

Books and Culture: Canned, Canonized, and Neglected

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WOODY ALLEN'S MODERN everyman, Zelig, in the film of that name, dies with but one regret: having just begun *Moby Dick*, he'll never know precisely how it turns out. Sitting in a movie house reading this printed quip that ends the film, one ponders some of the questions that plague all considerations of the role of both popular culture and books in people's and society's life. Is *Zelig* popular culture and *Moby Dick* not? Has Melville's classic become a part of popular culture, so much so that Allen can count on a certain reaction to its mention, with part of the joke being that everyone knows how it comes out even if they, unlike Zelig, never begin it? And may Allen's movie soon become an artifact for the erudite, known to a handful of scholars and of interest to few of them? Why are the final words of the film put in print instead of given to the voice-over narrator who has told us most of the story? Does the printed word have some peculiar power, or does the very process of reading dictate some more intense or complicated involvement with the jokes or information or myths conveyed? And what do I learn from seeing *Zelig*—or Zelig from reading *Moby Dick*—if we think about it? What is learned if, as is more common, we don't particularly care to think about it? Is my watching and his reading a mark of our being mass men, representing the commonplace means through which we are made identical to every-

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one else, something that Zelig's earlier peculiar propensities—when with the Chinese, he becomes Chinese—illustrated in more dramatic form? Or does his reading and my viewing entail a broadening of our freedom by suggesting some aspects of human possibility and experience more clearly or poignantly than we might otherwise have known?

In thinking about the relation of books and popular culture, I was reminded of a distant undergraduate argument about Puritanism when a young sceptic told me that two terms I'd used, 'sins' and 'God,' had no empirical meaning. 'My sins,' I assured him, 'are empirical enough.' We know what books, like sins, are, though there may be some gray areas of doubt, especially about including the more ephemeral or venial varieties, such as pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, broadsides, or scholarly journals. As I understand the doctrines of this latitudinarian society for the study of the book, there is little that is printed that falls outside the scope of its proper moral consideration.

If we know what books are, empirically or by definition, 'popular culture' retains something of divine or satanic elusiveness. One need only read in the many accounts of the field to become convinced that we still view this entity, despite its very rich and varied self-conscious contributions in the last two decades, through a glass darkly, if not a fun house mirror distortedly. In fact, the religious analogy seems especially appropriate for a field in which theory tends to veer wildly between visions of apocalypse and what might be called zingy paeans to Pop-a-lisp. This paper will suggest some of the benefits that may grow from an emphasis on the solid, hand-bound book in a field that often seems flighty, going wherever the wind blows, listing zany without ballast. I'll suggest some particular areas and topics where books and popular culture might be—and have been—drawn together, but this I do incidentally in arguing the benefits of closer ties between respectable books, representing the canonized lineage of humane

scholarship, and the burgeoning if somewhat declass  field of popular or canned culture.¹ I'll argue that, since much designationally unsanctioned intercourse—some of it wonderfully productive—has been going on for a long time, a formal marriage of convenience is in order. With the hopefulness of all matchmakers, I think this union might give a valuable sense of care and responsibility to a field often too happy-go-lucky, and contribute some added vitality to the noble house of historical-literary scholarship, always in danger of suffocating under the weight of traditional pedantry.

I'll call the banns in the traditional three stages: (1) pondering the problems of definition and teleological moralism in the theories of popular culture; (2) considering some of the limiting aspects of major methodologies applied in the field, and difficulties commonly seen in some of the relevant work on the pre-1860 period; and (3) suggesting a few of the many directions that might be taken in what is in fact a respectably ancient intellectual pursuit.

Vagaries in the definitions of the field of popular culture complicate its elusiveness. Despite frequent hazy evocations of numbers, no scholar has suggested that popular culture be defined in contrast to unpopular culture by establishing some numerical threshold of readers, viewers, or practitioners in different areas. Most critics agree only about what popular culture is *not*: it is certainly not 'high' culture, or related to the art and thought of the elite; and (most agree) it is not folk culture, the art and myths and music and traditions of preliterate or at any rate 'precommercial' common people.

¹ Throughout the paper there are some problematic distinctions that should be explicitly listed: (A) Much writing on popular culture dates back to the 1920s and 1930s of this century and development of the *field* to the 1960s, which for convenience might be symbolized in the founding of the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1967. (B) I use the term 'popular culture' with some breadth (as it is commonly employed), and with no rigorous determination to distinguish it sharply from elite or folk culture studies, something I find impossible to do. (C) Some historical fields retain some clarity by insisting on a focus on one topic: politics diplomacy, economics, music, religion. But fields that stress integration—i.e., intellectual, cultural, and social—are by their nature not capable of sharp definition or precise segmentation.

This is clear enough until one begins to try to establish the precise lines of demarcation. The primary distinguishing criteria seem to involve money and class. Folk art is allegedly done for free, and high art for reasons of personal creativity, while canned art is made for money. Yet enslaved Solomon Northup played his fiddle, not only because he liked to, but because it bought him opportunities for better food and longer holidays from his chores. And surely this concern about reward was in the tradition of medieval troubadors and tribal storytellers and Navaho weavers, as well as their modern followers such as Woody Guthrie or the young woman playing a mandolin behind a hat on the subway. Sarah Parton, as 'Fanny Fern,' drove hard bargains for her immensely popular sketches, but she couldn't hold a candle to Ludwig von Beethoven for single-minded rapaciousness. Some great artists wrote for years with slight or no emoluments, but so did writers who were neither great nor popular. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe served about equally long, underpaid magazine and annual apprenticeships before success came. When his poems didn't sell, Whitman took on a government clerkship. When his novels ceased to pay, Melville joined the customs house crew that Hawthorne had escaped. Margaret Fuller turned to conversations and journalism to earn a living, and wrote the better for it. Ralph Waldo Emerson spent as much time lecturing as writing because it was more profitable. It was Samuel Woodworth who remained faithful to writing popular plays and songs while living in near-destitution. If the *Dial* and 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' were labors of love, so were 'The Hunters of Kentucky' and 'The Old Oaken Bucket.'²

² Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* [1841-53] (Baton Rouge, 1968), pp. 163-66; on Parton's financial demands, see Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1984), pp. 152-58; Margaret V. Allen, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller* (University Park, Pa., 1979). The introduction to Samuel Woodworth's first published book of verse offers a picture of his destitution, a situation that changed little in his later years. See *The Poems, Odes, Songs, and Metrical Effusions of Samuel Woodworth* (New York, 1818).

Such random evidence suggests a very simple psychological truth: that a desire to create, and a need to live, and a yen for money or recognition are not warring but joined elements in human beings. Such a gross truism would hardly be worth making did it not relate to one of the most popular of explanatory put-downs of popular culture. To decry popular culture because it's involved with profit motives is to disparage all levels of culture, all similarly tinged with personal adulterated motives. Few human conceptions are immaculate, and nothing helps less in understanding or evaluating popular culture than the pretense that something profoundly telling is revealed when a profit motive is discovered. Most prophets are willing to take their profits, too, and, as far as is known, no early American refused royalties, salaries, or other rewards for being too high, any more than has any recent scholar who points with disgust at the money others make. The truth seems to be that people create as their needs and taste and abilities allow, whatever the mixed underside of their motivation. Successful popular culture radiates the same honesty as does effective high or folk culture, despite the trammels of conventionality on all levels of aesthetic tradition. There is much more often a crossover of taste—the popularity of Emerson as lecturer, for example—than there is of efforts by popular writers to turn out, against all financial considerations, the Great American Novel or Epic, or of efforts by 'high' writers to slum for profit. There were some competent playwrights in the late nineteenth century and some good screenwriters in the 1930s, but these did not include the profit-seeking Henry James or William Faulkner or F. Scott Fitzgerald. A reading of Walt Whitman's temperance novel is the best way to appreciate the literary merits of Timothy Shay Arthur.

The class and literacy distinctions between popular and other cultures also are dubious, especially in American society. Here, as studies increasingly suggest, illiteracy was never great, even in those groups with whom folk culture is especially

associated: blacks, and Appalachian and frontier whites.³ Illiteracy was predominant among slaves, of course, but efforts by blacks changed that quickly, once freed from enforced separation from printed matter. The emphasis on Bible reading in the evangelical Protestantism of Appalachian and black social-cultural life underlined the commitment toward literacy in these groups. Seemingly, literacy does less to undercut folk culture within groups than does prosperity, the ability to buy the creativity and entertainment that otherwise needs to be produced at home. In the Corcoran Gallery's recent beautiful exhibit of black American noncommercial art of the twentieth century there was conspicuous emphasis on words in a great many of the richest folk paintings, sculptures, and constructions. And the country's leading folklorist, Richard Dorson, has always recognized, somewhat reluctantly, the impossibility of separating out the mutual influences between oral and commercial or printed (or, after Edison, recorded) formulations of folk tradition. Davy Crockett became a folk hero on the printed page before the folk talked of him and long before Tin Pan Alley 'Fess-Parkered' him for intellectual toddlers. Estes Kefauver, donning the coonskin cap in his 1950s campaigns, was simply restoring folk and commercial borrowings to their calculatedly political sources. And the 'slave music' that Solomon Northup played for Southern black and white folk doubtlessly was drawn from the popular songs of New York where he grew to manhood.⁴

³ Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago, 1981), esp. pp. 28-57, 148-92. The work uses Kenneth Lockridge's earlier study entitled *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York, 1974). In European societies, boundaries between popular and elite culture, and between literate and illiterate peoples, were often sharper, owing to more divisive class and educational lines. Peter Burke argues interestingly that such divisions came to European cultures only in the early modern era, and that scholars like Montaigne and Herder began elite appreciation of the culture of the people, once the divisions were clearly drawn. See *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), esp. pp. 244-86.

⁴ Northup was thirty-three when kidnapped and enslaved. Born in New York State, he played his violin for dances, shows, and circuses there (*Twelve Years*, pp. 8-14).

Class lines are even less easy to connect with particular levels of culture. It is not, of course, that classes didn't exist in the United States, although they did lack important elements of permanency and clarity that defined the traditional vision of what class means. But there seems little question that class essentially rested on money, and there is no indication that taste followed whatever broad financial divisions might be traced. The intellectual center of canonized American culture in the mid-nineteenth century was Concord, Massachusetts, a political and economic backwater. There was some travel into Boston, of course (similar to the sneak forays of Henry David Thoreau and his laundry from Walden to Concord), but Emerson at least claimed that the only knowledge of transcendentalism on State Street, the hub of New England power, was that it seemed to threaten the sanctity of contracts.⁵ When opera and minstrelsy developed simultaneously toward separate theatrical forms in the 1840s, their initial appeal seems to have been cross-class and parallel, with the expected elite-lower sorts differentiation developing eventually less from taste than from prices, which skyrocketed for opera.⁶ The genteel embodiment of elite culture, the poetry of Sigourney, Longfellow, and Lowell, was immensely popular. Does this make Walt Whitman an elitist because his audience was small? Or does Emily Dickinson become a folk poet because her work

James Atkins Shackford, *David Crockett, the Man and the Legend* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1956), offers the best resume of the many 'sources' of this legend. Richard Dorson coined the term 'fakelore' to attack ersatz literary creations of folk material, but his own studies have tended to rely on written sources for most things, such as frontier humor. Presumably, there is some background in oral tradition, but one could argue that Dorson's American folklore is very much old fakelore. Perhaps this accounts for his recent admission that the relation between folk and popular culture may be one of 'interpenetration instead of confrontation.' See Dorson's 'Folklore and Fakelore,' *American Mercury* 70 (March, 1950): 335-43; *American Folklore* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 19-63; *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1972), p. 41.

⁵ William Gilman and J. E. Parsons, eds. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols. (New York, 1974), 8:108.

⁶ David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 107-10, 190-91, 238-39; Deane L. Root, *American Popular Stage Music, 1860-1880* (Ann Arbor, 1981).

earned her nothing, and because that genial representative of elite cultural arbiters, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, discouraged her from printing her poems unless she smoothed out the meter and didn't rhyme 'day' and 'eternity'? Two American writers who have remained in the elite canon, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, were the most popular American authors in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Does Cooper change from a popular writer to a representative of elite culture when his bile rises and his sales plummet in the late 1830s? It does not seem likely, since the *North American Review*, the elite intellectual journal, liked his popular tales and scorned his bad-tempered snarls at democracy, just as the masses did.⁷

If one looks at the most popular early 'imported' literature, probably more widely read than the native product, the difficulty of separating popular taste from elite or high standards is clear. Surely Samuel Richardson, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and Charles Dickens remain within scholars' holy canon, and these were the most popular writers in the United States. Even writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot are prominent on Mott's problematical bestseller lists. The list of favorites included some minor figures like Hannah More or Thomas Hood, and certainly they excluded some greats like William Blake and John Keats. Still, the distinctions one looks for between good and popular taste are wholly hazy, and those between classes are almost always the product of unsubstantiated assertions and assumptions. In fact, the whole presumed divisionary structure of popular culture may represent a twentieth-century perspective, which closer eighteenth- and nineteenth-century work may puncture. Certainly this century's rejection of traditionalism, and the development of a variety of mass media as well as mass production of art on all levels,

⁷ Robert Spiller, *James Fenimore Cooper, Critic of His Times* (New York, 1973), chronicles the largely hostile assessments of the unpopular 'domestic' novels in journals like *Knickerbocker*, *New York Review*, and *North American Review*.

has created disgust with others' taste and a desperate desire to assert the superiority of one's own. Hence, Ezra Pound's friendly 'Salutation' to the bourgeois shows the tripartite division of cultural styles that has infiltrated popular culture studies:

O generation of the thoroughly smug
 and thoroughly uncomfortable,
 I have seen fishermen picnicking in the sun,
 I have seen them with untidy families,
 I have seen their smiles full of teeth
 and heard ungainly laughter.
 And I am happier than you are,
 And they were happier than I am;
 And the fish swim in the lake
 and do not even own clothing.

The unbuttoned folk are happy as fish, Pound insists, but he is happier (and wiser) than we, the aesthetically jacketed and emotionally tied bourgeois. Yet Pound clearly shows that he, too, is uncomfortable because it's difficult to be thoroughly smug, amidst the clamoring competition for smug superiority. Hence we have Dwight MacDonald's charming phrase 'mid-cult' to prove that he—and his readers, of course—look down on the taste of those who look down on the taste of 'mass-cult.' Doubtless these concepts could be intellectually refined: upper mass-cult, middle mid-cult, perhaps lower high-cult for MacDonald (or should that be upper mid-cult?).⁸ This lust for badges of superiority accounts partly for Pound's own steady parade of cultural allusions to prove—perfectly convincingly—that he knows many things that we don't, a concern even surpassing that of Cotton Mather, who seemingly trotted out and pushed in infinite random knowledge to show how effulgently culture grew in wilderness. Of course, much of the breathless enthusiasm for popular culture grows from a similar need to prove superiority by being securely high enough to enjoy

⁸ Ezra Pound, 'Salutation,' in *The Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1968), p. 94; Dwight MacDonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York, 1966).

slumming, say, in Susan Sontag's camp. When so many appreciate Verdi and Van Gogh, a major cultural imperative of our 'with it' society, one-up-personship, demands obeisance to Campbell soup cans and Captain Marvel and being 'Caged' in silent symphonies.

I don't mean to disparage the process much; it's kind of fun, if semidesperate fun at times. And obviously one can't think or write or laugh about the process without fully participating in it. Yet there's some need to question broad cultural theories born so clearly of intellectual status seeking.

A recognized grounding of popular cultural studies in pre-twentieth century books and periodicals should also cut through some of the distorting elements related to the teleological dimensions often given the field. Much of the difficulty with theories of popular culture involves their concentration on moralistic negativism on the one hand and uncritical enthusiasm on the other. The first wide-scale scholarly attention to popular culture came in the revolution that infiltrated all intellectual and artistic fields in the years between 1885 and 1914. Thinkers besieged the Victorian or genteel notions of a moral, providential, or natural law with which the post-medieval world had asserted moral harmony and fended off the idea that life might be guided merely by chance or by power.⁹ In this creative and volatile environment, each art form and intellectual discipline underwent a transformation (if not a formation) that gave shape to the modern world by calling into question the values and the assumptions that had gone before. Out of this came a divided reaction to popular culture. On the one hand, some scholars discovered and praised the vitality of vaudeville, or Yiddish theater, or black spirituals—a movement that had its most lasting American scholarly offshoots in

⁹ Morton White, *The Revolt Against Formalism: Social Thought in America* (New York, 1949); Thomas Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science . . . and the Crisis of Nineteenth-Century Authority* (Urbana, 1977); Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976).

the rediscovery and encapsulation of folk art, music, and literature.¹⁰ The second negative strand had stronger roots in Europe, where there was more fear about the rise of the influence of the masses. Ortega Y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses* was the classic—and very popular—elite alarm bell, but the ideas were a part of a much larger lament for a passing old order that runs, in differing forms, from the novels of Galsworthy through the plays of Chekhov and the histories of Spengler. The new technological media, especially films, records, and radio, were young in the United States when World War I ended, and American study of popular culture turned into diatribe against its bourgeois emptiness. Writers like H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Van Wyck Brooks and Paul Elmer More made careers out of scorn for mass-American traditions, though the more robust of them did so with some mixed feelings.¹¹

The 1930s joined the European voice to the American perception in a situation where the fear and distaste of modern mass or popular culture seemed justified by the twin totalitarian viciousness of fascism and communism. The move of the 'Frankfort school' to the United States gave a theoretical grounding to the study of mass culture for the first time, but one that strongly stressed the negative. As fugitives from fascist Germany, their fears of mass society were reasonable enough, but they hardly deepened critical understanding by seeing only 'decadence' in mass culture.¹² Their judgments—

¹⁰ Some of this interest grew from William Graham Sumner's richly suggestive *Folkways* (New York, 1906).

¹¹ Sinclair Lewis presented an amusing sketch of the conflict between the intellectuals and the 'booboisie' in 'Main Street's Been Paved,' *Nation* 119 (Sept. 10, 1924): 255–60. The fascist propaganda of Ezra Pound shows a strange combination of insanely virulent anti-Semitism with an exultation in American slang and colloquialisms. See Leonard W. Doob, ed., 'Ezra Pound Speaking': *Radio Speeches of World War II* (Westport, Conn., 1973).

¹² The best introduction to the Frankfort school's views on popular culture is the 1944 study by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialect of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972). Martin Jay stresses the group's Marxist commitment in *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfort School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Boston, 1975), while George Friedman discusses the group's roots in the theories of Oswald Spengler and Ortega Y Gasset in *The Political Philosophy of the*

and their depth of analysis—of popular culture were almost perfectly parallel to those of Bible-belt revivalists and Legion of Decency censors. They also broadened the politics of this theology of popular decadence from the elitist, sometimes crypto-fascist leanings of Ortega, Pound, and Eliot to the liberalism of Theodor Adorno, the home-grown radicalism of Dwight MacDonald, and the Marxism of Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse probably did most to develop the idea of mass culture as the opiate of the masses and to suggest capitalist manipulation of it in semiconspiratorial terms.¹³ Certainly there are odd political bedfellows among those who decried the destructiveness of popular culture: elite traditionalists, radical Marxists, and religious conservatives (the populist wing of the coalition), intellectually represented by those pop psychologists who periodically declared that comic books or horror films or rock music were sapping the nation's moral fiber.¹⁴ In all three positions the dislike for mass culture was tied to disgust with the United States' development. For elitists, mass culture was a product of American democracy; for Marxists, it was the result of American capitalism; and for the religious, most popular culture was the fruit of an American humanist plot to ensure a society where anything goes by making sure the eternal verities went first.

Such glib predictions of apocalypse have generated reasonable if sometimes equally glib assurances that things aren't so bad. Pop culture wasn't all or always bad, people suggested—

Frankfort School (Ithaca, 1981). Also valuable is Phil Slater, 'The Aesthetic Theory of the Frankfort School,' in Peter Davison *et al*, eds., *Culture and Mass Culture*, 1 vol. (Cambridge, Eng., 1978), 1:307-48.

¹³ Marcuse developed the most specifically Marxist formulation, especially in *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964) and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston, 1978). The stress on a return to the people and to American traditions during the New Deal also encouraged much rich, if untheoretical, work in earlier popular culture. For examples, see footnote 19.

¹⁴ Patrick Brantlinger covers various theories that tie popular culture to social collapse, present or predicted, in *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca, 1983).

or, more amusingly, had always been awful. Remember bear-baiting, suggested David Manning White, and comic book horrors come to seem tame. They also insisted that the funeral for all things of value was, like Tom Sawyer's, somewhat premature.¹⁵ Such correctives were in order but, like much academic revisionism, they had their own disappointing aspects. Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensional argument, overturned or tipped on its head, remains one-dimensional. And in the 1960s, when America was greening and charring, some students of popular culture took the offensive in the name of the nameless masses of consumers. Rock music had a politically revolutionary beat; Superman comics were primal myths; *Star Wars* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* were religious allegories that hailed a second coming; *The Godfather* films presaged and promoted the fall of capitalism. Zap! Bang! Wow!¹⁶

Such works were often insightful about dimensions of popular culture and how it might be interpreted. Indeed, much of the myth finding (and making) paralleled what scholarly critics regularly did to canonized culture. Yet analysis often seemed paralyzed by the discovery of a pretentious connection. When a traditional myth was found in Lil' Abner, or when John Kennedy was proclaimed a pop prince of a campy Camelot, the quest was often over.¹⁷ And the suggestion usually was

¹⁵ David Manning White, 'Mass Culture in America,' in Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), p. 14. This collection, which in many ways marked the initiation of popular culture as a field, offered a rich array of perspectives and types of study. The two editors took opposite views in their introductions, with Rosenberg blaming popular culture for everything from Madame Bovary's fall to the trivialization of modern life and the projected demise of highbrow cultures. In another study, Fred E. H. Schroeder suggests the ways that definitions of popular culture are amended to suit different materials in his edited collection *5000 Years of Popular Culture: Popular Culture Before Printing* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1980).

¹⁶ John Hess, 'Godfather II,' in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 81-90; Gary Herman and Ian Hoare, 'The Struggle for Song,' in Carl Gardner, ed., *Media, Politics, and Culture* (London, 1979), pp. 51-60.

¹⁷ Marshall Fishwick's amusing, wide-ranging, once-over-lightly volumes perhaps represent this approach most clearly. See *Parameters: Man-Media Mosaic* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1978), and *Common Culture and the Great Tradition: The case for Renewal* (Westport, Conn., 1982). He turns gloomy predictions on their head by asserting that

that all this showed that the things the negative viewers found dangerous were just pure delight: technology, mass society, American society, modern society, kitsch, lack of taste, inert watching, rapidly changing values, determined commercialism.¹⁸ In essence, rejection of the standards by which critics tried to distinguish high from vulgar art—vague as those were—led to a celebration of tastelessness and an insistence that worrying about those forces with which popular culture critics were concerned marked a nail-biting fuddy-duddy. The puffing enthusiasts of popular culture often gave analyses, for all their desperate cheerfulness, little richer than opponents' whines about decadence. Reading much recent popular culture theory creates a longing for something in between Oswald Spengler and Dr. Pangloss, a craving for considered judgment of things related to popular culture unshadowed by a conviction of the four horsemen or the Millenium riding in their immediate wake. In short, one wants the attitude one has in reading a book: hope of finding something of value—or at least of being jogged to connect it with something of interest—and sufficient skepticism to ensure that that value not be too easily produced.

Barbara Pym, in her novel *A Few Green Leaves*, amusingly sketches the extremes of the fastidious opponents of popular culture and its all-accepting proponents. In a scene where a gourmet complains to his village doctor of his depressed irritability at canned culture, at 'being offered vinegary bottled mayonnaise instead of home-made, or sliced bread, or processed cheese, or there being no dijon mustard . . . , or freshly ground

twentieth-century popular arts are restoring a 'common culture,' one not divided by class, to all, and are renewing the 'great tradition' that will help end corrosive social divisions. See Fishwick, *Common Culture*, pp. 19-41.

¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan's theories lie behind much of the more utopian thinking about mass culture, though he himself presents his hopes with tart irony. See *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), and *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York, 1951). The latter, McLuhan's richest handling of popular culture, treats the marriage as a delight, while the reiterated central image conjures up Mary Shelley's—and Elsa Lancaster's—chilling vision.

coffee, and finally, the use of tea-bags—that seemed to upset him quite unreasonably.'

The doctor, who pushes platitudes more than pills, has ready advice: 'Try not to be quite so critical—learn to like processed cheese and tea-bags and instant coffee, and beef burgers and fish fingers, too. Most of the people in the village live on such things, and they're none the worse for it.' Well, possibly none the worse, but does one have to choose between waxing depressed over fish sticks and Big Macs and waxing lyrical over them? Pym asks with uninsistent reasonableness, a tone one yearns for in popular culture studies.

If, as I believe, the price of liberty is some mixture of eternal hope and eternal fretting, theories that permit only half the equation are not only flattening but dangerous. Texas may have nothing to say to Maine, as Thoreau tartly suggested to those who predicted a better world was to be strung on telegraph lines, but the world seems hardly threatened by their chance to talk. On the other hand, need we laugh along with a leader who finds (off the air, of course) nuclear annihilation a big joke, the humor obviously embodying the wish fulfillment over which conscious knowledge and inhibitions hold loose rein. Apocalypse is possible, and need only happen once to be statistically significant, humanistically speaking. If it seems excessive to see the end in the unending *Search for Tomorrow* or even *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, all democrats should be concerned about how their society channels its passions and technological chainsaws, and about what *The Young and The Restless* as well as the middle-aged and disillusioned, the old and embittered, the poor and oppressed and the rich and supercilious are up to. At its best, the study of popular culture can make people not only aware of telling clues to society, but also make them thoughtfully appreciative *and* wary of them.

One advantage of grounding popular culture in earlier periods is that this almost automatically destroys much emphasis on teleological determinism. Quite clearly, minstrelsy and the

dime novel led neither to Eden nor the End. Chronological perspective also underlines that, while popular culture may be a new field, studying aspects of popular culture is a long-established reality. There are numerous early books on the subject: Frank Luther Mott's surveys of newspapers, magazines, and best-selling books, the latter a field also covered in James Hart's *The Popular Book*; Douglas Branch's genial handling of fads, fashions and mores in *The Sentimental Years*; Harry Jaffa's unsurpassed evaluation of the Lincoln-Douglas debates; George Pullen Jackson's account of Southern white spirituals, and Sigmund Spaeth's survey of popular songs; Charles Johnson's descriptions of the rituals of camp meetings; Constance Rourke's handling of American humor; Carl Wittke's sketch of minstrelsy or David Brion Davis's study of detective fiction.¹⁹ These books range from profound and exciting to useful, but they clearly illustrate that there was a wide array of histories of nineteenth-century popular culture before there developed a 'field' in the 1960s. Often in academic work, the stress on revising what came immediately before creates a degree of amnesia about earlier works, at least equally interesting in terms of data and idea. John Bach McMaster's old history is still one of the best accounts of the antebellum years that integrates materials from popular culture into a general history of the era.²⁰

¹⁹ See Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States* (New York, 1941), as well as his studies *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, 1938), and *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947). See also James Hart, *The Popular Books: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York, 1950); E. Douglas Branch, *The Sentimental Years, 1836-1860* (New York, 1934); Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, N. J., 1959); Sigmund Spaeth, *Read 'em and Weep: The Songs You Forgot to Remember* (Garden City, N. J., 1926); George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands: The Story of the Folsa, Their Songs, Singing, and 'Buckwheat Notes'* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1933); Constance M. Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of National Character* (New York, 1931); David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1790-1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca, 1957); Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (New York, 1930).

²⁰ John Bach McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States: From the Revolution to the Civil War*, 8 vols. (New York, 1883-1913). The quality of McMaster's comment and interpretation is also generally impressive.

If one goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one finds interesting evidence about the way in which divisions between high and popular culture tend to reflect scholarly convenience rather than clear separations dictated by level or quality of audience. For these periods of American history, cultural scholars read mostly sermons, diaries, journals and political essays; they look mostly at portraits; they listen to hymns or marches. This is basically true not because the tastes of elites or the quality of popular culture changed, but because after 1800 America began producing rather than importing its eventually canonized culture. Hence scholars concentrate on a fairly fixed body of aesthetically ambitious material large enough to exclude from general anthologies—and often general consideration—equally valuable and vital materials.²¹ What writing tells as much of Puritan and American values as John Winthrop's sermon 'Model of Christian Charity'? Yet one suspects it would have few readers were the literary competition keener, just as do Charles Grandison Finney's better-written sermons, which are equally crucial to the understanding of American religion's democratic transformation.

American scholars should be glad to have even passing acquaintance with the diaries of Samuel Sewall or William Byrd II. We should all lament that so few read the extraordinary diaries of George Templeton Strong or Mary Boykin Chesnut, both of whom, in my judgment, wrote more dependably controlled and vigorously original prose than Emerson, Hawthorne, or Melville. Historically, both Strong and Chesnut exist largely as conservative caricatures instead of the complicated and superb social observers they were. Chesnut has fared a bit better because there's less canonized Southern culture, although perhaps the chief image of her remains Martin

²¹ The interest during the 1920s in the question of elite and other tastes lay behind the academy's finally beginning a serious incorporation of the major American literary texts into courses. Until that time, colleges viewed these texts with the same disdain now often expressed toward still-unsanctified texts of popular culture.

Duberman's caricature of a palpitatingly snobbish racist. For poor Strong, the 'conservative' label remains so pervasive that no one seems to read him, except in search of passages to illustrate this 'self-evident' truth.²²

Or consider ballads, the center of thriving scholarly study until the nineteenth century but neglected thereafter. Yet I know of no tragic ballad more powerful than one written and published (presumably for profit) as a broadside in Albany, New York, in 1843 as 'Verses on Mariah Hocrij':

As her folks were at Work in the dairy, one day,
 At scalding the curd, for the cheese, in the *Wbey*,
 They let down the *Kettle* by a *Windless* or crank,
 Below the first floor, into a Caldron or tank.
 The caldron was boiling, with Water, half full;
 They used it, sometimes, for their hogs and the fowl,
 To boil up their food and to fatten them well,
 'Twas adjoining the place where those animals dwell.
 The kettle being rais'd, she was steadying the same,
 When she slip'd, and into the caldron she came.
 Her father let go of the *Windless* and *Crain*,
 To save his dear child from the scalding and pain.
 Being in haste, he was careless, did not make them fast,
 And the kettle went down on this dear creature's breast
 Where it held her so fast, that two minutes, or more,
 Elaps'd, before he his child could restore.
 In that liquid flame, what tortor she felt;
 Her cries would have made e'en an adamant melt.
 Submerged in the boiling hot Water, she lay,
 Held down by the *Kettle* of hot scalding *Wbey*
 Her face and her hands, they only escap'd
 This hot bath of fire, that she had to take;
 And she was so scalded that her flesh it gave way,
 In taking her out of the place where she lay.

²² Martin Duberman, *In White America: A Documentary Play* (New York, 1965); George M. Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York, 1965), pp. 55, 101. The recent republication of Chesnut's work and of her original diary suggest correction of this neglect. See C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, 1981), and C. Vann Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenberg, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut* (New York, 1984).

As they took off her clothes, the skin and the flesh
Came off in large masses, *we* here do confess.
Her blood turned inward, and so freely did flow,
Out of the cavities made, it forced its way through.

Yet she liv'd for some hours, though greatly distress'd
And her God and her friends alternately address'd.
She said she felt peace, thro' the blood of the Lamb,
And for her redemption, could trust in his name.

The tendency to fit forms of cultural expression into hierarchical categories—so close to the heart of the field of popular culture—distorts careful reading and understanding fairly dependably. Culture is treated with trinitarian absolutism—awesome, all right or awful—in ways that impede thought about it on all levels. Thomas Hooker was a superb prose stylist; until Henry David Thoreau, no writer did so much to bridge the abstract and the everyday with metaphor. But, in Hooker's phrase, 'that wind shakes no corn,' because scholars are not told to look for anything except ideas in his sermons, despite some insightful suggestions from Perry Miller. Hooker is all right but not awesome, so readers don't think much about how he writes, any more than they generally notice the centrality of puns, English, Latin, and Greek, in the writings of Cotton Mather, who developed this form of American humor, again to reach perhaps its literary apex in Thoreau.

My complaints here essentially center on the fact that, when one thinks of 'popular culture,' the 'popular'—to contrast it with elite and folk—gets emphasized rather than the 'culture.' And this encourages a quest for categories and divisions that tend to be, in practice, empty fabrications and obfuscations that distract attention from the true grail, understanding more clearly and more richly how human beings lived and thought and felt. If one emphasizes, instead, 'culture' in the old-fashioned anthropological sense of those ideas or beliefs that give unity to the various aspects of society, attitudes that tie together child-

rearing practices and economic customs, myths and political structure, and sexual patterns and totems and taboos, it becomes clear that the antitheses that are made so much of in theories of popular culture are empty. What matters is coming to understand a bit more what the styles of greeting and parting, or what the tales and talismans of the high priests suggest about an aspect of culture and its relation to the whole. This is vague and more generalized than some of the recent anthropological theories that have had some impact on historical and especially popular culture studies, such as semiology, or the structuralism associated especially with Levi-Strauss, or the ritual analysis of Clifford Geertz, and the theorizing of Victor Turner.²³ Yet such intellectual approaches are often limited by the theoretical abstraction that is part of their virtue and appeal. They encourage abstracting a single entity—a cock fight, or a poem, or a style of etiquette—to analyze its parts more closely, but in a way that often cuts it from the broader culture of which it's a part. Semiology and structuralism define their subjects as alienated from outside connections, in a way that makes the approach an excellent starting point for cultural analysis but often a sterile ending point.²⁴ And users of the anthropological theories too frequently finish rather than begin with the announcement that dime novels embody primal

²³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969), and *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, 1974); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1972); Claude Levi-Strauss, *Triste Tropiques* (New York, 1973), and *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963). A useful brief statement of his position is Levi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth,' *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1955): 428-44. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lynn M. Berk apply structuralist approaches to the mass media in a way that suggests the tendency to lose sight of meaning in the organization of types of 'rhetoric.' See their study *The New Languages: A Rhetorical Approach to the Mass Media and Popular Culture* (New York, 1977).

²⁴ Good critiques of these positions are found in Gregory Baum, ed. *Sociology and Human Destiny* (New York, 1980), and especially in the essays by G. R. Kress and Robert Hodge in C.W.E. Bigsby, ed., *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1976), pp. 85-128. Stuart Clark offers somewhat parallel criticisms of constrictive theories in 'French Historians and Early Modern Culture,' *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 62-99.

myths and militia musters are complex social rituals, so that preordained truths are illustrated, rather than the cultural context to which the myths partially gave meaning.

To the self-enclosed limitations of recent anthropological or structuralist myths, rituals, and synagymys, Marxist theories offer a valuable corrective by insisting on the connections between cultural artifacts (that is, the intellectual-aesthetic manifestations of a society) and their socioeconomic setting. Surely no scholar recently has done more to consider culture thoughtfully than Raymond Williams.²⁵ Yet, despite the contribution of the Marxist approach to the field, this analysis of popular culture commonly contains two debilitating ideas in relation to the actual handling of artifacts, both of them derived fairly directly from the master. One is that economy broadly dictates cultural artifact rather than interacts with it, in a way that abstracts the complex cross-traffic of cultural networks into a predetermined one-way street. Whatever the element of truth in the Marxist belief that people must eat before they think, the notion does suggest a group of scholars who have seldom had to prepare meals. And this certainty about basic cause and purpose in culture often inhibits close search for meaning in the artifact itself, which contributes to the second flaw, the tendency to deride all bourgeois manifestations of culture, often in semiconspiratorial terms, and to pretend that the eventual classless culture will be wholly freeing, just as that of bourgeois society is wholly enfeebling.²⁶ In the field of popular

²⁵ Raymond Williams's contribution to the field centers on two points. He has, more than anyone else, suggested both the need for a theoretical (or at least broadly thoughtful) approach, while doing good close cultural analysis. Second, he has stressed the socio-economic ties of cultural manifestations, without implying economic dictation. Even in his later, more avowedly Marxist work, Williams insists on 'interactions' of a complex sort between thought, artifact, and economy. See *Culture and Society, 1780-1960* (New York, 1958); *The Long Revolution* (New York, 1960); *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976); and *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977).

²⁶ The Gardner collection, *Media, Politics, and Culture*, cited in footnote 16, is valuable in part because the essay by Williams contrasts so strongly with the more doctrinaire Marxist approaches in the rest of the book. Tony Bennett et al., eds., *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process: A Reader* (London, 1981), has a good section on

culture, Marxist scholars have a lot of company in posing some vague total evil against a utopian total good, but the crowd appeal of such ideas to scholars makes them no less destructive of thoughtful consideration of what might be seen if the objects at hand were looked at microscopically rather than through a teleological telescope.

The advantage of the older anthropological theories of culture—basically, those that Caroline Ware presented to historians in the 1930s—is that their humanistic and platitudinous quality, that is, looking at things closely and connectedly, without undue prescription about how that must be done, avoids what seems to me the disabling precept that some more or less strict methodology will provide a path to truths that will finally be cumulative and complete.²⁷ The richest answers that scholars give are not those that pretend to prove conclusively, but those that suggest realities, connections, and possibilities not fully realized previously.

If one is going to add an adjective to 'culture' to distinguish the areas usually conjured up by popular culture, I'd suggest that 'neglected' might be better. At least it avoids the stress on numbers as the antithesis of quality, the stupidities of which are so apparent if one thinks of Sophocles and Shakespeare, but an argument that is equally untenable if seriously applied to

structuralism, but is most interesting in the presentation of Antonio Gramsci's ideas, with an analysis of them by Chantal Mouffe. Many Marxists have found in Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' what they consider a 'nonreductionist' approach to ideology and cultural artifacts, although I have trouble seeing how hegemony does much more than admit the obvious in Marxist theory, namely, that the economic direction of ideas and culture is often subtle, unconscious, and unforced. See esp. pp. 191-234.

²⁷ Caroline Ware, *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York, 1940). Ware's book was obviously a product of the ideas and popularity of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (New York, 1934). The problem in this theory is open-endedness and the elusive use of key terms. See Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture, A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952). This looseness is what Levi-Strauss refers to as 'a lawless humanism' in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), p. ix. The question involves determining if there are 'laws' that permit as rich a handling of materials as does a flexible carefulness that encourages openness in exploring connections. The study by Ray Browne, Sam Grogg, and Larry Landrum, eds., *Theories and Methodologies in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1978), presents several theories suggesting a very casual and eclectic approach.

more recent culture. And the term suggests precisely what popular culture study does at its best: looking closely at what other scholars have neglected in their attempts at establishing, intentionally or willy-nilly, a canon about what is significant. It also suggests that aesthetic or intellectual evaluation is not a matter of absolute criteria, but of understanding the elements of depth and sincerity and complexity that enter into many kinds and levels of creativity. To scoff at *Simple Gifts* because it's not Beethoven's *Ninth* is ridiculous. To neglect Samuel Woodworth's rollicking treatment of the American con man in his popular song 'Dr. Stramonium' because it's not like Melville's weighty *The Confidence-Man* is equally mistaken. And not to read Sarah Parton's essays in *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends* because they are not like Emerson's is about as intelligent as rejecting Emerson's because they are not like Addison's or Carlyle's. It's also to miss how tartly observant and how richly suggestive about society the sentimental mode of the very popular 'scribbling women' of the mid-nineteenth century could be.²⁸

If one thinks about some of the major contributions to American history in these years, it becomes clear that the argument that the study of popular culture through books is valuable is less a plea for a new tack than an appreciation for much of the most significant work that has been done. Vernon Parrington's literary histories were path-breaking surely not because of the categorization of everything around a democratic-aristocratic axis, but because he included in his study political, theological, economic, and folk thinkers, along with the canonized literary greats. Basically, he joined many neglected sidestreams to the main currents of American thought, in supply sufficient to irri-

²⁸ On topics like popular magazines, novels, and songs, a method of 'content analysis,' tied to sociology, might be useful. The precategorization of the material hinders subtlety of interpretation, but some general sense of pattern would obviously be a helpful beginning. For examples, see Patrick Johns-Heine and Hans H. Gerth, 'Values in Mass Periodical Fiction, 1921-40,' in Rosenberg and Manning, *Mass Culture*, pp. 226-34, and Donald L. Shaw, 'At the Crossroads: Change and Continuity in American Press News, 1820-1860,' *Journalism History* 8 (1981):38-53.

gate several scholarly fields for generations. And could there be a stronger argument for the historical study of books representing neglected culture than the precedent of what seems to me the greatest work of American history in this century, Perry Miller's study of Puritanism? What Miller did might be done in any number of directions: he read thousands of overlooked documents, mostly books, that other scholars had neglected because they were supposedly uninteresting. And, because Miller read them both appreciatively *and* critically, a major section of American history was salvaged from the twin evils of antiquarian pietism and modernist denigration. He made us see the Puritans as people whose very special struggles both separated them from us and tied us to them in an intellectual tradition very different from the earlier moralistic pattern, which Parrington so completely accepted in its negative form.

Because Miller did his work so profoundly, most subsequent study on colonial New England has been minor, if often quite sophisticated, embroidery on his tapestry. Once Miller drew vital attention to what had been neglected materials, others began to worry productively about what he neglected. One of several valuable results of such ponderings has been the debate over the relation of ministerial beliefs to the 'popular religion' of common people in seventeenth-century New England. Had Miller not suggested so richly the structure of thought of the Rev. Thomas Shepard, there could have been little probing consideration of how Shepard's congregant's faith paralleled or diverged from the ministerial pattern.²⁹ The best of works

²⁹ Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), and *From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), offer the richest suggestion of the perfect compatibility of intellectual history with popular sources integrated into a social context. The publication of *Thomas Shepard's Confessions* (Boston, 1981) by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts under the editorship of George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley made generally available an unusual source relative to popular religion: the spiritual testimonies of common men and women as they applied for church membership. Selement and David D. Hall, in separate essays in the January 1984 issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, define some of the interpretations suggested by this document about the relationship between ministerial and congregant faith. (*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser. 41 (1984): 32-55). Since the 1960s

obviously don't end debates, but generate, inform, and enrich new ones.

Much of the most exciting new work in Revolutionary historiography has grown from close inspection of neglected aspects of more popular culture rather than the canonized political theories of John Locke and the philosophes. Bernard Bailyn collected American political pamphlets and essays and suggested their ties to Caroline Robbins's Commonwealth polemicists, to give a different and richer sense of the American Revolution's ideological origins. And in somewhat related efforts, Henry May looked especially at people's libraries to suggest the several 'enlightenments' from which Americans drew. May emphasized strongly Scottish roots, a perception developed insistently and interestingly in Gary Wills's gesture toward *Inventing America*. In somewhat different directions, Alfred Young and others have sought in the rituals of riot, parade, and pageant the sources of a radically democratic tradition.³⁰ The contribution of these studies grew from overlooking the previously accepted sources for the American Revolutionary political and cultural tradition, and looking at probably more popular and certainly more neglected artifacts.

While one could trace many of the major studies in American history to the scholarly pursuit of popular or neglected culture, the explicit interest and theorizing about it as a field grew up in the 1960s, as a corollary to the interest in those groups that were deemed outside the elite political-economic-diplomatic-intellectual structure. For the pre-twentieth century period at least, the most notable products of this interest were the works in quantitative history that used numbers to try to give clearer

demographic-quantitative studies have added new data related to understanding colonial New England, often drawn from issues Miller broached.

³⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (Cambridge, 1965), and *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967); Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763-97* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1967); Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976); Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.J., 1978).

shape to the demographic, economic, and legal lives of ordinary men and women, whom we know only as names on birth and death certificates, or in wills, court cases, and census tabulations.

Much of this interest in the 'inarticulate' or 'historically voiceless' (perhaps a better adjective again would be 'neglected') grew out of dislike for or disinterest in the 'establishment,' which came in a variety of political hues.³¹ There was, especially in those works tied to the field of popular culture, a strong sense of Americanism, of pride in those things—radio, film, tv, pulp magazines, canned food, Wonder bread, graffiti—seen as the great neglected representatives of truly American sensibilities. Read any early issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, begun in 1967, if you doubt this propatria impulse. This stress was certainly understandable in a field where scorn for popular culture was commonly intertwined with mistrust of democracy, technology, mass enthusiasms, and other essential aspects of the American way of life. Perhaps the most important recent study to deal with varieties of popular culture in the early nineteenth century was Daniel Boorstin's second volume of *The Americans*, the volume subtitled *The National Experience*. If Boorstin's Americanism had different political roots than Marshall Fishwick's twentieth-century studies, that simply shows how this field, more than most, draws people of opposite political persuasion toward the same conclusion. Boorstin's work was, in a sense, both a culmination and a departure from his earlier works. In perhaps his best and certainly his most intellectually interesting work, *The Lost World of Thomas*

³¹ Tamara Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), offers a good introduction to the ties between popular culture materials and the new social history. Perhaps the two most influential early quantitative studies both listed below, suggest especially well how broad conclusions rest less on the data than on cultural assumptions and implications that need to be explored through other kinds of sources as well. See Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, 1961), and Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964). Mary Ryan's recent study illustrates the growing integration of popular culture to quantitative data in reaching answers. See *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York, 1981).

Jefferson, Boorstin detailed the limitations of the vision of Jefferson and his 'circle' by suggesting the many areas in which they simply assumed rather than explored basic positions. Boorstin developed this idea, more abstractly and much less critically, in his *Genius of American Politics* where, in line with his own transformation toward assertive patriot, he now treated a rather simplistic pragmatism—no one cares about ideas, so we Americans all get on right friendly and effectively—as the source of unparalleled national virtue and success.³² These ideas were pasted onto *The Colonial Experience*, most oddly in the section on the Puritans, who surely cared about right ideas as strongly as any social group could. By the time Boorstin wrote *The National Experience*, however, his book came to illustrate rather than argue his thesis. What ideas popped up were handled so casually that the material equally illustrated the opposite argument. Given the threadbare quality of repeated paeans to anti-intellectualism, the intellectual loss was slight, and many of the topics he spilled out—place names, community boosterism, the balloon-frame house, claims clubs—were stimulating. Like twentieth-century studies of popular culture, it drew attention to many areas that could be investigated, but it also suggested that such topics were there to be enjoyed more than pondered. The book intimated that American scholarship, like American life, was, at its best, characterized by genial thoughtlessness.

In the meantime scholarship, serious enough for any taste, was going forth regarding the 'neglected'—perhaps most notably women, workers, and blacks. Quite soon it became clear that quantitative study, valuable and necessary as it was, pro-

³² Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1948); *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953); *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958); *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965). In this last book, for example, Boorstin insists that community precedes government, in a discussion where the evidence suggests the opposite (pp. 65–72). Russell B. Nye offers rather similar treatment in his useful survey of the more common topics of popular culture. See his work *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1970).

vided not answers but data that had to be worried into meaning, much like personal letters, or newspaper opinions, or folk tales. Sometimes the figures might contradict an assumption or conclusion; often they might suggest answers or probabilities. But never was their meaning self-evident. In addition to the uncertainties in the data, there also lurked questions that the most perfect figures would scarcely answer. Did workers move a lot from place to place because they were desperate, or because they were ambitious, or because, like much of the middle class, they were restless? Was the fact that the poorest laborers in a community seldom advanced in job category, but tended to buy homes and have bank savings and see a substantial portion of their children move up a notch, proof of the falsity or the truth of the promise of American life? Did the separation of middle class women from the world of paid work and formal politics isolate them or open to them involvement in certain areas of society from which they formed beachheads of female power? How often need slaves be whipped to make that form of action a central aspect of their control? What yearly rate of family separation need occur to make that a 'significant' aspect of slavery? What do wages, or amount of land ownership, or divisions of wealth in a community tell about the elusive realities of power and prestige there? If many new people became wealthy but many old rich families stayed wealthy, does this support or deny the notion of America as a land of opportunity?

To many of these questions, the confusions lay in ambiguities of definition of the kind William James suggested in the problem his philosophical friends debated after they walked around a tree to better see a squirrel, which foiled them by circling behind the trunk from them as they circled it. And had they gone around the squirrel? But it also became clear that the questions involved not simply the data and definitions but the consciousness of those experiencing the situation. And how could one get at that, except by looking, not at canonized culture, but at those remnants of popular culture that might tell

how people responded to and structured their experiences: letters, diaries, reminiscences, newspapers, books, theater, social practices, dress, home furnishings, recipes, place names, popular songs, hymns, public meetings and communal lynchings, sports, sewing circles, parades. The list could, and should, be extended indefinitely. Zelig might have finished *Moby Dick*; people, even undergraduates, have been known to. But historians may live, and die, happily knowing that they won't ever exhaust popular or neglected culture. People and societies have too much variety and inventiveness to require that scholars try to understand them only by interpreting *Moby Dick* or the causes of the Civil War, for the two hundred-sixty-fourth time—unless they prefer to, of course. But let's hope that some scholars, like Melville's Bartleby regarding the canonized conventionalities, 'prefer not'—without starving.

What's needed in popular or neglected culture is some of the intensity and rigor and complexity that scholarship at best brings to its study of canonized political or intellectual or aesthetic culture, a determination to figure out what's going on in the minds that create, or practice, or absorb it. Good things are being done, such as Lawrence Levine's study of slave songs and tales, Eugene Genovese's fascinating exploration of slave religious experiences, and aspects of Herbert Gutman's handling of worker culture. Yet even in valuable works on popular culture, there tend to be disappointments that fall broadly into two compartments, both connected with the joint tendency of deplorers and enthusiasts to take the content of neglected culture lightly.

First is the tendency, especially strong in liberal historiography, to deplore earlier prejudices, instead of trying to understand more fully their roots and their limitations. Let me illustrate with three examples, all books that I respect, drawn from the Jacksonian period, which should make clear these difficulties. These illustrations also show how old, varied, and essential are historical contributions to the study of popular culture.

The first is Ray Allen Billington's *The Protestant Crusade*, the classic study of nativist books of the era, surely an excellent example of properly uncanonized culture. No one could argue with Billington's basic description of much of nativist feeling as 'bigotry' (with an occasional aside that sometimes Catholics may have triggered hostility). Yet there is loss, I think, in the fact that readers are encouraged to come away from the material comfortably concluding that nativists were paranoid nasties instead of pondering how hard it is to preserve freedom in a complicated context: in a society where opposing groups have many legitimate interests that aren't fully reconcilable; in a world where hate, paranoia, and scapegoating always skirt the edges of issues that deeply divide; in a situation where relativism threatens all commitment, and pretensions to peculiar guardianship of universal truth challenge serious dissent. One cannot object to Billington's horror at Philadelphia nativists' burning Catholic churches and Irish homes. One should object, I think, to his glib acceptance of the reasonableness of the Irish attack on a nativist political rally in a public square in an Irish section of town. And if one thinks about the issues involved here, specifically those of freedom of speech and political assembly, and of the people killed—all of whom were nativists shot to death before there was any suggestion of violence on their part—the story becomes not a moral melodrama of simple villains and even simpler victims, but a complicated morality play involving issues at the heart of democracy. Surely the lesson of the dangers of bigotry is deepened not denigrated if one is led to see the tragedies of these events less in terms of their perpetrators' vileness than in relation to a democratic society's inevitable dilemmas and potential for viciousness.

In the books as well as the events related to his story, Billington seeks out the excess rather than the limitations. Why, despite the popularity of the respectable pornography of Maria Monk, and the twisted excesses of the picture of Cath-

olic practices, did no nativists ever suggest banning convents or cathedrals, or urge legal suppression of priests and nuns? Convent visitations were a nasty joke (at which few failed to laugh when the chief Massachusetts investigator took along his mistress at public expense), while some ludicrousness adhered to the nativists' primary proposal, requiring twenty-one-years' residence here prior to citizenship—on the grounds that, if it took American males twenty-one years to prepare to vote, it should take the Irish *at least* equally long. Yet this is hardly a pogrom, and there is need to consider not only the sources of mean-spirited attacks on particular groups, but the causes that often limited and blunted them.³³

Ruth Miller Elson's survey of textbooks, *Guardians of Tradition*, a good work on a major subject, also fits the data too readily into expectations of what should exist. Elson's handling of children's textbooks, probably the best indicators of a nineteenth-century American common culture, ties everything to the capitalist ethic—honesty, promptness, hard work, thrift—or to national, religious, and racial narrowness.³⁴ In my reading of one of Elson's central texts, I catch glimpses of some of these things, and reiterated emphasis on a few, especially honesty. But several other stresses contradict or complicate Elson's portrayal. The patriotism of McGuffey's Readers seems always tied to the best actions and writings in the American tradition, and never argues and seldom intimates national superiority. It is also modified by respect for writings and peoples of other countries. Elements of the 'Protestant ethic,' such as thrift, are seldom mentioned, and never at the expense of

³³ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study in The Origins of Nativism* (New York, 1938).

³⁴ Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Textbooks in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, Neb., 1964). Elson wholly neglects humor and specifically denies any expressions of sympathy about poverty. I've looked only at McGuffey's Readers, perhaps a skewed sample, although they sold about 107 million copies between 1836 and 1890. See John A. Neitz, *Old Textbooks* (Pittsburgh, 1961), pp. 72–73. My selections come from the *Fifth Reader* (Cincinnati, 1844), the only one edited by Alexander (rather than William) McGuffey, but there are similar passages in the other readers.

that trait given cardinal emphasis, generosity. While there are few pictures of Catholics or blacks—despite some passages from writers like Cardinal Newman and Father Matthew—there were no derogatory portrayals either. And the bestowal of material rewards, of a modest kind anyway, at a story's end suggests, not the complacent equation that 'well-off equals worthy,' but rather the insistence that there was moral meaning in the universe. This stress is made clear as many of these heroes and heroines suffer a near lifetime of privation—all the time remaining wholly virtuous—before providence rewards not their hard work but their moral integrity and generosity. And although never suggesting much practical reform, the stories repeatedly present social suffering that has nothing to do with personal flaws. One selection, 'It Snows,' presents several stanzas showing how pleasant snow is for the well-off but then concludes:

'It snows!' cries the Widow, 'O God!' and her sighs
 Have stifled the voice of her prayer;
 Its burden ye'll read in her tear-swollen eyes,
 On her cheek sunk with fasting and care.
 'Tis night, and her fatherless ask her for bread,
 But 'He gives the young ravens their food,'
 And she trusts till her dark hearth adds horror to dread,
 And she lays on her last chip of wood.
 Poor sufferer! that sorrow thy God only knows;
 'Tis a most bitter lot to be poor, when it snows!

Such dark hearths are overlooked in studies of both nineteenth-century texts and of the poem's author, Sarah Hale. The problem is that students of popular culture, unlike those who work with elite artifacts, neglect what is surprising or strangely deepening because they expect their material to wear its meaning on its sleeve. Yet, the suggestive nuances require as subtle handling as those in high culture, perhaps even more so because the deepest implications are more subconsciously than consciously expressed.

Elson neglects the puzzling comic selections in McGuffey's Readers, a substantial portion of the whole, which often mock the very values upheld in the serious sections. What would an eleven-year-old make of patriotism, heroism, faithfulness, love, and even life, when taught to read partly on 'Faithless Nelly Gray':

Ben Battle was a soldier bold,
And used to war's alarms;
But a cannon-ball took off his legs,
So he laid down his arms!

Now Ben, he loved a pretty maid,
Her name was Nelly Gray;
So he went to pay her his devoirs,
When he'd devoured his pay.

But when he called on Nelly Gray,
She made him quite a scoff;
And when she saw his wooden legs,
Began to take them off!

'O Nelly Gray! O Nelly Gray!
Is this your love so warm?
The love that loves a scarlet coat
Should be more uniform!'

Said she, 'I loved a soldier once,
For he was blithe and brave;
But I will never have a man
With both feet in the grave!

'Before you had these timber toes,
Your love I did allow,
But then, you know, you stand upon
Another footing now!'

Convinced that, although he has no feet, someone else was standing in his shoes, the former soldier got a rope, again 'enlisted in the Line,' and hanged himself by removing his wooden legs. The poem concludes:

And there he hung, till he was dead
 As any nail in town:
 For, though distress had cut him up,
 It could not cut him down!

Just what traditions were the people who accepted such passages guardians of? Certainly something more interesting, I think, than comes from our treasured clichés about Victorianism.

Robert Toll's study of minstrelsy, *Blacking Up*, much more self-consciously a part of the 'new' popular culture field, shows similar limitations. For Toll, the key to minstrelsy is racism, an argument (like Billington's) convincing enough. It's easy to see in these stage skits and songs the seeds and sometimes the husks of subsequent racial stereotypes. Yet, one also sees in them sentimental pictures of romantic blacks, sharp folk wisdom, the wit of wise fools, and many not very covert attacks on slavery and racism. Faithless Nelly Gray is very different from the faithful love of her darker namesake:

One night I went to see her, but 'she's gone,' the neighbors say
 The white man bound her with his chain.
 They have taken her to Georgia for to wear her life away,
 As she toils in the cotton and the cane.

chorus:

Oh my poor Nelly Gray, They have taken you away.
 And I'll never see my darling anymore.
 I'm sitting on the river and I'm weeping all the day
 For you've gone from the Old Kentucky shore.

How are the thesis-jarring elements of sentimental sympathy and covert antislavery protest in these lines tied to the more negative tone of racism? Certainly Toll's assertion that minstrelsy offers no favorable portraits of blacks and black traits, save that of 'the asexual Old Darkey,' is contradicted by much of the material he includes and more that he doesn't.³⁵

³⁵ Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974). I develop these problems more fully in an article written with William Stowe, 'White-Black Humor,' *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 3 (1975):78-96.

Another flaw accompanies the tendency to see only a simple version of what we already know in popular culture. Meaning often becomes truncated because there is so little contextual or comparative understanding, so little sense of what preceded, followed, paralleled, or contributed to the main show. In Billington, the Catholics are, for the most part, passive victims and not active participants in the battle. Nor does Billington explore how Protestant leaders who were not nativists responded either to Catholicism or to the anti-Catholic crusade. Catholic views about Luther, or Methodists, or religious toleration are not handled, even though they are obviously germane to any consideration of bigotry. With Elson there is almost no consideration of textbooks in other countries, or in later periods, or in parochial schools that might give a sharper sense of what was peculiar in the public school texts of that era. And Toll makes few probing references to the parallel low comedy stereotyping of Irish, Frenchmen, Jews, sailors, or Yankees—types that often became especially popular with the groups they caricatured—in ways that might clarify the influences of racism in changing such characterizations.

Because the understanding of popular culture is always complex, the common notion that one study of various subjects is enough (or more than enough) is mistaken. Understanding will grow, as it does in other fields, with competing interpretations, and will not always come quickly. Perhaps no area has so been so richly explored recently as women's culture: Among the writers addressing the subject are Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton on Revolutionary women; Julie Jeffries on frontier women; Nancy Cott on the bonds of womanhood, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg on female friendships; as well as Daniel Scott Smith, Barbara Berg, and Barbara Epstein on domestic feminism and its social adjuncts. The list could be easily much extended. From this perspective has come attention to a group of mid-nineteenth-century women writers who were all immensely popular. Ann Douglas has continued the tradition of

earlier male scholars in disparaging the conventionality and moralism of these authors, which she sees at the heart of a trivializing feminization of American culture in the nineteenth century.³⁶ Other scholars of the period have tended to react to such easy put-downs by stressing the opposite argument, namely, that a covert protest at women's limited role was shown by their heroines' triumph over hostile circumstances, although these victories were presented in conventional rather than questioning terms. Some have even claimed a radical unconventionality in these novels.³⁷ Mary Kelley has most recently surveyed these best selling women authors with strong admission of 'ambiguities,' but her concern has been with collective biography more than with an analysis of the books themselves.³⁸ Despite this variety of able scholarship, these books and articles give little sense of why this fiction was so attractive. None of them consider very much the less successful female fiction that might offer some key to peculiar sources of popularity. None of them strongly differentiate between the various works in the genre. And there are few clues about how to evaluate this literary form. None offer me much explanation about why *Ruth Hall* and the Fanny Fern sketches strike me as so vital, while I could finish Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's *Isbmeal* only through true grit and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* not even with that. I sense that the historical suggestiveness of this fiction is just beginning to be touched, and its aesthetic qualities scarcely at all.

³⁶ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977). Her ideas largely repeat those in Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1960) and Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York, 1978). All represent variants on Dwight MacDonald's notion of a 'Gresham's law of culture,' namely, that bad art drives out good.

³⁷ Much more enthusiastic arguments about the critical and radical views in this literature appear in Dee Garrison, 'Immoral Fiction in the Late Victorian Library,' *American Quarterly* 28 (1976):71-89; Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1970* (Ithaca, 1978); and, most richly, in Helen Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America* (New York, 1956).

³⁸ Mary Kelley, *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1984).

In the area of worker culture, scholarly efforts have been even more a product of assertion than analysis, partly because it's less easy to find obvious sources. Paul Faler has best suggested the kind of literary source that might be used—letters, diaries, newspapers, but their sparsity and their questionable ties to worker sensibilities gave some thinness to even his account. For Faler's 'radical' group, for example, the proof rests on a short-lived worker paper, edited not by a Lynn laborer but by a transient advocate-newspaperman. In this field we need to discover more telling books or documents, and perhaps interpret more closely things like public celebrations, worker festivities, parades, and 'turnout' rhetoric and practices.³⁹ It would be highly telling if we could learn a bit about what books workers owned or borrowed, what songs they sang, what family rituals they practiced. The very question of whether there is anything that could be meaningfully segregated as working class culture (or middle class or elite) depends on exploring more closely the similarities, differences, and, most important, the shadings of difference in emphasis within general assumptions and traditions.

The list of what might be done with books is so broad that one can do little more than list some of one's favorite things—if other people would only do them. Get a decent, careful index of *Niles' Register*, and maybe a few other major periodicals, so that one could use magazines more readily for what they tell about response to many topics. Decently index at least one major newspaper for the same purpose. Explore more seriously the good penny press that grew up in the 1830s, without glib assurance that it represents primarily sensationalist journalism. My cursory reading in the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* suggests that they represented major

³⁹ Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany, 1981); John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in American 1776–1790* (New York, 1976); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1790–1865* (New York, 1984).

gains in journalistic as well as marketing competence, though the attempts to apply 'objectivity,' that twentieth-century talisman, obscure the real issues.

My wish list goes on. Study hymns. Explore the social convictions of mainline Protestant and Catholic journals. Analyze the toasts at political, cultural, and occupational banquets. Examine the questions and answers that engaged debating societies. Give a close reading to frontier, political, and urban humor. Examine the agricultural press, since by far the largest group of American worker-entrepreneurs in this period, farmers, have been most neglected. Ditto for farm women. Consider nuns, the most neglected large group of working women and communitarian experimenters. Read the subterranean literature of large cities: brothel directories, fireboy songs, and protest literature like *The Almighty Dollar*. Analyze police dockets and the police columns—and lists of sermon topics—in various newspapers. Read vigilante publications, without taking their obviously self-justifying myths at face value. Consider communal promotional and historical literature, to see when and how towns and cities and neighborhoods gave a semblance of permanence to themselves when all quantification seems to suggest perpetual flux. Ponder cookbooks and the menus of oyster houses and Delmonico's. If possible, figure out who checked out what books from merchants', mechanics', church, and public libraries. Think about what children were taught in Sabbath schools and confirmation classes. Study more closely and variously political culture in the age, and, until that's done, avoid plugging materials into Democrat-Whig pigeonholes on the basis of clichés drawn from Progressive historiography, one of the commonest techniques for explaining away instead of exploring this material.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The assumptions of simplistic political ideology, drawn from progressive clichés, is clear, I think, in much of the cultural treatment of James Fenimore Cooper and in works like Kenneth Lynn's *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (New York, 1959), where the Whig label is put on a group of writers, mostly Democrats, and broad patterns extrapolated from works by Augustus Longstreet, most of which are not found in

And do all this—and much more, of course—with the caring and carefulness that one would give to another analysis of the words of Abraham Lincoln or *Moby Dick*. Do such things, and surely we will have a more interesting scholarly world through this formal wedding between books and neglected culture, as we do now through their casual intercourse.

'I (y)am what I (y)am,' saith Yahweh and Popeye. But scholarship, lacking omniscience and always in need of spinach, is what, and how richly, scholars learn to see and connect. We are what we do. And exploring widely varied aspects of neglected culture will remain, as it always has been, part of the unfinished work. Despite the claims of new departures from all sides, a field can hardly be new or faddish when it was the speciality of that 'father of history,' Herodotus, who explored comparative popular culture with such geniality. Now, had that been tied to Thucydides' analytic bent . . . Ah, well. The work continues, stumblingly, imperfectly, glibly, apocalyptically, tellingly—humanly, you might say.

the writings of other members of the school. Collections of historical sources for this period suggest many potential topics related to popular culture. See John Demos, *Remarkable Providences, 1600-1760* (New York, 1972); Gordon S. Wood, *The Rising Glory, 1760-1820* (New York, 1972); Carl Bode, *Antebellum Culture* (Carbondale, Ill., 1970); David Brion Davis, *Antebellum American Culture: An Interpretive Anthology* (Lexington, Mass., 1979); David Grimsted, *Notions of the Americans, 1820-1860* (New York, 1970); Alan Trachtenberg, *Democratic Vistas, 1860-1880* (New York, 1970).

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