Book Review

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**Jordan Alexander Stein, *When Novels Were Books*,
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.**

Much of Jordan Stein's book *When Novels Were Books* takes place during the period we call baroque, and this is basically irrelevant to his argument except as the setup for a punchline to a joke that is itself maybe too baroque to be really funny. From the Anglophone perspective, the baroque—which, according to some critics, took place everywhere but England and its colonies—seems strangely mechanic. The baroque is a land of formulas. It is, to our aesthetic categories, ugly. More offensively, its subjects are products of artifice. They are not sincere and not organically in touch with their inner selves. By contrast, we Anglophone readers have inherited a better recognition of real character. It is our Protestant legacy. We know authentic character when we see it, including our own. Though we perhaps developed that capacity for recognition through the technology of literary genres, it was through stories of real *experience* rather than, say, Jesuitical templates for prayer and contemplation that we achieved this exemplary, maybe exceptional capacity. Regardless of our individual theological position, early Americanist literary criticism of the past few decades has observed that confessional self-disclosure doesn't just narrate the self: it underwrites that self's reality. Stein's persuasive materialist account of the character of modern novels proposes a comic reversal: this supposedly deeper, truer experience of character that we Anglophone readers possess may have depended less on engaging with a set of ideas about personhood circulating in the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century than on the size of the paper in which we read about it, and on whether or not that codex had an index.

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This book's argument will be of obvious interest to those working in book history and the history of material texts more generally. One reason for this is that the book boldly and charismatically explains how very basic material qualities like a book's shape, its portability, its organization, where it was printed and how it was marketed have profound effects on experiences that claim more metaphysical status, like your sense of what makes you you. "Readers judge books by their covers," Stein writes; "the idea that we ought not to is an ideological stance that privileges the abstract domain of literature over the inexorable material vicissitudes of experience" (20). But Stein insists that we remain sensitive to witnessing the subtlety of those vicissitudes, that "the imaginings of self and culture that follow from engagements with them, are all complex and dynamic things" (21). Accordingly, each chapter, though its claims are bold, unfolds circumspectly, with "skepticism about linear transmission or development" (165). At each step, he observes differences between things—an almanac and an autobiography, say—while staying open to the surprises that these objects present to each other and to us. Nothing immediately supplants anything else, since readers, in Stein's treatment, are complex actors. We are complex to ourselves, too, juggling multiple modes of interpretation even as we experiment with new formats and the proficiencies those formats invite.

The argument is a wildly fun gamble: As good literary historians, sensitive to the historical contingency of aesthetic regimes, how materialist, or "vulgar," do we really want to be—about our literature *and* about the selves that love it? After an introduction that surveys the argument, the method, and the significance, Stein's chapters tell an incremental story about the Anglophone novel's progress, and the progress of its readers. The first chapter establishes the significance of character in the Protestant social imaginary as well as its early modern expression in spoken autobiographical discourse that was, notably, rehearsed rather than organic, and importantly, often preserved in writing. The second chapter turns to publishing history to describe the devotional books in which these autobiographies sometimes went to be embalmed, and how they were read: mostly noncontinuously—in fits and starts. As with similarly bound texts like almanacs or devotional manuals, readers dipped in and out without any great commitment to the exemplary life's continuous sequence. In the eighteenth century, that continuous sequence became more important. Why? Before the fourth chapter tests this thesis in an analysis of print lyric, in the leap from the second to the third chapter Stein shows how early novels—or at least textual objects we now rec-

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ognize discretely as novels—fortified readerly desires for continuity by eliciting investments in character that extended beyond the story contained in the codex itself, a claim with great plausibility yet uncanny resonance in a contemporary entertainment landscape oppressively filled with sequels, reboots, spin-offs, origin stories—populated, in other words, with the same familiar characters. Continuity of character within the covers of a codex unexpectedly generated longing for continuous relations with those personalities beyond their covers, beyond even the prose sentences themselves. The attractions of a character, a personality, in league with the portability of the bound codex, disciplined the patience for continuity rather than the other way around.

The book is so energetically persuasive and incremental in its exposition that by its conclusion, Stein's thesis about the material artificiality of character is hard to argue with, though it might also, by the same token, be very weird to sit with. It seems worth lingering with some of the possible sources of resistance toward Stein's claim. Among them is the claim's implications for you, as a reader familiar with fiction's artifice—a reader, this book suggests, self-conscious of your own artificiality. Stein's third chapter examines the text-networks that circulated the personalities of David Brainerd, who was a real person, and Pamela Andrews, who was not a real person, as if both were available for real horizontal emotional investments on the part of readers—as if, in other words, both personalities were real. Stein observes that when Brainerd's autobiographical narration "grounds personal history in generic precedent" (the famed Protestant conversion narratives of early American literary history), such storytelling "has the effect of enabling the generic to appear genuine" (103). Stein very soon reiterates the claim: to succeed, the text must be aware of its generic precedents, but it must perform that proficiency naively, effortlessly. Now I would like to reiterate the claim, this time from the perspective of the other side of the green curtain. But it's very tricky to try, because when the generic appears genuine successfully, it would mean that the generic—the rehearsal of genre's conventions and the technologies responsible for that reproduction—might really disappear. Your personality, and those of especially vivid characters in your world, now look severed from artifice altogether, along with the curtain hiding the machinery.

That we are all sort of artificial is not a new claim, though it is a proposition being reexamined vividly by contemporary autofiction, and recent work by critics like Timothy Bewes is exploring why and how. When such self-doubt appears in a novel, we can consider such uneasiness at a distance. It's one thing when Ben

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Lerner's sometimes distasteful protagonists feel this way, since the author does us the distancing favor of naming his characters after himself. But the genre of the monograph presents such a claim with a different sort of force. Stein is asking us to consider that the size of the binding in which we read about other personalities has had a remarkable influence on our conviction that we actually are genuine, that we are not generic, that there is something important about our innermost selves—and to consider too that, at the end of the day, there may not actually be anything that genuine or important here.

I'm using the word *personality* in a fast and loose fashion, as if it were easily interchangeable with *character*. It's a risk, I know, but with it I am hoping to emphasize the significance of Stein's proposition beyond book history. To the degree that personality names the lived experience of character as Stein's book describes it—a self-persuasive performance—the implications of Stein's findings should feel weird, should affect your sense of confidence in the success of the personality-cultivation techniques that you probably learned through genres like the novel, whether in book or movie or serialized TV form. Of course, many readers tend not to turn to the genre of the monograph, far less the subgenre of the book history monograph, to find life-transforming insights. So maybe the value here is less in changing anyone profoundly than in unexpectedly affirming a feeling of personal unreality or artificiality that some readers occasionally yet powerfully feel. As Lauren Berlant observed in *Cruel Optimism*, "Only some people feel connected to the cultivation of selves, will, desire, and inflated poetic interiority" (Berlant 2011: 157); furthermore, "investment[s] in emotional authenticity," like most experiences of the viscera, "have been taught, and are teachable" (159). In this regard, Stein's book participates obliquely, yet with great sprightliness, in a recent literary critical mood fascinated with the incremental, minor, the nominally antisocial—yet, at the same time, fascinated, too, with the possibility that such a mood might possibly ease the demands of liberal individual social life.

What's most enchanting about this theoretically vibrant quality of Stein's book, though, is that it wears its significance so lightly. Stein claims his affiliations in his introduction, and does so modestly, citing mostly fellow historians and literary historians, or other participants in the "bummer theory of print culture" (19). You pick up the book thinking you're in for a story about paper, and you end up rethinking, vertiginously, your own sense of personhood. Undersell, as the twenty-first-century students I used to teach in Philadelphia—the print capital of Anglophone America in the period Stein covers—put it. Then over-

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deliver. We like our jokes laconic. Still, I hope this book will inspire critics elsewhere to consummate the argument's baroquely comic potential. The story Stein tells is very Protestant, self-consciously so, and one of its thrilling implications is a transformation in what we think we mean when we (mostly Anglophone literary and cultural historians) talk about "taking religion seriously." Stein's claim about print and specifically Protestant interiority invites us to consider what the *material* history of interiority looks like in other confessional contexts. Already this work is being initiated, but from a different angle of approach. Recent scholarship in early Latinx literature, for example, by critics like Raúl Coronado, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, or Rodrigo Lazo has begun to examine how print culture—or its absence!—can participate in the formation of peoplehood as well as personhood. But perhaps the most serious uptakes of Stein's argument will be in readings and rereadings of personalities, maybe not all of them in English, who don't take themselves seriously at all.

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Work Cited

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