-and-dice these stories across separate issues. In the process these stories of statesmen and patriots became a kind of currency among the editors, who often republished each other’s work. Carey’s biography of Nathaniel Greene, for instance, was republished in the *National Magazine* in 1799.⁹¹ The anonymously-authored “American Plutarch” series from the *Columbian* would be expanded and published by Isaiah Thomas as the *American Biography* in 1794.⁹² This repurposing of the magazine sketches made sense insofar as the sketches themselves were serial in nature. Later, as biography was increasingly published in book form, this seriality would continue with multivolume national biographies of famous Americans that were issued in parts. Here we see the beginnings of an American version of the “social canon” of public characters that David Brewer has demonstrated in eighteenth-century English print culture.⁹³ By transforming historical actors into popular characters in print, the early U.S. magazine began a process of social canonization that Mason Weems and other booksellers could, and would, exploit in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The example of Jeremy Belknap’s *American Biography* shows how the genre moved slowly from the magazine into the book. Prior to the Washington biographies published in 1800, the magazine was a more effective forum for these literary efforts insofar as they addressed a national and nonpartisan audience. A national audience for a biographical book had not yet emerged. Other pre-1800 publications confirm this structural constraint. David Humphreys’ *An essay on the life of the Honorable Major-General Israel Putnam* (1788) proclaimed itself the first “American” biography published in book form in the post-revolutionary period. This text shows the limitations of the early U.S. book trade in the 1780s. While Humphreys acknowledges his narrative is putatively “the first effort in biography, that has been made on this continent,” the book was made for a specific occasion, to honor the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, and not for a national market.⁹⁴ Published in Hartford, the book did not reach a broad audience of readers, although reprinting in the magazines extended the text’s circulation. Excerpts from Humphreys’ biography were republished in several magazines in the 1790s. Shortly after the book’s first publication *The Columbian Magazine* excerpted an entertaining anecdote from the life of Putnam involving the hero’s battle with a she-wolf.⁹⁵ Another excerpt would appear in a New Jersey magazine several years later.⁹⁶ Reviews in the magazines also helped push the biography into the foreground of the literary

⁹⁰ *The Columbian Magazine* (June 1789), 327

⁹¹ *The National Magazine, or, a Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository* (1799), vol. 1, 84-87

⁹² Jeremy Belknap, *American Biography: or, an Historical account of those persons who have been distinguished in America, as adventurers, statesmen, philosophers, divines, warriors, authors, and other remarkable characters* (1794, 1798). Belknap died while the second volume was put to press; as a result his projected three-volume collection was never completed.

⁹³ Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character*

⁹⁴ David Humphreys, *An essay on the life of the Honorable Major-General Israel Putnam* (1788), iv

⁹⁵ “Excerpt from David Humphreys’ Life of Israel Putnam” *Columbian Magazine* (Aug. 1788), 591-592.

⁹⁶ “Historical Memoirs of Mrs. Jemima Howe, of Hinsdale” *The Rural Magazine: or, Vermont Repository* (Feb. 1795), 81-85

culture, as in Noah Webster's criticism of Humphreys' work in New York's *The American Magazine*.⁹⁷ In sum, both Belknap's *American Biography* and Humphrey's life of Putnam demonstrate that the magazine helped mediate the literary biography as it moved from initial conception into publication. Books with limited release could circulate more widely if reprinted in the magazines, and fugitive pieces written for the magazines could in turn become the basis for multi-volume books.

Magazines in this period operated very much like a "museum," a gathering space for the presentation of stories and images of public interest. This print medium emphasized curiosity as biography's *raison d'être*. Noah Webster's *American Magazine* called for submissions of the lives of female authors "to indulge immediate curiosity, as well as to furnish authentic materials for subsequent biography."⁹⁸ Regional periodicals called for printed lives to honor local affiliations. Vermont's *The Rural Magazine* requested that subscribers pen the lives of "those men, who have performed eminent services for the people of this state," and other magazines followed suit.⁹⁹ There was also frequent borrowing of lives of famous international persons from the English magazines. These local and transatlantic connections remind us that while some American magazines did employ biographical representation for "national" purposes, the lives of American patriots were not necessarily more interesting than character sketches of European personalities. Curiosity could extend in local, national, or transnational directions.

American magazine writing fostered literary criticism of biography. As previously mentioned, Noah Webster reviewed Humphreys's life of Putnam, remarking "the style of the author is generally correct and elegant; but sometimes approaches to bombast, or rises considerably above his subject."¹⁰⁰ Such reviews served to spread the news about a publication while also articulating competing visions for how the genre might best address American audiences. Alone among post-revolutionary novelists, Charles Brockden Brown—a frequent contributor to the magazines—challenged biography's ability to explain human action. In a critique of Abiel Holmes' *The Life of Ezra Stiles* (1798), Brown argued that strict chronology was not necessarily the best mode of representation. "Mr. H. has chosen the chronological method of arranging his materials." Brown then gives an alternate conception of the genre:

We are inclined to the opinion that a different one would have been better. It is difficult to exhibit a *complex* and diversified object with complete intelligence and satisfaction, without systematic division, without throwing the component parts into distinct groups. Perhaps if the annals, in chronological order, had been more contracted, and afterward a more distinct and systematic sketch given of his mode of study, his habits of life, his favourite pursuits, his foreign correspondence, &c. or, in other words, if his literary, christian, social, ministerial, and academic characters, had been thrown into separate chapters, and materials which are now scattered had been brought into one view for the illustration of each, the work would have been more pleasing and impressive.¹⁰¹

Brown's interest in the inscrutability of moral causes (a theme explored throughout his novels) here becomes a kind of literary theory of biography, where lived experience is necessarily "a *complex* and

⁹⁷ *The American Magazine* (Sept. 1788), 733-734

⁹⁸ *American Magazine* (March 1788), 196

⁹⁹ "Historical Memoirs of Colonel Seth Warner" *The Rural Magazine* (Jan. 1795), 41; see also Pennsylvania's *Literary Museum, or Monthly Magazine* (Jan. 1797).

¹⁰⁰ *American Magazine* (Sept. 1788), 743

¹⁰¹ *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine and American Review* (1799), 47

diversified object,” and is therefore in need of arrangement into component views or synoptic portraits. Like the form (or, more accurately, pages) of the magazine itself, Brown imagined life as a series of successive views of an object transformed anew in each successive representation. On this point Brown was consistent in his other writings dealing with biography. In the essay “Walstein’s School of History” the novelist begins with a description of a “professor of history at Jena” who writes a life of Cicero. History in this literary essay amounts to biography, which, in Brown’s deconstruction of historical writing, amounts to an insistence that all biography is fiction. “Human affairs are infinitely complicated,” he writes. “The condition of no two beings is alike. No model can be conceived, to which our situation enables us exactly to conform.”¹⁰² Taking to task the didactic function deeded to biography, Brown in turn suggests that the biographer’s goal should be to “render an imaginary portrait useful to those who survey it.” When the novelist himself wrote a short biography of his friend, the deceased poet John Lind, Brown is careful to mark the limits of the genre, claiming no absolute authority for the authenticity of his narrative.¹⁰³ The novelist’s perspective ran counter to prevailing wisdom, which vacillated between the civic humanist model that emphasized didacticism and the British model, drawn from Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets*, that stressed domestic privacy over public deeds. Brown departed from both these models while at the same time seeing in biography the value of the “imaginary” portrait. While he did not focus on the materiality of the printed book as Weems did, both the novelist and the bookseller recognized literary biography as an *image-making* activity. Mathew Carey’s early biography of Nathaniel Greene, Charles Brockden Brown’s literary criticism, and Mason Weems’ insistence on the interesting frontispiece all emphasized the pictorial dimension of biography. As we will see, later publishers seized upon the importance of the image for biographical representation, in turn generating debate over whether the techniques of the engraver were being valued above the requirements for an accurate or comprehensive biographical narrative.

2.4 Selling George Washington

Predictably, the magazines also anticipated the surge of interest in biographies of George Washington. In 1798—a full year before the ex-president’s death—Thomas Condie penned a series of biographical sketches of Washington that were published in *The Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*. Those sketches were collected in book form as *Biographical Memoirs of the Illustrious Gen. George Washington* (1800). Essentially a scissors-and-paper job consisting of lengthy excerpts from Washington’s journals, letters, and published speeches, Condie’s book took an early lead in the race to take advantage of public interest in the deceased statesman. Many of these writer-compilers sought to avoid charges of opportunism. Condie prefaced his work by disavowing any claim to a “Complete Biography” of Washington, instead claiming to offer his republished magazine sketches “in a form more convenient and agreeable” to inquisitive readers.¹⁰⁴ From the other side of the Atlantic, the British writer John Corry wrote a *Life of George Washington* whose preface admitted that “elaborate eulogiums” and memorializations of the statesman were “superfluous,” citing Shakespeare: “To gild refined gold, to paint the lilly [...] Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.”¹⁰⁵ In the rush to memorialize Washington in print, observers noted the opportunism at play. “Too many of those who have attempted to eulogize the father of our country,” wrote Charles Brockden Brown,

¹⁰² Charles Brockden Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review* (Aug.-Sept. 1799)

¹⁰³ “C.B.B.” [Charles Brockden Brown], “A sketch of the life and character of John Blair Linn,” in John Blair Linn, *Valerian, a narrative poem* (1805), iii-xxiv

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Condie, *Biographical Memoirs of the Illustrious Gen. George Washington* (1800), ii

¹⁰⁵ John Corry, *The Life of George Washington, Late President and Commander in Chief of the United States of America* (1800), iv. An American edition of Corry’s book was reprinted in Philadelphia in 1801.

“have indulged an undisciplined and lawless fancy, which has produced nothing but extravagant bombast, outrageous metaphor, and splendid conceit.”¹⁰⁶

This turn of events—the deliberate transformation of Washington’s death into a series of commemorative books—marks a shift away from the ideals of fame that motivated the men of the American Revolution, pointing the way to a new commodity culture. Public curiosity in the lives of historical figures now seemed to bespeak a desire to know the American founders as celebrities. In his classic essay “Fame and the Founding Fathers,” the historian Douglass Adair once argued that the leaders of the American Revolution understood and valued fame as the public display of virtue. This idea of fame was opposed to the contrary view that one’s importance could be the effect of, well, being famous.¹⁰⁷ Whereas the former position emphasized that virtue resulted in fame, the latter threatened to disregard virtue altogether. By 1800 print capitalism and a new world of consumer goods was appropriating the republican image of fame for new opportunities to sell patriotic books and souvenirs. As Gordon Wood has recently argued, the republican desire to spread Enlightenment principles in the early nineteenth century through didactic histories created “a popular cultural monster that could not be controlled,” subverting through commercialism the very principles that engendered patriotic reading.¹⁰⁸

The sheer number of “Lives” of George Washington published in the decade after his death did more than supply readers with edifying reflections; they also constituted a kind of literary field.¹⁰⁹ Different biographical narratives of Washington were addressed to different constituencies of readers (gentlemen, children, middling sorts, etc.). In their material composition, these narratives took the form of books that indexed differences of class and status. Weems is our best evidence for this roving field of literary objects insofar as he toured the United States with an assortment of books that included John Marshall’s mammoth five-volume *The Life of George Washington* as well as Weems’ own duodecimo biography of Washington. This array of texts corresponds to divisions of taste. Weems sold what he termed “small books” or “small histories” to whomever he met in taverns or at market, but he also courted gentlemen and secured subscriptions for Marshall’s expensive literary undertaking. The letters between Weems and his associates in the book trade preserve an evolving conversation about the relationship between popular narrative and the book as a physical object, resulting in a curious paradox. On the one hand, the insistent nationalism of the Washington biographies repeatedly hailed American readers as members of an inclusive community of fellow countrymen. On the other hand, the material differences tied to book production subtly differentiated this American audience into tiered strata. Although these narratives repeatedly assert the veneration of Washington was a way to unify Americans, those very same texts divided readers according to the social position indexed by the book in its own construction.

My interpretation of a literary field of value-laden books reconstructs the position of the bookseller in the early republic. The bookseller’s pattern of movement was an important vehicle for the circulation of civic texts. When C.P. Wayne secured the rights to publish the American edition of John Marshall’s *Life of George Washington*, he soon arranged for two agents, Mason Locke Weems and John Ormrod, to canvas the Southern and Northern states for potential subscribers to the five-volume set. A lot of money was at stake in this venture, as John Marshall and Bushrod Washington (the late president’s nephew) had negotiated heavy terms from Wayne.¹¹⁰ Wayne’s goal was to secure

¹⁰⁶ Charles Brockden Brown, [Review of] “An Oration on the Death of General Washington, pronounced before the Citizens of Albany, on Thursday, January 9, 1800. By William P. Beers, Esq.” *Monthly Magazine* (Feb. 1800), 131-133

¹⁰⁷ Adair, Douglass, “Fame and the Founding Fathers” (1974)

¹⁰⁸ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 564

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “Intellectual Field and Creative Project”; idem, *The Field of Cultural Production*; idem, *The Rules of Art*

¹¹⁰ Each of the five volumes were to be sold for three dollars apiece, with John Marshall and Bushrod Washington taking one third of the profit for each book sold. See Fredrika J. Teute, “Marshall’s Life of George Washington: A Book

fifteen thousand subscriptions; falling short of this number by one half, the actual total of over seven thousand was still very respectable, making Wayne's production one of the most extensive printing projects of the decade. Many reputations were at stake in this literary affair, and beyond this the work itself had to sustain an unsullied reputation if it was to gain a national audience. The publisher accordingly monitored how the book was advertised in the press and in at least one instance exaggerated accounts of the book's wide circulation worried Wayne.¹¹¹ As we will see, this concern with the "character" of the book would be a continuing problem for Wayne.

The length (five hundred pages per volume) and expense of the five volumes, combined with the work's distinguished pedigree to make Marshall's literary effort a high-profile work guaranteed to draw the interest of gentlemen and elite patrons. No mere book by any standard, Wayne enticed subscribers by offering them a symbol of American greatness, a bound monument to its most beloved leader. The publisher's subscription book, still held to this day at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, proudly features the signatures of virtually every major politician and statesman of the period, including President Jefferson. Production details mattered for this select audience, as in Wayne's original subscription advertisement:

The work will be handsomely printed, with a new type, on vellum paper, hot-pressed, to be comprised in four or five octavo volumes, of from 450 to 500 pages each, and embellished with an elegant portrait of the General, engraved by the best artist in the country, from an original painting by the celebrated Stuart.¹¹²

Later I will show how the ambiguous length of the series—would it amount to four or five volumes?—would have negative consequences for the booksellers. Fine printing on this scale severely taxed Wayne's resources. Both Weems and Ormrod repeatedly stressed to the publisher that the much-anticipated work would be scrutinized closely upon delivery. From the bookseller's point of view, appearances mattered because word travelled fast among the gentlemen-customers.

Unfortunately Wayne's execution was shoddy with regards to the paper, presswork, and binding. Weems wrote many letters such as the following that report his dismay:

'Tis to me a matter of infinite grief that I cannot impress your mind with a just sense of the importance of having this work this most Interesting of all American works, executed in a *finely uniform style*. Everybody admires the execution as to its Internals—w'd you but finish its Externals in a style *equally elegant* and as universally acceptable, you w'd find in every subscribers to Washington a Cordial Patron of your every subsequent undertaking. But I do not even hope it. That were to hope against the stars—for I was born under a planet at mortal variance with all my typographic exertions. People begin to complain of the binding as coarse, clumsy, & totally unworkmanlike.¹¹³

Publishing Episode in the Early Republic" (1989, unpublished essay in author's possession). For an overview of Marshall's literary project, see Charles F. Hobson, Fredrika J. Teute, and Laura S. Gwilliam, eds., *The Papers of John Marshall: Volume VI Correspondence, Papers, and Selected Judicial Opinions, November 1800-March 1807* (1990).

¹¹¹ Wayne was incensed *The United States Gazette* wrote a notice of the biography that puffed-up the list of subscribers. The newspaper claimed that Ormrod had garnered upwards of ten thousand subscribers (*United States Gazette* 22 July 1803). From the bookseller's perspective this kind of exaggeration might damage the book's reputation by suggesting that they were overly pandering for popular appeal.

¹¹² Proposals for "Life of George Washington," Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹¹³ Weems to Wayne, 5 Sept. 1804, in Skeel, vol.2, 302

Here Weems returns to the difference between the text and the book, or, in his lexicon, internals and externals. In alerting Wayne to the need for a “finely uniform style” to the volumes, the bookseller points to an unanticipated problem: several binders had been commissioned to prepare the books, and their designs and embellishments did not match one another. By February 1805, with the arrival of the second volume in the series, the situation became clear, with Weems graphically demonstrating in one letter how the numbers on the spine varied according to the binder, with some copies stating “Vol. 1” and others having a plain “1”—“The People in the South are Infidels,” Weems fumed, “They will run horn mad if you vex ‘em in the Life of Wash.”¹¹⁴ Although it was common practice for individuals to have their own books bound to taste, Wayne’s subscription plan offered several options for publisher’s bindings.

Even more egregious from the bookseller’s position was Wayne’s inability to secure a sufficient quality of fine paper for each volume. Ormrod and Weems were exasperated. The subscription proposal promised a handsome book on vellum paper, but by the time the second volume was put to press Wayne was forced to use several grades of inferior paper. The publisher advised his agents to finesse the issue: “Be sure to say nothing about the inferior quality of the paper as a difficulty has occurred!—The papermaker finds it impossible to obtain a sufficient quantity of fine rags to make it. You may say it will be good better than the generality of paper.”¹¹⁵ In advising the colporteur to say the inferior paper was still “better than the generality of paper,” Wayne alerts us to the heart of the matter: paper was subject to evaluation, and what counted as good paper could depend upon the interpretive conventions at play in the given situation.¹¹⁶ At the very least, convincing the customer that the paper was not quite so bad was still one way to obviate the charge of delivering a false bill of goods. Surviving copies of Marshall’s biography demonstrate the use of at least four different paper stocks (in the language of the booksellers: fine, coarse, thick, thin). “There is *such a mixture of paper in the second volume,*” Ormrod lamented:

It creates or causes disagreeable reflections [among Ormrod’s customers] which I am obliged continually to evade or bear. There is certainly a *falling off* in the execution. Also black & [crude?] sheets interspersed throughout the volume. The binders have been very careless in consequence a number of books are returned to me on account of faulty leaves, omission of sheets and duplicate sheets &c &c. which I must return to you. I managed the business as well as I can and show them how much more [...] paper they get for their money than was promised.¹¹⁷

These complaints reveal much more than the travails of American publishers and literary peddlers in the late hand press period—they also provide collateral evidence for the scrutiny that elite readers placed upon the material text in the early United States. Ormrod reiterates Wayne’s strategy of treating the moment of delivery as a performance of the book’s quality before the customer. Though less documentation exists for Ormrod’s bookselling practice (especially when contrasted with Weems’s voluminous correspondence), his letters to C.P. Wayne allude to a strategy of evading, or

¹¹⁴ Weems to Wayne, 25 February 1805, Skeel vol.2, 315.

¹¹⁵ Wayne to Ormrod, 27 July 1803, Dreer Collection, HSP. Wayne’s paper woes continued throughout the remainder of the year. In a letter to Bushrod Washington, Wayne states that a contract with one paper maker for “1,000 reams” went unfulfilled, forcing him to look elsewhere for the necessary materials. C.P. Wayne to Bushrod Washington, 11 August 1803, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹¹⁶ On interpretive conventions, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980). In suggesting that interpretive practices condition the reception of print my analysis is indebted to Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (1998).

¹¹⁷ Ormrod to Wayne, 19 Oct. 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP

bearing, “disagreeable reflections,” which—along with his finessing of the paper issue—point towards the colporteur’s need to stage a careful performance at the moment of purchase and delivery.¹¹⁸ Such performances are inherently fleeting and rarely become a part of the historical record, and yet Weems and Ormrod leave traces of their cultural style in these brief allusions to moments when the book trade resembled a confidence game.¹¹⁹ The ideal arrangement between colporteur and subscriber depended upon trust, which, as my evidence demonstrates, was not understood as a given but rather a *quality* that had to be carefully staged and cultivated. Subscribers for Marshall’s *Life of Washington* read more than the words on the page—they also literally read the page itself, along with the rest of the book’s structure, in determining the success of literary productions.

To borrow a theoretical distinction from Jerome McGann, the bookselling parson understood the difference between a linguistic code and the bibliographical codes, and it is the latter that made all the difference in this curious affair.¹²⁰ Historians who have examined the troubled reception of Marshall’s biography in light of partisan disputes between Federalists and Jeffersonians have overlooked the fact that Weems emphasized production details—in short, the bibliographical code—as transcending party differences. Bindings in particular mattered to all: “Observe—nothing, nothing will do with either Feds or Dems but Calf binding.”¹²¹ Copies sold in boards were particularly unappealing: “Take notice, Nobody will subscribe for the work in *boards*. Great attention must be paid to the same ornamenting &c. &c.”¹²² Ormrod voiced similar concerns. Both booksellers were derailed by the publication delay caused by Marshall in preparing the manuscript for the second volume; neither was able to deliver the first two volumes together, despite Wayne’s insistence that they keep a tight pace when delivering the books. Shoddy binding meant that some volumes were simply unsalable. “Pray make the binders more careful,” Ormrod writes, “I shall have to send home a number of Vols which are defective or faulty in the binding which have been returned to me by the subscribers.”¹²³

With regards to the problem of paper, I am less interested in a modern bibliographer’s analysis of the paper evidence in surviving copies of Marshall’s biography than I am in the collateral evidence for paper’s valuation as given by Ormrod, Weems, and Wayne. Rather than supply a rigorous analysis of the paper—although this might lead to some fascinating discoveries—I focus on the evaluation of paper by readers as mediated by the colporteur’s theatrical display of the book.

¹¹⁸ Mason Weems’s reputation as a kind of confidence man may therefore be overstated in light of the evidence supplied by how he and Ormrod both dealt with disgruntled customers. As the subscription trade continued to develop in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century, travelling booksellers balanced the need to garner sales with the specter of artful deception. Like the larger culture of the market of which booksellers were but one part, nineteenth-century American commerce involved allegations of fraud and manipulation. On the cognitive issues at play in nineteenth-century commerce and their relationship to language and theatricality, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, “Banking on Language: The Currency of Alexander Bryan Johnson,” (1993). For a broader intellectual history of the theatrical dimensions of economic exchange, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (1986). I’ve adapted the concept of artful deception from James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (2001). For an overview of nineteenth-century subscription publishing that links Weems to later allegations of dubious bookselling practices, see the introductory essay in Keith Arbour, ed., *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers’ Ephemera, 1833-1951, in the Collection of Michael Zinman* (1996).

¹¹⁹ In “What is the History of Books?” Robert Darnton noted that viewing booksellers as cultural agents raised unanswered questions about their techniques of negotiation. Like other modes of economic exchange, Darnton mused, the book trade “was largely a confidence game, but we still do now know how it was played.” Weems and Ormrod provide a fascinating case study in this regard for the American context. See Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette*, 130-131.

¹²⁰ McGann, *The Textual Condition*

¹²¹ Weems to Wayne, 28 January 1804, Skeel vol.2, 290-291.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ John Ormrod to C.P. Wayne, 2 November 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP.

Scientific analysis of paper can only corroborate the evidence contained in the correspondence; collateral evidence, in this regard, is the closest we can get to learning about the fleeting moment of purchase, delivery, and evaluation. As we have already seen, inconsistencies in the bindings were one source of complaint that came up in the moment of exchange for bookseller and reader alike. These “Externals”—to again invoke Weems’s lexicon—compromised the feeling of trust, damaged the book’s reputation, and remained a sticking point for Weems throughout the five years of publishing and delivering all of the volumes. In 1806, before Marshall’s fifth volume and the accompanying atlas were put to press, Weems reminded Wayne that sloppy production had ruined the business: “Had we set out right we shou’d never have gone wrong—But by starting with as many different bindings as there are colours in the changeful rainbow, or patches in Josephs coat, you have thrown everything into confusion.”¹²⁴

In the language of the booksellers the varieties of paper amounted to critical differences in thickness and finish: thin versus thick, and coarse versus fine. As with the bindings, the valuation was keyed less upon an ideal book than upon the expectation that all the volumes would be uniform. For instance, Ormrod informed Wayne in 1804 that some subscribers preferred the “thick” paper copies over the books with “thin” paper, but one year later he reversed the valuation and told Wayne that one customer expected the fourth volume to have “thin” paper to match his other volumes.¹²⁵ For Ormrod, therefore, the problem of not having the entire edition printed on fine paper was of less importance than the mixture of different stocks in the gatherings, especially in the second volume, as well as the discrepancies in the paper when the different volumes were combined as a set. Weems, on the other hand, consistently portrayed Southern readers as especially sensitive to quality and uniformity. Not just a consistent set of volumes (Ormrod’s standard), but a consistently fine book in every instance was his requirement. “I hope for your sake,” the parson writes to Wayne, “never to see the face of one of the coarse edition, nor a copy in boards—nor patch’d or mismatched.”¹²⁶

The moment a subscriber compared a fine with a coarse edition (or thick paper with thin paper) was foreseen by all involved in the curious affair as an occasion for rumor and negative assessments of character. “An alarm will be sounded,” Bushrod Washington told Wayne, “not only prejudicial to your & our interest, but, what is of more consequence, to our characters. I should not wonder, if it should prevent in a great measure all future subscriptions.”¹²⁷ Here we see that “character” (reputation) could operate as a feedback loop in the communications circuit: a bad book could reflect negatively on the parties involved and did in fact lead subscribers to reject the fourth and fifth volumes. In an era when discourses about personal character could be used to legitimize, or delegitimize, access to political or cultural authority, Bushrod Washington articulates how those same discourses could be extended to the evaluation of printed books.¹²⁸ As with personal character, the quality of the book was subject to judgment and scrutiny; like an individual’s reputation, signs of inferiority in the face of a person (as in Johan Kaspar Lavater’s theory of physiognomy) or in the externals of the book (which like the human body, has its own physiognomy) could be used to reinforce social and cultural hierarchies or to dismiss pretensions to those signs of authority. Not just money, in other words, but the social and cultural capital of the parties involved could

¹²⁴ Weems to Wayne, 30 September 1806, Skeel, vol.2, 348.

¹²⁵ Ormrod to Wayne, 11 September 1804; *ibid.*, 27 November 1805, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹²⁶ Weems to Wayne, 9 January 1805, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹²⁷ Bushrod Washington to Wayne, 16 December 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹²⁸ On discourses on character in the early American republic, see Christopher J. Lukasic, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (2010).

potentially be threatened by careless binders and a shortage of good paper.¹²⁹ The whole affair hinged upon trust, and the evidence suggests that the subscribers trusted the colporteurs less each time they visited to collect more money. Ormrod makes the point more directly than Weems: “The people object very much to pay the last installment *they say that they trusted you* with advance for the preceding vols. and you must *trust them* for the last and that when they *receive the completion* of the work they will *pay*.”¹³⁰ In another letter Ormrod suggests that subscribers who knew one another had spread the word and agreed collectively to not remit more money until all the volumes were delivered; here we see the original ambiguity in Wayne’s prospectus—four or five volumes?—was becoming a sticking point with readers tired of the whole curious affair.¹³¹

Weems’s fear that some readers might reject Wayne’s unsatisfactory volumes would be further substantiated by an unexpected source of competition: the London book trade. When C.P. Wayne secured the publishing rights to Marshall’s biography from Bushrod Washington, that privilege was also extended to a London publisher, Richard Philips, who Washington and Marshall had granted the right to publish an English edition of the work. The possibility of imported copies would not have been a problem had Marshall’s manuscript been delivered to Wayne in a timely fashion for each volume, however, the judge’s delay in composing the first two volumes meant that Philips was able to print his own quarto and octavo editions of the biography in time for American subscribers to have a choice between Wayne or Philips. Despite Bushrod’s suggestion that the English imprints would not compromise the market for Wayne’s books, the delays in receiving the manuscript, compounded by Wayne’s paper woes, meant in practice that the first volume of the English edition was available for sale one month ahead of Wayne; likewise, the second volume was published in England six weeks ahead of the American edition.¹³² “These things are known in America,” Wayne groaned, “I have had letters complaining of the delay of my publishing and my price & threats of getting the work elsewhere than from me—the writers mean from London & while the books can be imported cheaper than it is possible for me to sell, then introduction here is inevitable; notwithstanding the Law.”¹³³ One Baltimore bookseller warned Wayne that unwarranted competition—which Wayne interpreted as “piracy”—would make the production flaws in the American edition even more apparent. “You may depend upon it,” Wayne’s friend wrote to him, “many copies will be pirated into this Country and even Gentlemen will prefer the London copy to yours.”¹³⁴ Wayne responded to this warning by linking the threat of “pirated” copies to his burden

¹²⁹ In making this argument I draw upon Bourdieu’s understanding of capital as extending beyond economic realms to include social and cultural practices, valuations, and their objectifications. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984); *ibid*, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” (1985); *ibid*, “The Forms of Capital” (1986).

¹³⁰ Ormrod to Wayne, 11 April 1806, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³¹ Ormrod to Wayne, 29 August 1806, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³² The letters exchanged between C.P. Wayne and Bushrod Washington substantiate this chronology. On 19 August 1804, Wayne informs Washington: “My fears are realized: Philips published the first vol. in London on the 2nd of May!! –I have seen his advertisement.” Bushrod responds one week later: “I do not see how Philips’ publication can affect you, as they cannot be imported into this country and you have published not more than will serve the subscribers and purchasers here” (24 August 1804). But Wayne’s fears were correct. For Wayne’s statement that the first two volumes of the biography were published in England ahead of the American edition, see C.P. Wayne to Bushrod Washington, 8 September 1804. Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³³ Wayne to Bushrod Washington, 8 September 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³⁴ George Hill to Wayne, 4 September 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP. A significant number of extant copies of *The Life of George Washington* are in fact part of Philips’s English quarto and octavo editions. However, research libraries often mistakenly catalogue them as part of Wayne’s American edition. The Library Company of Philadelphia has complete English sets in both formats that are misattributed to C.P. Wayne. See John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington* (Am 1804 Mar Lif Gwb.4, 1804 quarto edition); *ibid*, *The Life of George Washington* (Am 1804 Mar Life Gwb.41, 1804 octavo edition). Richard Philips employed separate printers for each edition. Quarto edition: “By Taylor, Black-Horse-Alley;

of publishing beyond his means: “I know Philips has the advantage of me—he prints one thousand. Perhaps, which he can do in a week; I have to print 7,000!!!! —But the law prevents their importation, and I shall in every instance look to the law for redress.”¹³⁵ Of course, in the absence of an effective international copyright law, Wayne didn’t have a legal leg to stand on in the matter. For our purposes, Wayne’s acknowledgement of Philips’ advantage is also an admission that his own material constraints (not enough fine paper, mistakes in the binding process) had opened the opportunity for other publishers to produce a more luxurious book. In contrast to Wayne’s books, Richard Philips’ London quarto and octavo editions were superbly executed on fine paper, and this foreign imprint offered paratextual supplements such as a “Pedigree of George Washington” and additional engravings not available in the American edition. Once again we have encountered a situation where the particularities of bibliographical format and the qualities invested in paper and binding make a difference in the reception of a literary text. With different editions of varying qualities, of the same “text” in circulation, the prestige and finer details of the books differentiated audiences and conditioned textual reception. And there were, of course, many other biographies of George Washington for sale in this period, including the little books written by Weems.

What all this means is that the most important legacy of the Marshall biography may have little to do with the narrative proper and everything to do with the material facts of its production, distribution, and reception. Its infelicitous reception gives us traces of how American readers and booksellers paid attention to the whole book and not just the linguistic code, and reception issues involving trust, character, and reputation were grounded in the book as object. As Wayne’s failures spectacularly demonstrate, subscription publishing on a large scale for elite audiences couldn’t be sustained in the first decades of American independence, in part due to the poor state of the country’s infrastructure (bad roads and the need to ship the books by boat), but also because of a lack of centralization and planning (did the binders even know they needed to keep each others’ work in mind?) along with a critical shortage of materials to match the books-as-promised in the prospectus with the finished product. Wayne lost thousands of dollars and as a result never attempted another project of this kind. As late as 1816, the publisher was still trying to unload three hundred complete sets in sheets, offering them at a fraction of the price originally charged to subscribers.¹³⁶ Daniel Boorstin was certainly correct in describing Marshall’s biography as *the* “publishing catastrophe of the age,” but I think we can turn Boorstin’s assessment to different ends by that recognizing the affair raised to the level of discourse some implicit assumptions about the importance of the material text for the transmission of literary narrative.¹³⁷ In this regard, John Adams’s famous dismissal of Marshall’s five-volume potboiler as a “Mausoleum, 100 feet square at the base and 200 feet high” is not simply a commentary on the narrative’s indigestible length but also an echo of the bookseller’s experience of trafficking in unsalable books that were bulky, poorly constructed, and unattractive to reader and bookseller alike.¹³⁸

Mathew Carey called the travelling subscription method used by Weems and other itinerant booksellers “forced trade.”¹³⁹ This clumsy process of returning to towns to collect subscription fees and then returning again to deliver the books ate away at the book peddler’s profits. Ormrod and Weems had to crisscross the towns on their itineraries to complete the sale, delivering each volume

Stower, Charles-Street, and Marchant, 3, Greville-Street, Hatton-Garden.” Octavo edition: “Printed by J. Adlard, Duke-stree, Smithfield, and I. Gold, Shoe Lane.”

¹³⁵ Wayne to George Hill, 6 September 1804, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³⁶ Contract between Wayne and a New York bookseller, 11 April 1816, Dreer Collection, HSP.

¹³⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (1965), 342.

¹³⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 13 July 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (1959), vol.2, p.349.

¹³⁹ On forced trade, see Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*

when published and collecting funds for the next volume. Effective communication with Wayne in Philadelphia was crucial so as to insure that books were delivered at the right town at the appropriate time. The resulting letters between publisher and peddler detail the social experience of distributing books in the early republic. Ormrod in particular took time in virtually every letter to request that Wayne keep an eye to the health and safety of the peddler's wife; elsewhere he describes the dangers of the road.¹⁴⁰ The effort required to get the books out explains Ormrod and Weems' great dismay when they realized Wayne had sold an inferior product. But this interruption in the exchange of money for books preserves in the archive traces of the moment of purchase, when gentlemen examined the book and evaluated works of literature in terms of their material composition. And from Wayne's failures Weems extracted the lesson that properly distributed and well-fashioned cheap books dedicated to the lives of the founders could successfully capture readers in the early republic.

2.5 Typographic Exertions: The Weems Biographies

In a characteristic hyperbole, Weems complained to C.P. Wayne that deficiencies in the execution of Marshall's biography had upset all of his "typographic exertions," a phrase that aptly captures Weems's multifaceted relationship to books. By "typographic" Weems meant activities pertaining to the distribution of print, but typographic at this time also denoted a person versed in the history of printing.¹⁴¹ As we have already seen in his allusions to Robert Bell, Weems's typographic expertise included his knowledge of the eighteenth-century English book trade, which he used to leverage support from Carey and Wayne. To the showmanship and literary sensibility of Bell, Weems added the lesson of cheap books taught by the English bookseller James Lackington. "What made Lackington in Moorfields?"—Weems asked Carey—"Cheapness." "With the right cargo on board," he again tells Carey in an 1810 letter, "and myself at the helm, you would yet in 10 years be the Lackington of N. America. God grant you the wisdom to but try the experiment."¹⁴² Weems' emphasis on cheapness marks the major difference between his biography of Washington and Marshall's unwieldy tome. Cheap popular reading was inspired by Weems's desire to translate the sharp practice of the English book trade to the social context of the new republic.

Weems's typographic exertions also involved a life of itinerancy. As a purveyor of print Weems at times extended the meaning of the typographic into a metaphor for his strategy of movement. In countless letters he details the labors of a literary agent seeking to squeeze profit out of every social situation. One effect of his project of constantly scheming on how to turn a dollar off the national image is the recurrent suggestion that Weems understood himself as a sign, a fragmented self who changed according to the given situation:

I have travell'd a great deal from New York to the Oconee but no where have I seen such an opening for a large Book store conducted by a man of Intelligence, activity, and popular manners: One who can dash around with his books to the Courts; preach with the Preachers reason with the Lawyers & Doctors, and render himself

¹⁴⁰ Ormrod to Wayne, 12 Dec. 1805, Dreer Collection, HSP. Ormrod confronted inclement weather, yellow fever, and thieves: "There have been two Post Offices plundered and two travellers murdered and robbed in this quarter since I have been hence [...] and it is extremely dangerous to travel it seems even in middle of the day."

¹⁴¹ "Typographic," *Oxford English Dictionary*

¹⁴² Weems to Carey, 29 Jan. 1810, in Skeel, vol.3, p.8. On Lackington and book history, see Marjorie Plant, *The English Book Trade* (1965). Weems and Carey would have likely known Lackington's infamous memoirs of his bookselling career. On Lackington's memoirs, see Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self* (1996).

dear to the Leading Characters of Society, themselves purchasing his books and recommending them to all their Friends & Neighbors.¹⁴³

The range of personae adopted combined with the fervid activity necessary to “dash around” in so many contexts suggests a fractured persona, which some historians have interpreted as the psychological effect of the rise of a market culture in the new nation.¹⁴⁴ In their material form, Weems’s letters support this thesis, especially his use of wild graphic embellishments and his penchant for hyperbole. In an 1817 letter Weems went so far as to map out his vision of book distribution *typographically*. The geographic pattern of itinerancy is imagined in the space of the letter. According to this graphic representation of his travels, Weems adopted a travel itinerary that was more like a zigzag than a plodding movement in a single direction. Read in terms of these accumulated meanings—practical knowledge of the trade and its history, a flexible style of movement and dissemination, and a performative notion of selfhood—“typographic exertion” provocatively suggests how Weems’s public self is at once a signifier, a series of masks and unstable personas tied to the culture of the market, even as he privately wrote to his publishers as a speculative thinker for how books move through society. His letters theorize how print fashions the nation into an object of desire by accounting for every stage in the life cycle of a book.

Weems’s biographies of George Washington and Francis Marion were far more successful in terms of sales than any other biography written in this period.¹⁴⁵ In both their mode of address and their wide circulation within the United States, they were truly popular and national texts. Printed in duodecimo, they were designed to sell cheaply with profit assured over time. But as with the Marshall books, appearances mattered. Weems hounded Carey repeatedly about any detail that might hinder sales. He criticizes the pricing for the Washington book, which at 61 ½ cents cost twice as much as Carey’s editions of *Pamela* and *Robinson Crusoe* and significantly more than Carey’s edition of *Charlotte Temple*.¹⁴⁶ As late as 1816, Weems complained to Carey that the Washington book was being undersold by a less expensive Washington biography written by David Ramsay.¹⁴⁷

Although Weems had been selling different versions of the Washington text since 1800, by the end of the decade he had arrived at a successful formula that would be carried over into the biography of Francis Marion. In terms of format, this meant affordable duodecimo editions. The earliest Washington texts from 1800 were stab-sewn pamphlets. Later, several octavo editions were published with significant textual expansions. By the time of the seventh edition (copyrighted by Weems in 1808), duodecimo was the standard. Next, Weems sold the copyright for his Washington to Carey for one thousand dollars, a significant sum for the time and a clear indicator of the popularity of the book. All of the resulting editions produced by Carey’s firm after 1809 retained Weems’ duodecimo format.

¹⁴³ Skeel, vol.3, 26

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Watts, “Masks, Morals, and the Market: American Literature and Early Capitalist Culture” (1986)

¹⁴⁵ Between 1800 and 1825 (the year of Weems’s death), the *Life of Washington* went through *at least* twenty-nine printings. As I showed in the Introduction, Weems’s book was likely kept in standing type until 1840, which means that there are many impressions of this text based on the 1814 edition. Between 1809 and 1826, the *Life of Marion* went through *at least* twelve verified printings, but more editions of this work were probably issued than are included in Emily Skeel’s bibliography of Weems’s works. Numerous editions of both biographies would be republished after Weems’s death over the course of the nineteenth century. There is evidence to suggest they were used as schoolbooks. Material from the Washington biography, in particular Weems’s invention of the “cherry tree” anecdote, would also be incorporated into other Washington biographies and print productions. According to Marcus Cunliffe *at least seven* separate books from the antebellum period stole material from Weems; see Cunliffe, “Introduction,” xxi.

¹⁴⁶ Weems to Carey, 20 March 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

¹⁴⁷ Cunliffe, “Introduction,” xix

As a biographer, Weems used a colloquial style well suited for popularity. Mixing sensationalism with moral didacticism, the biographies at times resembled novels while sharing many moral themes developed in Weems's many pamphlets against gambling and deviancy. In relationship to the novel Weems simultaneously denied and affirmed the role of fiction in his biographies. The original eighty-page 1800 pamphlet, entitled *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues, and Exploits of General George Washington*, contrasted Weems's truthful depiction of Washington with novelistic fiction. Weems compares the truth/fiction divide to the difference between reading about female beauty "in every love-inspiring novel we meet with" versus "compared to what we feel at sight of lovely woman herself moving into our presence amidst the living lustre of her charms."¹⁴⁸ "Equally great," he declares, "is the difference between a *dead description* and a *living example of virtue*." Fiction was dead description, biography seductively brought virtue to life. Despite these arguments against the novel, the text of Weems's biography evolved into a kind of historical fiction, particularly with regards to the author's use of voicing and characterization. The opening paragraph of Mathew Carey's 1809 edition of the biography is accordingly a masterful blend of novelistic dialogue and romantic nationalism:

"Ah, *gentlemen!*"—exclaimed Bonaparte—'twas just he was about to embark for Egypt...some young Americans happening at Toulon, and anxious to see the mighty Corsican, had obtained the honour of an introduction to him. Scarcely were past the customary salutations, when he eagerly asked, "*how fares your countryman, the great Washington?*" "He was very well," replied the youths, brightening at the thought that they were the countrymen of Washington; "he was very well, general, when we left America."—"Ah, *gentlemen!*" rejoined he, "*Washington can never be otherwise than well:—The measure of his fame is full—Posterity shall talk of him with reverence as the founder of a great empire, when my name shall be lost in the vortex of Revolutions!*"¹⁴⁹

In these opening lines Weems's text articulates a national imaginary along the lines suggested by the theorist Timothy Brennan, who argues that novelistic narrative "accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles."¹⁵⁰ Napoleon's sentimental ejaculation ("Ah, gentlemen!") recognizes the American youths as Americans. The entirely fictitious anecdote announces that the ensuing text operates on the level of national myth. Napoleon is invoked as a character whose sole function is to particularize the Americans and organize their social identities around the figure of Washington, who is denominated "your countryman."

In terms of narrative discourse Weems's use of secondary characters is a key to the rhetoric of his text. At key moments—whether in depicting Martha Washington, the major John Andre, Washington's soldiers, or Hessian mercenaries—Weems plays with biography's individualizing conventions by foregrounding the minor character.¹⁵¹ But rather than distracting from the biography, this recourse to secondary personalities is consistent with the rhetoric of cultural nationalism, which, as Benedict Anderson has claimed, capitalizes on pronominal usage to align individuals with a collective historical subject.¹⁵² Pronouns such as *yours* and *ours*—when tied to

¹⁴⁸ *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington* (1800), 1

¹⁴⁹ Weems, *The Life of Washington* (1962 edition), p.1

¹⁵⁰ Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," *Nation and Narration*, 49

¹⁵¹ On minor characters, see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many* (2003).

¹⁵² "The nation's biography," Anderson writes, "snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own'" (*Imagined Communities* 206).

national identity—bind the narrative’s protagonist, secondary characters, and the reader in an inclusive community. Both the Washington and the Marion biographies consistently use this formula.

In this sense the opening lines of Weems’s text (“Ah, gentlemen!”) demonstrate the work of interpellation occurring in American national biography. By definition these texts incorporate the reader into the national community. Secondary characters in these narratives accordingly occupy the displaced position of the reader of the Weemsian text. The relationship between minor characters and the nation stands in for the reader’s position.¹⁵³ For example Weems narrates the problem of political allegiance for the Hessian mercenaries enlisted to support the British cause. Their national identity is tied to the self-reflexive understanding connoted by the possessive pronoun. In Weems’ telling the Hessian mercenaries experience a political conversion once they are informed that they have no country, and in the process of this recognition they become Americanized, a shift Weems clearly underlines through linguistic markers. Here is his first voicing of the Hessians, whom he represents in garbled dialect:

“Oh mine Got and Vader! vot peoples ever bin heard of eat Christian man before!
Vy! Shure des Mericans must be de deble.”

The Hessians speak very much like period caricatures of African-American speech. Such heteroglossia, for theorists of nation and narrative such as M.M. Bakhtin and Benedict Anderson, denotes the novel’s special relationship to problems of group formation. Lacking a nation, and entertaining fantasies of American cannibalism, the Hessians are a figure for how speech and social identity for Weems are tied to one’s sense of nation, or, more accurately, how not having a nation amounts to a lack of coherence at the level of speech.

These foreign mercenaries proceed to be drawn into debate with a group of American farmers over the superiority of “their country,” to which the farmers reply that the Hessians have none to speak of:

“Your country!” said the farmers, “Poor fellows! where is your country? You have no country. To support his pomps and pleasures, your prince has torn you from your country, and sold you like slaves [...] to fight against us, who never troubled you. Then leave this vile employment and come live with us.”

Exile becomes the nursery of an emergent national identity, as the farmers’ rebuke opens up a kind of national conversion.¹⁵⁴ What follows is a flurry of inclusive pronouns:

“Our lands are rich; come help us to cultivate them. Our tables are covered with fat meats, and with milk and honey; come sit down and eat with us like brothers. Our daughters are young and beautiful and good; then show yourselves worthy, and you shall have our daughters and we will give you of our lands and cattle, that you may work and become rich and happy as we are.”

¹⁵³ In making this claim I draw on Bourdieu’s concept of the *homology* of the space of positions in the literary field, where a literary utterance can index and refract the position of the audience. In the Washington biography this means minor characters can index the social position of the reader; on homology and the field, see Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*.

¹⁵⁴ For Anderson, exile is a precondition for modern nationalism; see *Specter of Comparisons*. See also Brennan’s discussion of exile and nationalism as “conflicting forms of feeling” (“National Longing for Form” 60-62).

Weems strategically uses the tropes of anaphora and polysyndeton in a persistent repetition and variation on the theme of “our countrymen.” Understanding civic identity as articulated through language, Weems argues that syntax, diction, and dialect are markers of social identity. In response to the farmers’ invitation, the mercenaries reply with a startling shift in vocal register:

“O yes!” cried they, “and a thousand times more kind than we deserved. We were told the American would show us no pity, and so we were cruel to them. But we are sorry for it now, since they have been so good to us; and now we love the Americans, and will never fight against them any more!”¹⁵⁵

The Hessian mercenaries lose all trace of garbled dialect and achieve clarity in their collective vocalization in the very moment of recognizing the legitimacy of the American nation. Political conversion occurs here at the level of the pronoun, the linguistic equivalent of the transformation Weems describes from “iron enemies” into “golden friends.”

Weems’s narratives of the American Revolution were intended to have particular effects in the present time of their reading, inculcating models of virtue and linking moral education to popular literature. These narratives especially sought to educate remote citizens in the backcountry. There is substantial evidence from Weems’s letters and published writings to conclude that he viewed his own countrymen, particularly those in the South and in remote towns across the country, as incapable of independent thought and therefore dependent on the distribution of print as a means to stabilize local prejudice. The Washington biography was written out of such condescension. “Such is the Idolatry towards that Industrious Countryman of theirs,” he writes to Carey, “that the American People will have his history if cheap, especially if a little excited thereto by some genial touch.”¹⁵⁶ Weems linked popular consumption to national identity as soon as he heard of Washington’s death: “I’ve something to whisper in your lug. Washington, you know is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him.”¹⁵⁷ Understood in terms of a “gaping” mouth—which is also a reading mouth—Weems’s reader is at once defined by curiosity and provincialism and further depends upon the bookseller for access to information. The biographies were meant to fulfill curiosity while also training young readers that the consumption of republican literature is a continuing process, one that requires the purchase of more books whenever the peddler visited. Although the image of Washington represented in the biography emphasizes the public statesman and the virtue he displays in private life, Weems clearly approached Washington instrumentally as a typographic element that could be manipulated according to the perceived demands of readers.

Weems’ project of inculcating continued curiosity in the lives of the founders amounts to a direct continuity with what I earlier diagnosed as the magazine’s emphasis on the *serial* nature of biography. As we saw earlier, the magazines promised readers that a biographical series would unfold over the course of several issues. But now narrating the lives of national statesmen could create space for sequels in the form of more books. The success of the Washington book naturally encouraged Weems to imagine further exercises in national biography. “With respect to biographical merit,” the Federalist judge and author H. H. Brackenridge wrote to Weems, “I shall be glad to *see more*.”¹⁵⁸ Weems’ *The Life of Gen. Francis Marion* (1809) accordingly continues in the same vein as the Washington biography. Both texts circulated side-by-side, especially after 1815, in editions published by Carey and others. Like the Life of Washington, the biography of Francis Marion combines

¹⁵⁵ Weems, *The Life of Washington* (1962 edition), 82-86

¹⁵⁶ Weems to Carey, 23 Aug. 1809, in Skeel, vol.2, 419

¹⁵⁷ Weems to Carey, Jan. 1800, in Skeel, vol.2, 126

¹⁵⁸ H. H. Brackenridge to Weems, 19 Jan. 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

techniques of voicing and characterization more commonly associated with novels to augment the biographical narrative. By expanding his oeuvre to include more biographies of national figures, Weems actively contributed to an emerging literary archive in which American statesmen were becoming popular characters.

Though far less known than Weems' other texts, the *Life of Marion* is the closest work he wrote to the novel form. Weems used as his source material a manuscript given to him by a comrade of Marion's named Peter Horry, who initiated the project in response to the massive popularity of the Washington book.¹⁵⁹ But Horry was utterly disappointed with novelistic flourishes of the finished narrative. Horry's judgment was in fact correct; Weems had deliberately turned the manuscript into a novel. Weems' own inspiration in writing this book was in response to his knowledge of Southern reading tastes: "Novels and small histories are much asked for" in the South, he wrote to Carey during the same period he composed his second biography.¹⁶⁰ The Marion biography was expressly designed to satisfy this market. "I must needs say," Weems privately admitted in one letter, "that this *Life of Marion* is headed so much in the way of a *historical novel*, with battles and Loves, generosity of valour &c &c so scatter'd thro the work that I am considerably inclined to think with numerous Friends [...] that you might soon convert 3 or 400 copies of it into cash."¹⁶¹ As with all of his book ventures, this civic text depended upon a pleasing appearance. Carey suggested to Weems that a good likeness of Marion would help sales.¹⁶² As James Green has remarked with regards to these biographies, "the picture sold the book."¹⁶³ Prestige mattered as well. Weems accordingly courted the approval of gentlemen in Carolina to help sell the work.

By combining the narrative techniques of the novel with a biography of a prominent war hero from the American Revolution, the *Life of Marion* rivals the Washington biography in its importance for the canon of civic literature in the early republic. Hailed as the "Washington of the south," the preface to the Marion book is voiced from the perspective of a curious public, repeating the opening gesture posed by Bonaparte in the *Life of Washington*: "where's Marion? where's the history of Marion that we have so long been looking for?"¹⁶⁴ By announcing at the beginning of the narrative that Marion and Washington were born in the same year, Weems anticipates Anderson's thesis that the imagined community involves a collective understanding of the nation as a homogenous entity (synchrony) unfolding in time (diachrony).¹⁶⁵ The problem of group formation earlier explored in the Washington text is developed at greater length through Marion's quest to subdue and convert the Southern Loyalists. Much of the narrative explores the motivations behind Tory opposition in the Carolinas to the patriot cause. But as in the Washington text, the position of the reader is never far from Weems' concern.

At one point Weems equates Tory ignorance with lack of access to an enlightened print culture. The poor people of Carolina, "seldom get money; and indeed, what little they do get, is laid out in brandy to raise their spirits, and not on books and newspapers to get information. Hence they know nothing of the comparative blessings of their own country."¹⁶⁶ In this explanation we again see Weems' own take on the concept of the imagined community. Though the words are spoken by

¹⁵⁹ Leary, *The Book-Peddling Parson*, 102

¹⁶⁰ Weems to Carey, 30 Oct. 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

¹⁶¹ Weems to Carey, 6 Sept. 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

¹⁶² Weems to Carey, 16 Sept. 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP

¹⁶³ Green, "The Cowl knows best," 28

¹⁶⁴ *The Life of Gen. Francis Marion* (1815), 3

¹⁶⁵ "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (*Imagined Communities* 26).

¹⁶⁶ *Life of Gen. Francis Marion*, 90

Marion with reference to the Revolutionary War, this literary utterance articulates Weems' own position vis-à-vis his readers in the present. Equating the selling of books with the benefits of national loyalty, Weems has aligned his own project with the imperatives of cultural nationalism. In the narrative Marion declares that Toryism in the South is the "natural effect of public ignorance." This position encapsulates Weems' approach to national biography. "Of all sins," Marion continues, "there is none so hateful to God as national ignorance; that unfailing spring of National Ingratitude, Rebellion, Slavery, and Wretchedness!"¹⁶⁷ In both the Washington and Marion biographies the civic text narrates the process by which outsiders to the nation (foreign soldiers, ungrateful Tories, young readers) can be reincorporated into the national community through the agency of the book. National identity in this account is equally an object of *narrative desire* and an effect of the *print market* that was put into practice through Weems' typographic exertions.

Those exertions made Weems into a major American author in the early nineteenth century. Speaking to the American Philosophical Society in 1822, Charles Ingersoll singled out Weems as a prime example of a popular American writer and a major force for the dissemination of books. "Among the curiosities of American literature," Ingersoll mused, "I must mention the itinerant book trade. There are, I understand, more than two hundred wagons which travel through the country loaded with books for sale." Ingersoll singled out national biography as especially suited to this distribution system. "Many biographical accounts of distinguished Americans are thus distributed. Fifty thousand copies of Mr. Weems' Life of Washington have been published, and mostly circulated this way throughout the interior."¹⁶⁸ Ingersoll misses a crucial distinction, however, in the *kinds* of books Weems sold. Expensive works by John Marshall travelled alongside the popular duodecimo biographies on Weems' excursions. By conveying biographical accounts in a variety of print formats addressed to different classes of citizens, Weems participated in a distribution system that stratified and divided readers according to what they bought and read, even as the rhetoric of nation embedded within these texts stressed a homogeneity of national identity.

2.6 The Image Before the Text: Illustrated Biographies of the American Founders

In a print market where figures such as Weems prospered from issuing cheap books with engraved frontispieces of American patriots, it did not take long for other publishers to expand upon the role of the image in literary biography. Many prospective book projects advertised their distinction by claiming to blend fine printing with interesting engravings.¹⁶⁹ The inclusion of accurate engravings drawn from portraits became a selling point for patriotic books. For instance in 1815 the Philadelphia publisher Joseph Delaplaine undertook an ambitious series of illustrated biographies of the founders during the same period Carey continued to print Weems' duodecimo biographies of Washington and Marion. Dubbed *Delaplaine's Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* (1815-1818), the two-volume quarto edition was intended as an exemplar of American fine printing.¹⁷⁰ In terms of cost the book project was twice as expensive as Marshall's five-volume potboiler, but Delaplaine offered a less taxing set of narratives in the form of brief character sketches subordinated to the numerous portraits that were the main selling point.

Delaplaine's *Repository* was priced at four dollars per half volume and printed in quarto on "fine, wove, off-white paper, generous uncluttered margins, and a clean, modern type style."¹⁷¹ Such

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*, 243

¹⁶⁸ Charles J. Ingersoll, *A Discourse Concerning the Influence of America on the Mind; Being the Annual Oration Delivered Before the American Philosophical Society* (1822), 18

¹⁶⁹ For example, see William Barton's prospectus for *Select American Biography* (1814). Barton's project was never actually published.

¹⁷⁰ Gordon M. Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies: Three Case Studies" (1984)

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, 38

prestige bookmaking would seem to rule out competition from Weems' cheap books, nonetheless, at least one reviewer made the comparison in the literary magazine *The Portico*:

The Life of Washington written 'by the Rev. M.L. Weems,' and to be found in almost every school-room, a plain unassuming duodecimo, will be regarded, by every lover of true biography, with ten times more veneration, than the pompous quarto pages, which bear that title in the Repository.¹⁷²

Bibliographical format is crucial to this literary distinction. In dismissing the *Repository* this reviewer invokes a hierarchy of formats and relates them to categories of literary merit. In a kind of reversal of values, the smaller, "unassuming duodecimo" vended by Weems appeals to the literary reviewer precisely because it deflates the pretensions of Delaplaine's expensive undertaking. Both kinds of biography, according to this reviewer, seek to inspire "veneration." But in Delaplaine's case the veneration was directed more towards the printer and engraver than towards the biographical subject.

Negative reviews of the *Repository* in periodicals such as *The Portico* and *The Analectic Magazine* uniformly attacked what they saw as a scissors-and-paste job in which more attention was paid to the engravings than to the quality of the narratives. *The Analectic* for example lamented the lack of character development and attention to domestic privacy in Delaplaine's work: "you will seek in vain for those little loop-holes through which you might view the furniture and organization of the inner man." These reviewers recognized that the *serial* structure of collected biographies threatened to make the category of republican virtue seem indiscriminate and meaningless:

[T]he writer is obliged to chip off a great many little prominences of individuality; and we have nothing, at last, but a shapeless, mutilated remnant of the character which he is endeavoring to exhibit: or what is quite as frequently the case, he finds himself necessitated to interject a great many circumstances which are altogether extraneous to the person whom he is describing, and which are merely intended as a kind of biographical make-weight.¹⁷³

Delaplaine's *Repository* is accused here of turning the representation of virtue into an exhibition, a biographical museum of "shapeless, mutilated" characters. *The Portico* struck a related chord, faulting the illustrated series for collecting lives without regard for historical chronology. "This arrangement, besides being the most natural [...] would have precluded all suspicion of partiality in the selection."¹⁷⁴ Together, both magazines agreed that the project of giving readers thirty heroes for the price of one volume raised problems of balance and coherence across the separate narratives. They accused Delaplaine, in other words, of valuing the image above the text.

These criticisms made little sense, however, to the authors and engravers of the *Repository* who defended the book in terms of format, design, and execution. In a pamphlet defense entitled *The Author Turned Critic*, Charles Caldwell (who wrote many of the biographies in Delaplaine's series) argued that illustrated biographies of the founders should be evaluated according to merits of the whole book. The literary magazines mistook the aims of the printer and engraver. Rather than focusing on the text, critical appreciation should "examine into the merits and demerits, graphic,

¹⁷² *The Portico* 2 (Oct. 1816), 292

¹⁷³ *The Analectic Magazine, and Naval Chronicle* (Sept. 1816), 197, 196

¹⁷⁴ *The Portico* 2 (Oct. 1816), 283

typographic, and literary—not forgetting even the quality of the paper—of the volume before you.”¹⁷⁵ Caldwell gave a rationale for subordinating biographical narrative to the image:

This publication should be considered as somewhat resembling a book of maps or elegant engravings, where, ornament being the principal object, the typographic yields to the graphic art—or, rather, where the art of composition is secondary to both; the writing doing little else than preparing suitable explanations for the productions of the engraver, and furnishing the printer with matter on which to exhibit his skill. Such is unquestionably the light in which similar works are regarded in England; and, for sundry reasons, I believe it to be the true light. There are, in every cultivated nation, thousands of individuals, whose portraits, accompanied with biographical sketches, may be valuable and interesting; but of those, in any country, whose lives afford matter for a lengthened memoir, worthy of preservation, the number is small.¹⁷⁶

In defending the book, Caldwell situates the *Repository* in terms of aesthetic standards derived from European fine printing. Cultivated readers should recognize that luxury publishing involves the planned coordination of writing, typography, and illustration, resulting in a hierarchy in which the text is embedded within a larger visual and material setting. Illustrated biography called attention to the book as a material object. Furthermore, if nations are to be narrated, Caldwell insinuates, the sheer number of characters whose distinction merits inclusion into national biography runs into a stumbling block. On the one hand, were the net cast too wide thousands of biographical sketches would make for a never-ending series. On the other hand, the range of lives that could endure the Weems treatment is too small to meet the demands of national biography. The solution is to abbreviate the biographies and replace a longer narrative with an engraved portrait. Behind this defense is Delaplaine’s and Caldwell’s desire to rival the national biographies produced in England during this period that successfully used engravings to portray England’s national heritage.

Delaplaine’s *Repository* has lasting significance for having picked up the role of the image in American biography and pushed the pictorial element into the foreground. The images themselves, however, became subject to critical scrutiny that questioned the success of the endeavor. *The Portico* in particular lambasted Delaplaine’s engravings: “We see none of that originality and splendor of genius, which should have characterized a national work. Some of the portraits, indeed, are executed in a style but little above mediocrity.” Particularly egregious was the frontispiece to the first volume:

[W]e have the stale design of the Genius of America, with a most unmeaning face, pointing out to the Genius of History, who seems to look upon the work assigned to her, with the half suppressed, sarcastick smile of ridicule, the busts of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and somebody else, who, from the resemblance, might be taken for the twin-brother of Jefferson. The face of Washington, can only be known to be his, from its occupying the most conspicuous station; for it resembles that of a baboon, much more nearly than it does the human countenance.¹⁷⁷

The tables were turned. Through a close reading of this prominent national image the editors of *The Portico* had transformed a representation of national piety into an image of ridicule. The shift towards

¹⁷⁵ Charles Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic, or, The Reviewer Reviewed* (1816), 32

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 11

¹⁷⁷ *The Portico* 2 (Oct. 1816), 285

illustrated biography created new opportunities for criticism and indeed the minutest details, such as a representation the hand in one engraving of the politician Fisher Ames, could be pinpointed to delegitimize the entire undertaking. These negative reviews of the *Repository* highlight how material details within published biographies were scrutinized in order to judge the quality of national literary works. Both image and narrative could be rejected if they impeded access to the aura of personality. Illustrated biography, stated in more abstract terms, faced the problem of *reification* insofar as poor execution in an engraving threatened to reveal that the true function of persons in these texts was that of a typographic element, a manipulable set of signs. Failures in execution mattered since these images were engraved likenesses taken from portraits; as second-order reproductions—the copy of a copy, in other words—the work of the engraver inadvertently brought the activity of his own hand into the field of vision. His cross-hatchings and scratches could backfire insofar as they crossed a threshold from a poor reproduction to the suggestion that the endeavor of illustrated biography itself exposed the American founders to the travails of mechanical reproduction.

In provoking these critiques from the magazines, the makers of illustrated biographies brought to light a problem already latent throughout the many national biographies and critical reflections I survey in this chapter, from *The Columbian Magazine's* engraving of Nathaniel Greene, to Charles Brockden Brown's suggestion that biography's aim is to register life in a series of portraits, to Mason Locke Weems's careful scrutiny of the frontispieces in the books he sold on his travels. Within every American biography of statesmen during this period is a return to national and republican topoi that emphasize the *display* of character in public, but the intervention of print's graphic and typographic mediations raised anxieties about the possibility that character was nothing but display, an empty pose. In this regard the biographical narratives I have examined all participate in a kind of reification of political life, particularly in their common focus on eloquence as a sign of character. Given the American Revolution's dependence on rhetorical performance, as Jay Fliegelman and other historians have amply demonstrated, the narrative recreation of the lives of the founders runs into the problem of representing virtue without turning it into mere rhetorical display. For example, in his *Life of Patrick Henry* (1817), William Wirt runs into the problem of reconciling Henry's fame as an orator with rhetoric's tendency towards the superficial. Having written little of merit, Henry is dependent on his biographer to perpetuate his fame: "notwithstanding the wonderful [oratorical] gifts which he had derived from nature, he lived himself to deplore his early neglect of literature."¹⁷⁸ But when Wirt does narrate Henry's oratory, the biography stops short of a full description and the narrative is arrested as an image:

And, now, came on the first trial of Patrick Henry's strength. No one had ever heard him speak, and curiosity was on tiptoe. He rose very awkwardly, and faltered much in his exordium [...] But these feelings were of short duration, and soon gave place to others, of a very different character. For, now were those wonderful faculties which he possessed, for the first time developed; and now, was first witnessed that mysterious and supernatural transformation of appearance, which the fire of his own eloquence never failed to work in him. For as his mind rolled along, and began to glow from its own action, all the *exuvia* of the clown seemed to shed themselves spontaneously. His attitude, by degrees, became erect and lofty. The spirit of his genius awakened all his features [...] His action became graceful, bold, and commanding; and in the tones of his voice, but more especially in his emphasis, there was a peculiar charm, a magic, of which any one who ever heard him will speak as soon as he is named, but of which no one can give any adequate description. They

¹⁷⁸ Wirt, William. *Life of Patrick Henry*, 127

can only say that it struck upon the ear and upon the heart, *in a manner which language cannot tell.*¹⁷⁹

The task of representing virtue breaks down into an image of rhetoric. Wirt tries to evade this problem of reification by appealing to the *topoi* of the indescribable, which of course flies in the face of the didactic function of biography, since these narratives must make the particularities of character palpable in narrative discourse.

Virtue needed to be represented by virtue of the demands of the genre, but early U.S. biographers repeatedly run into the problem of the cliché. *The Portico* made the essential point: collected biographies confute their own claims for individual distinction by narrating every life of virtue in the same terms. “Instead of biographies,” the reader “will see nothing but high wrought, hyperbolic eulogies which, mutata nomine, are the same, for every subject. Indeed, the author proves himself a perfect adept, in the art of exaggeration.”¹⁸⁰ The descriptions of eloquence in Delaplaine’s *Repository* evince this dilemma. Every founding father, according to these potted biographies, has eloquence “altogether particular and unique” (Alexander Hamilton) or, in the case of Samuel Adams, could “combine everything great in oratory.” They were each the best at what they did, which, *mutatis mutandis*, rendered the distinctions virtually meaningless.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin described a shift from the ritual function of art to what he termed its exhibition value.¹⁸¹ Following in general contours the shift described by Marx between use-value and exchange-value, the replacement of aura with mechanical reproduction necessitates the production of pseudo-auratic objects that attempt to recapture a lost sense of authenticity and tradition. In the period I’ve studied here, I argue the printed book in the early United States exposed the lives of the founders to the contingencies of mechanical reproduction. These biographies, which explicitly sought to construct national myths, in turn translated the image of the founders into a common stock of characters that could be manipulated in popular literature as well as in elite books. Having surveyed the major biographies written from 1800 to 1840, the most important development in terms of these texts’ material organization is the shift towards a greater emphasis on the reproducible image. These images—along with the popular narratives and histories that contained the engravings—helped set in motion the formation of a national canon of public characters. From the crude woodcuts that accompanied Weems’ early pamphlet life of Washington to the elaborate illustrations in Delaplaine’s *Repository*, the image was an important part of the biographical text. The image could even vie for greater importance. Delaplaine’s next project after his *Repository* series was to discard the book altogether and open a portrait gallery where citizens could view the founders in person.¹⁸² The next major illustrated biographical collection, John Sanderson’s nine-volume *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* (1820-1827), took the reproducible image even further by including reproductions of the *signatures* to the Declaration. Increasingly, less importance was placed on the narrative text, with more attention paid to the quality of the engravings and to other paratextual details that could lend a more patriotic aura to the reading experience. The editors of Sanderson’s multivolume set went so as to plagiarize a few biographies and images from Delaplaine’s earlier illustrated book. Charges of “literary piracy” marred the reception of Sanderson’s project. Biographers freely borrowed from each other, not simply because copyright was lax in this period, but also due to the *seriality* inherent in the conventions of the genre, a convention that began in the

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*, 44

¹⁸⁰ *The Portico* 2 (Oct. 1816), 287

¹⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*

¹⁸² *Prospectus of Delaplaine’s National Panzographia for the reception of the portraits of distinguished Americans* (1818)

early American magazine and was carried forward into book publications. Because the authors of these biographies functioned primarily as editors who culled together and assembled their texts out of other materials, the governing wisdom seemed to suggest that others could freely borrow from published biographies and incorporate their texts into new publications.

Following on the heels of Sanderson's project was the most successful illustrated biography of the period, James Barton Longacre and James Herring's four-volume *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (1833-1839). These impresarios of the book placed an even greater emphasis on engraved illustrations than any previous series.¹⁸³ And in keeping with the notion of a field of literary objects that discriminated among owners according to format, Longacre and Herring issued a variety of sizes (royal quarto, imperial octavo, royal octavo), a choice of different-quality paper corresponding to each format, as well as the option of purchasing the books unbound in parts, in cloth binding, or in a special red, green, or black morocco leather embossed plaque bindings for truly discriminating citizen-readers.¹⁸⁴ Longacre's *National Portrait Gallery* raised the standard for illustrated biography and was truly a watershed in early nineteenth-century American fine printing. Like earlier projects by Joseph Delaplaine and John Sanderson, the work was a collaborative effort between a host of engravers, writers, and publishers (Longacre and Herring described themselves as the "conductors" of the portrait gallery). Original portraits and source documents were supplied by families and individuals from across the country; several of the biographies were written by descendants of the biographical subjects.¹⁸⁵

The books are noteworthy for their inclusion of women in the national canon, breaking with the masculine conventions that held throughout much of American national biography. Previous instances of national biography neglected the contributions of women. This focus on men partakes of the structural problem of fraternity in the republican tradition diagnosed by figures as diverse as philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and by scholars of gender in early American cultural history.¹⁸⁶ Liberalism and republicanism defined public life in ways that made women seem invisible to the political project of democracy. Longacre's inclusion of women is therefore noteworthy, particularly in regards to the decision to incorporate the author Catherine Sedgwick into the pantheon of distinguished national figures. Sedgwick has the distinction of being the first contemporary woman included in early nineteenth-century national biography (she appears in the portrait gallery's first volume; in terms of the order of the biographies as the book was published in parts, she appears in the second issue of the first volume alongside Andrew Jackson and Israel Putnam). Longacre's treatment of women partakes of the gender bias diagnosed by the literary scholar Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, who argues that early national discourses of gender organized the category of "privacy" to demarcate the space within which women could be excluded from public life.¹⁸⁷ A passage from the short biography of Sedgwick demonstrates these concerns:

¹⁸³ Marshall, "Golden Age of Illustrated Magazines," 59

¹⁸⁴ Prospectus for *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans, Conducted by James B. Longacre, Philadelphia; and James Herring, New York; under the superintendence of the American Academy of Fine Arts* (1835?), collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

¹⁸⁵ George Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington, wrote the biography of the first lady. Custis' hand-sewn manuscript is held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; see "Biography of Mrs. Martha Washington, By Her Grandson, George W. Custis Esq" (1833), Longacre Papers, HSP.

¹⁸⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (trans. 1997). For Derrida, the trope of friendship in Western political philosophy is a symptom of how fraternity as a form of political organization is predicated on the exclusion of differences, including gender differences.

¹⁸⁷ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom* (2004)

Our readers must be aware that the license which is allowed us in the sketch of a lady, precludes us from borrowing from memory or asking from friends, any of those details without which that strong individuality which is, or might be, engraven on our own minds, could not be transferred to others. Were it no trespass, we should, to the best of our ability, present those charms of conversation and those traits of moral excellence which render Miss Sedgwick's society and character the objects of admiration, and of the most partial attachment to all who enjoy her acquaintance and friendship.

Sedgwick is included because of her public life as an author of fiction, but her presentation within the *National Portrait Gallery* reinforces the exclusion of women from politics insofar as their identities are aligned with "engraven" impressions that cannot be translated from the "charms of conversation" into national discourse. Expanding the canon of national heroes to include women such as Sedgwick, in other words, allows for the presence of women in print but only on the condition of their absence from public life in a substantial manner. "The duties of a housekeeper, a wife, and a mother," according to another biography of Louisa Adams included in the series:

do not, when exclusively pursued, so well fit [a woman] to shine upon that brilliant theatre of politics and fashion to which she may yet be called. This may in part account for the somewhat remarkable absence of female biography in the annals of our nation, and for the little power which appears hitherto to have been exerted by individuals of that sex in the circles of American society.

The semi-public lives of notable women such as Louisa Adams, Dolly Madison, and Catherine Sedgwick enable their inclusion into the national pantheon, but by and large their exceptionality confirms the general bias in which the role of women in republican ideology is confined to the privacy of the home.

Class-determined restrictions also continued to guide the principle of selection for who was included. We learn of Dolly Madison's important role in encouraging sociability during the Jefferson and Madison administrations, and these representations of patriotic women return to the physical book as an objectified representation of class distinction. See for example the narrative description of James Madison's mother in a scene of domestic privacy:

She was sitting, or rather reclining on a couch; beside her was a small table filled with large, dark, and worn quartos and folios, of most venerable appearance. She closed one as we entered, and took up her knitting which lay beside her. Among other inquiries, I asked how she passed her time. 'I am never at a loss,' she replied, 'this and these,' touching her knitting and her books, 'keep me always busy; look at my fingers and you will perceive that I have not been idle.

Like the books comprising the *National Portrait Gallery* that contained this narrative, book formats in this anecdote index and reinforce social hierarchies. The presidential mother is aligned with her possessions, "large, dark, and worn [...] of most venerable appearance." The book here acts as a totem full of symbolic connotations that signify tradition and stability in ways that counteract and smooth-over the relatively youthful state of the American nation. Longacre's choice of format and luxurious binding—*The National Portrait Gallery's* artful binding making this one of the most striking works in the history of the American book—sought to inspire this same feeling of veneration. By appealing to the stabilizing form of the luxury book, the depiction of women such as Madison's

mother both extends the canon to include women while also subtly reinscribing modes of exclusion rooted in class and taste.

Despite the accomplishment of having produced a truly extraordinary series of visually-stunning books, Longacre did not achieve pecuniary success with the portrait gallery, which eventually bankrupted him. The size of the books themselves created obstacles for dissemination across geographic distances; for instance, Longacre recognized early in the project that he couldn't ship the quarto editions over long distances without damage to the books.¹⁸⁸ In one 1836 letter Longacre admitted that the cost of shipping, especially to cities in the western United States, ate up a significant amount of the profits.¹⁸⁹ These problems were accelerated by the economic panic of 1837, which ruined sales of the third volume of the series. Sales for the fourth and final volume were also poor. Longacre was forced to adopt the Weems strategy and undertake long excursions across the country to unload unsold volumes. He was over seven thousand dollars in debt by 1844 on the basis of the failed fourth volume alone.¹⁹⁰ However, out of this financial ruin Longacre's fame as an engraver would save the day. Almost immediately after declaring bankruptcy Longacre would be appointed as the official engraver for the United States Mint by President John Tyler, a post he would occupy by the beginning of 1845 and would keep for the next twenty years.¹⁹¹

Longacre's trajectory from book publisher to chief designer for the nation's coinage makes for a fitting conclusion given my chapter's focus on the relationship between objects (books) and the formation of a national culture. Books and coins held similar functions in this engraver's imagination. An unpublished circular letter written by Longacre to explain his intentions behind the *National Portrait Gallery* emphasized the cultural power of the engraver and the influence his art had on society. The illustrated biographies were accordingly "calculated to produce a community of feeling" among readers. The circulation of these luxury books among the populace, Longacre wrote, "introduces the Arts, as a peace offering to the angry and jealous passions, that are striking at our Nation's heart."¹⁹² In an era when national politics was divided over nullification and the debate over slavery, Longacre sincerely believed that his illustrated books could foster community among dispersed populations of readers. Though he shifted focus from books to coins Longacre held firm to this theory of sentimental national attachment. In a notebook entry from 1844 when he was being considered for the post at the mint, Longacre described the cultural power of the "artistic character of the coin." The artist-engraver sought to craft iconic images that could bind the nation together by fostering recognition and national veneration through objects. The nation's coinage accordingly "forms the point of contact between the institution and the nation at large; it is that by which the masses must form their judgment of its operation and utility."¹⁹³

After 1840, later biographical projects continued Longacre's trend towards more image and less text in American national biography. William H. Brown's *Portrait Gallery of Distinguished American Citizens* (1845) increased the size of the format to royal folio, even as he shrunk the narratives to a few paragraphs apiece. The field was now crowded with just about any format, size, and kind of biography one could wish for. Weems's vision was realized; the gaping mouth of the public could be satisfied by any number of patriotic books.

¹⁸⁸ James B. Longacre to Edward Weems, 30 May 1833, Longacre Papers, HSP

¹⁸⁹ Letter book 1830-37, 11 Nov. 1836, Longacre Papers, HSP

¹⁹⁰ "Assignees of James B. Longacre & Account with the Estate" (account book, Jan. 1844), Longacre Papers, HSP

¹⁹¹ The appointment letter from Tyler as well as numerous documents related to his involvement with the U.S. mint can be found in the Longacre Papers, HSP.

¹⁹² Undated draft letter by James B. Longacre, Longacre Papers, HSP.

¹⁹³ James B. Longacre, Memoranda Book (ca. 1844), Longacre Papers, HSP

Chapter Three: P.T. Barnum's Biographical Illusions and Antebellum Print Culture

3.1 From National Heroes to Ordinary (and Extraordinary) Lives

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter on American biography in the early national period, *distinction*—which I understand as the cultural means by which groups perpetuate their values beyond the specific individuals in which those values are embodied—was a central ideological category through which the literary genre of biography represented the nation through exemplary statesmen and public characters.¹⁹⁴ John Marshall, Mason Locke Weems, William Wirt, John Sanderson, Joseph Delaplaine and a host of other writers, engravers, booksellers, and publishers sought to capture the attention of American audiences by the luster of civic fame synonymous with the life of a George Washington or Patrick Henry. Already by 1800 the bookseller's appropriation of the Revolutionary generation's understanding of fame was moving in the direction of popular appeal, in effect turning on their head the republican values of public character and reputation and paving the way for a new market for patriotic books. The materiality of the printed book (the bibliographical code) colluded with the linguistic code to attenuate the process of forming an imagined national community. Publisher's decisions with regards to format, paper, engravings, bindings, and other aspects of the book arts transformed the reader's consumption and ownership of these literary artifacts into an act of patriotism in which the nation was celebrated through memorabilia. The written texts themselves assumed a stance and mode of address that amounted to a rhetoric of identification accomplished through pronominal usage. These heroes, in other words, were to be understood by readers as *our* countrymen. Such texts homogenized readers into the general category of fellow Americans, but as I have also shown in Chapter Two, the range of biographical materials published in the early national period also subtly differentiated readers and consumers of texts into tiered strata. High-end productions such as Marshall's *Life of Washington*, Wirt's *Life of Henry*, and the illustrated biographical collections by Sanderson and Delaplaine circulated within a literary field that also included Weems's cheaper pamphlets, chapbooks, and duodecimo volumes.

As I shift emphasis from the early national period to popular entertainment in the 1840s and 1850s, I want to recall my readers to a larger claim: the process of constructing a canon of distinctive national heroes also had the consequence of eliding critical distinctions between the founders, and one major consequence was that these historical figures became, in a significant sense, literary characters and figures of popular culture. Washington was not Henry, who was not John Hart or Richard Henry Lee, however, collections such as Sanderson's *Biographies of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*—by their internal organization of individual narratives—arranged these lives into an interchangeable series. In this regard the practices of early national booksellers with regards to published biographies clearly had a homogenizing effect, resulting in a flattening of the category of heroic distinction into a series of popular characters. As Roger Stoddard has suggested, the project of publishing books in a series became a reality in the early nineteenth century, making biographical efforts by U.S. publishers a valuable site for understanding how the history of books intersects with the emergence of cultural nationalism.¹⁹⁵ But in tandem with this range of literary objects, which in their own way led what we might term a contextual life, is the variable trajectory of distinct audiences, who in their consumption of specific texts were at once homogenized and, just as crucially, stratified into hierarchies of readers and consumers. The biographical subject—George

¹⁹⁴ I've adapted this definition of distinction in the early United States from Christopher Lukasic, *Discerning Characters* (2010)

¹⁹⁵ Stoddard, "Morphology and the Book from an American Perspective," 9

Washington is a paradigmatic example—circulated across the various texts, even as audiences for specific books could range from elite patrons to middling readers. Readers encountered Washington in numerous instances, including fictionalized forms such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* (1821), a massively popular historical novel that is but one instance of the formation of a social canon of recognizable characters.

Here I want to argue that a further stage in the unfolding dialectic of biographical representation would occur within the biographical subject himself, by which I mean to mark what I perceive as a shift from the national hero as the subject of American biographies to a more capacious range of possible lives that were written and consumed. Fittingly the decade of the 1840s saw the emergence of a popular cast of American characters whose lives would be consumed in print. However by incorporating the ordinary American into the halls of distinction, American biography in the antebellum period risked becoming a literary dime museum, an indiscriminate collection of mundane, profit-seeking, or just plain bizarre characters. The present chapter focuses on P.T. Barnum's distinctive use of biography as part of his mid-nineteenth century culture empire, and my major claim here is that accounting for the many instantiations of the Barnum persona allows us to catch a glimpse of how Barnum's contemporaries made sense of his migrating character. Public commentary in newspapers and magazines grappled in their own ways with what we can call, in hindsight, the emergence of a mass culture. As I demonstrate, understanding the centrality of biography for Barnum's own popularity as well as for that of his performers and curiosities points to an unrecognized function of the genre within antebellum print culture. In keeping with the previous chapter's attention to nationalism, Barnum's jingoistic appeals to American identity in this period are a telling example of the tight fit between biography, print, and nation in this era of cultural history. His own published memoir *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1855)—one of the most widely read autobiographies of the nineteenth century—opens with his dedication to what he calls "The Universal Yankee Nation, Of Which I am Proud to Be One." The individual biography of Barnum is here framed to represent an entire nation through the medium of the printed life. However this specific text, Barnum's autobiography, grew out of Barnum's lifelong strategy of circulating his biography to the public. Not autobiography but *biography* is key to understanding how Barnum traded his own life story as well as that of his performers.

The present chapter has two major points of emphasis: first, to recover the various trajectories taken by Barnum's life story as it circulated within antebellum print culture (sections 3.2 to 3.6); second, to then show how the pamphlet lives of the curiosities at Barnum's American Museum contributed to new idioms of celebrity in nineteenth century mass culture (3.7-3.11). The analysis in this chapter is largely synchronic rather than chronological. But stated in terms of chronology, my argument is that Barnum discovered early on in his exhibition of Joyce Heth that cheaply printed biographical pamphlets were a powerful way to create publicity. In a larger sense, by fostering the representation of his freaks and performers in print, Barnum succeeded in transforming them into figures of popular culture that acquired a life of their own. At the same time, Barnum's own public persona became a part of the social canon for antebellum Americans.

3.2 Images of P.T. Barnum

In his classic study *Humbug* Neil Harris argued that Barnum's 1855 autobiography is "not simply the chronicle of a life, but a text on the social functions of illusion and the role of the deceiver in an egalitarian society."¹⁹⁶ The spread of print networks and the shift in printing techniques from the hand-press period to the era of the industrialized book was the structural precondition for Barnum's life work in print culture. Barnum's writings offer a meditation on

¹⁹⁶ Neil Harris, *Humbug* (1973), 231

nineteenth-century American print culture and its capacity to shape fame. The 1855 *Life* explains how print disseminated the Barnum persona in terms of the circulatory processes of antebellum print media. Of particular interest is an early moment in Barnum's career when his image began to attain its own autonomy, separated in many respects from its iconoclastic referent. Towards the end of 1841, Barnum recognized the spread of his image as an effect of print. He relates the following anecdote, which occurred shortly after he had produced several short sketches of his career for the *New-York Atlas*:

The incident I am about to relate requires me to mention, that the proprietors of the Atlas had published my portrait with a brief sketch of my life, interspersed with numerous anecdotes. At the time Adams was murdered by Colt, the excitement in New-York was intense; and when the body of the victim was discovered, cut up, packed in a box, and shipped for New-Orleans, a pamphlet was issued purporting to give a correct portrait of the murdered Adams. Like thousands of others, I desired to know how the poor man looked, and greedily purchased a pamphlet. I found that the stereotype of *my portrait* had been purchased from the Atlas, and was published as the portrait of Adams! I fancied, then, as well as many times before and since, that "humbug" did not belong exclusively to the "show" business.¹⁹⁷

Barnum is surprised to see his portrait attributed to the identity of a dead man. Unbeknownst to him, the stereotype of Barnum's image had been reused by a newspaper publisher intent on capitalizing on the public's desire to consume a sensational murder story. Barnum displays a keen awareness—even to the level of the technology of printing—of the affinity between humbug and popular media. Here the stereotype of a Barnum sketch had been detached and reused in an entirely new context; Barnum recognizes that printing technology, in other words, opened up new avenues for the circulation of images.¹⁹⁸ The portrait was taken from a biographical sketch of Barnum that had appeared in the newspaper, but like the murder victim's body it had been "cut up" and "shipped"—in other words, reproduced, disseminated, and entextualized—by the press for new purposes.

This anecdote summarizes my initial focus in the present chapter on the ways in which Barnum, or what I prefer to term the Barnum persona, circulated within antebellum print culture—and crucially this circulation coincided with the repeated activity of telling Barnum's biography in print. In becoming excited about the murder story Barnum clearly identifies himself as a member of an urban reading public; like thousands of other readers, interest in the story reflected a desire to see anything associated with the Colt-Adams murder, and this desire took the shape of a "greedy" wish to consume the news. However, as the anecdote clearly relates, Barnum's interest took a strange turn, as the wish to see a glimpse of the "murdered Adams" produced an uncanny recognition. For a brief moment, for himself as well as for untold numbers of other readers, he was the murder victim. But in recognizing the juxtaposition of his image with the dead man's name was an effect of ink and paper, Barnum manages to extract a lesson that would be central throughout his career. While his earlier exploits as the exhibitor of Joice Heth had demonstrated to him that mastery of the press was essential to popular entertainment, he now understood that the press could in turn appropriate his image and his tactics for its own purposes. "Barnum" would hereby become something more than a

¹⁹⁷ *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1855), 356-357

¹⁹⁸ On the adoption of stereotyping in the United States, see Michael Winship, "Printing with Plates in the Nineteenth-Century United States" (1983)

specific person, even functioning as a trope for the visual disfigurements and dislocations made possible by a burgeoning print culture.

I take the anecdote as illustrating how the penny press and the showman shared similar practices for the circulation of images, demonstrating that Barnum was intensely aware of the parallels between popular print media and his version of museum culture. To borrow from Raymond Williams, Barnum's anecdote shows that the "recognition of the relation of a collective mode and an individual project is a recognition of shared practices."¹⁹⁹ The Colt-Adams anecdote allows us to inquire into a moment when media practices were recognized by a historical actor as a site for cultural analysis. "As we discover the nature of a particular practice," Williams adds, "and the nature of the relation between an individual project and a collective mode, we find that we are analyzing, as two forms of the same process, both its active composition and its conditions of composition, and in either direction this is a complex of extending active relationships." In precisely this way Barnum is a key figure for understanding nineteenth-century print culture insofar as his creative project and the practices he encouraged intersected with, and contributed to, the larger pattern of circulation. The timing of the Colt-Adams incident—1841—is also significant in that it locates Barnum's stance towards print in the years of print's rapid expansion, the "great leap forward" once described by the book historian John Tebbel.²⁰⁰

The Barnum persona and his biography are extraordinary for the way in which they circulated in antebellum print culture. The present chapter examines a variety of published sources, including sketches of urban humor, newspaper articles, literary reviews, promotional pamphlets, print ephemera, and personal narratives in order to demonstrate Barnum's distinctive mark on antebellum print culture. While scholars have appreciated Barnum's importance in areas such as public entertainment, attitudes towards race, and the formation of middle-class values, much spadework remains to be done on the dynamics of the public sphere that shaped his celebrity in a depersonalized medium of print that nevertheless insisted on personality. Biography was the central narrative mode through which the stories of Barnum's curiosities moved beyond the parameters of the American Museum. Barnum's famous autobiographies are revealing documents that recount his own interpretation of his personal trajectory—he was beyond doubt the ideologist of his own life. As Constance Rourke declared in her influential study of Barnum, the showman was "tireless in his practice of autobiography."²⁰¹ But in a more fundamental sense the Barnum persona was a figure of biography insofar as his life was told, and retold, by numerous commentators. This broad appeal of Barnum's life, as I will demonstrate, was ideological. The writers of the penny press recited Barnum's biography because his story reinforced an egalitarian narrative of social mobility in the developing American market society. At the same time, however, Barnum's reputation for humbug also subtly disturbed the ideological coherence of American meritocracy insofar as his story of self-making was predicated on a series of elaborate fictions. Barnum's remarkable ability to adapt himself to the antebellum cultural field, in other words, made him at once an example of Yankee ingenuity and also a figure for a kind of confidence man specializing in hawking his life as an elaborate fiction.

With regards to circulation Barnum's era differs from that of earlier periods in American cultural history insofar as the explosion in publishers and readers made for greater frequency, more variation, and wider dissemination of stories, images, and anecdotes of public figures unlike anything seen before. Barnum is central to this phenomenon because, as David Henkin points out, his entire career "traces the trajectory and highlights the dominant themes of the history of print in

¹⁹⁹ Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," 16

²⁰⁰ John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States: Volume 1: The Creation of an Industry, 1630-1865* (1972)

²⁰¹ Constance Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee*, 276

nineteenth-century America.”²⁰² The distinctive feature of Barnum’s rise to celebrity was the level of participation from others in recycling his personal narrative into cultural currency. This collective and collaborative project is something we can recognize today as the emergence of a modern media celebrity amid a cacophonous print media, a strategy that Barnum would in turn use in shaping Jenny Lind’s public image for middle-class audiences. And yet, the Barnum personae of the 1840s and 1850s were never unified in content but rather shot through with a variety of perspectives and contradictions. The real Barnum’s mastery rested in his managerial skill—friends and associates always called him a “consummate manager”—in negotiating these conflicting and frequently negative portrayals of his persona.²⁰³ Even negative or ridiculous iterations, because they served to provoke further public interest and discussion, ultimately worked in his favor. In this regard Barnum concentrates within one career many of the features of the cultural field theorized by Pierre Bourdieu.²⁰⁴ The showman’s competitive approach to public entertainment and his plebeian appeal instigated and provoked responses from other cultural producers, in effect raising into view and bringing to the level of public discussion the competitive strategies and position-takings that characterized cultural production in nineteenth-century America. And despite the fact that more attention has been paid to Barnum in recent literary and cultural studies of antebellum America, his career, according to historian James Cook, “remains one of the great unexplored (or more accurately, under-explored) subjects in American cultural history.”²⁰⁵ Like the infamous Drummond Light mounted atop his American Museum, Barnum in many senses had a focalizing effect on the larger culture, drawing public attention in the direction of the glare. To debate Barnum, in other words was to engage in criticism over the meaning of his biography, and it also drew commentators into an implicit debate about the emergence of a mass culture. Barnum’s “life” was thoroughly instrumentalized for the purpose of garnering cultural and economic capital, and in the process the legitimacy of popular entertainment became a point of public dispute.

3.3 Planet Barnum

By 1851, following the success of the Jenny Lind tour, commentators began to make grand claims about the nature of Barnum’s celebrity. “Our subject has become almost too vast for contemplation,” writes H.L. Stephens. “This most scintillating bug of the nineteenth century,” Stephens dubbed the showman, was at once a symbol of ideals of meritocracy embedded in Jacksonian ideology and a symptom of the limitations of those ideals, as the Barnum “bug” represented for these same commentators the reduction of the principle of meritocracy into the absurd proposition that success could arise out of a series of hoaxes.²⁰⁶ In the accompanying chromolithograph to Stephens’ essay on Barnum, the showman is depicted as the “Hum-Bug,” with Barnum’s head transposed onto a cockroach. Such transpositions and visual disfigurements were

²⁰² David Henkin, *City Reading* (1998), 80

²⁰³ William K. Northall, *Before and Behind the Curtain* (1851), 16

²⁰⁴ In *The Rules of Art* (trans. 1996), Bourdieu examines nineteenth-century French culture in terms of the system of relationships between author-creators, publishers and other cultural mediators, and audiences or publics. He emphasizes the power of cultural brokers such as impresarios and theatre managers to shape urban tastes. I argue that Barnum is the closest and most conspicuous nineteenth-century American analogue to the position of the mediating figure in Bourdieu’s sociology of cultural production.

²⁰⁵ James W. Cook, “Mass Marketing and Cultural History: The Case of P.T. Barnum” *American Quarterly* 51.1 (1999), 177. Important recent studies include Peter G. Buckley, “To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860” (unpublished dissertation, 1984); A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (1989); Bluford L. Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum* (1997); Cook, *The Arts of Deception* (2001); Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave* (2001); Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (2007).

²⁰⁶ H.L. Stephens, *The Comic Natural History of the Human Race* (1851), 53

frequent ways of mocking, while also implicitly acknowledging, Barnum's ubiquity.²⁰⁷ These characterizations translated Barnum's image into visual currency, one of many modes through which he circulated in print. "HUM-M-M, Bur-r-r, num-m-m—Hum-m-m Bug," opens Stephens' essay in an attempt to evoke a sense of the showman's incessant, insect-like activity. Like a pest, Barnum is inescapable, infiltrating the essayist's thoughts when least expected: "while sitting immersed in a 'cogibundity of cogitation,' in our sanctum, we were aroused by a humming and a buzzing and [...] discovered before us upon the table, the distinguished bug whose likeness adorns these pages."²⁰⁸

The character sketch clinches my argument for the centrality of biography in securing Barnum's cultural position, as his source is one such Barnum biography. "By reference to a small pamphlet before us," states the narrator, "we are informed that this Bug came into the world on the fifth day of July, 1810." The pamphlet mentioned by Stephens could have been one of the promotional guides Barnum published for his American Museum.²⁰⁹ The lesson of the bug's life was its break with genteel cultural traditions, as the market could now serve as a barometer of success. "If success is the true test of merit," writes Stephens, then "the Actor, the Opera Singer, and Barnum are the most meritorious of men."²¹⁰ As an entertainer Barnum is capable of expressing the "wild manias, or perversities of taste," of his urban audiences.²¹¹ But here Stephens' criticism was slightly out of step with Barnum's newest tactics, as the showman was at this point already engaged in the project of sanitizing his image and distancing himself from fraud. Barnum's engagement with the cultural field shifted over time, and by 1850 this meant appealing to the bourgeois values associated with Victorian America.

²⁰⁷ Polemics and insults, for Bourdieu, imply recognition: "adversaries whom one would prefer to destroy by ignoring them cannot be combated without consecrating them" ("The Field of Cultural Production"). For a characteristic attack on Barnum during this period, see Thomas Ford, *A Peep Behind the Curtain: By a Boston Supernumerary* (1850)

²⁰⁸ Stephens, *Comic Natural History*, 49

²⁰⁹ Two contemporary pamphlets advertising the museum that included Barnum's biography include *Sights and Wonders in New York* (1849) and *Barnum's American Museum Illustrated* (1850).

²¹⁰ Stephens, *Comic Natural History*, 31

²¹¹ *ibid*, 25

VIEW OF THE BARNUM PROPERTY.



Figure 2. "View of the Barnum Property" *Yankee Doodle* (1847)

The debate over Barnum's unwarranted hegemony over public taste that Stephens and other commentators raised was challenged in the showman's own literature by arguments for his capacity for judgment and selection in choosing offerings suitable for urban audiences. Barnum's promotional literature repeatedly emphasized that visitors attending the American Museum were to be carefully shepherded by the showman's judgment. Souvenir guides to the museum were quick to point out that its many galleries were the result of careful selection. "The visitor can linger here," one pamphlet assures us, "and find reason for deep and earnest contemplation in the objects submitted to him."²¹² By 1850 this new phase implicitly emphasized that Barnum's judgment was an

²¹² *Barnum's American Museum Illustrated* (1850)

enabling mechanism for the modes of aesthetic contemplation suitable for middle-class viewers. The principle of selection behind the exhibits proved the “universal character of Mr. Barnum’s American Museum, which may justly be called an epitome of all time and men.” Such aesthetic components extended down to the level of the spatial organization and the physical experience of visiting the museum, and this was explicitly signaled by the title of pamphlets like *Sights and Wonders in New York*, or by the more immediate sensory bombardments that came with hearing Barnum’s loud brass band or the glare of his limelight.

As period texts such as George Foster’s wildly popular *New York by Gaslight* readily attest, the Drummond Light was a trope for antebellum writers to understand the ubiquity of Barnum’s publicity.²¹³ In the New York periodical *Yankee Doodle*, a short piece written by Herman Melville entitled “The New Planet” blended scientific concerns over the sight of an unfamiliar light in the sky—could it be a new star or a planet?—with a joking tribute to the showman.²¹⁴ “The New Planet” begins with a letter to the periodical’s editors written by a professor of astronomy. In response to his query the editors dub this new planet “THE BARNUM”:

It is unquestionably a most potential planet, and has presided over the birth a great many wonderful and curious creatures. It was under this star, we think, that Mrs. JOYCE HEATH attained her 104th birth-day and came to be the nurse of General WASHINGTON. This was the natal star, we believe, of the Feejee Mermaid. It ruled for a time the destinies of General TOM THUMB, and now culminates powerfully, according to popular belief, in the direction of the Chinese Junk. Its place was first fixed by a Mr. BARNUM, an enterprising citizen of this city, and it appropriately bears his name.²¹⁵

I think it’s important here to recognize that beneath the humor is the recognition that the Age of Barnum was concomitant with public awareness of an emerging mass culture. The sketch’s further suggestion that Barnum’s light confuses “the cattle in the fields” is surely a figure for the mass audiences that flocked to the American Museum, a point that would be hammered home in the following issue of *Yankee Doodle* in a sketch entitled “View of the Barnum Property.” Also possibly written by Melville, this second piece includes a drawing of a frenzied crowd rushing pell-mell into Barnum’s museum (Figure 2). *Yankee Doodle* asserted this artist’s representation of the American Museum would give potential visitors an “exact likeness” of the property without the cost of the entrance fee, thus “out-Barnuming Barnum.” The image, along with the Melville sketches, crystallize what David Reynolds dubbed the carnivalesque dimension of antebellum popular culture.²¹⁶ The nondescript monads of the anonymous urban audience are dwarfed in size by the image of Santa Anna’s boot displayed on the large façade. Here we see a New York periodical culture echoing and responding to the phenomenon of spatial incongruity that Barnum excelled in with the large posters he used to advertise his curiosities in urban space. According to *Yankee Doodle*, Barnum’s domain “extends even to the forest, and he claims exclusive right to all wooden legs lost, as estrays on the

²¹³ George Foster, *New York by Gaslight* (1850). According to Peter Buckley, the installation of the Drummond Light atop the American Museum in 1846 made the museum into a landmark. “Never before had a building’s presence so directly been imposed upon [New York] city” (“To the Opera House” 490).

²¹⁴ “The New Planet,” *Yankee Doodle*, 24 July 1847. This sketch, along with several other pieces from the same periodical, is included in *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 9. The editors of Melville’s collected works suggest that the author may have written this piece, along with several other short writings on Barnum, including “View of the Barnum Property” and “Authentic Anecdotes of ‘Old Zack’”.

²¹⁵ *Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 9, 446

²¹⁶ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988)

field of battle, and, as a matter of course, to the boots in which they are encased.” As with the accompanying image, the sketch highlighted Barnum’s reach across regional or national boundaries for new oddities. This satire was not far from reality, as the American Museum had many topical exhibitions meant to stoke nationalist fervor in the context of the Mexican War. Wax busts of Zachary Taylor, miniature statues of Mexican generals, and the uniform of a “Mexican military officer, taken in the late war” were all prominently featured.²¹⁷

Melville would again respond to this conjunction of print culture, popular entertainment, and American nationalism in another set of sketches from *Yankee Doodle* entitled “Authentic Anecdotes of ‘Old Zack’”. Here Barnum is constantly on the hunt for anything associated with the war hero Taylor, be it a mortar shell, Taylor’s pants, or old Rough and Ready himself. These sketches display a keen awareness of Barnum’s presence in print media, giving a kind of comparative (or dialectical) reading, not entirely unlike Barnum’s stereotype anecdote, in which Barnum’s search for current news resembles print media, and print media’s penchant for entertainment begins to look like humbug. In this regard Melville’s “Authentic Anecdotes” and the other related *Yankee Doodle* sketches do more than just invoke Barnum for humor’s sake, serving instead as acts of cultural criticism diagnosing Barnum’s dialectical relationship to print and to mass culture. At the same time, Melville’s sketches also contribute to the phenomenon under critique, since the representations of Barnum in the sketches further popularized an already formidable presence.

Such satirical characterizations had the effect of making the Barnum persona into a detachable icon, a kind of serial character akin to the minor character that flowered in the nineteenth-century novel.²¹⁸ “The minor character,” Alex Woloch has recently suggested, “rests in the shadow-space between narrative position and human personality: an implied human being who gets constricted into a delimited role, but who has enough resonance *with* a human being to make us aware of this constricted position as delimited.”²¹⁹ I would add that Woloch’s argument gets a slightly different accent when a public celebrity such as Barnum is fictionalized. Such characterization is, as Woloch suggests, delimiting, partial, and constricting, but at the same time we see that such characterization generates detachable and reiterable figures or entextualizations (like Barnum’s stereotype). In this sense Woloch’s theory of characterization feeds into a historical inquiry into the patterns of circulation made possible by print. Both the image of Barnum and the story of his life circulated, sometimes together but also separately, in ways that make him into a kind of figure for print circulation. Stated in different terms, the density and ubiquity of Barnum characterizations made him at once a figure for his wider enterprises (public entertainment, humbug) as well as a figure for the process of circulation itself; at the very least, this was Barnum’s own interpretation, as we have seen in his autobiography.

To conclude this portion of the argument: what appears at first glance to be a set of jokes in an 1840s New York periodical turns out to be precisely the kind of extension of active discursive relations that Raymond Williams theorized in his discussion of practices as the structured and structuring relationship between individual and collective experiences of mass mediation. Between the Colt-Adams anecdote and the *Yankee Doodle* writings on Barnum I have identified a set of shared concerns. In Melville’s sketches, Barnum’s attempt to capture objects (including Santa Anna’s boot and Zachary Taylor’s pants) for the purpose of entertainment is part of a story that implicitly

²¹⁷ *Barnum’s American Museum Illustrated*.

²¹⁸ Quite a few English writers adopted Barnum as a minor character who could be summoned to introduce humor into their narratives; for examples, see Henry Spicer, *Sights and Sounds* (1853) and Philip Kelland, *Transatlantic Sketches* (1859). English literary culture has a long history of extending the life characters into a textual commons that could be reused in new contexts; see Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character*. I relate Brewer’s argument to Melville’s *Israel Potter* in Chapter Five.

²¹⁹ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 40

suggests that news from the war front was itself a form of entertainment to be consumed by America's first mass audience. (And as we will see in Chapter Three, both U.S. soldiers in Mexico and embedded American journalists such as George Wilkins Kendall were instrumental in turning the war into print entertainment). Melville's story is therefore a kind of allegory for how the period's public sphere could make politics indistinguishable from entertainment, as when Melville's narrator states "it is not our purpose, however, merely to sit perched upon the old hero's shoulder and crow his triumphs; as faithful chroniclers we have something else in view—the circulation of authentic anecdotes, tending to elucidate his character."²²⁰ As in so many of this author's allusions—one thinks immediately of *The Confidence Man's* famous meditation on character as a kind of "Drummond Light"—there's a palpable element of identification between Melville's narrative voice and Barnum's creative project. The recurrence of "barnumesque" tropes and verbal echoes in Melville's fiction has not gone unnoticed in recent scholarship.²²¹ To such accounts I emphasize that print media's entextualizations of Barnum seems to have been a concern of Melville's in the period leading up to *Moby-Dick*, and that his own periodical writings bear witness to the strange pattern of circulation of the Barnum persona.

3.4 Stages of the Barnum Persona

Having demonstrated the circulation of Barnum's image and life story was ubiquitous in the newspapers by the end of the 1840s—Melville's satire serving as proof of a phenomenon widespread enough to merit such parody—I'd like to take a step back and explain how Barnum's trajectory can be understood in terms of the interaction between habitus and field. Repeatedly, Barnum adapted to the given distribution of economic and cultural opportunities. His early days in Connecticut established the pattern. When Theophilus Fisk gave an oration on a free press on the occasion of Barnum's release from jail in 1832, the orator described him as a "young man on the threshold of active life, whom neither bolts, nor bars, nor prison walls, can intimidate or drive from the path of honor, truth, or justice."²²² The event, with its enthusiastic toasts, harkened back to the practices of public orations and patriotic processions that helped foster national sentiment in post-revolutionary America.²²³ Ironically enough at the beginning of the showman's life, much was made of his moral integrity. The issues of the *Herald of Freedom*, a Connecticut newspaper Barnum edited and published (here we see the earliest stage of his lifelong relationship to print) were filled with Jeffersonian assertions of liberty of conscience against Connecticut's religious orthodoxy.

When his opponents in Connecticut had Barnum imprisoned for libel, the young showman quickly transformed his imprisonment into a promotional tool. Writing to a friend from jail, Barnum first espoused his managerial strategy. "I chose to go to prison," states Barnum, "thinking that such a step would be the means of opening many eyes, as it no doubt will." "Public opinion is greatly in my favor," the twenty-one year-old crowed.²²⁴ Such letters make palpable the dispositions—in Bourdieu's theory, the habitus—that were key to the interactions between the given set of possibilities in the cultural field and the capacities of an agent to respond accordingly.²²⁵ Barnum's

²²⁰ "Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack'", *Writings of Herman Melville*, vol.9, 222

²²¹ For a recent example see Christopher Taylor, "The Limbs of Empire: Ahab, Santa Anna, and *Moby-Dick*," *American Literature* 83.1 (2011)

²²² Theophilus Fisk, *The Nation's Bulwark: An Oration on the Freedom of the Press* (1832), 13

²²³ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*

²²⁴ Barnum letter to Gideon Wells, 7 Oct. 1832, in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, ed. Saxon (1983), 2

²²⁵ "The habitus," writes Bourdieu, "structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences, which are modified by the new experiences within the limits defined by the power of selection, brings about a new integration, dominated by the earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class." (*The Logic of Practice* 60) In its most succinct form the habitus can be described as a cultural history inscribed

trajectory, we might say in these theoretical terms, was a distinct deviation within the rural-but-modernizing Connecticut milieu from which he sprung. But by extending the sharp practice associated with the Connecticut Yankee into the domain of urban entertainment, Barnum can be said to have discovered many of the features that Bourdieu associates with cultural and symbolic capital. With Bourdieu, we can point out that Barnum carried out “in full what economism does only partially,” insofar as the showman extended “economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation.”²²⁶ From Joice Heth to Santa Anna’s boot and Zachary Taylor’s pants, Barnum was understood by his contemporaries as uniquely capable of transforming rare objects and persons into capital.

At each stage of his career Barnum’s own self-representations intersected with a cultural field that secured and legitimated his success, in spite of (and sometimes because of) persistent criticism. In the early newspaper days he projected himself as a mouthpiece for Jacksonian democracy. During the Joice Heth years (1835-1836) he straddled a fine line between carnival huckster and white mastery over a black body.²²⁷ This project mixed sensationalism over race with appeals to humanitarianism. In *The Life of Joice Heth* (1835), the first biography produced for one of his curiosities, the narrator states that “in giving the foregoing brief sketch of the life and character of Joice Heth, the writer of this has but one single motive, and that is of charity towards the descendants of this living monument of antiquity,” suggesting a strategic humanitarian slant to the exhibition.²²⁸ In the same period, however, Barnum could easily slide between Northern humanitarianism and Southern attitudes towards slavery. Barnum, in other words, actively cultivated contradictory appearances in print. Neil Harris has described this willingness to embrace contradictory positions as a “strain of philosophical pragmatism” in Barnum’s life, but in terms of the analysis of cultural practices this duplicitous posture can be understood as a case of the habitus adapting itself to the available cultural positions.²²⁹ The expediency that most clearly defined Barnum’s media practices was suited to a chaotic print environment where frequency and variation of presentation (including contradiction) secured attention.

But even within these contradictory positions there are continuities—specifically, the showman’s linguistic style—tying together the stages of the Barnum persona. The polished, quick dealing quality of Barnum’s prose in texts such as *The Adventures of an Adventurer: Being Some Passages in the Life of Barnaby Diddleum* (1841) inaugurates a consistent style of sharp rhetorical practice that I will call, as a term of art, Barnum’s literalism. As he details in the 1855 autobiography, the showman learned this style as a youth in Bethel, and it became the style that distinguished his use of words in public spaces. The infamous sign at the American Museum pointing “to the egress” exemplifies how his literalism dupes readers with what David Henkin has called “the hidden demands of ostensibly simple signs.”²³⁰ The lesson Barnum taught about print culture was that the most literally worded

within a body, a kind of practical knowledge that emerges in dialogue with a changing social environment in which decisions and strategies are made somewhere between the level of conscious volition and unconscious practice.

²²⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 178

²²⁷ Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave*

²²⁸ *The Life of Joice Heth* (1835). I return to this pamphlet later in the chapter.

²²⁹ Harris, *Humbug*, p.229

²³⁰ Henkin, “City Streets and the Urban World of Print,” *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, p.343. Barnum’s rhetoric reflects perceptual issues posed by antebellum commerce. As Jean-Christophe Agnew has argued, the language of commercial exchange in nineteenth-century America “cheapens *and* deepens meaning at the same time, multiplying and complicating cultural exchange in such as way as to render its currency—language—at once reassuringly standardized and disturbingly defamiliarized.” Agnew, “Banking on Language: The Currency of Alexander Bryan Johnson,” *The Culture of the Market*, ed. Haskell and Teichgraeber (1993), 231.

phrase was also the one most liable to a covert reading, an urban variation on the childhood deception played upon him by his grandfather, who promised the gullible young Barnum his own island (which turned out to be a swamp). Promise and disillusionment were held together by the strategy that literal words didn't necessarily lie, they just demanded a double reading. Barnum's time amidst what he calls the town's "society of jolly fellows" inculcated the showman's close attention to words.

Such deception also made contemporaries compare the showman to the figure of the confidence man.²³¹ However, modern literary and cultural studies of this figure have only given Barnum minimal attention, partially because of the dispersed nature of the iterations of the Barnum persona in the archive but also on account of Barnum's own deliberate self-distancing from this cultural type by mid-century. More productively, David Reynolds links Barnum to what he terms an antebellum "carnivalization of American language," whose humor stripped objects and principles of intrinsic value, generating bizarre juxtapositions.²³² All of these scholarly interpretations miss the essential point that Barnum himself identifies in the Colt-Adams anecdote and that Melville played upon in his writings. In the humor sketches and other popular genres that took stock of Barnum, the circulation of "authentic anecdotes" about the showman was becoming unmoored from his actual person. In this sense the Barnum persona was entextualized, subject to unusual juxtapositions and personations in word and image. The spread of mechanical reproduction of words and images in early nineteenth-century America was the condition of possibility without which Barnum's "operational aesthetic" could never have become a major feature of popular entertainment.

3.5 The Biographical Illusion

Bourdieu has described the narrated life of traditional biography and autobiography as a rhetorical illusion whose underlying principle of continuity of personality across successive events can be called into question. From a sociological perspective biographical events can also be understood as "just so many investments and moves in social space, or more precisely, in the different successive states of the distribution structure of the different types of capital which are in play in the field considered."²³³ The life history will vary, "as much in its form as in its content, according to the social quality of the market on which it will be offered—the situation of the inquiry itself inevitably helping to determine the discourse needed." Implicitly, this interpretive stance allows room for the consideration of the material text as it shapes the presentation of character since published biographies themselves are freighted with the values encoded within the cultural field.

As I argued in Chapter Two, biography was an especially material literary genre for booksellers and publishers like Weems and Carey, who meditated on the influence of format on public reception. In my analysis, the biographical text's relationship to format, design, and paratextual ingredients such as illustrations help position the text within the cultural field. In this regard the cheaply printed pamphlet was particularly crucial for disseminating Barnum and his projects. Countless periodical pieces and other published accounts from the period begin by narrating Barnum's life, but they often relied upon the pamphlets for background information (just as Stephens did in the *Comic Natural History of the Human Race*). In 1850 *The Southern Literary Messenger* fumed over the fact that a program for one of Jenny Lind's concerts spent a lot of time retelling the social origins of the showman. "The real object of this pamphlet," they suspected, "is to present a

²³¹ Susan Kuhlman, *Knave, Fool, and Genius* (1973); Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (1982); William Lenz, *Fast Talk and Flush Times* (1985); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (1982)

²³² Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 467

²³³ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," *Identity: A Reader*, ed. du Gay (2000), 302

biography of our friend Barnum.”²³⁴ By 1851—four years before Barnum published his autobiography—the periodicals had already made the showman’s biography into standard fare. “Mr. Barnum’s life has been written in a dozen languages,” write the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* in 1851.²³⁵ Short biographical narratives of Barnum were written in a host of contexts—from full-page features in *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* to antebellum guides to personal credit and wealth.²³⁶

But why would biography be central to Barnum’s success? Why do biographies of the showman center on his rise to wealth? Or, more broadly, why do biographies in this period ceaselessly recount tales of American success as their central concern? One reason comes from the fit between Barnum’s specific trajectory and the egalitarian ideology of the Jacksonian period, which lauded the success of men from humble origins.²³⁷ A characteristic example of this kind of rationalization can be found in Cornelius Mathews’ *A Pen-and-Ink Panorama of New-York City* (1851). “Did you ever hear of a gentleman named Barnum?”—asks Mathews. Once again his life story is retold, but for our purposes it is the narrative frame used to introduce the life that merits closer examination:

It is a favorite notion of ours, that artists, soldiers, and poets—the learned professions and legislatures—do not exclusively possess all the best talent of the world. Sustained by observation of men in the various walks of life, we do not hesitate to assert that no small share of what is called genius is engaged in the everyday business of buying and selling.

Moving away from distinction as a class-based determination based upon ascribed position, Mathews poses the question of social mobility, asking whether the man of the market can bear the same scrutiny as traditional status. Do such market-driven men and women have lives worth recounting, given their lack of heroism?

To test the question fairly, we would take them in pursuits which are not all heroic in their nature, and where nothing but a native energy and originality in scheming, could have secured success and a large return. Mr. Barnum, for instance, of the Museum, began with a few shells, and two or three stuffed animals; he is now known and recognized all over the world.

From this mixture of the shell game and hard work Mathews draws the conclusion that the combination of Barnum’s “originality of character” and his use of the press elevates Barnum from obscurity into notoriety. “Every community,” Mathews concludes:

²³⁴ “Our Friend Barnum,” *Southern Literary Messenger* (Dec. 1850), 758

²³⁵ Cited in Saxon, *P.T. Barnum*, 4

²³⁶ *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* 1.4 (24 May, 1851), 57; Moses Beach, *The Wealth and Biography of the Wealthy Citizens of the City of New York* (1846), 4

²³⁷ Joyce Appelby, *Inheriting the Revolution* (2001). For Appelby, personal narratives of individual enterprise helped justify social transformations occurring in the early United States towards an impersonal market society. “The market intensified and rewarded an array of personal characteristics, most of them masculine: alert self-interest, promise-keeping, pleasure deferred, attention to distant communication, commercial imagination, the capacity to initiate trade relations. There was also in the independence fostered by personal engagement with market schemes an accompanying acceptance of the setbacks of commercial failures” (243-254). Barnum’s biography emphasized the positive character traits associated with an economy based upon personal endeavor and moral self-restraint, even as he played with the idea of fraud. Barnum’s exhibitions accordingly engaged Americans in the uncertainties *and* promises characterizing the expanding market society; on Barnum and the market revolution, see Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

Demands an individual who shall take upon himself all sorts of extraordinary achievements in the way of public amusements: who will advertise largely in all the newspapers; set great banners flying from the house-top; [...] who will crowd the streets, and distract the walkers therein, with transparencies and musical vans: in a word, every great community needs a Barnum: and New York is fortunate in having him.²³⁸

Mathews links life in the market (“the everyday business of buying and selling”) to the antebellum interest in biography and its related interest in the social origins of distinctive Americans. In discussing Barnum, Mathews is drawn to the dislocating effects of market capitalism, a transition he observes in the shift from fixed status to class mobility and from ascribed position to a market for talent, a society composed of interacting parts and interchangeable participants. The individual life narrative validated this social order. American biography as evidenced by Barnum functioned as a form of cultural capital that could be exchanged and recognized as proof of the market’s legitimacy. “In the division of ideological labor,” Joyce Appelby explains, “life stories supplied the empirical evidence to validate sanguine assertions about American destiny.”²³⁹ Barnum became a conspicuous occasion for his commentators to celebrate meritocracy while at the same parodying meritocracy’s excesses. Foreign visitors likewise linked the appeal of Barnum’s persona to his capacity to symbolize antebellum commerce. One English commentator held that “few commercial people in the United States [...] would not look upon Barnum as a congenial, though a superior spirit; or at all events who do not feel a pride, albeit a secret one, in his exploits.”²⁴⁰ Through foreign eyes and for American commentators, Barnum was the specular double of the legitimate manner of doing business in the newly United States.

Antebellum America saw a remarkable rise in the publication of biographies about Americans even in comparison with publications from the early republic. While in many ways sharing some of the same ideological projects as the period’s novels and visual culture, the encounter between individual reading subjects and printed lives was seen as having greater cultural power, according to historian Scott Casper, for enthusiasts of the genre.²⁴¹ Unlike the lavish book projects of national biography I discussed in Chapter Two, this new era was thoroughly on the side of the popular and the ephemeral, as Casper explains in his recent survey of the genre:

Biographies of living figures [...] consisted mostly of newspaper and magazine sketches (whose subjects ranged from authors and politicians to criminals) and campaign biographies. Their subjects’ distinction might or might not last, and the biographies themselves were published in forms (newspapers, pamphlets, cheap books) not designed for permanence. Most of the lives of the living worked to promote their subjects.²⁴²

²³⁸ Cornelius Mathews, *A Pen-and-Ink Panorama of New-York City* (1851), 37-41

²³⁹ Appelby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, p.256-257

²⁴⁰ Lewis, John Delaware, *Across the Atlantic* (1851), p.24-25. Citing Emerson’s notion of the “representative man” this same author argued that Barnum was as important for the nineteenth century as George Washington was for the eighteenth.

²⁴¹ Scott Casper, “Biography,” *An Extensive Republic* (2010)

²⁴² Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, 225. Barnum and mid-nineteenth-century popular culture are conspicuously absent from Casper’s survey of the period.

These texts were produced within an expanding marketplace for print and were important carriers of publicity. The genre was also remarkably supple in that it could be included in a variety of print formats, from periodical pieces to short pamphlets and printed books. By midcentury the genre was also distinguished by its low literary prestige, in part due to the common practice of using hack writers or second-tier literary aspirants to produce texts quickly for the marketplace. Authorship is therefore an open question for this genre and many such texts leave no trace as to who wrote them.

The Barnum archive in particular is riddled by many texts that share similar thematic concerns and verbal tones but without clear indications of authorship. These hackney texts appear to “voice” Barnum through an act of impersonation.²⁴³ Close attention to Barnum’s biographical illusions reveals that these cross-references and verbal echoes suggest a kind of corporate authorship, where the figure of Barnum becomes an effect of coordinated voicing. In these instances the manager’s agency is disguised, giving the further effect that promotional materials advertising his own celebrity (by telling his life story) seemed as if they were produced by an appreciative public. *Sights and Wonders in New-York* (1849) sets the pattern by proposing a “concise history of Mr. Barnum.” The narrative, voiced from the perspective of an “Uncle Timothy Find-out,” turns out to have very little to say in specific about Barnum’s life, and we learn in two sentences that he was born in Connecticut, worked as a dry goods clerk and newspaper editor, acquired the American Museum, and escorted Tom Thumb across Europe. Then the narrative immediately shifts in the third sentence to an extended description of Barnum’s “oriental” mansion Iranistan. Here the emphasis on the home is in keeping with the middle-class persona Barnum was crafting at the time. This reformed version of the showman, we are told in the brochure, devotes himself to “the most pleasing performances, which are chaste and entirely free from any immoral influences.” There is no mention of humbug.

Sights and Wonders demonstrates that Barnum’s team of hackney writers produced a corpus of materials that ventriloquized the perspectives of his appreciative audience. Out of these works the figure of Barnum became an effect of what could be termed a vast co-textual array of cultural artifacts and the conversations generated from them, of which the 1855 *Life of P.T. Barnum* is just one later example.²⁴⁴ As previously demonstrated, the appeal of Barnum’s biography in the mid-nineteenth century arose from his persona operating as a symbol of both the uncertainty of economic exchange and Victorian discourses of self-control and moral reform. Cornelius Mathews celebrated Barnum’s “originality in scheming” and made this the lesson of his biography, just as *Sights and Wonders* presented the showman as a paragon of bourgeois morality. The two perspectives seem to offer contradictory accounts of Barnum’s success even as they appealed to the same urban audience. In truth, Barnum’s persona demonstrates how economic calculation and the mainstream of American Protestantism had reached a compromise at mid-century, with the latter supplying the moral justification and inspiring the kind of work habits and discipline necessary for life in the market.²⁴⁵ Many biographies portrayed Barnum in precisely these terms, stressing his ingenuity and

²⁴³ James Cook has highlighted the showman’s penchant for a “kind of calculated cross-referencing” between Barnum’s public exhibitions and literary personas (*Arts of Deception* 99).

²⁴⁴ The theorist of autobiography Philippe Lejeune similarly argues that a more rigorous sense of context is needed to read autobiographies without falling back into the ideology of individualism. “It appears very difficult,” he suggests, “to link autobiography and social history without first putting autobiography back into the vaster systems of discourse: on the one hand, biography, the most fundamental genre (and the least studied); on the other hand, the system of discourses on social success” (Lejeune “Autobiography and Social History” 176). In “The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write,” Lejeune continues his critique of the autobiographical subject by arguing that many instances of first-person autobiography are in fact mediated through the activities of other agents.

²⁴⁵ Appelby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 250-251

his support for reform causes such as temperance.²⁴⁶ Because of the social authorship that produces so many of texts bearing the showman's name, it is hard to draw the line separating Barnum's agency from texts that purport to be written by independent sources. In an important sense, understanding Barnum's place in American popular culture involves tracing the biographical illusion and understanding these entextualizations as the site of a reality effect. Understanding Barnum's contribution to his era, in other words, requires a serious look at the paper trail that mediated and produced the person that could be displayed before the public. As one commentator noted in a critique of American newspapers that gave space to Barnum, each published anecdote about him was inevitably "an advertisement in masquerade."²⁴⁷

3.6 Entextualizing P.T. Barnum

The biographical illusion, understood as part of a pervasive cultural interest in printed lives in antebellum America, promised to narrate a true account of public figures, but the personae constructed out of these print phenomena were far from stable. A glance at the variety of names attached to these personae shows how unstable "Barnum" could be: Barnaby Diddleum, Peter Tamerlane B—M, Petite Bunkum, the Hum-Bug. Cornelius Mathews' assertion that every community needs a Barnum highlights his representative character—and many other commentators argued that Barnum was a kind of "representative man" in Emerson's sense of term—however, unlike other notions of nineteenth-century representative men, the Barnum personae did not aspire to what Mitchell Breitwieser calls the period's interest in "the reflective clarity and coherence of a single voice."²⁴⁸ Close attention to Barnum's printed lives in the 1850s supports my view that he is a case of what might be termed typographic pluralization. Remarkably, some of the Barnum texts display a degree of self-reflexive awareness of this kind of low-brow intertextuality.

Circulation and cross-referencing pervade this phase of Barnum's appearances in print. In 1854-1855, two printed lives related to the Barnum persona were published in New York, the first being a miniature book entitled *Auto-biography of Barnum*.²⁴⁹ The second, a parody of Barnum entitled *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum, the Yankee Showman* was also published in 1854. Both texts allude to forthcoming publication of the 1855 *Life of P.T. Barnum*. Textual clues within these two pseudo-autobiographical pamphlets evidence a cross-referential relationship that points to a kind of "barnumesque" joke on the reader. In terms of his writing practice (including the texts produced by his associates and cronies), Barnum frequently recycled his stories in different contexts. But as I have also shown, the many entextualizations and print iterations of the Barnum persona also necessarily meant his image accumulated numerous accreted echoes because of those reiterations. In other words, what Barnum scholars such as A.H. Saxon or Constance Rourke identify as Barnum's penchant for recycling stories is but a part of a larger economy of images, stories, textual artifacts, and public representations.²⁵⁰ The Barnum persona is in this sense a social text composed of

²⁴⁶ For an example, see George W. Bungay, *Off-Hand Takings; or, Crayon Sketches of the Noticeable Men of Our Age* (1854), 199-204

²⁴⁷ Lambert Wilmer, *Our Press Gang* (1859), 154

²⁴⁸ Mitchell Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin*, p.1

²⁴⁹ *Auto-biography of Barnum* is a rare artifact which has caused some confusion for Barnum's most authoritative historians. Originally published in 1854, a second impression appeared much later in 1889, two years before his death. In the classic study *Humbug*, Neil Harris only mentions the 1889 version in a footnote, calling it a "parody" (Harris 324). Similarly, recent Barnum biographer A.H. Saxon lists only the 1889 version in his annotated bibliography, dismissing the miniature book as an "illustrated book of only 16pp., with very little in the way of text" (Saxon 417). Copies of the 1854 edition can be found at the Huntington Library as well as the American Antiquarian Society, which also has a copy of the 1889 edition. According to one bibliographer the miniature book was "likely a marketing piece" for the 1855 *Life of P.T. Barnum*. See Robert C. Bradbury, *Antique United States Miniature Books, 1690-1900* (2001), 174

²⁵⁰ Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: the Legend and the Man*, 18

innumerable references, jokes, insults, and peculiar identifications and disidentifications—a collective cultural achievement that emerged out of a dynamic print culture.²⁵¹ In the following close reading of the pseudo-autobiographies, I draw out of some of the implications for how we can understand the Barnum persona through the complex of images, texts, and discussions that circulated in the antebellum period.

Auto-biography of Barnum concludes its short narrative by discussing how Barnum built his Iranistan: “I built a house after the model of a castor, with pepper boxes, vinegar cruet, and mustard pot, in full force. This house I set down in Bridgeport, & from my room in the dome that represents the cover of the mustard pot, I fulminate my book. The oyster yawns wide open at my feet.”²⁵² This statement is cited verbatim in *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum*. In this latter text, the citation occurs after the Barnum persona describes his insatiable lust wealth after the success of the Feejee or “Fudge” Mermaid:

My fortune was very much enlarged by this most fortunate speculation; but, as is too often the case, the richer I got the greater became my thirst for additional wealth. I resolved to become a millionaire before I ceased my operations. I became a man of mark and confidence on 'Change; I traded in real estate, dabbled in stocks, and became connected with banks. To quote the words of a celebrated author, in allusion to me, “I built a house after the model of a castor with pepper-boxes, vinegar cruet and mustard-pot in full force. This house I set down in Bridgestout [sic], and from my room in the dome that represents the cover of the mustard-pot, I fulmunate [sic] my book. The oyster yawns wide open at my feet.”²⁵³

Small variations in spelling result in some distortion in the process of transmission (*Bridgeport* becomes “Bridgestout,” *fulminate* becomes “fulmunate”). It is reasonable to ascribe these errors to hackwork; nevertheless, the repetition of the citation is remarkable. I’m particularly drawn to the narrative frame in which these citations occur. Described as written by a “celebrated author,” the unnamed source text buttresses the main narrative of *Petite Bunkum*, giving an illusion of popular reception and uptake. The resulting entextualization, oddly enough, reproduces the situation we already examined in Cornelius Mathews’ writings on Barnum: a “celebrated author” remarking upon the extraordinary success of a person (Barnum) whose practices are a hyperbolic instance of what Mathews termed the “everyday business of buying and selling.” At the same time as the resulting text echoes other published writings on Barnum, the playfulness of the allusion adds an additional tone of irony, whereby the Barnum persona gains the upper hand through its meta-commentary on the circulatory processes of antebellum print culture. This excessive allusion is yet another instance of the “twinkling” of the authorial and managerial eye that critics and historians have noticed in Barnum’s signature use of print culture.²⁵⁴ “To quote the words of a celebrated author, in allusion to me” takes as its medium print culture’s spread of the Barnum persona. Here the miniature book winks at us and informs us that Barnum is a privileged figure for media circulation in the 1850s.

Furthermore, the framing voice of the *Petite Bunkum* narrative and the framed “I” of the miniature book intersect in striking ways—the reference doesn’t work, we might say, in the way citations usually do. For one thing, the syntax and diction of the cited “I” closely mirrors the voice

²⁵¹ For cultural meanings as dependent on reciprocal responses between producers and their publics, see Bourdieu, “Intellectual Field and Creative Project”

²⁵² *Auto-biography of Barnum*, 15-16

²⁵³ *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum*, 31

²⁵⁴ Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee*, 369

of the framing narrator. No distance, in other words, is achieved in Petite Bunkum's switch to the "celebrated author's" voice. A comparison of the syntax makes this clear:

Bunkum's framing voice: I traded in real estate, dabbled in stocks, and became connected with banks.

"Miniature" framed voice: I built a house after the model of a castor, with pepper-boxes, vinegar-cruet, and mustard pot, in full force.

These verbal echoes multiply in a second direct quotation in *Petite Bunkum* from the miniature book:

Framing voice: One other brief quotation will serve to show the estimation in which I was held :—

Framed voice: I spoke—drunkards trembled, and Schiedam Schnapps lost its power. I wrote—authors grew pale with envy, and publishers rent each other's garments in a struggle for my book!²⁵⁵

What I earlier identified as Barnum's conspicuously literal rhetorical style recurs in the above passages. This deceptively simple voicing is, of course, the very same approach to written words that Barnum used to advertise in public spaces. The concern with authorship stands out in particular as an object of parody, as if the Barnum persona delights in showing how publishers (and the press) scramble to enshrine the triumphant showman as a truly legitimate cultural presence. But at the same time these entextualizations across ephemeral print artifacts jokingly argue for a reconceptualization of authorship as *social authorship*. The authorial voice—a privileged rhetorical mode in the genre of autobiography—is here the effect of a corporate process that involved anonymous agents. The fact of this collaborative voicing alerts us that by 1855 the circulation of Barnum's printed lives had reached a certain threshold of density, in which the 1855 *Life of P.T. Barnum* was preceded by another book (*Petite Bunkum*) which could glance backwards (to the miniature book) and forwards (to the forthcoming *Life*, to which it was an advertisement). On this basis I would further speculate that in a quite uncanny way the entextualization of Barnum's printed lives is a micro-discursive version of the wider cultural phenomenon I have traced thus far in this chapter. The broader social text of the Barnum persona seems to be built out of this micro-discursive play of entextualized voices, and on the concrete level of the printed editions we can see that Barnum and his collaborators were actively fostering this very process of circulation.

In terms of his broad appeal, part of the power of the Barnum persona lay in its ability to provoke. Throughout the many print appearances the biographical illusion merged the activity of narrating a life with that of a different desire, that of an enraged public, who was invited to take vengeance upon the showman. On the iconic cover of *Petite Bunkum* purchasers of the cheap book would have been greeted by a barnumesque caricature, whose sales pitch (take my *life*, i.e., buy my book) doubled as an invitation to the death of the author (*take* my life, i.e., put a stop to this blowing or puffing nonsense). This provocative mode of address fills the pages of *Petite Bunkum*, especially in its parting salutation: "Reader, although you have proved yourself an assassin by taking my *Life*, I bear you no ill-will."²⁵⁶ This is an implicit echo of the same joke employed in the miniature *Auto-*

²⁵⁵ *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum*, 81; *Auto-biography of Barnum*, 14

²⁵⁶ *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum*, 63

biography, which concludes with: “P.S. This may be considered my dying speech and confession.”²⁵⁷ Even Barnum’s death became a point of speculation for writers drawn to his celebrity. The author of *Crotchets and Quavers* (1855) for instance devoted several pages to imagine an elaborate funeral parade for the showman filled with Barnum’s freaks and curiosities.²⁵⁸ Such humor, like Barnum’s penchant for negative publicity, was never an end in itself, rather, it created more opportunities to circulate his image.

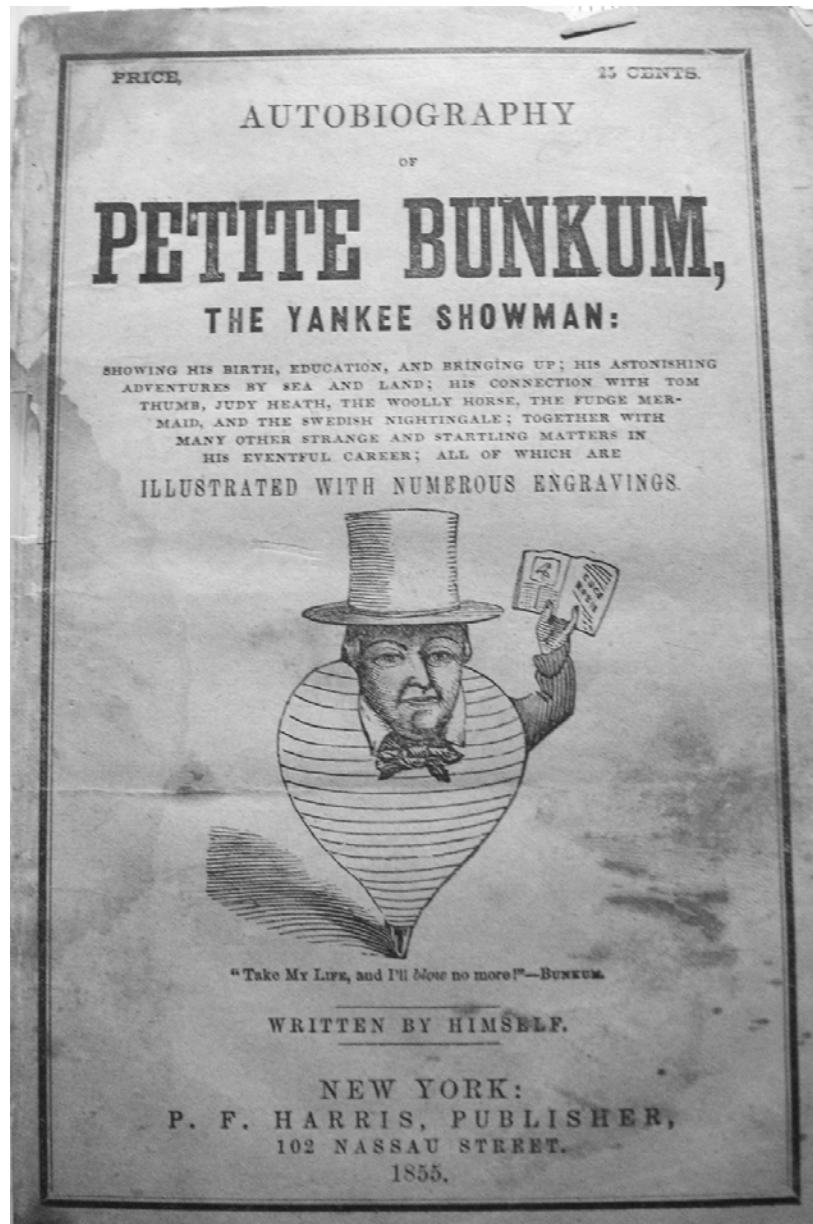


Figure 3. *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum, the Yankee Showman* (1855). Below the image, the caption reads “Take My Life, and I’ll blow no more!”—Bunkum.”

²⁵⁷ *Auto-biography of Barnum*, 16

²⁵⁸ Manzarak, Max, *Crotchets and Quavers: or, Revelations of an Opera Manager in America* (1855), 134-135

The cover of *Petite Bunkum* depicts the showman as a spinning top (Figure 3). This is an extremely apt for figure for the range of meanings, iterations, and entextualizations of the showman that occurred in print during the antebellum era. Particularly significant in the cover image is an extended arm proffering one of Barnum's numerous pamphlets. Like a kind of trickster, the whirling figure eludes a fixed identification, only to turn to us again and invite us to take his life. Whether or not Barnum himself chose this image is irrelevant, since, as I have demonstrated, the Barnum persona is an effect of collaborative voicing, a polyphonic text that brings to mind Bakhtin's claim that addressivity and modes of address are always inaugurated by a *turn*: "the quality of turning to someone," he writes, "is a constitutive feature of the utterance."²⁵⁹ This turning motion summarizes the plasticity of the Barnum persona. Each event of entextualization lifted Barnum out of a particular context and reinscribed him into another. The spinning top therefore also expresses the seriality of the Barnum personae, the different faces presented to the public that adapted to the given distribution of capital. Finally, the relationship between the outstretched arm, the pamphlet he displays, and the trickster's body becomes one of prosthesis. Biography gave substance to the life in the form of a story, an explanation of social origins, and a material objectification of a life (the book itself). In Barnum's hands the biographical illusion, in other words, gives a determinate form to the conniving agent, a social identity traded and exchange for the purpose of public recognition. This turning figure, in the final analysis, aptly portrays Barnum as a master of spin.

The entextualizing process would continue well beyond the 1850s, but there was a moment when attention began to wane—when the period question "where's Barnum?" became old hat. A sure sign of waning adult interest is Barnum's inclusion into the canon of juvenilia. In children's collections such as Francis Woodworth's *Uncle Frank's Pleasant Pages for the Fireside* (1859), the Barnum persona is stripped of all traces of humbug. The biographical fixation on social origins here becomes children's fare, as Barnum's story of his childhood visit to New York in the early 1820s becomes representative of the narrative of leaving home and discovering the duplicity of the city.²⁶⁰ As he grew older Barnum would encourage this redefinition, "authoring" (again through paid hacks) children's books himself. By the time that *The Life of P.T. Barnum* was rewritten as the evolving text known as *Struggles and Triumphs* Barnum's status as an autobiographer was secure, but at the cost of forgetting the earlier period of circulation in the 1840s and 1850s in which biographical representation in the penny press made him famous.

3.7 Antebellum Popular Culture and Printed Lives

Previously I focused on the importance of biography for the circulation of the Barnum persona, but, as I have already indicated, the biographical pamphlet was also crucial to the success of his many curiosities. In nineteenth-century America, circus performers and freaks often supplemented their public appearances by the sales of biographical chapbooks and *cartes de visite*. Lavinia Warren, the wife of Tom Thumb, describes using these souvenirs in her memoirs, noting how she got her start on the kind of steamboat that figures centrally in Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857).²⁶¹ Warren's memoirs and Melville's final novel both point to plausible historical scenarios. The opening chapters of the great carnivalesque novel include Melville's attention to a peddler of cheap print, a "versatile chevalier, [who] hawked, in the thick of the throng, the lives of Measan, the bandit of Ohio Murrel, the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country."²⁶² This peddler belongs to a recurring type within Melville's fiction of the

²⁵⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," 99

²⁶⁰ Francis Woodworth, *Uncle Frank's Pleasant Pages for the Fireside* (1859), 32-39

²⁶¹ Lavinia Warren, *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb (Some of My Life Experiences)*, ed. A.H. Saxon (1979)

²⁶² Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), 7-8

literary amateur and begging artist, the kind of hackney writing and street vending that Barnum frequently employed for his promotions.²⁶³ Surprisingly, nowhere in the scholarship on Barnum has sustained attention been paid to his use of print media and biography in particular, despite the fact that many of his performers sold short biographical pamphlets to curious attendees at the American Museum. In what follows, I argue that the printed lives of Barnum's curiosities are doing a particular kind of cultural work in tandem with the overt project of publicity: the transformation of the extraordinary into the everyday (and vice versa). Through biography Barnum's freaks are brought down to the level of the community of readers commensurate with the cheap print market for which the biographies were written.

In part the scholarly neglect of these printed lives is a result of the ephemeral nature of the material texts themselves. These short pamphlets, with stitched bindings and colorful paper wrappers, do not have the durability of the book, and even today when one encounters copies in the archive the original covers and paratextual materials are often long discarded. As I will demonstrate with regards to the Tom Thumb biographies, the paratexts are an important resource for understanding the cultural contexts of Barnum's shows. Neglect is also due, as I have already suggested, to Barnum's preeminence as an autobiographer, which has occluded the biographies through which his own exhibitions were presented and remembered by his audiences. Furthermore, the increasing use of photography (as in the *cartes de visite*) to publicize freak shows, especially in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, has obscured the earlier biographical texts. In his history of the dime museum, Robert Bogan discusses how the freak show and photography flourished together after the Civil War, with some photographers even specializing in freak portraits.²⁶⁴ But in the period before photography supplanted the printed life, the presentation of living curiosities in narrative form was itself a kind of portraiture and image-making. As we will see with the Jenny Lind biographies, modern celebrity in America owes something to the rhetorical strategies that Barnum honed through the pamphlet lives of curiosities like Joice Heth and Tom Thumb.

This second half of the present chapter gives a series of short readings of the most interesting printed lives produced under Barnum's aegis; in almost every case the authorship of these texts is unknown but the regularity of format suggests a consistent formula—an account of the subject's social origins, a series of anecdotes emphasizing the subject's unique qualities, sporadic attention to the moral character of the subject, physical description, and always ending with an endorsement from newspapers and other public sources (including medical and scientific authorities) that attest to and justify the public's interest in getting a closer look. Supplementary material usually included a pictorial representation of the curiosity (wood and steel engravings), selections from stage performances and song repertoires, and, in the case of foreign or exotic persons, a general description of the country, climate, and cultures of foreign lands. I trace a history that begins with Joice Heth and continues with Tom Thumb; by 1850, with the Jenny Lind tour, Barnum had perfected the genre. But whether the subject is an aged slave, a dwarf, an opera singer, or a bearded woman, these biographies bring the subjects closer to the reader and make them comprehensible as both *outré* and familiar.

3.8 The Life of Joice Heth

When the sociologist of literature Leo Lowenthal described biography as composed of equal parts carnival freak show and Christian piety, he was perfectly describing a persistent feature of

²⁶³ Ann Fabian, "Amateur Authorship," *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, 407. On amateur authors see also Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth*, 39-42. The hawking of cheap pamphlets frequently occurs within the Barnum corpus of texts; see for example the figure of "Our Ned" in *Autobiography of Petite Bunkum*.

²⁶⁴ Robert Bogan, *The Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), 15

Barnum's printed lives.²⁶⁵ The human curiosities the showman put on display derived their distinctive features not simply from being grotesque but (just as importantly) from their ordinariness and quotidian properties. Freakery, after all, as a form of deviation implies a norm. In Victorian America, normative ideals could be understood within the fusion of popular strains of Protestantism and the emerging bourgeois lifestyles of a new middle-class; at the same time, Victorianism's bourgeois norms took root amid a great public interest in abnormal bodies. By mid-nineteenth-century, "the interest in freaks," Leslie Fiedler once observed, "reached a high point" in England and America.²⁶⁶ Barnum's museum became a site of public rituals (under the guise of entertainment) through which urban American audiences engaged in a collective act of looking at human curiosities.²⁶⁷ The printed biographies extended this encounter, as readers could ponder the extraordinary body long after they had left the museum.

With the 1835 Joice Heth pamphlet, Barnum's first biography set the pattern for the dialectic of familiarity and otherness that marks later attractions like "What Is It?" In the biography Heth is a mixture of the extraordinary and the everyday, at once a "living monument of antiquity" and strikingly contemporary (for her antebellum audiences) given her evangelical piety, her domesticity, and her habits of consumption (coffee, tobacco, whiskey, and a daily diet of "a little weak tea and corn bread, with rare cooked eggs").²⁶⁸ Biography helped secure public interest in Heth, and as such played a role in the formation of the technique and cultural style that Neil Harris has termed an "operational aesthetic." "It was during Joice Heth's tour," Harris writes, "that Barnum first realized that an exhibitor did not have to guarantee truthfulness; all he had to do was possess probability and invite doubt."²⁶⁹ The pamphlets were crucial here. In *The Life of Joice Heth* a mixture of reliable evidence and outlandish fact centers on Heth's aged body. She is humanized to a certain extent, especially in terms of her exaggerated piety that she performed by praying fervently in front of her audiences. But she is also marked as inhuman. Newspaper extracts included in the biography describe her as an "animated mummy," whose fingers "more resemble the claws of a bird of prey than human appendages." Like a forgotten heirloom, "she has been very much neglected, laying for years in an outer building, upon the naked floor."

These sentimentalized descriptions are framed in the pamphlet as a kind of humanitarian project—not mere entertainment—insofar as the narrative engages in a parody of abolitionist discourse. If enough copies are sold, readers were promised, Heth's surviving grandchildren could be purchased from slavery. "This work, together with what may be collected from her exhibition, after deducting expenses, is expressly for that purpose, and will be immediately be done whenever there can be realized the sum sufficient to do it." The writer of the biography imagines himself as a providential tool, "through the favor of the Lord, in opening a new channel through which might flow freely and effectually to those unfortunate beings, the glorious blessings derived from knowledge of the gospel." This rhetoric exemplifies the power of what the legal historian Elizabeth Clark has called the "evangelical framework" for ameliorating black suffering. "By the 1830s," Clark writes, "many Americans turned for guidance to the emotions over the intellect, identifying the moral sense more with feeling than with rational thought."²⁷⁰ The Heth biography extended this

²⁶⁵ Leo Lowenthal, "The Triumph of Mass Idols," *Literature, Society and Popular Culture*

²⁶⁶ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978), 15

²⁶⁷ See the essays in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Thompson (1996)

²⁶⁸ *The Life of Joice Heth* (1835)

²⁶⁹ Harris, *Humbug*, 23

²⁷⁰ Elizabeth Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History* 82.2 (1995), 477. See also Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Bender (1992).

emotional appeal and helped legitimize Barnum's racial spectacle by relying upon a vague concoction of piety, sympathy, and national memory.

Readers of these biographies, I argue, were faced with outlandish spectacles on the borders of recognizable humanity, only to discover that beneath this strangeness resided qualities of ordinary experience. Otherwise the sympathetic discourse described by Clark cannot work, as antebellum audiences needed a substratum of commonality—not just moral feelings, but also signs of quotidian life—through which a sympathetic bond could be sustained. This kind of bond could be sustained in the imaginary space of entertainment, and as entertainment it avoided the real consequences faced by the abolitionists. Just a few years after the Heth affair, the *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave* (1838) launched public outcry over the possibility that slaves might garner support in texts that might be nothing more than humbug.²⁷¹ Barnum's 1835 slave narrative is therefore an important point of intersection between what James Cook has termed the culture of "artful deception" and the abolitionist public sphere. Heth stands first in a series of promotional biographies that are a neglected aspect of Barnum's formidable cultural influence. It was through using *The Life of Joice Heth* as a promotional tool that Barnum discovered how a specific print genre could expand the range of his entertainments beyond the immediate sphere of the sideshow.

3.9 Barnum and Blackness: Blackface Minstrelsy in the Life of Charles S. Stratton

As the Heth affair demonstrates, Barnum's attitudes towards race were at bottom based on a principle of expediency. The humanitarian veneer used to sell Heth's performances was willingly cast aside when it was more effective to present her as a black spectacle ("My black beauty," he elsewhere called her, to "be commanded at my sovereign will and pleasure").²⁷² For the rest of Barnum's career race would have a persistent role in his public entertainments. One larger context for his racial politics is the institution of blackface minstrelsy. Following Heth's passing in 1836, Barnum proceeded to stage many minstrel shows in his early tours, even blacking himself up in one notorious anecdote recounted in the 1855 autobiography.²⁷³

Although the showman claimed during the Civil War to support the rights of African-Americans, these decisions really amounted to his sense of what the public wanted, hence the Janus-faced quality to his racial politics. Here Bourdieu's analysis of the social trajectory of the artist clarifies the contradictory positions. A trajectory is the diachronic movement of a social agent across the different synchronic states of the field in question, "a series of successively occupied positions by the same agent (or the same group) in a space which itself is constantly evolving and which is subject to incessant transformations."²⁷⁴ Specific positions within the field are "just so many *investments* and *moves* in social space, or more precisely, in the different successive states of the distribution structure of the different types of capital which are play in the field considered." In this sense Barnum is the American equivalent to the nineteenth-century French theater managers discussed in Bourdieu's sociology of culture. In terms of trajectory and expediency, such an agent could be racist, and support emancipation, depending upon the situation. Barnum's constant attention to the distribution of capital explains how he could take radically different positions on race. I emphasize this is a structural position—Barnum's plastic position within the field of culture—and not simply the tactics of a hypocrite. Although undoubtedly correct, accusing Barnum of hypocrisy risks masking a more complicated strategy with a moral valuation.

²⁷¹ Fabian, *Unvarnished Truth*, 94

²⁷² "The Adventures of an Adventurer" (1841), *Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*, 22

²⁷³ *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 189-190

²⁷⁴ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 301-302



Mr. Barnum makes a grand *burst*—with the whole company.

Figure 4. A caricature of Barnum as one of the curiosities. From “Original Comicalities,” *Graham’s American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* (June 1854)

These “merchants in the temple” of culture are for Bourdieu figures who shed light on the sociology of cultural production; through them

the logic of the economy is brought to the heart of the sub-field of production-for-fellow-producers; they need to possess, simultaneously, economic dispositions [...] and also properties close to those of the producers whose work they valorize and exploit.²⁷⁵

Mediating agents like Barnum are at the same time driven by the market while also sharing some of the properties of their performers. Antebellum print culture substantiates Bourdieu’s claim that the structural homologies and elective affinities between performers and their managers are encoded within cultural artifacts, which index and refract the properties of the field. My claim here is that through valorizing and exploiting Joice Heth, Tom Thumb, Jenny Lind, and others, Barnum himself assumed some of their qualities by way of continual association; likewise, the curiosities themselves could become extensions for his racism. Barnum understood the metonymic effect his museum had on his persona, noting in his autobiography that the showman “had also become a curiosity” at the American Museum. “If I showed myself about the Museum or wherever else I was known, I found eyes peering and fingers pointing at me; and could frequently overhear the remark, ‘There’s Barnum,’ ‘That’s old Barnum,’ etc.”²⁷⁶ Writing in 1851, the theater veteran William Northall concurs: Barnum is one of the “curiosities” at the museum.²⁷⁷ Close association between showman and

²⁷⁵ Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 39-40

²⁷⁶ *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 292

²⁷⁷ Northall, *Before and Behind the Curtain*, 158

curiosity entailed a metonymic substitution whereby the former took on some of the distinctions of his exhibitions. In a caricature included in *Graham's American Monthly Magazine*, the showman has become incorporated into the canon of freakery (Figure 4). His line of vision points directly at Joice Heth in the right corner, who is at once *marginal* in the organization of the figures in the image but also *central* to the entire scene, since it was with Heth that Barnum embarked upon his career. In this sense it is not at all a stretch to say that racial difference is at the root of Barnum's version of the dime museum. If we peer closer at this image of Heth, we notice that her lower torso resembles a fishtail. The reference here is to the Feejee Mermaid, and the suggestion is that all of Barnum's freaks, even his racialized performers, are staged concoctions.

Barnum's white performers drew upon their manager's racism to entertain audiences. Tom Thumb, for instance, assumed some of the attributes of the Barnum persona, including his racism. Thumb was Barnum in miniature. Writing in 1851, H.L. Stephens interpreted Thumb in precisely this fashion; the dwarf was a "satirical allegory" of the "trivial developments of the age," a "reduction ad absurdum" or mass culture's awarding of "merit to success."²⁷⁸ Barnum encouraged this identification; according to Leslie Fiedler, the showman "dressed Tom in clothes identical to his own, perhaps as a kind of joke on himself" on the occasion of their historic 1844 performance before Queen Victoria.²⁷⁹ Unlike Heth or the Feejee Mermaid, Thumb was strikingly "normal" in appearance, apart from his small size. His public appeal involved identification with his audiences, often through racism. "He was the furthest thing possible from a monster," writes Neil Harris, and "crowds identified with him, rather than against him."²⁸⁰ His racism is preserved in the Thumb biographies, a series of pamphlet lives that make palpable Barnum's connections to blackface minstrelsy.²⁸¹ Few images or anecdotes survive of Thumb's blackface performances, which is why the pamphlet biographies hold a particularly important documentary place in the Barnum archive. The popular image of Thumb's childish demeanor and comic persona has skewed our memory away from the aggression in his performances. *Sketch of the Life [...] of Charles S. Stratton* (1846), a biography frequently reprinted over the course of Thumb's career, concludes its narrative with a compilation of the songs performed in the dwarf's shows. Three of the songs included were among the most well-known minstrel tunes of the period: "Old Dan Tucker," "Lucy Long," and "Dandy Jim."²⁸² This evidence supports Eric Lott's argument that Barnum was central in expanding the popularity of the minstrel circuit, since the American Museum gave legitimacy to blackface by placing it in a middle-class venue. "It was Barnum's use of such appalling spectacles," Lott writes, "that the tastes of his plebeian audiences were represented—in the sense of both satisfying their desires and of raising them to public view."²⁸³

The spectacle of the diminutive Thumb as a spokesman for white prejudice seems to have been a source of amusement for Barnum, who gleefully reported (in travel letters published in the *New York Atlas*) a charged encounter between the showman, his protégé, and a black Briton:

Very few negroes are seen in London, and when seen at all they generally walk arm in arm with a white person of the opposite sex. A negro came into the General's exhibition the other night with a well dressed white woman on his arm. The darkey was dressed off in great style, with gold chains, rings, pings &c., (niggers always like

²⁷⁸ Stephens, *Comic Natural History*, 31

²⁷⁹ Fiedler, *Freaks*, 65

²⁸⁰ Harris, *Humbug*, 49

²⁸¹ On minstrelsy, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995)

²⁸² *Sketch of the Life, Personal Appearance, Character and Manners of Charles S. Stratton, the Man in Miniature* (1846), 16-18

²⁸³ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 75-77

jewels,) and his lady love was apparently quite fond of him. I made General Tom Thumb sing all the “nigger songs” he could think of, and dance Lucy Long and several “Wirginny breakdowns.” I then asked the General what the negroes called him when he travelled south. “The called me little massa,” replied the General, “and they always took their hats off, too.” The amalgamating darkey did not like this allusion to his “brack bredren ob de south,” nor did he relish the General’s songs about Dandy Jim, who was “de finest nigger in de country, O,” and who trapped his pantaloons so fine when “to see Miss Dinah he did go.” The General enjoyed the joke, and frequently pointed his finger at the negro, much to the discomfiture of “de colored gemman.”²⁸⁴

In this appalling scene Thumb functions as a kind of appendage (literally, as a pointing finger) for Barnum’s racism. Two of the minstrel songs mentioned in the anecdote (Dandy Jim, Lucy Long) are straight out of the repertoire from Thumb’s biography, confirming that the minstrel show was an integral part of his performances. Clearly, Barnum was in on the act. In the passage above, it is the showman who provokes Thumb to insult “de colored gemman” with the racist songs.

Barnum’s trip to Europe with Thumb was an occasion to showcase American racism. While in London, the showman’s friend Albert Smith composed a play specifically for Thumb. In *Hop-‘O-My-Thumb, or the Seven League Boots* (1846), Thumb greets a king, who asks the dwarf “what can you do?”

Hop. Oh, anything. (*He advances and speaks to Orchestra.*)
 Just play a nigger air.
 Now look, your Majesty, I’ll make you stare.
 SONG.—[sung by General Thumb]
 “Lucy Long.”
 Oh! if you will listen to me.
 I will sing you a little song.
 It’s all about my sweetheart,
 The lovely Lucy Long.
 So take your time Miss Lucy,
 Miss Lucy, Lucy Long. (*Nigger dance.*)
 All. (*at the end.*) Bravo! Bravo!²⁸⁵

In the play, Stratton concludes his performance of the minstrel tune by breaking into a hornpipe dance. In moments such as this we can see that a significant part of the dwarf’s popular appeal stemmed from his facility in fusing American blackface with English folk traditions. Barnum’s European tour with Thumb is therefore an important moment in the transatlantic story of the minstrel show. “He’s really very cunning,” replies the king in response to Thumb’s spectacle. Crowds enthusiastically responded to Thumb’s negro tunes—a fact recorded in the play’s script by the “bravos” concluding the song.

In sum Thumb’s participation in minstrel traditions is an important element of his popular appeal. As late as 1856, in a stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* performed in Barnum’s Lecture Room, Stratton performed in blackface. The printed lives preserve and codify this part of the performances by including Thumb’s minstrel songs in the appendix to his life. Minstrelsy

²⁸⁴ *New York Atlas*, 21 July, 1844. These letters, known as Barnum’s “European Correspondence,” are excerpted in Cook, *Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*, 69

²⁸⁵ Albert Smith, *Hop-‘O-My-Thumb* (1846), 10-11

was part of what made Stratton appealing for audiences beyond the initial surprise of seeing a dwarf; the songs kept audiences coming back for more. As such they are a case of the shuttling between the extraordinary and the everyday I see as a consistent pattern in Barnum's spectacles. Drawing out the racist dimensions of Tom Thumb's shows clarifies how Barnum continued to emphasize the mockery and display of black bodies well after the Joice Heth phenomenon was over. The showman even offered to pay the ex-fugitive slave Anthony Burns to appear at the museum and tell his story:

Immediately after Burns recovered his freedom, the great showman, Barnum, addressed a letter to one of his friends offering him \$500 if he would take his stand in the Museum at New York, and repeat his story to visitors for five weeks. When Burns was made to comprehend the nature of this proposal, he rejected it with indignation. "He wants to show me like a monkey!" said Burns.²⁸⁶

Had Barnum managed to hire Burns, the showman surely would have printed off some copies of the ex-slave's story to sell a souvenir pamphlet to curious viewers drawn to the spectacle.

3.10 The Many Lives of Jenny Lind

The Jenny Lind tour is a watershed moment in the emergence of mass culture in antebellum America, as the concerts put on by Barnum were the most publicized, most highly attended, and expensive musical performances the nation had seen. As I already noted they were part of his strategic transformation into a manager of respectable entertainment.²⁸⁷ At this time drinking and lewd behavior were strictly proscribed at the museum. With the introduction of the "Lecture Room" Barnum staged plays such as *The Drunkard* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This new moral regime took aim at illicit activities such as prostitution.²⁸⁸ But the racial hierarchies I've traced with regards to Joice Heth and Tom Thumb continued with Lind, albeit in subtler form. Lind partly appealed to white audiences across class boundaries, according to Lawrence Levine, insofar as her vocal talents were attributed to her "northern European origins."²⁸⁹ Relations between the young singer and the impresario called forth jokes that played upon black stereotypes. Rumors of sexual relations between Lind and Barnum were couched in popular texts through the tropes of blackface minstrelsy: "What is de reason dat Jenny Lind and Barnum would neber quarrel?" "Ha! Ha! Doctor, can't tell dat." "Well I tell you. Jenny Lind was always for-giving, and Barnum was always for-getting."²⁹⁰ For the most part, however, the Lind tour distanced itself from any kind of behavior that did not conform to Lind's Victorian demeanor.

Barnum's publicity campaign made much of Lind's biography. In 1850 Lind's American tour was anticipated by a slew of cheap printed lives of the Swedish Nightingale, with titles such as George Foster's *Memoir of Jenny Lind*, G.C. Rosenberg's *Life of Jenny Lind*, Nathaniel Parker Willis' *Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind*, and S.P. Avery's *The Life and Genius of Jenny Lind*. All of this promotional material drew heavily from English newspaper reviews of Lind's European performances. Musical programs distributed at Lind's concerts included biographical sketches of the singer. Shorter versions of Lind's life story were printed in newspapers and magazines to ensure

²⁸⁶ Stevens, Charles Emory, *Anthony Burns: a History* (1856), 216

²⁸⁷ See also Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, chapter 2

²⁸⁸ Claudia D. Johnson, "That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century American Theaters," *Victorian America*, ed. Howe (1976). Barnum's publications declared that the museum would be a place where genteel men could "take their wives and daughters to a theatre without the constant apprehension of pollution." *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese*, (1850), 202

²⁸⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), 219

²⁹⁰ *Christy's and White's Ethiopian Melodies* (1850), 70

widespread circulation of her tour.²⁹¹ Barnum's imprimatur accompanied many of these texts, as in his opening dedication to Rosenberg's pamphlet. "I have never read anything," he declares, "which so completely puts us in possession of all the interesting details of her life as the work before me." These texts emphasized the selling point of Lind's character was her disarming normalcy. The illustrated covers of these cheap books were in this regard as important as the stories themselves. Every biography of the singer included at least one wood engraving or pictorial representation, resulting in a curious paradox: these representations of an ordinary woman often bore little resemblance among themselves. S.P. Avery's profusely illustrated biography of Lind for instance seems to cast aside any sense of internal consistency between the Lind pictures.²⁹² Like the Barnum persona, Lind was the site of a typographic pluralization.

Sol Smith, one of Barnum's many friends on the theater circuit, recalled that by comparison with the showman's many projects, "not one required the exercise of so much humbuggery as the Jenny Lind concerts."²⁹³ The biographies were a prominent part of this strategy. In a review of the Foster and Rosenberg books, the *Nassau Literary Magazine* complained that the pamphlets "steaming from brain and press" were likely a "manufacture of Barnum" and had very little to say about the singer that was not culled from the British press.²⁹⁴ George Foster, for instance, stole much of his narrative from an English book entitled *Lindiana*.²⁹⁵ This writer justified the recycled material by arguing that the American public could only form a "proper estimate of the peculiar powers and style of the artist" by exposure to European criticism.²⁹⁶ Such a strategy, as Bourdieu once argued, manufactures prestige out of cultural production, inviting audiences and publics to "join in the game of images reflected *ad infinitum* which eventually come to exist as real in a universe where reflection is the only reality."²⁹⁷ The biographies offered readers a pre-formed set of judgments about the quality of Lind's singing. As Barnum later mused in his autobiography, the recycling of foreign "criticism in American papers, including an account of the enthusiasm which prevailed at her trans-Atlantic concert, had the desired effect."²⁹⁸ A lithograph from 1850 richly dramatizes the effects of Barnum's promotions on his audiences. In "The Second Deluge," with Barnum ensconced in the tree on the upper right as a kind of man-monkey, a swarming audience of freakish concertgoers, many with animal heads, jostle for position to see Lind in performance. Such attempts at satirizing the success of the Lind tour with negative appraisals—another example is the poetry collection *Mahomet; or, The unveiled Prophet of Inistan*—only further served to spread Lind's fame to urban readers.²⁹⁹

Like Barnum's fame, Lind's persona also circulated and was entextualized beyond her specific person to embrace a variety of objects. Rosenberg noted in his biography that Lind's name was attached to a slew of commodities: scarves, cravats, gloves, polkas. "Her name had invaded everything."³⁰⁰ With Horkheimer and Adorno, we might say that Lind is a historical example of how mass culture fabricates norms of personality, transforming the self into a commodity.³⁰¹ In person and in print, Lind's image was carefully staged as the ideal Victorian woman whose persona was balanced between artlessness and artfulness, the trained singer and the natural person. For

²⁹¹ Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 50-51

²⁹² S.P. Avery, *The Life and Genius of Jenny Lind, with Beautiful Engravings* (1850)

²⁹³ Sol Smith, *The Theatrical Journey-Work and Anecdotal Recollections of Sol Smith* (1854), 9

²⁹⁴ "Literary Notices," *The Nassau Literary Magazine* (June 1850)

²⁹⁵ *Lindiana: An Interesting Narrative of the Life of Jenny Lind* (1847)

²⁹⁶ George Foster, *Memoir of Jenny Lind* (1850), 24

²⁹⁷ Bourdieu, "Intellectual Field and Creative Project," 103

²⁹⁸ *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 306

²⁹⁹ *Mahomet; or, The unveiled Prophet of Inistan: A Bouquet for Jenny Lind* (1850)

³⁰⁰ C.G. Rosenberg, *The Life of Jenny Lind* (1850), 37

³⁰¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. 2002), 136

Rosenberg, Lind shuttles between a “remarkably unassuming countenance” and an extraordinary “range of character.”³⁰² Foster drew a similarly paradoxical portrait, seeking on the one hand to narrate a “history of her artistic life” while repeatedly emphasizing her “intrinsic worth of heart and delicacy of mind.”³⁰³

The preferred terms—artless, demure, purity, delicacy, sensibility—index the ideal qualities of the ordinary sentimental woman of the period, even as Lind’s skill and talent signaled something unattainable for her admirers. A recurring subplot in nearly every life of Lind revolves around her attempts to escape celebrity and, by way of artifice, disguise herself as an anonymous, ordinary young woman. Despite the numerous illustrations and portraits of the singer that Barnum circulated, Lind was strikingly nondescript, lacking any distinguishing signs of beauty. Nathaniel Parker Willis, who accompanied Barnum on tour, noted her plainness: “I noticed, by the way, that the engraved likenesses, which stick in every shop-window, had not made the public acquainted with her physiognomy.”³⁰⁴ Barnum recognized this conundrum. In his preface to Rosenberg’s biography the showman emphasizes the authenticity of a high-quality steel engraving as an important selling point: “The beautiful Portrait on steel of this distinguished songstress [...] is a wonderful exact copy of the best likenesses ever published of her, and is amply worth four times the trifling sum charged for your book.”³⁰⁵ The heavy use of superlatives in Barnum’s attestation, however, subtly betrays the fact that every image of Lind was an idealized abstraction of Victorian womanhood.

By examining the Lind biographies I think we see one mechanism through which celebrity became an effect of antebellum print culture. Earlier biographies written for Americans, such as those I discussed in Chapter Two, emphasized didactic character, exemplarity, and republican virtue. The Lind biographies, by contrast, made celebrity an end in itself, reversing the order of priorities in biographical discourse. Stated differently, character was instrumentalized in the Lind biographies, as Barnum later made clear:

I may as well here state, that although I relied prominently upon Jenny Lind’s reputation as a great musical artiste, I also took largely into my estimate of her success with all classes of the American public, her character for extraordinary benevolence and generosity. Without this peculiarity in her disposition, I never would have dared make the engagement which I did, as I felt sure that there were multitudes of individuals in America who would be prompted to attend her concerts by this feeling alone.³⁰⁶

The biographies cultivated this impression of moral distinction among potential concertgoers. As a rhetorician Barnum understood publicity and celebrity in terms of the rhetorical figure of polyptoton: print puts the subject *before* the public *before* they are seen in public. Through the printed lives Lind was “effectually brought before the public before they had seen her. She appeared in the presence of a jury already excited to enthusiasm in her behalf.” “Biographies of the Swedish Nightingale were largely circulated, in precisely this way, and “printer’s ink was employed, in every possible form, to put and keep Jenny Lind before the people.”³⁰⁷

³⁰² Rosenberg, *Life of Jenny Lind*, 6, 79

³⁰³ Foster, *Memoir of Jenny Lind*, 3, 5

³⁰⁴ Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Famous Persons and Places* (1854), 416

³⁰⁵ Rosenberg, *Life of Jenny Lind*,

³⁰⁶ *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 307

³⁰⁷ *ibid*, 316

3.11 The Later Biographies: Ordinary Freaks

So far I have shown how three very different performers—Joice Heth, Tom Thumb, and Jenny Lind—were the subjects of promotional biographies that utilized a common rhetorical strategy of peeling away the extraordinary veneer to reveal hints of a common humanity that audiences could identify with. The shared format of these biographies reinforced the continuities between the performers: similar title pages, colorful wrappers, advertisements for Barnum’s museum, recycled periodical notices, “authenticating” documentation, and anecdotes from past performances.

The cookie-cutter aesthetic made these pamphlets repeatable when applied to later curiosities. Tom Thumb’s biography, for instance, became the template for the next dwarf in Barnum’s employ, an even shorter man named Commodore Nutt. The two dwarves often appeared in public together, with Nutt even serving as best man in Thumb’s 1862 “Fairy Wedding.”³⁰⁸ That same year Barnum issued a pamphlet life entitled *History of Commodore Nutt*. The text of this pamphlet is a nearly verbatim recitation of *Sketch of the Life [...] of Charles S. Stratton*. “Since the earliest days of historical record,” opens the Nutt pamphlet,

there has existed, among all races of men, a common average as to height, size and proportion, and so little has it been found to vary, that we might refer the dimensions of our race to an almost universal standard, regarding striking and casual deviations from the usual order of things as only exceptions to the general rule.³⁰⁹

The narrator’s emphasis on the relationship between “striking and casual deviations” and a “common average” supports my argument about Barnum’s production of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Time and again the Barnum pamphlets open with an emphasis on striking deviations, only to defuse that otherness by highlighting the ordinary and the humane.

The repeated use of such formulae invite further inquiry into their place in a commodity culture. “The biographers,” according to Leo Lowenthal, venture into the unknown and fantastic elements of life only to return with “an herb and bottle collection.”³¹⁰ As we have seen repeatedly in Barnum’s rhetoric, superlatives abound in these texts, which for Lowenthal marks the intrusion of commodity fetishism into the norms of personality. “People are described as ‘unique’ in terms of sameness, and everybody is marked by a pricetag and a sales plug making such outrageous claims that no single person in reality shows any specificity because the distinction of uniqueness is conferred on all.”³¹¹ The *Biography of Madame Fortune Clofullia, the Bearded Lady* (1854) is full of this kind of overstated uniqueness. Simply by having a full beard, Clofullia is celebrated as an “astonishing phenomenon,” “one of the most remarkable freaks of nature ever witnessed,” “the greatest and most wonderful of nature’s singularities.” This particular biography trucks in a kind of mindless pleasure, as evidenced by the logically impossible inclusion of an engraving of Clofullia standing between her two children, despite the fact that we are told in the biography that the son

³⁰⁸ For a literary take on this media stunt, see the pamphlet *The Pygmies and the Priests: A Ballad of the Times of Enchantment* (1862)

³⁰⁹ *History of Commodore Nutt* (1862), 3. Compare with the opening lives of the 1846 Thumb biography: “Ever since the commencement of the world, there has existed, amongst all races of men, a common average as to height, size and proportion, and so little has it been found to vary, that we might refer the dimensions of our race to an almost universal standard, regarding striking and casual deviations form the usual order of things, as only exceptions to the general rule” (*Sketch of the Life* 1).

³¹⁰ Lowenthal, “The Biographical Fashion,” 197

³¹¹ *ibid*, 199

was born six weeks *after* the death of Clofullia's first child. Suitably enough, the biography concludes its narrative in tautology:

Should this biography fall into the hands of any incredulous person, let him call at the Museum, where the BEARDED LADY will be most happy to see him, and where, for a trifle, he may purchase these lines, read them over at his leisure, and satisfy himself of the correctness of the Bearded Lady's statements.³¹²

Only a hack could have carelessly suggested that after reading the pamphlet we should go to the museum and purchase the pamphlet again.

I've argued that the extraordinary unravels into the ordinary and mundane in these pamphlets, but the process works in both directions. The two terms in the opposition, in other words, are relational. Distinctions, Bourdieu suggests, are "nothing in fact but *difference*, a gap, a distinctive feature, in short, a *relational* property existing only in and through its relation with other properties."³¹³ The life of Sylvia Hardy is a case in point, a woman who Barnum made famous simply by virtue of being tall. Like all of the biographical subjects in these texts, Hardy's life is one of passivity. Lowenthal's analysis of biography as a mass cultural phenomenon emphasizes the problem of reification in ways directly applicable to Barnum's archive. "The individual who is fettered by these paraphernalia is reduced to a typographic element which winds its way through the narrative as a convenient device for arranging material."³¹⁴ The narratives I am examining here revel in this passivity. Witness Hardy: "At thirteen, she was tall; at fourteen, she was a novelty; at fifteen, she was truly a wonder."³¹⁵ The syntax of this statement reinforces an overriding sense of passivity; the physical oddness of Barnum's performers—in other words, their *distinction*—is *not* the result of human activity (even as it *is* an effect of discourse). The result, as Lowenthal makes clear, is that "history and time have become reified in biography—as in a kind of petrified anthropology."³¹⁶

³¹² *Biography of Madame Fortune Clofullia, the Bearded Lady* (1854), 13

³¹³ Bourdieu, "First Lecture. Social Space and Symbolic Space" (1991), 631

³¹⁴ Lowenthal, "The Biographical Fashion," 190

³¹⁵ *The Life of Miss Sylvia Hardy, the celebrated Maine giantess, the wonder of America: about eight feet in height and weighing nearly 400 pounds* (1856), 14

³¹⁶ Lowenthal, "The Biographical Fashion," 190

Chapter Four:
Annexation, Dismemberment, Disavowal
(Biography and Visual Culture of the U.S.-Mexican War)

4.1 The Leg I left Behind Me

Two conflicting desires animated the cultural experience of the U.S. nation in the war with Mexico (1846-1848): annexation and dismemberment, the urge to attach bodies and lands to the white republic and a parallel desire to tear those bodies and lands to pieces. Throughout the American invasion, politicians and commentators debated just how much land should be incorporated into the United States once the conflict was over, ranging from those who advocated claiming “All of Mexico,” to more reserved voices who feared the consequences of racial contamination that would necessarily result from incorporating a people of mixed-race ancestry into the nation.³¹⁷ In the popular culture of the day, this political debate was refracted into figures and images that sought to annex, or to dismember, the Mexican people. Annexation, translated into tropes of sexual conquest. In this version, Mexico was feminized and stylized as an object of exotic desire for the white republic. In contrast, images and figurative expressions of dismemberment followed a supplementary desire to tear the Mexican body to pieces. Both tropes appear throughout the literature and visual culture of the war, and they could operate together, as in the following popular tune from the *Rough and Ready Songster* (1848):

Throughout de land dar is a cry
And folks all know de reason why,
Shy Mexico’s two letted b’ars,
Am ‘tacking Uncle Sammy’s stars, [...]
Den march away, bold sons of freedom,
You’re de boys can skin and bleed ‘em.
Dey’re kicken up gunpowderation,
About de Texas annexation,
Since Mexico makes sich ado,
We’ll flog her and annex her too. [...]
Little Texas when quite in her teens,
Did give ‘em a dose of leading *beans*,
An’ now old Sammy is calling out,
Dey’ll catch salt-petre sour crout.
Den march away, &c.
Since Texas cut off Sant Anna’s peg,
We’ll *Amputate* Ampudia’s leg,
An’ so his carcass de air shan’t spoil
We’ll boil it in his own hot oil.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ According to Amy Greenberg, the year 1848 “marked the first time that the fear of incorporating supposedly ‘inferior races’ into the United States limited the nation’s territorial expansion.” Greenberg, *A Wicked War* (2012). Despite not having annexed the entire Mexican nation, the territory gained from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo would include the states of Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and New Mexico.

³¹⁸ “Uncle Sam and Mexico,” *Rough and Ready Songster* (1848), 91-92. The song is an adaptation of the minstrel tune “Old Dan Tucker.”



Figure 5. *Santa Anna Declining a Hasty Plate of Soup at Cerro Gordo*. Lithograph, published by H.R. Robinson (1847). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-13650). On the bottom right, two soldiers discover the general's prosthetic leg, along with a treasure chest full of gold. On the bottom left, a U.S. soldier confiscates Santa Anna's "best fighting cock," in an act of symbolic emasculation of the Mexican general.

Envisioning Mexico as an alluring yet timid ("shy") senorita, American popular culture fantasized about "flogging" their neighbor to the south and accordingly framed the conquest of land in sexual terms. As Shelly Streeby has recently demonstrated in the case of numerous popular romances and novelizations of the war, "relationships between U.S. soldiers and Mexican women [...] are used to figure possible postwar relationships between nations."³¹⁹ According to this kind of

³¹⁹ Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002), 21. Streeby's study is the most compelling work by a literary historian to relate the Mexican war to racial categories that operated in American popular culture. While I am especially indebted to Streeby's attention to the interrelations between the urban print cultures of New York and Philadelphia to the sites of empire-building in the American west and Mexico, my chapter departs from *American Sensations* in its greater attention to a specific genre, biography, to which Streeby gives no attention. By focusing on how biographical propaganda worked in tandem with the visual culture of the war, I seek to open a new site for ideological analysis that builds upon Streeby's insistence that the "mode of production" of popular war literature "has the effect of foregrounding the gaps, contradictions, and seamy underside of the ideological projects of white settler colonialism and Manifest Destiny" (40). For a view of the war as structuring both the far-flung scenes of empire and the private sphere of women's domesticity at the heart of American society, see Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002). The foundational cultural history of the American perception of the war with Mexico is Robert Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (1985). For a

psychoanalytic analysis, the many expressions of interest by soldiers, journalists, and commentators (including authors of fiction) in the allure of the Mexican female body offered a displaced version of incorporating all of Mexico into the U.S. political body. But when this attraction drew the white republic too dangerously close to the specter of miscegenation, as it in fact did, the Mexican body (particularly that of the male body—but as we have seen in *The Rough and Ready Songster*, women could be “flogged” as well) became the site of punishment, dismemberment, and amputation. The historical basis for this strange fascination with dismemberment in American culture arose from popular interest in the General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who wore a prosthetic cork leg to replace the one he had previously lost fighting the French in 1838. In the Battle of Cerro Gordo, American soldiers under the command of Winifred Scott captured the cork leg. The debacle became a subject of humor in popular prints such as *Santa Anna Declining a Hasty Plate of Soup at Cerro Gordo*, where the leg is taken, along with Santa Anna’s “best fighting cock” and a war chest worth eleven thousand dollars in gold (Figure 5). As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, the New York press joked about the possibility of Santa Anna’s leg being exhibited to paying customers at Barnum’s American Museum.

This comic event inspired a song composed by U.S. soldiers that adapted the popular tune “The Girl I Left Behind Me” into “The Leg I Left Behind Me.”³²⁰ In this example images of sexual attachment and corporeal detachment haunt one another. Leaving their sweethearts at home, U.S. soldiers had sexual relations with the camp women and citizens of Mexico, which the popular culture of the period understood as “annexation.” At the same time, the experience of the war for many soldiers, as well as for American readers, involved memories of how they joked about Santa Anna’s lost leg, a comic figure who provided an outlet for the desire to dismember Mexico, as well as being yet another symbolic expression of the emasculated Mexican leader. All of these instances of popular culture fixated on depicting the Mexican as inept and inferior to the white republic. As the song I quoted from *The Rough and Ready Songster* makes clear, Americans playfully extended the figure of the dismembered Mexican general into fantasies of domination. In *The Rough and Ready Songster*, the verb “amputate” conveniently rhymes with the surname of the Mexican commander Pedro de Ampudia, but the violence envisioned for him goes beyond the price of a severed limb to include boiling his carcass in hot oil. Clearly, the cultural dimension of the U.S. invasion unleashed a host of racist, misogynist, religiously-motivated, and class-based antagonisms towards the Mexican people. Critics of the war such as Albert Gallatin pointed out how the “splendid and almost romantic successes” of the U.S. invasion caused the American people to forget the flimsy justification for Polk’s war and to further imagine that those successes “gave the nation a right to dismember Mexico, and to appropriate to themselves that which did not belong to them.”³²¹ The racial ideology of white herrenvolk democracy, where America’s Anglo-Saxon blood triumphs over Mexico’s mixed (and therefore flawed) ancestry, for Gallatin, “is but a pretext for covering and justifying unjust usurpation and unbounded ambition.”³²²

recent historical overview of the conflict that challenges the assumption that Americans at home and in combat unilaterally supported the invasion, see Greenberg, *A Wicked War*. For a literary analysis of the U.S.-Mexican War that stresses the war’s continued resonance with contemporary ambiguities over Mexican-American identities in the context of globalization and transnationalism, see Jaime Javier Rodriguez, *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War: Narrative Time Identity* (2010).

³²⁰ Johannsen, *Halls of the Montezumas*, 240

³²¹ Albert Gallatin, *Peace with Mexico* (1847), 11-12

³²² *ibid*, 14

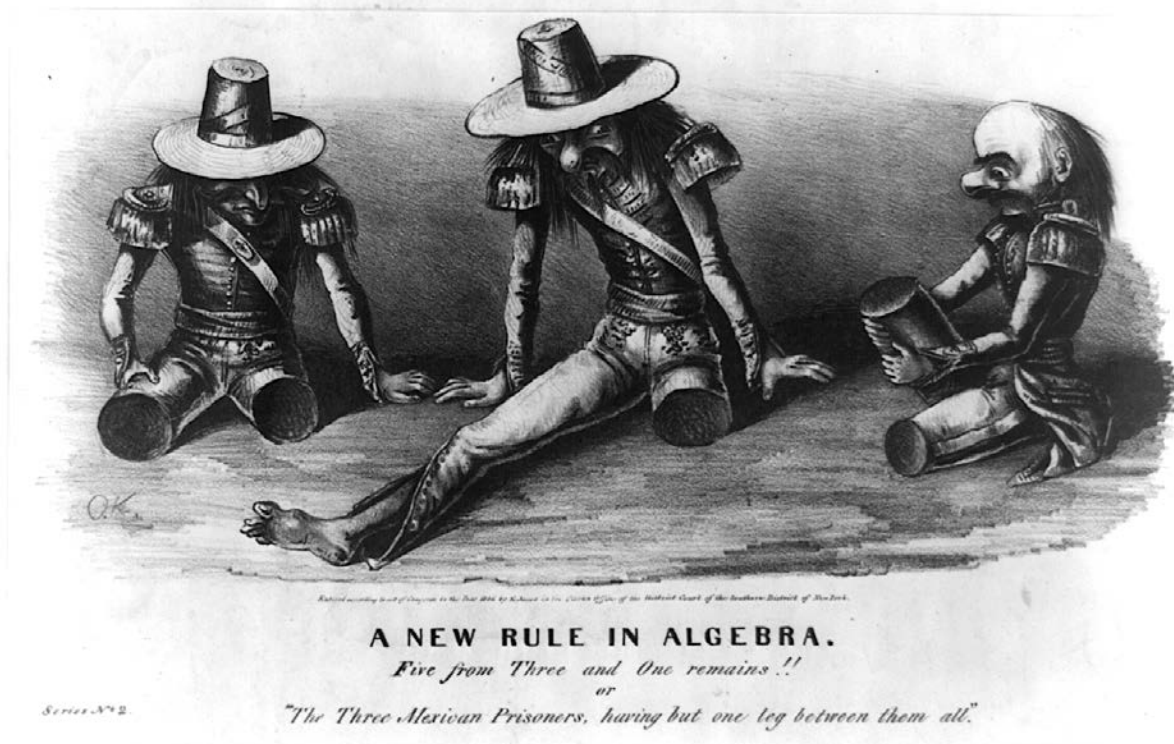


Figure 6. *A New Rule in Algebra. Five from Three and One remains!! Or "The Three Mexican Prisoners, having but one leg between them all."* Lithograph, published by E. Jones and G.W. Newman (1846). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-9915).

The expanding marketplace for images in 1840s America popularized—and was the condition of possibility for—these tropes of attraction, repulsion, and invasion, allowing them to take root in the popular consciousness with regards to the Mexican political body. In *A New Rule in Algebra* (Figure 6), a lithograph published not long after the war's outbreak, three Mexican soldiers stare down in amazement at their missing lower limbs. Marionette-like, their exaggerated facial features and scrawny bodies symbolize the widely held and racially-motivated assumption that the Mexican nation was unfit for republican self-rule. The absence of blood and gore in an image of amputation is striking; it conveys the message that the war was somehow not a violent affair, despite its violent acts, and was somehow not waged against a completely human foe, but instead was more of a patriotic romp against a nation of marionettes that could be disposed of at will. Here we see that the visceral details of dismemberment as they would have appeared in reality could be disguised and muted through the control of representation in a specific artistic medium. As Rick Stewart has observed of the many lithographic prints circulated to commemorate the war, images from this period tended to hide the grisly details of carnage that resulted from the U.S. invasion by abstracting the war's visual representation into landscape views that evoked the grandeur of historical paintings.³²³ Images of humiliated Mexican soldiers like that of *A New Rule in Algebra* did occasionally enter the visual field, but rarely did the abuses of the U.S. volunteers—who committed countless predatory acts on Mexican civilians to while away their time when not in combat—make it

³²³ Rick Stewart, "Artists and Printmakers of the Mexican War," *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (1989, ed. Sandweiss, Stewart, and Huseman), 14

into the visual record.³²⁴ By focusing solely on the comic element of the amputations and the foolish Mexican soldiers' own self-regard and amazement, *A New Rule in Algebra* functions as a powerful instance of ideology and propaganda, displacing and removing the cause of these mutilations (the American army) so as to put the responsibility for the trauma onto the victims themselves.

Not every lithograph was as open in its attachment to cartoon violence as *A New Rule in Algebra*, and not every printed book was as vocal in its declaration of sovereignty over the physical integrity of the Mexican people as *The Rough and Ready Songster*. Nevertheless, annexation and dismemberment were latent and widespread desires that frequently slipped past the ideological façade. In terms of my own intervention in recent literary scholarship pioneered by Shelly Streeby, I focus on how the symbolic expression of these tropes extended beyond dime novels and sentimental fictions. Unlike fictional treatments of the war, I argue that the visual culture of illustration (in mediums such as lithography and wood engraving) and the many popular histories and biographies of the war have an *immediacy* of ideological impact, since they functioned as *news* and as topical *commemorations*, in ways that the novels could never attain. The present chapter, therefore, grapples with questions of ideology and rhetorical strategies of containment more than my previous chapters. Relating the concerns of personal narratives with the visual representations of the war, I'm interested here in how the literature of the Mexican War effectively screened out the troubling consequences of its violent acts by hiding American culpability. We see one version of this containment in the bloodless, clean, and almost surgical treatment of dismemberment in *A New Rule in Algebra*. But personal narratives also necessarily grappled with the causes and consequences of violence, or more accurately, they dealt with the horrors of war by relegating those thorny questions to silences and gaps in the written record. As Paul Foos observes, "in the narrative 'histories' of the most articulate volunteers there are profound and troubled silences concerning the ad hoc and self-serving practices in this war for empire. Mexican War diarists and correspondents invoked 'honor' and democratic fellowship to cover or mitigate the crimes of their fellows, recreating the disjunction between propaganda and action that mirrored the larger reality of American society."³²⁵ Rhetorically, this means that the war narratives leave out the grisly details that the texts nevertheless rationalize and defend, resulting in a classic instance of what psychoanalytical criticism understands by the concept of disavowal. Personal narratives of the conflict, in other words, repudiate actions that they cannot directly acknowledge. As a literary critic, the challenge for my analysis is to identify how those repudiations are also a kind of reverse acknowledgment. Why else would they so frequently defend something that supposedly did not happen? "To deny something in one's judgment," Sigmund Freud famously argues, "is at bottom the same thing as to say: 'That is something that I would rather repress.'"³²⁶ Repudiation acts as a form of acknowledgement in the texts I examine in this chapter.

My interest in the ways such written documents intersect with the visual iconography of the war is not accidental but rather stems from their common link in the publishing industry; in fact, popular authors such as John Frost used words and images to satisfy the interest of the American public in the war. A prolific writer and rabid nationalist, Frost entered the ranks of the war's propagandists with two books, a collected biography entitled *The Mexican War and its Warriors*, and an illustrated book entitled *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War*. As we will see, Frost's own

³²⁴ On U.S. military abuses in Mexico during this period, see Paul Foos, *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (2002). As Foos explains, the major distinction in the U.S. military during the early nineteenth century was between the regular army and the volunteers. Volunteers were especially prone to violations of camp discipline and were responsible for many war crimes against Mexican civilians.

³²⁵ Foos, *Short Offhand Killing Affair*, 84

³²⁶ Freud, "On Negation," 214

publisher argued in a private letter that illustrated books, popular history, and biography aimed for the same market of patriotic readers. Subscription agents—travelling booksellers in the mold of Parson Weems, but updated for the times with attractive salesman’s dummies to help make the sale—peddled illustrated books and biographical accounts side-by-side. As with Chapter Two, I take the evidence for this array of commodities (a kind of menu, if you will, for potential consumers) as proof of a kind of emergent literary field of material texts. Examining an array of propagandistic biographies in the context of the period’s visual culture, my argument in this chapter is that ideological pressure was applied to both text and image to mitigate the social experience of the war with Mexico, effectively screening-out its more unsavory events and consequences. In keeping with my focus throughout the dissertation on the material circumstances of textual production, the effort to transform the war into a palatable commodity (printed books and illustrations) meant that ideology extended to the material features of the books themselves. In illustrated histories such as George Kendall’s *War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, the presentation of large, colorful lithographs and accompanying narrative description was mediated through the book’s bibliographic format, in which the volume could be sold either singly, as a set of prints suitable for framing; or bound as a folio-sized book. Through these distinct instantiations of a particular text, the presentation of the war in particular book formats fostered an appreciation of U.S. nationalism and imperialism in the form of the book as souvenir.

Here we see a further development of the phenomenon I examined in Chapter Two, where publishers made use of different formats to sell narratives of American nationalism to a broad spectrum of readers, from elites to middling sorts. In the texts examined in the present chapter, now souvenirs of U.S. empire would be circulated across the social spectrum to celebrate the American victory and the nation’s hegemonic status on the continent, from expensive texts such as Kendall’s lavishly-illustrated collection to cheap, pocket-sized mementoes such as the *Rough and Ready Songster*. As with the biographical narratives of the American founders I discuss in Chapter Two, these souvenirs of imperialist expansion asserted an ideological consensus of an American people who supported the war through bibliographic formats and commodities that subtly reaffirmed the emerging class differentiations of antebellum America. By foregrounding these material features of the book themselves, my goal is to show that the American 1848 involved the use of the popular appeal of the American victory to mask social differentiations and oppositions that were quite palpable during the experience of the war itself. Though most mass market publications largely supported and legitimated the American invasion, some soldiers did in fact use print to critique the war. For instance, a pamphlet series entitled *The “High Private”* promised to tell the story of a New York regiment that was underpaid, underfed, and largely exploited throughout the conflict, however, the series did not continue past the first issue published in 1848.³²⁷ The fiction of an ideological consensus surrounding the American invasion and victory in Mexico had the dual function of selling an imperial vision of America as beneficial to the white republic (even as the war itself demonstrated the inequalities within American society) while also rewriting the war itself from a violent affair into a clean and bloodless victory ordained by fate itself. As we will see in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, this enforced ideological consensus had a material basis in the activity of editing and erasing the war’s troubling details from the historical record.

³²⁷ *The “High Private,” with a full and exciting history of the New York volunteers, illustrated with facts, incidents, anecdotes, engravings, &co., including the mysteries and miseries of the Mexican War* (1848).

4.2 National Vanity: Print Capitalism, U.S. Empire, and Writings from the Camp

“The essential link between the war and the people,” writes Robert Johannsen in his influential study of the war’s cultural dimension, “was provided through the nation’s press.” Not only was the Mexican conflict America’s first foreign war, it was also the first major event in American history in which a military conflict was largely experienced by citizens of the nation through the medium of print communication. Johannsen outlines the structural frameworks and technological innovations that contributed to the war’s representation in print media: “The war coincided with the era of the penny press, a time when technology, marketing innovations, and a dramatic increase in literacy all combined to produce a veritable ‘print explosion.’”³²⁸ Innovations in the manufacture of paper, faster presses powered by steam, the use of stereotyping to allow publishers to keep a greater number of imprints ready on demand, the consolidation of the book trade by capital interests in New York and Philadelphia, the invention of the telegraph and the formation of the Associated Press, and more effective techniques for the distribution and dissemination of news all colluded to make the Mexican war a major media event. New imaging technologies also played a role; in the 1840s a whole industry and set of practices grew around lithography, chromolithography, daguerreotypes, and wood engraving, resulting in a new media environment in which images were available for people and became part of everyday life (especially for those living in urban centers) in greater numbers and a wider variety than ever before. The Mexican war was the first military event in American history to be represented through these new forms of visualization.

In terms of the social experience of the conflict, the newness and exoticism of a grand campaign fought on foreign soil (in combination with the developments in publishing outlined above) helped propel personal experience and personal narratives into the foreground of the war literature. From the perspective of the thousands of American soldiers who left their homes to participate in the campaign, the romance of the conflict inspired many to put their experiences to pen and paper in the form of letters to home, diaries, travel narratives, autobiographies, biographies, and published narratives. Indeed, the tedium of camp life itself provided the occasion for soldiers to write who otherwise (had they not participated in the war) might not have entered the written record.³²⁹ Not long after the conflict began, the New York newspaper *Yankee Doodle* satirized the vast written output of the soldiers. In “The Latest from the Army” (Figure 7), more attention is paid to writing than to combat, and the soldier on the far left composes a letter seemingly without regard for the corpse at his feet. Clearly, soldiers were writing so much that the phenomenon became a fit topic for satire. For *Yankee Doodle*’s urban audience, this “triumphant and scribbling soldiery” marked the major difference in the campaign from earlier military conflicts.

The cartoon identifies the performative force of writing a history of a war still in progress, alerting us to the fact that contemporary commentators of the war were themselves aware of the dangers of propaganda. This visualization of soldiers engaging in writing is the counterpart to Robert Caton Woodward’s famous painting, *War News From Mexico* (1848), which depicts an array of American citizens eagerly crowded around a newspaper in the hope of learning the latest tidbit of information regarding Zachary Taylor’s army. Such images of Americans gathered around the newspaper, according to the literary historian Elisa Tamarkin, “suggest that both a painting and a newspaper communicate with us by controlling or homogenizing our perspective.”³³⁰ Deciding

³²⁸ Johannsen, *Halls of the Montezumas*, 16

³²⁹ On camp life and writing, see Johannsen, *Halls of the Montezumas*, 151

³³⁰ Elisa Tamarkin, “Losing Perspective in the Age of News,” *PMLA* 125.1 (2010), 199. My chapter expands upon Tamarkin’s argument by suggesting that beyond the newspaper and paintings, other visualizing mediums such as the

what's included as opposed to that which is excluded from the frame turns the news into a political struggle for attention. *War News from Mexico* was not unique in making this point. Many contemporary prints represented Americans in the act of receiving the news and, just like Woodville's painting, dramatized the intrusion of print media into the home. In a lithograph entitled "The Mexican Express" printed in an 1852 gift book, we see the news in its emotional effects as a rupture of domestic sanctity. The central scene of mother and child weeping for the dead soldier, the *effect* of the news, is only tangentially related to its proximate *cause*, a newsboy fading out of sight (in the lithograph, pictured in the window on the left). Unlike Woodward's painting, these kinds of domestic scenes dramatized how the communications network that emerged during the war collapsed the distance between remote Mexico and the bourgeois home, making America's first foreign war also startlingly domestic in character insofar as its effects were registered in the home. "For far upon yon Mexic plain," we are told in the accompanying poem to the 1852 lithograph, "where hungry vultures hover,/ Reposes, 'mid th' uncoffined slain,/ The Patriot—Husband— Lover./ And this is what the world calls Glory,/ A nation's chivalry,/ The deeds that are to live in story—/ Fame's immortality."³³¹ In both poem and image all eyes are turned towards the emotional effect of the news on mother and daughter, in effect stitching together the bourgeois American home with imperial expansion. In terms of ideology, therefore, the private life of domesticity was bound up with wars fought abroad. Here we see that privacy was marshaled in support of imperialism, making private life as much a site of ideological control as public displays of patriotism. "What is celebrated in national festivals and in religious or military days of remembrance," Friedrich Nietzsche has argued, "is actually such an 'effect in itself.'"³³² So too, as the domestic literature of this period makes clear, were the effects of ideology registered in domestic terms. Writing letters from camp and delivering the news to the home were part of a larger communications circuit that was generative and performative in its ability to capture and frame public attention.

lithograph and the wood engraving also structured public perception about what counted as relevant in the story of the war.

³³¹ "The Mexican Express," *Odd Fellows' Offering, for 1852*, 257-258

³³² Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History*, 17

"LATEST FROM THE ARMY."



A fond father, whose only son and heir has gone to defend the honor and soil of Yankee-doodle-land in foreign parts, permits us to copy the following letter, which is one of those 14,000 written on the field of battle by YANKEE DOODLE's triumphant and scribbling soldiery:

MONTEREY, November 26, 1846.

Dear Father—What could have possessed you to send me away of here? Your notions of military glory are altogether too exalted. Yet it was natural for you, that had fought in the Revolutionary and Late Wars, to entertain a big opinion of battle. As for me I detest it. It's all well enough to talk about; but a most dreadful thing to practice. While our town was alive with the victories of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma: while my blood was hot: while every body "went a soldiering," I thought it would be rare sport to march to Mexico. Visions of sunny skies and tropical fruits, of rare and lustrous-eyed beauties, and of "reveling in the Halls of the Montezumas," danced before my mind; but 'twas "distance lent enchantment to the view." The gilded and dazzling aspects of glory have changed like the pretty scene of a theatre, when one passes from the far-off boxes to the near-by side wings. If you will not be offended, I will whisper in your ear my private opinion of war in general, and of this Mexican war in particular.

Well then, it's a stupendous Humbug! But for the stirring music and fine dresses, it would pass for just the same as other butchery. There is no fun in cutting throats. I've tried it. The other day, I dissected several of my fellow creatures in the most approved military style; but do you think it was pleasant to see their bowels gush out, and hear their cries of agony? I shudder to think of it, though it was a whole month ago. Even my platoon, a set of rough-looking fellows as ever you saw, looked then as if they had been physicked.

I am obliged to mother for her advice, but it's worse than thrown away on me now. It's no use to read the Bible in the midst of swords and bayonets. Somehow or other I feel all the time that what I am reading and what I am doing are very different things. Either I am, or that book is, wrong. How can I pray for those that I mean to kill the next minute? How rejoice in "good will among men," when all my deeds are designed to stir up bitter strife and enmity? If the Mexicans are made "of the same blood" with myself, what right have I to spill it? Can I "love my enemies," and keep shooting at them all the while? Besides, if I were "to do to the Mexicans as I would have them do to me," I should let them alone. No doubt many of them have a kind father, such as you, and a mother like mine, and sisters and brothers, or better than all, wife and children;

and as I should hate to be popped forever out of the sight of such with what face can I kill a Mexican? No, no! if you want me to be a good soldier, don't request me to read my Bible. The spirit there and the spirit here are not at one.

Next week we are to have a brush. I shall do my best to run my sword into half a dozen Mexicans. Poor fellows! I shall really hate to do it, for they so enjoy the war. I don't mean that they love fighting—not they; but they love the American army. It is a reasonable attachment. For we protected them from their own military leaders, and from the Indians, and purchased their products at the highest prices. The Mexicans indeed are the only persons, as I see, likely to reap any advantage from this invasion. Our forces are a perfect godsend to their little towns. The gates are at once thrown open, and the citizens get frantic with the excitement of brisk trade.—Blowing out the brains of such jubilating, good-hearted simpletons, is no joke; but I am called out. Farewell.

Mr. Webster's wrong Speech.

On the morning after the recent Tariff dinner to Mr. WEBSTER in Philadelphia, one of the free-trade papers there published the famous free-trade speech delivered by Mr. W. twenty-six years ago, which is so convincing that he has never himself been able satisfactorily to answer it. This we regard as an attempt to injure Mr. WEBSTER, scarcely less censurable than that of Mr. INGERSOLL. YANKEE DOODLE would like the Philadelphia editor to stand up and name a man in his own party whose political consistency can be traced through a tenth of an Olympiad. Nay—at this moment such a phenomenon does not exist, nor can in the present century. The only difference is that when great men like Mr. WEBSTER are guilty of an aberration, a broad gleam of light tells that, comet-like, they are passing from one point of the Heaven to another—while lesser luminaries twinkle, culminate and expire like tallow candles, leaving nothing but a disagreeable odor behind them.

PATCHING UP MATTERS.

It is said that Santa Anna in a late proclamation assured the Mexicans that all the fortifications which the American Army has destroyed would be repaired by the American Government. His assurances were based upon the publicly declared principles of Mr. Secretary MARCY, that "all repairs of breaches should be paid for by the Government."

Figure 7. "Latest From The Army," *Yankee Doodle* (Dec. 12 1846). In the satiric letter accompanying the wood engraving, a fictional soldier writes to his father that his "visions of sunny skies and tropical fruits, of rare and lustrous-eyed beauties" were nothing but a "stupendous Humbug!"

A telling example of a personal narrative from the war is *Camp Life of a Volunteer*, published in 1847 by Grigg, Elliot, & Co., and attributed (according to the title page) to “One Who Has Seen the Elephant.” The colloquial phrase, “seeing the elephant,” was part of the popular lore that became associated with the military experience in Mexico; among its various meanings, it often referred to the disillusionment many American soldiers felt when their fantasies of adventure in foreign lands were confronted by the grim realities of battle, the tedium of camp life, and the dreaded “vomito” that plagued the U.S. camps due to improper sanitation and poor living conditions. The author of *Camp Life* belonged to the “Spencer Greys,” a volunteer regiment from Indiana. As its title suggests, this book recreates what it was like to experience military boredom when not on the front lines of combat; in the narrative, soldiers while away their time reading, writing letters, and taking in Mexican culture. As such, the story typifies the silences and gaps in popular histories of the war; instead of an honest account of the frequent abuses perpetrated on Mexican civilians, *Camp Life* largely sanitizes the volunteers’ interactions with the local inhabitants. In one incident, the volunteers set out at night to a Mexican village “in search of a ‘fandango.’” Upon arrival, the visitors were “received with great trembling by the women.” Our narrator, if he is to be believed, portrays the soldiers’ nighttime romps as wholesome, well-behaved affairs, but the recurring subtext in such anecdotes is sexual desire and male sociality untethered from the regulation of the home.³³³ Violence and sexuality, in other words, are the excluded context of many of these episodes. Whenever the narrator of *Camp Life* recounts his interest in Mexican women, the descriptions suggest illicit activities that can only be implicitly communicated. He writes that he “is greatly pleased” by the women; “their small beautiful feet were not cramped in stockings, shoes, or their ankles hid with a skirt too long. Their bosoms were not compressed in stays, or mantled in cashmeres, but heaved freely under the healthful influences of the genial sun and balmy air of the sunny south.”³³⁴ Although he repeatedly avows his adherence to a “moral and virtuous life,” this moral conduct is clearly defined against the actions of his fellow volunteers that cannot be depicted in the narrative. Stated differently, I argue because *Camp Life* can only speak of illicit behavior in negative terms, it silently affirms the reality of the very actions it condemns. “The more I see of vice and dissipation,” the narrator states, “the firmer I believe a moral and virtuous life constitutes the only sure guarantee of happiness.”³³⁵ Although he carefully distances himself from vice, the narrator clearly has seen it. Perhaps because it conforms to acceptable attitudes towards martial manhood, the narrator can occasionally take note of violence in the camp committed by the volunteers against one another. He retells the story of a “row which broke out between two companies of Georgia troops,” a fight that led to several deaths, including a colonel who died from a gunshot to the head delivered by an Irish volunteer.³³⁶ These violations of military discipline suggest that personal narratives of the Mexican war written by U.S. soldiers offer valuable commentary on how many moral norms broke down in the course of the soldiers’ adventures. “Points of character that at home lie concealed from every one,” the writer of *Camp Life* admits sadly, “are here developing every day [...] The more I see of a soldiers’ life, the stronger is my conviction that there are worse evils to be feared than those of the battlefield.”³³⁷ Once again, *Camp Life* repudiates illicit activities that cannot make it onto the page.

³³³ *Camp Life of a Volunteer. A Campaign in Mexico, or a Glimpse at Life in Camp, by “One Who Has Seen the Elephant”* (1847), 44-45

³³⁴ *ibid.*, 29

³³⁵ *ibid.*, 28

³³⁶ *ibid.*, 27

³³⁷ *ibid.*, 34

Understood as ideology, personal narratives of this kind insinuate one kind of illicit behavior (sexuality and violence) that can be correlated by the eruption in the text of other instances of violent manhood. In this regard, the very phrase, to “see the elephant,” is the cue of a grimmer reality that cannot make it onto the page without filtrations and self-serving justifications. The tropes of annexation and dismemberment offered a metaphorical outlet for activities that could not be spoken in literal terms. Annexation could function as a shorthand for behavior that cannot be stated in balder terms; for instance, a U.S. soldiers’ newspaper published during the war from the city of Puebla jokingly referred to a letter from a “member of the Massachusetts regiment” stating that a “Lieut. Thomas J. Myers, of company I, has received his discharge from the regiment, and ‘annexed’ himself to a beautiful Senorita, near Monterey. The fair Mexican brings her lord the cool sum of thirty thousand dollars. Lieut. M., it is also stated, is about to establish a newspaper in Monterey.”³³⁸ Were such affairs not part of what the soldiers termed “seeing the elephant”? Lieutenant Myers marries (annexes) a rich Mexican woman, and uses her wealth to establish a newspaper. Once again, soldiers seem to be writing, printing, and philandering more than they are fighting a war.

The plethora of such written accounts, including newspapers produced by and for the army, suggests that *Yankee Doodle* was essentially correct in portraying the soldiers as agents of cultural production, a “triumphant and scribbling soldiery.” Journalists such as George Kendall of New Orleans played a significant role in documenting their experiences, becoming the first embedded journalist for an American military conflict. According to the war’s historians, Kendall adopted the “garb and appearance” of the volunteer regiments and “lost no opportunity to see the surrounding country with his wilder compatriots.”³³⁹ He saw the elephant, and probably also saw quite a bit of illicit, undisciplined behavior.³⁴⁰ In news reports originally published in the New Orleans *Picayune* and widely reprinted in other newspapers across the nation, Kendall always defended American martial valor and consistently downplayed the evidence for violence and exploitation.³⁴¹ And like so many of the contemporary histories and news accounts, Kendall’s massive folio edition of *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* deflects attention from the grimmer realities of war. Kendall’s book was lithographed, printed, and hand-colored by Parisian artisans in a grand manner, making it one of the most costly and most beautiful print souvenirs of the campaign. It is truly stunning, with battle scenes that evoke the grandeur of history paintings. The emphasis throughout is on distance and perspective, with military combatants who look so tiny in comparison to the plateaus and chaparral of the Mexican landscape.

In the preface to *The war Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, Kendall emphasizes the book as a culmination of his own eyewitness reporting and as the finest example of lithography; its market value and cultural value are mutually constitutive:

[T]he object of both artist and author, in securing the services of the best lithographers, colorists, and printers, has been to produce a work which, so far at least as appearance may be taken into account, will be creditable to the United States, and in this they trust they have succeeded. They have certainly bestowed much time and money on the undertaking, and can boldly assert that no country can claim that

³³⁸ *Flag of Freedom* (Puebla Mexico), 12 Feb. 1848.

³³⁹ Stewart, “Artists and Printmakers of the Mexican War,” 17

³⁴⁰ In *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War*, Jaime Rodriguez compares Kendall’s journalistic writing to the many dime novels that treated Mexican subjects in the war’s aftermath. In analyzing Kendall’s journalism, Rodriguez notes the paucity of “on-the-spot detail,” resulting in Kendall’s suppression of the “chaos, pain, and fear of actual combat” (99).

³⁴¹ See George Wilkins Kendall, *Dispatches from the Mexican War*, ed. Lawrence Delbert Cress (1999).

its battles have been illustrated in a richer, more faithful, or more costly style of lithography.³⁴²

I read this statement as a declaration of the deliberate collusion between image and text, artist and author, to manipulate what Kendall terms the “appearances” of combat for the purposes of cultural nationalism. The result is pure ideology in material form: a book whose verbal, visual, and bibliographical codes work together to filter out the grisly details of the American invasion. Landscape portrayals of the battles are in this sense the objective correlative of a desire to wish away and forget the horrors of the conflict. As the historian Paul Foos has demonstrated, and as *Camp Life of a Volunteer* amply suggests, those horrors were the quotidian facts of life in camp, where volunteers and regimentals regularly interacted with Mexican noncombatants in exchanges that were certainly unequal and frequently exploitative. These details are precisely what gets lost in Kendall’s descriptions, and the accompanying colored lithographs aestheticize the U.S. invasion as a sublime and well-orchestrated movement across a romantic landscape. Such silences and gaps in the book are all the more striking because Kendall himself likely encountered numerous depredations on the Mexican people in his embedded journalism.

“Storming of Chapultepec—Pillow’s attack” (Figure 8) is a perfect example of how Kendall’s chromolithographs hide from view the internal divisions within the army and the excesses of U.S. military discipline. In the print, a sea of American soldiers in matching blue uniforms surround a castle once owned by Spanish royalty—images of this kind evoked medieval romance and chivalry—but what lies hidden from view are the actual divisions within Winifred Scott’s army at this time. As Amy Greenberg discusses in her recent history of the war, the Battle of Chapultepec was an occasion for General Scott to exorcise one of the most troubling forms of protest emanating from within the American army: the San Patricios, or Saint Patrick’s battalion, a group of mostly Irish soldiers who defected from the American cause to fight on the side of their Catholic brethren, the Mexicans. As soon as Chapultepec was captured, the U.S. forces raised their flag in victory, and publicly executed the thirty remaining San Patricios in a mass hanging held at the Spanish castle.³⁴³ But you would never know the San Patricios existed if you relied upon *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, precisely because the book’s purpose is to screen-out these inconvenient details. Kendall deliberately (and openly) intended his illustrated book to conceal and argue against the existence of dissension within the American ranks. As he writes in the conclusion to *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, “The old monarchies of Europe had always cherished the belief that the new republic would be shaken, if not broken into fragments, by the first war of an offensive nature in which it might engage. How idle these hopes were has been abundantly proved by the unity and spirit which the different campaigns in Mexico were prosecuted to a successful termination.”³⁴⁴ Here we see that lithographic prints shared with the newspapers and with paintings the ability to control the viewer’s perspective, screening out signs of fragmentation so as to ensure an image of “unity and spirit” would be enshrined in the national imaginary.

³⁴² George Wilkins Kendall, *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* (1851), iv

³⁴³ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 210

³⁴⁴ *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, 52



Figure 8. "Storming of Chapultepec—Pillow's attack," from *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* (1850). Lithographed by the Parisian artists Lemarcier and Adolph Jean Baptiste Bayot. Image courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

Though it remains one of the most striking examples of color lithography in the history of American book arts, Kendall's work was not alone in using new visual mediums to popularize the war. Nathaniel Currier (of Currier and Ives fame), for instance, produced over seventy lithographic scenes in prints that were sold in the streets of New York City by hawkers and street cart vendors.³⁴⁵ Several other expensive chromolithographic projects were undertaken to celebrate the war; today they are highly valued by collectors of Americana and are extremely rare in research libraries.³⁴⁶ By 1848 enough prints were in circulation for critics to direct barbs at the obvious opportunism at work. Writing in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Charles Lanman mocked this use of imagery to appeal to the market for national desires. "National vanity is the root whence all these silly projects of 'nationality' arise, and their advocates [...] will almost invariably be found to be men who have great ambition with small ability." Books like *The War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, along with "Currier's lithographed daubs of Capt. May and the battle of Buena Vista," according to Lanman, turned nationalism into a cheap commodity offered in "all sorts and sizes, prices and qualities."³⁴⁷ Lanman's recognition of how these commodities differentiated themselves in terms of sorts, sizes, prices, and qualities once again demonstrates the emergence of a field of souvenirs, and he recognizes that publishers and entrepreneurs calculated the presupposed audience for each souvenir and therefore addressed their productions to a variety of consumers spread across the social spectrum.

4.3 John Frost: Subscription Publishing, Wood Engravings, Biographical Propaganda

In terms of the sheer number of images collected within a single book on the war, the winner by far is John Frost's *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* (1848), which interspersed over five hundred wood engravings across his six hundred page narrative history. Frost exemplifies how visual representations of the war were marketed alongside biographies of the generals; in addition to writing the *Pictorial History*, Frost also authored the biographical collection *The Mexican War and its Warriors*, published in the same year as the illustrated book. Of interest with both texts is their mode of distribution to American readers: the subscription book trade. Frost's Philadelphia publisher, James A. Bill, wrote a circular letter in 1850 to potential book agents in which he openly linked the profits of the book trade to the market for patriotic souvenirs related to the Mexican War; entitled "The Possession of Wealth the Desire of All," the publisher wrote the following to entice travelling salesmen:

The possession of wealth the desire of all. How shall we obtain it is the anxious inquiry of many. This problem has been solved to the entire satisfaction of the subscribers numerous agents in a manner that would excite the envy of a "Californian." The arrangements being complete for the seasons campaign I am now prepared to offer such inducements as must secure the services of many more of "the same sort." Being aware that no book can at the present day receive popular favor unless found to possess real merit, no pains or expense has been spared to produce works in the different departments of History, Biography &c. that would be acceptable to the publick. "The Pictorial History of the World" by Professor Frost is a most beautiful volume & one that will find a place in the library of thousands & be appreciated when the trashy publications of the day are forgotten. "Pictorial History

³⁴⁵ On Currier and Ives, see *Eyewitness to War*

³⁴⁶ See Daniel P. Whiting, *Army Portfolio* (1847); Henry Walke, *Naval Portfolio: Naval Scenes in the Mexican War* (1848).

³⁴⁷ Charles Lanman, "On the Requisites for the Formation of a National School of Historical Painting," *Southern Literary Messenger* (Dec. 1848), 728

of Mexico and the Mexican War” by J. Frost, LLD is a faithful & impartial history of that Country & of the war the maps & engravings with which it is embellished gives to it a great additional value. Sanderson’s “Biography of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence” revised by Judge Conrad with beautiful steel engravings is a book that should find a place in the library of every lover of his country. “The Pictorial Life of Washington”, “The Pictorial History of France,” “General view of the World” by J. Augustus Mitchell” and many other valuable standard books some of them in the German language can be found in his series. My connection with the Publishing House of Thomas Cowperthwaite & Co. Phila enables me to furnish agents with American & foreign publications at the lower city prices with the privilege in all cases of returning all unsold books (if uninjured) the same as charged. Any person desirous of engaging in the business will find it to their interest to give the subscriber a call. Any communications addressed to him at North Lyme will receive prompt attention.
 Lyme 6th Sept. 1850 James A. Bill.³⁴⁸

From the perspective of a publisher engaged in the subscription book trade, illustrated works such as Frost’s *Pictorial History* were intended to circulate within the same literary field as works of nationalist biography.³⁴⁹ Many books of this nature were sold by travelling salesmen who advertised their wares with a relatively recent publishing innovation: the sample book or “salesman’s dummy.”³⁵⁰

Selling books on subscription so as to reduce the financial risk of a publication was already a well-established practice in eighteenth-century British North America. By the second quarter of the nineteenth-century, publishers began producing “dummies” (also sometimes referred to as canvassing books or prospectuses) that offered an incomplete sample of the book the customer was to purchase. Over the course of the nineteenth century, canvassing books became more elaborate, often including samples of bindings and illustrations, testimonials from readers, and private memory aids for agents in the form of prepared speeches to help sell the book.³⁵¹ Because salesman’s dummies are not complete “books” in the usual sense they have largely been overlooked by cultural historians, despite the fact that they contain valuable evidence of how books were distributed in nineteenth-century America; as such, they belong to the history of the book trade, reading, and the formation of popular taste. In his circular letter, James Bill mentions several standard works of history and biography that would have been sold by subscription, including two works by John Frost. Although not every canvassing book has survived in the archive, we know that Frost’s biographical anthology *The Mexican War and its Warriors* (1848) was sold by subscription in this manner.³⁵² The letter by Bill, in other words, substantiates my claim that patriotic biographies, illustrated books, and popular accounts of the Mexican War circulated side-by-side and appealed to

³⁴⁸ Letter written by James A. Bill, 6 Sept. 1850. A copy of this letter is contained in the “Diary/account book, 1835-1858” of John Wight Bill, a manuscript source housed at the New-York Historical Society. The son of John Wight, James A. Bill published Frost’s *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* in 1848 in collaboration with the Philadelphia firm Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co.

³⁴⁹ On subscription publishing, see Michael Hackenberg, “The Subscription Publishing Network in Nineteenth-Century America.”

³⁵⁰ On salesman’s dummies, see Keith Arbour (ed.), *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers’ Ephemera, 1833-1951, in the Collection of Michael Zinman* (1996).

³⁵¹ Scott Casper, “Alternative Publishing Systems: Other Variations on the Trade,” *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*.

³⁵² Two separate dummies of this title are held by American libraries (Beinecke Library, Yale University and the American Antiquarian Society).

the same readership. Texts such as John Sanderson's *Biographies of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*, which I discussed in Chapter Two, were now part of an expanded commercial field that included illustrated books on the Mexican War, which leads me to conclude that the market for nationalism was adapting itself to popular interest in Manifest Destiny. Surviving copies of salesman's dummies from this period amply demonstrate their widespread appeal with readers. Frost's *The Mexican War and its Warriors* was popular with southern readers, as one canvassing book used in North Carolina makes clear.³⁵³ In the Michael Zinman collection of canvassing books—the largest collection of this print genre anywhere—several texts are directly linked to the war, including presidential biographies of Winifred Scott and Zachary Taylor, as well as popular histories such as John Jenkins's *History of the War Between the United States and Mexico* (1850). And because some salesman's dummies advertised several different publications for subscription, the notations within these documents as to specific sales to individuals is a way to track exactly how popular certain titles could be. For instance, James A. Bill—the author of the letter cited above—issued a canvassing book that offered eight different popular titles ranging from biographies of American founders to Bible concordances and surveys of world history. By far, John Frost's *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* outsold these other titles through the subscription method.³⁵⁴

Given my evidence for their parallel circulation, biographies of the Mexican war must therefore be read in tandem with the war's illustrations. Frost's *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* is an example of how wood engraving was transforming the use of images in printed books. Although woodcut blocks had long been used to print images, Thomas Bewick's discovery, at the close of the eighteenth-century that the end grain of the wood surface could be carved with precision by a copperplate graver opened up space for a new deluge of printed images, since now carved blocks of wood could be incorporated and arranged in relation to moveable type on the same printing surface.³⁵⁵ By the 1840s, English publishing had invented the illustrated periodical, and newspapers would never be the same. As the art historian Tom Gretton has argued, the facility with which wood engravings could now be manipulated on the page opened up new possibilities for text and images to work together to produce meaning; words and pictures were now relational and combinatorial. I think we can apply Gretton's analysis beyond illustrated newspapers to think more generally about how wood engravings interact with text. With over five hundred illustrations in his book, John Frost's *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* offers a test case for examining the ways that the insertion of a specific wood engraving on a particular page was never accidental, rather, as Gretton argues, "the page became an entity whose logic was dictated by the images it carried."³⁵⁶ In illustrated books, we might think of texts and images in a figure-ground relation, with the text (linguistic meaning) serving as the ground and support for the image, which figures or exemplifies the textual message. As Gretton has argued, attention to the entire page reveals that wood engravings enabled a "layout practice that gave precedence to the pleasures of order, symmetry, and display, rather than the adherence of images to words."³⁵⁷ Certainly, any reader of Frost's *Pictorial History* would have immediately noticed this book's investment in the pleasures of visual display. Most pages in Frost's book contained several images. To appreciate this aspect of how words and pictures collaborate in illustrated books, we must reorient our perspective to think beyond the page and to focus on what I term *the opening*, the reading space produced when the book

³⁵³ Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

³⁵⁴ Western American Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

³⁵⁵ Alpheus Hyatt Mayor, *Prints & People: A Social History of Printed Pictures* (1971), 636-639

³⁵⁶ Tom Gretton, "The Pragmatics of Page Design in Nineteenth-Century General-Interest Weekly Illustrated News Magazines in London and Paris," *Art History* 33.4 (2010), 694

³⁵⁷ *ibid*, 704

is spread out before us into two pages, verso and recto. The important point is that the wood engraving acquires a kind of relative autonomy in relation to text and can therefore signify and make meaning in ways that can augment, supplement, and reinforce a book's ideological message.

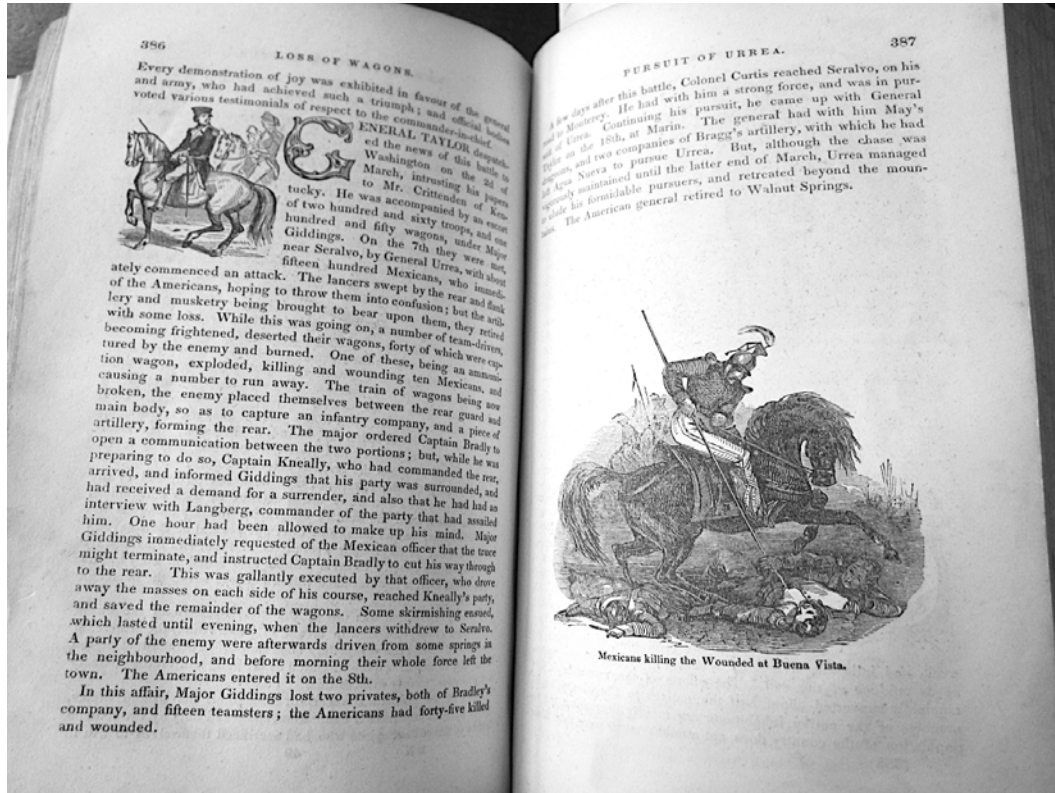


Figure 9. Two representations of soldiers on horseback. John Frost, *Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War*, 386-387. Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

In Figure 9, we see how Frost's illustrations actively construct dichotomies between Mexican and American soldiers, with the American horseman embedded within the text on the left—a figure for order and discipline—while the Mexican on the right is free-floating, disconnected from the narrative, and engaged in gratuitous violence. Once again, we see text and image colluding to hide any suspicion of U.S. lawlessness, this time by turning our attention to the bloodthirsty Mexican on horseback. Verso and recto here are mirror images of each other, insofar as we have paired engravings of soldiers on horseback, but this specular relation is unequal; the function of the violence on the right, I argue, is to distract us from considering that the left-hand figure, the American soldier, was also violent and capable of atrocity. Frost's *Pictorial History* enacts the kind of reversal of word and image that Roland Barthes once argued for in his discussion of newspaper photography and the use of explanatory captions. Since wood-engravings allow for pictures to acquire a degree of autonomy within the book—offering connotations that do not depend upon the narrative diegesis—they make the narrative structurally parasitic upon the image. Drawing upon Barthes' early theory of photography, I think we can plausibly conclude that Figure 9 exemplifies how the connotations and ideological effects of wood engravings produce what he termed “a

regulating function, preserving the irrational movement of projection-identification.”³⁵⁸ Barthes terms these effects the “compromise” between word and image; in Figure 9, this corresponds to the recognition that both soldiers on horseback were by definition violent figures, but the compromise comes in the form of disavowing the possibility that the American soldier was capable of the same gratuitous violence as the Mexican horseman.³⁵⁹

In *The Mexican War and its Warriors* (1848), published in the same year as the *Pictorial History* and sold by subscription, John Frost writes a history of the war in the form of collected biography. Frost openly avows the work is a response to popular curiosity; in his preface, Frost argues that newspaper reportage alone is “insufficient to satisfy the lively curiosity which such events are well calculated to awaken. ‘A round unvarnished tale’ of the whole progress of the war is necessary to form a portion of the historical library of every family.”³⁶⁰ Once again personal narrative is used to document the war. As Ann Fabian has demonstrated, the trope of the “round unvarnished tale” invoked by Frost was a frequent rhetorical device in personal narratives written by-and-about nineteenth-century Americans; truth and authority in this trope was facilitated by an artless rhetoric of the plain, unvarnished biographical tale. As Fabian explains, the simple story of a life in this mode required authentication from an external source in order to take its fullest effect. “To be taken as true,” Fabian writes, “every story had to be ratified by those with more evident social or cultural power.”³⁶¹ But understood as a mass cultural phenomenon, the narrative form of “unvarnished” biography would also seem to have some of the elements that Walter Benjamin identified as the decline of storytelling and the rise of information in the narrative modes of modernity. Information, for Benjamin, “lays claim to quick verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself.’”³⁶² The self-evident biographical narrative, especially in the case of group biographies that assembled several lives in reference to a common ideological core, could be persuasive through the mass of accumulated facts and details. By amassing biographical “facts,” Frost’s narratives are verifiable in Benjamin’s sense. When John Frost cites the insufficiency of the newspapers to satisfy public curiosity in the war, he proposes an alternative notion of truth, one grounded in personal experience but augmented by the editor’s capacity to synthesize those experiences into a master narrative. “It is with these views that the biographical sketches have been written,” he declares.³⁶³

The trope of the round unvarnished tale, in other words, acquired a specific political accent when it was used to legitimate the war, its causes, and its consequences. Such acts of legitimation amounted to a powerful propaganda tool, one that drew its effectiveness by portraying the Mexican people as unfit for self-government, thereby arguing against national sovereignty in ways that justified the American intervention. As I’ve argued throughout this chapter, part of that justification involved denying and disavowing the illicit activities of the volunteers and their abuse of the Mexican civilians. Authors, editors, and publishers shared a role in downplaying the evidence. In *The Other Side* (1850), an account from the Mexican perspective of the war that was translated into English and published by John Wiley, the editor went so far as to include footnotes to contradict and undermine the authority of Mexican allegations of war crimes. In one passage, the Mexican narrator describes how a “D. Juan Cervantes” decided to single-handedly harass the U.S. army,

³⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” *Image-Music-Text* (1977), 27

³⁵⁹ For another striking instance of how wood engravings from this period contrasted Mexican cruelty and lawlessness with the nobility and order of the American cause, see *Mexican Treacheries and Cruelties: Incidents and Sufferings in the Mexican War [...] By a Volunteer Returned From the War* (1847).

³⁶⁰ John Frost, *The Mexican War and its Warriors* (1848), 5

³⁶¹ Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth*, 173

³⁶² Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, 89

³⁶³ *The Mexican War and its Warriors*, 6

armed only with “a lasso and his ardor.” In a footnote, the American editor interjects: “What rashness is this?” “It certainly would not have required much argument to make him out a noncombatant, and as such the Mexicans knew very well they were never molested.”³⁶⁴ Once again, the repudiation seems out of keeping with the event in question and in its excessiveness points to the existence of the very thing sought to be contained and denied. Elsewhere in this text, the American editor alleges that any accusations by Mexicans of U.S. violence should be treated with suspicion; citing what he calls “the peculiar delicacy of feeling, and the refined sensibility so decidedly feminine in the Mexican character, have given them a preeminence over some others in this species of delineation.”³⁶⁵

Popular historians of the Mexican war, in other words, walked a fine line between denial and implicit recognition of culpability. The thorniest issue was the cause of the war itself. Historians largely agree that the Mexican war was a deliberate act of U.S. aggression, and that the proximate cause of the war—a dispute over a strip of land at the southern border of the Republic of Texas and Mexico between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande—was a result of President Polk ordering Zachary Taylor’s army to occupy the contested region so as to provoke the Mexicans into a conflict.³⁶⁶ Biographies of the war’s heroes necessarily sidestepped the war’s illegitimate foundations. In Fayette Robinson’s *Mexico and Her Military Chieftains* (1847), one carefully-worded sentence seeks to explain away the cause of the conflict: “It is not unlikely there would have been no war, at least immediately, had not the United States occupied the country west of the Nueces.”³⁶⁷ Statements such as these acknowledge the U.S. took the contested land by force, but the use of the triple-negative (“not unlikely,” “no war,” “had not the United States”) confounds the direct correlation between cause and effect, effectively burying responsibility in the convoluted grammar. For Frost, in *The Mexican War and its Warriors*, the simple drama of Taylor’s army crossing the Nueces River “in the face of the foe” suffices to justify the war on the basis of the call to patriotism. Frost’s book itself, as a collective biography of the U.S. generals, largely argues that the heroism displayed by the U.S. army was itself sufficient justification for the invasion.

Frost’s jingoism followed from years of ardent nationalism; as early as 1841, in a lecture given at Marshall College, he outlined that history must serve national interests, and that the historical “had been” needed to be turned into patriotic literature so as to dictate what the present “should be”:

Why was it that the Romans, ever attentive to the preservation of a indomitable national spirit, were so fond of referring their origin as a nation to the gods, and especially to Mars, the God of war? It was because they knew that historical recollections form the broad basis of national character. It was because they knew, at every period of their brilliant career of universal conquest, that what Rome *should be*, depended on the people’s recollection of what Rome *had been*.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ *The Other Side, or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States* (1850), 254

³⁶⁵ *ibid*, vii

³⁶⁶ For a lucid overview of the war’s causes, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (2007), 708-743. As Howe notes, Zachary Taylor was instructed by Polk’s cabinet to treat “any attempt by the Mexican army to cross the Rio Grande as an invasion of the United States and an act of aggression” (734). Howe ultimately argues that Polk had premeditated the attack on Mexico so as to secure his real interest in claiming California as U.S. territory.

³⁶⁷ Fayette Robinson, *Mexico and Her Military Chieftains* (1847), 312

³⁶⁸ John Frost, *The Duty of the American Scholar to the Literature of His Country* (1841), 12

Frost's 1841 lecture on the uses of history in forming national ideology demonstrates that historians of his generation found in the Mexican war an opportunity to satisfy their desire for an uncomplicated expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority over a racially inferior foe. The problem, of course, was that Mexico was itself a republic like the United States. In order to sidestep this complication, writers like John Frost and Fayette Robinson argued that the Mexican people were inherently unfit for the personal valor and rational deliberation that distinguished the white republic. To make this point, Mexican cowardice and treachery was contrasted with the heroism of the U.S. army. The "rational" faculties of the Mexican people were dismissed on the basis of religion, with writers such as Frost arguing that Catholicism had long accustomed the Mexicans to superstition and fear, ruling out in advance the chance for the kind of reasoned governance that characterized the United States.

Taken to its logical conclusion, U.S. propagandists even denied that Mexico fit the requirements for nationhood. Arguing for dismemberment in the form of annexing Alta California, one pamphleteer cited Mexico's confused racial categories as a legitimate excuse to tear the nation to pieces:

Deprive Mexico of her northern provinces, and she remains depressed under her burden of Negroes, Indians, Mulattos, Mestizos, and Sambos, breeds of men who are doomed by nature to ignorance and stupidity, and whose presence, their present redundancy of numbers, does but clog the wheels of their national advancement.³⁶⁹

Here, Mexico's mixed-race population is cited as evidence for annexing its northern territories, the argument resting on the presumption that Texas and California could be set aside for white settlers as a kind of safety valve for the expanding U.S. population. The "burden" of the other races and mixed-race peoples could be consigned to Mexico. But not everyone agreed, and many voices clamored to take southern Mexico as well, specifically the Yucatan. In the "Song of the Volunteers" this version of the desire for annexation once again deploys tropes of dismemberment and physical humiliation:

Herrera and Paredes too,
And all the chiefs of the vile crew
We'll show unto their lazzaroni
Mounted on a wooden pony. (chorus)
And when we've punished them enough
We'll make them shell us out the stuff,
To pay the war's expense, and then
We'll have, besides, old Yucatan!³⁷⁰

The war's expense for the defeated Mexicans, according to this song, comes in the shape of land appropriation, tributary fines, and a humiliating ride on a wooden horse. In contrast to the cleaned-up and relatively nonviolent narratives of John Frost, Fayette Robinson, and George Kendall, these more direct pronouncements show that the tropes of annexation and dismemberment captured popular desires, despite the ideological screen cast over the majority of popular prints and histories of the war.

³⁶⁹ *Alta California* (1847)

³⁷⁰ William M'Carty, "Song of the Volunteers," *National Songs, Ballads, and Other Patriotic Poetry* (1846), 36

4.4 Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Post-War Politics of Editing

The conclusion of the Mexican war, consecrated by the Nicholas Trist's Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), opened up new political opportunities for its charismatic generals. During the war, countless biographies of Zachary Taylor helped propel him into the hearts of Americans at home. When Taylor ran for President on the Whig ticket in 1848, the story of the Mexican war became a fixture of numerous campaign biographies written about his life. In terms of U.S. political culture, the use of biographical publications to help steer political opinion for presidential candidates goes as far back to 1824³⁷¹, but the print genre really took off in earnest in 1828, the year that Andrew Jackson once again squared off against John Quincy Adams. In addition to being a species of political rhetoric for the new democratic nation, the printed texts themselves demonstrate how the pragmatics of page design and the editorial process could combine to help steer readers in a particular ideological direction. For instance, in one 1828 pamphlet that compared the biographies of Jackson and Adams, the use of dual text columns stages the campaign on the page itself; here the pro-Adams bias of the pamphlet silently makes its point by spilling over onto the left-hand column reserved for Jackson.

In this final section of the present chapter I want to suggest that these editorial decisions continued to inform campaign biographies written in the wake of the Mexican War. In particular, I demonstrate the editorial strategies involved in Nathaniel Hawthorne's biography of Franklin Pierce carefully filtered Hawthorne's source documents so as to screen out moments of indecision in Pierce's war experience. These strategic erasures, omissions, and deletions, I argue, represent a continuation of the rhetorical strategies of containment that I detailed throughout the chapter as a whole, making the memory of the war with Mexico equally a subject of ideological distortion as its visual representation.

Campaign biographies are decidedly derivative in terms of content. From 1824 onwards, reprinting is a key feature of nearly every U.S. campaign biography. By and large these texts appropriate previously published material, from the 1824 *Sketch of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (which reprinted material first published in the *Port-Folio*) to the Andrew Jackson campaign biographies from the same period (which reprinted an 1817 narrative written by John Henry Eaton).³⁷² Biographies of Martin Van Buren, published in 1832 and 1835, also drew from extant newspaper articles and magazine sketches. By 1840, the notorious "log cabin and hard cider" campaign of William Henry Harrison amplified these strategies and turned the presidential election into a media spectacle. A pamphlet such as *The Tippecanoe Text-Book* (1840) freely reprinted biographical material published in the 1840 *Life of General William Henry Harrison*. Songsters and almanacs such as *The Harrison and Hard Cider Song Book* (1840) and the *Hard Cider and Log Cabin Almanac for 1841* included biographical sketches of the presidential candidate along with popular material. Zachary Taylor's use of print in the 1848 election, in other words, built on what was becoming a time-honored tradition in American electoral politics.³⁷³

The Mexican War continued to shape presidential elections well into the 1850s. In terms of my overall thesis in this chapter, the campaign biography that best exemplifies how ideological factors conditioned what was included (and excluded) from the public memory of the war is Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 *Life of Franklin Pierce*. By and large, scholars who have taken interest in

³⁷¹ See *Sketch of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (1824).

³⁷² Compare Eaton's 1817 *The Life of Andrew Jackson, Major General in the Service of the United States* with the 1824 and 1828 editions, republished specifically for Jackson's presidential quest. See also the 1828 pamphlet *A History of the Life and Public Services of Major General Andrew Jackson*. This latter text shows that reprinting could be used for the purposes of critique, as the editor of the pamphlet appropriated Eaton's pro-Jackson book to argue in favor of Jackson's opponent.

³⁷³ On campaign biographies in this period, see Michael J. Heale, *The Presidential Quest: Candidates and Images in American Political Culture, 1787-1852* (1982).

Hawthorne's entry into political literature have done so because the biography offers a window into Hawthorne's defense of the constitutionality of slavery, an issue that had increasingly polarized the nation in the wake of the Compromise of 1850, the admission of California as a free state, and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. In the biography of Pierce, Hawthorne dismisses abolitionism as the "mistiness of a philanthropic theory," and defends Pierce's conservative view in which individual states have the right to decide the slavery question for themselves.³⁷⁴ These direct pronouncements on slavery have prompted critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch to relate the campaign biography to earlier texts such as *The Scarlet Letter*; for Bercovitch, "*The Life of Pierce* represents a certain choice. *The Scarlet Letter* represents a metaphysics of choosing."³⁷⁵ Unlike Bercovitch, I seek to understand the campaign biography on its own terms as an editorial act and as a material text. Given that Hawthorne drew upon published materials and Pierce's diary, the campaign biography demonstrates how a process of filtration kept some aspects of Pierce's war experience from public view.

The challenge Hawthorne faced in framing Pierce's experience as a general of a volunteer regiment in the Mexican War is yet another instance of how ideological pressures screened out unpalatable signs of American cowardice and brutality. Part of the reason for writing the biography (beyond the common practice of using such a text to generate publicity) was to publicly defend Pierce against rumors that he lacked the qualities of heroism that other leaders such as Taylor and Winifred Scott had demonstrated in the conflict. Hawthorne adopted the strategy of incorporating passages from Pierce's personal diary from the war in order to put forth Pierce's own voice to quell these rumors; in addition, the author wrote a full chapter narrating Pierce's war experiences. The excerpts from Pierce's war diary and Hawthorne's chapter on the war demonstrate a careful process of selection, deletion, and erasure. For instance, when excerpting from the diary Hawthorne was careful to expunge passages that hinted at discord among the Americans. In the published text, Hawthorne chose to leave out Pierce's entries from June 28 to July 1, 1847, which describe how a "Major Smith" arrived at Pierce's position at Veracruz for the purpose of quelling trouble in the quartermaster's department. I suspect that Hawthorne excluded the following passage on the grounds that it hinted at Pierce's poor leadership: "He [Mr. Smith] finds the Department in the utmost confusion, and when I see the self sacrificing spirit with which he seems to grapple with the Herculean task before him I tremble for the result so far as he is personally concerned." The next entry in Pierce's diary, also excluded from Hawthorne's text, suggests an undisciplined military: "July 1st Major Smith cannot accomplish impossibilities [...] I have therefore only to do all that may be done for the health & discipline of my command, and patiently wait for the means indispensable for our march to the interior."³⁷⁶ In describing military order as a "Herculean task" and an "impossibility," Pierce unguardedly hinted at weaknesses in his leadership in ways that needed to be expunged from the record.

The omissions from Hawthorne's published text continue with a compromising entry dated July 15, 1847, in which Pierce expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the Mexican campaign; the excluded passage begins with the following:

Has this the appearance of War? *Our* Gov't does not comprehend *this* Gov't. I say Gov't because a *people*, in our acceptation of the term there is none. Most evidently nothing like an intelligent people framing their own laws & controlling their own

³⁷⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852), in *Miscellaneous Prose and Verse*, ed. Woodson, Simpson, and Smith (1994), 292. All references to Hawthorne's text are drawn from this edition and will hereafter be referred to as MPV.

³⁷⁵ Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Return of Hester Prynne," *The Rites of Assent* (1993), 226

³⁷⁶ "Franklin Pierce's Mexican Diary," in MPV, 472-473. The original manuscript of Pierce's diary is held at the Huntington Library, and the text in its entirety is included in MPV.

Government. *War* has been *declared*, but with all our battles, all has not been *prosecuted* I could desire that it may not be, but from the little I have observed I believe, that it *must* be before a peace can be “*conquered*.” I mean war as it has been recognized for the last 200 years in the most civilized Nations. No, not as it has been recognized, but *war* as it has actually been carried on, with its fruits & its results. *War*, that actually carries, wide spread woe & desolation to the *conquered* and tacitly, at least, allows pillage & plunder with accompaniments not to be named during a campaign like this Even in a private journal.³⁷⁷

The main tone of the passage above is one of confusion, ambiguity, and uncertainty of purpose: “Mexico” is ambiguously positioned between its “Gov’t” and its “people,” war as it has traditionally practiced has been “declared” but not actually “prosecuted,” and the biggest ambiguity is whether Pierce believes that legitimate war should lead to “wide spread woe & desolation.” Understandably, Hawthorne excludes this moment of uncertainty over the legitimacy of the war in a campaign biography whose primary function is to present Pierce as an ardent nationalist. By far the most damning statement is Pierce admission that “pillage & plunder” is tacitly being carried on by his regiment against the Mexican people (a restatement of his confusion of whether the true enemy is the people or the government). Even in a private diary these tacit depredations, as with so many of the texts I have discussed in this chapter, can only be acknowledged through disavowal; they are “accompaniments not to be named during a campaign like this Even in a private journal.” The most Pierce can do is refer to them indirectly, but on the condition that even his “private journal” is too sensitive to give a full and accurate description of the extent of the illegitimacy of his campaign and the extent of the horrors inflicted upon Mexico.

Clearly, the war diary expressed private views that needed to be censored if the diary was to be made public in Hawthorne’s published text. Pierce’s private statements on the confusions of the war continue; in the following expurgated passage, the Mexican War is described in terms of slaughter and illegitimate violence:

Perhaps a peace can be conquered by our present System of Operations & policy. If so, we have made a grand leap in civilization, we will astonish the world—nay more, we will make wars to *cease*, a desideratum to every philanthropic heart, of all others, the most desirable because if we can conquer a peace in this way, we can conquer it better without arms than with them. I hope I am mistaken. I hope I have an incorrect view of things when I am so foolish as to think that in this 19th Century *war* to be effectual must be *war* not a mission of civilization and humanity. If my boy should ever read this daily journal I desire that he may not misunderstand his father— I hate war in all its aspects, I deem it unworthy of the age in which I live & of the Gov’t in which I have borne some part. All I mean to say is, that there can be no such thing as a profound sense of justice, the sacredness of individual rights and the values of human life connected with human butchery, and all men, who think & feel as I think & feel and yet are found on fields of slaughter are in a false position from education and the force of circumstances. If you must have war the answer of Palifox—“War to the Knife and the Knife to the hilt” is the true sentiment, no, sentiment is not the word—the true import of sentiment knows no such application, but it is expression of the most emphatic and elevated tone of *war*.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ “Franklin Pierce’s Mexican Diary,” MPV, 492-493

³⁷⁸ *ibid*, 493

I submit that here Pierce's admits the Mexican War was an act of "human butchery" at odds with his own understanding of the meanings of justice, human rights, a respect for the lives of the people of Mexico. Here, in precisely the passages that Hawthorne purposely left out of his biography, is the closest we can get to an admission of the excluded content of military violence that is the real historical context behind all of the printed books and images I have discussed in the present chapter. In this private document, Franklin Pierce voices a critique of the Mexican War that substantiates the modern historian Paul Foss' claim that the American invasion of Mexico amounted to "state sponsored murder by a loose confederation of volunteers and regulars."³⁷⁹ In hiding these opinions from public view, Hawthorne transformed Pierce into a solid supporter of the war and sanitized the war's troubling legacy for voters in the 1852 election. But the responsibility for the biography's final shape could also be said to belong to Pierce; before the book went to press, the politician carefully reviewed the manuscript and made several small emendations. In a sense, therefore, Pierce and Hawthorne were the co-authors of the *Life of Franklin Pierce*, and in their editorial acts they agreed with the majority of American publishers that the history of the Mexican War was to be written, as John Frost so eloquently put it, not as it actually was but as it *should* be.

³⁷⁹ Foss, *Short Hand Killing Affair*, 116

Chapter Five: “Biography, in its purer form,” Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter*

5.1 A Biographical Ghost

Though it may be the least appreciated extended fictional narrative composed by Herman Melville in the creative six-year period between *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855) holds many claims to literary distinction, both in terms of the critical reception of Melville’s oeuvre as well as with regards to the culture of reprinting and literary appropriation that Meredith McGill has recently offered as a historical paradigm for understanding the transatlantic circulation of American literature in the nineteenth century.³⁸⁰ If, as McGill argues, the lack of an international copyright law until the end of this period allowed for a chaotic transatlantic print marketplace in which much literary production circulated outside of authorial control, resulting in what she terms a “culture of reprinting,” then *Israel Potter*’s multiple states of publication and entextualization are one entryway to relate Melville to these larger conditions of publication and literary reception through a particular literary text. Linking publication history to this text’s thematic concerns, I am interested in how *Israel Potter* raises several critical problems: the limitation of a national framework for understanding nineteenth-century American literature, the interpenetration of literary meanings with the materialities of textual production, the fragility of claims to authorship with regards to publishers’ control over the circulation of texts, and, ultimately, Melville’s melancholy reflections on the category of “distinction” and whether distinction’s converse—be it anonymity *or* notoriety—is capable of sustaining a literary biography and grounding literary value in a literary culture increasingly defined by a marketplace and the kinds of disembodied social relations that Leon Jackson has recently unearthed in his study of the business of antebellum letters.³⁸¹ Melville’s protagonist Israel Potter entwines all of these concerns in his anonymity and exclusion from national memory (his life is truly without distinction), in his material life as an 1824 pamphlet that had “appeared among the peddlers” only to be lost and later “rescued” through Melville’s act of literary recuperation, and in Potter’s life of exhausting labor in the brickyards and markets of London.³⁸²

In choosing Potter as its subject, Melville’s text asks whether mere labor can sustain a biographical narrative. “The gloomiest and truthfulest dramatist,” writes Melville, “seldom chooses for his theme the calamities, however extraordinary, of inferior and private persons; least of all, the pauper’s.”³⁸³ The forty-five years Potter spends in London amid complete anonymity and deadening work has moved the novel’s readers, then and now, to conclude that Melville’s concern with the laboring classes extends to a diagnosis of global capitalism’s capacity to transform people into things and to reduce living agents into passivity.³⁸⁴ Contemporary London reviewers recognized this point.

³⁸⁰ Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (2002)

³⁸¹ Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (2007). Borrowing from Karl Polanyi and Bourdieu, Jackson’s key insight is to argue that the story of authors in the nineteenth century is not so much a shift from amateur to professional, but rather a move from “embedded” personal relations to “disembodied” formal relationships with regards to authors and publishers, where “embedded” denotes a wide variety of economies (gifts, patronage, prizes, etc.) and “disembodied” denotes a more restricted notion of economics defined by the market and impersonal relations.

³⁸² Herman Melville, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, ed. Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle, p.v. All further citations to the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Israel Potter* will be abbreviated as NN IP.

³⁸³ NN IP, 161.

³⁸⁴ *Israel Potter*’s plot for those unfamiliar with the text can be summarized as follows: As a young man growing up in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, Potter at the age of 18 runs away from home and begins a series of adventures and misadventures that include his briefly serving as a soldier in the American revolution during the battle of Bunker-Hill. While fighting the British at sea Potter is captured by the enemy and taken to England, where he soon escapes and for several years tries to elude recapture as a refugee, lost in the English countryside. Along the way he encounters King

Though a critic in the *Daily News* was unsure of the “literary merits of the book,” he nevertheless observed that Potter’s labors symbolized degradation, and that the theme of exhausting labor in turn reflected Melville’s own authorial labors: “he [i.e. the author Melville] becomes feeble, irregular, weary apparently of his own work; and his hero himself [Potter], abstracted from the events with which he finds himself unexpectedly mixed up, loses all individuality, and is scarcely to be recognized as a living agent.”³⁸⁵ My chapter takes this contemporary judgment as its organizing principle: Melville’s protagonist experiences a loss of living agency as a result of his labors, and this diegetic transformation within the narrative is presented through figurative and rhetorical strategies that in turn relate his fate to the weariness of the author. But rather than simply offer an exegesis of this claim, my goal is to use publication history to complicate and extend the book’s meaning so as to show how the larger story of the Potter myth and the plight of the author is refracted through the contingencies of cultural production and the literary field.

Anonymity, exhaustion, print ephemerality, and unrecognized labor crystallize Potter’s existence—and these themes have ramifications for understanding the contextual life of Melville’s own book, which began with the story’s serial publication in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* (1854-1855), followed by George P. Putnam’s book publication of *Israel Potter* in 1855 (three separate American editions are published in that year), a pirated “one shilling railway” English edition (also published in 1855), and an 1865 unauthorized edition in which Melville’s narrative was retitled *The Refugee*. If we also take into account the 1824 pamphlet that was Melville’s source text, the contextual life of *Israel Potter* widens to include Potter’s original pamphlet, which was issued in two separate editions. To fully elaborate the concerns of my chapter I therefore must move between-and-across these entextualizations of the Potter story to show how this phase of Melville’s literary career can be understood in terms of Jackson’s business of antebellum cultural production and McGill’s reprinting thesis. Those author-publisher relations help fill in the rich context of *Israel Potter*’s publication and, I hope, demonstrate that this text must be a crucial part of future work on Melville’s fiction. Just as importantly, *Israel Potter*’s publication history—its multiple editions, piracies, and unauthorized versions—is yet another example of my general strategy throughout the dissertation in which close bibliographic examination of the material text can unpack narratives and valences of literary meaning that would otherwise go unnoticed if we relied solely on modern editions. In tandem with these book-historical concerns, my analysis of *Israel Potter* fits within the larger subject of my dissertation insofar as this text is Melville’s only exercise in literary biography and, as such, offers a valuable literary reflection on American biography at mid-century, particularly in Melville’s dedicatory preface which offers a complex meditation on biography’s relationship to cultural distinction, to the materiality of print, and to popular culture as a vehicle for American nationalism. As we will see, the “literary” or formal aesthetic distinctiveness of *Israel Potter* emerges from its calculated distance from the genres of political biography that had become widespread in the mid-nineteenth century. Defining itself against the campaign biography or nationalist hagiography, Melville’s dedication stages a determinate negation of those categories to

George, Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, John Paul Jones, and a bevy of colorful English characters. Despite his heroism and ability to assume disguises, Potter eventually loses his way and after the revolutionary war becomes a beggar and laborer in the streets of London for forty-five years. Finally, at the end of his life he makes his way back to America on the fourth of July, where ironically he is nearly run over by a patriotic parade. No one recognizes him when he returns to America and Potter dies after having tried for a time to seek repayment from the U.S. government for his service during the war.

³⁸⁵ “Literature,” *Daily News* (London, 28 Aug. 1855). Many commentators agree with Hennig Cohen’s argument that *Israel Potter* is both a biography of Potter and a metacommentary on literary authorship or, as Cohen states, the book is both “a narrative of the character’s and the author’s struggle for survival.” Hennig Cohen, “*Israel Potter: Common Man as Hero*,” *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. Bryant (1986), 279.

produce a notion of biography in a “purer” literary form, but this comes at the cost of transforming Potter into what I term a biographical ghost, a specter of failure and exploitation that is excluded from the national narrative. My analysis moves from a brief survey of the text’s critical reception to a close reading of the opening dedication, where I also show that Melville’s concern with revising Potter’s pamphlet also points to the work of revision that *Israel Potter*-the-book is performing on earlier aspects of Melville’s oeuvre. I then recover and explain the significance of a crucial chapter division in *Israel Potter*’s original magazine publication and book by Putnam, a division of the narrative that is effaced in modern editions of the text. This chapter break, I argue, is part and parcel of how *Israel Potter* should be read with a lens to the narrative’s investment in the critical idea of exhausted labor. Along the way I turn to *The Refugee* as an instance of how Melville’s text circulated beyond his control, an instance of textual drift that establishes the precedent for the problems I identify with modern editions of *Israel Potter*. In collapsing what was originally two chapters into one, these modern editions of Melville’s book have occluded some of the significance of unrecognized labor that is clearly delineated by those original chapter divisions.

Focusing on Potter’s life of drudgery as a major part of the biography’s significance in turn reflects back upon Melville’s own relationship to literary labor insofar as the book’s dedication pointedly frames the author-creator as “The Editor.” I read this decision to make Melville the editor of his book as a cue to read *Israel Potter* intertextually. After the abysmal failure of *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852)—a novel itself centrally preoccupied with authorial labor—*Israel Potter* revises the position of the literary creator by arguing that creativity occurs through acts of editing, recuperation, touching up, and rescue. In a story that itself is a revision, my take on Melville as the editor of *Israel Potter* offers a way to understand this text as an editorial revision of two issues central to *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*: labor and authorial production. By asking in *Israel Potter* “who ain’t a nobody?”—Melville’s narrator revises Ishmael’s crucial question from *Moby-Dick*: “who ain’t a slave?”³⁸⁶ The question’s shift in subject matter from slaves to nobodys registers on two levels, at once marking the distance from the national question of slavery posed in *Moby-Dick* to a transnational and more capacious question of laboring bodies, as well as folding the problem of literary anonymity—the editorial function—into the matter of the text, since Potter’s story is in effect authored by nobody in particular, but instead becomes an instance of what could be termed social authorship. Faced with an unreceptive literary marketplace, Melville might indeed have chosen to identify as an editor as a way to mark his own effacement into nobody. While previous critics have viewed *Israel Potter* as failing to capture the problem of slavery as effectively Melville’s masterpiece “Benito Cereno,” I offer another point of view that stresses the semantic shift from *slaves* to *nobodys* can be read as an attempt to represent labor through a transnational literary frame, where the London labor market speaks to aspects of exploitation that transcend the conditions of chattel slavery.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale*, 6. In this novel, Ishmael’s question “Who ain’t a slave?” abstracts from the particularities of chattel slavery to refigure slavery as a universal metaphysic, with the effect of assuaging Ishmael’s anxieties over the hierarchies of the workplace: “however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is in some way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed around, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content” (6). As I demonstrate in my analysis of *Israel Potter*, the description of brickmaking in London moves in the opposite direction by considering the metaphysical but preferring the concrete materialities of labor and production.

³⁸⁷ In *Shadow Over the Promised Land*, Carolyn Karcher argues that Melville’s literary investigations of slavery are essentially so convoluted so as to lose their critical potential, becoming in effect a protracted distraction and mitigation of the issue; Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* (1980).

5.2 A Curiously Unequal Book

In terms of modern literary criticism *Israel Potter* has not fared well since the Melville revival of intense critical interest that took place in Anglo-American literary criticism in the 1920s. Indeed, according to a historical overview included in the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Israel Potter*, “among the ten books Melville wrote from 1846 to 1856 only *Omoo* has received as scant commentary.”³⁸⁸ Compared to *Moby-Dick* and other recognized high points of Melville’s career this foray in literary biography has been deemed by many a failure and a sign of diminishing artistry. In *American Renaissance*, F.O. Matthiessen spoke for many critics in seeing in it “signs of exhaustion in Melville’s vitality,” arguing that Melville’s biographical novel was “produced by a man not at all able to write the kind of books he wanted to, but under a miserable compulsion.”³⁸⁹ A decade later C.L.R. James couldn’t even muster the interest to mention *Israel Potter* by name in his influential Melville monograph; for James, in the wake of writing “Benito Cereno” the author “was finished and he knew it [...] he wrote two more novels [...] one of them he did not finish and one was very carelessly written. He got himself a job as an inspector of customs, and for twenty years he wrote not a line of fiction.”³⁹⁰ Though coming from vastly different political and critical paradigms, F.O. Matthiessen and C.L.R. James can be read together as symptomatic of a broader critical neglect of *Israel Potter*. These two critical appraisals deliver a judgment of failure registered in the domain of politics and aesthetics—*Israel Potter*, both James and Matthiessen agree, fails to sustain the range of literary responses that have captivated readers of Melville’s other novels. Both James and Matthiessen play upon a trope of creative exhaustion in their criticism of Melville’s “careless” approach to Potter’s story and the narrator’s “miserable compulsions,” in the process missing, I want to highlight here, the possibility that exhaustion itself might in fact be a crucial interpretive kernel for unpacking the possible aesthetic and political meanings of the book.³⁹¹ Stated differently, I’m arguing that the kind of revolutionary politics that James famously admired in *Moby-Dick* may in fact have been reconfigured in the biography through an aesthetic of exhaustion and failure, a rhetorical and narrative stance taken by Melville to use Potter’s quotidian existence to explore the drudgery of mere labor and to register that drudgery in a ragged and monotonous tone in order to ask whether unredeemed labor can be compensated through the lens of the nation-state, by the literary marketplace, or by any institutional means. Potter’s loss of agency and his absorption into the mass of London’s laboring bodies, I will insist throughout this chapter, is potentially as revolutionary of a literary utterance as C.L.R. James’ famous proposal that the real protagonist of *Moby-Dick* is the Pequod’s transnational crew of mariners, renegades, and global castaways.

James and Matthiessen’s distaste with the supposedly careless and tired sheen of Melville’s prose in *Israel Potter* overlooks the fact that the biographical novel was composed during a period when Melville’s fiction took a decidedly aesthetic turn. Given the sheer amount of hermeneutical labor performed by generations of scholars and students on texts such as *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, “Bartleby,” “Benito Cereno,” and *Pierre*, it stands to reason that questions of form and aesthetics should not be overlooked when it comes to *Israel Potter*. And while there have been attempts to rehabilitate the biographical novel in terms of theme and symbol, most twentieth-century critics

³⁸⁸ Walter E. Bezanson, “Historical Note” to NN IP, 227.

³⁸⁹ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941), 491

³⁹⁰ C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways* (1953, 2001 ed.), 112

³⁹¹ In *Subversive Genealogy*, Michael Rogin also interprets *Israel Potter* as a “biography of failure” and extends this reading to Melville’s own psychological state, arguing that in the wake of “Benito Cereno” the author’s fiction “charts the internalization of his forces of destruction, his deepening personal despair,” in part due to the deepening national crisis over slavery. See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (1983), 221-230. The problem with claiming that Melville’s book shows despair over national politics is that *Israel Potter* is in fact a transnational narrative, where most of the diegetic action takes place at sea or in England, and not in America.

move far too quickly from the aesthetic to the political in their arguments for *Israel Potter's* significance, citing an important critique of American nationalism in the text without, however, paying attention to Melville's material engagement with Potter's pamphlet.³⁹² These same interpretations in general fail to take into account questions of publication and republication in America and abroad.³⁹³ More recently, Robert Levine has argued for the significance of Melville's aesthetic portrayal of war, particularly in the chapters in *Israel Potter* that deal with a major sea battle of the American Revolution, but this interpretation also doesn't account for the material text and for its various instantiations.³⁹⁴ Other recent articles have begun to explore the transnational dimensions of the text; I value this effort to read Melville in global terms, but here too the relations of publishers and other agents of cultural diffusion have some bearing on how a literary artifact circulates beyond a single nation or region in ways that necessitate my intervention.³⁹⁵

Melville's literary aesthetics tends to elicit intense interest from readers in the dense verbal layers of his narrative descriptions, which seem to propose several registers of meaning while at the same time leaving the reader uncertain of how to negotiate the raveling and unraveling of linguistic detail.³⁹⁶ Contemporary readers of the biography came to similar conclusions. Even in its initial reception most critics expressed puzzlement at *Israel Potter's* elusive tone, its relatively simple plot structure, and its uneven development of character over the course of the narrative. Positive evaluations stopped short of calling the book a resounding success. The *Boston Post*, for instance, called it "not great" but "readable" by comparison to *Pierre's* impenetrability.³⁹⁷ New York's *National Magazine* identified a "tinge of obscure sarcasm pervad[ing] the book" that unsettled and made unclear the story's ultimate meaning.³⁹⁸ English reviewers called it a "curiously unequal book" despite its readability, citing a tension between Melville's particular focus on Potter in the initial chapters and the distanced perspective taken in the second half, "a fatal mistake in Art," according to one London periodical, since "an author who ceases to be particular and becomes general, in all cases where the drawing of human character is in question, is sure to lose his hold of the reader in the most disastrous manner."³⁹⁹ This narrative movement from particularity to generality, I'd like to point out here, pertains to the thematic of mere labor I will elaborate over the course of my analysis. Like the review in the *Daily News* I cited earlier, these critics took note of Potter's progress into a kind of impersonality that accompanied his life of poverty. The London *Leader's* expectation in a plausible "drawing of human character" is frustrated by a narrative that proceeds to delineate its protagonist in shapes increasingly abstract, general, and angular—in a word—*brick-like*. In detailing

³⁹² Thematic and symbolic readings of the novel vary widely. Many critics emphasize Potter's role in the American Revolution to extract a kind of meta-commentary on the place of the revolution in American national character; see Robert Zaller, "Melville and the Myth of Revolution" (1976), William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Later Novels* (1986). For analyses of *Israel Potter* as a wry commentary on the genres of biography and historical fiction, see Brian Rosenberg, "Israel Potter: Melville's Anti-History" (1989); Daniel Reagan, "Melville's Israel Potter and the Nature of Biography" (1989); Peter Bellis, "Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction" (1990). Also falling within a symbolic reading are interpretations of the novel's use of figure and typology to identify Potter and the American nation with the Biblical Israel; see Bill Christopherson, "Israel Potter: Melville's Citizen of the Universe" (1993).

³⁹³ For a recent restatement of the nationalism question that ignores the conditions of the book's many states of publication, see William V. Spanos, *Melville and the American Calling* (2008).

³⁹⁴ Robert S. Levine, "The Revolutionary Aesthetics of *Israel Potter*," *Melville and Aesthetics*, ed. Sanborn and Otter (2011)

³⁹⁵ See especially Paul Giles, "Bewildering Interentanglement: Melville's Engagement with British Culture" (1998), Hester Blum, "Atlantic Trade" (2006), John Ernest, "Revolutionary Fictions and Activist Labor: Looking for Douglass and Melville Together" (2008), Amy Kaplan, "Transnational Melville" (2010)

³⁹⁶ Samuel Otter, "An Aesthetics in All Things" (2008)

³⁹⁷ *Boston Post*, 15 March 1855, in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Higgins and Parker (1995), 455. Further references to periodical reviews collected in this volume will be abbreviated as HMCR.

³⁹⁸ *National Magazine*, 6 May 1855. HMCR, 461

³⁹⁹ *Leader*, 5 May 1855. HMCR, 463

how Potter becomes-a-brick, the narrative aesthetic used throughout the novel turns into a diagnosis of how forms of labor devolve upon laboring bodies and transform people into the arrested image of the commodities they produce. These bricks, whether located in a kiln or in a building, bespeak a fixedness of social position, becoming in the language of the novel a type of Potter's "for ever arrested intentions, and a long life still rotting in early mishap."⁴⁰⁰

What these contemporary reviews tend to register is bafflement at a narrative that took the commonplace and ordinary details of Potter's undistinguished role in the American Revolution and filtered those details through figural and narrative strategies that suggested a kind of literary excess (on the level of linguistic detail) amidst a characterology that unraveled the integrity of its main character as Potter's life becomes more desperate and belabored. London's *Weekly Chronicle* made this point most clearly: "The book leaves the impression of having been carefully and purposely rendered commonplace. You feel that the author is capable of something much better, but for a freak is resolved to curb his fancy and adhere to the dustiest routine."⁴⁰¹ This feeling of "something much better" suggests a text that at times exceeds its overt content, but at other moments revels in the mundane and the unexceptional. Like "Benito Cereno," *Billy Budd*, or *The Confidence-Man*, I want to suggest here, *Israel Potter* is a case of literary excess, where on the minute level of literary wording the sense of greater meaning is at once signaled and effaced.⁴⁰² But more so than Melville's other narratives, I would argue that the engagement in *Israel Potter* with the materiality of the page—the charged relationship of the author-turned-editor and the old pamphlet that forms the basis of the story—offers a particular instantiation of the mundane that differs from his shorter fiction or his earlier novels.⁴⁰³ In terms of *Israel Potter*, Melville's distinctive engagement with the materiality of print takes center stage in his opening dedication, to which I now turn.

5.3 Melville's Dedication

The major difference between the *Putnam's* serialization of the narrative and the 1855 book publication of *Israel Potter* lies in the latter text's inclusion of a pointed dedication "To His Highness The Bunker-Hill Monument" (Figure 1). At least one magazine review singled out Melville's dedication as the best example of the obscure sarcasm that suffuses the biography's pages. The dedication is in fact a highly over-determined literary utterance, one that sets the frame for the ensuing narrative while also doubling back and revising some major elements of the two novels that preceded *Israel Potter*. In relation to *Pierre*, the 1855 dedication repeats the opening dedication of the earlier novel, which was addressed "To Greylock's Most Excellent Majesty." In an extended essay on *Pierre's* place in American literary history, Sacvan Bercovitch once claimed that *Pierre's* dedication crystallized the most difficult interpretive problems posed by Melville's prose, the ambiguities of "excess, cliché, paste-board dramatics, unexplained reversals of meaning."⁴⁰⁴ The same case can be made for *Israel Potter*. By repeating, augmenting, and extending *Pierre's* rhetorical strategy of the

⁴⁰⁰ NN IP, 168

⁴⁰¹ *Weekly Chronicle*, 2 June 1855. HMCR, 465

⁴⁰² On problems of tone in *The Confidence Man*, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2007); on literary excess in *The Confidence Man* and *Billy Budd*, see Sharon Cameron, "Lines of Stones: The Unpersonified Impersonal in Melville's *Billy Budd*," *Impersonality* (2007).

⁴⁰³ By invoking the terms *material* and *materiality* I argue for a more expansive and book-historical reading than Elizabeth Renker's work on Melville's "scene of writing" in *Strike Through the Mask* (1996). Although Renker attends to the "matter of writing" in Melville's prose to include both writing as an activity and the physical features of the written page, her analysis largely centers on moments of "blockage, suspension, and fear" that operate as recurring figures in Melville's prose (xviii). When it comes to the material text, Renker limits her evidence to Melville's manuscripts and as a result ignores the book trade as a further site of mediation.

⁴⁰⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, "*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History," *The Rites of Assent*, 248

excessive dedication, *Israel Potter* from the very first page offers a critical revision of Melville's corpus in connections that are subtle yet quite palpable. For instance, the narrator's description of Potter's 1824 pamphlet as "forlornly published on sleazy gray paper," echoes and amplifies the attention in *Pierre* to the materiality of print—a connection signaled by Melville's pointed use of the adjective "sleazy." In a puzzling chapter in *Pierre* entitled "The Journey and the Pamphlet," the protagonist Pierre Glendinning—just like the editor of *Israel Potter*—encounters a "ruinous old pamphlet," a "thin, tattered, dried-fish-like thing; printed with blurred ink upon mean, sleazy paper."⁴⁰⁵ The word "sleazy" appears a total of five times in *Pierre*, but only in connection to the pamphlet. This intertextual echo between Potter's sleazy pamphlet and Plotinus Plinlimmon's sleazy philosophical tract cannot be accidental, since, as I have demonstrated, *Israel Potter*'s dedication enacts a reiteration of *Pierre*'s dedication, one that frames the activity of literary production in terms of editorial revision and so therefore is engaged with refiguring aspects of the earlier fiction. On this basis alone *Israel Potter* merits far more careful scrutiny than it has traditionally received.

A reading of Melville's dedication could begin from the bibliographic code itself, which would include the specificities of typography and page design. This emphasis on bibliographic analysis as the "grammar" of literary transmission—to borrow from W.W. Greg's influential formulation—requires precision in terms of chronology of publication.⁴⁰⁶ What I want to establish first is that the various editions and modes of publication of *Israel Potter* help destabilize its generic status. In terms of the material text, *Israel Potter* as it was published in 1855 is not a novel but a biography. Prior to the book publication, it was a serialized tale. Serialization in *Putnam's* did not place it in the genres of novel or romance; contemporary reviewers of the magazine such as the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* loosely classified it as a "tale" and a "series of adventures"—not a novel.⁴⁰⁷ (Only with the 1865 publication of *The Refugee* would Melville's tale/biography clearly become a novel, as I will demonstrate.) Putnam's first edition of the book frames the narrative differently from the magazine serialization. Typography and the arrangement of the printed marks on the page can make a difference here. On the one hand, the diminutive "TO" stands in relation to the larger "HIS HIGHNESS" in a way that mirrors the posture of deference taken by the narrator's address to the Bunker Hill monument. Here we see that close bibliographic analysis can reveal how "the material form of books," according to D.F. McKenzie, "the non-verbal elements of the typographic notations within them, the very disposition of space itself, have an expressive function in conveying meaning."⁴⁰⁸ It is quite unlikely Melville had a say in these questions of design, and so I am not speaking here in terms of authorial intention, but nevertheless typography mediates literary utterances in the era of the printed book, with the latter depending in every instance upon the former for their instantiation. In this sense the very first word following the opening honorific is absolutely crucial. The book held in the 1855 reader's hands is a "BIOGRAPHY." As we continue to read this opening paragraph, the text becomes a critical excavation of biographical narrative's relationship to what the narrator rather cryptically terms "biographical distinction." Whereas in earlier chapters (such as Chapter Two, on early national biography) I showed how texts can be mediated by their bibliographic format, here we see that publisher's decisions with regards to the arrangement and size of the marks on the page can tell us how to read the text. By extension, the bibliographic code can position the text in broader generic categories; in *Israel Potter*'s first paragraph, we see the words "biography," "biographer," and "biographical" printed in close succession. Given

⁴⁰⁵ *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities*, 206

⁴⁰⁶ W.W. Greg, "Bibliography—An Apologia" *The Library* 13.2 (1932)

⁴⁰⁷ *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, 29 July 1854, in HMCRC, 455

⁴⁰⁸ D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1999), 17

Melville's penchant for the echo and for the accretion of literary details, we can also expect that this biography will also reflect upon other biographies and their biographers.

Nowhere in the modest archive of scholarship on *Israel Potter* has due attention been paid to Melville's awareness of Nathaniel Hawthorne's investment in biography. The dedication subtly establishes the connection. For one thing, the 1855 opening implicitly echoes *Moby-Dick's* famous dedication to Melville's literary friend, which was offered to Hawthorne, "In Token of My Admiration For His Genius." And given that all three dedications (from *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *Israel Potter*) deploy a kind of symbolic exchange of tokens and honorific recognitions in advance of the beginning of their respective stories, *Israel Potter's* blatant rewording of its predecessors keys the reader to how the 1855 dedication ironizes the Melville corpus.⁴⁰⁹ By extension—and this is not at all a great leap—Melville's relation and regard for Hawthorne also becomes a target for irony; in this regard, *Israel Potter* ironizes the "token" of admiration earlier given to Hawthorne with an even more pointed invocation of Hawthorne's more recent literary productions. A close reading of the 1855 text reveals a coded reflection on Hawthorne's own foray into biography and the dynamics of gift exchange from which Hawthorne profited by writing a campaign biography, *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852).

Expanding upon the honorific gestures and the "tokens of admiration" offered to Bunker Hill, Graylock, and Hawthorne, the text here calls attention to the genre of the campaign biography as itself predicated upon the exchange of honorifics. The biography of Pierce is targeted as a self-interested gift exchange, a kind of literary economy that stands at loggerheads with the stated intention in Melville's dedication of recounting the narrative of a life without distinction. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, in the aftermath of the Mexican War a series of war heroes, including Zachary Taylor and Franklin Pierce, used biographical representation to translate Manifest Destiny into political capital. Hawthorne's 1852 *Life of Franklin Pierce*, a campaign biography partly based upon Pierce's experience in the Mexican War, was a work of propaganda that significantly helped Pierce secure the U.S. presidency. In repayment of this gift, Pierce appointed Hawthorne in 1853 to a lucrative sinecure as the U.S. consul to Liverpool. Read with this context in mind, Melville's dedication functions as an implicit critique of this kind of literary gift economy, where literary narrative is offered in an exchange of political power and financial remuneration. Where *Moby-Dick* offers a "token" of homage to Hawthorne, *Israel Potter* refigures "acknowledgment" as the gift of dubious distinction. Biography, according to this coded literary utterance, confers distinction to the parties involved; for the biographical subject (Pierce or Potter), distinction can lead to posthumous recognition or to positive gains in this life. For the author-creator (Hawthorne or Melville), the dividends depend upon whether the biographical subject can repay the gift. Hawthorne, if we read Melville's dedication closely, "availed himself" of the gift economies of antebellum literary production, translating his narrative skill into real political effects and financial gain. But this is not literary biography "in its purer form," the narrator seems to suggest. Only by writing "the ended lives of the true and brave" can "biographical distinction" function as "pure" literature.⁴¹⁰ Importantly, by invoking a "purer form" the first words of the book establish the

⁴⁰⁹ Several critical studies have taken note of *Israel Potter's* reworking of Melville's earlier fictions. For an interpretation that sees Potter as a vestige of *Moby-Dick's* Ishmael or an "Ishmaeleian sensibility," see Clark Davis, "The Body Deferred: Israel Potter and the Search for the Hearth" (1991). In *White Lies: Melville's Narratives of Facts* (1989), John Samson traces *Israel Potter's* intertextual echoes of the earlier sea narratives *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*.

⁴¹⁰ In "Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction," Peter Bellis reads Melville's dedication as a generic declaration that "biography [...] can only be written and read after the death of its subject," without however taking into account Melville's awareness of Hawthorne's book and its relationship to literary authorship; see Bellis, "Israel Potter" *American Literary History* 2 (1990), 611.

conditions for *literary* biography: its *form* must be “purer” than Hawthorne’s campaign biography. *Israel Potter* is accordingly highly aestheticized.

What Melville’s narrator is hinting at here is in fact the central problem of *Israel Potter*: can biography tell the life of the ordinary, the mundane, of society’s losers? And can this be done without sacrificing formal and aesthetic complexity? To fulfill this aesthetic question, the dedication coins the term “biographical distinction” only to expose this nebulous concept to two negations, signaled in the paragraph by a “neither ... nor” scenario in which no recognition is given by the subject to the author, and no recompense is gained by the author for his presentation of the subject. Potter’s biography is in this regard a critical negation of the kind of popular biography written by Hawthorne or Jared Sparks.⁴¹¹ By invoking in the dedication, just several paragraphs later, the *Library of American Biography* edited by the Whig historian Jared Sparks, Melville situates Potter’s life as existing outside of, and in a relation of *negativity-to*, the entire literary field of national biography pioneered by figures such as Sparks and Mason Locke Weems. I argue this invocation of the concept of distinction followed by its negation points us towards Melville’s coded response to the development of an antebellum literary field and the position of authors within that field’s multiple economies, both embedded and disembedded. Potter-the-protagonist is neither the kind of founding statesman or war hero memorialized by Weems and Sparks, nor is he a fit subject for campaign biography à la Pierce. Instead, Potter is positioned outside of these generic categories, becoming in effect a kind of specter or biographical ghost whose literary appearances announce Melville’s deconstruction of American biography’s function as a monument to state and nation.⁴¹²

Distancing itself from Hawthorne’s campaign biography, *Israel Potter* nevertheless opens up a thematic concern with the problem of literary authorship in its opening paragraph. If campaign biography of the sort written by Hawthorne is by definition a species of epideictic rhetoric, then its negation occurs by way of writing a life without distinction, which, by implication, means that the position of the author loses its own prestige. Writing the life of a nobody has implications for the author’s prestige. Melville was clearly interested in this period in the dynamics of what he once termed *reverse distinction*, the structuring of specific positions in the literary field that have their value only in relation to other positions. The hallmark of this kind of gymnastics lies in the purposeful evasion of publicity. According to Walter Bezanson, Melville flatly refused *Putnam*’s urgent request during the period of *Israel Potter*’s serialization that the author’s daguerreotype be published in the magazine. Bezanson explains: “during the serialization of *Israel Potter* one author was featured each month with a full-page frontispiece engraving (except for the November [1855] issue, a spot Melville could have had).”⁴¹³ This refusal of literary prestige echoes Melville’s 1851 letter to Evert Duyckinck in which the author refused an earlier request for his daguerreotype. Melville’s rationale was that since “almost everybody is having his ‘mug’ engraved nowadays [...] this test of distinction is getting to be reversed.”⁴¹⁴ Through these relationships and communications with his publishers, we see that

⁴¹¹ On Jared Sparks’ approach to national biography, see Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, 135-153

⁴¹² In referring to the specter and the ghost as a figure for the phenomenal haunting of categories I am drawing upon Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1994). Derrida’s assertion that “the national (*heimlich*) haunts itself” could be said to summarize many of the concerns of *Israel Potter* (144). Space does not permit in my essay to fully examine the hauntology that suffuses Melville’s text, but I must note that at several points Potter is identified as a ghost, beginning with the dedication’s reference to him as a “dilapidated old tombstone retouched” (NN IP v), his entombment in Squire Woodcock’s secret cell (67-72), and Potter’s disguise as a scarecrow in a humorous interlude entitled “An Encounter of Ghosts” (76-77). “Come along, then, my ghost,” an English master-at-arms says to Potter in the chapter where our refugee seeks to pretend that he is a member of an English ship he accidentally finds himself aboard (139).

⁴¹³ Bezanson, NN IP 211

⁴¹⁴ *ibid.* Melville’s 1851 letter to Duyckinck in which he refuses to have his “mug” engraved forms the basis for the passage in *Pierre* where the protagonist declines to visit the daguerreotypist: “For [Pierre] considered with what infinite readiness now, the most faithful portrait of any one could be taken by the Daguerreotype, whereas in former times a

Melville toyed with a kind of literary anonymity and that this intentional absence from the visual record may not simply be a rejection of fame but rather a dialectical move within the literary field in which declining a certain mark of distinction potentially resulted in a new kind of distinction. The dedication to *Israel Potter* frames the text within a comparable logic, where one kind of distinction (à la Hawthorne and Pierce) is critiqued for not being literary enough, which generates a new literary position (“biography, in its purer form”) and a text suffused, on the level of rhetoric, literary form, and narrative structure, with a deliberate attempt to make the ordinary and mundane into a resource for literary narrative. Stated differently, I am arguing that a division between fame and anonymity and a complementary aesthetic vision emerges when we bring *The Life of Franklin Pierce* into the picture, where on the one side Hawthorne and Pierce exemplify mutual benefit from popular recognition but at the cost of formal purity, whereas Melville’s appropriation of Potter’s life—including the author’s reframing of his own labor as editorial work—moves in the different direction of anonymity, poverty, and reverse distinction, but with the benefit of the purity of a formal aesthetic vision, however ragged and exhausted. Potter’s life of anonymity suggests in this regard a kind of allegory or displaced symptom of an emerging question of the relationship between literary success and forms of publicity that allow for public recognition of literary authors; at the same time, Potter’s exhaustion is clearly aestheticized in the opening dedication, and this formal feature of the text corresponds to the distance established from the national narratives of Hawthorne, Sparks, and Weems. The mistake by readers such as F.O. Matthiessen and C.L.R. James is to confuse the “gloom” of Potter’s story with a lack of artistic investment, despite the fact that the dedication says that it “durst not substitute [...] any artistic recompense of poetical justice” to imagine a positive ending for Potter’s life.⁴¹⁵ Rather than being a turn away from the aesthetic, this statement betrays the very quality of the literary that critics have oddly denied to the text.

5.4 The Many Editions of *Israel Potter*

Melville’s 1855 dedication raises fundamental questions about what constitutes an authoritative edition of any text. In the dedication, we are told that Melville’s narrative “preserves, almost as in a reprint, Israel Potter’s autobiographical story,” however, in the very next sentence the authenticity of this “autobiography” is called into question since the 1824 source text itself turns out to be spurious. The dedication informs us that this “little narrative” of Potter’s life “appeared among the peddlers, written, probably, not by himself, but taken down by the lips of another.”⁴¹⁶ In point of fact the absence of an authoritative edition is the condition of possibility for Israel Potter’s ensuing afterlife as a literary character. A brief bibliographic overview of the two editions of the *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* demonstrates that the textual ambiguities of Potter’s story run deeper than Melville probably even knew.

faithful portrait was only within the power of the moneyed, or mental aristocrats of the earth [...] Besides, when every body has his portrait published, true distinction lies in now having your published at all. For if you are published along with Tom, Dick, and Harry, and wear a coat of their cut, how then are you distinct from Tom, Dick and Harry?” *Pierre*, 254

⁴¹⁵ NN IP, vi

⁴¹⁶ NN IP, v



Figure 10. Engraved frontispiece to the first edition of *The Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (1824, printed and authored by Henry Trumbull). Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

As Ann Fabian has documented in her history of how ordinary nineteenth-century Americans spread their tales of personal calamity, the historical Potter belonged to a generation of revolutionary war veterans who used print as a means to garner financial support and to make public their demand for compensation from the federal government for their military service.⁴¹⁷ Potter's one hundred-page pamphlet belongs to a curious moment in nineteenth-century U.S. cultural history, at once belonging to the category of cheap popular reading of the sort sold by Mason Locke Weems (see Chapter Two) while also representing a moment in the social history of marginalized persons who used print as a way to seek redress. Melville was correct in his suggestion that Potter was not the author of his autobiographical narrative. The real "author" of the pamphlet is its printer,

⁴¹⁷ Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (2000)

a Henry Trumbull of Providence, Rhode Island, who in the copyright notice to the text's first edition "claims as author" the rights to Potter's life. (Potter's text belongs to the same genre as an 1829 pamphlet entitled *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts*, also printed and "authored" by Henry Trumbull, who held the copyright to both pamphlets.⁴¹⁸) Potter's "life" in this sense was never a simple transcription of an autobiographical narrative but rather the product of a set of relations in which the real author (i.e. the agent of cultural production) is the printer. Ironically enough, this "origin" of Potter's life in print is itself built on shaky foundations. Trumbull's first edition of the pamphlet contained several critical errors that undermined the authenticity of Potter's tale of poverty and woe. For instance, in an errata notice at the end of the pamphlet's first edition, Trumbull informs the reader of a compositor's mistake regarding the cost of Potter's rent for his London garret apartment, which instead of "six pence per week" (which is cheap) should have read as a far more expensive "six pence per day."⁴¹⁹ These tiny details mattered when readers evaluated how convincingly Potter's story was to be read. Understood in light of this typographical error, the decision to replace Trumbull's original frontispiece of Potter (Figure 10) with a new engraving for the second edition bespeaks a concerted effort to use print to better represent a life of poverty. In the frontispiece to the pamphlet's second edition (Figure 11), Potter looks far more ragged, and he has twice as many mouths to feed. Clearly, Melville's claim that Potter is a "grammatical person"—a literary character and a product of early American print culture—needs to take into account the fact that there never was an authoritative original in the first place, and that Potter was always in an important sense the product of print's mediations. Indeed, as the historians David Chacko and Alexander Kulcsar have discovered, Trumbull's pamphlet life of Potter is full of inventions, half truths, and shopworn melodrama.⁴²⁰ Melville's source text, in other words, was itself a kind of fiction—all the more reason, I argue, for the biographical novel to take a spectral character or biographical ghost as its protagonist.

⁴¹⁸ Robert Voorhis, *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts* (1829). Essentially a slave narrative, this pamphlet detail's Robert's escape from slavery and his subsequent life in isolation after learning of the suicide of his wife and the death of his children. Here, as in Potter's text, Henry Trumbull's voice frames the autobiographical narrative of "poor artless Robert" (27). And like Potter's pamphlet, the story of Robert was an act of philanthropy meant to garner proceeds to buy Robert a new hut to live in. Priced at 12 1/1 cents, this 1829 pamphlet was also printed on what Melville's narrator would have termed "sleazy" paper, with blue paper wrappers.

⁴¹⁹ *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (1824), 83, 104

⁴²⁰ David Chacko and Alexander Kulcsar, "Israel Potter: Genesis of a Legend" *William and Mary Quarterly* 41.3 (1984), p.368. These historians even argue that Potter was not "born of reputable parents," as Trumbull's pamphlet claims, but in fact was a the bastard child of a single woman named Amey Ralph; he acquired the surname Potter in 1757 when the young ward was placed under the care of John Potter of Cranston, Rhode Island (368). Among many fabrications, the most significant is that Potter's revolutionary war company most likely did not fight in Bunker Hill.



Figure 11. Engraved frontispiece to the second 1824 edition of Potter's *Life and Remarkable Adventures*, printed for Potter by John Howard. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Printing a second edition of Potter's life therefore meant more than just resetting the type and correcting for errors, it also involved a more refined attention to the details of poverty, including its visual representation. In the pamphlet's second edition, poverty's expression occurs by way of dress and bodily comportment. From head to toe Potter is transformed into a more convincing beggar; his hat, beard, jacket, and pants have all slid a few rungs further down the social hierarchy, and he doesn't even have a chair to mend in the revised frontispiece. He's hemmed in by two children—out of a total of ten, nine of whom would die in his lifetime—symbolizing the claustrophobia of London poverty and his overwhelming despair. We don't know which edition Melville used to compose his narrative, but attention to differences in presentation in the original pamphlet reveals that Melville's own interest in the "sleazy" pamphlet becomes more complicated

when we account for the wider field of relations between authors, biographical subjects, and publishers that produced his source text.

These questions of what made for an authoritative edition further conditioned Potter's reception during the period when Melville's book was first issued by Putnam's publishing house. Just as there was no single authoritative version of the 1824 pamphlet, so too was the authority of Putnam's book challenged by an unauthorized English edition, bound in yellow boards and clearly marketed for a wide urban audience. The 1855 piracy of Melville's story by the London publisher George Routledge and Co. exemplifies how Melville's text was circulating beyond its official chains of dissemination.⁴²¹ The cover of Routledge's one-shilling railroad edition of *Israel Potter* offers a striking instance of how bibliographic devices can frame a literary text in ways at odds with the narrative proper. The bright yellow cover of this pirated edition features a wood engraving of an arctic scene in which a small ship is locked in combat with a whale—which of course puts us in mind of *Moby-Dick*—but the picture has little actual relation with Potter's narrative, being instead a ploy by the publisher to market the text as a sea tale along the lines of Melville's more successful books *Typee* and *Omoo*. Importantly, this piracy helped circulate Melville's narrative to readers who otherwise would not have encountered the text, and this particular edition was reviewed in at least one English periodical.⁴²² The six thousand copies printed by Routledge probably meant that *Israel Potter* had a modest readership in England, and certainly a larger share of English readers than for *Pierre* and possibly *The Whale*. English readers would also have the opportunity to purchase Putnam's official edition through an agreement the American publisher had made with the house of Sampson Low, Son & Co.

Routledge's spurious (but also inventive!) cover to their edition of *Israel Potter* demonstrates how generic categories (is the book a novel, a series of episodic tales, a biography?) are framed and mediated by a publisher's decisions with regards to bindings, illustrations, type, and bibliographical format. The cover of the 1855 piracy announces the text as a sea adventure along the lines of *Typee*, and therefore does not necessarily frame the text as a novel or a romance. Here we see that genre was not entirely stable for Melville's book. As I earlier suggested, the dedication to Putnam's 1855 American editions frames the text within the terrain of popular biography. Prior to its publication as a book, the earlier magazine serializations of *Israel Potter* lacked the framing device of the dedication, and since the episodic narrative was issued in parts over the course of a year, readers of *Putnam's* would likely have agreed with the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer's* judgment that the story should be categorized as a "series of adventures."⁴²³ Of course we cannot work with more than inferences on this matter, but my point is to suggest that the multiple states of publication and entextualization of Melville's narrative point to the historicity of generic categories. The specificities and details of publication, and whether those publications include framing devices that cue us to generic categories, make a difference in how a text acquires meaning and helps frame its genre. And since the cover of Routledge's piracy boldly advertises Melville as "author" of *Typee* and *Omoo* (and not *Pierre* or *Moby-Dick*), these framing devices can also serve to construct the image of the author for potential readers. For contemporary reviewers, *Israel Potter* was especially timely for the health of

⁴²¹ According to Bezanson, Routledge had twice pirated Melville's novels before *Israel Potter* (with separate editions of *Typee* and *Omoo* in 1850), IPNN, 220

⁴²² The *Athenaeum's* (London) review of Melville's text was likely based on the Routledge edition. Towards the end of this review the book is declared "not a bad shilling's worth for any railway reader, who does not object to small type and a style the glories of which are nebulous" (HMCR 465). Both the cheap price of the book and the use of "small type" indicate the pirated edition, and not the authorized English edition published by Sampson Low, Son and Co. According to Bezanson, the Routledge edition probably amounted to around six thousand copies, a substantial print run that was larger than Putnam's American editions (NN IP 221).

⁴²³ *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* 29 July 1854, in HMCR, 455.

Melville's career: was he going to return to form or continue to write turgid, overblown narratives? Routledge's edition provides the answer on the book's cover, short-circuiting what the narrative itself might offer on this issue. Well into the remainder of Melville's career, *Israel Potter* offered the potential of a return to exciting adventure tales, and publishers took note. For instance, in 1857 the Philadelphia publisher T.B. Peterson purchased the stereotyped plates of *Israel Potter* from Putnam's and republished the book in 1865—minus the opening dedication—under a different title as *The Refugee*, a new novel by Herman Melville (Figure 12).⁴²⁴ Published as part of Peterson's "Dollar Series," the new work was issued in the Civil War era as a gamble by Peterson's that purchasers would likely not have seen the original, and consequently assume this was a new novel by Herman Melville in the vein of his early successes. Our author was not amused. In Melville's personal copy the author circled the titles of two works that Peterson's had wrongly attributed to him on *The Refugee*' title page. Melville writes: "These books were not written by Herman Melville as alleged." In another hand, most likely that of Melville's sister, Peterson's is accused of committing a "fraud" on "Israel Potter."

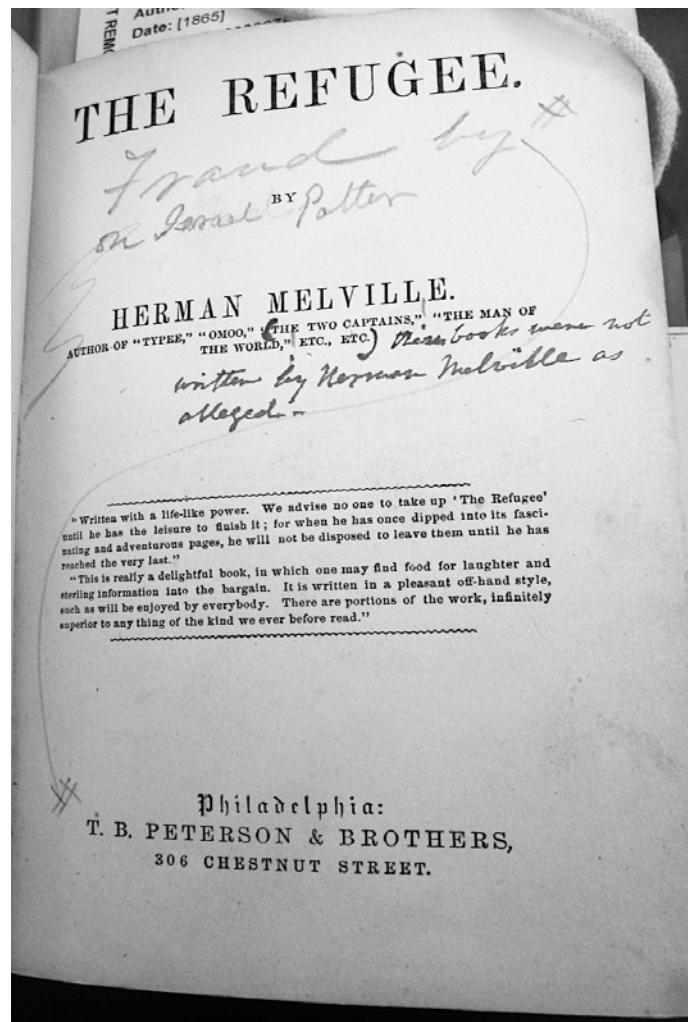


Figure 12. Title page to *The Refugee*, from the personal library of Herman Melville. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁴²⁴ Peterson's acquired the stereotyped plates from Putnam's during the financial panic of 1857; Bezanson, NN IP, 224

The Refugee is instructive for showing how Melville carefully monitored his literary reputation and opposed the unauthorized reproduction of his work. He seemed especially incensed by Peterson's attribution of two spurious titles to his oeuvre: "The Two Captains" and "The Man of the World." Towards the close of the author's life he wrote to an appreciative reader that "The Two Captains" and "The Man of the World" were "books of the air—I know of none such. The names appear, tho', on the title-page of a book of mine [...] which was republished by a Philadelphia house some time ago under the unwarrantably altered title of "The Refugee."⁴²⁵ Although Peterson's continued to advertise the sale of *The Refugee* well into the 1870s, Melville grumbled in another letter "in connection with that title Peterson Brothers employ my name without authority, and notwithstanding a remonstrance conveyed to them long ago."⁴²⁶ Melville's frustration is understandable. But from the critical perspective of a sociology of texts in which every edition, issue, state, or instantiation of a text offers a potential for new literary meanings to accrete and thicken the meanings within literary history, Melville's frustration is somewhat ironic. Was not the author-turned-editor's own appropriation of the 1824 pamphlet itself a case of employing another's name and story without authority? And could not a case be made for Peterson's legitimate authority to appropriate *Israel Potter* in terms of the customary practices of the book trade, where ownership of the stereotyped plates amounted to a kind of de facto copyright?

Below is a schematic presentation of what I see as an uncanny parallel between the conditions of Melville's own literary production and Peterson's appropriation.

Trumbull's pamphlet	→ Melville	→ <i>Israel Potter</i>
<i>Israel Potter</i>	→ Peterson's	→ <i>The Refugee</i>

In a sense, Peterson's appropriation could be justified on the same grounds of legitimacy that Melville himself argued for in *Israel Potter's* dedication: a text that had once circulated in one format (pamphlet/book) had fallen out of circulation and was taken up by another literary producer (author/publisher), given a new title and some new accents, and disseminated once more for the reading public. Of course, my attempt to outline the parallels can only go so far since authors and publishers occupy unequal positions in the communications circuit. The greater takeaway of this discussion of the many editions of Potter's textual life (from pamphlet to magazine to book) is that the wider publishing context of Melville's narrative raises fundamental questions in literary studies about what constitutes an authorized edition of any text, a question that in turn opens up considerations of how the author-function is in many ways an effect of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the literary field; the latter point is especially evident in cases of unauthorized publication, where houses like Peterson's and Routledge constructed the image of Melville as a particular kind of author through framing devices and paratextual additions and deletions. In this regard, these two unauthorized editions of Melville's book must not be understood as straying from the meaning of a supposedly pure original (an "ideal" text) that best approximates the author's original intentions. Instead, they represent distinct instantiations that helped to further circulate the narrative in various temporal and geographic contexts that otherwise might not have happened. The piracy and the unauthorized reprint are in this sense *productive* of new literary meanings, both in terms of circulation and with regards to Melville's own responses, in the letters in which he complains about Peterson's, to a disembedded literary field where his texts were moving outside of his control. In this sense they

⁴²⁵ Letter from Herman Melville to James Billson, 7 April 1888, in *Correspondence*, 511-512.

⁴²⁶ Letter from Melville to *The Literary World* (no date), in *Correspondence*, 538

are an important part of the Melville canon; like *The Whale* (the 1851 English edition of *Moby-Dick*) they point to the need to account for all of the textual variants that might befall a text.⁴²⁷

5.5 A Difference in Brick

Paying attention to the variant editions in turn opens up productive questions about how chapter divisions play a role in emphasizing meaning within a narrative. In particular, my concern here is with the chapters in *Israel Potter* that detail the protagonist's experience of labor in the brickyards of London. In both the *Putnam's* serialization and the nineteenth-century book editions (by Putnam, Routledge, and Peterson's) Melville's narrative divides the description of brickmaking into two chapters: Chapter Twenty-Three ("Israel in Egypt") and Chapter Twenty-Four ("Continued"). However, the modern scholarly edition of the book by Northwestern-Newberry (edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle) collapses these two chapters into one.⁴²⁸ So too does the 2008 Penguin mass paperback edition, edited by Robert Levine. Because Melville's original manuscript was not preserved, the question is less that of the author's intention than it is a question of what readers in 1855 would have encountered. According to Bezanson in the "Historical Note" to the Northwestern-Newberry edition, the type for Putnam's book was likely set by using the magazine serialization as the printer's copy.⁴²⁹ Putnam's proceeded to stereotype the text for the second and third editions issued of *Israel Potter* in 1855. All of these American editions preserve the original chapter divisions. Furthermore, Routledge used one of the three 1855 Putnam's editions in setting the type for their English piracy, and so it too divided "Israel in Egypt" into two separate chapters. And because *The Refugee* was printed from Putnam's stereotyped plates, it also followed the same chapter arrangement.

In regaling these details I'm interested in the relative fixedness of the 1855 text not solely on account of bibliographical concerns but because the chapter(s) in question are the ones that most tenaciously grapple with an account of Potter as a figure for alienated labor. Below is the final paragraph from Chapter Twenty Three as it appeared in the original editions:

Sometimes the air was harsh and bleak; the ridged and mottled sky looked scourged; or cramping fogs set in from sea, for leagues around, ferreting out each rheumatic human bone, and racking it; the sciatic limpners shivered; their aguish rags sponged up the mists. No shelter, though it hailed. The sheds were for the bricks. Unless, indeed, according to the phrase, each man was a "brick," which, in sober scripture, was the case; brick is no bad name for any son of Adam; Eden was but a brick-yard; what is mortal but a few luckless shovelfuls of clay, moulded in a mould, laid out on a sheet to dry, and ere long quickened into his queer caprices by the sun? Are not men built into communities just like bricks into a wall? Consider the great wall of China: ponder the great populace of Pekin. As man serves bricks, so God him; building him up by billions into the edifices of his purposes. Man attains not to the nobility of brick, unless taken in the aggregate. Yet there is a difference in brick, whether quick or dead; which for the last, we now shall see.

⁴²⁷ *The Whale* is notorious for excluding the concluding epilogue to *Moby-Dick*. Minus this part of the text, English readers arguably encountered a radically different book, since they wouldn't have known that Ishmael survived the Pequod's destruction.

⁴²⁸ NN IP, 154-157

⁴²⁹ Bezanson, NN IP, 213

At the beginning of this chapter we learn that “Israel resolved to turn brick-maker,” but the narrative proceeds to argue that persons in conditions of exploited labor do not simply choose their professions; instead, the work in an uncanny sense chooses them. Consequently, the laborers begin to assume some of the characteristics of the commodities they produce: “The truth indeed was, that this continual, violent, helter-skelter lapping of the dough in the moulds, begat a corresponding disposition in the moulder.” In the paragraph cited above, the immiserated laborers become the site for the familiar conceit in Melville’s prose fiction in which characters (the solidity and integrity of persons) become impersonal, with the consequence that the line dividing characters from their surroundings becomes hopelessly blurred. (In the passage above, “cramping fogs” penetrate to the bone, and Potter’s clothing absorbs poverty and exploitation like a sponge.) In this regard, a specific aesthetic orientation of the narrative conjoins the tactic (noted by literary scholars such as Sharon Cameron and others) of deconstructing the line between character and its exteriors to a specific analysis of a mode of capitalist production. In typical Melvillean fashion, the metaphors careen from the specificities of air, bone, and brick to the metaphysical (Biblical typology) and the exotic (China’s Great Wall of bricks), but only in the end to ask the crucial question of whether a materialist analysis must jettison typology and symbol to know for certain whether there is a “difference in brick.” As I’ve already suggested, this figurative exploration of alienated labor differs from *Moby-Dick*’s argument for the “universal thump” that masters deliver to laborers in that the metaphysical resonances are only but one stage in a further inquiry into the materialities of the workplace. By ending this chapter on precisely this question, the difference in brick clearly has a special significance for the overall narrative, especially because it hangs in suspension. Will the next issue of *Putnam’s* settle the difference?

I read the “difference in brick” as a literary utterance that implicitly argues that what we call the “material” and “materialities” are also figurative, in that the former can only be expressed through literary figurations. In a book that bases its narrative on the “sleaziness” of old paper, there will always be a figurative excess or substrate to the material, but that materiality cannot be easily captured within established or authoritative frameworks for figurative interpretation. This is why Potter’s first name is Israel: to point to the allure of type and symbol but only to negate that authority. More importantly, this question of a “difference in brick” is left hanging in the original magazine serialization and the book editions. Readers of the magazine would have needed to wait for the next issue to know what this difference is; likewise, nineteenth-century readers of the book would experience the difference as a break in chapters—perhaps not as pronounced a delay as having to wait another month for the magazine, but certainly a difference in the time needed to turn the page. The decision to end Chapter Twenty-Three on a difference in brick installs a temporal gap, which according to the narrator “we now shall see.” But this “now” must pause for the next installment or the turn of the page. *Israel Potter* was not alone among Melville’s magazine pieces to use this tactic of delay; “Benito Cereno,” which was serialized in *Putnam’s* just several months after *Israel Potter*, similarly ends its first installment on a gap in time, “lengthened by the continual recession of the goal.”⁴³⁰ My point here is to make the simple suggestion that the chapter break is not uncharacteristic of Melville’s writing for the magazines. Like the dedication, it repays closer scrutiny.

Chapter Twenty-Four (“Continued”) is devastating in its continuation of the theme of alienated labor in the context of brick making. What we learn from the decision to make the reader pause before discovering the “difference in brick” is that Melville’s narrative proceeds to relate labor

⁴³⁰ “Benito Cereno,” in *Great Short Works of Herman Melville* (1969), p.264. The story was serialized in the three final issues of *Putnam’s* for 1855 (October, November, December).

and production to the emergence of hierarchies and class distinctions. This is how the March 1855 installment of the serialization begins:

All night long, men sat before the mouth of the kilns, feeding them with fuel. A dull smoke—a smoke of their torments—went up from their tops. It was curious to see the kilns under the action of the fire, gradually changing color, like boiling lobsters. When, at last, the fires would be extinguished, the bricks, being duly baked, Israel often took a peep into the low vaulted ways at the base, where the flaming faggots had crackled. The bricks immediately lining the vaults would be all burnt to useless scrolls, black as charcoal, and twisted into shapes the most grotesque; the next tier would be a little less withered, but hardly fit for service; and gradually, as you went higher and higher along the successive layers of the kiln, you came to the midmost ones, sound, square, and perfect bricks, bringing the highest prices; from these the contents of the kiln gradually deteriorated in the opposite direction, upward. But the topmost layers, though inferior to the best, by no means presented the distorted look of the furnace-bricks. The furnace-bricks were haggard, with the immediate blistering of the fire—the midmost ones were ruddy with genial and tempered glow—the summit ones were pale with the languor of too exclusive an exemption from the burden of the blaze.

If we think in terms of genre, what's notable about passages such as this in a biography is that the project of giving a full account of Potter's life is frustrated by a narrative that proceeds to delineate its protagonist in shapes increasingly abstract, general, and angular—in a word—*brick-like*. In becoming-a-brick, the materialist perspective taken throughout the novel turns into a diagnosis of how forms of labor devolve upon laboring bodies and transform people into bricks. But note also the subtle invocation of paper as a metaphor for exposure to the dangers of the marketplace: “the bricks immediately lining the vaults would be all burnt to useless scrolls, black as charcoal, and twisted into shapes the most grotesque.” This statement of Potter's labors turns to paper and its deterioration as if to say that a literary analysis of one form of material life (labor) can only register the degradation of laboring bodies by way of figuration: bricks and scrolls, or bricks as scrolls. Here, in this return to the materiality of the page, we see the return of the concerns with the materiality of print and the page announced in Melville's dedication. Given his origin in a sleazy old pamphlet, paper is metonymically tied to Potter's identity. This paper origin allows him to be linked to a burnt scroll, or to the rags from which paper is made. His clothes are ragged, and when peace is restored after the war's conclusion, the influx of former soldiers depresses the labor market and reduces our character to “the collecting of old rags, bits of paper, nails, and broken glass.”⁴³¹ These tidbits of trash signal the deterioration of Potter's self. He is literally as ephemeral and quotidian as any character can be, perhaps one of the most degraded and “material” characters in all of American literature. Like the women of the “Tartarus of Maids,” Potter's exhaustion transforms him into the commodity he produces. When the narrator of this short story observes “rows of blank-looking counters,” “blank looking-girls,” in the act of “all blankly folding blank paper,” that narrative argues that labor exploitation is best symbolized by having literary characters adopt the features of their material existence.⁴³² Likewise, Potter is both paper and brick, slowly deteriorating into trash.

The lengthy passage cited above was the opening paragraph of the final installment of *Israel Potter* that appeared in *Putnam's Magazine* in March 1855, a clear indication of its significance for the

⁴³¹ NN IP, 163

⁴³² “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in *Great Short Works*, 215

narrative structure of the entire story. This concluding portion would have demonstrated for contemporary readers that the difference in brick was in fact a complex allegory for how the labor market structures divisions between people. Most obviously, the hierarchy of bricks outlined above could be read in terms of class divisions, with the most privileged bricks being the ones at the top of the heap. However, these are of little use because they are not sufficiently exposed to the fire. The bricks that are most exposed to the heat are also flawed since they are exhausted by the blaze, leaving the bricks in the middle. Potter is clearly fated to remain among the bricks exposed to the “immediate blistering of the fire.” But at the same time—as the allusion to paper makes clear—this structured and structuring hierarchy might also be an allegory for the position of the author in the literary marketplace. The tripartite division of outermost/midmost/topmost bricks also connotes different modalities of authorship: too great an exposure to the demands of the marketplace, too far a remove from its demands (could this be Hawthorne?), and a productive medium to which “the highest prices” can be fetched (incidentally, Melville was paid quite well for his labor in writing *Israel Potter*). Midmost and outermost in this formulation could correspond to different features of Melville’s experience as an author, with the caveat that the passage does not clearly distinguish who falls into either position. This ambiguity is a virtue. In other words, the value of this passage comes from its refusal to predefine the kind of person belonging to each position in the social structure. Like a kind of social theorist, Melville’s narrator argues for the opposite: the structured and structuring relations themselves define the contours of agency and identity. One becomes a brick and adopts its features through one’s engagement with the field of production. No one, not even Potter, is inherently a burnt and useless scroll—although certainly one’s predispositions, preferences, and accumulated history might tilt one’s destiny towards one tier or another. The labor marketplace and the literary marketplace, in this regard, share the problem of fixing the potentials of living agents into arrested intentions. Chapter Twenty-Four—precisely the chapter that modern editions have collapsed into its predecessor—is the place where we find the evidence to support the claim of London’s *Daily News* that Melville’s protagonist, “abstracted from the events with which he finds himself unexpectedly mixed up, loses all individuality, and is scarcely to be recognized as a living agent,” and the allusion to paper in this chapter may also have motivated these critics in linking Potter’s life to his author turned editor.

In focusing on labor as a type of enslavement (“Israel in Egypt”), the characteristic passivity Potter demonstrates throughout the narrative offers a twist on the genre of the historical novel as elaborated by Walter Scott and others. According to George Dekker, whose influential discussion of the historical novel in early U.S. literature remains one of the best discussions of Scott’s influence on American fiction, the *Waverly* model “often turns on the failure of a character or class to understand that attitudes and behavior recently appropriate and tenable are so no longer. *Waverly* is a great case in point. Because the Jacobite party and its chief are [...] a full century out of date in their aims and methods, they are doomed from the start and lose a gallant, a ‘chivalrous’ rebellion.”⁴³³ Potter is different, and it would be difficult to plausibly interpret his story in terms of outmoded ways of thinking or to blame him for a failure of character or class. The emphasis instead is on how Potter’s failures haunt us in the antebellum present. Whereas the hero of the *Waverly* novels exhibits a passivity that allows the protagonist to be swept up in the stream of historic events, *Israel Potter* invokes a major historical moment—the period of the Age of Atlantic Revolutions—only to push the protagonist into the margins, into crevices and out of the way places where time barely passes. (Chapter Twenty Six, in the original editions, is entitled “Forty Five Years”). This diminishment of history on the grand scale in a historical novel, I argue, is part and parcel of what I earlier termed Potter’s negativity, his ghost-like existence on the margins of history, neither great nor

⁴³³ George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (1987), 15

consequential, but still a character for all that, however flat or brick-like. Especially in the London scenes, what appears to be past (London in the late eighteenth-century) turns out to be shot through with the premonitions of present troubles. Dekker agrees, arguing that like “Bartleby” and “The Tartarus of Maids,” *Israel Potter* belongs to a constellation of texts that worry that mid-nineteenth-century America is heading in the same direction of exploitation and immiseration as old industrial England.⁴³⁴ The dominant mood in these stories is exhaustion. Unlike the exuberance of labor evident in *Moby-Dick*—one thinks of Ishmael’s delight in the “sweet and unctuous duty” of processing the whale sperm in the chapter entitled “A Squeeze of the Hand”—“Bartleby,” “The Tartarus of Maids,” and *Israel Potter* portray specific modalities of work (but *not* all work or labor per se) as antithetical to the development of character. Bartleby is a specter of one form of work, as are the maids in the paper mill. Together, these short stories share with *Israel Potter* the limits of narrative to represent the life of marginalized persons. “I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man,” laments the narrator of “Bartleby.” What we can know is filtered through what we can only see in the activity of work, and so characters like Bartleby and the women of the paper mill are necessarily grotesque and underdeveloped because the conditions in which they live and labor constrict human relations.

Like the two short stories, Potter shares the problem of blankness and impersonality borne out of the depersonalizing aspects of the workplace. This dynamism of a historical novel with a patently unhistorical and depersonalized character comes to the foreground in those moments when Potter encounters great men such as George III, Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones. None of these men turn out to be that great, however. George is a stutterer; Jones is a figure for American barbarism; Allen is a theatrical travesty of Bayard and the prizefighter Tom Hyer; and Franklin is a confidence man. Especially in its depiction of Franklin, *Israel Potter* has too often been thought of as a reflection on American national character, with Melville’s characterizations serving as evidence for the novelist’s own perspective of the virtue of this founding father.⁴³⁵ The problem with this interpretation is that it doesn’t sufficiently reflect upon *Israel Potter*’s animating gesture: its fixation on an old artifact of early U.S. popular culture. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, peddlers and booksellers such as Mason Locke Weems and a host of other popular writers published numerous small books and pamphlets that offered popular histories of the leading men of the American revolution, in the process transforming the founding fathers into figures of popular culture. These cheap lives of Washington and Franklin, in my analysis, worked analogously to the process of social canonization that David Brewer has identified in eighteenth-century English print culture.⁴³⁶ Essentially, the popular histories of the American Revolution encouraged a process of character migration, where historical figures begin to lead separate lives in spinoffs, sequels, and entirely different contexts. *Israel Potter* itself is one version of this phenomenon, but it adds an extra layer of mediation, I think, by the narrative’s own attention to character migration as an ongoing process.⁴³⁷ Paul Jones’ final appearance in Melville’s book lets the cat out of the bag: “For a time back, across the otherwise blue-jean career of Israel, Paul Jones flits and re-flits like a crimson thread.”⁴³⁸ These entrances and exits are as much a commentary on the social canon of a culture as they are a window into the public meaning of any particular historical person. This awareness offers yet another twist on the historical novel, as Melville’s recreations of these historical characters are

⁴³⁴ Dekker, *American Historical Romance*, 196

⁴³⁵ F.O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* argued as much, claiming that *Israel Potter*’s redeeming quality was it displays “how much Melville had reflected on the American character, and on what is needed most to bring it to completion” (493).

⁴³⁶ Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character*

⁴³⁷ In Chapter Three, I show how character migration occurs in the 1840s and 1850s with P.T. Barnum.

⁴³⁸ NN IP, 131

shot through with contemporary concerns from the 1850s: The tenor of the characterization of Ethan Allen, for instance, suggests he might easily be exhibited in Barnum's museum. Paul Jones' ship, the *Serapis*, is similarly analogized to Cheng and Eng, the famous Siamese Twins that fascinated nineteenth-century Americans. Throughout the book, crowds flock to see Paul Jones like they would a circus.⁴³⁹ And in the final analysis, the characterization of Franklin is so explicitly over-the-top that it would be foolish to expect anything less than a full ironization at work in Melville's sketch of this historical person. "Every time he comes in he robs me," Potter complains from his interactions with this American icon.⁴⁴⁰ Like Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre*, Franklin signifies greater depth and philosophical meaning in his physical bearing, but the literary narrative relentlessly exposes this as all surface and no depth, anticipating the games of skepticism and belief that animate *The Confidence Man*.

5.6 *Israel Potter* and the World We Live In

C.L.R. James' 1952 study of Melville's oeuvre was subtitled "The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In," emphasizing what for James was the contemporary relevance of Melville's insights into modernity, in particular the echo he perceived in *Moby-Dick* with twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. For us, in the present critical moment, James' monograph represents an important early attempt to situate American studies within a transnational framework, despite its interpretive flaws. As late as 1978, in a new edition of *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*, James argued that the virtue of his book was its demonstration of how "Melville in *Moby-Dick* saw more clearly than even Dostoevsky in *The Possessed* what the future of capitalism was going to be. But what Dostoevsky did not see was the creative power of the popular mass which Melville saw and portrayed."⁴⁴¹ On the basis of this statement we can diagnose precisely why James saw little value in *Israel Potter*. James valued the popular vision of a proletarian revolution, and he read this image of revolt into Melville's representation of the crew in *Moby-Dick*. Like Marx himself, James equated labor with living activity. Potter's passivity probably read to him as a defeat. The closest we get in *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways* to an appreciation of what Melville was up to in *Israel Potter* is by way of "Bartleby," which James reads as a revolt against white-collar work. In Bartleby, James sees a type for the modern worker that expands beyond the confines of the office to envelope larger spheres of human life: Bartleby is like "the contemporary millions who constitute the hewers of wood and drawers of water for the vast administrative machines that now dominate modern life."⁴⁴² Characters like Bartleby and Potter, in James' reading, are emblems of passivity, the negation of revolutionary politics in the classic Marxist tradition.

Still, I think Potter's labors should have interested C.L.R. James more deeply. At the very least, in our current critical conjuncture *Israel Potter* allows us to push James' transnational focus further while also bringing literary-historical questions of circulation and reception into the picture. As I have demonstrated throughout the dissertation, literary texts depend upon the agents of cultural diffusion to acquire meaning. *Israel Potter* stands out in this regard since it is both about a transnational story and was itself circulated in America and England in a series of books that at times violated the author's sense of propriety. The various editions that circulated in the second quarter of the nineteenth century may have made *Israel Potter* the one of the most accessible and widely read of Melville's texts in the 1850s, which in turn might prompt scholars to revise the familiar narrative of Melville's decline and loss of a wide readership after *Pierre*. Critics who have

⁴³⁹ NN IP, 112

⁴⁴⁰ NN IP, 53

⁴⁴¹ *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*, 172

⁴⁴² *ibid*, 107

tended to skip over *Israel Potter* in their emphases on *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence Man* may in fact be guilty of distorting the historical record. Given that *Israel Potter* itself was a source of frustration for Melville's identity as an author—he demoted himself to the status of an editor of the text, and he lived to see the book republished as *The Refugee*, which named two books he never wrote—we might take stock of these misrecognitions and reconsider whether *Israel Potter* was really a failure, whether it ever was solely about failure, and if our own failure to appreciate the book as a masterpiece in its own right might be a reflection of our inability to value failure in aesthetic terms.

Coda:
Biography, the Book Trade, and the Making of an American Literary Canon

In 1854, the publisher Charles Scribner mailed the following circular letter to solicit contributors to a new literary anthology, the *Cyclopedia of American Literature*:

145 Nassau Street, New York.

As it is my intention to publish the coming season a work, entitled *AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN LITERATURE*, embracing *Personal and Critical Notices of Authors, with passages from their Writings, from the earliest period to the present day, with Portraits, Autographs, and other illustrations*, I have adopted the method of addressing to you a Circular letter, as the best means of rendering the book as complete in regard to points in which you may be interested, as possible, and as faithful as may be to the memories and claims of the families and personages whose literary interests will be represented in it. The plan of the work is to furnish to the public, at one view, notices of the Lives and Writings of all American authors of importance. As it is quite probable you may have in your possession material or information which you would like the opportunity of seeing noticed in such a publication, you will serve the objects of the work by a reply to this circular, in such answers to the following suggestions as may appear desirable or convenient to you.

1. Dates of birth, parentage, education, residence, with such biographical information and anecdote, as you may think proper to be employed in such a publication.
2. Names and dates of Books published, references to articles in Reviews, Magazines, &c., of which you may be the author.
3. Family notices and sources of information touching American authors no longer living, of whom you may be the representative.

Dates, facts, and precise information, in reference to points which have not been noticed in collections of this kind, or which may have been misstated, are desirable. Your own judgment will be the best guide as to the material of this nature which should be employed in a work which is intended shall be of general interest and of a NATIONAL character. It will represent the whole country, its only aim being to exhibit to the readers a full, fair, and entertaining account of the literary products thus far of AMERICA.

It is trusted that the plan of the work will engage your sympathy and concurrence, and that you will find it a sufficient motive for a reply to this Circular. The materials which you may communicate will be employed, so far as it consistent with the limits and necessary literary unity of the work, for the preparation of which I have engaged EVERT A. and GEORGE L. DUYCKINCK, who have been prominently before the public for several years in a similar connection, as Editors of the "LITERARY WORLD."

Yours, respectfully,
CHARLES SCRIBNER⁴⁴³

Published in 1855, the *Cyclopedia* was a monumental feat of literary history by the brothers Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck, who were influential players in the New York literary scene and the

⁴⁴³ Charles Scribner, May 1854. In Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, 634-635

Young America movement. As we see in the circular letter, the literary anthology mixed literary history and bibliographical details with capsule biographies of famous American authors. In an important sense, the Duyckincks' mammoth collection fixed the image of American authors at mid-century.

The circular letter proves the *Cyclopedia of American Literature* was inherently collaborative, insofar as it depended upon submissions from authors, even as it involved years of research for the Duyckinck brothers themselves. In the Duyckinck Family Papers at the New York Public Library, a significant cache of the notebooks, memoranda, and lists that went into the *Cyclopedia* survive, including hundreds of small paper slips, in Evert's hand, with information he had gathered on American authors and their works. This rich archive allows us to trace the *Cyclopedia* from initial conception and assembly to its reception, and on to the text's afterlife, which includes a unique extra-illustrated edition (Evert's personal copy, extended to eight folio volumes) that has hundreds of tipped-in documents, archival letters, and autographs from literary figures as diverse as the Tory printer James Rivington to Catherine Sedgwick, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville. Understood as a material text, therefore, the *Cyclopedia* contains within itself a rich narrative of compilation, arrangement, and critical reception. The extra-illustrated edition in particular proves its uniqueness as an archive of literary history. At the same time, the anthology's unique place at mid-century is belied by the Duyckincks' debt to two more commonplace print genres from the period: the literary anthology and the bookseller's catalogue.

"A history of literature," Rufus Griswold grouses in his corrosive 1856 review of the *Cyclopedia*, "should itself be literature." A long-time rival of the Duyckincks in the literary scene, Griswold was incensed that the brothers had stolen content and inspiration from his earlier anthologies *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) and *The Prose Writers of America* (1847). "It is true," Griswold continues, "that 'compilation' comes from 'compilatio,' and equally true that 'compilatio' means 'pillage,' but it does not follow necessarily that compilation is to be literally pillage."⁴⁴⁴ In a sense, Griswold's complaint meant little in a period where publications freely plagiarized each other; this "culture of reprinting," as Meredith McGill has recently argued, was common practice, the product of legal and political resistance to tight enforcement of intellectual property rights.⁴⁴⁵ Griswold's main purpose in his negative review is to delegitimize the *Cyclopedia*'s authors as literary authorities, and he does so by painstakingly detailing what he judges as the Duyckincks' sloppy research and their equally sloppy writing. He lists all of their grammatical errors and asked how the former editors of *The Literary World* could have been "so ignorant of the commonest and simplest uses of language." The result, as Perry Miller has detailed in his study of antebellum U.S. literature, is "the most destructive review in all American history."⁴⁴⁶

To be fair, the editors of the *Cyclopedia* gave credit to their predecessors, including Griswold. In terms of the work of assembling their anthology, the Duyckincks not only drew upon Griswold's books but also the trade catalogues that had become increasingly important to the publishing industry.⁴⁴⁷ *The Literary World* was itself a trade publication that originated as an outgrowth of the trade newsletters and sales catalogues written by George Putnam and John Wiley (1841-47). Bookseller's catalogues at this time were a useful way to keep track of authors and their works. In Evert's notes we see that he occasionally relied on the work of the bookseller William Gowans, a

⁴⁴⁴ Rufus Griswold, *The Cyclopedia of American Literature, by Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck. A Review* (1856), 10, 30

⁴⁴⁵ McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, 1

⁴⁴⁶ Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale*, p.329. Miller's book gives the backstory of the feud between Griswold and Evert Duyckinck that originated in the 1840s.

⁴⁴⁷ On book trade catalogues, see Jeffrey D. Groves, "Trade Communication," *The Industrial Book*

well-known dealer in the antiquarian scene who began issuing book catalogues in the 1840s. (At the time of his death in 1870, Gowans had himself left uncompleted his own take on an American literary anthology, *A Biographical Bibliography of American Literature*.) Understood as a literary handbook, the *Cyclopedia* is comparable to similar publications from the period that were essentially publishers' catalogues.⁴⁴⁸ Both catalogues and anthologies were concerned with enumerating an author's (or a period's) total literary production; catalogues were useful in compiling the anthologies, and anthologies were produced by publishing firms to sell more books.

Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to ground my investigations of a literary genre within the context of publishing history. I end with the *Cyclopedia of American Literature* because here we have come full circle: a publisher (Scribner's) employed two literary editors (the Duyckincks) to produce a comprehensive account of American literary history through a combination of bibliographical research and biographies of major authors. In Chapter Five, I noted how Melville purposely signs *Israel Potter* as its editor, a gesture that reminds us that American biography has always had a curious relationship to authorship—since, time and again, biographical writing turns out to be a matter of repurposing previously published material or making use of private documents. When Melville coins the phrase “biographical distinction,” he argues for authorship as an effect of the relations between writers, their subjects, and their collaborators. Authorship in biography is more a case of attribution than a question of originality, or even literary property. Some biographers, such as Jared Sparks, profited and made a name for themselves through their work, but many did not. Hawthorne profited indirectly from the *Life of Franklin Pierce* from a sinecure, and not by publishing a text designed for posterity or literary prestige. A sizeable number of the texts I've examined in the dissertation lack clear authorship, and another significant group frame their creators as editors, compilers, or conductors—not authors. Joseph Delaplaine and James Longacre (Chapter Two) published illustrated biographies to earn a reputation as engravers, not as literary figures. John Frost (Chapter Four) attributed his name to hundreds of works in the mid nineteenth-century, but he also employed hacks to write most of the copy.⁴⁴⁹ P.T. Barnum also likely employed a host of assistants to write his promotional material. By studying biography in terms of the relations between the various agents in the communications circuit, I have tried to put into practice D.F. McKenzie's suggestion that book history offers a way to understand authorship as radically contingent on the network of the author's collaborators, including the author's publics.⁴⁵⁰ Mason Weems, it should be remembered, actively revised his Washington biography in the first decade of the nineteenth century in response to what he learned from his bookselling tours in the South; his letters to Mathew Carey show the author using reader responses to help produce more interesting and easily digestible books. Though Weems made fun of what he termed the “gaping” mouth of the public, he clearly tuned his ear to what his customers had to say. Audiences, in this scenario, also had a hand in the creative process. And in an age of cheap print, readers themselves could produce their own books through the practice of scrapbooking.⁴⁵¹ As Patricia Buckler has recently shown, scrapbooking was a popular activity for women during the period of the U.S.-Mexican war, giving noncombatants at home a

⁴⁴⁸ For examples, see O.A. Roorbach, *Biblioteca Americana* (1852); George Putnam, *The Book-Buyer's Manual* (1853); *The American Catalogue of Books; or, English Guide to American Literature* (1856); Joseph Gostwick, *Handbook of American Literature; Historical, Biographical, and Critical* (1856); Norton's *Literary Register; or, Annual Book List for 1856*; Charles Cleveland, *A Compendium of American Literature; Chronologically Arranged with Biographical Sketches of the Authors*

⁴⁴⁹ According to Robert Johannsen, Frost “employed a corps of researchers and writers to assist him in turning out an estimated 300 works before his death in 1859” (*Halls of the Montezumas* 260).

⁴⁵⁰ McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*

⁴⁵¹ See *The Scrapbook in American Life*, ed. Tucker, Ott, and Buckler (2006)

chance to produce their own “individual, unique memoir.”⁴⁵² Or, readers could compile the memoirs of others to make their own homemade biographies of famous Americans. For example, in one artifact I’ve located in Harvard’s Theatre Collection, a nineteenth-century scrapbook devoted to P.T. Barnum contains pages and pages of clipped biographies of the showman taken from newspapers.⁴⁵³ Attending to these material practices of composition turns the history of biography into an interesting twist on the development of authorship, print culture, and cultural production.

Closely related to the scrapbook and other forms of commonplacing is the phenomenon of extra-illustration. As I earlier noted, Evert Duyckinck lavishly extra-illustrated his personal copy of the *Cyclopedia of American Literature* with artifacts from his years as a New York literary broker. Originating in England by the Reverend James Granger, who published a *Biographical History of England* (1769) that included blank leaves to be filled-in by readers with an appropriate engraved portrait for each section, the practice of extra-illustrating or “Grangerising” a text was, like Granger’s own book, especially popular for historical or biographical texts. Biographical collections, including the *Cyclopedia*, lent themselves to Grangerization; so too did the older illustrated biographies such as the *National Portrait Gallery* lend themselves to appropriation, as owners could remove the engravings from these collections that pleased them most and insert them into other books. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, extra-illustrated books were dismissed as the worst example of bibliomania, the passion for collecting and owning taken to absurdity. But they are also instances of curatorial creativity or what Michel de Certeau would term secondary production, the product of the effort, as Jean Ashton has argued, to “extend the experience of reading in time and to create from a fixed and common text a new work that is different from all other versions of that text—that is, to make or ‘write’ a book of one’s own.”⁴⁵⁴

Evert Duyckinck’s decision to elaborately expand his personal copy of the *Cyclopedia* through extra-illustration into eight folio-sized volumes suggests a tension between history and microhistory, collaboration and individual experience, biography and autobiography. This complicates my argument about the *Cyclopedia*’s role in constructing a national canon of American literature, as it turns out that Duyckinck the canon-maker would publish a comprehensive anthology for the public, but only on the condition of having his own unique curios to authenticate and illustrate this public text in his private archive. Duyckinck’s own archive—all of those letters written to him by Emerson, Melville, Cornelius Matthews, and others—negates in some respects the point of making a popular canon, since in the end it all amounts to his private collection of letters and autographs.

In titling this coda “Biography, the Book Trade, and the Making of an American Literary Canon,” I want to signal that the *making* took two forms. On the one hand, Scribner’s publication of the *Cyclopedia* makes public an authoritative literary history of America, one that scholars have referred to ever since. On the other hand, Evert Duyckinck’s private making of a Grangerized copy of the *Cyclopedia* was a kind of secondary production, a secondary making that tethered his national literary history to his own personal experience. Was this extra-illustration a kind of authorship? And, if we compare this luxury edition to the hundreds of scraps of paper that Evert used to compose the *Cyclopedia*, which has greater value if we are interested in the making of a national canon? Stated differently, I’m asking what happens when a materialist analysis of writing finds multiple practices of composition in the production of the same text-artifact. At the most fundamental level, it is those slips of paper and Evert’s many notebooks that form the bedrock of his writing practice in the

⁴⁵² Patricia P. Buckler, “Letters, Scrapbooks, and History Books: A Personalized Version of the Mexican War, 1846-1848” in *The Scrapbook in American Life*, 61

⁴⁵³ *Collection of newspaper clippings relating to P.T. Barnum*. Houghton Library (Theatre Collection Thr 1228.1.8*)

⁴⁵⁴ Jane Ashton, “Imagining *Pierre*: Reading the Extra-Illustrated Melville.” *Melville’s Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*, ed. Bryant and Milder (1997), 324-325; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)

Cyclopedia, even as the act of secondary production or extra-illustration that went into his personal copy of the text calls attention to itself as an extraordinary manifestation of literary capital. Navigating the difference between such isolated leaves of paper and such extravagantly bound volumes has been the pleasure in writing this dissertation since, as I have shown throughout, the values encoded in paper and in binding can be crucial for defining what counts as literature. If bibliography as a historical methodology is to lose its association with antiquarianism so as to fulfill W.W. Greg's bibliographical dream of a science of the modes of transmission of literary documents, it must learn to attend to those scraps of paper.

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The Grolier Club (NY)
Historical Society of Pennsylvania (PA)
Dreer Collection
Lea and Febiger Collection
James B. Longacre Papers
Houghton Library, Harvard University (MA)
Theatre Collection
Library Company of Philadelphia (PA)
National Museum of American History (Washington, D.C.)
New-York Historical Society (NY)
New York Public Library (NY)
Duyckinck Family Papers

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