

Beggars and Books

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The gloomiest and truthfulest dramatist seldom chooses for his theme the calamities, however extraordinary, of inferior and private persons; least of all, the pauper's; admonished by the fact, that to the craped palace of the king lying in state, thousands of starers shall throng; but few feel enticed to the shanty, where, like a pealed knuckle-bone, grins the upholstered corpse of the beggar.

Herman Melville, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855)

I. BEGGING AND WRITING

DURING the cold winter months of 1807–08, Moses Smith, a poor cooper from Long Island, made his way overland from Maryland to Brooklyn. He had escaped from a prison in Carthage, a Spanish-ruled city state in present-day Colombia, and had returned to the United States with nothing but a good story to get him home. Telling his story, he begged passage, food, and shelter from those he met along the way. His trip was not easy, but once back in New York, he turned to political allies and brought out a book in which he recounted his adventures and detailed his sufferings.¹

Joyce Appleby, Richard Bushman, Cathy Corman, Bob Gross, Karen Halttunen, David Jaffee, Elizabeth Kaspar-Aldrich, Jill Lepore, Margaret McFadden, Meredith McGill, Jeremy Mumford, Bill Reese, Joan Shelley Rubin, Marni Sandweiss, Caroline Sloat, Christopher Wilson and the students in 'Getting Into Print,' the American Antiquarian Society Seminar on the History of the Book in American Culture in the summer of 1997 all helped me to think about beggars and their books.

1. *History of the Adventures and Sufferings of Moses Smith during five years of his life; from the beginning of the year 1806, when he was betrayed into the Miranda Expedition, until June 1811, when he was nonsuited in an action at law which lasted three years and a half* (Brooklyn: Thomas Kirk, for the author, 1812). A second edition of Smith's book was printed in Albany by Packard and Van Benthuyzen in 1814.

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In 1812, after war began with Britain, Michael Smith, a shabby Baptist preacher, gave up his property in Upper Canada, packed his family in a wagon and made his way south from Ontario to Virginia. To get the money to feed them all, he preached, he cut wood, he begged, and he sometimes sold the books in which he described the Canadian countryside, the war in the northeast, and his personal sufferings.²

In October 1815 a merchant with designs on trade with Africa said that he had plucked from among the 'distressed seamen' and discharged soldiers who, in the wake of Waterloo, crowded the London streets, a mixed-race and illiterate American sailor calling himself Robert Adams. Adams had attracted notice among the street beggars by embellishing his story of a shipwreck on the coast of North Africa and a captivity among the Moors with descriptions of a visit to the 'far-fabled' city of Timbuktu. The merchant, S. Cock, lured the sailor into his office with an offer of food and clothes ('of which he stood particularly in need'), gathered a group of 'gentlemen' to interrogate him, and transcribed for publication the tale that had made the ragged sailor a man of 'consequence' on the street. The merchant promised that a portion of the profits from the book's sale would be reserved for Mr. Adams.³

To some of those they met, these men appeared as beggars, but they were also storytellers who rehearsed their woes aloud and then turned tales into printed books. It is clear that they wrote from the margins of the economy, but they also extracted from

2. Michael Smith, *A Narrative of the Sufferings in Upper Canada, with his family in the Late War and Journey to Virginia and Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky.: Printed for the author by Worsley and Smith, 1816).

3. *The narrative of Robert Adams, an American sailor who was wrecked on the Western coast of Africa, in the year 1810; was detained three years in slavery by the Arabs of the great desert, and resided several months in the City of Tombuctoo* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1817), ix-xi. A London edition was published by John Murray in 1816; a Paris edition by Michaud in 1817; a Stockholm edition by A. Gadelius in 1817; and an Amsterdam edition by J. C. Seepen Zoon in 1818. The American edition of Adams's story appeared in 1817 in a handsome 200-page book brought out by Wells and Lilly in Boston with the help of Mathew Carey in Philadelphia. On April 30, 1817, Mathew Carey noted an expense of \$275 for the 200 copies of Adams's *Narrative* that he ordered from Wells and Lilly. Accounts, vol. 31, 1818, Papers of Mathew Carey, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

their experiences of economic marginality a kind of provisional cultural authority.⁴ Much as reading and writing may have hastened the spread of gentility through American life, beggars' narratives remind us that stories set down in books did not necessarily foster high thoughts and fine manners. Storytelling beggars, carrying the books and briefs that detailed their woes, wandered from the courts of the old world into the marketplace of early nineteenth-century America. With the help of political allies, wealthy patrons, sympathetic co-religionists, commercial scribes, and friendly printers, some poor people who had been reduced to begging got stories made up as books, using print to achieve their own ends and turning narratives of misadventure into commodities that could be transferred and sold.⁵ These authors pocketed a little authority and a little cash. But exchanges between writing beggars and patronizing readers were complicated. Some prosperous readers who purchased beggars' tales discovered that good stories could mask shoddy motives and that clever dissemblers could pass as deserving sufferers.⁶

4. Mechal Sobel, 'The Revolution in Selves: Black and White Inner Aliens,' in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 163-205; and Joyce Appleby, 'New cultural heroes in the early national period,' in *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays*, ed. Thomas L. Haskell and Richard F. Teichgraeber III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 163-88.

5. Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 280-87. On the 'golden age' of American printing, see William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1959), 17-37; and David Hall, 'The Uses of Literacy,' in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William Joyce, et al. (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983).

6. On beggars' books, see John Cumming, 'Mendicant Pieces,' *The American Book Collector* (March 1966): 17-19. Other books that begin with a writer reduced to poverty include *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of John Robert Shaw, the well-digger, now resident in Lexington, Kentucky* (Lexington: Printed by Daniel Bradford, 1807); *The Life of Captain David Perry, a soldier in the French and Revolutionary Wars. Recollections of an Old Soldier. Containing many extraordinary occurrences relating to his own private history, and an account of some interesting events in the history of the times in which he lived, no-where else recorded* (Windsor, Vt.: The Republican & Yeoman, 1822); and *A Narrative of the Travels and Voyages of Davis Bill. Late a Mariner in the British Navy, and formerly of New-Fane, Vermont* (Brattleboro: William Fessenden, 1811). Those who appealed to readers to buy stories to help them recover from financial losses include James Riley, *Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce* (Chillicothe: Published for the Author, 1820); *Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings of Samuel Patterson* (Palmer, Mass.: The Press in Palmer, 1817); Lloyd Burt, *An Account of the Loss of the Ship Rose in Bloom* (Massachusetts, 1829);

Peculiar witnesses beggars may have been, but beggars with stories had good tales to tell. They bore witness, of course, to their own suffering and to their own merit. They also witnessed the effects of an expanding maritime economy that tied men and women of the east coast into an Atlantic world where some prospered but others were sent wandering in search of money or work.⁷ Some writing beggars described stable folk grown suspicious of wanderers who asked for relief. Some took part in their country's first imperial adventures and observed the beginnings of a world where men sometimes ordered a bewildering flux of experience by asserting claims of national identity. To be an American, they found, could be beneficial; it could also be risky. Although they described themselves telling tales aloud, they also witnessed a society becoming habituated to finding books in the hands of ordinary people.⁸ In their books they described a world dominated by spoken exchange, but they put their descriptions into a form designed not to be spoken but to be read. They boasted no great skills as readers or as writers, yet they became the authors of books. What can we learn of the workings of culture in nineteenth-century America by exploring connections between behavior so socially marginal as begging and behavior so culturally central as writing?

Owen Chase, *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whaleship Essex of Nantucket* (New York: W. B. Gilley, 1821); and Elisha Dexter, *Narrative of the Loss of the Whaling Brig William and Joseph, of Martha's Vineyard* (Boston: Charles C. Mead, 1848).

7. Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 37-38, 164. See also Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 30-37.

8. On reading, printing, and publishing, see Charvat, *Literary Publishing*, 17-37; Rollo G. Silver, *The American Printer, 1787-1825* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967); Milton Hamilton, *The Country Printer: New York State, 1785-1830* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?,' *Daedalus* (Summer 1982): 65-83; and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17-36. Although scholars have questioned the rigid opposition between oral and literate cultures so important to much of his work, Walter J. Ong did describe the episodic patterns that characterized the narratives of an oral culture. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 147-51.

2. THE ADVENTURES OF MOSES SMITH

Moses Smith, a Brooklyn cooper, was among those who participated (unwittingly, he maintained) in Francisco de Miranda's ill-starred initial attempt to lead Spain's South American colonies to independence. When local peasants failed to rally round Miranda, he abandoned the expedition. His underlings, Smith among them, fell into Spanish hands. A colonial court convicted them all of piracy. Ten were hanged. Smith and several others were sentenced to ten years hard labor.⁹ After eighteen months' confinement, Smith tunneled out of the 'foul and unwholesome' dungeon where he was held. A kind American captain took him as far as Maryland. Even though he had completed the longest leg of his voyage, Smith still had to get to Brooklyn. He had only ten shillings, hardly enough to pay his way to New York, so he decided to use his story, telling his tale in the hope that those who heard it would finance his travels through the wintry countryside. Once home, he sued the Federalist plotters he insisted had tricked him into enlisting with Miranda. A judge found too little ground for his accusations of fraud and dismissed his case. Determined to get the last word, Smith turned to political allies who helped him get his story printed as a book.¹⁰

9. A list of those executed and those incarcerated appears in *The History of Don Francisco de Miranda's attempt to effect a Revolution in South America in a series of letters. By a Gentleman who was an Officer under that General, to his friends in the United States. To which are annexed, Sketches of the Life of Miranda, and Geographical Notices of Caracas* (1808; reprint, Boston: Oliver and Munroe, 1812), 242-43. See also *Mechanics of New York, read the heart-rending Truth! Sixty American Citizens enslaved—Ten beheaded and hung by the nefarious scheme of Miranda, the would-be King of America, the Duke of Braintree, a Burrite Col. And a Nova Scotia Tory, F***k, together with a tory-federal merchant, S. O—n* (New York, 1806). In his haste, the composer of the broadside surely reversed the sequence of punishment for it is hard to imagine a man beheaded before being hanged.

10. *History of the Adventures* (1814), 124. Historians of the Early Republic have used the story of Miranda's first expedition to illustrate the troubled state of diplomatic relations with Spain during Jefferson's second administration. Miranda made friends in high places. Benjamin Rush arranged for the charming Miranda to dine with Jefferson and Madison, and Miranda then operated as though he had tacit approval from the President and his Secretary of State. Although Jefferson avoided war with Spain, Federalists tried to use the episode to discredit Madison. See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President, Second Term, 1805-1809* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 80; Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Second Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), vol. 1, 189-96; and Irving Brant, *James Madison: Secretary*

Smith thought he had a good story to tell. It began simply enough: all innocent and patriotic, he enlisted in a band recruited, he thought, to ride guard beside U.S. mail stages on the road between Washington and New Orleans. He was promised, he said, a uniform, a salary of \$25 a month, and, if he stayed on for three years, a bonus of \$50 and 'one hundred acres of the lands of the United States.' A good offer, he thought, for a young man 'reduced in circumstances—and out of employ.' To his surprise, the ship he boarded did not head south to Washington but set out on the high seas for Santo Domingo. When Miranda presented himself on deck, Smith said he realized for the first time he was part of an adventure neither of his choosing nor to his liking.¹¹

Miranda went on to plot revolution in London, eventually joining Simon Bolívar and returning to Venezuela in 1811 as dictator of an independent country. He would not fare so well in the coming years. When Miranda signed an armistice with Spain in 1812, Bolívar accused him of betraying the revolution, and gave him over to Spanish authorities. Miranda was transported in chains to Cadiz, where he died, still in prison, in 1816.¹²

In the meantime, Smith concerned himself with his story. Unfortunately, in the late fall of 1807 Smith found his countrymen had lost interest in Miranda and his revolutionary schemes. Those determined to promote the settlement of the Mississippi

of State (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), 326–35. For a fuller portrait of Miranda's extraordinary career, see William Spence Robertson, *The Life of Miranda* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929).

11. *History of the Adventures*, 121–23. John Sherman, *A General Account of Miranda's Expedition. Including the Trial and Execution of Ten of his Officers and an Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of the Remainder of his Officers and Men who were Taken Prisoners* (New York: McFarlane and Long, 1808), 19. While Sherman admitted that the men recruited to join Miranda were deceived, he also thought it possible that some joined up enticed by a promise of easy wealth. For Smith's story to work the way he intended it, he needed to present himself as a man governed by the purest motives. The idea that Smith and others enlisted to guard the mail is repeated in *Report of the Committee to whom was referred the Petition of Sundry Citizens of the United States confined at Carthage in South America* (Washington: A. and G. Way, Printers, 1809), 3. See also, 'An Account of the Sufferings of the Crew of two Schooners, part of the Squadron of General Miranda, which were taken by two Spanish Guarda Costas, in June 1806. Written by one of the Sufferers who made his escape,' *Select Reviews and Spirit of the Foreign Magazines*, 11 (1809): 44–55.

12. Robertson, *The Life of Miranda*.

Valley had supported the man because his schemes for South American independence promised markets for American produce. But support was short-lived, and Smith complained that people he met that winter were more interested in Aaron Burr's newly exposed plots than they were in Miranda and in the injustices experienced by a poor cooper who had been seduced into Miranda's service. Burr's trial, Smith wrote in exasperation, had so 'fatigued the public mind' that few now had patience for his story.¹³

Smith said he had expected to endure icy nights and irregular meals, but he was surprised at the cold reception given his story.

Instead of that sympathy which the injured and oppressed in general meet with in this great community, I experienced more of aversion or contempt. As I proceeded on my weary journey, I related my story to such as were disposed to hear it. Besides that it was the story nearest to my heart and nearest to my tongue, it was also necessary to account for my condition and appearance, which was too like that of a convict escaped from legal coercion. It was mortifying, humiliating, and afflicting to find with what indifference, distrust and contempt it was sometimes received by my fellow citizens.

At one tavern, a sarcastic landlord dismissed Smith, telling him that "*such stories were good to tell some people.*" But certainly not his paying customers.¹⁴ 'Thus did I pass along,' Smith whined, 'trailing my wearied steps thru melted snow and ice, shivering and sinking with fatigue; unpitied and never regarded but with eyes of

13. *History of the Adventures*, 99. Walter Flavius McCaleb documents the earlier interest in Miranda's ventures. *The Aaron Burr Conspiracy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1903), 114-15.

14. *History of the Adventures*, 104-5, 107. Smith's confidence that he would find a welcome reception, good fellowship, and some interest in politics in a tavern was not entirely unfounded. See David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1995), 10-11, 313-14; and Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1982), 94-98. A few years before Smith appeared, the notorious Stephen Burroughs had begged his way through the Maryland countryside. Burroughs, however, addressed himself to the wealthy and respectable who accepted him as one of their own fallen on hard times. *Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs* (1798; 1804; reprint, ed. Philip F. Gura, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 326-37.

distrust or scorn, nor answered but with the tone of neglect and disgust.¹⁵

Smith was not the only poor vagrant of his generation trying to finance a journey with a tale of woe; others, however, were more successful. Henry Bird, redeemed from captivity among the Shawanese in the Ohio Valley in 1811, remembered that 'his story almost always gained him food and lodging, and, with very few exceptions, he was seldom turned away from any man's door.' 'Misery and poverty so seldom knock at the doors of an American farmer,' he continued, 'that his heart is not yet steeled to apathy by becoming familiar with objects of distress.' Living off the 'benevolence of his countrymen,' Bird traveled from Vermont to Washington, where he arranged an audience with President Madison and registered a plea for his friends and neighbors still held captive on the Ohio frontier.¹⁶

Or consider the case of the Pequot writer William Apess. In 1813 Apess and a companion used a fabricated story of an ordeal on a captured privateer to carry them from New London to New York. Apess's companion (a man he described as the better storyteller and the more abandoned liar) gave a 'great account of our having been captured by the enemy, and so straight that they believed the whole of it,' at least until they tried to convince a group of sailors that their captors had forced them to eat bread laced with ground glass. Torture heightened drama, but drama too lurid pushed a story beyond the plausible. Drama, which might well serve the needs of traveling entertainers, could discredit those whose tales had to sound 'true' in order to gain an audience's sympathy and assistance.¹⁷

If the published version of Smith's story bears any resemblance

15. *History of the Adventures*, 99.

16. *Narrative of Henry Bird, who was carried away by Indians after the murder of his whole family in 1811* (Bridgeport, 1811), 7.

17. *A Son of the Forest: The Experience of William Apess, a Native of the Forest in On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writing of William Apess, a Pequot*, ed. Barry O'Connell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 24. Karim M. Tiro, 'Denominated "SAVAGE": Methodism, Writing, and Identity in the Works of William Apess, A Pequot,' *American Quarterly* 48 (December 1996): 653.

to what he had begun by telling out loud, he certainly did try to create a good yarn. He incorporated a combination of political intrigue (wily Federalists using guileless young men, like Smith, to discredit Jefferson and Madison), biography (a 'biographical sketch' of Miranda concluded the second edition of his book), travelogue (notes on the climate and landscape of Colombia), and Gothic adventure (escape from an airless, damp, and 'dark cavity' behind the moss-covered walls of a castle).¹⁸ He described prisoners held in 'gloomy seclusion,' fed on a 'loathsome diet,' deprived of 'light and air,' and subject to 'irons, insults, and other means of terror, to break down the courage of the victim and weary him of life.' Smith documented the ingenuity of ordinary Americans. He and his comrades dug through walls of a 'thickness twice the length of a man's stature,' using only a shoemaker's hammer. They covered the noise of their digging by rattling their chains and by making rough music on the flute, fiddle, and fife they had purchased with money advanced them by a visiting American captain.¹⁹

By rights such stories should have interested American audiences who followed the misadventures of virtuous protagonists, like Smith, in popular novels. In order to heighten reader involvement in the story, novelists often insisted that their tales were true. Like these novelists, Smith offered readers something akin to an intimate experience, but his tale had to conform to a higher standard of apparent truth, insofar as he asked of his audience more than the emotional response invited by novelists. Smith had no choice but to create a credible narrative, for incredulity (as Apess and his friend learned) would break his con-

18. Smith apologized for the poor quality of his travelogue. 'It is of importance to my story, that the reader should understand the nature of the territory, which is now the scene of action. It cannot be expected that my description should be entirely accurate, as I was more intent upon concealing myself from view, than on making observations.' *History of the Adventures*, 83-84.

19. *History of the Adventures*, 32-33, 75, 78. On the conventions that characterize Gothic fiction, see Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3-6.

tract with the reader. Moreover, Smith needed responsive readers to complete his story. No fictional hand could right the wrongs he had suffered. That task was reserved for the readers who invested mind and money in Smith's tale. Resolution of Smith's plot waited for readers who would believe his version of the events and relieve his suffering.²⁰

Smith continued to search for those who would listen to his story. He 'did not like to beg,' he said, but when he met a brewer on the road, he admitted that he 'had not the wherewithal to pay my lodging for the night.' The brewer invited him home and helped him arrange to insert a paragraph about his South American adventures in a Baltimore paper.²¹ When he later spotted some men reading the paper in the stage office in Philadelphia, he hailed them, presenting himself as a celebrity of sorts. They accepted this apparent confirmation of his story and gave him money to continue to New York, where, after a tearful reunion with his father, he launched a lawsuit against those he contended had tricked him into enlisting on the ill-fated voyage.

Smith's luck in the courtroom was little better than it had been in the tavern, and after three and a half years of motions and delays, the judge dismissed Smith's suit.²² In print, Moses Smith prevailed, pursuing a back channel, if you will, into the archives

20. *History of the Adventures*, 20. Certainly 'experience' described in accents of a humble narrator was useful to a novelist like Daniel Defoe. He was a mere 'editor' of *Moll Flanders* (1722). On novels, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 123-37, and Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15-37, 70-79.

21. *History of the Adventures*, 104-8.

22. A jury had already acquitted the most prominent of Miranda's supporters—Colonel William Stephens Smith, son-in-law of John Adams, the surveyor of the New York port and an old travelling companion of Miranda, and the 'tory-federal merchant' Samuel Ogden. Although Smith and Ogden had acquired arms for Miranda and helped him recruit, by ruse, his little band of mercenaries, they had broken no law. From the evidence presented, the jury could not conclude that Colonel Smith and Mr. Ogden had intended to provoke war with Spain. *The Trials of William S. Smith and Samuel G. Ogden, for Misdemeanors, had in the Circuit Court of the United States for the New-York District, in July 1806* (New York: Printed by and for I. Riley and Co., 1807); *Mechanics of New York, read the heart-rending Truth!*

and making sure his version of the events was on record. He republished the charges that the New York court had dismissed and favorably compared the swift, if severe, justice he had received in a Spanish colony with the arcane practices of the United States. Spanish judges, he declared, believed him, but found it hard to accept the fact that a country supposedly ruled by law could harbor seducers of innocent workers.²³ Finally, Smith appended his opinion of legal writing, criticizing the excesses of lawyers and praising the plain and unadorned prose that characterized narratives like his. 'I am sorry,' he wrote,

that it becomes necessary to my story, to lay before my reader a law paper: for I know that it is the driest, dullest kind of reading, and that such things are generally so skillfully drawn up, as to be unintelligible to plain people. The lawyers, call it my declaration; some for shortness call it my *narr*. It is as intelligible, I believe, as a law matter can be. . . . I am sure, if my counsel had been at liberty to use their own good sense, and tell my story in their own way, instead of this distorted manner of legal narrative, it would have been much better.²⁴

We know Smith's version of the story of his story, of course, only because he recruited enough subscribers in New York City and in Albany to produce two editions of his book.²⁵ Smith incorporated his adventure into a partisan narrative, blaming the

23. 'It was too evident from this sentence, that our judges did not credit our story, true as it was, that any man could dare to do, in a country where there are laws and civilization, an act so audacious as that which Mr. Fink did, when he entrapped fifteen of us into this desperate adventure, under pretence of an authority to enlist us for a guard to the Washington mail.' *History of the Adventures*, 44.

24. *History of the Adventures*, 119.

25. According to William Charvat, subscription publishing, so common in eighteenth-century Britain, had begun, by the early years of the nineteenth century, to fall out of favor. Personal ventures like Smith's, however, were still common in the United States in the 'teens and twenties. William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (1968; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1968]), 21. See, for example, *The Life and Adventures of Robert Bailey from his Infancy up to December, 1821* (Richmond, Va.: for the author, 1822); *Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings of Samuel Patterson*, and *A Narrative of the Travels and Voyages of Davis Bill*. On the form of subscription publishing common later in the nineteenth century, see Michael Hackenberg, 'The Subscription Publishing Network in Nineteenth-Century America,' in *Getting Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in 19th-Century America*, ed. Michael Hackenberg (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Center for the Book, 1987), 45-75.

New York Federalists for his woes and turning his Republican confreres into subscribers to his book. In the person of Thomas Kirk, Smith enlisted the help of a Democratic-Republican printer, but he also found nearly 500 men and women in and around New York City to subscribe to his book. He found some 400 more upstate (more than 10 percent of them women) and hired the commercial printers, Packard & Van Benthuyzen, to produce a second edition. Smith attracted supporters from a wide range of occupations, counting among his subscribers merchants and shipmasters as well as grocers, hairdressers, sailmakers, coopers, masons, sailors, cartmen, and laborers.²⁶

An author like Smith who published his own books could minimize the risks of an uncertain market by finding his buyers before the book appeared. Those willing to advance him money underwrote the costs of paper, printing, and binding, and probably helped defray the costs of distribution as well. Like many such authors, Smith recruited friends and friends of friends, but his political claims remind us that such social and intellectual networks were also supported by partisan allegiance.

In his publication he reprinted for readers the charges the New York judge had dismissed, criticizing the long and futile legal process. At a moment of deep despair, he asked himself 'What had I done to merit so much anguish. To be disowned and abandoned

26. On Smith's subscribers, see *Elliot's Improved New-York Double Directory* (New York: William Elliot, 1812). The political nature of Smith's argument is suggested not only by his association with Thomas Kirk, the Democratic-Republican printer of the *Long Island Star* but also by his repeated assertions of a Federalist conspiracy. See Hamilton, *The Country Printer*, 52. On the contests for the political loyalties of New York artisans and renewed intensity of party rivalries during the War of 1812, see Howard Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 77-100. An advertisement printed in Boston in *The Literary Mirror* (September 10, 1808) suggests why Smith sensed there might be interest in his story. In the paper, the publishers, Oliver and Munroe, recommended their *History of Don Francisco de Miranda's Attempt to Effect a Revolution in South America in a Series of Letters* for '[t]he unstudied simplicity of the narrations carries conviction of its truth—I have advised its publication: so have other gentlemen of more deserving weight of character than myself. It has so much of incident that it will engage the curious reader; so much of disaster as to fix on sensibility and carries proof of such depraved hypocrisy in the leader as to interest every lover of truth' (120).

by my country, unprotected by its laws. My only crime was my simplicity, and the ignorant credulity with which I listened to the vile and interested deceiver, who has wantonly plunged me into this complicated misery.' According to Smith, the Federalist cause was clearly the cause of Satan, and his own cause was the 'cause of every free-born citizen. It was the cause of every virtuous heart. It was the cause of a great community, whose honour was involved in the eyes of other nations.'²⁷

Although we recognize in Smith's appeal the strains of a populist rhetoric designed to capture the complaints of men who called themselves simple and ignorant, Smith was not as simple and ignorant as he would seem to have readers believe. Although Smith may have been a man of scant material resources, he was not without intellectual gifts or social connections. And though he was, for a time, a poor vagabond, even wandering paupers, Smith knew, could claim privileges of citizenship. By describing himself as a poor and persecuted American citizen, Smith tried to make his personal experiences into something more than an eccentric misadventure. His unvarnished truths, he insisted, had to be read in a political context, as an episode in the history of the young nation.²⁸

The pain he suffered in a Spanish colonial dungeon and the injustice he suffered at the hands of New York courts lent significance to his tale, and in describing pain and injustice, he drew comparisons that showed readers that he was a man of judgment. Perhaps because he pledged to tell an artless tale in plain unvarnished prose, Smith could not embellish his account with elegant analogies. But even without access to rhetorical flourish,

27. *History of the Adventures*, 89–90, 104.

28. Under the Articles of Confederation, paupers and vagabonds were explicitly excluded from privileges and immunities of citizenship, 'but the federal Constitution did not repeat the phrase.' Linda K. Kerber, 'The Meanings of Citizenship,' *Journal of American History* 84 (December 1997): 843.

Although the phrasing is surely foreign to the plain style Smith espoused, perhaps one could follow the literary scholar Lauren Berlant and credit Smith with working out his own 'structure of personal/national representation.' *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

he established authorial expertise by expressing several straightforward judgments. He ranked the relative severity of the pain, suffering, and injustice he witnessed, developing devices perfectly suited to authority based on experience rather than genius, education, social position, or art.

This pattern of judgment becomes particularly clear as Smith fills readers in on the events of his life between his return from Colombia and the composition of his story. He tried various jobs and finally shipped as a common sailor to London. He invested in a schooner that wrecked on the Rockaway shoals, but he deemed this loss a calamity not worth recounting. '[M]isadventures of this nature do not wring the soul like justice denied, or the triumph of iniquity, and make but a small part, indeed of my calamities, and do not demand public attention as public wrongs do.'²⁹

When Smith recomposed his story in 1811 and offered it to readers who were slowly turning their attention (whether in favor or opposed) to war, he found that his eloquence could not bridge the seven-year gap between his experiences and their publication. To his frustration, interest in his story had proved brief and fickle, for the political landscape had changed a good deal since his departure on the ill-fated expedition. With eloquent appeals to national feeling he invoked shared patriotism to lend significance to events that no longer had much popular currency.³⁰

Smith began with a story of adventure that he exchanged for food, shelter, and passage home. Once home, he turned the story of his experiences into a vehicle to recover his good name. To recover his good name, however, he needed audiences, readers, and interlocutors to accept not only his description of things he had seen and heard—his experiences—but also his explanation of why

29. *History of the Adventures*, 115. Perhaps Smith manages here to elevate himself above those who found injustice in small and private failure. See Toby Ditz, 'Shipwrecked; or Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,' *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 51-80.

30. For a discussion of the ways in which political conflict over the War of 1812 shaped publication, see Daniel A. Cohen, "'The Female Marine' in the Era of Good Feeling: Cross Dressing and the "Genius" of Nathaniel Coverly, Jr.," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103 (October 1994): 359-93.

he had joined Miranda and his conspiratorial interpretation of what had happened to him. Smith had not shipped out in the hopes of personal profit; he was a man duped by evil plotters. The structure into which he placed his own calamities—powerful plotters/innocent pawn—is a recognizably political one. With claims of innocence he made believing his tale of experience into a multi-layered partisan act: he recruited readers as advocates of his personal cause, as supporters of a political faction, and finally as partisans of a nation that had become a player on a world stage.

3. THE SUFFERINGS OF MICHAEL SMITH

The preacher Michael Smith had better luck with his publications, but he too suffered for his national allegiance, and he too learned something of the fleeting market for stories based on specific personal experiences. A particular combination of experience, suffering, and the people he met made Smith a writer: experience among the British in Canada gave him something to say; suffering the moral authority to say it; and Baptist friends and sympathetic printers gave him the wherewithal to publish it. Michael Smith suffered from hunger, cold, poverty, and ill-health. For all Baptists, he suffered the rebuffs of arrogant Presbyterians; for all Americans, he suffered the tyrannies of British authorities and the insults of their Mohawk allies, one of whom advances on Smith with 'hasty steps and terrific looks,' shouting "where is de d—m Yankee? Me now kill him—oh, me kill him—his blood now spill—de Yankee must die." In his books Smith combined a geography of Canada with an account of the war, adding to the last editions of his book depictions of his personal travails and spiritual growth. At the start of his career as a writer, he produced a kind of travel literature, offering readers the benefit of his 'experiential knowledge' of Canada. By the end of his brief public career (1813–17), he had replaced secular information with a narrative of spiritual experience.³¹

31. Michael Smith, *A Geographical View of the Province of Upper Canada, and Promiscuous Remarks Upon the Government in Two Parts, With an Appendix: Containing a complete descrip-*

Lured to Canada, like his fellow emigrants from the States, by promises of cheap land and no taxes, the Pennsylvania-born Smith settled with his wife and two small sons on the shores of Lake Ontario in 1808. He tried various ways to earn money, teaching school, publishing a newspaper, and preaching, but he was never very successful. Even though ill-health and impending war dogged his ventures, he insisted in print that he found Upper Canada an excellent country for poor men. To encourage others to come north, he began a process of observation and notation ('taking and writing') necessary to produce a geographical and political account of British North America.

Judging from Smith's writing, he had gone to Canada looking to better his fortunes and not to spread the American version of republicanism. Nevertheless, as war approached, it became increasingly difficult to remain above politics, and British authorities, suspecting that Smith, like most of the American settlers who had come recently to Upper Canada, likely had little love for Britain, asked him to swear his loyalty to the king. When Smith refused, they kicked him out of Canada, turning him and his family over to the American army. Smith seemed a suspect character to British authorities who recognized that his geographical account could serve an invading army as easily as it could would-be settlers.³²

To add to Smith's troubles, some of the people he met in the United States apparently read his praise for Canada as a sign of disloyalty to his native country. During the Revolution, American

tion of Niagara Falls. And remarks relative to the situation of the inhabitants respecting the war (Hartford: Printed for the Author by Hale & Hosmer, 1813), 4. Michael Smith, *Human Sorrow and Divine Comfort; or a short narrative of the suffering, travel and present feelings and situation of M. Smith, preacher of the gospel, author of the view of Upper Canada and British Possessions. Intended to illustrate the goodness of God* (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1814), 9.

32. *A Geographical View* (Hartford), 5-6; *A Narrative of the Sufferings*, 5-13. George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit and Parole: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 79-91, 98; and Alan Taylor, 'John Graves Simcoe's Colonists: A Canadian Perspective on the Legacies of the American Revolution' (paper presented at the Columbia University Early American Seminar, May 12, 1998). In fact, during the war, civilians like Smith spied for both sides. See Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 38-39.

Loyalists had fled to Canada in large numbers, and perhaps some of those in the United States who questioned Smith's patriotism recalled this earlier emigration to Canada.³³ To allay suspicion, Smith displayed his poverty like a badge of honor, insisting that readers see in it proof of patriotism. 'Some may imagine, because I write thus, that I have a partiality for the English—but this I solemnly deny; I only describe things in their true characters, with the impartiality of an historian. I began this before the war; I undertook it with an earnest desire to benefit some, I care not who; if any are benefitted I should be gratified; in short, I write this *Pro Bono Publico*.'³⁴ Smith admitted later that he also wrote for 'the benefit of myself, for I am needy enough, having lost all the property I had (chiefly land) in Upper Canada, rather than remain there and be obliged to fight against my own country.'³⁵

But even patriotic poverty was sometimes a hard sell. One man turned away the 'poor, cold and hungry' family, insisting, 'I do not lodge such mean looking people as you are, nor will I let you stay.' Even the plea that they had forfeited all property in Canada rather than 'bear arms against my *beloved countrymen*' found no sympathy. 'You ought to have staid and helped the British to kill every one of the invaders,' replied the householder. 'Our government had no right to trouble that country! You see what your beloved countrymen have brought you to—then, if you love them so well, go and let them provide for you and your poor perishing wife and children.'³⁶

Smith may have lost what little property he had in Canada, but he recovered the portions of his manuscript on Canada that he

33. Smith may have insisted on his patriotism to assuage the doubts of readers who remembered that, during the Revolution, Loyalists had fled to settlements in Upper Canada. Alfred Leroy Burt and John Bartlett Brebner, *The Mingling of the Canadian and the American Peoples* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), 87.

34. *A Geographical View* (Hartford), 4–5.

35. *A Geographical View of the British Possessions in North America: comprehending Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, New Britain, Lower and Upper Canada, with all the country to the Frozen Sea on the North and the Pacific Ocean on the West: with an appendix containing a concise history of the war in Canada to the date of this volume* (Baltimore: Printed for the Author by P. Mauro, 1814), v.

36. *A Narrative of the Sufferings*, 67.

had sent to an American printer. Unfortunately, he had no money to have it printed, so he joined the wandering poor, supporting himself and his family, including his little son Milton Paradise (who got sick but never did get lost), as a day laborer and preacher, but begging when he could find no work. As he moved through a country where most people were poor, Smith saw no shame in his poverty. In fact, misfortune sometimes contained the seeds of small prosperity, and the poor preacher acknowledged a sort of good luck in following an outbreak of typhus through upstate New York. In the winter of 1812-13, he survived by preaching funeral sermons to grieving Presbyterians ('the higher class of people in those parts'), who to their apparent consternation had no one to turn to but a man of 'Indian appearance,' an unprepossessing Baptist preacher in a shabby coat of 'bearskin cloth, of drab colour, and quite ragged and patched and belted also around the middle with a strap of leather.'³⁷

Moses Smith had found sympathetic, believing readers among political partisans; Michael Smith found his among his co-religionists. In Bennington, Vermont, Smith met a fellow Baptist willing to invest in his 'experiential knowledge' and to underwrite the publication of his manuscript. In exchange for several hundred copies of the work, the Bennington minister would pay to produce the book. 'As I had no money,' Smith remembered, 'I thought this an advantageous offer, and of course accepted the same.' As in many transactions engineered by rural printers and booksellers, no cash changed hands in Smith's initial venture.³⁸

37. *A Complete History of the Late American War with Great Britain and her allies: from the commencement of hostilities in 1812 till the conclusion of peace with the Algerines in 1815: with geographical notes relative to the seat of war and scene of battle, and biographical sketches of the principal actors* (Lexington: Printed for the Author by E. Bradford Jun., 1816), 269-70. To put a fine face on Smith's travels, we might label him an itinerant entrepreneur in the religious line. See Stephen A. Marini, 'Evangelical Itinerancy in Rural New England: New Gloucester, Maine, 1754-1807,' in Peter Benes and Jane Montague Benes, *Itinerancy in New England and New York*, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings, June 16 and 17, 1984 (Boston: Boston University Press, 1984), 63. O. K. Armstrong and Marjorie Armstrong, *The Baptists in America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 103-17.

38. Jack Larkin, 'The Merriams of Brookfield: Printing in the Economy and Culture of

Smith went to Hartford, where he arranged to have the first edition of *A Geographical View, of the Province of Upper Canada, and Promiscuous Remarks upon the Government* set in type. It is likely that the Vermont minister's confidence in a market for Smith's manuscript was enhanced by Smith's willingness to append an account of the war to his already completed geography.³⁹ This was the first of several publishing transactions that financed the Smith family's trip back to Pennsylvania and then on to Virginia. Several times, Smith exchanged the right to print his manuscript and to sell copies of his book in a particular region for a portion of a print run. He worked out arrangements with printers in New York, Philadelphia, and Trenton. Each of these printer/publishers assumed control over a discrete local market, supplying Smith with updated reprints of his book, which he agreed to sell elsewhere. These publishing agreements pushed him south. 'After my printing was done,' he explained as he started for Virginia, after spending a few months in parts of Pennsylvania and Maryland, 'as I had obligated myself not to sell any of my books in the above two states, and as I did not see any prospect of living here, and wishing to go to the south where I married, I concluded to start on that way.'⁴⁰

By the time he left New England, Smith estimated that he had left behind almost 30,000 copies of his book. While he headed south with his little stock in his wagon, copies of his work likely moved out across the countryside in the packs of the itinerant

Rural Massachusetts in the Early Nineteenth Century,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 96 (1986): 39-73; and Philip F. Gura, 'Early Nineteenth-Century Printing in Rural Massachusetts: John Howe of Greenwich and Enfield, ca. 1803-1845,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 101 (1991): 25-62.

39. *A Complete History of the Late American War*, iv.

40. *A Narrative of the Sufferings*, 32. In 1813 he produced editions in New York (printed by Pelsoe and Gould), Philadelphia (printed by J. Bioren for Thomas and Robert Desilver), and Trenton (printed by W. and D. Robinson for More and Lake). Although each edition of Smith's book contained the same basic geography with which he had begun, as he worked his way south, he changed its title, adding a 'concise history' of the war's progress 'to the present date.' When he reached Richmond in 1814, he changed the title of the book to *A Continuation of the History of the War* and finally, after the Treaty of Ghent was signed in February 1815, to *A Complete History of the Late American War*.

peddlers who supplied New Englanders with reading material.⁴¹ Smith's book was well-suited to readers attuned to what the historian David Jaffee has called the 'village enlightenment,' for he used piety and patriotism to offer readers a wealth of secular information, particularly about Canadian geography but also about American military tactics. Into these more public stories, he inserted his own opinions on everything from the proper compensation for itinerant clergymen to the best means of converting Indians to Christianity. His book was one of many produced in the early years of the century that, as Jaffee suggests, helped turn reading from a devotional practice into a means of acquiring secular knowledge. For a writer like Smith, a narrative of personal experience was the best way to link the spiritual and the secular.⁴²

Smith distributed his books as he moved his family through the mid-Atlantic region where support for the war was strong. Wartime mobilization had brought prosperity to the farmers and manufacturers of Pennsylvania and New York who had contracts to supply the army.⁴³ As the war progressed, the price of Smith's book (like the price of produce) rose. For the first edition, he charged 50 cents. At the war's end, he was asking a dollar, a high price given that a skilled laborer (or an itinerant preacher like Smith) earned about one dollar for a day's work.⁴⁴

When the war ended, he continued to seek out printers and Baptists willing to help him. He asked the Baptists to subscribe to

41. On peddlers, see Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 174-89; Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 38-42; and William J. Gilmore, 'Peddlers and the Dissemination of Printed Material in Northern New England, 1780-1840,' in Benes and Benes, *Itinerancy in New England and New York*, 76-87.

42. David Jaffee, 'The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760-1820,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 47 (July 1990): 327-46. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 99-100; 116-18.

43. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 227-31. A conscientious search for customers predisposed to accept his patriotic account perhaps explains why Smith never produced an edition of his book in Massachusetts, a state most important to the New England book trade, but one whose Federalist majority was hardly enthusiastic about war with England. On Massachusetts printers and the New England book trade, see Larkin, 'The Merriams of Brookfield.'

44. *A Narrative of the Sufferings*, 282. On preachers' wages, see Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Baptists in America*, 116.

his publications and the printers to lend him money outright. Like other itinerant peddlers (Washington's biographer Parson Weems is probably the best known), he sold his books where he could find crowds of potential buyers. He approached those willing to extend charity to him and his family and those curious to know more about Canada and the war. Smith went to Baptist meetings and militia encampments, selling books among those who did not know him personally but, by a kind of institutional affinity, were predisposed to accept him as a reliable witness of the events he recounted.⁴⁵ He often sold books to those who had heard him preach, who had seen his poverty with their own eyes and assessed his sincerity for themselves. With their help, his books moved from a society of close connections into a world of disparate readers. Late in his career, although he was still a poor man who depended on printers' advances to produce his books, he calculated that there were 'about 50,000 volumes in circulation bearing my name.'⁴⁶

But profits were slow in coming to Smith. He remembered selling most of his Lexington edition 'at a reduced price to the *pedlars*; of course, [I] did not gain much by the publication.' He also learned that a wartime book market could be hazardous. He lost would-be customers when a militia company was mobilized; he lost several copies of his books in 'transportation'; and when the British set fire to Washington, most of the Baltimore edition he had stored in the Treasury Building went up in smoke. Without his stock of books to sell, he fell ever deeper into debt and found himself 'unable to get money fast enough to pay what I had borrowed in due time,' including sizeable debts of \$1,200 each that he owed a printer and a bookbinder in Lexington, Kentucky.⁴⁷

As the war drew to a close, Smith added to his book a personal account entitled *A Narrative of the Sufferings in Upper Canada, with*

45. *A Narrative of the Sufferings*, 275-80; Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship*, 18; Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 42.

46. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 124-25.

47. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 120, 104, 282.

his family in the Late War and Journey to Virginia and Kentucky, of M. Smith. When the war ended, he sold his personal narrative as a separate book, by subscription, working again among Baptists and soldiers. He accepted the fact that he hardly appeared the most prepossessing of authors and admitted that many subscribed to his book 'more from a wish to benefit me than from a desire to obtain such a book,' more, in other words, out of sympathy for the man and his family than out of curiosity about what he had written. Smith boasted about his knowledge of Canada and the war, but by eliciting sympathy from would-be purchasers, he seemed to invite those who bought his book to condescend to a needy man and his family.⁴⁸

A litany of his sufferings, a list that echoed both the sufferings of Job and tragedy of Lear, appears near the conclusion of his narrative.

In the first place, I have been brought to the gate of the grave, and seen that vain was the help of man. I have been brought to bow at the feet of the ignorant and wicked savage of the woods; to beg my life at the hand of children. I have been stripped of all I had in this world, and with it my prospect of early joys.—I have been obliged to bear the ridicule of the polished and the laugh of fools.—I have begged bread for myself and family to eat and have been denied the boon.—I have laid on the floor like a dog, and have been refused that privilege; and at other times I have been drove from the ashes to the piercing wind.

Retreating from a description of lonely suffering, Smith concluded his complaint by reminding readers that he was a family man: 'In all these sufferings my little babes and affectionate wife have participated, though unused to such things. *My soul bath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.* — Jer.'⁴⁹

Smith's account of his suffering was clearly intended to move his readers to pity, yet at the lowest moment of beggarly debasement, he played his author card. He was, he reminds us, a writer, a man of experience, with information to sell, or, if he preferred,

48. *A Geographical View* (Baltimore), ix.

49. *Human Sorrow and Divine Comfort*, 35-36.

to give away. He was grateful to those who had helped him, but in his turn he too could be generous. He distributed 'gratuitously' some 1,800 copies of his narrative to soldiers encamped in Virginia. He believed, he said, that 'the reading thereof did some good by inducing the soldiers to trust in God.' However indirectly, reading also encouraged them to support literary projects like Smith's. Some of limited means who chose to buy Smith's books surely did so at the expense of purchasing books by more celebrated authors. Smith wisely prepared for the end of the war by setting aside his timely narrative of current events and cultivating an evangelical market where discussions of man's relations to the eternal were a more timely commodity. Although he announced his intention to publish a journal of his life and a history of evangelical revivals in the west, his last book was *The Beauties of Divine Poetry, or, Appropriate Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, a project he thought 'likely to be the most profitable book I ever published.'⁵⁰

Smith had as little talent for accumulation of wealth as he had aspiration for refinement, and it is probably his candor about his economic position that makes him such an appealing character. Even debt, Smith reckoned, could be a sign of his good character because who would lend money to a bad man? According to Smith, Mr. F. Bradford of Lexington 'agreed to print the work, which would amount to nearly \$200, without requiring an obligation from me. I mention this to show the reader in what estimation I was held, though nearly a stranger.'⁵¹

50. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 104-5, 135-37, 123-24. *Beauties of Divine Poetry, or, Appropriate Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Lexington: Printed for the Author by Worsley and Smith, 1817). The first version of Smith's personal narrative (*Human Sorrow and Divine Comfort* [Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1814]) appeared as an appendix to his book on the war. In Lexington, he published two subsequent editions as *A Narrative of the Sufferings in Upper Canada, with his family . . .*; one printed by F. Bradford, jun. in 1816; the other, by Worsley and Smith in 1817. On evangelical publishing, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 141-44; David Paul Nord, 'Evangelical Origins of Mass Media In America, 1815-1835,' *Journalism Monographs* (1984); and R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13-27.

51. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 120.

Down and out when he finally reached Richmond ('an expensive place'), he refused an offer of charity to maintain him and his family through the winter. 'However, I declined receiving one cent in that way, especially as I had some money. I thought it would be time enough to beg, when I should have nothing to live upon.'⁵² Writing, Smith sensed, was an honorable substitute for begging—readers could buy his books to benefit him, if they wished, but he offered them something in return. He never forgot that he was as likely to need charity as were many of the poor to whom he preached.

As a wandering man, Smith would have had a hard time obtaining relief from municipal authorities in the towns he passed through, so he sought out fellow Baptists. But in the first few decades of the nineteenth century even poor residents who stayed put were facing tighter requirements for relief. During the years Smith travelled through the northeast, communities began to abandon an easy tolerance for the poor. At the start of the century, those reduced to dire poverty by death or accident could still turn for relief to a patchwork of public and private organizations. As the number of poor people increased during the Embargo Crisis of 1809, during the War of 1812, and following the Panic of 1819, towns began to adopt measures to restrict begging on the streets. During the teens and twenties, municipalities discouraged public begging, sending non-residents like Smith and his family on their way and passing measures designed to limit outdoor relief and to confine the permanent poor to almshouses and workhouses.⁵³

52. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 76.

53. On changing patterns of poor relief see Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825*, 15-38, 67-83, 161-64; and Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 170-71. See also Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 3-66; Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 253-63; and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 155-68. It was not until after the Civil War that beggars appeared conspicuous enough in the United States to be deemed endemic. For an astute reading of the application of measures against begging in the 1870s, see Amy Dru

Unlike reform-minded municipal authorities, Smith was willing both to give to the poor and to listen to their stories. Although he had used his experience in Canada and the war to produce a series of books that turned him into something of an expert, he acknowledged that his social position was little changed. He sustained sympathy for the lot of the beggar, hesitating to draw distinctions between the worthy and the undeserving poor. 'For my part, I am so well convinced that nothing is lost, but much gained, by the exercise of a liberal disposition, that I am determined to be so to the extent of my power, and do encourage it in my children (and others); for which purpose I have often put money into their hands, and then led them to the *beggars' shed* in the large cities, to listen to their *tale of woe*.'⁵⁴ It is hardly surprising that a minister like Smith, who believed that the rich should help the poor, would urge readers to perform acts of charity. What is surprising is that he did so by encouraging them to go to the places where beggars congregated and to listen with hearts and purses open to the tales that beggars had to tell. As we shall see, beggars with stories could muddy the waters of charity.

4. THE TRAVELS OF ROBERT ADAMS

Robert Adams and his sponsors brought to press just such a narrative from the 'beggars' shed.' Although Moses Smith and Michael Smith both launched their publications from the margins of society, they were confident that writing would lead to profit, and they retained control over the production and marketing of their books. In their printed works they argued that their experiences mattered, especially to an American public concerned about world events. They offered to their readers the words of witnesses, the testimony of just the sort of free white men whose experiences were coming to define the nation. They insisted, more-

Stanley, 'Beggars Can't Be Choosers,' in *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 98-137.

54. *A Narrative of the Sufferings* (1817), 118-19.

over, that poverty was a passing thing, the result of misfortune and not of moral failing.

Robert Adams's book differs in several respects, notably in the likelihood that the whole story may have been an elaborate hoax, although it is not entirely clear whether Adams duped some London gentlemen or whether a London gentleman tricked the book-buying public. Adams's account of his adventure takes up a mere 50 pages of a 200-page book; the rest of the publication consists of devices of authentication—preface, introduction, footnotes, commentary, an elaborate map, and two appendices containing speculations on African geography. Extensive appendices were common in African travel narratives, particularly when explorers claimed credit for significant discoveries, but the appendices in Adams's book were designed as much to prove the man a plausible narrator as to document his discoveries.⁵⁵

Adams's story was distinctive in other respects as well. It appeared by grace of a peculiar sort of literary patronage; after extracting the story from an illiterate, mixed-race, American sailor, Mr. S. Cock, offered it 'to the Committee of the company of merchants trading to Africa.' 'Gentlemen,' he wrote,

I beg leave to present to you the NARRATIVE of the Sailor ROBERT ADAMS, in the form which I conceive will be most interesting to you and to the publick, and most useful to the poor man himself, for whose benefit it has been committed to the press.

I have the honour to be,

GENTLEMEN

Your faithful and obedient Servant,
S. Cock⁵⁶

Perhaps Cock's salutation was designed to alert readers to a ruse, suggesting that, like the long story that concludes Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), Adams's tale was a 'cock and

55. See, for example, Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa performed under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1799); and René Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830).

56. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, [1].

bull' story. It is also possible that Cock's 'African Committee' was a deliberate play on the African Association, the group of aristocrats and businessmen underwriting the European exploration of Africa. As fabrication, *The Narrative of Robert Adams* can perhaps tell us more about how devices of authentication worked in an early nineteenth-century beggar's tale than about a trip into the interior of Africa.⁵⁷

Cock acknowledged that the recent departure of Major John Peddie's expedition from London bound for Timbuktu had heightened interest in the sailor's account of a similar voyage. In addition, he and his friends were surely aware of the rapid sale of Mungo Park's recently published African travels.⁵⁸ But Adams was neither a Scottish adventurer like Park nor a British officer; he was an innocent, ignorant, and illiterate American who had managed, through no particular virtue or effort, to reach the mysterious city that had lured a number of European explorers to their deaths.⁵⁹

To demonstrate for readers the value of the story they now held, Mr. Cock said that the sailor's African tale had made him a 'man of consequence' on the streets of Cadiz. Adams's account of a shipwreck, a Barbary captivity, and a voyage to Timbuktu was so good that he had used it to work his way from North Africa to Portugal, from Portugal to Wales, and finally to London, where,

57. The novel concludes 'L—d! said my mother, what is all this story about?—A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick—And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.' Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67; reprint, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New with an introductory essay by Christopher Ricks [London: Penguin Books, 1967]), 543. The phrase is an old one, dating back at least to the second half of the seventeenth century. Adams's tale was indeed a 'long, rambling idle story.' Or it could have been, more precisely, a deliberate sham, an 'idle, concocted, incredible story; a canard.' *The Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), II: 569. On the African Association, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 69–70.

58. The first edition of 1,500 copies of Park's book sold out almost immediately, and versions of travels have remained in print for most of the 200 years since its initial appearance. Christopher Lloyd, *The Search for the Niger* (London: Collins, 1973), 46.

59. On European exploration of Africa, see Robert Rotberg, *Africa and Its Explorers: Motives, Methods, and Impact* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); on Timbuktu, see Christopher Hibbert, *Africa Explored: Europeans in the Dark Continent, 1769–1889* (London: Allen Lane, 1982), 154–77.

according to Cock, he hoped to trade on his tale one more time and persuade the American consul to pay his passage home.⁶⁰ Cock said that he and a group of 'gentlemen merchants' who had heard tell of a sailor with a tale intercepted Adams on his way to the American consulate.

Adams explained that he had been forced to leave the United States because of an 'amour, which he was unwilling to make good by marriage.' Like Moses Smith and Michael Smith, he set high value on his national identity. A British consul in Cadiz was touched when Adams let out 'an involuntary exultation at the sight of the American flag, which seemed quite convincing.'⁶¹ Although Adams's American identity may have been a marketing ploy designed to give audiences in the United States a tie to his experiences, American identity also gave Cock an excuse to ship an unreliable narrator off to New York, far from the English readers who might have questioned his story. A few years later an American reporter found no trace of Adams or his family.⁶²

In fact, the begging sailor had no firm identity, national, racial, or personal. The introduction, which, at first glance, seems to tell readers enough about Adams to make them inclined to believe the man and his story, ends with a note from the British consul at Cadiz that clouds rather than clarifies Adams's identity. In the note, the consul admits that the name Robert Adams was unfamiliar to him but suggested that the man calling himself Robert Adams was a sailor he had ransomed who was then known as Benjamin Rose.⁶³

According to Cock, Adams was the son of a sailmaker from Hudson, New York. On June 17, 1810, he sailed from New York in the ship *Charles* bound for Gibraltar with a cargo of rice, flour, and salted provisions. In Gibraltar the *Charles* took on wine, 'blue nankeens and old iron' and headed for the Isle of May. The ship

60. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, x, xv.

61. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, xxi.

62. 'The Narrative of Robert Adams,' *North American Review* 5 (July 1817): 205-6.

63. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 38.

ran aground some '400 miles northward of Senegal,' and Adams and his shipmates were taken prisoner by the Moors. He was put to work tending goats and sheep. In these respects, his story resembled that of many Barbary captives. But then either Adams or Cock soon found a way to make it more interesting.⁶⁴

Adams insisted that he had accompanied the Moors on a slaving expedition through the Sahara. Captured by 'a large party of Negroes,' they were taken to Timbuktu. While the Moors sweltered in a prison, Adams and a Portuguese boy were free to roam the city. For six months, Adams observed the commerce and customs of the residents of Timbuktu. Cock induced Adams to answer questions that had vexed and troubled a generation of Europeans. Was there an opulent city on the southern edge of the Sahara? Who ruled Timbuktu? Did the natives traffic in gold? How far south did the empire of the Moors extend? How far was Timbuktu from the Niger River, and did the Niger flow toward the east or toward the west? And finally what is '*the extended and baneful range of that great original feature of African society — Slavery?*' The last was no innocent question, and a generation later, African American abolitionists would object to its underlying assumption that slaves were somehow responsible for slavery.⁶⁵

Adams, or the character of Adams invented for the purpose of publishing a little book about Timbuktu, had an answer to every question, and the editor had an explanation for his every answer. As for gold: 'He never saw the Negroes find any gold, but he understood that it was procured out of the mountains, and on the banks of the rivers, to the southward of Tombuctoo.' As to the site

64. Paul Baepler, 'The Barbary Captivity Narrative in Early America,' *Early American Literature* 30 (1995): 95-120. Adams's book could not compete with James Riley's story of his Barbary captivity. *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce, wrecked on the western coast of Africa the month of August, 1815, with an Account of the Sufferings of her surviving officers and crew, who were enslaved by the wandering Arabs of the great African Desert, or Zaharhab* (New York: For the Author, 1817). According to Baepler, nearly one million copies of Riley's book appeared in different editions between 1817 and 1851 (115).

65. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 165. On the origins of slavery, see James W. C. Pennington, *A Text Book of the Origin and History, &c. &c. of the Colored People* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1841), 39-42.

of Timbuktu: the city was situated on a level plain, 'on the south-east side' of a river he called the '*La Mar Zarab*.' The houses were 'square, built of sticks, clay, and grass, with flat roofs of the same materials,' and the king was not a Moor, but a Negro, probably affiliated with the King of Bambarra. The editor pointed out that contradictory accounts about who ruled the city should not surprise Europeans who had recently witnessed so many changes in sovereignty on their own continent. '[A]n African traveller (if so improbable a personage may be imagined) who should have visited Europe in these conjunctures, might very naturally have reported to his countrymen at home, that Russia, Germany, and Spain were but provinces of France; and that the common sovereign of all these countries resided sometimes in the *Escorial* and sometimes in the *Kremlin*!'⁶⁶

According to Cock, Adams's interlocutors at first found his adventures and sufferings so extraordinary they suspected that his account of residence at Timbuktu was 'invention.' They asked him to repeat it. Over a period of several weeks, they asked him questions, and they looked for discrepancies in his answers. Internal consistency reassured them, but it was not enough. They felt better when they found in Adams the 'artlessness' they considered necessary for impoverished storytellers.

In Adams we find an individual relating travels and adventures, which are indeed extraordinary, but are told with utmost simplicity and bear strong internal marks of truth. Placed in a wide and untravelled region, where a mere narrator of fables might easily persuade himself that no one would trace or detect him, we find Adams resisting temptation (no slight one for an ignorant sailor) of exciting the wonder of the credulous, or the sympathy of the compassionate, by filling his story with miraculous adventures, or overcharged pictures of suffering. In speaking of himself, he assumes no undue degree of importance. He is rather subordinate to the circumstances of his story, than himself the prominent feature of it; and almost every part of his Narrative is strictly in nature, and unpretending.⁶⁷

66. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 40, 43, 146, 155n.

67. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 146-47.

In other words, Adams was the very model of a deferential beggar with a great story; he bowed to the 'facts' of his experience, like every 'modest witness' to empirical truths, but in doing so, he also bowed to the interpretive powers of social betters.

In the preface, the editor informed readers exactly how Adams came to know the things he now recounted. Late in the story he reminded them that Adams was an illiterate man, an 'unscientific individual,' who had learned nothing from books. His uncorrupted knowledge came, instead, from physical observation. Adams knew the 'exact number of *days* occupied in his long journeys' because he had been 'obliged to travel almost naked under a burning sun . . . and always inquired, before setting out on a journey, how long it was expected to last.' He knew 'the precise number of *miles* which he travelled each day' because 'he could easily recollect whether camels on any particular journey, travelled well or ill.' Heavily burdened camels, he knew, would not travel more than ten to fifteen miles a day; fresh and lightly laden camels would travel from eighteen to twenty-five miles a day. He knew the '*directions*' in which he traveled because, constantly plotting his escape, he 'always noticed in a morning whether the sun rose in his face, or not.' But what he could not know was what his tale meant.⁶⁸

As a raconteur Adams grew so deferential that he declined an invitation by the editor to elaborate on a story about witchcraft. 'Is it unreasonable to suppose,' the editor asked, 'that having found his miraculous stories . . . discredited and laughed at, both at Mogadore and Cadiz, Adams should at length have grown ashamed at repeating them, or even outlived his superstitious credulity? This solitary instance of suppression (the particular stories suppressed being of so absurd a nature) may be rather considered as proof of his good sense, than as evidence of an artfulness, of which not a trace has been detected in any other part of his conduct.'⁶⁹

68. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 143, xiv.

69. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 107, n. 28.

In effect, the editorial frames stripped from Adams the storyteller all opportunity for self-assertion and made of him a man who deferred to social and intellectual betters. There were instances, of course, when his account appeared preposterous (he described, for example, an enormous elephant with four tusks), but these exaggerations his editor excused as what one would expect from 'an uncultivated individual like Adams.' All the apologies and explanations for Adams's inconsistencies might be read as simple literary conceit, but, as the editor noted, in 1815 the streets of London were crowded with men like him. This milling crowd might turn to revolutionary violence if these sailors of the wandering proletariat ever came to see themselves as men of 'consequence' (as Adams, remember, was wont to do). In the structures of 'truth' that the editor so carefully built into Adams's story we can see a means of taking knowledge (even accidental, experiential knowledge) and its promise of power from a poor man.⁷⁰

Upwards of 'fifty gentlemen' (men who carried by grace of title and social position a capacity to pass on the truth of stories told by men like Adams⁷¹) had seen Adams and 'interrogated him at different times; among whom there was not one who was not struck by the artlessness and good sense of Adams's replies, or who did not feel persuaded that he was relating simply the facts which he had seen, to the best of his recollection and belief.'⁷² The documents surrounding Adams's tale contained several phrases designed to mark its 'truth'—the social standing of the

70. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 108. 'During the crisis of the autumn and winter of 1816,' Peter Linebaugh wrote, 'the municipal authorities took active steps to control the independent mobilization of the urban proletariat.' Those responsible for maintaining order in the city of London paid particular attention to African-American sailors, for authorities saw 'the danger of a nautical proletariat joining London's idle apprentice [*sic*] in insurrectionary alliance.' 'A Little Jubilee? The Literacy of Robert Wedderburn in 1817,' in *Protest and Survival: Essays for E. P. Thompson*, ed. John Rule and Robert Malcolmson (New York: The New Press, 1993), 207. See also Stanley Palmer, *Police and Protest in England and Ireland, 1780-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169.

71. Although he studied an earlier generation, Steven Shapin's work on gentlemen scientists sheds light on the role social position could play in even a book like Adams's. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 65-125.

72. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, xi, xiii.

gentlemen interrogators, the artlessness of the modest witness, and the consistency of repeated reports—but none was quite enough to prevent questions about the sailor's peculiar tale.

Although Adams's book is often listed among the tales of white men enslaved in Africa, his racial identity, like his tale, was rather more complicated.⁷³ To his British friends, Adams was a mixed-race American. ('His mother was a Mulatto, which circumstance his features and complexion seemed to confirm.') But to his black hosts at Timbuktu, he was a white man. His editor noted that Adams called himself the first white man to visit the city of Timbuktu because the value of the tale rested in part on such a claim. But a parenthetical aside qualifies the contention. 'He believes, as well from what he was told by the Moors, as from the uncommon curiosity which he excited (though himself a very dark man, with short curly black hair,) that they never had seen one before.' The British Consul suggested that it was more likely Adams's religion than his race which excited the natives of Timbuktu. But Adams admitted he was a poor Christian. Among the Africans he may have passed as a Christian, but he described himself as a Christian 'who never prayed.'⁷⁴

Nor was Adams always the 'stupid, unthinking, simple being' his sponsors suggested. One reviewer, convinced that London merchants were trying to dupe the gullible public with the tale of a guileless sailor, quoted a 'gentleman' who had seen Adams on the streets of Cadiz and insisted that 'he was shrewd, intelligent, and proud, and valued himself highly on the reputation of having been at Timbuktu. He saw it gave him consequence, and was disposed to take advantage of it.'⁷⁵ If Adams had 'craft' and was 'observing,' precisely the virtues that might have made him better able to describe the peoples and landscapes of Africa, he was, paradoxically, not to be trusted. The better his intellect, the more

73. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 49–63.

74. *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, xxi, 68, xviii, 56, 116, n.37.

75. 'The Narrative of Robert Adams,' 211–12, 221.

likely he was either to take advantage of kindly 'gentlemen' or to inspire his peers to dissent. It is this paradox that makes his book not just a good Barbary captivity, not just a good yarn about Timbuktu, but also a good tale about how a story from the beggars' shed could serve the purposes of gentlemen.

The supporting documents, the appendices, the map, and the commentary by the British consul who had ransomed him, failed finally to establish either Adams's identity or the facts of his tale. Contemporary reviewers in the United States were skeptical about both the man and his book, although their concerns differed from those of the British gentlemen who perhaps used the story to belittle a street person suddenly grown into a man of consequence. American reviewers were less concerned about the revolutionary potential of a propertyless, wandering proletariat than about the history and future of slavery. Editors of the *North American Review* were sure that Adams's publishers had launched the narrative, 'a tissue of lies' made credible by the sanctions of 'distinguished men,' to take advantage of a reading public made vulnerable by their curiosity about 'the city of Timbuctoo, about which so much has been said and conjectured, and so little is known' and by their sympathy for the 'accumulated ills of Africa. . . . The natural disadvantages and privations to which it is subjected, had already awakened the sympathy of the friends of humanity. It became now the subject of general attention and interest.' Africa, according to the reviewer, had excited two of the most powerful principles of the human mind—'sympathy and curiosity.'⁷⁶

Cock positioned Adams's narrative at a precise point where the interests of traders in African markets coincided with recently

76. 'The Narrative of Robert Adams,' 205–6, 209. 'Interiour of Africa,' *North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 5 (May 1817): 12. 'The Narrative of Robert Adams,' *The Athenaeum or, Spirit of the English Magazines* 1 (April–September 1817): 60.

In his *The Travels of Richard Lander into the Interior of Africa, for the discovery of the course of the Niger* (London: W. Wright, 1836), Robert Huish accepts Adams's story, despite its inconsistencies (132–63). He thought Adams likely the 'first Christian who ever reached the far-famed city of Timbuctoo' (161). But on this, he seems to take Adams (or Cock) at his word.

awakened 'sympathy' for enslaved Africans. Adams's narrative appeared in its American edition in 1817, less than a year after the founding of the American Colonization Society, an organization dedicated to resettling free black men and women in undeveloped regions in Africa. According to the *North American Review*, the good hearts of American readers had made them the easy victims of a scheming beggar and his clever British patrons. A reviewer pointed out the 'improbabilities, inconsistencies and contradictions' in Adams's story, and asserted that he had searched in vain for an Adams family in Hudson, New York. He also described a letter from the collector of the port of New York saying that no vessel matching Adams's description of his ship *The Charles* had sailed on June 17. The reviewer finally dismissed the book as a 'gross attempt to impose on the credulity of the publick. To us, indeed, this appeared so obvious, that we should not think it worthy of any serious examination, had it not excited so much interest, and gained universal belief in England.' And he concluded that 'We leave our readers to draw such inferences from these facts, as they think proper. To us they appear conclusive, and connected with the fabulous character of the narrative, they impress a conviction of deception and bold imposition, on the part of Adams, which we think no one, who examines the subject with much interest or candour can resist.'⁷⁷ Some fifteen years later, the *North American Review* again dismissed Adams's story as a 'motley concoction,'⁷⁸ suggesting this time that the begging sailor and not S. Cock and his friends had engineered the fraud.

What are we then to make of Adams's African tale? On the one hand, if we assume that there was an historical Robert Adams, a poor and illiterate sailor who begged his way from North Africa

77. 'The Narrative of Robert Adams,' *The North American Review*, 5:2 (July 1817): 220, 222, 204, 223-24. On the American Colonization Society, see Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 11-25.

78. René Caillié, 'Journal d'un Voyage à Tombouctou et à Jenne dans l'Afrique Central, pendant les années, 1824, 1825, 1826, 1827, 1828,' *North American Review* 36 (January 1833): 48-49.

to England, then we can read his story as an episode in the social history of a particular kind of experiential knowledge. He told his yarn to his sailor friends, and apparently, they liked it. To circulate his experience into the world of print he had to make allies of gentlemen who possessed the authority to label it true, authentic, and, therefore, valuable. On the other hand, if we assume that the story was a hoax, we have an implicit acknowledgment on the part of both hoaxers and those who tried to expose the hoax of the appeals to sympathy and curiosity that made it so hard for better-off readers to know how to respond to a poor man with an extraordinary tale to tell.

5. THE NARRATIVE OF ISRAEL POTTER

Not long after Robert Adams supposedly headed home from London, another displaced American, 'clad in tattered garments,' presented a request for passage to the American consul. By 1822 the aging Revolutionary veteran Israel Potter was at the end of his rope. His wife had died; his health was failing; he had exhausted his reserve of rags, nails, paper, and broken glass scavenged from the refuse of the streets; and his young son Thomas ('a child of my old age') was trying desperately to support the two of them by mending chairs, sweeping the causeways in front of 'gentlemen,' and making and selling matches. In the years after Waterloo, competition at the bottom of the economy was stiff, and Potter suffered from the added disadvantage of being known in London as an American. (According to the overseer of the poor who turned him away from the almshouse, he was nothing but a 'd—d yankee vagabond.')

Despite his hardships, Potter consoled himself that his sufferings were real and that he had never resorted to the fraud so common among the fraternity of the street.⁷⁹

79. *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter (a native of Cranston, Rhode-Island); who was a soldier in the American Revolution, and took a distinguished part in the Battle of Bunker Hill (in which he received three wounds,) after which he was taken prisoner by the British, conveyed to England, where for 30 years he obtained a livelihood for himself and his family, by crying 'Old chairs to mend,' through the streets of London* (Providence: Printed by Henry Trumbull, 1824), 88, 95-96. Henry Trumbull held the copyright to one version of Potter's story. J. Howard,

Among the latter class, there are many; however, who so far from being the real objects of charity that they represent themselves to be, actually possess more wealth than those who sometimes benevolently bestow it.—These vile imposters, by every species of deception that was ever devised or practiced by man aim to excite the pity and compassion, and to exact charity from those unacquainted with their easy circumstances—they possess the faculty of assuming any character that may best suit their purposes—sometimes hobbling with a crutch and exhibiting a wooden leg—at other times ‘an honourable scar of a wound, received in Egypt, at Waterloo or at Trafalger, fighting for their most gracious sovereign and master King George.’⁸⁰

With effort, Potter persuaded the consul that he was indeed an American, and the consul arranged to send both Potter and his son back to the States. Young Thomas sailed immediately for Boston, but Potter had to wait a few months before a berth could be found for him. The consul provided the old man with the wherewithal to sustain himself. Lodged at a public inn, Potter rediscovered ‘civility’ among the American seamen, who, like him, ‘were boarded there at the Consul’s expence [*sic*], until passages could be obtained for them to America.’ The displaced sailors formed a fellowship of storytellers. ‘[B]y hearing them daily recount their various and remarkable adventures, as well as by relating my own, I passed my time more agreeably than what I probably should have done in any other society.’⁸¹ As had Moses Smith, Michael Smith, and Robert Adams, Potter describes a scene in which he rehearses his story before a ‘live’ audience, who approved it.

Potter had long dreamed of returning to his native soil, but his welcome home was less warm than he had anticipated. Family members he had hoped to find in Rhode Island ‘had many years

also of Providence, printed another edition for Potter that same year. The second edition sold for 31 cents. In *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy and Beggars and Begging*, C. J. Ribton Turner described men and women who survived, like Potter, scavenging the waste of the streets (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887). Charles Dickens put scavengers like Potter at the center of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65).

80. *Life and Adventures*, 62–63.

81. *Life and Adventures*, 100.

since removed to a distant part of the country.' And his brothers, before departing, had divided their father's estate among themselves. Disappointed in his inheritance, Potter turned to the government, petitioning Congress (as had many of his surviving comrades) 'to be included in that number of the few surviving soldiers of the Revolution, for whose services they had been pleased to grant pensions.' Congress refused his petition, even though he had submitted his request 'accompanied by the deposition of a respectable gentleman (which deposition I have thought proper to annex to my narrative) satisfactorily confirming every fact as therein stated—yet on no other principle, than that *I was absent from the country when the pension law passed*—my Petition was REJECTED!!!'⁸²

Some disappointed veterans protested in the streets, but Potter took to the page. Once more, a story of begging resulted in a book, and once more, a writer who was an object of charity becomes the subject of a story. His twenty-eight-cent book would have to provide his pension, and it was as carefully constructed as a formal petition to the government.⁸³ Like Moses Smith, whose story was similarly discounted by an official audience in a court of law, Potter composed his book as a motion for a rehearing. Like the other poor men turned writers, Potter established his patriotism, describing his services in the Revolution and the abuse he subsequently suffered when he refused to renounce his country. He established his need for relief by detailing his poverty and sufferings; his honesty by exposing the lies of other beggars; and his skills as a storyteller by describing himself at home among the raconteurs at a public inn. His story was all that he had to persuade those he met that he was a 'hero' and not a fraud. He said

82. *Life and Adventures*, 105. On pensions, see John P. Resch, 'Politics and Public Culture: The Revolutionary War Pensions Act of 1818,' *Journal of the Early Republic*, viii (1988): 139–58.

83. David Perry, another veteran of the Revolution, also peddled a book when denied a pension. His printer/publisher at the *Republican & Yeoman* in Windsor, Vermont, promised to allocate his own share of the earnings from the sale of Perry's book to underwrite publication of the narratives of other impoverished veterans. *Recollections of an Old Soldier*.

in his book that the American consul believed him and so did a 'respectable gentleman' whose affidavit he attached to his story.

Of course, Israel Potter is remembered today because Melville rewrote his story (never mind the obscurity of Melville's novel). In Melville's retelling of his tale, Potter found symbolic justification, but symbolic elevation was not initially what the old beggar had intended.⁸⁴ Like the two Smiths and the sailor Adams, Potter tried to win an audience by inserting his tale of personal suffering into a larger story. Moses Smith had wanted readers to see him as a victim of the political and diplomatic intrigues of powerful men heedless of those whom they abused. Michael Smith had two great stories at his disposal: a history of war and a history of spiritual striving, and he used them both to appeal to readers' sympathy. Robert Adams embellished a sailor's yarn with information designed to appeal to explorers and merchants who had their eyes on Africa. Or, if you prefer, S. Cock embellished a beggar's tale with information designed to appeal to readers curious about Africa and sympathetic to her sufferings.

All these stories turn on dramas of identity. Who were these men? Were they beggars or entrepreneurs? Were they long-suffering heroes or practiced liars; innocent victims or escaped convicts; patriots or traitors? Each asserted national identity to quiet doubts about ambiguous personal identity. Whatever they were, they were Americans, 'd—m Yankees,' if you will. But American identity was a category as unstable as all the others; not something fixed and permanent, but something claimed and demonstrated. These early-nineteenth-century stories offered readers lessons in how to claim the rights and privileges of citizenship. What would a country do for ordinary citizens bound to be caught up in inter-

84. At the start of the 57th chapter of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael pauses to acknowledge the artistry of a crippled 'kedger' who has survived for some ten years by begging beside a painting 'representing the tragic scene in which he lost his leg. Whether his story was true or not finally did not matter, for Ishmael offered him "justification," judging his whales "as good whales as were ever published in Wapping, at any rate; and his stump as unquestionable as any you will find in the western clearings."' Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (1851; reprint, ed. Charles Fiedelson, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 357-58.

national adventures? Would a government ransom foiled filibusterers from foreign jails, rescue settlers from enemy nations, provide pensions for old soldiers, or pay passage home for the elderly, impoverished, or infirm? If the filibusterers, settlers, soldiers, and others spun a good story, maybe. But official aid was never enough. Begging writers needed a second audience, a democratic readership who would right the wrongs they had suffered by buying and believing their stories.

6. ENTREPRENEURS OF EXPERIENCE

Most of those uprooted by the political and economic events of the early nineteenth century had modest aspirations for their stories of disaster. Poor men and women with tales of loss and suffering first turned to family, friends, neighbors, and the agents of organized relief. When these failed, they resorted to print, exchanging tales of woe for charity. As municipal agencies came to see poverty as the fault of the poor, they demanded explanations from those who sought help. Explanations involved stories. And good stories got results. For example, several victims of shipwrecks and fires, for example, took stories of misadventure to the New York City Clerk's Committee on Markets, which could waive the fee for a license to sell the cheapest of goods—coffee and vegetables, most often—in established markets. Thus stories became means to edge into the legitimate commercial economy.⁸⁵

For some, they were a means to edge into the literary economy. In the 1840s the poet John Greenleaf Whittier took a nostalgic look at the wandering beggars whose tales, recitations, and songs had sometimes broken the monotony of his rural youth. He begins his story, 'The Yankee Gypsies,' describing the arrival of a

85. Petitions of Alexander Dobbins, Bridget McLaughlin, Mary Dorsey, Mrs. Porter, and Ann Banta, 'Markets—Petitions, Stalls and Licenses,' City Clerk's Documents, Box 57, 1810, New York City, Municipal Archives. See also John Yates, 'Report of the Secretary of State in 1824 on the Relief and Settlement of the Poor,' in *The Almshouse Experience*, ed. David Rothman (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 941–1009; and *Report to the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New-York; by Their Committee on Idleness and Sources of Employment* (New York: Published by Order of the Board, 1819). On shop rents and contests over space at the bottom of the economy, see Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, 171–72.

beggar carrying a written description of a shipwreck in which he lost his worldly goods. The narrator weighs the beggar and his tale, listening first to the promptings of an angel of benevolence, who urges him to give generously to the man, and next to an angel of prudence, who warns him to be wary of the fraud. And indeed, the beggar is a fraud. The narrator recognizes him as a man he has seen begging many times before, in the guise of a poor Penobscot Indian, as a widowed father, and as a fever-afflicted immigrant. The narrator discovers the beggar has purchased the written description to support his latest disguise 'from one of those ready-writers in New York who manufacture beggar-credentials at the low price of one dollar per copy, with earthquakes, fires, or shipwrecks, to suit customers.'⁸⁶

Whittier recognized that social relations in an increasingly complex economy tried the feelings of sympathy that he liked to think once governed relations between the poor and their more prosperous neighbors. He longed for a world of fixed and stable communities, where few disputed the obligations of the propertied to care for the indigent. The nature of obligation was more difficult to define in a commercial society that depended more and more on transactions between people who did not know each other. Poor men and women, often well deserving of aid, were often forced to move from place to place in search of work. How, Whittier asked, was one to separate these deserving poor from 'vile imposters'? And how was one to tell the storytelling impostors from professional poets and writers, like Whittier, who made a living arranging words.⁸⁷

86. John Greenleaf Whittier, 'The Yankee Gypsies,' in *Margaret Smith's Journal, Tales and Sketches* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1892), 328-29. On Whittier, disguise, masquerade, and the wholesale pursuit of gain, see Perry, *Boats Against the Current*, 154-59.

87. Lennard Davis and Robert Darnton have both investigated connections between intellectual and criminal sub-cultures of Grub Street. *Factual Fictions*, 125-31; and Robert Darnton, 'A Police Inspector Sorts His Files: The Anatomy of the Republic of Letters,' in *The Great Cat Massacre And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 145-89. For the evolutions of professional authorship in the United States, see Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship*, 5-48. Of course Melville, and not Whittier, saw the irony in the kinship between writing beggars and begging writers.

Was an author a beggar, a philanthropist, or a businessman who gave good value to discriminating purchasers? Surely some who contemplated the question recalled the opening lines of *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749): 'An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money.' Henry Fielding's advice to engage the market no doubt suited many writers, but as we have seen there were 'authors' who presented themselves not as peddlers of goods or dispensers of charity but as receivers of alms.

These 'authors' proved particularly troublesome to the mid-nineteenth-century reformers who were anxious to systematize the distribution of charity. By providing a foil for professional authors (like Whittier), begging writers played a small part in the commercialization of literature. But they also played a part in the transformation of philanthropy into a professional activity whose principal work was distributing money (rather than kindness and love).

Social reformers and philanthropists assumed the task of vetting beggars' stories. The best-known example of this literary side of social reform can be found in the last chapter of the last volume of the English reformer Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). In it, Mayhew and his colleague Andrew Halliday denounced the 'systematic impostures' of the current generation of beggars. They recognized that dissembling beggars had been around for at least two hundred years, but only recently had they made fraud into something that appeared to reformers to be an organized system. Like Israel Potter, Mayhew and his associates found on the streets of London a motley fraternity of burnt-out tradesmen, blown-up miners, old soldiers, shipwrecked mariners, and fugitive slaves, some of whom actually had suffered the misfortunes they complained about; many of whom had not.

Fraudulent beggars enraged them, especially those who carried printed accounts of suffering, many of them carefully produced and carrying affidavits signed by 'honest' men. One of the tasks of

Mayhew's Mendacity Society was to protect a credulous public from imaginative schemes hatched by the clever poor. In exposing clever schemes, the society also guarded against the misappropriation of the devices of verification so necessary to a commercial world dependent on honest communication in printed documents. To help those who would protect themselves, the Mendacity Society published a list of the poses most common among the dissembling fraternity. The list included men and women (like Whittier's friend) who carried printed accounts of the deaths and disasters, the shipwrecks, earthquakes, storms, and fires that had reduced them to poverty. Among the writing beggars, they also found 'decayed literary gentlemen' who carried greasy copies of their 'works,' tales designed sometimes to document suffering and sometimes to serve as evidence of writerly talent worth supporting.⁸⁸

The beggars whom Mayhew questioned knew that some stories were better to beg with than others. A one-armed man, for example, who had lost a limb working in a brickyard, dressed up as a sailor when he discovered that it was easier to make money posing as a man who had been maimed at sea than to explain his accident at the workplace. Dressed as a sailor, but saying nothing, he could conjure in the minds of would-be philanthropists a long history of nautical adventure; brickmakers (a job, as the unfortunate Israel Potter learned, reserved for the desperately poor) had no such stories.

To their consternation, agents for the Mendacity Society discovered that other beggars were using tales of a more recent vintage. They found men making a living on the London streets by pretending to have escaped from slavery in the United States. Some of the supposed runaways were actually white men 'fortu-

88. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-1852; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 403, 425, 427-28. The writer Joseph Mitchell learned that 'decayed literary gentlemen' continued to practice their begging arts well into the twentieth century. See 'Professor Sea Gull' and 'Joe Gould's Secret,' in *Up in the Old Hotel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 52-70 and 623-716. The story of Mr. Gould first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1964.

nate enough to possess a flattish or turned-up nose' who had 'dyed themselves black.' All the fugitives, black and white, were telling stories of suffering and escape that Mayhew and his colleagues assumed they had learned from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Americans and American stories had begun to wash up on English shores.⁸⁹

The idea that antislavery sentiment could be inspiration for fraud would not have surprised the genial defender of slavery, George Fitzhugh. Fitzhugh incorporated a long section on storytelling beggars into his defense of slavery, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (1856). He reprinted a catalogue of 'Lurkers'—poor people armed with stories and preying on the prosperous—that had first appeared in *The Edinburgh Review*.⁹⁰ Fitzhugh's catalogue of beggars resembled the compilation of the Mendacity Society, but Fitzhugh used it to defend slavery, not to warn against the wiles of the poor. Beggars were a blot on the free labor economy, a reminder that capitalism had unsettled everything. If wealthy philanthropists were gulled into supporting lying beggars, they had no one but themselves to blame. Fitzhugh knew it would make the prosperous uncomfortable to be reminded that they might be victimized by the clever poor, and he

89. The association of sailors with stories has, of course, a long and venerable history. Publishers in the 1840s actively solicited sea stories. Charles Ellms concluded his *Robinson Crusoe's Own Book; or the Voice of Adventure, from the Civilized Man Cut Off from his Fellows, by Force of Accident, or Inclination and from the Wanderer in Strange Seas and Lands* (1842; reprint, Boston: Joshua V. Pierce, 1846) with a 'Card,' inviting 'mariners of every grade' to send him accounts of 'adventures sufficiently remarkable for publication, . . . such as shipwrecks, and extraordinary escapes from these and other disasters; intercourse with uncivilized people, whether of a peaceful or warlike character. . . .'

On the importance of being Uncle Tom, see Robin Winks, 'The Making of a Fugitive Slave Narrative: Josiah Henson and Uncle Tom—A Case Study,' in *The Slaves' Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 112–46. Victorian diarist Arthur Munby took a special interest in white working-class women who masqueraded as black. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 108.

90. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves without Masters* (1856; reprint, edited by C. Vann Woodward, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 137–45. Fitzhugh's chapter is little more than an extended quotation from an article published in July 1852 in the *Edinburgh Review*. The article itself, 'Mendacity: Its Causes and Statistics,' was little more than a pamphlet previously published in Birmingham. Turner traced the 'lurk' from the *Welsh Ilerc*, which he defined as a 'fit of loitering.' *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy*, 311.

used his knowledge to turn an indictment of heartless capitalism into a warning against abolitionist methods.

Fitzhugh evoked lying beggars to warn those who had listened to tales told by men and women who escaped from slavery that by sympathizing with poor storytellers, they opened themselves to fraud and trickery. Fitzhugh admitted that he had scrutinized abolitionist strategy and tactics. He confessed that he had borrowed for his own projects an art of using poetry and song he had learned from "our Masters in the art of war" [abolitionists] when we carried their camp and their whole park of artillery (which we are now using with such murderous effect against their own ranks). We also captured their camp equipage, books of military strategy, &c.⁹¹ It was apparent to Fitzhugh, as it was to Mayhew, that storytelling fugitives could be the near relatives of storytelling beggars. By hinting that fugitive slaves borrowed the tactics of scheming beggars, Fitzhugh evoked for readers troublesome figures who reminded middle-class abolitionists that their purses, as well as their hearts, were vulnerable.

With Fitzhugh's passage on beggars and stories, we have come full circle. We began with beggars who cast themselves as the victims of circumstances they could not control; we end with middle-class philanthropists worried that they have become the victims of beggars. Stories of suffering (and the ways stories were told, ratified, and sold) played critical roles for victimized beggars and for victimized philanthropists. It is possible that Moses Smith, Michael Smith, Robert Adams, and Israel Potter found some satisfaction in ordering their experiences into stories and in getting stories made into the printed books they could exchange for cash. They learned that interest in their stories could be ephemeral and that their stories' value depended on their being taken as true. Sometimes they vouched for the truth of their stories by standing up for them, by presenting themselves in person to answer questions. On the printed page, such vouchers lost their force.

91. Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 250.

For poor men, printed truths were tricky things. To ensure the truth of their tales (and therefore their value) they relied on processes of verification exercised by individuals or organizations with acknowledged social weight. As readers and writers knew well, ratification was easy to fake, and certificates designed to assert the truth of a tale told were as often made to serve the interests of fiction as those of fact. But in so many transactions, printed forms of verification were the only guarantees of truth to be found. It was hard to have full confidence in the power of written assurances. They did serve to acknowledge the power of 'gentlemen' to designate 'truth,' but who was to protect readers from beggars who invented gentlemen to back their lies? A necessary faith in printed forms came back to haunt middle-class philanthropists who had opened themselves to the tales they read. Mayhew and Fitzhugh recognized that storytelling beggars exposed faults in a system meant to separate those who spoke and wrote the truth with authority from those who borrowed the trappings of legitimacy and retailed experiences from the margins.

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