letter in an era that saw the advent of electric and electronic telecommunications as well as multiple daily mails. As a result, parallels drawn between Whitman’s vision of a world body interwoven with telegraphic wires and contemporary online connectivity remain cursory.

*Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865* makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the American letter exchange and the political work that, consciously or not, letter writers performed in the antebellum period. The book, in fact, would be well served by a subtitle announcing its single-minded concern with correspondence as political praxis and allegory. Whole sectors of the cultural practice of letter writing are not covered: there is no examination of the New Testament epistolary model and the scriptural frame of reference so important to the major themes of this writing; there is little attention (except in the abstract) to issues of class and literacy. Moreover, this study insists on viewing letter writing as the activity of reciprocating individuals in ways that obscure the extent to which letters were family and communal enterprises devaluing private authorship and readership. Nevertheless, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865* frames and implements an inquiry with admirable erudition and argumentative tenacity, and it exhibits the rare power to transform the ways in which we read the nineteenth-century classics. The book’s merit is that it asks certain questions and pursues them relentlessly.

William Merrill Decker

*Oklahoma State University*


Stephen Carl Arch thinks we have got it all wrong. In his view, our scholarly obsession with Benjamin Franklin’s (1706–90) “autobiography” has closed our eyes to the myriad other fascinating personal narratives of the early national era. It has distorted our understanding of Franklin’s own text. And it has hidden from view an intriguing transition that Arch argues takes place only after Franklin: that from self-biographical narratives to true autobiographies. Defining the latter as “any narrative written or told by one person in which that person struggles to tell the story of how he or she came over time to be an independent, often original, agent” (6), Arch argues that autobiographical narratives fully “emerged” only around 1830. Arch’s purposes in *After Franklin*, then, are many. He wants to end our habit of considering Franklin’s text an “autobiography” and of considering Franklin a progenitor of the modern self. And he is attempting two “acts of recovery.” The first “is a recovery of particular texts that have been for the most part ignored in the schol-
arship” (xi); these include those of Stephen Burroughs, Ethan Allen, Elizabeth Fisher, and John Fitch. The second, and more ambitious, is the “recovery . . . of the discursive practices that formed around the concept of self or personhood or personal identity” during the years of the early republic. “The emergence of autobiography,” Arch writes, “is . . . one example of (or site for) the self as self, of the individual as a unique and original entity” (xi).

After Franklin is at its best in Arch’s close readings of personal narratives. After an introductory chapter in which he makes his case for Franklin’s essentially emulative conception of the self, Arch turns to three texts whose authors resist the celebration of self that they see around them in the early republic—and who do so even as they offer detailed accounts of their own lives. Alexander Graydon is a Federalist who feels his failure to advance in the new nation is evidence of his virtue and the nation’s increasing vice; he offers himself up, Arch argues persuasively, as a kind of wryly sincere negative example. Next, Arch explores Benjamin Rush’s memoirs as a history of the molding of a mind; Rush believed too strongly in the effect of environment, Arch suggests, to be capable of celebrating or even believing in the possibility of self-invention. Finally, Arch turns to Ethan Allen. For all his exploits and frontier ways, Allen appears here as no wild western loner; instead, he sought to form himself into a gentleman and to find joy in community.

In the second and final section of the book, Arch explores works that are, in his view, beginning to make the leap from the older style of narrative to autobiography. Their authors, he suggests, are no longer seeking to mold themselves into forms their culture has already cast. Arch argues that Stephen Burroughs, everyone’s favorite early national conman, believed that underneath his many masks lay a kind of “core” self (112), one known only to him. For this reason, Arch deems Burroughs a pioneer of true autobiography. Arch then turns to authors who have received even less scholarly attention than the flamboyant Burroughs and finds that they, too, were early practitioners of the emergent genre. Elizabeth Fisher and K. White, two women who recount their unusual journeys both through the United States and through unorthodox relationships, “imagine personal identity,” Arch argues, “as oppositional, eccentric, and self-directed, anticipating autobiography’s focus on an independent self” (112). Finally, Arch explores the narrative of John Fitch, an early proponent of steamboats who emphasized his “singularity” and originality in his story of his life and inventions.

Arch’s readings of these texts are uniformly sympathetic and insightful. His eye for such subtleties as Alexander Graydon’s rueful awareness of his own battles against the very selfishness against which he directed his memoirs, or John Finch’s showcasing of his misshapen body as proof of his uniqueness, draws us close to authors whose work, in other hands, would have remained remote and even uninteresting. Arch, moreover, has surely succeeded in his goal of proving the need to study these texts further, and in demonstrating that the early national period is, as he puts it, “important in its own right” (13). The framework of the book as a whole, however, poorly serves its many compelling parts. Arch’s argument that scholarly fascination with Franklin has obscured the interest and merits of other examples of “self life writing” seems reasonable enough. But Arch does not do quite enough with Franklin to convince a skeptical reader that Franklin is as bound to principles of emulation as Arch suggests, and the insistent downplaying of Franklin’s “origi-
nality” adds little to the analysis of the other texts Arch examines. (Adding to the awkward role of Franklin in the book is the fact that Arch’s longest treatment of Franklin’s text is left out of the index.)

Moreover, it is Arch’s eagerness to contrast other texts to Franklin’s that prompts the few strained readings that mar this otherwise sensitive work. That Franklin wrote that he had to “avoid all Appearance” of sloth or profligacy hardly demonstrates that “Franklin’s self requires a society to call itself into being” (127). Likewise, Stephen Burroughs’s assertion, “I have aimed at nothing but a bare supply of the necessaries of life,” falls short of illustrating that “Burroughs goes beyond Franklin in claiming that one’s motivation to enact a desired self is not social but private” (127). Finally, Arch’s insistence on separating Franklin’s texts from developments that came later makes it difficult to acknowledge the important factors, ranging from radical Enlightenment thought to the culture of sensibility that had begun, even before Franklin, to influence many Americans’ understandings of themselves and their relationship to forms and to communities.

More interesting than Arch’s somewhat cranky attempt to dislodge Franklin from center stage is his argument that “lower- and middle-class white men” (47) and women, rather than privileged men, were innovators of what Arch deems true autobiography. The first group created original selves in print because, with no “honor” and status to define them,” they “had only ‘character,’ constructed in actions and, even more, in print” (46). Women such as Fisher and White, for their part, “finding no connections where they are supposed to (as daughters, wives, and mothers) and finding none where male self-biographers found them (in politics, society, books, etc.),” began to “look to themselves as natural sources of moral authority” (156). Foregrounding this argument not only would have been a more effective way of escaping the shadow of Franklin—rather than, as Arch’s framing conceit does, holding it close at every turn—but also would have forced Arch to delve more deeply into other intriguing issues that his work does raise. What, for example, is the relationship between the development of the self in narrative and the development of modern conceptions of the self outside of print? Arch does not make clear whether he sees the development of autobiography as a response to or a spur to the development of ideas of “personality” and originality. While his refusal to make simplistic claims is admirable, coy formulations such as “the emergence of autobiography is thus one example of (or site for) the self as self” (xi) leave the reader wanting, if not more answers, at least a more direct confrontation of the interesting questions. Likewise, Arch takes an interest in fictional portrayals of the self, most notably J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s (1735–1813) Letters from an American Farmer (1782), and suggests at one point that, “given postmodern assumptions about autobiography, it would perhaps not matter much to us if [Fisher] had fabricated her story” (150). “Perhaps”? And, does Arch share these “postmodern assumptions”? Such passages call out for more ambitious exploration of the relationship between print representation and experience. And, given Arch’s suggestion that individuals may have been inspired by fictional accounts as they wrote their autobiographies, questions may be raised as well about whether “emulation” of the kind found in earlier personal narratives had truly been superseded, or instead had persisted in new forms.
This is a book, then, that does not seem quite comfortable in its own skin—an interesting fate for a text devoted to exploring struggles for self-expression. It is, nonetheless, a useful addition to both the history and the literary studies of the period, one that will no doubt inspire scholars to seek out overlooked narratives and to ponder the issues that Arch has productively raised.

Catherine Kaplan
Arizona State University


Strange, brilliant, and maddening, Studies in Classic American Literature (1923) dramatically influenced the interpretation of American literature, and Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen are to be commended for this excellent edition of D. H. Lawrence’s (1885–1930) important book. Everyone interested in American literature and criticism will benefit from the expert job they have done.

American literature is now such a vast enterprise that we tend to forget how long it took the field to gain acceptance. During the first decades of the twentieth century—I am drawing here upon the account I give in volume 5 of the Cambridge History of American Literature (2003)—American literature was typically perceived as a branch of English literature. When critics and teachers paid attention to American writers, they asked how these writers contributed to English culture and letters. A specifically “American” literature, a body of texts different in a crucial way from that of English literature, was not a recognized entity. In the 1920s, the members of the American Literature group pondered whether they should secede from the Modern Language Association and form their own organization; even as late as 1930, American literary history still appeared under the heading of “English XI” or “English XII” at the annual MLA meetings. It was sometimes said in the mid-1930s that American literature was the orphan child of the curriculum.

By midcentury, American literature had become an established field—there had been a revolutionary change brought about by American critics and scholars inside and outside the academy, including H. L. Mencken, V. L. Parrington, Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, Constance Rourke, and Alfred Kazin. But the pioneer was the English novelist, poet, and essayist D. H. Lawrence. With exotic eloquence, he emphasized in Studies in Classic American Literature the double meaning, symbolism, and subterfuge of American writing at its most supreme and argued that Americans had to remap the literary landscape that they thought they already knew—a landscape then dominated by Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, and other Boston, Cambridge, and Concord worthies. Lawrence identified Edgar Allan