

“satire upon all of us”: The Self-Made Man as Confidence Man in P.T. Barnum’s America

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[...] the people will go to see old Barnum. First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it! I believe if he should swindle a man out of twenty dollars, the man would give a quarter to hear him tell about it. (P.T. Barnum, quoting a ticket seller at his American Museum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself*)

*I*n a scathing review of P.T. Barnum’s first autobiography, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (1855), *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* grumbled,

Seriously, we have not read, in a long time, a more trashy or offensive book than this; and we should not have considered it worthy of the least notice had we merely looked to the intrinsic merits of its contents. But it is worth noticing as a satire upon all of us; and we hope it may have the effect – very different from what its author intended – of opening the eyes of the public, for some little time at least, to the shameless exhibitions which have become a matter of regular trade and speculation. (189)

The *Blackwood's* writer assumes that Barnum's "satire upon all of us" is not at all "what the author intended"; but a close reading of the brazen contradictions of Barnum's self-presentation in his public persona and autobiographical writings reveals his highly self-conscious use of satire. Specifically, in his professional life and in his writing, Barnum portrayed himself both as the incarnation of the American success story – the self-made man – and as the ultimate confidence man – the "king of Humbug" (*Colossal* 20) – thus conflating two seemingly antithetical nineteenth-century myths.¹ By showing the self-made man to be at bottom a confidence man, Barnum revealed the American Dream itself to be a con game, thereby sapping the myth of its integrity.

But, as I will endeavor to show in this essay, Barnum claimed as well as mocked respectability, exposing himself and others as frauds while attempting to justify or account for his own fraud. Barnum thus achieved his societal critique by highlighting his own unscrupulous hypocrisy and self-contradiction, and then expanding his denunciations outward to satirize those who saw themselves as above such machinations. That is, Barnum's self-fashioning as a self-made con man exposed moral and cultural élites – especially clerics – as themselves caught up in an economy of false confidence and slippery appearances, and therefore no different from other operators in the emergent market economy that he praised and sought to embody.

Later in the *Blackwood's* review, the disgusted writer claims that Barnum "has left nothing for his worst enemy to do; for he has fairly gibbeted himself. No unclean bird of prey, nailed ignominiously to the door of a barn, can present a more humiliating spectacle than Phineas Taylor Barnum, as he appears in his *Autobiography*" (199). What the reviewer misses is that leaving "nothing for his worst enemy to do" is a profitable and prescient use of self-mockery that is a key component of Barnumesque satire. In his autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writings, the very magnitude of the unscrupulousness he attributes to himself in effect disarms his detractors. The self-satire of his blatantly belabored hypocrisy allows Barnum to control the public's perception of

him by anticipating and preemptively levying criticisms at himself. In short, Barnum's exposés of Barnum are often more entertaining than others' exposés of him, and therefore have more traction with the reading public. Through such self-satire, combined with his apparent embrace of others' satires on him, Barnum subtly ameliorates his public image both by demonstrating his good humor and by rendering others' satiric critiques on him at best repetitive, at worst productive of publicity for Barnum's persona and products.

Self-"gibbet"-ing is important to Barnumesque satire not only because it helps him maintain jurisdiction over his image but also because it is from the self-satirized position that Barnum engages in satiric leveling to show how everyone else in the hurly-burly of the American market economy is just as hypocritical and unscrupulous as he is. Barnum uses satiric leveling to challenge religious and moral authorities (which, when taken seriously, are bad for business) by playfully and ironically inhabiting their roles. In his writings, Barnum levies this satiric leveling against the democratic myth of the self-made man and the nineteenth-century aura of individualism, both of which are intimately tied up with notions of originality and authenticity. Such satire ultimately undermines notions of authenticity – both of his exhibits and of individual identity – by confusing the lines between reality and hoax, true self and impostor.

The self-made man, as shown to the public sphere, is merely a self-fashioned entity. But, when identities are so easy to don and doff, one begins to question whether there is any true self underneath the various levels of self-fashioning. Instead of offering an individual self, Barnum presents so many different selves that he endangers the concept of selfhood at a time when a recognizable identity was absolutely essential to the credit system at the heart of the capitalist market. Karen Halttunen, in *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982), a historical study of nineteenth-century conduct manuals, has connected confidence games to the exigencies of the fast-changing market economy. "The proliferation of moveable wealth," she writes, "especially negotiable paper, in the early nineteenth century, and the growing confusion and anonymity of urban

living, had made possible for the first time a wide variety of swindles, frauds, forgeries, counterfeiting activities, and other confidence games” (7). In what follows I will examine how Barnum took advantage of both the market economy and the mass media not only to turn a profit but also to problematize his era’s celebration of the self-made man and its trust in an identifiable, unitary self. In mass-marketing and constantly re-defining his exhibits and himself, Barnum removed any trace of what Walter Benjamin labeled the “aura” of originality and presented everyone – even himself – as a mass-produced, saleable commodity.

For Benjamin, the main consequence of reproducible art is such a loss of “aura” (221). “The presence of the original,” Benjamin writes, “is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (220); but mechanical reproduction, in “making many reproductions ... substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (221).² Barnum, too, destroys or irrevocably alters the originals not just of cultural artifacts but of the people he exhibits, including himself. For example, through training, faked documents, and lies, he transformed Joice Heth from an old-looking slave to the 161-year-old nurse of Washington, thus discarding her original identity for a more saleable one. Similarly, Barnum taught a diminutive child named Charles Sherwood Stratton songs, dances, and comedy routines, called him “General Tom Thumb,” more than doubled his age, and took him on tour; in doing so he eradicated Stratton’s original identity for a fraudulent but lucrative one. Finally, in his own autobiographical writings Barnum presents and disseminates multiple, conflicting versions of self, flooding and cornering the market with multiple personalities. In making himself a popular exhibition Barnum calls into question even his own identity as master manipulator of others’ authentic and inauthentic selves.

David S. Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1989), captures this element of what he repeatedly describes as “Barnumesque culture” (560) when he describes how the hodge-podge of Barnum’s American Museum “unabashedly cast the profane and the sacred together into the arena of profit-making theater” (469), resulting in an “Ameri-

can humorous carnival" in which "distinctions of all kinds are eradicated, and the high and low, the human and nonhuman meet on the flat level of humorous theater" (468). But such relativism and "universal equality of things" also describe the structure of Barnumesque satire, in which Barnum uses satiric leveling to elide professional and cultural distinctions by demeaning the "high" and scandalously elevating the "low." Specifically, Barnum, through material and social leveling, claims his own respectability while bringing those who consider themselves to be respectable (especially, as we shall see, clergymen and lawyers) down to the showman's level of prestige, showing that they are like him and, just as important, vice versa.

If, then, modernist art as Benjamin describes it operates by presenting objects upon an equal plane, placing its audience in a critical stance, and destroying authenticity through mass dissemination of inauthentic copies, Barnum is certainly a nineteenth-century modernist. Barnum's writings and exhibitions actively work to eradicate the original, present a host of seemingly incongruous selves in its stead, and raise questions about the very notion of authenticity. Barnum's greatest act of mass production may have been of himself. During an age with a vast marketplace for books – media historian John Tebbel writes that by the mid-nineteenth century "the rapid growth of education at all levels had produced the largest reading audience anyone had ever seen, an audience which virtually demanded books..." (107) – Barnum was a best-selling author many times over. Most conspicuously, Barnum wrote and rewrote his own life, publishing multiple versions of a best-selling autobiography (the 1855 version alone sold 160,000 copies in the U.S. [Fretz 98]); Carl Bode estimates that the autobiography in its various incarnations was the most widely read book in America in the second half of the nineteenth century [23-24]). But Barnum also wrote several running newspaper columns, a serialized novella (*Adventures of an Adventurer* [1841]), and a popular nonfiction work (*Humbugs of the World* [1865]).

Barnum the author was apparently livid that the *Blackwood's* review of *Life* painted him as a mere blackguard. Large parts of the review were

reprinted in American periodicals, including the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, to which Barnum held a subscription. In a long letter to Rev. Thomas Whittemore, editor of the *Trumpet and Universalist*, Barnum defended himself in a manner that is highly telling of his methods in business and literature, and encapsulates many of Barnum's concerns and aesthetic strategies. After vehemently denying claims that the autobiography was ghostwritten,³ Barnum attempts to justify his charlatanism as arising from personal levity and professional necessity instead of from his essential character:

[...] any appearance of rejoicing in the success of some of my schemes which may have been considered questionable must be ascribed in a good measure, or a bad measure, to my inborn and life-long love of a practical joke and my professional life as a Showman. It is not a vindication but a fact, that men as politicians, sectarians, and lawyers frequently do what they would *not* do as *men*; and the same I suppose is generally true of caterers for public amusement. I do not defend here what I speak of, but I think it is hardly fair to make a fish of a lawyer and flesh of a showman. (qtd. in Saxon, *Legend* 16)

Barnum here connects his profession of showman to more "respectable" jobs of politician and lawyer. They, too, are unscrupulous, he says, and if you damn me you damn them. In this way, Barnum engages in satiric leveling, simultaneously demeaning the respected professions for removing morality from their work and raising himself up to their level of respectability via the juxtaposition. But Barnum's defense also makes a revealing differentiation between "men" and their professions. In claiming that "politicians, sectarians, and lawyers frequently do what they would *not* do as *men*," he articulates what he sees as a fundamental disconnect between one's professional persona and his or her true self.

"gulled by Barnaby Diddleum": Satiric Self-Presentation as Annihilation of Self in *Adventures of an Adventurer*

Barnum first created an alternate self in print in his novella *Adventures of an Adventurer*, which also happens to be the work in which he most cynically embraces the role of "king of Humbug" (*Colossal* 20). *Adventures*, billed by *The New York Atlas* (the newspaper in which the serial appeared in 1841) as a behind-the-scenes exposition of the Joice Heth affair by her exhibitor, is ostensibly authored and narrated not by Barnum but by "Barnaby Diddleum," whom Barnum presents as a cruder and crueler version of himself. The narrator's first name is derivative of "Barnum," and the surname implies his penchant for cheating others. Since he is not yet world-famous, Barnum in *Adventures* has less to lose and therefore can depict himself as more unapologetically exploitive than he will in the later *Life* and *Humbugs of the World*. Diddleum's crass bragging burlesques the process of becoming a self-made man, as his confessions reveal his worldly successes to be the artificial products of guile and lies. Diddleum not only creates false identities for his exhibits but also for himself; he uses various notions of "self" to his advantage, disseminating different selves for different purposes. This unscrupulous use of self-fashioning shows that everyone's presented persona is in essence self-made, a show.

As *Adventures* purports to be a firsthand confession unmasking the Joice Heth exhibition, Diddleum comes off as quite vicious, as when he claims that upon purchasing Heth, "I made her look a great deal older, I extracted her teeth, which caused her cheeks to sink in" (Barnum, *Colossal* 16).⁴ Interestingly, in *Life* Barnum attributes the tooth extraction story – and several other details relayed in *Adventures* – to a hoax perpetrated by his employee and exhibitor Lyman (whose name is evocative of allegorical morality-play monickers). In *Life*, Barnum recalls that Lyman told *Herald* editor Gordon Bennett

what purported to be the history of Joice – of her having been first found by me [Barnum] in the out-house of a plantation in Kentucky – of my having extracted all her

teeth – taught her the Washington story – called her 110 years old in Louisville, 121 in Cincinnati – twenty years older in Pittsburgh, and 161 at Philadelphia. (*Life* 175)

Barnum immediately calls this a “ridiculous story” (175) and then takes credit for discrediting it for the first time in his autobiography. He writes, “The story of Lyman has since been generally accredited as the true history of the old negress, and never, until the present writing, have I said or written a word by way of contradiction or correction” (176). What Barnum does not say is that almost every detail of this “ridiculous story” – down to the ages and towns – came straight from his own *Adventures*.⁵ By the time *Life* was published in 1855, Barnum wanted to distance himself from both the Heth exhibition and from his self-portrayal of his role in it in 1841.

Despite Barnum’s eventual disavowal of its claims, *Adventures* is important because it displays Barnum’s first and wildest descriptions of the enormity of the concept of humbug. Diddleum’s definition of “humbug” here is quite broad, as seen in his reference to “all of the humbugs with which the world has been humbugged since the serpent humbugged Eve, and Eve humbugged Adam, and all their sons and daughters have since humbugged each other...” (*Colossal* 15). Barnum’s repetition of “humbug” here, as well as his placement of it in genesis, reveals an understanding of the pervasiveness of “humbug” that his cultural contemporaries seemed to share or at least to echo.⁶ For Diddleum, claiming the ubiquity of humbug (or diddling) is a justificatory exercise: if everyone is humbugging everyone else, Diddleum’s Heth hoax is, if not morally tenable, just another example of something that occurs constantly and almost naturally.

But, if humbug is all around us, Diddleum’s self-coronation as “king of Humbug” makes him king of everyone and everything. I present the following excerpt without abridgement to accurately capture Diddleum’s monomaniacal grandiosity:

Crown me with fame – erect a monument to my memory
– decree me a Roman triumph – I deserve all – I stand

alone – I have no equal, no rival – I am king of Humbug – the king among princes. O, it is great, it is glorious – I chuckle now at the might of my sovereignty, the extent of my works, and laugh in ecstasy! Other poor pitiful humbugs, of whom I am as heartily ashamed as Falstaff of his ragged regiment, have been content to gull a portion of the public mass – the unthinking, with their nostrums, promising them eternal health; others have promised eternal bloom, others have promised eternal happiness, and sold out sin licenses and security from damnation – all for a price. Others have made science subservient to their desires, and nicely dovetailing truth with falsehood, consistency with inconsistency, have taken in a few wise men whose learning has made them mad – have done it for a price; but the success of these paltry, miserable humbugs has been comparatively small. A portion only of the public has worshipped the new lights, believed in them as an oracle, or idolized them as divinity. I have triumphed over all – I have marched a conqueror from city to city. The enlightened, the ignorant, the lawyer, the student, the divine – young, old, virtuous, vicious – the good, the bad, and the indifferent, and over and above all, those immaculate men who sit in judgment upon the world, the oracles of the press – the organs of the people, have been gulled by Barnaby Diddleum. Like the immortal Caesar I can say of the places I visited – *Veni vidi vici* – ha! ha! ha! (20-21)

Diddleum here refers to himself as king, emperor, and god, and tops it off with a villainous laugh. He also summarizes other – to him inferior – types of humbug, including medical, scientific, religious, and psychological humbugs, and refers to the process of “nicely dovetailing truth with falsehood.” Diddleum’s incessant listings – first of humbugs and then of those who commit them and are taken in by them – “The enlightened, the

ignorant, the lawyer, the student, the divine” – is a leveling gesture that equalizes the high and the low, the respectable and the disreputable. Since each of these classes of people engages in humbug and is in turn humbugged by Diddleum, the snake-oil salesman who peddles “nos-trums” is no worse than the “divine” who sells indulgences. After all, even inferior humbugs were “believed in ... as an oracle” and “idolized ... as divinity.” Only Diddleum is situated above them: not because he is a better man but because he is a better con man. Diddleum’s obviously overwrought self-aggrandizement here allows Barnum to mock the pomposity and self-importance of his narrator even as he satirically notes the power and influence of confidence men. In *Adventures* Barnum satirizes himself (as Diddleum) as the worst possible manifestation of a calculating confidence man and personification of “conquering” market forces. But the satire also moves outward from Diddleum to “respectables” such as the clergy and anyone else who saw themselves as socially “above” the class of showman and even to his audience (both of the Heth exhibition and of its exposition in *Adventures*) for its insatiable desire for novelty and its willingness to be “conquered” by perpetrators of humbug.

Diddleum expresses a particular antipathy to clergymen.⁷ He claims to “have hated priests for the most part with a Carthaginian hatred...” (43) and says, “If I had my will, many of those wolves in sheep’s clothing should be sheared twice a year – but, as it is, they shear their flock fifty two times a year, and milk the goats (beg from the world’s people) as often as opportunity offers” (49). But immediately after this diatribe, he rethinks his position: “However, as this portion of the community are *humbugs*, I suppose I ought not to find fault with them, for humbug is my hobby” (49). According to Diddleum’s logic, reverends and showmen are equally humbugs; in this equation lies the key to Barnumesque satire. That is, Barnum engages in self-satire (through Diddleum) to conflate priests and showmen as frauds or “humbugs” of equal stripes. This conflation raises Barnum to the level of respectability of a clergyman while demeaning clergymen to the status of an unscrupulous showman. Satire critic Frank Palmeri characterizes “material leveling” in satire as “con-

testing authoritative distinctions between high and low among bodily functions, social groups, literary genres, and rhetorical operations" (10). According to Palmeri, "rendering the spiritual equivalent with the material, satire also levels high and low in social, philosophical, and literary hierarchies of value" (12). Barnum's addition to this formula is to raise himself up – by brashly or fraudulently inhabiting a "higher" role – while dragging down those viewed as more respectable. The result is a carnivalesque relativization of status.

In *Adventures*, Barnum lays claim on clerical respectability in part through unscrupulous impersonation. Diddleum's unapologetic willingness to become what he hates is important to understanding how Barnum's satire works. His impersonation belittles and materializes the spiritual work of clerics, thus destabilizing the civic and moral authority of organized religion. As Diddleum describes his preaching, "I was always to the world at large of a religious bearing, partly because it assisted my grand schemes, and partly because I had the gift of eloquence to a considerable extent, and was devilishly proud of it. This led me to become a preacher, and in all places where it would be advantageous to me, I figured as the *Reverend* Barnaby Diddleum" (20). The fact that Diddleum is "devilishly proud" of his priestly "bearing" immediately announces to the reader the disingenuousness and superficiality of his transformation into "the *Reverend*." He preaches not for the glory of God or the rectification of wrongs, but because "it assisted [his] grand schemes." Diddleum continues,

Upon the particular occasion to which I allude, I was in a small town on the northern border, and promised on the ensuing Sabbath to deliver a discourse. I was at the time somewhat indifferently clad for a Reverend, who is nothing without his sables. I did not wish to purchase any clothes, as my funds were rather low; but I resolved to have a suit. So I took a trip over to Canada, and ... got into playing several games of chance with some former acquaintances. I won my clothes – brought them over in

triumph, and on the ensuing Sunday preached an admired sermon on the fatal effects of gambling, which I have since learnt, totally reformed one habitual player.
(20)

Here Diddleum's assertion that a reverend "is nothing without his sables" again highlights the externality of his role-playing. The metonymy of Diddleum's thought process, which sees clothes as the key constitutive element of clericalness, is commonly used in satiric leveling. Palmeri writes, "Against assertions of natural and social harmonies that may take the form of metaphors, metonymic reductions can reduce incorporeal to corporeal" (15). Often this corporealizing exposes the material basis of the abstractions that the metonymy punctures, creating a "parodic form of the economic and social forms it discloses" (16). Diddleum's quick and easy transformations into a reverend reveal clerical work to be material (i.e. the clothes make the man) and remunerative (e.g. "it assisted my grand schemes") instead of ethereal and philanthropic. But the most entertaining part of this story lies in Diddleum's smug relish at the irony that he gambled to win the clothes in which he then preached against gambling.⁸ Such reveling in hypocrisy does not just reveal Diddleum to be the ultimate confidence man; it also comments on the ease with which anyone can inhabit antithetical professions, personalities, and positions almost simultaneously. It turns out that the confidence man is in a very real sense a "self-made man," in that he makes himself into whomever he wants.

A second punch line arrives when Diddleum pretends to drop his cynical stance to brag about the "real" effects of his "fake" sermon as having "totally reformed one habitual player." This incident prefigures a similar one in *Life* in which Barnum recounts trying his hand at preaching in North Carolina in 1836. The message of his sermon, as he remembers it, was that "We cannot violate the laws of God with impunity, and he will not keep back the wages of well-doing. We must look to realities and not appearances" (*Life* 188). This last pronouncement is highly ironic, since Barnum made his living by exploiting the difference between

appearance and reality, and especially because he is taking advantage of false appearances even as he speaks. Barnum recalls, "I went on in this strain, with much Scripture and many familiar illustrations, for about three quarters of an hour. [...] I felt happy in believing that I possibly had done some good in that charming grove on the Sabbath" (189). In gloating over the "good" that their religious impersonations may have done, Barnum and Diddleum obliterate the lines between sin and "well-doing," cynicism and earnestness, performance and reality. For Diddleum and his creator, the simultaneous inhabitation of contradictory roles can be quite lucrative. Both multiply their identities, deploying different selves in different situations in order to eke out profits from the cultural assets on hand. In *Adventures* and, as we will see, in his subsequent writings, Barnum highlights this multiplicity in a medium that also serves to mass-produce different selves. In performances that at first seem merely to highlight his own bald hypocrisy, Barnum registers his readers' suspicions regarding confidence games and their attendant endangerment of the concept of a stable, consistent, and unitary self. Barnum's self-satire shows that, if he is a hypocrite, so is everyone else; he, at least, is better off for realizing it.

"we are all showmen": *The Life of P.T. Barnum*

It is said that P.T. Barnum, the great showman, is engaged in writing his "Life and Adventures." It will sell – while those who buy and read it, will be "sold." (*Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 3 March 1854)

Barnum's multiplications of self continued in his first autobiography, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself*. In *Life* Barnum plays the simultaneous roles of self-made man and confidence man, didactic teacher and bad-apple student, moralist and prankster, preacher and sinner. These roles are not so much contradictory as dialectic, representing the multivalent complexity of the age of the "market revolution," to borrow historian Charles Sellers' term. In this book Barnum presents himself in a more respectable light than he had in *Adventures*, but he re-

tains elements of the salacious self-exposure of a confidence man while refashioning himself as a self-made man in the Franklinian mold. Though Barnum's didactic pose does follow Franklin's, it is singularly, self-referentially Barnumesque and raises questions about the earnestness of his Franklin imitation.

Consider, for example, the moral that Barnum draws from relating his experiences as a lottery agent. First, he provides a detailed account of how profits were made from lotteries, including the "'scheme price,' which allowed the agents from 25 to 30 per cent. profit" (*Life* 126). After giving all of this information in "facts and figures" and with an accompanying illustration, Barnum shifts to a moral and educative tone when he claims, "Thousands of persons are at this day squandering in lottery tickets and lottery policies the money which their families need. If this *exposé* shall have the effect of curing their ruinous infatuation, I, for one, shall not be sorry" (128). The figures, then, are not – or not only – a demonstration of Barnum's lottery-business acumen, but an "*exposé*" intended for the readers' protection from such schemes. But in the very *next sentence* Barnum brags about how successfully he engaged in the same lottery bilking that he warns his readers against:

After learning the *profitable* basis of the foregoing facts, I went to our Connecticut lottery managers, and from that time obtained my tickets directly from them at "the scheme price." In my turn I established agents all through the country, and my profits were immense. I sold from five hundred to two thousand dollars' worth of tickets per day. (128)

Barnum here goes through the autobiographical motions of making his personal experiences fodder for public lessons for public posterity: in Barnum's case "the million" who are his readers and museum patrons. But in doing so, Barnum, in subsequent sentences, celebrates *both* his role as a public protector in revealing the unfairness of lotteries *and* his role as an unscrupulous capitalist making "immense" profits off that public. (Of course, he also made a profit from his memoirs, which his read-

ers presumably purchased less to learn lessons in civic morality than to revel in the details of his shady dealings.) Barnum's pose of didactic instructor and public benefactor, which he repeats at other points in his *Life* and later in *Humbugs of the World* (1865), then, is at least partially disingenuous, and can be read as a cynical burlesque of the Franklinian mode of autobiography as the generic genesis of the model American to be imitated by its readers.

In this way, Barnum follows the script of self-made-man memoirs but constantly winks at his readers as he does so. As a *New-York Times* reviewer put it, "Barnum is the embodiment and impersonation of success" (qtd. in Sandage 75). This formulation, inspired by Barnum's life and *Life*, highlights the performative nature of the self-made man. That is, Barnum's prose follows the standard master-plot of the American success story, and indeed he had been successful enough to write and sell his memoirs. But the idea of success that the memoir by its very existence claims is based on a tautology: Barnum has achieved the American Dream simply because his narration of his life tells us that he has, thus attesting to the superficiality of the self-made man.

In an April 1855 review of *Life* in *Metropolitan Magazine*, critic Severn Teackle Wallis wonders why readers should be interested in reading Barnum's autobiography:

There was a time when people must have lived lives before they could sell them. It was necessary for them to have been something, or to have done something, which the world knew and valued, as a model or a warning, before they could persuade or induce the world to buy or read their stories [...]. Now it seems that everybody's life is treasured up to made [sic] a book. (72)

This complaint connects to Walter Benjamin's point about the fast-vanishing line separating authors and readers in the age of mechanical reproduction. "With the increasing extension of the press," Benjamin writes, "an increasing number of readers became writers [...]. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character.

The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer" (232). Similarly, since art in the age of mechanical reproduction puts its audiences in the role of the critic (234), Wallis as writer and reviewer is doubly threatened by Barnum's foray into literature. Nevertheless, his objection to Barnum's becoming a memoirist, whether intentionally or not, seems to capture a key change in the prevailing American myth of class mobility from an equal chance in life to an equal chance to write one's "Life." Egalitarianism had been removed from society to the sphere of publishing. Wallis goes on to ask, "What is the inventor of the 'wooly horse' to this visible, diurnal sphere, more than the 'wooly horse' itself?" (73). But part of Barnum's reason for writing his memoirs was to mass-produce and disseminate the wooly horse, Jumbo, Tom Thumb, the Fejee Mermaid, *and* himself. Putting his curiosities and adventures into book form was an entirely logical enterprise for a showman interested in reaching a mass audience. More comprehensive (and cheaper to produce) than his traveling shows, which also sought to bring his products to a wide range of people, Barnum's books reproduced his exhibits and made an exhibit of himself.

Barnum was intensely aware of his own exhibition value, and duly exploited it. In *Life* Barnum recalls the moment that he realized he was as much an attraction as his exhibits. Soon after his return from the European Tom Thumb tour he was "surprised to find that I had also become a curiosity during my absence. If I showed myself about the Museum or wherever else I was known, I found eyes peering and fingers pointing at me, and could frequently overhear the remark, 'There's Barnum,' 'That's old Barnum,' etc." (292). He then tells a story about how he was reading a newspaper in the American Museum's ticket office when a patron

came and purchased a ticket of admission. "Is Barnum in the Museum?" he asked. The ticket-seller, pointing to me, answered, "This is Mr. Barnum." Supposing the gentleman had some business with me, I looked up from the paper. "Is this Mr. Barnum?" he asked. "It is," I re-

plied. He stared at me for a moment, and then throwing down his ticket, he exclaimed, "It's all right. I have got the worth of my money;" and away he went, without going into the Museum at all! (292-93)

This anecdote advertises both Barnum and his museum while serving the generic requirements of his autobiography by announcing that he has "made it." It also illustrates how he has collapsed the distance between autobiography and exhibition. For Barnum, the self-fashioning self-exposure of his memoirs is merely an extension of his role as museum proprietor and showman. In both cases he combines salacious titillation with didactic moralizing, claims of authenticity with suspicions of fraud, and an interplay of competing identities.

Barnum's revelations of his own schemes connect to the American autobiographical tradition begun by the Puritans he spent his life rebelling against. Puritan writers like Thomas Shepard used autobiographies to recount a specific conversion experience. Barnum, it seems, was constantly and endlessly converting. In *Life* and elsewhere, he consistently places his unscrupulous or "bad" self in the past as he confesses how and why he conned the public. In fact, Barnum re-published his revised autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs* almost yearly with new appendices, thus highlighting the author's ability to create and recreate the self and allowing him further to sanitize his image as he became more "respectable." The ironic twist, of course, is that in publishing and selling that confession (something the Puritan autobiographers never did) he swindled the same public again, thus ensuring the need for a future confession in a future revised edition of the autobiography. The result is an endlessly serial self. In creating and disseminating multiple, competing selves, Barnum depicts himself less as singular or unique than as multiple, everywhere, and, as he appears in multiple editions of his autobiography, entirely reproducible, both as a model American and as a material product of the printing press. Barnum does not lament this loss of individual identity; in his writing he affirms the difference between the private self and the self brought to market, a.k.a. the self-made man.

But Barnum is no mere parading confidence man: A confidence man disguises his “true” self, and works to convince others that his masked, “fake” self is his “true” self in order to win their confidence and thus swindle them. One scholar describes the “formula” of the confidence man as “an ingenious pose concealing a private, secret self confident of its powers, confident especially of its power to elicit trust in the pose. The stronger one’s feeling of secure selfhood, the more successful the persona; and the more successful the mask, the surer one’s private sense of self, confidence breeding confidence” (Wadlington 12). In this sense, the confidence man is absolutely invested in convincing others that there is such a thing as the unitary self; this is the basis of confidence. But Barnum, as another scholar notes, was “a shaker of public confidence” (Sandage 76) with his hoaxes and untrustworthy personas.

Like Walt Whitman (whose first version of *Leaves of Grass* was also published in 1855), Barnum reveled in the pluralistic, self-contradictory nature of the self. Both celebrated the possibilities of radical social leveling and multiple identities. After all, it was Whitman, that famous singer of the self, who wrote “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (68). Whitman also shared Barnum’s zest for popular culture and his literary nationalism. In fact, upon returning from his Tom Thumb tour in Europe in May 1846, Barnum was interviewed by a young journalist named Walter Whitman, who wrote in the 25 May 1846 *Brooklyn Eagle*:

He told us of his tour through all the capitals of Europe, and his intercourse with kings, queens, and the big bugs. We asked him if anything he saw there made him love Yankeedom any less. His gray eyes flashed: “My God!” said he, “no! not a bit of it! Why, sir, you can’t imagine the difference. – There every thing is frozen – kings and *things* – formal, but absolutely *frozen*: here it is *life*. Here it is freedom, and here are *men*.” (qtd. in Zunder 40)

The “life” that Barnum celebrates in his interview with Whitman as a constituent of Americanness features a chaotic interplay of competing

identities in the emergent marketplace.⁹ Barnum's discovery that the self need not be coherent – indeed, that the division of labor could radically extend to the division of self – allowed him, as a showman and as a writer, to be "all things to all people" (Barnum, *Colossal* 31).

Profitable Pillory: Barnum's Relationship to (and Authorship of) Satires on Barnum

Among other possible responses, Barnum's exhibits and writings allowed the viewer/reader to question or ridicule Barnum himself, a gesture that re-inscribed Barnum's authorship of the entire experience. In some cases, as we have seen, Barnum encouraged this ridicule through his satiric self-presentations; but he was also willing to accept and even embrace satiric leveling aimed at him by others, and consistently saw the aesthetic and pecuniary benefits of satires on him.

In *Life* Barnum enjoys recounting jokes played on him and satires written or displayed at his expense. He devotes three pages, for example, to reprinting a poem from *Barnum's Parnassus: being Confidential Disclosures of the Prize Committee on the Jenny Lind Song* (1850), a collection of satiric poems parodying Barnum's own poetry contest, which was designed to drum up interest for Jenny Lind's arrival in America. Barnum says that the pamphlet's poems "abounded in wit" (*Life* 311), and he happily concedes that he "suffered some" in the barbs they leveled at him (310). The poem that Barnum reprints in full – titled "Barnumopsis" – good-naturedly pillories Barnum and the American Museum's collections in mock-heroic terms.¹⁰ He also reprints a stanza from another poem – "The Manager and the Nightingale"¹¹ – in which the Barnum character addresses Lind by saying, "And you will touch their hearts, and I will tap their pockets;/ And if between us both the public isn't skinned;/ Why, my name isn't Barnum, nor your name Jenny Lind" (310). This is remarkably similar to Barnum's own synopsis of his work in the Lind enterprise, in which he says "[...] little did the public see of the hand that indirectly pulled at their heart-strings, preparatory to a relaxation of their purse-strings" (315). The satire, then, is mild, because in portraying Bar-

num as genially unscrupulous it also compliments his skill as a legitimate operator. The real satiric target, then, is the public on whom he operates.

But, in considering Barnum's reprinting of these satiric poems, we must also account for portions of "The Manager and the Nightingale" that Barnum did not see fit to include in *Life*. The lines immediately following the stanza Barnum reprinted focus less on Barnum's disingenuous ingeniousness – which, as we have seen, he has been happy to highlight and exploit throughout his *Life* – than on his perceived business failures:

But in the last few months there's been a slight decline
In the living Alligator and Anaconda line;
Even Tom Thumb exhibitions are getting rather slow,
And my factory for Whales was burnt a while ago,
And the Mammoth Boy and Girl are getting rather thinned,
As sure as my name's Barnum and yours is Jenny Lind?

I must provide the public with some new Exhibition,
For I hold my popularity on that express condition;
So I thought of you Miss Jenny, the Swedish Nightingale; [...]
(Butler 18-19)

The poem's litany of Barnum exhibits grown stale is much more potentially damaging to his reputation than jokes on his "skinning" the public, because the former implies that these curiosities are no longer curious and therefore not worth the public's attention. In claiming that Barnum's "popularity" is in danger if he does not "provide the public with some new Exhibition," the poem hints that Barnum desperately needs Lind's services to boost his faltering reputation. By presenting the earlier section of the poem that praises him with faint damning – depicting Barnum as he consistently depicts himself, as a crafty operator – and omitting the portion of the satire that questions the success of those operations, Barnum works to control satiric critiques of him. That is, because he displays good humor in recounting burlesques on him, he cannot be accused of ignoring or reacting negatively to them. But, in reprinting only the

section of the poem that levels a particular critique that he sanctions and embraces, Barnum sidesteps potentially more destructive assessments that cannot also be read as paeans to his status as master showman and to his skill as a businessman.

In *Life* Barnum reveals how he utilized a similar strategy in his confession about deftly playing Peale's Museum's attempts to satirize him to his own advantage. Peale's, a rival to Barnum's American Museum, having failed financially, "endeavored to thrive by burlesquing whatever I produced. Thus, when I exhibited the Fejee Mermaid, he [Henry Bennett, Peale's proprietor] stuck a codfish and a monkey together and advertised the Fudg-ee Mermaid" (*Life* 243). Not only did Barnum not take offense at this imposition, he lauded the effort as "an invention creditable to his genius" that "created some laughter at my expense" (243). More importantly, Barnum notes, "it also served to draw attention to my museum" (243). As a result, when "the novelty of Bennett's opposition died away" Barnum took the incredible step of buying the Peale's collections and building, and "secretly engaging Bennett as my agent, we run [*sic*] a spirited opposition" (243). In another section of *Life* Barnum praises the British satiric magazine London *Punch* for its consistent mockery of Tom Thumb during their visit to England. Tom Thumb, Barnum writes, "was an almost constant theme for the 'London Punch,' which served the General and myself up so daintily that it no doubt added vastly to our receipts" (262). Here as in the previous examples, Barnum brags of encouraging satire on himself – especially genial satire that treats him "daintily" – as priceless advertising that calls attention to the very endeavor it mocks. Hence, not only could Barnum see satires at his expense as "creditable to" the "genius" of the satirist; more importantly and more lucratively, in multiple instances he co-opted them for his own profit, thus controlling satiric presentations of his image. If Barnum relished equally the role of satirist and satirized, it seems that he also always wanted a hand in the authorship of such satires.

But the most shocking instance of Barnum satire advertising Barnum is the sixty-four-page pamphlet *The Autobiography of Petite Bun-*

kum, *the Showman*... (1854), a parody of Barnum's *Life* that was published just before Barnum's book. The authorship of this work is still a matter of debate among Barnum scholars;¹² but, whether Barnum was directly or indirectly responsible for the parody, a brief look at the text as well as the publication's back matter illustrates in detail how Barnum embraced and profited from satires on him. Most of the jokes at Barnum's expense in *Petite Bunkum* are rather harmless swipes at his greed and unscrupulousness; and, in most cases, the brash, confessional tone does not much surpass Barnum's own exuberance in *Life*. Many of the jabs mock Barnum's justifications for the frauds he perpetuates. For instance, when he sets out to become a showman and collector of curiosities, Bunkum declares that "not chiefly to gratify my own tastes will I do this. No, that would be selfish; I have a nobler object in view – my own enrichment. The public shall view my splendid collection – *and the public shall pay well for the privilege!* Thus will I be doing mankind a benefit, and filling my coffers at the same time" (12). Here the narrator sets up certain moral expectations – the standard perception of a "nobler object" than selfishness – but then undercuts these expectations with an all-consuming greed.

The most illustrative sections of *Petite Bunkum* are those in which Bunkum muses upon the ways in which he delights in and profits from others' mockery of him. And, since the entire book mocks Barnum, the implication is that Barnum, too, delights in and profits from this exercise. At one point, Bunkum describes and reprints a poem mocking him. He says,

About this time, (all great men have enemies), the following "Acrostic" upon me, appeared in one of the newspapers, and was extensively copied throughout the United States; it will be seen the letters beginning the lines, form this sentence – "Bunkum, Prince of Humbug." (28)

This is remarkably similar to Barnum's reprinting in *Life* of the "Barnumopsis" poem. But in this case, the poem is obviously made up,

since the acrostic spells "Petite Bunkum," who does not exist. The poem, then, is a fake satire on a fake person in a real satire of Barnum, who may or may not have written or contributed to the piece himself. Bunkum, for one, pronounces himself pleased with the poem. "This sublime production," he claims, "instead of injuring, benefited me greatly, for it increased the celebrity of my 'Wooly Horse,' and awakened the public curiosity to behold the wonderful animal" (28). Bunkum makes a similar pronouncement – in Barnumesque fashion through a pun – when recalling a blatantly hypocritical and disingenuous speech that he made after the first "Swedish Nightingale" concert, which caused the crowd to erupt in "roars of incredulous laughter" (36). Bunkum claims that the audience can groan at him all it wants, "so long as they cause my coffers to groan with the pressure of dollars" (36-37). Bunkum's acuteness and greed, it seems, outweigh his personal pride, except for the pride that he has in winning the end-game. In this sense, pillory neither harms nor deters Bunkum (or Barnum); on the contrary, it serves to reinforce his behavior. This contradictory play of praise and blame – or, self-praise for others' blaming – structures *Petite Bunkum*, which itself praises Barnum by burlesquing him.

The extra-textual material in the book (i.e., the advertisements in its final pages) continues this dialectic. For instance, an ad for the printer describes *Petite Bunkum* as "the Great Book which P.T. Barnum tried to get an injunction on, to prevent my publishing." This description not only reveals *Petite Bunkum's* already-obvious satiric referent; it also seeks to portray the book as an unauthorized, though indirect, exposé by allying itself against Barnum. But, incredibly, another ad actually plugs Barnum's own forthcoming autobiography. The advertisement reads, "The AUTOBIOGRAPHY of P.T. Barnum, sent by mail (free) on receipt of \$1.25. Let no person extant fail to read the life of the GREAT LIVE YANKEE SHOWMAN." Other than its transformation of Barnum into an exhibit (which, as we have seen, Barnum himself does in his autobiography) by describing him in barker's terms as "the GREAT LIVE YANKEE SHOWMAN," this is a highly complimentary description of

Barnum and his book. Even more astounding is that, as Barnum scholar A.H. Saxon points out,

at the end of the narrative the editor steps forward to explain that the book's purpose is simply to playfully lampoon Barnum, whom he personally likes and whose forthcoming autobiography is bound to be a huge success, for "everybody must and will read Barnum's book!" It was the sort of publicity the showman loved to receive and that he was quite capable of getting up on his own.¹³ (13)

The book, then, is to some extent a crafty embrace of satire to advertise one's own (self-) satire, as *Petite Bunkum* performs the same dialectic of profitable pillory for Barnum that its satiric target describes and claims for himself in *Life*. Such satiric puffery also mocks and exposes what Lara Conger Cohen has described as "a fraudulent print public sphere" (662) built on an anonymous puffing system that allowed "authors to review their own work with impunity" (660).

In preemptively occupying the ground of Barnum ridicule, Barnum had once more left "nothing for his worst enemy to do," to again quote the *Blackwood's* review. A similar review of *Life* – in *Fraser's Magazine* – exemplifies the difficulty that some critics had in understanding this method. The critic writes, "It must be a strange taste, indeed, which leads a man to gibbet himself for contempt, and to court the rotten eggs and dead cats of moral pillory. Strange, however, as it is, the phenomenon is presented in perfection in the person of Mr. Phineas Taylor Barnum..." (213). But Barnum does not so much "court the rotten eggs and dead cats of moral pillory" as soft-toss a few at himself to guide others' reactions. As we have seen, the thoroughly entertaining quality of Barnum's salacious self-critiques – whether disguised in anonymous satires or highlighted in his autobiographies – drives out other critics' denunciations of Barnum and his humbugs, allowing him a modicum of control over his image. Additionally, both Barnum's satiric self-presentation as a hypocrite and others' ridicule of Barnum create an environment of levity in

which he can return the favor and subsequently satirize his critics and supporters (and all of America) for their pretensions to the normative morality that proceeds from assumptions of a unitary, un-self-contradicting "self." In his multiple professional and literary self-incarnations – as Barnaby Diddleum, as Petite Bunkum, as several versions of P.T. Barnum – he thus performs a "satire upon all of us" not simply for believing in an inauthentic exhibition but for believing that there can any longer be an authentic one.

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Notes

I would like to thank Terence Whalen for introducing me to P.T. Barnum as a subject of inquiry, both through his personal guidance and through his excellent introduction to the University of Illinois Press edition of *Life*; for lending me primary source materials; and for patiently reading and responding to early drafts of this essay.

¹ The confidence man was such a key figure in mid-nineteenth century America that one critic has described the confidence game as "the quintessentially American mode of Romantic capitalism" (Wadlington 12).

² While Benjamin mostly discusses the technological innovations of photography and film, his remarks are still applicable to Barnum's aesthetic response to the changing media technologies of his time, an era when advances in printing and the advent of lithography brought words and pictures to a growing audience at ever-lower prices, thereby making the consumption of reproduced texts and images part of everyday life. Barnum, who as a young man printed his own newspaper (Barnum, *Life* 138) and later owned the short-lived *Illustrated News* (385), certainly understood the significance of these innovations. In fact, Barnum's career was a testament to the use of the press to aid business; he always "puffed" his schemes in newspapers, and he claims in *Life* that it is "the powers of the press [...] to which more than any other cause I am indebted for my success in life" (129). Barnum's con-

sistent use of all available media outlets helped create a mass audience for his amusements.

³ Scholars have long debated Barnum's authorship of *Life* and his other works. Constance Rourke, in *Trumpets of Jubilee* (1927) writes that Rufus Griswold, editor at Barnum's *Illustrated News*, "may well have written Barnum's first autobiography" and claims that "most if not all of Barnum's books seem to have been written by humble servitors; it was his pleasure, perhaps, to command a literary style like any other exhibit" (412). In offering this simile, Rourke ignores the fact that Barnum often "authored" his exhibits by engineering them and writing innumerable pieces of puffery in newspapers. More recently, A.H. Saxon, in his biography *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (1989) defends Barnum's authorship, noting that "Amidst the rush of his other activities, it is easy to forget how fluent, prolific a writer Barnum was. By the time his autobiography appeared in 1854, he had already been a practicing journalist for several years" (17). Saxon, who edited Barnum's selected letters, also points to several letters that Barnum wrote to friends about the writing of the book, usually seeking details on exhibits, etc. Saxon concludes that "it seems safe to infer that the writer was also actively engaged in the necessary research for his book" (18-19). For my purposes it does not greatly matter whether or not Barnum was literally the author of this and other works. Either way, he was still in control of the public dissemination of his image(s).

⁴ Barnum scholar James Cook thinks that "Barnum probably concocted the tooth extraction as a brutal allegory of the 'puffing system' (in which antebellum managers regularly fabricated new names, images, and biographies for their performers). But it is hard to be certain. After all, he *did* sell tickets to Heth's autopsy" (*Colossal* 246).

⁵ In *Adventures*, Barnaby Diddleum tells of finding Joice Heth – then a slave owned by a friend of his – in Paris, Kentucky (21); of teaching her the Washington story (27); and of increasing her age incrementally for exhibitions in Louisville (22), Cincinnati (25), and Pittsburgh (26) (though the specific ages differ slightly).

⁶ See, for example, Edgar Allan Poe's "Diddling Considered As One of the Exact Sciences" (1850) and Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857).

⁷ Barnum's consistent aggression towards organized religion is an important part of his satiric critique of the myth of the self-made man. Critic John G. Cawelti points out that the "predominantly moralistic ethos of the gospel of self-improvement" derived from the fact that "In the first half of the nineteenth century, its exponents were primarily Protestant clergymen" (53). Barnum's insulting imitations of clergymen, then, call into question the clergy's rendering of self-making as a moral or spiritual transformation; his version of the self-made man is amoral but nevertheless monetarily and socially successful.

⁸ It is interesting to note that, in his discussion of lotteries in *Life*, Barnum seems to paraphrase this anecdote. Barnum writes, "Lotteries in those days were patronized by both Church and State. As a writer has said, 'People would gamble in lotteries for the benefit of a church in which to preach against gambling'" (*Life* 75). The "writer" here is probably Barnum, as the structure of the joke is the same as in the *Adventures* anecdote.

⁹ But there is also some national pride – implied by both Barnum and Whitman – in having culturally conquered the capitals of Europe during an apex of American social and cultural anxiety. One critic marvels that Barnum "could not have chosen a worse time [1847] to visit Britain. Relations between the two countries were at their lowest ebb since the American Revolution [...]. Charles Dickens had recently published the American chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and while the British roared with laughter, the Americans howled with rage" (Fitzsimmons 63). In his daring internationalization of humbug, Barnum exported his semi-fraudulent exposition – General Tom Thumb, who was several years younger than Barnum admitted he was and whose stage persona Barnum taught him – to con European royalty in an act of cultural nationalism that humbugged the old colonizers. Barnum then celebrated his conquests – while praising America and mocking European culture and

political systems – in his writings, especially *Life* and his “European Correspondence” series in the *New York Atlas* in 1846. In this way, Barnum managed yet another transformation of self: turning the self-made con man into a political weapon in the service of (a highly profitable, of course) cultural nationalism. Barnum showed that, if the American identity was slippery, such slipperiness aided Americans not only in navigating the domestic marketplace but also in international cultural and economic transactions.

¹⁰ “Thanatopsis” (1814, 1821) was William Cullen Bryant’s elevating meditation upon death.

¹¹ This title seems to play loosely on the medieval debate poem “The Owl and the Nightingale,” which was certainly accessible to nineteenth-century readers. But the poem itself, though presented as a dialogue between Barnum and Lind, does not follow the plot or structure of “The Owl and the Nightingale.” (I would like to express my thanks to Christopher Kuipers for consulting with me on this issue.)

¹² Benjamin Reiss, for one, claims that he is convinced Barnum himself wrote the thinly disguised caricature. In a footnote he admits that “The authorship of this strange pamphlet is problematic” and “could have been simply a parody of the first edition of Barnum’s autobiography,” or “it could be that Barnum allowed the publication of *Bunkum* by G.F. [sic] Harris to compensate for Redfield’s having won the rights to his autobiography (107). But Reiss goes on to say that his “own sense is that Barnum and the editor collaborated, for its distortions of Barnum’s autobiography are too close to Barnum’s earlier journalistic voice [i.e. from *Adventures* and other essays] to be coincidental” (107). Saxon is less sure of Barnum’s direct authorship but notes that, “since the burlesque’s contents follow so closely those of the autobiography, it seems more than likely that he had some hand in it, if only to the extent of supplying its anonymous author with a précis of his own ‘forthcoming’ book” (13).

¹³ I did not find such an editor’s note in the version of the pamphlet that I consulted at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

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