

Must expose the wires.—Edgar Allan Poe, notes for “The Living Writers of America”

Literary histories of the antebellum print explosion habitually read this sudden proliferation of books, newspapers, and periodicals as an expression of the nation’s democratic spirit and the spread of freedom and self-determination. Such assessments, however, represent less an analysis of the period than an acquiescence to its powerful capacity for mythmaking. Writing against this familiar narrative, I will suggest in this essay that the dispersion of texts does not necessarily entail the dispersion of cultural authority. In fact, this mythology is an invention that dates back to the period itself, when it provided a pretext under which networks of authors, editors, and critics consolidated and extended their influence, along with the cultural and financial capital it brought. By examining the print discourse around print discourse, my essay will trace a dialectic between democracy and the literary marketplace, focusing on two movements in antebellum print culture. First, authors and critics made concerted efforts to erase the operations of the market and to circulate in their place a story of democratic literary flowering; and second, controversies over the “puffing system” continually threatened to deflate this story—and the literary public sphere itself. Tracking back to the formation of antebellum print’s public sphere, celebrated so often by critics for its democratic openness, this essay finds its origins in literary-critical fraud.

By proposing that the mass market of the 1830s and 1840s made

possible both an ideology of literary democracy and a contraction of cultural authority, I place in relation the two markedly different paradigms with which histories of antebellum literature tend to understand the connections between literature, democracy, and the market. The first version, described above, triangulates the three in the mutually beneficial harmony of a “literary democracy,” to quote the title of Larzer Ziff’s well-known study.¹ The second version, however, describes an antagonistic relationship, in which the market hampers and constrains the inherently democratic energies of artistic expression.² This version, which follows a long history of romantic oppositions between art and the corrupting forces of commerce, pits the public sphere of letters against the private maneuvers of the market. Yet for all their differences, both these accounts leave the customary alignment of literature and democracy intact, without considering the ways in which their articulations with the marketplace made and remade each entity. Understanding antebellum literature solely as a democratic gesture or solely as a commodity within a tyrannical market misses the point: antebellum literary culture is a market that operates under the sign of democracy.

“Democracy” in America

“The vital principle of an American national literature must be democracy,” the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* announced in its first issue (1837). “[T]his must be the animating spirit of our literature, if, indeed, we would have a national American literature.”³ Literary historians tend to take this pronouncement as a foregone conclusion, but when the editors of the *Democratic Review* issued their challenge, they were countering the long-held assumption that literature and democracy were irreconcilable. When one of the editors of the *Democratic Review* solicited John Quincy Adams for a contribution, for instance, he replied that “democracy of numbers and literature” were “self-contradictory.”⁴ Many maintained that the imperative of self-making was anathema to artistic development and that all attempts to forge an American literature capable of matching, much less surpassing, European precedents would remain hopeless without the supporting structure of a patronage system such as the one overseas. When the booksellers of New York City held a celebratory dinner in 1837, however, the toastmaster, John Keese, contended that Ameri-

can literature owed its success to American democracy: “[T]he literary glory of our country, (urged and impelled by the spirit of free and popular institutions), has kept pace with the greatness of our political system. . . . [W]e cannot but exult that we have lived to see the day when American liberty and American literature walk hand in hand.”⁵ By 1842, it was no longer a matter of infusing literature with the alien spirit of democracy. This time the *Democratic Review* simply declared: “The spirit of Literature and the spirit of Democracy are one.”⁶ What had happened in the interim to enable such a claim?

Throughout the eighteenth century, as Raymond Williams points out, “democracy” was “a strongly unfavourable term” for all but the most confirmed radicals.⁷ In number 10 of *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison famously wrote that democracies were dangerous to their citizens, not to mention prone to self-destruction: “Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”⁸ In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, however, democracy shed its pejorative connotations and became a politically useful term. In this transformation, a word that had been relegated to the margins of American culture acquired institutional currency, as evidenced by the founding of the Democratic Party in 1828. In fact, the Democratic Party soon found its exclusive claim to the label under attack. When Whig William Henry Harrison won the 1840 election on the strength of fabricated log cabin origins and an orchestrated appeal to the common man, the *Democratic Review*, which had close party ties, commented bitterly: “We have taught them to conquer us!” Through “a ludicrously impudent imposture,” the Whigs “are now, forsooth, the ‘*Democratic Whigs*.’”⁹ One might assume that the transformation in the meaning of democracy points to a surge of revolutionary energies, an embrace of populism. But this turn takes place just when, historians have argued, popular authority contracts, moving direct political participation out of reach of a majority of citizens. Madison’s vision of a government distinguished by “*the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity*” prevailed, as a system of virtual representation replaced local assemblies, dramatically attenuating opportunities for direct democracy.¹⁰ As Dana Nelson argues, the “centralizing, abstracting, potentially monarchical” structures legislated in the

Constitution “rerouted energy for and relevance of local and direct self-governance” by “virtualizing it, abstracting its face-to-face negotiations through the managed competition of private voting booths and the symbolically distancing and organizing mechanisms of party politics.”¹¹ As civic participation narrowed to casting a vote, national political culture (at least in its official form under the two-party system) grew to mirror national consumer culture. Nelson’s analysis of the limiting, rather than liberating, principles of the Constitution intervenes in a liberal historical tradition that plots the history of the United States as the steady progression toward political freedom and self-determination. In fact, one might argue that the elaboration of such a narrative is itself symptomatic of one of the forces behind the dismantling of possibilities for political action: the establishment of liberalism as the preeminent national political doctrine.

A number of historians, most notably Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock, have described this post-Revolutionary moment as marking the transition from republican to liberal principles, which effectively hobbled popular civic participation by replacing communitarian ethics with possessive individualism.¹² During the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, “liberty, as the old Whigs had predominantly used the term—public or political liberty, the right of the people to share in the government—lost its significance,” Wood explains. “The liberty that was now emphasized was personal or private, the protection of individual rights against all governmental encroachments.”¹³ Shifting the government’s goals from the regulation of individual interests to their protection, liberalism wedded national political institutions to the facilitation of capitalism. But I want to suggest that the transition to market-oriented liberalism paradoxically made the rhetoric of democracy more, not less, useful, transforming it into a kind of lingua franca that nearly anybody in the first half of the nineteenth century could invoke, from farmers to land speculators, from radical workers to wealthy capitalists, and from abolitionists to slaveholders. C. B. Macpherson has argued that early liberalism was a theory of the market, and that it was only in the early nineteenth century that the notion of democracy was grafted onto it to create a theory of humanism. Once “market society had produced a working class sufficiently politically conscious that the franchise could not be denied it much longer,” it became “necessary to present an image of liberal-democratic society which could be justified by some-

thing more morally appealing (to the liberal thinker and, hopefully, to the new democratic mass) than the old utilitarianism. This could be done, consonantly with the liberal commitment to individual freedom, by offering as the rationale of liberal-democratic society its provision of freedom to make the most of oneself.”¹⁴

This account of the genesis of liberal democracy has some drawbacks, most notably a tendency to empty democracy of any history or meaning until it is married to liberalism, but Macpherson’s basic insight into the felt need to rehabilitate market society remains instructive. Although he primarily focuses on the English tradition, his analysis has resonance also for the United States, where the type of humanistic liberalism he describes—“the pursuit of happiness”—was built into the Constitution and subsequently consolidated with the development of free-market ideology. As the purpose of government, and the definition of freedom, increasingly became synonymous with the protection of private rights and property, it became useful to reanimate the rhetoric of civic virtue, as Sean Wilentz has shown:

Between the Revolution and 1850 changing class and social relations led to recurring reinterpretations of republicanism and battles over what the republican legacy meant. During that period, some groups of Americans—preeminently, so far as we know, the nation’s leading politicians and jurists but certainly many more—came increasingly to interpret the republican framework as one or another form of liberal capitalist polity and economy. They did not reject republicanism in favor of liberalism; they associated one with the other.¹⁵

Wilentz draws an important class distinction: The redeployment of democratic (or republican) rhetoric was not simply a means of wrestling with a difficult inheritance. It was also a means of securing existing power. The memory of egalitarianism—and its continuing possibility—was even more important to invoke as these practices were left behind.

In an influential essay, the political theorist Claude Lefort has described democracy as a social space so radically indeterminate that it instigates a kind of crisis of representation. The subjects of the *ancien régime*, he explains, “fitted together within a great imaginary body for which the body of the king provided the model and the guarantee of its integrity.” Democracy, however, dissolves this body, producing what Lefort calls a “‘disincorporation’ of individuals.” With

its absence of an organizing principle (or principal), “[d]emocracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent.”¹⁶ Such representational instability raises questions that it cannot answer, however, and in a cruel twist, democracy provides the seedbed for totalitarianism, “which tends to stave off this threat, which tends to weld power and society back together again, to efface all signs of social division, to banish the indeterminateness that haunts the democratic experience.”¹⁷ Lefort’s emphasis on the power of an imaginable polity—and the consequences of an unimaginable one—is useful in understanding historical transformations of the state. But the premium that democracy accrues during the antebellum years, and the accounts of its deployment that historians such as Wilentz provide, suggest that in the antebellum United States (and probably in many other places), democracy is never so empty and thus never so pure, in Lefort’s terms. To argue that the urgency of symbolic representation leads to a totalitarian makeover forgets the extent to which democratic states like the United States are invested in their representation *as* democracies. The demand for embodiment does not necessarily entail a new governmental paradigm; rather, the democratic state itself enacts the shift to embodiment that Lefort locates in totalitarianism.

The post-Revolutionary transformation in the language and practice of democracy suggests that far from resisting representation, democracy (at least the American variety consolidated in the Jacksonian period) proliferates it, overdetermining the democratic imaginary rather than rendering it indeterminate. In the United States, democracy has historically appeared not as a lack, as Lefort pictures it, but as a plenitude; and not as an open space but as a constructed space—constructed precisely *as* open. Its construction can take place under the sign of democracy as easily—more easily—than under the sign of totalitarianism because it preserves appealing elements of the “crisis” in name (the attractive word *democracy*) as well as in residual, especially discursive, forms. Yet because this embodiment takes the form of constructed disembodiment, the appearance of an enviable crisis—a dispersal of authority to the people—remains endlessly renewable. What Lefort describes is not a model of democracy but of the fantasy by which modern liberal-democratic states sustain them-

selves.¹⁸ Although Lefort bases his analysis on European examples, its inscription (however unintended) of democratic fantasy has particular implications for the United States, where it underwrites a kind of normative fraudulence cathecting literature, politics, and the market.

Marketing Democracy

As I have suggested, during the first half of the nineteenth century, American political and cultural leaders rescued *democracy* from its associations with mob rule and reinvented it as a term of approbation. This idealization of democracy was linked to its dematerialization; that is, the word became increasingly ubiquitous as the kinds of political agency it described disappeared from Americans' daily lives. During the 1830s and 1840s, however, a series of political scandals—including the bank wars, election fraud, and political double-dealing—threatened to drive a wedge between the state and its deployment of democratic ideology. After the Whigs carried the 1840 presidential election by means of free cider, parades, catchy songs, and the ubiquitous myth of William Henry Harrison's humble origins (he was actually a wealthy Virginia planter), many concluded that federal office had been reduced to pure spectacle. (The plebian mythology, of course, was hardly new. Andrew Jackson, also a wealthy planter, had persistently portrayed himself as a simple farmer.) When Harrison died one month after his inauguration and "His Accidency," the perennially unpopular John Tyler, took office, it seemed to confirm the growing emptiness of the nation's political institutions. In the House of Representatives, lobbyists gained increasing control by amply rewarding legislative support, and a number of Congressmen were discovered to be draining the Treasury through fraudulent expense reports.¹⁹ At the same time, growing antislavery sentiment and the development of an organized abolitionist movement, as well as the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, made the contradictions of American democratic ideology increasingly unavoidable. Of course, these ideological ruptures did not lead political leaders to drop democracy from the conversation; the word remained valuable and contested territory, claimed by all parties in the debates over slavery, expansion, the party system, and currency, among other issues. I want to suggest, however, that the poor fit that Americans discovered between democracy and the

state during this period led to democracy's ideological reconstitution in a "literary democracy."

The tensions between democratic ideology and its institutionalization—and the consequences these tensions had for American literary culture—emerge strikingly in an article by Evert Duyckinck in the *American Review*, "Literary Prospects of 1845," which disconnects democracy from its customary relation to the state and realigns it with literature. Duyckinck begins with the familiar contention that the "business of literature" is no business at all; although "it is incomplete without the interest the world takes in the matter," literature "is carried on . . . in quiet," by those who are "commonly poor and with no intrigue or cunning to supply the defects."²⁰ Once he clears literature of any commercial taint, however, Duyckinck's attention turns from defining literature in opposition to the market to defining it in opposition to the state. Complaining that the nation's expansionist ambitions have monopolized the press, crowding out any discussion of literature, Duyckinck protests, "The opening of a new department of native authors may be as well worth talking about as the acquisition of Texas." But just as he earlier referred to "the business of literature" only to prove that literature was no business at all, here he describes American literature as a federal bureau only to reinforce its distinction from national policy: there exists just "this little difference in the subject matter of the two, that while one is an enlargement of the freedom of the mind, the other is a question of the slavery of the body."²¹ Duyckinck's abrupt transition from the market to the state becomes clear when we see that his complaint is exactly that the two are contiguous. By defining literature against the expansion of slavery—the proposal to annex Texas that would shortly result in the Mexican War—Duyckinck pictures literature fulfilling the broken promises of an American democracy sacrificed to commercial interests and the traffic in bodies. While the imperial state pursues the "slavery of the body," literature devotes itself to "the freedom of the mind." Literature's importance, for Duyckinck, resides in its presumed distance from both the state and the market or, more specifically, from the state's troubling imbrication *in* the market, which leads it to sanction oppression and violence under the guise of the individualist prerogative and the protection of property.

If Duyckinck's mapping of literature, democracy, the market, and the state seems familiar, it may be because it anticipates a much

better-known model of the relationship between print culture and the modern nation's political and economic institutions: Jürgen Habermas's public sphere. Although Habermas bases his theory on European examples, Americanists have avidly imported his model to the point that it has become the standard reading of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States print culture.²² According to Habermas, during the eighteenth century the notion of a "public" detached itself from state authority, emerging instead as a "civil society" of "private people come together as a public."²³ This public sphere offered, at least in principle, a kind of egalitarian oasis that "disregarded status altogether," as the disembodied power of language—one's use of reason and argument—supplanted embodied social status as its motive force (*ST*, 36). Such a system, Habermas emphasizes, does not emerge autonomously but involves a kind of retrofitting of an existing literary culture; it is a matter "of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and forums for discussion" (*ST*, 51).

At times Habermas worries about the operative elisions of the public sphere, admitting that even as "the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access," property and education remained the prerequisites for admission to it, and these were "by no means [universally] fulfilled even in the first half of the nineteenth century" (*ST*, 83, 87). But he has no such compunctions about its literary prototype; whatever doubts he has about the potentially dysfunctional "political functions of the public sphere" arise because this configuration fails to reproduce the admirable operations of the public sphere of letters. Although critics of Habermas have described his account of the public sphere as following a cynically postlapsarian narrative—the degeneration of an ideal model of public communication—*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* equally mourns the postlapsarian character of the civic public sphere itself, fallen from the heights of the literary public sphere.

Yet Habermas's valorization of the public sphere of letters, however influential it has proven, fails to hold up even in his own account. According to Habermas, the literary public sphere develops somewhat unevenly across Europe and the United States, but it reaches its high point when the print public sphere of "pure news" gives way to the establishment of "literary journalism," or "as soon as individual authors availed themselves of the new instrument of the periodical

press providing a hearing for their critical-rational reflections, pursued with pedagogical intent, by getting them into print" (*ST*, 182). Habermas's reconstruction of "the literary journalism of the journals cultivating rational-critical debates" marks an extraordinary moment in his study, because although intended to illustrate the origins of the public sphere (and, as I have noted, its purest form), here his theory that liberalism produced an egalitarian public sphere threatens to run aground. The public sphere, he contends, gave way to political ideology when "[o]n the basis of the continuing domination of one class over another, the dominant class nevertheless developed political institutions which credibly embodied as their objective meaning the idea of their own abolition" (*ST*, 88). This situation, however, did not apply in the world of letters, which Habermas, even while delineating it in class terms, attempts to extract from the disagreeabilities of class conflict or even class formation. "Bourgeois culture was not mere ideology," he contends. "The rational-critical debate of private people in the *salons*, clubs, and reading societies was not directly subject to the cycle of production and consumption, that is, to the dictates of life's necessities" (*ST*, 160). The commodification of rational-critical debates in print only raises them further above the fray of the market, Habermas somewhat paradoxically maintains, since "the function of the market was confined to the distribution of the cultural goods and to their removal from the exclusive use of wealthy patrons and noble connoisseurs" (*ST*, 165). In this delicately balanced configuration,

[t]he publishers procured for the press a commercial basis without, however, commercializing it as such. A press that had evolved out of the public's use of its reason and that had merely been an extension of its debate remained thoroughly an institution of this very public: effective in the mode of a transmitter and amplifier, no longer a mere vehicle for the transportation of information but not yet a medium for culture as an object of consumption. (*ST*, 183)

According to Habermas's schematic, the literary market enables the construction of a social world that transcends this market. Yet this description, in which the market enables its own disappearance, disquietingly resembles Habermas's earlier description of the ideological apparatuses of the civic public sphere, which likewise underwrite their own disappearance—and thus guarantee their continuing power.

Such moments reveal the odd tautological mechanism that under-

pins Habermas's narrative, which appears more explicitly in his description of the ideological effects of the public sphere of letters: "The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted" (ST, 51). In this account of the "process of enlightenment," Habermas offers not one but two genealogies for its development. On one hand, it is the result of collaborative public reflection, but on the other, it is an extant idea that requires a concerted "promotion" to establish itself. In other words, although Habermas insists that enlightenment is a process, a phenomenon brought into being by a particular social configuration, in the same sentence he raises the possibility that it may actually be a deliberately crafted product. Far from elucidating the origins of "enlightenment," Habermas, however unintentionally, locates them in a circular, self-perpetuating myth. Local tautologies such as these can provide a kind of immanent critique of the system he delineates. Although his theory rests on rigid boundaries between the state, the market, the family, and the public sphere that obtain under the era he terms "constitutional liberalism," the tendencies of his public sphere to ratify its own outcomes suggest that these boundaries may not be natural but, rather, produced as such. In other words, Habermas himself opens up the possibility that no public sphere exists outside the market under capitalism; the construction of one that appears to be reliably demarcated from the market has no less a market function. Such iteration helps explain why procedural rationality, the operating principle of Habermas's theory, bears an uncanny resemblance to Adam Smith's famous formulation of the "invisible hand" that regulates market capitalism.²⁴

In Habermas's model, as in Duyckinck's, literature makes available a liberal-democratic civil society distinct from both the state and the market. Yet Habermas's objectifying logic also suggests that literature's privileged place as the locus of democratic ideology, while apparently secured by its distance from the market, ironically *depends upon* the market. During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, a rapid series of technological developments revolutionized the book and periodical trade and helped to engender the enduring figure of literary democracy by making possible a myth of unfettered access to books and of reading as self-determination. Former hand processes such as paper and board manufacturing, typesetting, and binding were

swiftly mechanized, and improvements to the printing press, the introduction of steam power, and the development of the stereotyping and electrotyping processes greatly accelerated production rates.²⁵ These innovations increased production quantities and lowered production costs, expanding the market in books and periodicals dramatically. While in 1830, the total value of books manufactured and sold in the United States was \$3.5 million, just thirty years later it had more than tripled to \$12.5 million.²⁶ The magazine trade, in particular, exploded, helped along by favorable postal regulations. Frank Luther Mott estimates that whereas fewer than 100 magazines were published in the United States in 1825, by 1850, six times that number existed.²⁷ Concurrently, the advent of the steamship and the railroad and the spread of track across the country extended and regularized distribution, while incidentally creating a market for inexpensive, portable editions. Together, the manufacturing and transportation innovations of the early nineteenth century transformed literature from a small-scale trade to a mass market, making publishing a potentially profitable venture for the first time.

Like Duyckinck, however, the antebellum literati persistently downplayed the financial value of the transfigured literary market, instead presenting the expansion of the publishing industry as an expansion of access and agency. Literary historians, moreover, have tended to reproduce this wishful conflation of literature, democracy, and commerce, dislocating the period's outpouring of writing from the emerging market for print and instead reading the proliferation of literature as a vibrant, nation-wide conversation existing outside of the mechanisms of production and circulation. When critics do situate the print explosion within the literary marketplace, they usually pit its emancipatory energies against the restraining forces of the market, emphasizing how publishers checked and regulated authors' writing on the basis of salability. What I want to emphasize here, however, are the ways in which, far from constraining democratic ideology, the emerging market culture actually enabled it. The mode of literary production described in the first instance, in other words, is as much a market construct as the mode of literary production described in the second—the creation of the period's cultural architects, who reinvented the literary market as a metaphor for democracy.

A striking instance of the process that was commuting the literary marketplace to a literary democracy is the American booksellers' din-

ner, mentioned earlier, an event hosted by New York publishers for 300 authors, editors, critics, and other members of the trade. Despite the unmistakable signs of prosperity—the sumptuous setting at the City Hotel, the multicourse banquet, the lavish decorations, and the accompaniment of a full orchestra—the hosts and their guests repeatedly pictured their mission as one of public service rather than private reward. In his toasts for the occasion (widely reprinted in the city’s newspapers), John Keese determinedly elides any market mechanism underpinning the reading public. “The productions of the brain are received *warm* from the artist’s hands in every part of our Union,” he declares, and the entire business of print manufacture and distribution—the business that underwrites Keese’s own career as an auctioneer and the bookseller’s dinner itself, both financially and ontologically—disappear in the remarkable bodily feat that carries texts directly from the author’s brain to his hands to his readers’ hands. As the disappearance of the market disembodies the work of literary “transmission,” however, it embodies its objects instead, as free subjects: “American liberty and American literature walk hand in hand,” Keese says, having “*together* found their way.”²⁸ The emancipatory work of national literature here is predicated quite literally on the timely deletion of the market.

The guests reportedly received Keese’s words with great enthusiasm, but one can perhaps detect a note of strain in their eagerness. During the toasts that followed his speech, they felt compelled to salute “the Republic of Letters” twice. And in a moment of striking self-consciousness, one guest archly gestured to the profitable slippage between commercial and social mobility. When Chancellor James Kent raised his glass to the booksellers, declaring, “[T]hey merit our gratitude, and especially when they zealously disseminate *American Law*,” one might interpret his toast as a tribute to the print explosion’s democratization of political authority—except that the “*American Law*” he refers to is not a national cultural construct but a book, his own four-volume *Commentaries on American Law*, published just a few years earlier.²⁹

Puffery and the Public Sphere

Literature becomes a key site for the articulation of American democracy, I have argued, not by virtue of its distinction from commerce but

precisely at the moment when it becomes a market. The extraordinary proliferation of print during this period opens up the literary marketplace as a site for political redaction, imagining a dispersal of cultural authority just as the consolidation of liberal capitalism increasingly contracted it. I turn here, however, to a different version of the literary marketplace, one that challenged antebellum representations of literary democracy but has since largely disappeared from history: the literary-critical machinations known as the puffing system. Recuperating the puffing scandals of the 1830s and 1840s helps bring to light the constructedness of literary democracy by demonstrating that the proliferation of print did not guarantee the democratization of print culture. More than that, it reveals that at times the proliferation of print facilitated the attenuation of cultural authority, by enabling certain individuals to consolidate and extend their influence through a range of literary critical practices that propped up a false pluralism in the profusion of print.

Literary criticism occupied an honored place in antebellum print culture, if only by default. As the critic William Alfred Jones maintained, "Criticism should flourish in this country, if no other form of prose writing meet with favor, for Americans are confessedly an acute and shrewd race," and these faculties "ought to be made the most of in the absence of original power and creative genius."³⁰ Unlike imaginative writing, Jones contended, literary criticism suited the national temperament, appealing to what Neil Harris has termed antebellum Americans' "operational aesthetic," "a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth." Like Harris's primary exemplar of the operational aesthetic, P. T. Barnum, antebellum literary critics strove to represent their writings as "objects which exemplified their own operations."³¹ They encouraged Americans to read the proliferation of the legible as the proliferation of legibility, to understand print culture as a transparent system.

As Harris explains, the operational aesthetic proved seductive in part because of its amenability to political allegory. Its emphasis on functionality and logic, the integration of component parts, each one essential, neatly—and wishfully—figured the nation's political institutions. "Structural coherence, functional efficiency—these were criteria which ordinary men . . . could demand in the objects that surrounded them, as well as in the political constitution that governed them," Harris explains.³² The operational aesthetic inscribed all it

touched in a rousing patriotic display that in turn consolidated the claims about democracy on which its initial equation with rationality rested. Of course, the democratic spirit that Harris has identified in Barnum's exhibits may be itself a ruse, an attenuation of the civic realm that reduces political participation to an up-or-down vote, but what is important is the success with which Barnum projected this image. Literary critics, too, eagerly took up the association of rationality with democracy, which was hardly surprising, given the political authority it accorded them. An article in the *Knickerbocker* thus repeatedly trumpets the gifts of "rational freedom, such as we of the United States are blessed with," and counts the "cultivation and independence of literature and the fine arts" foremost among them.³³ Positioned at the center of a dizzying array of printed material, critics could portray their interventions, as Nina Baym has noted, as "not an art but a service."³⁴ Critics insisted that the information and discernment they provided the public promoted republican ideals of self-determination, and such claims of civic responsibility elevated editors and critics to the status of public servants.

The principled rationality of the operational aesthetic supplied a rhetoric that allowed literary critics to frame their work as facilitating democracy—a rhetoric validated more recently by Habermas and nostalgic evocations of "literary democracy." But it is hardly a coincidence that their shared participation in the operational aesthetic places antebellum literary culture in the company of P. T. Barnum, since even as literary criticism established itself as a particularly American, particularly democratic institution, its integrity increasingly came under attack as a humbug. In this respect, the operational aesthetic's equation of observation and knowledge proved to be as important to literary criticism as its rational-democratic vocabulary. As the mid-nineteenth century embraced "a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth," the operational aesthetic trained Americans' eyes on the visible and the manifest and away from the invisible and covert, by promising audiences that accurate judgment lay in "observation" and "examination."³⁵ The scopic preoccupations of the operational aesthetic, that is, helped to enable the machinations that defined the literary world by deflecting attention away from secrecy and toward demonstrability (searching for the stitches on the Feejee Mermaid, for example). It thus offered a discourse of discernment that the literati eagerly took up as a screen: where Harris sees

the operational aesthetic anchoring the work of cultural productions from P. T. Barnum to the transcendentalists, savvy authors and critics recognized that the operational aesthetic need not be a practice. It could simply be an aesthetic.

Ever since the Philadelphia publisher Matthew Carey founded and assumed editorship of the *American Museum* in 1787, the book and periodical industries had been intertwined, and their relations remained cooperative, to say the least, until well into the middle of the nineteenth century. Duyckinck, for example, edited the series “The Library of American Books” for the publishing house of Wiley and Putnam while he was literary editor for the *Democratic Review*, and George Putnam ran both his own publishing house and the magazine *Putnam’s*. These dual roles allowed them to direct American readers’ tastes to their own catalogs. But the alliances between authors, editors, critics, and publishers were often much more difficult to discern than Putnam’s eponymous operations. Back-scratching “mutual admiration societies” heaped praise on each other as a matter of principle, and obliging magazine editors felt no compunctions about printing the readymade notices that publishers sent out with review copies.³⁶ The *Southern Literary Journal* explained the arrangement in a three-part series of articles:

“My friend,” says the editor, “whom I have so plentifully bespattered, surely will not, if there is such a thing as gratitude in the world, forget his kind eulogist. I may reasonably expect, engaged as I am in a similar vocation, to get part, at least, of my praise back again, and it may, perchance, be repaid with interest.” Thus, the press, which should be employed to enlighten the public mind, is prostituted to a miserable puffing system, and we have nothing but puffs, re-puffs, and sur-re-puffs, issued from our presses from one end of the continent to the other.³⁷

Of course, not every would-be author or publisher could expect to be on intimate terms with every editor, but what friendship could not accomplish, complimentary copies might, according to William Charvat.³⁸ Failing that, there was always the possibility of cash payoffs. Rufus Griswold, whom Charvat singles out as the era’s most energetic critic-for-hire, seems to have performed such jobs on a regular basis. Charvat quotes a letter from the Philadelphia publisher T. B. Peterson that contains the following request: “I would like you to get a good

notice of [Peterson's twenty-five-cent edition of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Gray*] in the Tribune and any other papers in New York you can, *all of them if possible*, and you can send your Bill to me for your trouble."³⁹

The problem spawned numerous newspaper columns, occasional poems, and even long-form verse. Some treated it lightly, while others railed against the practice, enumerating specific exaggerations and falsehoods and often naming names. In a review of Lambert Wilmer's literary satire *The Quacks of Helicon*, Edgar Allan Poe attacked the "coteries which, at the bidding of leading booksellers, manufacture, as required from time to time, a pseudo-public opinion by wholesale," with a venom that barely tolerated punctuation:

The prevalence of the spirit of puffery is a subject far less for merriment than for disgust. . . . Is there any man of good feeling and of ordinary understanding—is there one single individual among all our readers—who does not feel a thrill of bitter indignation, apart from any sentiment of mirth, as he calls to mind instance after instance of the purest, of the most unadulterated quackery in letters, which has risen to a high post in the apparent popular estimation, and which still maintains it, by the sole means of a blustering arrogance, or of a busy wriggling conceit, or of the most barefaced plagiarism, or even through the simple immensity of its assumptions—assumptions not only unopposed by the press at large, but absolutely supported in proportion to the vociferous clamor with which they are made—in exact accordance with their utter baselessness and untenability?⁴⁰

The picture that emerges here is something like an inverted Habermasian print public sphere. Where Habermas credits rational-critical literary journalism with precise calibrations of literary value, reliably singling out works of merit and dismissing less deserving productions, Poe insists that literary journalism functions according to the opposite principle, "absolutely support[ing]" works "in exact accordance with their utter baselessness and untenability."

Where mutual admiration societies proliferated favorable opinions, another variation on the puffing system proliferated writers themselves. Well into the late nineteenth century, most editorials and criticism in American periodicals were unsigned, a convention that preserved both a republican pose of disinterest and a genteel insulation from the market. But anonymity conferred the additional benefit of

allowing authors to review their own works with impunity. An 1834 poem entitled “Puffing, a Fable” describes a hen who acquires a “barnyard reputation” by cackling each time she lays an egg, provoking her irritated fellow fowls to ask: “[W]hy need you publish all your joys?”

She, meanwhile scratching with one leg,
 Soon gracefully up-drew it;
 And poised upon a single peg,
 Cried: “Oh! ’tis time you knew it;
 ’Tis the fashion now to lay an egg,
 And then, sir, to REVIEW IT.”⁴¹

Although it is impossible to estimate the extent to which authors took advantage of this expediency, bibliographic scholarship has turned up a number of impostures that provide some insight into the practice. In an unsigned 1847 article in the *Democratic Review*, Cornelius Mathews, the inexhaustible champion of literary nationalism, analyzes its importance and enumerates its representatives across time—Shakespeare, Milton, Addison, Montesquieu, Scott—before announcing: “The American writer who seems most deeply to have felt the want of, and who has most ably and earnestly, as well as earliest, insisted upon, nationality in our literature, is Mr. Cornelius Mathews.” He goes on to quote himself at length.⁴² Mathews may have gotten away with it, but James McHenry, the Philadelphia playwright, novelist, and critic, did not. In a rejoinder to McHenry’s slights to its own stable of authors in the *American Quarterly Review*, the *Knickerbocker* accuses him of a pattern of “deceiving the public”:

Did he not once determine to take the general applause by storm, and on the publication of one of his unhappy novels, repeatedly stop the press, and cause the *second*, *third*, and *fourth* editions to be inserted in the title page of the *same* impression? Was not the *third* edition for sale at the book-stores before the *first* was bound? . . . It is only by such modes of grasping at ephemeral praise, though trickery, coupled with advance eulogies and surmises in newspapers . . . that this critic has ever been honored, even with ridicule. . . . Thus, the argument spoken of as contained in his last Review—namely, that we have no great, long poem,—no big book of American metre, and that there is now a want of it—is only to herald a manuscript volume of his, in some nineteen books.⁴³

Under other circumstances, the critic explains, “we might let such literary empirics make themselves as ridiculous as they please. But when, *because anonymous*, their bad taste infects even a limited number of readers, their influence becomes offensive.” In the guise of a virtuous partisan of American letters, McHenry creates an artificial demand for his own product. Even as he exploits anonymity to disguise his own agency, however, he fabricates agency on behalf of the reading public, exploiting the authority and literal mobility of print (the technology of movable type, which allows him to produce different title pages in the same print run) to manufacture an appetite for his work that demands a fourth edition. Thus, while cultural and literary historians of the nineteenth century tend to emphasize the anxieties associated with urban anonymity, perhaps the most troubling aspect of the American literary crowd was the possibility that it was not anonymous at all. One “apologue” of puffing recounts the story of three rogues who swindle a Brahmin determined to sacrifice a sheep by persuading him to buy “an ugly dog, lame and blind,” instead.⁴⁴ The conspirators pull off the ruse by pretending to be objective strangers; each passes by and affirms that the dog is a sheep. Finally, the Brahmin, convinced that he must be delusional, buys the dog. In this fable, “calculated chiefly to benefit those who are simple enough to be gulled by a morsel of criticism,” anonymity is itself a fraud.

Critics further cultivated the illusion of plurality through a habitual use of the pronoun “we,” which “has a most imposing and delusive sound,” Washington Irving observed. “The reader pictures to himself a conclave of learned men, deliberating gravely and scrupulously on the merits of the book in question; and when they have united in a conscientious verdict, publishing it for the benefit of the world: whereas the criticism is generally the crude and hasty production of an individual.”⁴⁵ Self-effacement thus offered excellent opportunities for self-aggrandizement, as Irving recognized: “[S]uch the mystic operation of anonymous writing; such the potential effect of the pronoun *we*, that [the critic’s] crude decisions, fulminated through the press, become circulated far and wide, control the opinions of the world, and give or destroy reputation.”⁴⁶ Rufus Griswold, for example, enjoyed “powerful connections with some thirteen publishing houses, twelve magazines, and eight newspapers,” arrangements which made his opinions, if not his name, ubiquitous.⁴⁷ Disguised under the perceived democracy of print, the machinations of literary criticism artificially unite

public opinion into a fraudulent critical consensus—a configuration that exerted particular influence among American readers because it was enshrined in (and often conflated with) the nation’s political institutions. “In the republick of letters, as in all other republicks, it must be the voice of the majority which will eventually prevail,” an article in the *New-York Mirror* piously observed. Yet the writer was forced to admit that “[i]n this age of humbug, there is no system of imposture more successful than that practiced by the reviews and critical journals of the day,” and if the “voice of the majority” did not accord with the press, it could simply be manufactured.⁴⁸

Bruce Robbins, adapting the words of Walter Lippmann, has suggested that Habermas’s account of the public sphere belongs to the modern tradition of a “phantom public sphere,” which imagines the “public” as abstract, mythic, and unlocatable.⁴⁹ But whereas Robbins uses the phrase to describe the invisibility of publicness in models of political and cultural activity, the acknowledged and unacknowledged fictions of the public sphere I have discussed here illustrate that it equally describes the visibilities of nineteenth-century print culture, literally populated with its inventors’ projections. A phantasmagoria of democracy, resolutely forswearing the market yet unmistakably possessed by it, the spectralities of antebellum print culture suggest new dimensions to Marx and Engels’s famous maxim about modern capitalism as a whole: “All that is solid melts into air.”⁵⁰ Perhaps their source, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, is even more to the point: “These our actors . . . were all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air.”⁵¹

Thinking Debunking

The scandal of a fraudulent print public sphere allows us to bring to light the constituent elements of liberal democracy, extracting its emergence in the United States from history’s relentless process of self-naturalization. In this sense, we might understand the puffing system as what Walter Benjamin calls a “monad,” a “configuration pregnant with tensions.” “In this structure,” Benjamin writes, the historical materialist recognizes “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” and “takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history.”⁵² The outraged attempts of the puffing system’s critics to expose the machinations of the print public sphere give us access to a forgotten episode in literary

history—an episode that is the more conveniently forgotten because the memory of literary democracy that replaces it proves so flattering to the work of literary critics. But if excavating the puffing system offers a chance to rescue “the oppressed past” from the “continuum of history,” I want to end by suggesting that it also discloses how difficult it is to wrest oneself from that continuum. For while exposés of the puffing system debunk the myth of literary democracy and the emergence of democratic liberalism it enables, paradoxically, they may also uphold this myth, a double bind dramatized in John Beauchamp Jones’s novel *Freaks of Fortune; Or, the History and Adventures of Ned Lorn* (1854).

Freaks of Fortune describes what we might call, in contradistinction to the familiar term *print culture*, an antebellum subculture of print. The novel charts the rise of orphan Ned Lorn from poverty and obscurity to literary fame and a family inheritance, and the fall of his antagonist, the stock-jobber Job Mallex, from wealth and federal office to ignominy and madness. The print public sphere provides the stage on which the various dramas of the novel—the constitution and dissolution of families, legal battles, love, artistic success, and political machinations—unfold and which organizes their peculiarly involved relations. What qualifies written words for such a central role is their effectiveness as plot devices; in the novel’s first half, which is packed with slanderous newspaper reports, letters from imposter heirs, forged marriage certificates, counterfeit money, ghostwritten letters of resignation, and literary critical fraud, their omnipresent authority is only matched by their treachery. What makes print culture particularly dangerous, the novel suggests, is the ease with which it cloaks self-interest under the pretense of disinterest. Mallex demonstrates as much when he inserts a story slandering Ned in a newspaper he has “established by his capital” but that effectively manages to hide the strings, and that “now professed to be more elevated in its tone, and fastidious in its morals, than any of its neighbours.”⁵³ (The name *Mallex* seems to derive from a combination of the prefix *mal* [bad] and either the Greek *lexis* [words] or the Latin *lex* [law]; the ambiguity—the eligibility of either *words* or *law* and thus their implied commutability—is at least as suggestive as either option.)

It is literary criticism, however, that Beauchamp presents as the exemplary instance of print’s conjunction of deception with apparent transparency. After publishing several poems in a local newspaper

pseudonymously, Ned takes his verses to Mr. Shallow Skimmer, a well-connected author and critic who professes great admiration for them. Skimmer encourages Ned's ambition to publish a book but assures him that his own services will be essential to the project. His assertion astounds Ned, who possesses a deep faith in the integrity of the print public sphere, but Skimmer explains that publishers are unwilling to risk taking on new authors, except "on condition that I will write and have inserted, in several journals, three or four favourable notices, which I have promised to do" (*FF*, 195). When Ned protests against this picture of literary criticism, Skimmer scoffs: "Reviewers? We have no reviewers except one or two circles of exclusives, who review their own books. No, my dear sir, no reviewers, but hundreds of writers of notices and puffs" (*FF*, 195–96). The secret to this system's success, Skimmer reveals, lies precisely in the willingness of people such as Ned to mistake the literary marketplace for a Habermasian public sphere. When Ned asks incredulously, "But can a favorable notice of a poor book save it from failure?" Skimmer replies:

"Undoubtedly—often, often. Puff it, advertise it—rouse the public curiosity. Have it talked about and inquired for, and the booksellers will order it. Now, mind you, I don't pretend to say an unworthy production can always be crammed down the throats of the people. We cannot make them read a book; but we can make them buy it. . . . I venture to say I could name some works which have become quite celebrated, that have never been read by two hundred persons. And these very works have remunerated their authors handsomely. Good notices—notoriety is everything." (*FF*, 196)

Antebellum usage juxtaposed *notoriety* with genuine (that is, merited) reputation. Whereas reputation was forged in the purifying fire of public critical exchange, notoriety was simply the most undifferentiated form of publicity itself. But what Ned learns, to his dismay, is how easily the two might be confused.

If *Freaks of Fortune* initially seems like an exposé of the fraudulent print public sphere, it is remarkable how quickly and completely it rehabilitates that sphere. By the end of the story, the insidious system initially described contracts to the isolated crimes of Shallow Skimmer. Once Ned nobly rejects Skimmer's offer, a local newspaper agrees to serialize his pseudonymous, semiautobiographical novel; near the end of its run, Ned receives a letter from the editor informing him

that he negotiated with a publisher to issue the novel as a book, which is now on the market and “selling famously” (*FF*, 298). The envious Skimmer (who has recently published a novel of his own, which failed “in spite of the most extraordinary efforts to keep it alive”) attempts to discredit Ned’s novel, *The Dishonoured*, by inserting a scathing review in a New York journal, but to no avail. “Seemingly by one of those sudden caprices of taste, by which fortunes are sometimes made, ‘The Dishonoured’ was sought after by ‘everybody;’” and “with the exception of a feeble attack now and then from the prolific pen of Skimmer, (who wrote for several publications)” it “was noticed by the press with favour” (*FF*, 306). Against the odds Beauchamp initially describes, *The Dishonoured* beats the puffing system, intervening in the fraudulent subculture of print represented by Skimmer to bring the press, the public, and the market into their rightful alignment. Initially presented as the rule, the puffing system becomes the exception to literary democracy. The simultaneous emergence of an American poetry movement, which “spread over our broad domains like a fitful epidemic,” confirms that a transformation in literary values has taken place. This development, like that signaled by Ned’s triumph, is predicated on the miraculous collapse of the literary sphere’s deceptions and the restoration of its rational-critical faculty: “Of course the elements had been originally moved for the especial benefit of imperial geniuses; but a great deal of native poetry was so obviously equal to any of the recent importations, that a most fortunate hue and cry in favour of American poets was the consequence” (*FF*, 307). Beauchamp’s attack on the puffing system does not debunk literary democracy but quite comprehensively *produces* it, leaving the reader with a peculiarly empty critique.

This exception that proves the rule is even more noticeable in the literary plot’s political counterpart, where ingrained corruption is abruptly supplanted by intrinsic democracy. Beauchamp juxtaposes Ned’s professional trajectory with that of Job Mallex, who decides to run for political office just as Ned begins his literary career. But whereas Ned eschews the lures of the puffing system and thus redeems and revitalizes the print public sphere, Mallex deploys every available form of political subterfuge to attain office. In his bid for Congress, he uses “all sorts of intrigues and inducements” to win votes, including bribing tavern keepers to drop casual endorsements to their customers and children to persuade resistant parents (*FF*, 214). Mal-

lex's machinations parallel the workings of the puffing system: both appropriate apparently open, disinterested forms of discourse (in this extreme version, the prattling of children) and script them imperceptibly. And although Mallex is the villain of the novel, Beauchamp initially maintains that these particular misdeeds are normative. When his stratagems enable Mallex to rise from Congress to an unspecified high federal office ("head of one of the Departments"), Beauchamp issues an ironic exculpation of the plot development: "It is not to be supposed that such considerations as the above always have a controlling influence on the action of the high functionaries of our republican government. It would be a scandal and a libel to make such an assertion; and such is by no means the intention here" (*FF*, 317). Of course, his pious self-acquittal signals exactly the opposite of what it states; "such considerations," he implies, are exactly what powers "our republican government."

Yet the normative fraudulence of American democracy disappears as quickly and as thoroughly as the normative fraudulence of the literary sphere—and, not coincidentally, by means of it. The strategic disclosure of Ned's authorship of *The Dishonoured* effects Mallex's downfall, for as one of Ned's supporters explains, the novel's popularity, combined with its incriminating autobiographical content, put Mallex in an impossible situation:

"[W]hen you reflect that Mr. Mallex is now occupying a post of honour, and *should* be moved by honourable impulses; that his position can be maintained only by the skillful discharge of his duties, and the good report of the country; and that in confronting you as an author whose productions are stereotyped as they fall from his pen, and immediately after disseminated over the union; you see, if he still determines to withhold your fortune, he must be either reckless of the consequences which would follow an exposure of his abominable conduct, or else he must be prepared to rebut the evidence he will know it is our intention to produce against him." (*FF*, 318)

The plan depends on the operations of a public sphere that the novel only recently dismissed as an illusion, but quite suddenly, democratic representation is a function of "the skillful discharge of . . . duties" and "the good report of the country," rather than bribery, lies, and the machinations of the press. Yet the plan works: the revelations of Ned's

novel reach the president, who personally sends Mallex a letter “to which there was no signature attached. But he recognized the handwriting of the President”:

The paper contained a long catalogue of his offences. Of the bribes he had received; of the treacherous bargains he had made with politicians and political writers for his own elevation; of his secret efforts to defeat the measures of the administration, even those he had approved in cabinet council; of the removal of the President’s sincere supporters from office; of the appointment of his enemies; and of his agency in the procurement of attacks upon his colleagues, by members of Congress, and in the columns of newspapers in the interest of the opposition. That was all. There were no words of comment, no reproaches. The catalogue of his offences in the handwriting of the President sufficed. (*FF*, 380)

The absence of a signature and the impersonal tone suggest a more general authority behind Mallex’s dismissal, abstracting its contents (firing a federal employee) into a symbolic act (the restoration of democracy). This same tone—the dispassionate list of offenses, with “no words of comment, no reproaches”—also proclaims the reunion of democracy and rationality, whose natural association men like Mallex have disrupted. Suddenly, his misdeeds have been converted from a condition of American democracy to an easily corrected anomaly.

Despite these signs that a paradigm shift has occurred, Mallex initially retains his confidence in the illusory operations of print. Undeterred by his banishment to solitary confinement in the countryside, he proposes to “fill the papers with rumours of a mental malady, which will blind the public to the real cause of my retirement, and furnish a plausible pretext for winding up my affairs” (*FF*, 383). But his scheme cannot succeed in the novel’s refurbished public sphere. When Mallex receives the news that his plans have unraveled and the truth has come to light, however, he does not accept his fate but insists that it flies in the face of the nation’s political institutions: “‘It is a violation of the compact—an infringement of the constitution—’” (*FF*, 393). In this strange moment, Beauchamp’s fantasy of literary and democratic salvation seems to break down and the novel’s earlier vision of the public sphere reasserts itself, as Mallex suggests that his actions do not defy official policy but in fact are authorized by it. But Beauchamp abruptly dismisses this possibility, as Mallex adds: “‘But how I hap-

pened to mention the constitution, I am unable to say'" (*FF*, 393). Yet the possibility that Mallex is representative rather than transgressive of American print and political culture lingers, even as—or perhaps precisely because—Beauchamp so quickly shuts it down.

In its baffling about-face, *Freaks of Fortune* evinces the peculiar durability of literary democracy, which survives the novel's repeated attempts to deflate it and even seems to grow stronger by them. As the novel's critique of the puffing system repeatedly leads to dead ends and inversions, it suggests the possibility that attempts to debunk the literary public sphere by pointing out its deceptions carried a double charge. Their negative valuations presuppose a positive (and preexistent) model by implication, placing Beauchamp and other critics of the puffing system in the awkward position of disabling their critiques in the act of articulating them. In other words, the very accusations of puffery that beset the literary public sphere, damaging as they may seem, in some sense uphold its integrity. The enduring myth of literary democracy does not owe its longevity to its inventors or later proponents alone but, paradoxically, is also indebted to the attempts made to puncture it. In part, this double bind simply seems to confirm that the exception proves the rule. But it also itself belongs to the logic of literary democracy, which lives by representing its own openness, the indeterminate, empty space of Lefort's formulation. If on one hand, this means that literary democracy is hospitable to attacks on its integrity, on the other hand, it means that these attacks necessarily go nowhere, for by their very existence they shore up the formation they would expose.

Wayne State University

Notes

For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay, I would like to thank Wai Chee Dimock, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Michael Denning, Donald Pease, and the members of the 2004–05 Columbia University Americanist Dissertation Seminar.

My epigraph comes from Edgar Allan Poe's notes for the unfinished manuscript "The Living Writers of America" (ca. 1846–48), printed in Burton R. Pollin, *The Living Writers of America: A Manuscript by Edgar Allan Poe*, *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1991): 165.

- 1 See Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (New York: Viking, 1981). Studies of the antebellum era

often rely on the understood equation of literature and democracy, but scholars of the “American Renaissance” offer explicit statements. F. O. Matthiessen’s assertion that the authors he discusses “all wrote literature for democracy” is an easy target (introduction to *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941], xv); but see also David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988); and Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

- 2 See, for example, Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).
- 3 “Introduction,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 1 (October 1837): 14.
- 4 *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary, from 1795 to 1848*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 12 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1874–77), 9:416; quoted in John Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of “Young America”: A Study in the Relationship of Politics and Literature, 1837–1850* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1952), 5.
- 5 “The Booksellers’ Dinner,” *New York American*, 3 April 1837, n.p.
- 6 “Democracy and Literature,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 11 (August 1842): 196.
- 7 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 94.
- 8 [James Madison], “Federalist No. 10,” in *The Federalist Papers* (London: Penguin, 1987), 126.
- 9 “The War of the Five Campaigns,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 7 (June 1840): 486.
- 10 [James Madison], “Federalist No. 63,” in *The Federalist Papers*, 373.
- 11 Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 33.
- 12 See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975); and J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985). The phrase “possessive individualism” is C. B. Macpherson’s, from *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962).

- 13 Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 609.
- 14 C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon, 1973), 31, 6.
- 15 Sean Wilentz, "On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 55.
- 16 Claude Lefort, "The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism," in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1986), 303–4.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 305–6.
- 18 One might find further evidence of the liberal assumptions that structure Lefort's account in his essentially negative definition of democracy, in which democracy appears as absence rather than practice—much as liberalism understands democracy as nonintervention in the interests of private citizens.
- 19 See Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era, 1828–1848* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 168–69.
- 20 Evert Duyckinck, "Literary Prospects of 1845," *American Review* 1 (February 1845): 146.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 The most influential work is still Michael Warner's *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990); but see also Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997); and David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998).
- 23 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 26. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *ST*.
- 24 Grantland Rice makes a similar observation in *The Transformation of Authorship in America*, 3.
- 25 See John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972), 1:257–62; and Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, in collaboration with Lawrence C. Wroth and Rollo G. Silver, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1951), 72–90.
- 26 See Tebbel, *History of Book Publishing*, 1:221.
- 27 See Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1930*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1958–1968), 1:341–42.
- 28 "The Booksellers' Dinner," n.p.

- 29 James Kent, cited in "Rough Notes of Thirty Years in the Trade," *American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular*, 1 August 1863, 258.
- 30 William Alfred Jones, "Home Criticism" (1847), in *Essays upon Authors and Books* (New York: Stanford and Swords, 1849), 28.
- 31 Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 79, 81.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 33 "Liberty vs. Literature and the Fine Arts," *Knickerbocker* 9 (January 1837): 4. The writer repeats the phrase "rational freedom" on page 9.
- 34 Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), 21.
- 35 Harris, *Humbug*, 79.
- 36 William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), 174.
- 37 "Puffing System," *Southern Literary Journal* 2 (June 1836): 312.
- 38 See Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*, 172.
- 39 T. B. Peterson to Rufus Griswold, 7 January 1850, quoted in Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*, 176–77.
- 40 Edgar Allan Poe, review of *The Quacks of Helicon* by Lambert Wilmer, in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1010–11, 1006.
- 41 "Puffing, a Fable," *Atkinson's Casket*, August 1834, 384.
- 42 [Cornelius Mathews], "Nationality in Literature," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 20 (March 1847): 271, reprinted in *The Native Muse: Theories of American Literature*, ed. Richard Ruland (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), 302.
- 43 "American Poets, and their Critics," *Knickerbocker* 4 (July 1834): 24, 23.
- 44 "Literary Puffing," *Boston Weekly Magazine*, 19 December 1840, 110–11.
- 45 G[eoffrey] C[rayon] [Washington Irving], "Desultory Thoughts on Criticism," *Knickerbocker* 14 (August 1839): 176.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 W. S. Tryon, *Parnassus Corner: A Life of James T. Fields, Publisher to the Victorians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 189.
- 48 Henry Stanhope Lee, "Thoughts on Contemporaneous Criticism," *New-York Mirror*, 22 June 1839, 412.
- 49 Bruce Robbins, "Introduction: The Public as Phantom," *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii–xxvi.
- 50 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, 27 vols. (New York: International, 1976), 6:487.
- 51 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, scene iv, lines 148–50.
- 52 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*,

trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 262, 263. In recognizing the monad, the historical materialist refuses the notion of “homogenous, empty time” and instead experiences “time filled by the presence of the now” (261). My essay’s investigation into democratic representation (in the most calculating sense of the word) also began in a shock of recognition. If this essay is about the simultaneous proliferation and evacuation of *democracy* in the antebellum United States, it is equally about the same feat repeated at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

- 53 John Beauchamp Jones, *Freaks of Fortune; Or, the History and Adventures of Ned Lorn* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1854), 233. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *FF*.