

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Newbury. *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. viii + 251 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2858-4.

Reviewed by Thomas N. Baker (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)  
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If recent attendance at the annual meetings of the American Studies Association (or SHEAR conferences for that matter) is any measure, disciplinary convergence, along with a vibrant if occasionally shallow eclecticism, is the order of the day. This is as true of literary studies as it is of the study of race, politics, the theater, or cultural “borderlands.” Settling in to hear this or that panel on, say, the topic of “Gender and the Problem of Voice,” one can just as easily find oneself seated next to a card carrying member of the AHA as a cultural studies provocateur or “New Historicist” literary scholar. And a little casual conversation is often enough to reveal that many of us are working with similar evidence, albeit perhaps with different aims and methods. Yet for all the impact of interdisciplinary scholarship in the past several decades, it is the persistence of these different aims and methods, along with different standards of evidence and argumentation, that is often among the most striking aspects of modern scholarly culture. It certainly is one of the most striking aspects of Michael Newbury’s *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*. As this list is intended primarily for historians who, as we all know, face a welter of new scholarship to sift through, I thought I would approach my task by asking what we (as historians) can expect to gain from dipping into a book that clearly springs from a different sort of scholarly training and approach than most of us follow.

At this point perhaps it should be said that, as a historian interested in literary and print culture, I generally sympathize with the kind of disciplinary poaching described above. Some of the most exciting scholarship of the past decade or so has flowed from desires to expand disciplinary horizons. Mention David D. Hall’s *Cultures of Print* (1996) or Michael T. Gilmore’s *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985), for instance, and you

have conjured works that can be read profitably across several disciplinary boundaries; unfortunately, Michael Newbury’s *Figuring Authorship* is not one of them. For all Newbury’s desire to force a rethinking of literary categories, his book suffers from a parochial vision, one that will be particularly evident to historians who demand that studies of ideas be grounded in the biographical, social, and cultural conditions that help to give them meaning.

The title itself is a tip-off of what follows. For the “figurations” that Newbury seeks to illuminate are, in plain terms, the rhetorical analogies to various forms of labor that antebellum authors used to make sense of and define their position in the literary market, or, as he puts it, “reconstruct” their “newly professionalized work” (p. 4). Authors, he asserts, were undergoing a “crisis of self-understanding” triggered by the professionalization of their formerly genteel pursuit, one that they “solved” by imagining their literary endeavors as related in various ways to “industrial labor, slavery, white-collar work, and craft production” (p. 5). Each of several chapters aims to address the play of these particular rhetorical figurations in and among a variety of texts, most of them more-or-less “literary,” some of them not. The book also includes a chapter devoted to a brief discussion of literary property in antebellum America.

Most significantly, Newbury aims through his textual explication to show American authors’ “violent ambivalences about the potential benefits and problems of authorship’s and the industrial economy’s emergent structures of labor” even as he explores some of the ways in which these authors contributed to the hierarchization of the literary profession itself (p. 5). In doing so, he seeks to prompt literary scholars especially to rethink

traditional ways of understanding their field of study, such as, for instance, the standard tendency to divide authors into “romantics” and “sentimentalists.” Where others see monocausal explanations of emergent literary formations, he sees diversity and authors working at cross-purposes. “Any effort to recover a cultural history of authorship’s representation ought not to be overly devoted to finding a monolithically comprehensible unity,” he notes in a passage that could stand as a summary of his project, “but might instead strive toward the historically complex inclusion of a contradictory cultural consciousness that one would expect to find” (p. 77).

Newbury is at his best when his sources speak directly, if usually metaphorically, to the sorts of issues he wants to address. For instance, I found myself convinced by his discussion of Herman Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) that the author of *Moby Dick* saw himself as a kind of romantic genius whose work opposed itself to both the genial eighteenth-century Irvingesque tradition and the sentimental “scribbling” of those quasi-industrial “maids of Tartarus” who came into their heyday in the 1850s. It was in just such a fashion that male writers of the time tended to proclaim their value in the new democratic and sentimental market for print, a claim that, in Melville’s case, literary scholars took up again when they resuscitated his reputation in the early twentieth century. Broadly speaking, however, this is not a new insight, as Newbury himself shows with his citation of both Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* and Lawrence Buell’s *New England Literary Culture from Revolution through Renaissance* on the subject (p. 6).

Occasionally, other insights sparkle as well. I found the discussion of Henry Thoreau’s entrepreneurial dreaming about how to compete with the German pencil-manufacturing giant Faber particularly interesting in the way it worked to undermine the received wisdom about the thorough-going anti-industrial outlook of Walden Pond’s most famous sojourner. Newbury notes, for example, that the Thoreau factory included “newly invented and specialized machines and tools” which were used by hands hired from outside the family, and that Thoreau himself once journeyed to New York to sell over sixteen thousand of his family’s pencils (pp. 20-21). This is hardly the subsistence craft effort we might expect from the man who wrote about the wind as his only servant. Yet this interesting opportunity to plumb the tensions in Thoreau’s attitude toward work, literary and otherwise, is, like many similar avenues of inquiry, left relatively unexplored by Newbury in order that he may

engage instead in a kind of quixotic tilting at metaphorical windmills.

For this result I think we have his method to thank. For the most part, Newbury sidesteps the issue of authorial intention by claiming that what he seeks has more to do with a submerged “subconscious” expression of authorial “anxiety” than with any conscious rationality (p. 86). It is in the rhetorical “figures” which authors use, he tries to suggest, that we do best to look for the crisis of authorial self definition. This may be the case, but any attempt to explain or identify the sources of authorial “anxiety” will depend greatly for its plausibility on the way it goes about making its case. I am not sure that in this regard Newbury ever gets beyond a kind of seat-of-the-pants sense of how metaphorical affinities express common authorial stances. Why, for instance, does he choose manifestly “literary” texts like *Blithedale Romance* to ground his argument when “subliterary” texts are also written by authors who knew what it meant to grope for subsistence in the market for print? Early on he tells us that “literary” writers “think more about writing than others and, therefore, their texts are more fully and commonly suffused with figurations of this work” (p. 14).

But if the nub of figuration is in the “subconscious” and metaphorical, then “thinking” has little to do with the expression of the related anxieties our author posits. My own take on the situation, speculation to be sure, is that the lure of the “canon” remains strong in graduate programs in American literature, even as demands for treating “new” authors (like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern) builds. Training familiarizes students with Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, writers who are, to be sure, rewarding reading for intellectual types; any dissertation which doesn’t traffic in these masters risks landing its author an undesirable composition post at a branch campus of Land Grant University or, worse yet, a lengthy and sometimes terminal sojourn in the netherland of adjunct labor (a latter-day Tartarus is there ever was one). Still, you will need to leaven the classics with women writers and “extraliterary” texts if you want a hearing among the rising generation. So we get a bit of Susan Warner and Harriet Jacobs, but, surprisingly, no James Fenimore Cooper, a man for whom literary work was both a burden and a road to fame.

In Newbury’s case, however, the situation is worsened because the texts he chooses to address are made to divulge what he sees as their pregnant meaning only after highly speculative (and generally unconvincing) meditations on the import of their authorial metaphors. Con-

sider his chapter on the affinities between slavery and celebrity. As Newbury sees it, attitudes (Northern? antislaveryite? radical abolitionist? authors generally? it is not clear whose) toward slavery come down to a fear that slavemasters' power ultimately reduces itself to an "irrational," and thus contradictory, desire to consume their chattels' bodies (by whipping, branding, or killing). While this is certainly part of the abolitionist critique of slavery, I see no particular reason why we should see this as closely akin to "figurations" of a new authorial celebrity, especially given the texts which comprise Newbury's evidence. Just because Harriet Beecher Stowe made Little Eva give out locks of her hair to what Newbury calls her "fetishizing admirers," it does not follow, in the absence of additional evidence, that Stowe figured Eva as a stand-in for her own anxiety about the demands of an "increasingly grasping, appropriating audience" bent on consuming her body (pp. 95-6).

Neither is it enough to explain Arthur Dimmesdale's self-flagellation in *The Scarlet Letter* by noting that Hawthorne imagines his character as a kind of "cultural celebrity (and sinner)...who cannot imagine any type of privacy or corporeal self-possession, because he carries within and enacts upon himself—even when resisting it—the public's claim to his secrets and his body" (p. 100). Just what is a "cultural celebrity" anyway? Lastly, how is it that Harriet Jacobs's "limited celebrity" among abolitionists is disturbing enough to raise anxieties about "dismemberment and consumption not in corporeal terms of slavery but in the figurative terms, specifically literary self-presentation to a voyeuristic public" (p. 122)? I should think that the matter is more easily explained as an understandable fear that slave-catchers would re-enslave her (at least until her freedom is bought by the her employers, the Willises) coupled with an understandable worry that undue publicity of her private affairs might lead to reprisals against her relations and friends at the South, damage to her employer's literary career, and exposure of her own out-of-wedlock sexual activities (however coerced) while she was enslaved.

In every case, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *The Scarlet Letter* to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we are also dealing with what can be called breakthrough literary works, the very books that put these authors on the map. If these authors were to become so concerned with anxieties about being consumed by their readers' desire that their literary works divulged this subconscious fear, would not this result tend to happen *after* rather than before the fans began clamoring for autographs and such? Might not breakthrough authors also be happy

that someone was finally listening to them? All of which is to say, it seems to me that celebrity offered the potential for an expanded sympathy between reader and author as well as an increased worry over the sanctity of privacy which, at its extremes, might sometimes have approached the kind of fears of bodily consumption discussed here. Ultimately, however, Newbury's evidence suggesting correspondences between anxiety over slavery and celebrity is too spotty and speculative, even for these three authors, to be convincing.

Similar problems of unsubstantiated speculation and seemingly arbitrary textual choices plague the book throughout. Is it enough, for instance, to discuss Hawthorne's attitude toward literary property in light of a rather oblique and debatable "figuration" of the logic of copyright in "The Artist of the Beautiful," especially when even Newbury himself admits that the story's author does not seem to have mentioned the matter in any of his voluminous collection of letters or journals? More problematic still, the connections that are drawn between "texts" and the cultural movements are generally ill-defined. Hawthorne's attitude toward craft labor is, for example, shown to be both like and unlike the so-called fitness movement because artisanal labor (in the form of Brook Farm and Hester Prynne's scarlet "A" for authorship) helped him to imagine an alternative to the "dominant structures of labor and commerce" (p. 143). Yet this argument is made without ever really exploring any direct connections that may (or may not) have existed between the man and the movement (p. 143). A better approach to the problem of identifying cultural affinities must surely demand a more thorough and consistent, as well as less metaphorically-dependent method. But when *Figuring Authorship* does move into such territory, as it does at times in Newbury's penultimate chapter on literary property in nineteenth-century America, the contrast with his usual approach is illuminating.

Perhaps, as a historian, with an historian's prejudices, I am unwilling to venture as much as Newbury does on the plausibility of metaphorical speculation. But I would think that *Figuring Authorship's* speculations will fail to pass muster among many historically-minded literary scholars as well. For this reason alone, historians will probably want to go elsewhere to get their information about the newest scholarship on the antebellum literary world.

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