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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ON THE MOVE:
GAMES AND GAMING FIGURES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
U.S. LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY
DOUGLAS ANTHONY GUERRA

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2011

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Texts, like games, are deeply social objects, and this piece of writing is no exception. While at Loyola, I have had the benefit of writing, thinking, and working with an exceptional group of people, all of whom I would like to think are reflected somehow in this work (though its faults are certainly my own). Conversations with Faith Bennett, Leif Eckstrom, Sarah Foust Vinson, Ben Keough, Bill Malcuit, Roger McNamara, and Tripthi Pillai both kept me sane and probed productive insanities throughout my graduate experience. By the same token, I am indebted to Dr. Pamela Caughie, Dr. Joseph Janangelo, and Dr. Steven Venturino—wonderful teachers who pushed me to develop both my ideas and style in early coursework at the same time as they provided models of professionalism and caring pedagogy. Further, I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Castiglia, who helped me in the earliest stages of this project to discover the beauty of antebellum U.S. writing, as well as its powerful political, philosophical, and technological legacy in our own time.

My advising committee was amazing at all points in process—always available, thoughtful, and, when necessary, blunt. With a keen theoretical mind, Dr. Paul Jay consistently pushed me to contextualize the relationship between my own thought and that of other important philosophical and literary critical schools. An exemplary writer and scholar of the relationship between literature and material culture, Dr. Steven Jones

was a model of razor-sharp prose, creative thinking, and textual attentiveness throughout. His genuine interest and conversational generosity gave me the confidence to pursue this project at a time well before game studies and digital humanities had attained the currency they now have. Similarly, my director, Dr. John (Jack) Kerkering was always willing to think through a draft, talk through a difficult argumentative snag, or generally engage with whatever philosophical flights of fancy I threw his way. His incisive eye for language and aesthetics helped me to imagine how style and logic could cooperate in fascinating and inventive ways. For that, as well as his kind mentorship, I am deeply grateful.

I also want to thank the English Department and Graduate School at Loyola for their financial support during the process and completion of the project. An Advanced Doctoral Fellowship provided crucial assistance during the initial research and first chapters, while an Arthur J. Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship during 2010–2011 allowed me to focus on bringing things together without added financial worry during a trying time as my wife recovered from a life-threatening illness. Additionally, I would like to recognize Amber Gravett and David Tuma, whose generous research grant allowed me to travel out to the Milton Bradley Company archives in the summer of 2011, documenting important materials that reinforced the more distant readings of the dissertation and providing an opportunity to introduce literal color into the book that this project will become.

Finally, I want to express my profound appreciation to my family and friends, especially my brilliant wife, Courtney C.W. Guerra. You have been there through it all—loving, playing, laughing—and I wouldn't have it any other way.

In memory of Rene and Gloria Guerra: you were both magicians to me.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In his 1838 address to the Harvard Divinity School, Ralph Waldo Emerson declares that “in the game of human life, love, fear, justice, appetite, man, and God, interact” (Emerson 64). My dissertation takes Emerson’s central figure in this passage—life in the United States as a “game”—as its primary focus, analyzing the way that gameplay, considered broadly, both facilitated and informed representations of agency in the nineteenth century. In effect, games were archives of possibility made procedurally discrete, rendering modes of action and agency legible in ways that are suggested, although differently engaged, in their somewhat less ephemeral cousins: books. Understanding that both games and books emerged from within similar fields of cultural production and often marketed themselves to the same audiences, I argue that taking a technical and materially historical approach to games can help us to explore major literary works of the period to startlingly revealing effect. For instance, when Milton Bradley’s 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* coaxes players into defining themselves through stepwise decisions on a freeform grid containing squares like “Intemperance,” “Ruin,” and “Suicide,” it imagines an alternative agency to that of previous single-track games that left a player’s fate wholly up to the roll of a die. A procedurally attuned discussion of this agential form—which I connect to current new media discussions of the “avatar” figure in virtual environments—in turn allows fresh perspectives on Walt Whitman’s

1855 “Song of Myself.” Inclusive disjunctions (“or”s that do not preclude “both”) form a kind of algorithmic matrix from which the lyric self is constructed, as in Bradley’s game. Agency becomes a matter of *use*, rather than possession.

This project aims to redress a critical gap between important tropological studies of nineteenth-century games and more recent material approaches to the textuality of video games and new media. In the first category, historical studies of the interaction between literature and games in the nineteenth-century United States have focused on rhetorics of game and sport, parsing the metaphorical significance of gameplay tropes, often in contrast to a discourse of “seriousness.” Ann Fabian’s *Card Sharps, Dream Books, & Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th-Century America* makes effective claims about the significance of gaming rhetoric in creating models of “economic rationality” in the early age of stock market speculation (Fabian 2); while Michael Oriard’s expansive study, *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, traces the use of the word “game” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that the language of gaming metaphors in U.S. literature “reveals human thought processes and cultural values... [and] creates the perceived reality” (Oriard ix). Moving beyond these suggestive rhetorical ambivalences, I focus instead on the function and cross-pollination of specific structures within the available game commodities of the time. For example, a reading of Walter Aimwell’s *Peter Coddle’s Trip to New York*, a precursor to *Mad Libs*, adds nuance to Herman Melville’s notoriously fragmentary dialogue in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Like Melville’s characters, Peter Coddle falls victim to a savvy operator, drawn in by his desire for objects written on a set of cards that

are selected by players as the game progresses: “a stick of candy,” “a mint of gold,” or perhaps even “a quart of caterpillars.” Nested within a larger youth novel entitled, *Jessie; or, Trying to Be Somebody* (1858), Aimwell’s textual game makes an operative argument about the increasingly instrumental perspective on becoming “somebody” demonstrated in nineteenth-century reform literature; Coddle’s identity is structured as a set of social input-events bounded by a regulated but undefined grammar. Understanding this facilitates a reassessment of the similarly undefined passengers on the steamboat *Fidèle* (in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*) who construct their own identities as if they were a kind of fill-in-the-blanks game, valuing machine-like consistency over impromptu character-making. A surrogate for the lost agency of these passengers, the Confidence-Man begins to resemble more hero than villain in Melville’s narrative because he represents an aesthetic of limited invention and tactical play that is made transparent in (and humorously reinforced by) Aimwell’s game.

My precedents in this approach are interdisciplinary scholars working with digital games—some coming from a framework of textual studies and book history, such as Matthew Kirschenbaum and Steven E. Jones, and some from within new media studies, such as Ian Bogost, Jesper Juul, and Alexander Galloway. The insights of this recent work have not been fully applied to game forms that predate the twentieth century, although there is much to be gained from this encounter. Engaging with what Kirschenbaum highlights as formal and forensic materialities, nineteenth-century games like bagatelle, croquet, and even *The Checkered Game of Life* developed strategic habits of mind in players that were explicitly coincident with bodily habits of seeing, moving,

and touching. Hence, the official 1872 U.S. Patent and Trademark Office classification for “Games and Toys” includes “dumb-bells” and “exercising devices” alongside playing cards, dice, and puzzles. Here the materiality of gameplay *mattered* in a way that is only recently being reclaimed by critics of both games and books. And as these forms existed within a shared media ecology, both reflected and refracted the same cultural imaginary in different though comparatively interesting ways: if games carried the expectation of physical or dispositional exercise, then we are inclined to ask how books may have facilitated or enacted formally continuous modes of engagement. As New Media theorist Lisa Gitelman observes of media technologies in the late nineteenth century, “different media and varied forms, genres, and styles of representation act as brokers among accultured practices of seeing, hearing, speaking, and writing” (3). To understand literary history within the scope of the procedural and ludic practices materially modeled by games is to better comprehend the practices being “broker[ed]” by authors working in this historical moment.

At the same time, textual studies’ methodological focus on the sociality of texts enables me to address the full relational nature of these undeniably social objects. For instance, as a configuration puzzle that enjoyed steady popularity throughout the nineteenth-century United States, the Tangram features seven geometric shapes that can be arranged in a near-infinite array of two-dimensional images; yet the most successful collections relied upon paratextual cues that helped the game not only to signify, but also to satisfy. Pictorial supplements, step-wise narratives, and elaborate histories brought a conceptual image into contact with its social context, allowing it to communicate—and

sell. In his own configurative exhibitions, like that of the infamous part monkey, part fish Feejee Mermaid, P.T. Barnum referred to this active contextual engagement as “humbug” or “outside show,” implicating and embedding the spectator by using the same practices that made Tangrams enjoyable.¹ Attention to the full textuality of Tangrams becomes an opportunity to re-think the exhibitionary practices of P.T. Barnum’s autobiography, *The Life of P.T. Barnum as Told by Himself* (1855), in a manner sensitive to emerging modes of social interaction. Cheap and ubiquitous, these critically forgotten objects of popular culture bring together visual, performative, and mechanistic perspectives that powerfully resituate the literature of the nineteenth-century United States.

The first chapter of the project, “Forcibly Impressed: Reform Games and the Avatar Figure in Milton Bradley and Walt Whitman,” examines the overlapping discourses of “avatar” found in Milton Bradley’s *The Checkered Game of Life* and Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Placing focus on the “exercise of judgment,” Milton Bradley’s career-making amusement, *The Checkered Game of Life* (1860), broke with the Romantic trends in earlier board games designed for moral instruction—and not simply because it included references to “Suicide” and “Ruin.” In these predecessors, typified by Anne Abbott’s *The Mansion of Happiness* (1843), the gaming agent was framed as a passive cipher accumulating die rolls as he or she moved along a linear racetrack, with successful character largely defined by contingencies outside of player control. Bradley’s

¹ Indeed, mid-nineteenth-century reviewers recognized that this audience embedding was a crucial element of a successful novel as well, being “sensitive” as Nina Baym observes, “to the reader who completed the novel’s reality” (Baym 46).

game—circulated widely by civilian charities among Union troops during the Civil War—instead emphasized timing and decision as the basis of strong character. This change in the operation of the game rendered the player’s marker as what we would now call an “avatar,” an interactive social representation of a user defined by his or her actions in a shared virtual world. As a consequence, Bradley’s decision-based avatar-agent aligns with Walt Whitman’s poetic self in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* who Whitman asserts “is judgment” and who must “prove himself by every step he takes” (Whitman 620).

Allowing the operational perspective developed in the analysis of Bradley’s game to inform a renewed reading of “Song of Myself,” I contend that Whitman’s voracious “I” can be seen as an avatar-like position within an algorithmic poem. The flurries of inclusive “or”s that characterize his lyric become an opportunity to define a self that *chooses*, that decides among complex, but limited, collections of subject-positions within the American social milieu. At the same time, the troubled threshold between the first- and second-person in the poem (an identifying feature of avatar-agency) illustrates Whitman grappling with the simultaneity of individual and society in a way not frequently registered by critical discourse on the poem.

My second chapter, “Not Exactly Infinite: Smooth Operators and the Dangerous Allure of Discursive Consistency in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*,” further explores the constitutive relationship between agency and social interaction. Popular, but largely outside of critical view, Walter Aimwell’s sixth youth-oriented novel *Jessie, or Trying to Be Somebody* (1858) takes a puzzling turn midway through the tale when one of its protagonists introduces a “Game of Transformations” called *Peter Coddle’s Trip to*

New York. A forerunner of twentieth-century substitution games like *Mad Libs*, Aimwell's story makes Coddle the victim of a New York operator who seduces the rural mark with promises of fabulous luxuries that are filled in by the game players. As a result, Coddle's active identity is literally a function both of formal consistencies (the text surrounding the interactive gaps) and of contingent textual variables input by readers—without social interaction Coddle remains structured but undefined. Published a year earlier, Herman Melville's problem novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* portrays the passengers of the steamboat *Fidèle* as similarly undefined, giving them notoriously fragmentary dialogue that has often confounded criticism: "Believe me, I—yes, yes—I may say—that—that—," "Upon my word, I—I," and "I conjecture him to be what, among the ancient Egyptians, was called a —" (Melville 36, 53, 195). Through these stylistic gaps, Melville imagines public identity, within the emerging demands of reformist institutionalism, as an instrumentalization of one's social self: feelings of anxiety associated with chaotic and competitive interiorities were regulated by imagining the self as a consistent decision algorithm, a state machine like Aimwell's fill-in-the-blank story. As a result, Melville's characters cede their capacities for agency to the Confidence-Man, who re-affirms their desired identity, defining their structured incompleteness—for a price. In his triumph, the Confidence-Man represents the importance of the momentary and variable as an interactive (and critical) supplement to the structures of state and consistency that dominated U.S. reform discourse of the mid-nineteenth century. As institutionalism sought to flatten time in a manner that would

ensure a consistent future, *The Confidence-Man* reconfigures focus onto the differential moments when character is invented anew.

The important historical connection between a personal and a mechanical aesthetic of invention is made explicit in “Skillful, Timely, and Opportune: Configuration Culture in the Age of Barnum,” which situates the success of P.T. Barnum within the framework of advancements in U.S. patent law that reinforced a growing configurative focus in society at large. By keeping the cost of patenting significantly lower than in Europe and by creating managed public archives of existing inventions like the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, the Patent Act of 1836 contributed to a wider culture of exhibition in the United States and encouraged middle-class inventors to make their names by re-configuring pre-existing materials. Parallel to this legal development, Tangrams (known in Chinese as *Ch’i ch’iao t’u* or “seven skillful/timely/opportune pieces”) highlighted similar configurative practices being embraced within education and popular culture. Using seven geometric shapes to invent novel communicative images, Tangram players drew attention to important modes of meaning-making that had bearing upon Barnum’s more salacious exhibitionary practices. Because Tangrams were highly formal geometric configurations it was often imperative that they be accompanied by contextual cues in order to convey significance, to connect audiences to what they were seeing—something Barnum would describe as “humbug” or “outside show” (Barnum, *Humbugs*, 15). This provides perspective on Barnum’s exhibits, which use “outside show” or paratexts to implicate and embed the spectator, expanding the scope of exhibits to configure the audience as a part of it rather than fundamentally distant, a player rather

than a viewer. The re-arranged torsos of a fish and monkey become the profitable “Feejee Mermaid” only when exhibited alongside various narrative elements that encourage audiences to imagine the artifact as a part of their world, as a provocative conversation piece. By tracing this theme in *The Life of Barnum as Told by Himself* (1855), one can see how Barnum highlights an explorative agency that uses a mélange of identities and procedural protocols to define itself in the practice of creating public and intractably social stories. Barnum’s success was a function of placing focus on contexts of enactment and on the reciprocal and embedded interface of spectator and exhibit, rather than simply on the subject-object relationship between viewer and artifact. More than a spectacle, Barnum’s collection at the American Museum was also a generative platform for any number of novel configurative texts; it was an inventor’s space as much as a display case.

Expanding on the thematics of scope introduced via paratexts in Barnum, the final chapter, “A Little Removed from the Highway: Utopian Romance and Targeting as Agency in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*,” argues that Hawthorne’s narrative uses “targeting” operations in order to explore the possibilities of critical imagination in a world limited by the requirements of socially legible character. Targeting is both native and crucial to billiards and bagatelles—cued games that became immensely popular at the time Hawthorne was composing *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). More broadly, this operation is a function of placing one register of scope into motivated contact with another, recalling Barnum’s manipulations of “outside show.” In his foundational treatise on the game, *Billiards without a Master* (1850), Michael Phelan

expresses the utopian opinion that playing billiards might disclose and affect “the various dispositions of men” through physical and scopic habituation (Phelan 8). Billiards was seen not only as an opportunity for leisure, play, and conversation, but also as an important mechanism of imaginative training rivaling that of novels. As each move of the cue ball required a newly reinvented perspective on the possibilities for play, the iterative accumulation of moves produced a model of targeted visualization whose style was capable of radiating into the social layers outside of the game proper (creating the “various dispositions” Phelan notes). Observing this iterative and scopic mode in Hawthorne’s historically concurrent literary production, I argue that Hawthorne employs the logic of targeting throughout *Blithedale*, in part through his narrator, Miles Coverdale—a character with a deep fondness for his evenings “at the billiard-club” (40). Through Coverdale’s jarring and at times profoundly limited narration, *Blithedale* allows one to imagine scopic manipulation (stories-within-stories, point-of-view, and Coverdale’s often literal visual targeting) as a means of introducing productive ambiguity into social discourse, gesturing toward a culture that might see structural change only through motivated yet, paradoxically, vicarious means. P.T. Barnum’s Museum-goers’ capacity to explore such motivated points of contact was, in some sense, the side effect of a pragmatic business model; by contrast, Hawthorne’s romance actively links the mechanisms of targeting to a utopian mode of worldly literary engagement.

Over the course of these chapters, the problems of creating and performing public character mirror a certain strain of critical discourse within recent American Studies itself. How does one attain social agency—a question of the power to change one’s

world—despite the control exerted by the forms of institutional discipline responsible for structuring that world and making it present for such an agency? As Walter Benn Michaels put it three decades ago, critical transcendence cannot be taken at face value “not so much because you can’t really transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn’t have any terms of evaluation left” (Michaels 18). The issue of scholarly agency here is synecdochic for the wider issue of agency as a whole; six years after Michaels, Sacvan Bercovitch frames the problem as a decision “to make use of the categories of culture or to be used by them” (Bercovitch 373). In this dissertation, I read nineteenth-century U.S. writers, readers, game players, and designers, in the midst of an evolutionary engagement over the issue of embedded *use*, and not simply as it pertained to the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill. Whether it be Whitman and Bradley’s redefinition of character as iterative choice-making within a finite algorithm (use as personal judgment), Melville’s dark exploration of social confidence (use as manipulation), Barnum and Tangram players’ exploitation of the thresholds between text and paratext (use as configuration and invention), or Phelan and Hawthorne’s representations of dispositional change through targeting practices (use as scopopic contact), the perpetual use of at-hand cultural materials became a central mode of self-making in an era when traditional ways of adjudicating character were being left by the wayside.

This was not the self *made*, but a gerund-y and insistent *making*; it was a historical moment when, as Scott A. Sandage writes, “A rising ‘business man’ embodied true selfhood and citizenship: the man in motion, the driving-wheel, never idle, never

content” (Sandage 72). The requirement of constant change was accompanied by the persistent risk of failure—of inventing a business, a technology, or a self that failed to live up to its promise, by failing to resonate with the social body as a whole.² The rise and importance of the games discussed in “On the Move”—freeform board games, fill-in-the-blanks and configuration puzzles, and targeting contests like billiards, bagatelle, and croquet—speaks to a desire to plot such failures on a continuum, to enable inventive change despite the (often profound) human risk associated with each move this change necessitated. The works discussed here prefigure a need that advances into our own time, when critics call for re-conceiving “associations as sites of *inventive* alternatives... and not simply as reflections of preexisting or predetermined values” (Castiglia 300, emphasis added). While the rhetoric of “invention” here has attained the valence of a dead metaphor (a replacement for “creative” or “imaginative”), tactically critical and locally embedded use was explicitly conceived of as a kind of *mechanism* in nineteenth-century games, and often, as I argue, in literature as well. The machine metaphor was very much alive. In this way, this project continues the work called for in the conclusion of Bercovitch’s *Rites of Assent*, where he contends that “We will never properly understand [American writers’] force of enterprise, speculation, and invention until we set this firmly within a history of American enterprise, speculation, and invention in the nineteenth century” (Bercovitch 369). Supplementing the local comparative work done by individual chapters, this study situates major authors of the mid-nineteenth-century

² For more on the history of business failure in the nineteenth-century United States, see Sandage’s *Born Losers*, where he notes, “The new birth of freedom was an ideology of achieved identity; citizen and slave gave way to success and failure as the two faces of American freedom. That ideal depended not only on the chance of success but on the risk of failure” (Sandage 18).

within a history of “invention” by looking at procedural amusements as an interface between the representational and the mechanical. If we accept Michael Warner’s claim that “certain ways of representing individuals [can] produce new kinds of individuals,” then we are inclined to ask new questions about what kinds of individuals these period games might not just produce, but *invent*, as well as how these inventions were echoed, reinforced, or troubled in the literature of the same moment (Warner xiii).

Examining the figures and forms of mid-nineteenth-century games in the United States allows us to understand literature in conversation with a complex and evolving media marketplace, a conversation that facilitates one of literature’s core functions as historical repository. To find meaning in literary objects, critical scholarship must reconstruct the contexts that allow them to signify (one thinks of Frederic Jameson’s famous edict to “always historicize”); yet it has often proven difficult to track a context that is based on *motion* and *spatiality* and *operational possibility* using primarily non-procedural forms (novels, poems, autobiographies). As a result, critical methodologies fixate on the immobile, the institutional, and a historiography of increasingly obliterated time. These perspectives are crucial, and yet they risk leaving out the temporal local activities of daily life that are represented by gameplay and reading (or coding that activity as simple “resistance”). Here timing, movement, and sociality were always, and often explicitly, at issue. To get at a deeper understanding of the interactive medial shift that was occurring across the nineteenth century—corresponding to a shift in the possibilities of the literary—games offer models of emerging procedural grammars, drawing attention to the increasingly algorithmic structures enabling the civic agencies

that have been represented by American literary studies. The consequence of pairing games and literature allows us (to repurpose a phrase used by Gerry Canavan and Priscilla Wald) “to track both a shift in the formative terms of an ideology and the means by which that shift occurs” (246). In short, it allows us to create new ways of reading and to imagine old ways of reading that have striking implications for the present.

CHAPTER TWO

FORCIBLY IMPRESSED: REFORM GAMES AND THE AVATAR FIGURE IN MILTON BRADLEY AND WALT WHITMAN

In the months following Barack Obama's election to the forty-fourth US Presidency, our sixteenth president became suddenly more ubiquitous than ever. Whether the media was winkingly referencing 'a certain tall Illinois Senator with a gift for oratory,' or reporting on Obama's consultation of Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, national attention was preoccupied with the similarity of these two high-profile presidential "brands"—Lincoln and Obama—and whether history would ultimately view this similarity as tragedy, farce, or something altogether different.¹ Yet despite Marx's warnings about historical repetition, many in the media were, for a moment, committed to the hope that Obama would be "Lincoln-like," duly impressed by his rhetorical skill and talents of self-possession. Writing for *Newsweek*, Evan Thomas and Richard Wolffe even discussed Obama's potentially "Lincolnesque" qualities, suggesting that one basis for the comparison was that "[Obama] observe[d] himself as a kind of figure out of literature" (Thomas).

Self-observation and conscious persona-building, of the sort typically associated with the high-stakes political world of Presidential campaigns, is second-nature to a

¹ In Karl Marx's widely quoted opening to the 1852 pamphlet "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" he states, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (Marx 594).

rising generation of Americans who spend hours every week crafting and tweaking public representations of themselves in online environments such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Second Life, and other virtual spaces. These representations, which consistently allow one to “observe [oneself] as a kind of figure out of literature,” are referred to as “avatars” within the world of video games and internet communication;² indeed, Obama’s own savvy use of new media architectures to brand his campaign and convey his message arguably contributed to his November victory. Interestingly enough, the avatars that populate much of our virtual life today may have been in part a product of the nineteenth century, the invention of a personality better known himself by a brand name: Milton Bradley.

In a gesture that evokes Shepard Fairey’s iconic, unofficial work for the Obama campaign,³ the young Milton Bradley was vigorously interested in portraying an image of Lincoln. In the late summer of 1860, as the owner of the only lithographic press in western Massachusetts, Bradley undertook the task of creating a standard reproducible image of the then presidential candidate. He was a capable draftsman who previously had made a living by sketching detailed patent drawings for the early inventors of the American industrial boom. Now, excited by the prospect of a Lincoln presidency, he saw an opportunity to turn his political passion into a profit: working from a photograph, he

² One commonly accepted origin for this term in the gaming community traces back to Lucasfilm’s 1986 online game *Habitat*: “The players are represented on the screen by animated figures that we call ‘Avatars’” (Morningstar 664). A more detailed description of both the meaning and use of “avatar” as a gaming figure will make up a large part of the current chapter.

³ Fairey was responsible for one of the more enduring images of the 2008 campaign season, his immensely popular “Hope” poster.

would sketch a painstaking likeness of Lincoln's distinctive, clean-shaven face and press enough copies to populate every home in the New England area. For a time they sold incredibly well—but Lincoln's beard changed all that. As Bradley's biographer, James Shea, writes in *It's All in the Game*, "Bradley could not believe it. But it was true... and no one wanted a lithograph of a beardless Lincoln. Some even wanted their money back" (Shea 55). Frustrated but not defeated, Bradley turned his disappointment with the Lincoln-portrait scheme into a renewed energy to produce and sell a game he had invented just a few months earlier, *The Checkered Game of Life*.

If, as Johan Huizinga writes in his influential *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, "culture arises in the form of play" (46), it makes sense to think of new forms of play as attempts to re-make culture. Milton Bradley may not have seen his introduction of *The Checkered Game of Life* in precisely these sweeping terms, but there is no doubt that he saw himself as a participant in the national discourse of reform that swept through the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. On the colorful *Game of Life* board, Bradley created a likeness of nineteenth-century American life that placed new emphasis on timing and decision rather than the traditional ideals of place and avocation. In short, Bradley's innovation in board games was to invent a player-representation that was more like the contemporary figure of "avatar" in our own era than the traditional Romantic-era subject. Character in *The Checkered Game of Life* was a function of the decisions one made in a public space rather than a simple roll of the dice; it was a function of visualizing oneself as a "kind of figure" and then making decisions either further to embellish or to diverge from the likeness one had created.

In this chapter, I will analyze the figure of the “avatar” in Milton Bradley’s game, contrasting it with the other board games of the period as a way of understanding the competing perspectives on selfhood that existed in this turbulent moment of U.S. history. Using Bradley’s innovations in *The Checkered Game of Life* to codify these differences, I will then argue that Walt Whitman employs a similar figure in “Song of Myself” when he draws on the ancient Hindu sense of “avatar”—a term that predates our current usage, but that productively interlaces with it. Following this figure will allow us to characterize the distinction between Whitman’s lyric technique (and effect) and that of many of his contemporaries, just as Bradley’s creation separates itself from conventional board games of the period. In important ways, juxtaposing Bradley and Whitman reveals a convergence between the interior discourse of character and its profoundly public manifestations—a convergence that continues to resonate in our own time.

Bradley and the Game of Self-Representation

Like many of his contemporaries, Bradley was deeply concerned with the minds of American youths, and in particular with their ability to come to reasonable and informed consensus. After watching a fight break out between two of his neighbors in Springfield over the rules of croquet, he took it upon himself to research the existing mishmash of conventions for the popular game. To this point, the rules of croquet had been a largely informal affair with some more fanciful players simply making them up as they went along. When Bradley’s version of the game was patented in 1866, it may have helped ease the passions of his neighbors by providing the first printed rule sets for the game: “rules which substantially became those of American croquet today” (Shea 91-92).

In a similar turn, Bradley made significant contributions to art education. As an early proponent of the Kindergarten movement, he was particularly interested in color. Noting disagreement over the exact hues to be used in classroom color education, Bradley systematically developed a standard color wheel. After agreeing on hues with local teachers and artists, he toiled over watercolor pigments, exactingly mixing them in an ice cream freezer, and succeeded in developing standardized formulas for color that would be used for years afterward (121-124). Yet in *The Checkered Game of Life* we see what might amount to the purest expression of his drive to work with formal systems.

Bradley's invention stands out in the context of other board games of its moment because it configures a different relationship between player and game. Marrying unique elements to create a whole more interesting than the sum of its parts, Bradley's "new Social Game" (Bradley 2) combined a singular marker representing the player, a decision-based process of gameplay foregrounding chance and strategy, and a focus upon changing the outward habits, or "character," of the player. Perhaps none on its own marks Bradley's game as a turning point in American board game production. However, when taken together, these elements illustrate Bradley using what twenty-first century gamers might call an "avatar" figure to encourage a changing cultural aesthetic, an aesthetic, as I will argue, of operationality⁴ and portability that was filtered through the nineteenth-century discourses of subject and individual "character."

⁴ My use of the word "operation" and its cognates develops the definition given by Ian Bogost in his important work on game criticism, *Unit Operations*. He writes:

In systems analysis, an *operation* is a basic process that takes one or more inputs and performs a transformation on it. An operation is the means by which something executes some purposeful action. Mathematical operations offer fundamental examples, especially the function as outlined

Invented in 1860 and patented in spring of 1866, Bradley's *Checkered Game of Life* bears some resemblance to the 1960s revision most Americans are familiar with, but differs in ways that we might linger on for a moment so as to avoid conflating the two. Whereas in the modern game, players race to the "Millionaire" square and the player with the most "money" at the end wins (an obvious commentary on our competitive, fully-developed, money ideology), in *The Checkered Game of Life* the winner is simply whoever reaches the score of one hundred *points* first, by cobbling together various point-valued squares. "Wealth" is indeed one of these squares (and a valuable one at that), but so are the less monetarily focused, "Honor," "Happiness," and "Congress." "Happy Old Age" awards the player a whopping fifty points, but is not necessarily the endpoint of the game since a player could get there within five moves of "Infancy"—traveling diagonally across the board—without scoring any other points. In the "Centennial" variant of the game that most people are familiar with, such a quick jump to retirement is impossible—there are no leaps to proximate but non-linear squares on the station wagon journey to the "Day of Reckoning." Additionally, while the modern game includes copious paydays,

by Leonard Euler. Other kinds of operations include decisions, transitions, and state changes. I use the term *operation* very generally, covering not only this traditional understanding but also many more. Brewing tea is an operation. Steering a car to avoid a pedestrian is an operation. Falling in love is an operation. (7)

Bogost errs a bit on the side of overgeneralization here. (I doubt there could be any kind of consensus as to the *process* by which one falls in love; nevermind one that approached the utility of a basic guide to brewing tea. Still, self-help gurus are sure to disagree, so his point is taken.) However, his core point is useful: an operational perspective is one that sees actions broken into discrete step-wise procedures that narrate the inter-relationships necessary to produce given results within a given system. Further, my use has been inflected by the discourse of "mechanism" that pervaded the nineteenth-century American mind. Interpreting the biography of P.T. Barnum, Neil Harris helpfully coins the term "operational aesthetic" for this cultural meme and explains it as the result of the mid-century U.S.'s continued exposure to rhetorics of science and technology. Harris writes, "Machinery was beginning to accustom the public not merely to a belief in the continual appearance of new marvels but to a jargon that concentrated on methods of operation, on aspects of mechanical organization and construction, on horsepower, gears, pulleys, and safety valves" (75).

family-building (in the form of plastic children-pegs added to your car), and big gains to be won on the stock market, Bradley's 1860 version is decidedly more somber, including squares like "Suicide," "Intemperance," and "Gambling (to Ruin)" on its 64-square free-form grid. The distinctions are not solely content-oriented either, but include systematic changes to the way the game is played: landing on an opponent's square in the modern *Life* simply means you must move "forward to the first open space," leaving the idle player where they were ("Instructions" 2); in the 1860s, a similar move sends your opponent off to "Jail."

Many of these developments may have been justified in the twentieth century as a means of making the game more "fun" for an audience that had come to expect as much from its games.⁵ In general, this is true: the category of pleasure for its own sake was less important to game designers of the nineteenth century. Games of the antebellum era focused on learning and character-formation first, and amusement second. But I want to return for a moment to the variation of protocol between the peaceful resolution of landing on an opponent's square and the more punitive resolution of sending the opponent to "Jail," especially since this is the only way that a player could end up at the "Jail" square in Bradley's original game. In particular, what is being said here about the ability of two players to occupy the same place? What is it exactly that is being policed (as it were) in Bradley's nineteenth-century version? Though expediency may have

⁵ For an interesting take on the dynamics and import of "fun" in twentieth- and twenty-first-century games, see Raph Koster's *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*.

played a role, another answer may lie in the nineteenth century's preoccupation with will and representation.

As I will discuss in further detail below, Bradley's game is profoundly invested in framing life as a decision-making process, such that any position on the board is an opportunity to prove who "you" are by determining what strategy you might take in a given situation. This provides several explanations for Bradley's decision to send a landed-upon piece to "Jail." First, one might think of it as a punishment for the stationary player impeding the decisions being made by the player moving his or her piece, with the offending piece being castigated for its idleness by a trip back to the bottom plane of the board. In fact, this interpretation may have some weight; the square for "Idleness" sends a player to "Disgrace," two squares to the left of "Jail" and on the same horizontal plane as "Infancy" and "Prison." "As will be seen," Bradley writes in the patent, "the most valuable squares are on the upper half of the board, the highest being in the upper row. Consequently, it is a loss to be thrown back toward 'Infancy'" (Bradley 2). Whether it is because you landed on "Idleness," were idle enough to obstruct an opponent, or were idly pondering new strategies in "Prison. Where you must LOSE one move" (2), a lack of immediate *will* (in the face of another more active will) is a punishable offense in Bradley's nineteenth-century game. It is an offense that likens you to "Infancy," a subject-position predating individual will.

Growing out of this preoccupation, another explanation might take into account the era's deep anxiety with two persons occupying the *same space* of will (an anxiety humorously foregrounded in Mark Twain's late nineteenth-century narrative, *Those*

Extraordinary Twins). That is, if every space on the board represents exactly one range of possibilities for the marker that occupies it, we can see the idle player as effectively playing the role of the confidence man: pretending to have a public position that is rightfully that of another. Accordingly, the offender is shuttled to a jail cell.

This singularity of will and representation in a unitary game-piece is one aspect that sets *The Checkered Game of Life* apart from other available games at the time—particularly those of a provenance earlier than the nineteenth century. Prior to the mid-century, US games were imports, with the large majority being from Britain (Whitehill 2). These include some of the oldest games in history, games as familiar today as they were two hundred years ago: checkers and its European variant, draughts; chess; the Indian game of *Pachisi*;⁶ and, of course, numbered card games. When one thinks of these games, it is notable that there is either no representation of the player outside of the player themselves (as in poker) or else the representation of the player is dispersed across multiple pieces. This may speak to the simulation these games were meant to invoke: a view from on high of war, of military command, and of monarchical strategy. For instance, in a game of checkers or chess, the moves happen one at a time, but the strategy is divided among a range of player-controlled pieces. As a result, losing a piece or facing a setback may be a disappointment, but, depending on the value of the piece, may not require large-scale adjustments to player strategy. To use a literary analogy, the disappointment of losing a piece in checkers is more akin to the death of a character in a third-person narrative than to the abrupt end of a first-person narration. In the first

⁶ One of the most familiar modern variations of this very old game is Parker Brothers' 1934 variant, *Sorry!*

instance, the focus of story may shift, but the fundamental perspective does not change.

In the second instance, barring the introduction of a secondary narrator, the story is over (assuming a linear narrative chronology, of course).

The Checkered Game of Life situates the player as the manager of a *single* actor within the gamespace and in this way the marker is not a representation of others under the control of the user, but a representation closer to that of the user controlling “themselves”—to the first-person perspective.⁷ This self-controlled representation within a gaming environment is what I’ve been referring to as an “avatar,” a figure Mark Meadows describes within video games and contemporary media as an “interactive social representation of a user” (Meadows 13). Meadows formulates this definition to analyze the massively multiplayer online experience of *Second Life* (as well as *Super Mario Brothers*, *World of Warcraft*, and instant messaging usernames), but we need not relegate the figure of avatar to the twentieth century’s development of computerized games. (Additionally, the term itself has an earlier Hindu connotation, to which I’ll return when discussing Whitman’s use of the figure.) An avatar, in this definition, is simply the marker by which a player represents a singular vision of himself/herself in a gamespace. This is to say that with an avatar, the player is figured, via a unitary piece on the board, as the “cause” of his/her own singular advancement in the game. In *The Checkered Game of Life*, as in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” twenty years earlier, “Every true man is a cause” (Emerson 140).

⁷ An important critical dialogue on the role and implications of the first-person perspective in games can be found in Noah Waldrup-Fruin and Pat Harrigan’s *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*.

However, while there are a multitude of traditional games that opt against employing this type of unitary player representation, it alone does not make Bradley's game unique. A form of game known commonly as a "race game," in which players race to a set end point by accumulating die rolls on a linear (typically spiraling) track also uses a similar singular player representation—but with slight and relevant differences. The first game of this type known to be manufactured on American shores was the 1822 *Traveller's Tour through the United States* (Whitehill 10).⁸ Essentially a map of the eastern U.S. (stretching outward toward the "Arkansaw" Territory and part of Texas), the game board is crisscrossed with a long serpentine line stopping at 139 different points, corresponding to different American cities. Each of the cities on the game map has a listing in the key enclosed with the game (cross-referenced by the number listed at the indicated point) that includes some brief trivia about the city and its population. For instance, Boston is described as "the largest city in new England [and] situated on a peninsula at the bottom of Massachusetts bay. It has a fine capacious harbour, and is extensively engaged in commerce" (Whitehill 10). The players would start off of the board and, after rolling to see who would take the first turn in the game, would continue to roll to see how far they would "travel."⁹

⁸ Though its US manufacturing is novel, the game itself was not. By all appearances it was a direct reworking of Carrington Bowle's eighteenth-century British game, *A Journey through Europe* (Shea 60), a bourgeois homage to the Grand Tours of aristocratic European youths.

⁹ As with most games in this era, rolling was done with a teetotum – a kind of six-sided top marked with numerical values. Dice were the source of strong superstitions as a result of their association of with gambling: "The family taboo against dice was so strong that soldiers during the Civil War who carried them to gamble with would leave them behind when going into battle, so in case they were killed in combat, no dice would be sent back to the family as part of the soldier's personal effects. Because of this, Civil War battlefields are said to be an excellent place to unearth early bone dice" (Whitehill 11).

After this set up, a player would move his or her piece to the number indicated by the teetotum (represented by the aforementioned path-points) and read the information aloud. Alternatively, more advanced players were encouraged to recite the population of the town they had rolled, at the peril of losing their turn. Play continued by alternating turns and adding the rolled number to the number on the player's current path-point in order to determine the next city to which the piece would travel—hence the typical term for player game pieces in this era, “counters.”¹⁰ This “counting” terminology underlies the fact that the visualization enabled by the game board and player piece was, in *Traveller's* and other games of its ilk, primarily a way of spatializing accounting procedures. Operationally, gameplay in this sort of game (outside of the advanced rules requiring memorization) was a function of basic arithmetic: take the number of the space upon which you currently reside, add to it the number you have rolled, and then record the new sum by moving your piece the corresponding number. Here, basic arithmetic on a linear game board (*Traveller's* does not allow backwards moves) comprises the algorithm, or the discrete input-output structure, of the game. The teetotum spun by the player produces the inputs and the rules of arithmetic produce the outputs that determine the player outcomes on the board.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, Ralph Waldo Emerson demonstrates his familiarity with this gaming terminology in his well-known lecture on “The New England Reformers”: “Do you complain of our Marriage? Our marriage is no worse than our education, our diet, our trade, our social customs... Can we not play the game of life with these counters, as well as with those?” (Emerson 407). It is likely that Emerson's prescient reference to the “game of life” is either entirely metaphorical or a reference to the *New Game of Human Life*, an import from Europe that bore more resemblance to reform games like *The Mansion of Happiness* (discussed below) than to Bradley's *Checkered Game of Life*.

Because of this, we might link race games like *Traveller's* indirectly to the history of the term *algorithm*, which was “a transliteration and Latinization of the name of the ninth-century Arab mathematician Al Khuwarizmi” (Bogost 189). Credited as being the father of modern algebra, Al Khuwarizmi introduced the western world, via Latin translations of his collected work, to the convenience and accuracy of performing arithmetic with Hindu-Arabic numerals. In its first instances an “algorithm” was a symbolic replacement for the spatial counting operations traditionally handled by the abacus. A game like *Traveller's* combines these operations by allowing the marker and board to act either as a counting device (one can imagine younger players counting out each individual number they pass) or as an *accounting* device through which players represent the arithmetic totals they have calculated (placing their piece directly at the total) using the traditional Hindu-Arabic system.

In *The Checkered Game of Life*, this counting is displaced from the central playing field; the player piece, which Bradley still refers to as a “counter” (Bradley 2) does not represent a numerical accounting of progress, but rather an allegory of a self defined by its decisions. Here, by contrast to *Traveller's*, the game board is a free-form grid consisting of sixty-four checkered squares, a format putting pressure on the visualized “counting” terminology native to other games of the period. Optimally, a game would begin with four players, “although,” as Bradley notes in the patent, “it may be played with equal interest by more or less” (2). Starting at “Infancy,” in the bottom left corner, a player would spin the tetotum and coordinate his or her rolls (one through six) with instructions for movement written on the bottom of the “record dials.” These dials

take the place of the game board visualization required by race games like *Traveller's* and record how many points a player has scored toward the one-hundred point goal (via a small swiveling arm that points to numeric values arranged in an arc, like the minute-hand of a clock). This adjustment, however slight, leaves *the board itself* open to new functional interpretations. If the counting operations of the game have now been moved into the players' hands, a kind of sub-routine to the central focus of gameplay (the "record dials"), then we must now look to the supplementary algorithm that this displacement allows to take place on the board. Put another way, if the game board isn't a visualization of the *counting* going on, what exactly *is* it visualizing? The answer suggests Bradley's innovation: to make the "exercise of judgment" the primary focus of his game (Bradley 2).

Because of the combined use of chance and choice on the game board, decision-making is foregrounded in *Life*. As with *Traveller's*, play begins with a spin of the teetotum, but it immediately forces players to take accountability for the outcomes of their position, rather than a simple positional account. Rolling a one through three would allow the player to move one square either "up or down" for a one, "right or left" for a two, and "Diagonally in either Direction" for a three; rolling a four through six duplicates these options adding the ability to move "One or two squares" in either of the aforementioned directions. Players would alternate turns, decide their directions, and follow the instructions listed on the square upon which they land, which usually lists either a point value or another square to which the player should move his/her piece, such

as “School (to College),” “Government Contract (to Wealth),” and “Idleness (to Disgrace)” (Bradley 1).

Already here one can begin to see a strain in the terminology of Bradley’s patent: the movable piece he calls a “counter” is less a direct accumulation of points relating to a square on the gameboard than a *position* amidst a field of choices (dictated by chance *and* strategy) imbued with a relative value not transparently related to the gameboard square. Accordingly, Bradley warns that reaching “Happy Old Age” (the square most distant from “Infancy”) is not necessarily a foolproof strategy for winning the game. He writes, “as Happy Old Age is surrounded by many difficulties [Gambling, Ruin, Intemperance, and Poverty], fifty [points] may oftentimes be gained as soon by a succession of smaller numbers as by striving for ‘Happy Old Age’” (Bradley 2). The manipulation of the counter in the field of choices, and the presumed, if simple, relationship between player and counter, were precisely the aspects of the game Bradley hoped would allow it be a teaching tool, not just of *information* relating to virtues, but of smart and virtuous *habits* of decision-making. This is because the results of the game are dictated by player judgment rather than random number generation alone.

Here it is important to keep in mind that both the actions of the players and the limitations bounding them (teetotum spins as well as the edge, size, and make-up of the game grid) determine the outcome of the game—this is a fundamental element of games as algorithmic structures. An algorithm requires interactivity at some point in the process in order to determine some outcome. In a recent work on the relationship between games and culture, *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark defines algorithms as “a finite set of

instructions for accomplishing some task, which transforms an initial starting condition into a recognizable end condition” (Wark 41). As I hinted at earlier, an algorithm is a procedural decision-tree through which an input yields a discrete output. (These days, algorithms are typically thought of as the domain of computers.) In *The Checkered Game of Life*, the algorithms of the game rules govern things like the starting position of the counters (with the implicit question “Are you playing?” determining whether one is to place his/her counter at “Infancy” or not), the possibilities afforded players when they spin a given number on the teetotum (“Move left or right”), the results of inhabiting a given space on the board (either in movement or in numerical additions to the player’s running score), and the end conditions for declaring victory over one’s opponents (scoring one-hundred). However, none of these rules *does* anything without the players supplying the inputs that give starting values. So while there is a very real sense in which the player’s outcomes are bound and determined by the structure of Bradley’s algorithms, the regular iteration of decision-points in the game ensures that the outcome is never wholly out of the players’ hands.¹¹ “Without action,” writes Alexander Galloway in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, “Games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book” (Galloway 2). If *Life* can be seen as an experiment in decision-making and character habituation (an argument I’ll come back to momentarily), it is relevant then to ask what kinds of decisions it asks its players to make. Can we employ an operational hermeneutics to read this game as we would a text? I believe we can, and must, before we

¹¹ Not to be confused with the counted points that a player accumulates, a “decision-point” is a juncture at which the game would not move forward without player involvement, a location where some choice must be made.

can fully understand the effects a game like this might have had on its players, or, pursuing the textual metaphor I have used above, on its “readership.”

First and most obviously, we can look to restrictive positions on the board, such as edges and corners. At these positions, a player’s counter is against the boundaries of the game board, perhaps implying a certain back-against-the-wall feeling Bradley intended to generate among gamers who landed on these squares. This reading is supported by the backline squares we’ve already discussed—“Prison,” “Jail” and “Disgrace”—but also the presence of “Poverty,” “Gambling,” and “Ruin” at these locations. Further, even the positively valued squares at the edges of the board (squares that award the player direct points) are risky places to be: “Fat Office” (awarding the player five points) is surrounded by “Ruin,” “Prison,” and the game-ending “Suicide” (Shea Plate 11).

Even more restrictive than the edges, all corners allow only six choices for player movement, contrasting the sixteen choices available at other (non-edge) points on the board. Unless you are just starting or finishing *Life* it is never a good idea to be in a corner. Fortunately, “Infancy” and “Happy Old Age” are the only themed squares at those positions. But even “Happy Old Age” (worth a whopping 50) is “surrounded by many difficulties” (Bradley 1) such as “Gambling,” “Intemperance,” and “Idleness.” This means that if you were to land on Happy Old Age and not win the game in the same move, you would have a fifty percent chance of moving away from squares with point values (with three negative possibilities within reach, two neutral squares, and one positive: “Success”).

Perhaps the most compelling case-in-point is the role of “Truth” in Bradley’s game. As a square, it is telling that “Truth” has no value on its own, but puts you within easy striking distance of beneficial squares such as “Wealth” (worth the second-highest value in the game, ten points), “Matrimony,” “Happiness,” “Politics,” “Cupid,” “Perseverance,” and “Congress,” with its only possible negative outcome (within one or two squares in any direction) being “Crime” (Shea Plate 11). In other words, occupying a position of “Truth” (or following Bradley’s allegory, a subjectivity of truthfulness) may not give you any points, but is explicitly foregrounded as a strategic move: to seek out “Truth” is to put yourself in a position for potential happiness or love and to forestall the possibility of complete ruin. On the flip side, truth is not *automatically* valuable (as it is in other reform games of the period). Truth alone is ambiguous; it is a strategy and not an end in itself.¹² This is an important shift to narrate in a culture that was, by necessity, moving toward a more strategic view of truth. With scores of middle-class youths moving to the city to participate in the emerging markets of the mid-century period, “traditional, hierarchical social relationships based on deference” were replaced by “peer relations among social equals” (Halttunen 13). This meant that, even on the most basic occupational level, the truth of one’s received identity was not a known quantity. In the past, a young man might have known his occupation by looking to the occupation of his father, and this would constitute a certain kind of immediately valued truth: follow this path and virtue is yours, for this is the lot God has allowed you. However, by the 1820s

¹² Similarly ambivalent and yet tellingly situated are squares like “Ruin” (near “Suicide,” but also near “Bravery”) and “Poverty” (where the only negative outcome is a valueless turn and the possibility of “Disgrace;” positive outcomes include “Honesty,” “Ambition,” and “School”).

and '30s the nature of this truth was made uncertain by the strong economic draw of the urban society of strangers (Halttunen 13). If one was to succeed, then one needed to determine one's own professional truth and not just achieve it but *use* it to attain success.

Outside of the professional realm this new perspective on truth, highlighted in an operative interpretation of *Life*, was radiating into culture at large. The truth of a price was what you could reasonably expect someone to pay for a good or service in a given context (think of Barnum and Marx). The truth of an action had more to do with its acceptance and success in a given context than with a universally dictated, transhistorical mandate from God or the King (think of the Kantian influence on the American Transcendentalist movement or Benthamite Utilitarianism). These functional mandates in mind, we can now fully appreciate Bradley's goal of moral habituation in contrast to other attempts at reform through gaming available at the time.

Games before Bradley's undoubtedly focused on informing the player of virtues and vices. These games of moral instruction "mirror[ed] popular notions of the successful Christian life" by focusing on visualizations of virtue's positive effects and vice's negative outcomes (Oriard 167).¹³ For instance, 1843's *The Mansion of Happiness* was a race game like *Traveller's*, with a vice-vs.-virtue twist that linked it to earlier games like the Indian *Leela* (more familiar now as *Snakes and Ladders*). The first amusement of its kind known to be mass-manufactured in the US, *The Mansion of Happiness* indeed appears quite similar to *Life* in content and purpose. Players follow a spiraling path

¹³ *The Game of Goose*, one of the more well-known games of the "race" genre, was first published in England in 1597, and acted as a template for future games of a similar sort such as *The New Game of Human Life*, *The Mansion of Bliss*, and its later American rendition *The Mansion of Happiness*.

leading toward the central goal, “The Mansion of Happiness” (square sixty-seven), which one might reasonably compare to “Happy Old Age.” If a player were to land on a space relating one of the virtues (“Justice,” “Piety,” or “Temperance,” for example), he or she would jet forward on his/her path toward the center. On the other hand, if the player landed on a vice, say “Passion,” on the fourteenth space, he or she would have to return to the sixth space, “Water,” for as the rules read, “Whoever gets in a Passion must be taken to the Water and have a ducking to cool him.” Similarly, a “Sabbath Breaker [square twenty-eight] was ‘taken to the Whipping Post [square twenty-two] and whipt’” (Whitehill 9). In application, the goal of the game was to avoid vices and to achieve a counting score of sixty-seven as quickly as possible, similar to Bradley’s one-hundred point goal.

The differences between the two games, however, are what I would argue shifts the emphasis from in-forming the player to re-forming the player. In Bradley’s game, the progression one makes toward the score of one-hundred is neither linear, nor wholly left to chance. As opposed to the simple forward motion of *The Mansion of Happiness*, players of *The Checkered Game of Life* are persistently given choices regarding which direction they would rather take in the pursuit of a game-winning final score. This means that the player’s role is shifted from one in which he or she must only spin the teetotum and watch the results, perhaps forming positive or negative associations with different spots on the board, to one wherein he or she might choose to weather a certain degree of vice on the road to greater virtue. Players might take a slow and steady route garnering five points here and five points there, but avoiding areas of the board (insofar as it’s

possible) that hold higher amounts of risk. Or they might be forced, by the chance element of a spin, to navigate a difficult area of the board by trying to minimize time spent on valueless vice squares—forming an understanding that vice, for some, will be an unavoidable series of trials through which one must persevere; having persevered, they might have the opportunity to seek out new virtuous opportunities. One can see that in this circumstance, the simple addition of decision-points in Bradley’s game builds in a stronger sense of player actions (rather than chance alone) determining the outcome of the game. This also means that the players must formulate a personal strategy for navigating the counter, which makes their relationship to the game more interactive and connected to habit-oriented forms of social training.

The dominant manner of thinking through social training and the individual in the mid-nineteenth century was through the figure of “character.” In *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, Karen Halttunen defines character as such:

Within prevailing Lockean psychology, the youth’s character was like a lump of soft wax, completely susceptible to any impressions stamped upon him... The term *character*, in fact, could apply not to the lump of wax itself but to the impression made upon it. (Halttunen 4)

In the psychology Halttunen references here, the image of “soft wax” becomes an opportunity for figuring character as John Locke’s famous *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which the sensational world acts. Locke claims, arguing against an epistemology of “innate principles” (ideas human beings have even before birth), that the ideas forming the “character” of an individual are “acquired... imprinted by external things, with which infants have earliest to do, which make the most frequent *impressions* on their senses”

(Locke 272-275, emphasis added). “Ideas,” he continues, fill the “empty cabinet” of the mind and over time make the person who he/she is, yielding a somewhat passive perspective on character that is the result of factors largely out of a person’s control (275).

This information-based view of character “impression” (*ideas* are lodged in the mind and form the person) is clearly present in both the instructional goals and the mechanics of a game like *The Mansion of Happiness*. Here, players come across spaces, as in *Life*, such as “Generosity,” “Ruin,” and “[Becoming] A Drunkard” (Whitehill Plate 9). The consequence for landing on these spaces, which is wholly the result of the teetotum roll, is demarcated in a key that comes with the game, which admonishes players that: “Whoever possess Audacity, Cruelty, Immodesty, or Ingratitude, must return to his former situation... and not even *think* of Happiness, much less partake of it” (Whitehill 11, emphasis original). In these instructions, the player is informed that the presence of a vice in the mind precludes the presence of virtues, and thus prevents a happy result. It is as if the cabinet to which Locke refers has only room enough for one set of ideas or the other. Accordingly, the goal of the player is to educate him- or herself as to what these positive ideas are and to have a properly arranged stockpile of ideas (corresponding to a perfect accumulation of sixty-seven points: “The Mansion of Happiness”). Emphasizing this, the instructional passage lingers notably on a static and scenic depiction of the player’s mental state: the player “possess[es]” the vices (rather than, say, acting them out) and as a consequence is prohibited from moving on in the race (“think[ing] of Happiness”). This situates gameplay wholly in the realm of forming either

negative or positive associations with certain traditional moral ideas, “Audacity, Cruelty, Immodesty, or Ingratitude” against “Charity, Humanity, or Generosity” (11). As such, the “character” goal of a game like *The Mansion of Happiness* runs parallel to its operational goal: a player accumulating points is, at the same time, accumulating associational impressions, ideas of moral value.

Indeed, Bradley shares a similar declared focus upon “impressions” in the patent for *The Checkered Game of Life*, asserting that “it is intended to forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice” (Bradley 2). However, though the language of “impression” follows the Lockean precedent, the nature of these impressions is distinct from that in *The Mansion of Happiness*. In *Life*, impressions are made on a player by facilitating the active repeatability of certain decisions (re-forming the player time and again through *iterations* of judgment) in addition to the simple possession of certain ideas (in-forming the player). This operative addition, as I’ve argued earlier, is the central reform mechanism of the game. Bradley writes, “As the player... oftentimes has the choice of several different moves, the game becomes very interesting, the more so from the fact that the chance of the die is so connected with *the frequent choice of moves involving the exercise of judgment*” (2, emphasis added). While in *The Mansion of Happiness*, it is enough to *possess* “Prudence... [to move] toward the Mansion of Happiness” (Whitehall 11), in Bradley’s amusement that good judgment must be “exercise[d]”—a kind of use-it-or-lose-it approach to the same principles.

To further tease out the different role that “impression” plays in Bradley’s game, it is necessary to detail this procedural distinction between *Life* and games like *The*

Mansion of Happiness: that is, how does each game handle systematic player inputs, or decision-points? In *The Mansion of Happiness*, there are certainly moments at which inputs must be given to the rule system in order to produce forward movement toward the goal of the game. But it is important to recognize that player involvement at these decision-points is essentially that of a random number generator. At the onset of a turn, the player spins the teetotum and counts his/her piece forward the number of spaces he/she has rolled. There is no arguing with the die: if you're on the twenty-fourth square, roll a one, and note that one space forward will land you on "Immodesty," you cannot instead move one space backward to "Truth," or across the board to the adjoining fifty-second square, "Humanity." Unfortunately, it's "Immodesty" or bust. In this case, even though players are technically interacting with the algorithms of the game, the mode of their interaction is wholly in the physical act of spinning the teetotum.

In the current twenty-first-century climate of video games and high technology, the mode of activity employed by *The Mansion of Happiness* might not be called "interactivity" at all, given that our notion of interactivity has more to do with a real sense of *agency* (that is, a real give and take between the decision process of the algorithm and the decision process of the human mind). Addressing precisely this issue, new-media scholar Janet Murray writes,

Activity alone is not agency. For instance, in a tabletop game of chance, players may be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money, but they may not have any true agency. The players' actions have effects, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players' intentions. (Murray 128)

On the other hand, as previously noted, players of *The Checkered Game of Life* are given ample opportunities to take an agential role in the game, to, as Bradley puts it, “exercise [their] judgment” (Bradley 2). In this way, Bradley’s player/counter/game dynamic is more akin to Mark Meadows’ definition of “avatar” discussed earlier: an “interactive social representation of a user.” It is interactive, in that the decision-making process is two-sided (at least), involving the input-output system of the game rules *and* the player’s activity of judgment within this system. And it is social, in that the players’ decisions are represented visually on the board—by both their position (and history of positions) and the value of their “record dials”—for the benefit of other players, who might formulate their strategies and conceptions of the other players through this representation (are they reckless? cunning? timid? measured?). However, it is also important to linger on the double meaning of “exercise” as a means of tying this back to the nineteenth-century goal of “character” formation.

Insofar as Bradley’s game did utilize a more properly avatar-like counter than previous games, one can see the game as profoundly interested in representing a “self” *controlled* by the best judgments of the player/user. This represented self in the game, as argued above, was more like a puppet manipulated by the player than a sum of numbers. This emphasis on self-control was directly related to what Steve Mintz identifies as one of the core goals of mid-century reformers:

The traits associated with a firm character had a strongly moral dimension; they included personal integrity, high ideals, moral courage, a sense of duty, a capacity for hard work, and *self-control*... For early-nineteenth-century child rearing experts, the primary goal of socialization was not to nurture a happy, well-adjusted personality, but was to *implant a strong will, a capacity for self-*

discipline, and sense of duty deep within the individual character. (Mintz 13, emphasis added)

By playing at such “self-control” in the environment of Bradley’s game, a player, at each turn, was habituated to the notion of *judgment* being a contributing factor to good character development, or a good “impression.” Simply possessing good ideas was not enough: one must use these ideas to generate active solutions to an ever-changing gameplay situation. This gets to the core of the reform goals of the game since at every turn, players either form or iterate (re-form) a strategy for negotiating the board, representing their “will” or intentions, and reinforcing their “capacity” for self-control. The repetitive nature of decision in a turned-based game like *Life* meant that, quite literally, players were “exercising” (or training, or habituating) the faculty of judgment by playing. Rather than a self “impressed” by the outside forces of the game/world, this self “forcibly impress[es]” its avatar (i.e. develops procedural strategies) as a means of shaping the multitude of options that the world rains upon it. One can read a player’s “character” as the iterated accumulation of these local instances of strategy over time, rather than a simple accumulation of static ideas.

As a Massachusetts contemporary of Bradley, Emerson can offer a perspective on this process-minded re-imagining of the Lockean wax metaphor. In “The Transcendentalist,” he explains,

You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstances. Let any thought or motive of mine be different from that they are, the difference will transform my condition and economy. I—this thought which is called I—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould. (Emerson 83-84).

Where the earlier depiction of character situated the self as a malleable piece of wax and the world as composite agential force doing the impressing (lending itself to analogies of the divine), here, Emerson turns this on its head, suggesting that the world itself is wax and the self is the mould that impresses a shape upon the raw materials provided. This inverted metaphorical figure has two consequences significant to the parsing of character's relationship to self and agency. First of all, while it still gives some ground to the ability of the outside world to affect the product of the impression process (one can imagine different mixtures, colors, and consistencies of wax), Emerson's metaphor gives the final public configuration of agency to the self. Differences of "motive," which one might reasonably link to habituated strategies of judgment developed in Bradley's game, have a direct effect on the "shape of the mould." As a result, the accumulated force of a person's own active judgments have a direct effect on the self that is presented to the public world. Moreover, Emerson's image brings to mind a certain transposability not present in the earlier wax metaphor. By thinking of the self as a mould, one is encouraged to imagine multiple wax productions yielded from the same basic structure, each one slightly different in terms of the raw material furnished (the "circumstances" the world presents), but proximately linked via the shape of the underlying mould. Here one might think of the ever-changing states presented by a moderately open-ended game like *Life*: each turn instances a new circumstance, new raw materials for testing the desirability of the current strategy or "mould." It is obvious that Bradley hoped these habits of judgment would not only be "forcibly impressed" on the

character of the game's players within the game, but also capable of being ported to a real-world perspective on self (Bradley 2).

In this regard, it might be better not to understand Bradley's sense of character through Emerson's re-working of the Lockean wax metaphor, but rather through the lens of his own experience as a draftsman and lithographer. Without a doubt, his skill in producing vibrant and realistic images contributed to his success as a gamemaker. He spent the early part of his career producing schematic drawings for a local railroad company in Springfield, Massachusetts, surviving through the financial downturns of the late 1850s by drawing patent schematics for hopeful inventors and designing a luxurious railcar for an eccentric Egyptian pasha (Shea 39). In the process, he became interested in lithography and, in 1860, bought himself and his company a lithographic press. This press would be used to produce the prototypes of *The Checkered Game of Life* later that same year.¹⁴ To make a reproducible image, Bradley would take a large limestone plate and draw on it with a special *wax* marker, rendering the plate hydrophobic (water-resistant) in all of the areas he had drawn upon. Then, using a mixture containing gum arabic, he would wipe down the stone and produce a hydrophilic effect in the whitespace of the drawing. This meant that when he poured a combination of ink and water over the stone, the plate would retain ink precisely in the form of the wax-drawing, and from here the image could be *impressed* upon sheets of cardstock or paper. It was backbreaking work at times, made more difficult by the idiosyncrasies of the technology: "The drawing

¹⁴ Most games in the nineteenth century, as a result of lithographers multi-tasking their machines to make side profits in games, were listed as "Published by..." rather than "Manufactured by..." (Whitehill 8).

surface of the stone had to be kept absolutely clean; one drop of perspiration on it reproduced smudges on the finished print” (Shea 43). Still, thinking about this process, and its centrality to Bradley’s business (he owned the only lithographic press in Massachusetts outside of Boston), it may not be a stretch to imagine that when Bradley says that a game will “forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice,” his controlling metaphor is not wax molding but wax drafting and lithographic reproduction.

To pursue this, one might think of the movements of players as akin to the drawing of wax upon the limestone (rather than pouring the wax into a pre-established mould). At this point, adjustments can be made, just as in any given game a player’s strategy might change or adjust. However, through the habituation of certain types of decision-making at the iterated turns in the game, one might imagine that these momentary tactics or inspirations will begin to be inked—connected to positive strategic outcomes that the player wants to reproduce, in the game of course but perhaps in real life as well (since this distinction is specifically rendered ambivalent by the content of *Life*). Once the players’ habits are “inked” they can then be reproduced and transposed into different situations, as different individual “documents.” In the case of print-making each individual document maintains the idiosyncrasies of the medium and the pressing (how might a drop of sweat slowly cause slight changes to the picture over the course of an edition run?), while still maintaining a proximate genetic similarity that can read as a single text. In the case of “character” this “text” is a person’s public identity or avatar. Much as the lithographic press “forcibly impress[es]” its prints upon leaves of paper or

cardboard, the player now has a sense of agency and consequence “forcibly impress[ed]” upon his or her character—a character actively reproducible no matter how the confidence men of the world try to deform it at any local instance.

This social reproducibility reminds us again that Bradley’s game participated in a larger emerging discourse, one that insisted that the relationship between selfhood and society or selfhood and history was not passive.¹⁵ *Life* supplements and contrasts itself to earlier passive figurations of Romantic-era selfhood. In these figures, aptly visualized by the “counter” of a game like *The Mansion of Happiness*, the self is a cipher, or in Locke’s language, an “empty cabinet” through which the events of life pass. If these events happen to be virtuous, the vessel gains value. A poem prefacing *The Mansion of Happiness* explains that the game “gives to those their proper due,/ Who various paths of vice pursue,/ And shows (while vice destruction brings)/ That good from every virtue springs” (Whitehill 9-11). Unlike in *Life*, where a virtue like “Truth” is framed as a strategic position and may not “spring” positive results, *The Mansion of Happiness* both thematically and operationally asserts that one’s choices have very little to do with outcomes. Agency is framed in the ability of the individual to *know* rather than one’s ability to *decide* how this knowledge is used. This perspective can be summed up by Wordsworth’s position in the “Expostulation and Reply,” first published in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*:

The eye it cannot choose but see,

¹⁵ In *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*, Christopher Castiglia argues, “Reform espoused self-management as achievable through habitual exercise and continual vigilance. On the other [hand], the perpetual presence of a multiply divided interior meant that the forces of addictive appetite were never entirely conquerable” (11).

We cannot bid the ear be still;
 Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against, or with our will.
 Nor less I deem that there are powers,
 Which of themselves our minds impress,
 That we can feed this mind of ours,
 In a wise passiveness. (Wordsworth 199, emphasis added)

Here we are given the image of a “passive” self “impress[ed]” upon by the circumstances of the world—much in line with the Lockean metaphor to which Emerson found himself responding in “The Transcendentalist.” Will is subordinate to the hungry mind that fills itself with sights and sounds, and the “player’s” role is, again, one of accounting rather than accountability.

The ideology of “wise passiveness” is reflected in the American literary context by a poet like William Cullen Bryant. Taking the torch of Wordsworth’s wise cipher, Bryant’s speaker in “The Prairies” (written thirty-four years after Wordsworth’s poem) collapses history and nature into a justification for the transcendent self of the present.

Bryant writes:

The Prairies. I behold them for the first,
 And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
 Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo! they stretch
 In airy undulations, far away,
 As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell,
 Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed,
 And motionless for ever. (Bryant 20)

The viewer “Takes in the encircling vastness,” transforming the immensity and incorrigibility of the natural world into a “sight” that locates the speaker who has mastered it, much as a Claude glass frames an image and points an optic line from the

scene to the eyes of its viewer.¹⁶ Moreover, in this instance, “tak[ing] in” amounts to a similar accounting to that found in *The Mansion of Happiness*, where the player who takes in the most virtues is given his or her “due” in the form of forward movement toward the endpoint of the game. The ebb and flow of accounting is reflected in Bryant’s teleological perspective later in the poem: “Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise/
Races of living things, glorious in strength,/ And perish, as the quickening breath of God/
Fills them, or is withdrawn” (Bryant 22). The player who stands at the endpoint of history, at the top of the game, occupies that position because the “breath of God”—or the roll of the teetotum—has made it that way. Within a naturalized Protestant ethic of grace and election, those who have experienced withdrawals of this “breath,” who have moved backwards on the board, have only gotten what they were “due” (Whitehill 11).¹⁷

Yet if informed passivity is a virtue that links *The Mansion of Happiness* to early Romantic modes of self-awareness, then we might find an analog for the interactive self of *The Checkered Game of Life* in a poem like Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

Whereas both Wordsworth’s and Bryant’s speakers appear to yearn for a perfect passivity

¹⁶ A “claude glass,” named after landscape painter Claude Lorrain, was a tinted mirror painter and seekers of the picturesque would use to frame a setting in an aesthetic light; turning their back to the desired scene, the reflection within the glass was an encompassed view approximating the perspective and hue of contemporary oil painting (Buzard 46).

¹⁷ Carl Ostrowski notes the genocidal implications of this outlook in “‘I Stand Upon Their Ashes in Thy Beam’: The Indian Question and William Cullen Bryant’s Literary Removals” writing that “Bryant used Native Americans to illustrate a cyclic view of human history in which rising civilizations supplant their predecessors in upheavals condoned by nature, but in his zeal for American expansion Bryant anticipated cycles before they occurred, writing Native Americans out of the American history well before they had been moved off of the American landscape” (300). Although Ostrowski’s main point is astute, it important to recognize that it is not simply that Bryant “anticipated cycles before they occurred,” but that he actively constructs *historical* planes for the very purpose of allowing them to appear to supercede each other. Such an act requires an appropriately rich procedure for spatializing time, one into which the development of games in the nineteenth century gives us a considerable amount of insight, particularly through the figure of “state change” which will be discussed in the chapter that follows.

within “the game” of life that allows them a certain amount of subjective transcendence, Whitman’s lyric never quite leaves the active part of this “game” behind. As an attempt at rendering a semblance of life within representation, Whitman’s textual subject “Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary.../ Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” (Whitman 664). Accordingly, his use of the second-person and repetition in the poem shows him determined to leave the reader with a strong sense of implication and responsibility within the world he demarcates.

To be sure, in Whitman, as in Bradley, accounting is not abandoned; Whitman’s speaker in “Song of Myself” “contain[s] multitudes” (Whitman 709), which might recall us to Bryant’s “dilated sight.” Further, Whitman calls to mind both the passive accrual of counter-points and Wordsworth’s nonchalant speaker in lines such as “I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen, / And accrue what I hear into myself... and let sounds contribute toward me” (683). Even so, in what follows I will argue that the priority of this accounting is displaced by the operational mechanics of his engulfing lyric, by the style through which he employs this poetic containment. With Bradley we saw this displacement visualized in the substitution of the free-form grid for the traditional linear race track, moving the counting operations of the game into the hands of the players and freeing up the gamespace for an algorithm of decision. In the final part of this chapter, I want to make the case that “Song of Myself” imagines the avatar-figure of Bradley’s game *textually* through the use of repetitive syntax and ambivalent pronouns (the operational mechanics mentioned above). The effect is to foreground character as a kind of possibility-machine, the “current and index” (Whitman 680) through which accounting

for the discrete units of American life becomes an opportunity for accountability and judgment.

Whitman and the "Puzzle of Puzzles"

In a notebook entry dated sixteen years after *Leaves of Grass*'s initial publication, Whitman suggests that "The qualities which characterize 'Leaves of Grass' are not the qualities of a fine book or poem or any work of art but the qualities of a living and full-blooded man... You do not read, it is someone that you see in action" (785). This "someone" is, within the poem, often ambivalently framed as either the lyric subject (the "I" who "celebrate[s] myself" (662) in the poem's opening gesture) or, equally and significantly, the "you" who is reading the poem. After the celebratory opening, Whitman declares, "what I assume, *you* shall assume / for every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you" (662, emphasis added). Providing the framework of self through which the poem will be understood, Whitman establishes an early interface between the first- and second-person as located positions, as places from which to understand circumstance and shape it accordingly: "You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself" (663).¹⁸ As a result, the imperious "I" of the speaker's lyric is inaugurated with a gesture that is equal parts ego and radical formal empathy: we are the same because we shall occupy the same grammatical *place* in the lyric that follows, a place where "all sides" are

¹⁸ Of course, the line that precedes this might be seen as a contradiction of this view, "You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me" (663). However, this seems deeply ironic considering Whitman's opening. The apparent contradiction, aside from Whitman's own stated sympathy for contradiction, can be seen as a product of the high level of abstraction in his language, an abstraction rendered tractable by thinking of it against a board game metaphor: If you are out of the room when your turn comes about and, upon returning, I declare, "I moved you," there is no confusion about what it is that I have moved. Similarly, Whitman's lyric encourages the reader to take the position of the *poet* (a grammatical, decision-making position, like the marker in a game); it is not asking the reader to inhabit Whitman's physical body, "my eyes."

“filter[ed].” His use of “assume” in the opening lines reinforces this by playing on both a positional sense—‘assuming a proper posture’ or ‘assume the position!’—and an informational sense—‘here are the facts that can be assumed.’ The multivocality of “assumption” operates to foreground Whitman’s ambivalence between locating the reader in a *place* and giving the reader a *range* of data possibilities that he or she may work with at that location. As in *Life*, the position a marker “assumes” has an intimate relationship with the options available to it (the “assumptions” it may make).

These possibilities are enumerated throughout the poem as various character types, locations, and affections that radiate outward in a flurry of inclusive disjunction, “or”s that do not preclude the possibility of “both”s. We see one of the most explicit statements of this in his characterization of the grass that forms the central metaphor of the poem: “Or I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven... Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord... Or I guess the grass is itself a child” (665). The series of disjunctions here never excludes any of the others; they are consistently additive, although only one may be read at a time. Each option maintains a singular quality both in terms of textual space, and in terms of the temporal mechanics of reading. By this I mean that Whitman’s repetitive syntax, while yielding a synchronic sense to the poem that many have noted,¹⁹ also acts as a kind of textual metronome repeating a familiar beat that ensures the discrete separation of each possibility. In doing

¹⁹ Wai Chee Dimock provides a notable recent instance of this perspective, writing, “It is a poetry that dwells ever in the present, not because it refuses to look back, but because past events are so strangely foreshortened, so devoid of any weight of time, that they have the effect of being contemporaneous with all events subsequent to them. The operative process here is something like the transposition of seriality into simultaneity—the constitution of memory as a field of spatial latitude rather than temporal extension—a process that, I argue, makes for the perpetual openness of the poem” (Dimock 73).

so, it figures synchrony and diachrony in one breath. Being an American is being this or this or *this*, or all of these things, but only as time allows, only as one chooses to linger or return to a given option in an ever-growing list.

Whitman pervasively uses the phrase ‘I am the [insert noun here]’ to this effect. In one short passage alone, he writes: “I am the hounded slave,” “I am the mashed fireman with breastbone broken,” “I am the clock myself,” and “I am an old artillerist, and tell of some fort’s bombardment / . . . and am there again” (692). In these moments, analogous syntax reinforces the connection between each of these disparate narrative characters, linking them in an inclusive “I am,” notably in the present tense. And yet it also acts as a cue and reminder of those that have previously passed, as the slave transforms into the fireman and the fireman into the ticking clock itself. Equally suggestive, the concreteness of each incarnation, the ability of the I/you/reader to place themselves in the role that follows the “I am,” is actively linked to the passage of time. The “old artillerist” has a place (“I am there again”) as soon as he begins to “tell” the story of “some fort’s bombardment.” To tell a story is to take time, to move in one narrative direction over another. This is reminiscent of the synchronic grid one finds in *The Checkered Game of Life*, where “Wealth” is always present (and visible), but players only enact its benefit in the right moment, in time, and with a tactical use of the position they have assumed on the board. As a player’s eyes must drift across the possible positions available and settle upon the one she would like to make, so must a reader (the “I” or “you” of Whitman’s poem) give attention to one thing at a time, even as he/she

might remember the total assemblage. What holds Whitman's ambivalent first-/second-person together is its unity as a place of decision-making.

Understanding self as a possibility locus might give us perspective on Whitman's notebook revelation that the poem should be seen not as something one reads but rather as "someone." This term, "someone," acts as a personal cipher or marker, only fully intelligible in the action of choosing to linger on one or the other of the character choices imagined by the transcendent speaker. One cannot understand who "someone" *is* in the abstract; the pronoun simply stands as a mathematical variable might, a formal placeholder, unable to produce an output on its own. Yet one might understand this "someone" as a specific person if given information about either the person's actions or the framework in which those actions were carried out. "Song of Myself" is at pains to produce the latter (a framework), but makes appeals to the reader to provide the activity that will make this framework productive of a concrete "self" (rather than an abstract "someone"). "Not I," Whitman writes late in the poem, "not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself" (Whitman 705). The "you" of Whitman's song gains its constitutive definition by making decisions of focus from within the possibilities enunciated by the poem in a manner similar to Bradley's algorithm. Put another way, the "you" in this passage is a strategy for visualizing a kind of inhabitable marker, for allowing any number of readers to imagine themselves as a part of the world Whitman creates.

This allies Whitman's project to the figure of "avatar," although his use of the figure likely finds its roots in Hindu theology.²⁰ The extent to which Whitman was influenced by the religious thought of Hinduism is not fully known, but we do know from his later accounts of the writing process in *Leaves of Grass* that he was, at the very least, familiar with the core texts of this religion, and that may be enough for our purposes.²¹ In Hinduism's most historically prevalent form, Vishnu represents the universal figure of everything and all things (which calls to mind the inclusive disjunction of Whitman's general style). When that transcendental godhead takes on one form, or *incarnates*, this incarnation is referred to by the term "avatar" (*avatara*), which can be literally translated as "incarnation" or "descent [into a form]." In "Song of Myself," Whitman sings of a being that is at once a totality of material American existence *and* various local incarnations of this totality as particular things: slaves, fishermen, prostitutes, old maids, auctioneers. Each of these is both incarnate *and* transcendental in Whitman's narration—and so, even as his transcendental mode is like that of Wordsworth or Bryant, his incarnate lyric figures a self that is a very close analog to "avatar" in the traditional sense. As such the "I" and "you" of his verse are rendered both as singularity and as relationship-to-all that allows that singularity to be legible.

²⁰ See, for instance, O.K. Nambiar's "Whitman's Twenty-eight Bathers: A Guessing Game."

²¹ Whitman writes in "A Backward Glance": [I]n the presence of outdoor influences, I went over thoroughly the Old and New Testaments, and absorb'd (probably to better advantage for me than in any library or indoor room—it makes such a difference *where* you read,) Shakespeare, Ossian, the best translated versions I could get of Homer, Eschylus, Sophocles, the old German Nibelungen, the ancient Hindoo poems, and one or two other masterpieces, Dante's among them" (Whitman 479). For further insight into Whitman's engagement with Hindu culture and theology see R.K. Gupta, *The Great Encounter: A Study of Indo-American Literature and Cultural Relations* and Raman K. Singh, "Whitman: Avatar of Shri Krishna?"

It is precisely this type of figure that Whitman seems to hope for in his 1856

“Prefatory Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson.” He writes:

[In the United States,] there is being fused a determined character, fit for the broadest use for the freewomen and freemen of The States... each indeed free, each idiomatic, as becomes live states and men, but each adhering to one enclosing general form of politics, manners, talk, [and] personal style. (Whitman 646)

This “determined character” is not figured at the expense of the “idiomatic” here, just as the dynamics of gameplay in *Life* do not keep individual players from producing their own unique approach to the game. Additionally, it is telling that Whitman defines the “fit[ness]” of this figure by its capacity for broad “use;” it is not a model to aspire to, but facilitator of any number of future models, a kind of figuring figure. In this way, what Whitman refers to as “character” is, in its formal sense, less like the “character” described in Halttunen’s work cited earlier, and more akin to the avatar figure of Bradley’s game: a tool for *developing* character as aggregated judgments, a formal index through which the “free” and “idiomatic” might be expressed and habituated. Because of this, we might say that Whitman’s “determined character” is analogous to the lithographic press itself, rather than the iterated impressions made from it.

Coming to a similar conclusion, Wai Chee Dimock argues that the “self” at the center of Whitman’s poem is “turned into a categoric idea, so that it can remain structurally inviolate even as it undergoes many substantive variations, even as it entertains an infinite number of contingent terms” (Dimock 70). Her argument is that Whitman—in the tradition of analytic scholars like Kant, Rawls, and Chomsky—does this to eliminate the role of chance in the ethics of democracy. In short, the formal

democratic subject must be vacated of “luck,” of the contingent, in order to guarantee the categorical equality of all human actors in general, and all democratic US citizens in particular. In order for there to be a universal and unified notion of justice, chance cannot play a role in its validity. She continues:

[Whitman’s is] a noncontingent poetics, which ... *in effect* eliminates luck by eliminating the invidious distinctions it fosters, so that the whole world is now taken in, wrapped in a kind of cosmic tenderness, without exception and without fail, leaving nothing to chance. The objects of Whitman’s attention are admitted as strict equals, guaranteed equals, by virtue of both the minimal universal “Me” they all have in common, and of a poetic syntax which greets each of them in exactly the same way, as a grammatical unit, equivalently functioning and structurally interchangeable (Dimock 71, emphasis added)

For justice to be equally applicable, from the slave to the auctioneer, the structure of subjectivity must be seen as strictly equivalent across the board.

Here we get to the core of the “fair play” ethic that, in important ways, acts as a limit to the actions and potentials of what I’m calling the avatar figure.²² In gaming terms, the price one must pay for playing the game is to accept its rules. These limitations rule out certain strategic possibilities. For instance, we saw earlier that the rules of *The Mansion of Happiness* insisted on purely linear motion. Because this rule structured the possibility of the player’s counter, it forced him or her to move to “Immodesty” when a less linear rule-system might have allowed a move to “Truth” or “Humanity” instead. In so doing, it guaranteed a structural interchangeability, a kind of justice, for all players of the game; it produced a discrete output for any input the chance roll of the die might impose. This is not to say that luck does not play a role, but *from the perspective of the*

²² For interesting discussions of this ethic operating in the nineteenth century and beyond see Ann Fabian, *Cardsharps and Bucketshops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* and Michael Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*.

player its role is strictly determined by rules of the game. The self cannot take advantage of his or her own luck one way or another, and so the concept of luck as we understand it can be said to disappear. Contingency may exist in the spin of the teetotum, but *in effect* (to borrow Dimock's phrase) it looks as much like determinism as anything else—it looks, in fact, a lot like the “breath of God” that Bryant imagines—because all players are forced into an “equivalently functioning” agency.²³ Accordingly, *The Mansion of Happiness* produces a selfhood that is akin to the self Dimock sees operating in “Song of Myself, “A self that is beyond luck [and correspondingly] is... *barred* from the contingent” (Dimock 78, emphasis original). This, however, may not tell the whole story.

The inadequacy of Dimock's perspective lies in the operational difference represented by *The Checkered Game of Life*. While its rules did indeed adjudicate certain core conditions of winning and losing, as well as a common framework (the gamespace), contingency was built into the role of the players via a foregrounding of the *tactical* roles they might take within the algorithm at any given turn.²⁴ Whitman's use of the second-person perspective and inclusive disjunction, I believe, shows him employing a similar mechanism, despite the syntactic and categorical concessions he makes to enable it.

²³ This loss of contingent agency “in effect” may explain the boredom many adults find in playing race games like *Candyland* or card games like *War*: ‘I have no chance here, its all already determined by the order of the cards!’

²⁴ Michel de Certeau's explanation of the relationship between “strategies” and “tactics” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* forms the basis of my own usage of these terms: “A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it... A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance... [B]ecause it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time” (Certeau xix). On this mode of thinking, one might see “Song of Myself” as a strategic poem that demands and foregrounds tactical intervention on the part of its reader.

While the text itself may be notably “silent about those objects that, for us, are not categoric, not interchangeable or substitutable” (Dimock 78), I would argue that it is only as silent as a gameboard without players. Whitman invokes this in one of his most evocative passages, calling to mind both the symbolism of gaming amusement *and* the chaotic role of interpersonal sensation. He writes:

Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.

To be in any form, what is that?
If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous shell were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand.

Is this then a touch?.... quivering me to a new identity (Whitman 684)

Indeed, via a purely formal analysis the poem appears “callous.” But one cannot determine “callous[ness]” simply by appearance; one must be willing to “touch” or interact with the object in question, and it is precisely on the issue of interaction (a central aspect, recall, of the avatar figure) that Whitman lingers in this passage. Here, he is at pains to force the poem to reach out, despite the coldness of the textual space, to develop a relationship with its readers. If, as he has written earlier, “you shall assume” the same position as the “I” of the poem, then the sensational image of “stir[ring], press[ing], [and] feel[ing]” serves to draw you into the moment of holding a book, of touching that book with your fingers and restlessly moving about in your seat. And tellingly what you are

touching in this moment is the material document of this poem, a poem Whitman described in his notebooks as “someone” just as he does here in the moment of touch: “To touch [your?] person to some one else’s is about as much as [you?] can stand.”

As I’ve argued earlier, this “someone” is a variable in need of substantiation; and this substantiation requires a non-abstract agent such as the reader. It is not surprising, then, that it is at the moment of touch that Whitman foregrounds the “instant[aneity]” and disruptiveness of this sensational connection to the poem as a path to “new identit[ies],” stable points of focus in the undecided algorithm that makes up the poem. One might see here a correspondence between the “callous shell” and the game marker, and the non-callous shell that such a marker becomes when it is touched by the player, moved in ways that “quiver” it to a new position of possibility on the board, a “new identity.” If Whitman’s text is indeed silent in these moments (and I hope that I’ve shown that it isn’t entirely), it is because interactivity takes place across the interface of the text, between the text and the reader, between the player and the avatar. Again, Whitman writes, “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself” (Whitman 705). An avatar may be a figure of representation, but in the end, its fundamental value is in its ability to mediate between a productive simulation and the user’s reality.

Conclusion

Like Bradley’s *Checkered Game of Life*, Whitman’s avatar figure in “Song of Myself” is a way to achieve a kind of active element within consensus that enables legible freedoms. These social freedoms are achieved through, to paraphrase Bradley, a kind of “forcible impression” or habituation of the represented upon a human body

always subject to the “quivering” (Whitman 684) of new identities allowed by touch, and more generally by material experience. The cost of this legibility, of course, is implication in a system of possibilities that is not, strictly speaking, *free* in the most powerful sense of the word. The avatar is a figure that exists avowedly with one foot in the world of the ideological; and the ideological is, as is the case for any type of imagined self, the condition of its possibility. Sacvan Bercovitch frames this issue, in *Rites of Assent*, as “the doomsday trap of the rhetoric of consensus,” and argues that Emerson, in essence, comes to the same conclusion as Whitman:

Having alternated often and long between euphoria and despair, Emerson finally opted outright for the culture. ‘My estimate of America,’ he confided in his journals, ‘is all or nothing.’ Beyond America, *nothing*: it was the errand internalized, and made an avatar of the Self. (Bercovitch 63)

Bercovitch’s core argument is that the bricolage social sphere of America (envisioned as a collection of Emerson’s self-reliant citizens) adopts dissent as a Hegelian Romantic self-critical move that preserves conservative ideologies of self (the “determined character” of Whitman’s poem), while effecting a sense of motion through a safely enclosed social dialectic. This is to say, the debate and its opponents may change, but the structure of the algorithm—constituted in Bercovitch’s view by certain quasi-Christian and Enlightenment ideologies—may not. He writes, “In [Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*] and other key instances, the autonomous act that might have posed fundamental alternatives, imaginative or actual, became instead a mimesis of cultural norms” (59).

Bercovitch’s critique is both a warning and a savvy way of understanding how the United States, as a historical whole, avoids a kind of fundamental internal critique. And

there is certainly a case to be made for both *The Checkered Game of Life* and “Song of Myself” being very much in the realm of internalized ideology. Yet, as we have seen in this chapter, both Bradley and Whitman’s representative interventions use the ideological as a tool to leverage the agential, using *legibility* to imagine a parallel and unpredictable *ability*. In Bradley’s game, players were encouraged to see matrices of traditional values as opportunities for crafting an accountable individual agency. This agency was undoubtedly bounded by the underlying algorithms of the game, but these algorithms became the basis for strategic habituations that a player could transpose into a mathematically complex number of re-combinations suited to different gameplay situations. Similarly, Whitman’s “Song of Myself” uses ambivalent pronouns, repetitive syntax, and complex lists of “American” character traits to visualize the lyric speaker as a model for a self, an avatar that could legibly incarnate and interact with the world around it. In Whitman, the recombination of known quantities, by putting atemporal representations in contact with temporal realities, forms a basis for thinking through how a “someone” becomes an agent, a “you” becomes an “I.” As a result, both Bradley and Whitman give us considerable insight into the manner that agency was being re-imagined in the mid-century moment. In both cases it is clear that the important value may not be whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT EXACTLY INFINITE: SMOOTH OPERATORS AND THE DANGEROUS ALLURE OF DISCURSIVE CONSISTENCY IN MELVILLE'S *THE CONFIDENCE- MAN*

Well, I see it's good to out with one's private thoughts now and then. Somehow, I don't know why, a certain misty suspiciousness seems inseparable from most of one's private notions about some men and some things; but once out with these misty notions, and their mere contact with other men's soon dissipates, or, at least, modifies them.

—Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857)

Following a particularly wearying day on a trip to New York from rural Hogginsville, Peter Coddle, star of a popular nineteenth-century narrative, takes to his carriage for some rest and recuperation; “I put my quizzing glass away, laid back in my seat, and took a good snooze, with a cup of coffee for a pillow” (Aimwell 247).

Alternatively, “I put my quizzing glass away, laid back in my seat, and took a good snooze, with a quart of caterpillars for a pillow.” Moreover, it is not entirely certain that it *was* “a quart of caterpillars;” the pillow could have been “an Irishman” as well. Or “a Dutch farmer.” Or “half a dozen doughnuts” (257). These variations are not the result of printer's error or editorial dispute over authorial intention. They are, in fact, an intended part of the narrative; any one of them (and many others) might be correctly substituted. This is because the 1858 *Peter Coddle's Trip to New York* is both a short story and a self-described “Game of Transformations,” the nineteenth-century equivalent of what we today are most familiar with as *Mad Libs* (241). Using pre-made cards containing various

article-noun combinations, players would fill in the blanks to produce readable (if absurd) sentences, creating a slightly different story every time they played. In this way, *Peter Coddle* was an important mid-century example of a rhetorical “state machine,” a figure whose significance is the focus of the present chapter.

In a recent work of game theory, Jesper Juul provides the following definition of state machine, “To borrow from computer science, the rules of a game provide a *state machine*. Briefly stated, a state machine is a machine that has an *initial state*, accepts a specific amount of *input events*, changes state in response to inputs using a *state transition function* (i.e. rules) and produces outputs” (Juul 60, emphasis original).

It is important to note that while Juul uses the language of machinery, state “machines” can be abstract as well as hardware-based:¹ a properly-used multiplication table and a grandfather clock are state machines on different orders of complexity. Put in terms of its general figural characteristics, a state machine is a consistent set of rules that yield a new state (an output) from some initial state via an input—it is a more temporal way of envisioning the concept of “algorithm,” introduced in the previous chapter.² With player interaction, *Peter Coddle* is a simple linguistic game based on this general idea: The story has an initial state (legible but gap-laden), a set of input events and discrete places where these may be accepted (the word cards and the ellipses), basic rules for effecting

¹ See, for example: <http://foldoc.org/finite+state+machine> <Accessed March 8, 2011>

² Thinking of algorithms as state machines is useful because it introduces a temporal element into our understanding. Algorithms, while often at degrees of speed that approach immediacy in the current era, nevertheless, function specifically in a step-wise and progressive kind of time. Formalizing the discrete procession of input states, transition functions, and output states, algorithms produce and rely upon what might be called a rudimentary morphology of cause and effect. This morphology is figured by the state machine.

transition to a new state (fill the gap by reading “the uppermost card in the pile” [Aimwell 241]), and an output (the resulting sentences). In Chapter Two, we saw Walt Whitman employing an analogous mechanism. By encouraging readers of his lyric to fill out the details or focal points of their own “I” or “self” in “Song of Myself,” he invited them to render a “someone” into an avatar-agent capable of acting legibly in the American social sphere. The capacity to see oneself as a series of blanks that might be filled in, rendering the act of personal reformation a discrete and step-wise process, might be constructively framed as making a state machine out of subjectivity. With this in mind, it is interesting in no small measure that the book that contains *Peter Coddle’s* narrative is entitled *Jessie; or, Trying to Be Somebody*.

Published one year previous to *Jessie*, Herman Melville’s much reviled final novel, the delightfully opaque *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), illuminates a similar figure, again using the operations of substitution and transformation.³ As perhaps the perfect embodiment of Whitman’s avatar-agent, all the way down to the shape-shifting incarnations he takes on throughout the novel, Melville’s Confidence-Man plays people as if they were games. If the figure of the avatar, as construed in the last chapter, was conceived to allow privately-willed decisions that might be publicly legible and therefore a personal and narrative sense of agency, then one might see this figure as a kind of public mechanism of self-invention, a becoming “somebody.” Melville’s novel explores the dark side of this inventive process. Rather than solely focusing his inventive

³ For a compilation of nineteenth-century reviews of *The Confidence-Man*, see Brian Higgins and Herschel Parker’s *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*.

energies inward, becoming a lyric utopian *self* as in Whitman's poem, the Confidence-Man slyly empowers others to re-invent themselves temporarily in ways that produce an income for him. A widow becomes a charitable woman. A young collegiate becomes a business-man. And a sick man becomes a recovering patient. All of these re-inventions have the conspicuous side-effect of changing money from the hands of the marks to those of the Confidence-Man. By identifying their desire for a single consistent interiority, Melville's anti-hero renders and exploits people as "state machines," as transformation games of a sort: the input that causes them to spring to life is merely his carefully chosen words, but the outcome is money in his pocket.

State Machines and Algorithms of the Interior

Much has been made of the relative inscrutability of Melville's rhetoric in *The Confidence-Man*: the novel has been called "unstable"—"unreadable" even—because of its notoriously flat characterizations and opaque narrative style.⁴ An important and pervasive source of this opacity is Melville's use of omissions and elliptical statements throughout the text. One finds fragmented turns of phrase throughout the novel, gaps that place a deep burden on the conversational imagination of the reader. The Confidence-Man asks a woman if she is a sister of the Church and she responds, "Why—really—

⁴ In "'A ____!': Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*" Elizabeth Renker provides a useful catalogue of previous negative responses to the novel's "unreadability," concluding that it "*is unreadable*" because "in it [Melville] took on and explored the obstructing page that was at the core of his own writing anxiety; as he did so, he displaced his frustration with the page onto the reader" (116, 117). Taking a different tack, Rick Mitchell argues that Melville creates "an unstable text that continually frustrates the reader's attempts to gain (illusory) mastery (and the ownership that such mastery implies) of the narrative" in order to critique the mystification of the stable commodity form (62). Departing from these readings, this chapter approaches "unreadable" or "unstable" moments—such as the dialogue between the Confidence-Man and Mark Winsome that inspires Renker's title—as figurations of the operational opportunism that was emerging as a necessary part of everyday life in the nineteenth century.

you—” (Melville 52). Later, a mystic, pointing out another con man on the steamboat *Fidèle*, declares, “I conjecture him to be what, among the ancient Egyptians, was called a —” (195). In a traditional view of nineteenth-century novel, these dialogic elisions might be seen to imply a character’s weakness of mind or, in the latter case, some ominously gothic lacuna. However, in the course of this chapter I will suggest that they are also opportunities for narrative invention, if not necessarily on the part of the reader. We will return to Melville’s novel, but first it will be useful to approach the operational role of syntactic deletion from the perspective of a less strictly literary narrative, the aforementioned *Peter Coddle*. Indeed, this story also makes much of omission, although its use would be more likely labeled absurd or ridiculous than inscrutable. It is precisely its hybrid nature as a literary *game* that allows a fresh perspective on its more serious, and ostensibly less interactive cousin.

Peter Coddle’s Trip to New York was first published in 1858, as a nested bonus for readers of the children’s novel *Jessie, or Trying to Be Somebody*, the sixth installment in Walter Aimwell’s “Aimwell Stories.” Mixing pedagogy and whimsy with a decidedly reformist bent, Aimwell, the pen-name of writer William Simonds,⁵ announces in the preface that, “The special object of JESSIE is to kindle in the hearts of the young... a pure and noble ambition, and to encourage them to strive for that ‘good name’ whose price is far above rubies” (1). Midway through the tale, Jessie’s friend Ronald introduces her to

⁵ Owing to the death of Simmons, the seventh installment of the Aimwell series, *Jerry; or, the Sailor Boy Ashore*, was published in 1863 as an unfinished fragment to which was appended a memoir of the author’s life (likely written by his wife). This memoir, largely composed of journal entries arranged by the author, provides an interesting account of a working writer, editor, and journeyman printer in the period, and gives some insight into the quantitative and mechanic frame of mind that produced a literary transformation game like *Peter Coddle*.

his new “literary enterprise,” which she writes up in the family newspaper; Aimwell then takes it upon himself to relate Ronald’s full game and rules, “As this game [would] perhaps amuse [his] younger readers” (240). The narrative conceits of *Peter Coddle* are familiar to any reader of nineteenth century reform literature: Peter ventures forth from his rural home in search of “a larger field in which to... make his fortune,” encounters a series of tragicomic pitfalls, and returns home “in a very dirty and shabby suit, and with an anxious and wo-begone countenance”—perhaps having been driven “crazy” by the whole ordeal (242).

As related earlier, the conceit of the *game* revolves around the absence of various substantive nouns from the narrative as printed on the page (using ellipses to mark these deletions). The player uses a long list of stock phrases provided at the end of the narrative to fill in the blanks either by selecting them at random (the “Game of Transformations”), arguing with other players over appropriate substitutions (the “Game of Literary Patchwork”), or by trying to determine the precise non-absurd locations of every given phrase (the “Literary Puzzle”).⁶ Often billed as “Three Games in One,” the “Peter Coddle” name became synonymous with word games of this sort.⁷ Over the years after its appearance in the United States, many other game manufacturers, including Milton Bradley, tried their hand at versions of the game, taking the bumbling Peter not just to New York, but on travels all around the country, from Boston to Chicago. What is most

⁶ Gould & Lincoln, the book/game’s publisher, kindly offers to send a standalone copy of the game with pre-made cards “put up in a neat paper box” for an unnamed fee.

⁷ Interestingly, this game may have been predated by a year by a similar “trip” game, *Trip to Paris*, published by A. Williams and Co., also in Boston, a year previous. However, the record of this forerunner practically disappears after the emergence of *Peter Coddle*.

interesting about its prevalence in the nineteenth century is the convergence of its narrative themes and its gameplay, with perhaps the most cogent episode revolving around an encounter between Peter and a confidence-man.⁸

Arriving in New York late sometime after sundown, Peter dazedly walks out into the throng of people that populate the city. Soon after, he catches “the eye of a well-dressed gentleman” who strikes up a conversation with him:

“My friend,” says he, taking me aside, “I suppose you wish to find of the right sort. I suppose you’ve heard,” says he, “about the rascally tricks that are played off here upon strangers; but you’ve no idea how many sharpers always stand ready to fleece [...] That’s the reason I took you aside. If you want a good cosy home,” says he, “where you will be out of the reach of these sharks, and where you can have anything you call for, from to or , just come along with, me to my boarding-house. (248-249)

Later, he will wake up robbed and hungover, a victim of his erstwhile friend, but for now Peter is drawn in by the kindness, much as the objects of his own desire must be drawn in by the player. What Peter “wish[es] to find” is conspicuously omitted from the con man’s dialogue, as well as the things he might “call for” at the boarding house. Through these omissions, the game forces the player to take an active role in determining the shape of Peter’s character by constructing the content of his desire. In one iteration, he might have

⁸ The term “confidence-man” has its origins in the burgeoning urban culture of antebellum New York and its society of anonymously mobile rising middle-class. A bold crook named William Thompson would approach a mark on the street pretending to be an old, but forgotten acquaintance. Noting the kempt attire and genteel manner of Thompson, the mark would lament their lack of recollection, but undoubtedly trying to save face, would reassure him that they had confidence in the honesty of his story. Thompson would then ask them for a token of this “confidence,” a gold watch in the case of Thomas McDonald, claiming that their confidence would be affirmed when he returned with the watch the next day (Bergmann 305). When they presented him with this token Thompson would take it and walk away laughing, never to be seen again. That is, of course, until McDonald noticed Thompson working a nearby street in the weeks after the theft. The story arrested the imagination of New Yorkers and the term has been a part of the vernacular ever since. For an excellent history see Johannes Dietrich Bergmann’s “The Original Confidence-Man.”

a weakness for good food, convinced by the con man's depiction of "a heap of pancakes," "a stick of candy," and "a basket of chips" (257). On the other hand, he might be more inclined to luxury, lured in by "a velvet sofa," "twenty-three dollars," and "a mint of gold" (257-258). In the formal terms of the game, the player determines the very objects that act as the basis of Peter's confidence in the well-dressed gentleman.

Moreover, these determinations are precisely what the successful confidence-man must make in order to render Peter as a mark: he identifies appropriate items to fill in the gaps in his undoubtedly fabricated narrative (regarding what he has at his boarding house) and as a result succeeds in his game. In an unexpected turn, the player and the con man have more in common than Aimwell may have intended. Both player and confidence-man are able to work a system to their benefit by providing substance to a formally consistent set of blanks: What kinds of things will make Peter (and, one assumes, countless other strangers to the city) comfortable enough to return to the boarding-house? What nouns will dispel the grammatical discomfort of a story riddled with blanks? The answers to both of these questions require an agency willing to cooperate with a pre-existing structure (of anxiety and desire in the first case, of anxiety and narrative in the second). Registering this on the level of operative style, Aimwell's "Game of Transformations" implies that anyone who can appropriately work the lacunae of a system, who can identify the structural inputs and play the game accordingly, is bound to laugh last. As will soon become clear, this lesson is central to my reading of *The Confidence-Man*.

For now, it is enough to note that the pleasure of *Peter Coddle* is in the puzzling invention of a story. Put another way, the payoff of playing is in creating a narrative whole out of a figure of raw (but structured) indeterminacy. Aimwell writes:

Of course the story will read differently every time the game is tried, for the transformations it is capable of are infinite. No, not exactly infinite, which means without limits; but it would take many lines of figures to express the precise number, as any reader who has studied arithmetic as far as permutation can easily satisfy himself. (241)

The finite number of cards/stock phrases included with the game renders its narrative possibility a question of finite permutation, rather than infinite writerly freedom. Yet even if one were to expand the card set to a hypothetically infinite array, it is important to note that the type of freedom given to the player would be discretely bounded, “not exactly infinite.” These boundaries produce the consistent framework necessary to communicate the identity of the story despite the differences between its subsequent iterations. Because of this, players could feel a certain amount of confidence that, despite their most absurd efforts, something resembling a story (and therefore funny as opposed to utterly nonsensical or opaque) would be the result of their play.

Its interest in formalized transformations involving language makes *Peter Coddle* surprisingly parallel to the logical system being developed across the Atlantic by the theoretical forefather of computer science, George Boole.⁹ In his 1854 *An Investigation of The Laws of Thought*, Boole puzzles over “the grounds of that confidence with which

⁹ Later twentieth-century computational scientists, such as Claude Shannon, would use Boole’s propositional logic as the basis of binary switchboards (state machines *par excellence*), which would become the foundation of digital computing more generally. For more on Claude Shannon and his use of Boolean algebra see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2001/mar/08/obituaries.news> <Accessed March 9, 2011>.

[scientific truth] claims to be received” (Boole 402); that is, he wonders, how general truths of the world might be agreed upon despite the fact that they are “never [exemplified] with perfect fidelity, in a world of changeful phenomena” (407). He comes to the conclusion that this “confidence” is largely the result of the consistency of our formal expressions with regard to these truths, a consistency that leads him to make a strong (and revelatory) connection between logic and mathematical algebra, concluding, “The laws of thought, in all its processes of conception and of reasoning, in all those operations of which language is the expression or instrument, are of the same kind as are the laws of the acknowledged processes of Mathematics” (422). The fruit of this idea was the development of a new propositional logic, moving away from the basic syllogistic system of Aristotle to a symbolic “math” of the mind by turning logical terms like “and,” “or,” “is,” and “not” into an algebraic form ($x, +, =, -,$ respectively) and representing logical predicates with “letters [like $x, y,$ and z] as in mathematical analysis or algebra.” (Corcoran xviii). By formalizing the grammars of logic, one could pursue deductive conclusions, could tell new stories about the relations of things, while remaining assured in the validity of a result. Form, as in Aimwell’s word game, *is* confidence. Yet the utility of this way of thinking was not limited to mathematics or games. In an age of increased variability in both civic and social arenas, the need for such structural confidence was becoming a central aspect of modern life. While it is only alluded to on the level of narrative in *Peter Coddle*, in Melville’s more labored novel the ability to use structured states as opportunities for productive play is a critical theme.

At its core, *The Confidence-Man* is also a cautionary tale about strangers meeting strangers. And yet, these interactions are not as strange or variable as they might be; consistent assumptions about ethics, custom, and law ensure that certain baseline reactions can be expected. In a sense, culture and tradition provide quasi-mathematical forms of sociality that evoke Boolean logic, while accommodating a variegated range of individual personalities. Early on, Melville gives expression to this dichotomy of form and variation using the symbolism of the river upon which the narrative takes place. He writes of the riverboat passengers,

These mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. A Tartar-like picturesqueness; a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide. (Melville 17)

Insofar as the Mississippi has a certain assurance of identity, this is guaranteed not entirely by its content (which is always in transition) so much as by its form, by its topography and geographical consistency. The banks of the river and the depth and incline of its bed might be said to form the basis of its formal identity much as the skeleton narrative of *Peter Coddle* gave a foundation to its identity as a legible story. In the language of mathematics, the *form* of the Mississippi River could be considered as a “function” (a direct cousin of the “transition function” discussed earlier) such as $f(x) = x + 2$. Here, “ $x + 2$ ” defines the boundaries of the function abstractly without giving specific details about the value of “ x .” One might usefully understand this as the banks of the Mississippi. However, in order to produce a particular shape, the possibilities of “ x ”—the “domain” of the function—must be defined as well. In the case of the

Mississippi, this is where the “streams of the most distant and opposite zones” come in, providing various and “helter-skelter” inputs that, when combined with the topology of the banks, produce the “cosmopolitan and confident tide” of the river.

In the same passage, Melville telescopes this figure toward the direct setting of the novel, the steamboat *Fidèle*,¹⁰ connecting the image of a fluidly changing natural phenomenon directly to the world of human machines. He writes,

Though always full of strangers, [the steamboat] continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange; like Rio Janeiro fountain, fed from the Corcovado mountains, which is ever overflowing with stranger waters, but never with the same strange particles in every part. (15)

Melville encourages us to imagine the *Fidèle* as a formal system of transition by linking the imagery of the river and the riverboat—variable things with “never... the same strange particles in every part”—emphasizing that they nevertheless answer to consistent names. Flipping the image on its head and using Melville’s metaphor to further understand a state machine, we might think of the “x”s in a functional equation as “strangers,” perhaps following the Greek, *xenos*. These “strangers” always have a place in the machine, it doesn’t *do* anything without them, but their precise role is to be determined by what they bring to the system (their “domain”): the boat does not operate without a crew and passengers.

Into this already pregnant scene Melville’s main character emerges, first in the guise of an austere deaf-mute in “cream-colors.” “It was plain that he was,” Melville writes, “in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger” (Melville 9). With clothing

¹⁰ Of course, the name of the boat itself also evokes a certain changeless consistency despite the changing flow of the material world, punning on the French “fidélité” meaning “faith” (“Fidelity”).

evoking the collage aesthetic of the boat population at large, the deaf-mute steps onto the deck of the *Fidèle* and into a crowd of people. He blends into the mass and eventually stops in front of a placard (ironically) warning passengers to be on the lookout for a wanted “impostor.” Pausing for a moment he scribbles the phrase “Charity thinketh no evil” onto a small slate and holds it before him (10-11). He follows this up with a litany of variations on this theme, which increasingly annoys the audience standing before him: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind,” “Charity endureth all things,” “Charity believeth all things,” and “Charity never faileth” (11-12). Through all of this, Melville writes, “The word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank” (12). This structural continuity between each of the phrases involved suggests that the man in cream-colors is playing a bit of a *Peter Coddle* game with himself, although the productive output of this game is anything but antisocial.¹¹ Indeed, the passengers on the ship begin to see the deaf-mute himself as a kind of elliptical “blank” in an interpretive game of transformation.

Growing tired, the man plants his body against “a ladder there leading to a deck above... simple though he seemed, [he] was not entirely ignorant of his place” (13).

Recalling the earlier depiction of the *Fidèle* as a kind of constant, his position is

¹¹ In “‘The Confidence-Man’: Melville and the Problem of Others,” Gustaad Van Cromphout argues that the deaf-mute is a symbol for the impossibility of knowing other minds, citing the “unenlightening” descriptors the passengers assign to the him when watching him nap (Cromphout 39). I would argue that the novel is less about this inability, than it is about the capacity of social interactions to determine personal legibility (one’s own “mind” included). That is, Melville foregrounds the constitutive sociality of anything that could be construed as a “true self” (Cromphout 39). In this way, I am in agreement with Rachel Cole’s claim that the Confidence-Man “represents the possibility that personhood might be irreducibly social” (Cole 386).

meaningful in that he has placed himself directly at a ladder, a symbol of transition between two stable decks of the ship. By doing so, he imposes himself on the transition between these decks, becoming an ambiguous part of any movement between them, a kind of variable to the ladder's transitional function. The crowd wastes no time in making an attempt to assign him a stable value. Standing on a "cross-wise balcony" above him (evoking the standard variable "x," mentioned above, as well as biblical allegory) they refer to him alternatively as:

"Odd fish!"
 "Poor fellow!"...
 "Uncommon countenance."
 "Green prophet from Utah."
 "Humbug!"
 "Singular innocence."
 "Means something."
 "Spirit-rapper." (13-14)

These declarations, typographically presented as a long column of substantives, evoke the "Phrases to fill in the blank" that close *Peter Coddle*:

A humbug.
 A new idea.
 This, that, and the other.
 A bureau drawer.
 A dancing-master. (Aimwell 256)

By foregrounding a structurally placed variable, a "blank" with a clear call for contextual meaning, both Melville's and Aimwell's narratives emphasize precisely the type of variable consistency that is the hallmark of the "state machine" as a formal structure (in a figural role). Both narratives represent a general obsession with transformations of this

sort in the popular mind. A brief exploration of the term “state” sheds some light onto the reasons for this widespread preoccupation.

The earliest connotations of the term “state” revolved around two things: the general condition of a person or thing (are you diseased? is that water frozen or liquid?) and the politics of estate management (“State”). The latter had historically less to do with our modern conception of “State” as a self-fashioned governing *system*—as Eric Slauter has recently written, “the state as a work of art”¹²—than it did with the State as a politically necessary stalemate binding individual landed estates and their owners. The “State,” by this definition, was simply whatever the combination of individual estates produced, as a result of political or economic exigency; because of the ritualized and caste-based aspects of aristocratic culture, time or institutional progress had little to do with “state” until the late eighteenth century. However, by the nineteenth century, the concept of a “state” would take on both configurative and temporal meanings. In his work on Romantic-era historicism, *England in 1819*, James Chandler shows these two meanings converging in the literary genre of the “State.”¹³ While at first this genre only incidentally recorded the *date* of the State, Chandler argues that there was an increased emphasis across the eighteenth century on the annualization of the form: “by the end of the [eighteenth] century, successive volumes published under the genre-marking title

¹² Slauter writes, “Politicians and ordinary people in the early United States considered the state as a work of art. They believed that governments were fashioned by humans and subject to their control. They also believed that successful political constitutions should *emerge* from the manners, customs, tastes, and genius of the people being constituted” (Slauter 8-9, emphasis added). As discussed below, the eighteenth century saw a stronger focus on the notion of a State as an “emerg[ing]” entity.

¹³ According to Chandler the genre of the “State” consisted of documentations of the political condition and arrangement of the country (by writers such as Guy Miège in 1707).

‘The State of X’ tend to be cast as part of a series of volumes with annual dates featured in their titles” (Chandler 121-122). He continues:

The crucial element in this new Scottish-Enlightenment sense of history... is a dialectical sense of periodization in which particular ‘societies’ or ‘nations,’ newly theorized as such by just these writers, are recognized as existing in states that belong at once to two different, and to some extent competing, orders of temporality. On the one hand, each society is theorized as moving stepwise through a series of stages sequenced in an order that is more-or-less autonomous and stable... On the other hand, this same historiographical discourse always implies a second temporality, one in which these different national times can be correlated and calendrically dated in respect to each other. (128)

In other words, by the end of the eighteenth century, “state” had come to signify the current arrangement and condition of an entity understood both as progressive sequence and as the unified features by which it might be weighed against others.¹⁴ As George Boole writes, speaking of a system’s “constitution,” “The constitution of a system is the aggregate of those causes and tendencies which produce its observed character, when operating” (Boole 399). Here, the language of cause and operation shows an increased tendency in the nineteenth century to fixate on the formalized potential of a thing despite the actual “cosmopolitan” (to use Melville’s term) flow of the temporal order.

This insistence on formal unity, despite the changes of step-wise states through time, required a new focus on the style or rules by which a changing entity might retain

¹⁴ This recalls us to the previous chapter and William Cullen Bryant’s sense of American history: the political difference of the Indian state from the U.S. state is framed as one being “ahead” of the other in time. Because they do not do as we do *and* because we came here after them, their place in history is necessarily “past.” Further, it dovetails with *The Mansion of Happiness* and the sense in that game of linear time as progressing toward greater perfection and justifying the hierarchy of the current moment. “State” was now connected more firmly to time and date, and Chandler concludes that self-dating in this moment was a manner of self-making, “as if a *date of the nation* could figure the *state of the nation*” (33, emphasis original). The association of state and date worked in reverse as well, as the state of a given political entity was an indicator of whether “time” was progressing (that is, whether or not “history” had been made/recorded as such). Political change became a matter of actively and textually temporalizing one’s position as a means of justifying it as progress and necessitating change.

its identity despite the change. One way to unify the identity of a mass of public actors was through the rhetoric of “nation,” using the power of the press to inspire a representational idea of “print-nationalism” as Benedict Anderson has persuasively argued.¹⁵ However, Christopher Castiglia has recently noted that, “One finds, in the writing of antebellum political theories... less talk of *nationalism* than of the *state* as a network of civil institutions” (7, emphasis original). Nationalism might have made people feel as though they were a part of a community larger than their immediate neighbors, but it was only a mechanism of “state” change that would allow them to understand how they might take an active role in the civic life of the early United States. And active roles are exactly what reformers of the period demanded.

Returning to *Peter Coddle*, one gets a clearer sense of how a thing might stay the same despite substantive changes by thinking through the ontology of the game. What is *Peter Coddle* after all? It is defined by the structure it gives to the gaps in its narrative: you may place a noun here and not there, draw from this set of cards rather than another. Although any given iteration of the game might read entirely differently—might embody a wholly different output *state*—the structure of the game, the thing one is inclined to call *Peter Coddle*, remains steadfast. Similarly, in a democracy based on ideas (the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, etc.), it is these very ideas that come to define the character of the State, if not its particular state at any given time. A codified set of limitations—whether laws, rights, or more simply social rules—render the State as a state machine, and ensure confidence in its identity. Yet as the institutions that composed the

¹⁵ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

operation of this state machine grew, so did the scope of this particular figure. As we saw in Bradley, reform was pursued not only in the external political world, but in the interior world of habits and self-control as well (Mintz 13).

Supporting this, Castiglia argues in *Interior States* that the reform dictates of the State were firmly (if conflictedly) relocated in the interior of the American citizen, yielding a kind of institutional consciousness that he calls an “interior state” (3). This interior was a “virtual arena” in which individual citizens mediated between their own ambivalent wants and the myriad identity categories that reform institutions had produced during the period: the drunkard, the masturbator, or the gambler; but also the gentleman, the teetotaler, or the abolitionist (4-9). Following the above discussion of State, each of these identities might be seen as a potential output of the citizen *as* state machine. Reforming one’s habits, so reformers believed, was akin to adjusting the strategy by which one played one’s own interior game. Yet, Castiglia continues,

despite reform’s production of clear and easily distinguishable ‘types’ of interiority..., no one lives in either of these positions. They are impossible endpoints that exist only hypothetically, off the scale of human experience. Rather, citizens possessed of riven interiorities shuttle perpetually *between* self-control and appetite, desire and deferral, wait and want (10, emphasis original)

Advocates of reform assembled a ready stockpile of character “types” that corresponded to specific strategies of self-management; follow the right strategy and you could be assured of an appropriate outcome. However, growing institutional demands on one’s interior led to a corresponding multiplication of potential outputs, putting an impossible strain on the “citizens possessed of [these] riven interiorities.” Reform institutions demanded adherence to strict rules of “good” character; lived experience demanded a

constant (and changing) mediation among these rules. The resulting conflict between differences of circumstance, habit, and the drive to identify with reformed “types” meant that any given person’s capacity to embody a particular type was more a function of their desire to appear that way in a given context than it was a real depiction of a stable sense of interiority. One felt continuity of self, despite changes of circumstance, by *imagining* oneself a consistent output system, a kind of personal institution. This kind of interior state is a concept that makes more sense in the context of the earlier discussion of social states as figured by Melville in the image of the Mississippi River.

In the case of the Mississippi, Melville demonstrates that, despite the changes of content the river might undergo (the flowing water), the expressive identity (what it can be *seen* as being, the “Mississippi River”) was preserved by a consistent formal underpinning (the banks and geographical position). Similarly, to “be” an abolitionist was to have determined outputs, *ideally* corresponding to an interior sense of consistency, in specific social situations. To have specific legible affective responses, to talk in certain ways about slavery and race, and perhaps to donate to the abolitionist institution, was to buy into the *apparent* guarantee of a regulated interior. If one acted according to these rules, a person might not only call him- or herself an abolitionist, but he/she would have the security of identity that goes along with other people recognizing him or her as “an abolitionist” much in the same way one recognizes the Mississippi River. To be recognized affirming the rules of “type” was to enjoy the pleasures of tapping into a kind of abstract consistency discussed above in the case of the State. Despite, or perhaps because of, the demands that institutions of reform placed on citizens, the feelings of

anxiety associated with a chaotic and competitive interiority were regulated in part by imagining the self as a consistent decision algorithm, a state machine with which one could tinker to produce repeatable results over time. Moreover, since the only public indication of a person's success was the output state (Do people recognize you as an abolitionist? Is that in fact the Mississippi?), an after-effect of interiority was a somewhat paradoxical co-dependence. To be recognized for what one wanted to be was to have *confidence* (literally, "together faith") that one had successfully regulated his or her interior state machine. This required others to provide both opportunities for demonstration and validations of effect. In a dark turn, an intensely felt desire to cease the feeling of "shuttling" that Castiglia notes, even if only in the public eye, is precisely what allows the Confidence-Man of Melville's novel to do his work.

One way of understanding this is through the rhetoric of "puzzling" that persists throughout the narrative. Today's jigsaw puzzles are typically entangled arrangements of cardboard pieces that, when arranged in precisely one way, yield an image—of a puppy, a winter village, perhaps a spaceship. Similarly, Aimwell's one-solution variation of *Peter Coddle*, where players are required to figure out the exact and appropriate place for each card (rather than drawing at random), is referred to as a "literary puzzle" (242). More generally, being puzzled could refer to a state of bewilderment or confusion, being unable to determine a solution to a problem. Solving a puzzle is fun, but *being* puzzled may not be, and the characters of Melville's narrative are perpetually puzzled by the Confidence-Man—right around the time they give him their money. As The Man with the Weed in His Hat, Melville's protagonist accuses a merchant of not remembering him as a

made acquaintance, and in response “The good merchant looked puzzled” (26). The Man proceeds to use the “forgotten” acquaintance role to throw himself upon the merchant’s sympathies and walks away with money. Another avatar, The Man in Gray, listens as a young clergyman confesses his lack of complete faith in the identity of Black Guinea, an early incarnation of the Confidence-Man as a crippled, black beggar. The minister declares, “I confess, this [lack of faith] puzzles me” (42). The Man in Gray takes on the role of interlocutor, allowing the clergyman to absolve his guilt by accepting a trust on behalf of Guinea. Later in the narrative, the Cosmopolitan patiently waits in front of an old watchman with a bible in the main sleeping quarters, until “the old man...look[s] up puzzled at him a moment” (240). He proceeds to use their connection over the Bible to gather the old man’s trust—eventually escorting him out of the room and leaving the sleeping passengers to “the sad consequences which might, upon occasion, ensue from the cabin being left in darkness” (239). Finally, even the stoic Missourian is unable to resist the temptation to become a played game: “He revolves the crafty process of sociable chat, by which, as he fancies, the man with the brass-plate wormed into him... Before his mental vision the person of that threadbare Talleyrand... passes now in puzzled review” (135). The rhetoric of the “puzzle” takes on a deep irony here, representing both lack and form.

This is because, in one sense, “puzzling” represents the seeping sensation of the multifaceted interiority described by Castiglia; it is bewilderment with the lack of a singular self-defining character position. The clergyman is committed to embodying a charitable disposition of trust, which is unsettled by the skeptical custom-house officer.

Unable unilaterally to apply charitable trust because of this seed of doubt, the clergyman feels an intense anxiety at losing the functional basis of his character. If character is realized in the iteration of consistent visible states—the public application of trust, for instance—then a failure to repeat the desired results is a failure to actualize character.¹⁶ The anxiety of this failure is narrated as “puzzling” in Melville’s novel. Yet more than this, it is important to point out that one can only feel puzzled if one has a sense that his/her public display (the output) is *mismatched* with his/her imagined interior state machine. To feel a specific mismatch, the clergyman must formulate an algorithm of potential “correct” action (in this case vocalized by the Man in Gray): “we should shut our ears to distrust” (42). This formalization produces the conditions by which an anxiety resulting from failure becomes, additionally, an anxiousness for resolution. Consequently, being “puzzled” is both to be shaken in one’s facile sense of character and to be ready to enact a desired public self; it is to be configured as a state machine awaiting input. The clergyman and the Man in Gray continue:

“How shall I be sure that my present exemption from [doubt’s] effects will be lasting?”
 “You cannot be sure, but you can strive against it.”
 “How?”

¹⁶ Paul Brodtkorb comes to a similar conclusion in “The Confidence-Man: The Con-Man as Hero,” arguing that

a precondition of knowing oneself would be a personal consistency, yet a man could be consistent only if... he had a static idea of Man good for all occasions to which he could refer as if it were his essence. Yet... the essence of human nature is probably inconsistency; beyond that, in any case, it has none discoverable. (Brodtkorb 426).

By situating Melville’s narrative in the context of state and state machine figures in the nineteenth century, I move away from the rhetoric of essence employed here and take a more functional approach to the relationship between con-man and mark. I would argue that there is a high level of reciprocity between the appearances of consistency and inconsistency. Taken alone, the Confidence-Man may be a symbol of the latter, yet his interaction with the passengers of the *Fidèle* draws attention to the procession of ephemeral decisions (always potentially inconsistent) that constitute the appearance of stability.

“By strangling the least symptom of distrust, of any sort, which hereafter, upon whatever provocation, may arise in you.”

“I will do so.” (42)

The language of potential at the close of this passage suggests the clergyman’s desire to re-affirm the consistency of his character. As a result, he is all too happy to oblige the Man in Gray’s request for charity on behalf of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum. Because he cannot fully resolve his “puzzlement” without a public act of confirmation, “puzzling” becomes an opportunity for the Confidence-Man to act as an input variable does in an algorithm, transforming formal potential into an expressed public reality. Identifying the “need” of his marks, the Confidence-Man can set his own value (how much money should they give and to what supposed purpose?) and therefore exert a game player’s control over his mark’s expressive outcome.

At the opening of the book, we saw the Confidence-Man as a deaf-mute navigating the crowd and constructing a basic state machine with his chalk slate. The formal continuity of this small state machine (the constant or rules) was the phrase “Charity...,” and the inputs were a series of phrases that he scribbled in the proceeding space, producing different output phrases and, correspondingly, different reactions from his fellow shipmates. In the later chapter, “A Charitable Lady,” the character of the slate-bearer is immediately recalled. A well-dressed widow loafs on a sofa, pondering over the Bible; “Half-relinquished, she holds the book in reverie, her finger inserted at the xiii. of 1st Corinthians [the famous passage on love/charity], to which chapter possibly her attention might have recently been turned, by witnessing the scene of the monitory mute and his slate” (52). The narrator examines this woman and finds that her “aspect seems to

hint that, if she have any weak point, it must be anything rather than her excellent heart” (52). The irony is that her “weak point” (in terms of her capacity being puzzled) is precisely this, her “heart” or her desire to be a “Charitable Lady.” In the shape of an advocate for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, the Confidence-Man does not aim for a “weak point” so much as this self-perceived *strongest point*, which will be basis of their “confidence.” It is her desire to actualize this interior, at the expense of other character realizations, that the Confidence-Man exploits. Yet, at first he takes his time, simply asking, without context, if he can have her “confidence” (ostensibly meant as her ear) (52). Her intense and fragmented reaction again returns us to the deaf-mute and his *Peter Coddle* game.

Harking back to Castiglia’s point about “shuttling” interior states (corresponding to an unresolved state machine) we might read her reactions to the Confidence-Man’s early advances as cycling through unresolved subjectivities, as a demonstration of a state machine without an appropriate input: “Why—really—you—” and “Really, sir—why, sir—really—I—” (52). Significantly, these outbursts end short of *defining* the role that either she or the Confidence-Man will take, her sentences trailing off at the very moment where some substantial definition would need to be given to one or the other. Her first full sentence confirms the raw variability that she reads in the Confidence-Man, answering his question as to whether he can have her confidence with a confused, “Really, sir—as much—I mean, as one may wisely put in a—a—stranger, and entire stranger, I had almost said” (53). When he pushes her on the issue of confidence anew, she is again reduced to sputtering half-sentences: “But I—I have—at least to that

degree—I mean that—,” “Believe me, I—yes, yes—I may say—that—that—,” and finally, “She sat in a sort of restless torment, knowing not which way to turn. She began twenty different sentences, and left off at the first syllable of each” (53). Each sentence, one might well imagine, would correspond to a different known quantity—to a different value of x in her undefined equation, or to a different identity she would like to claim for herself.

In this scene, the charitable widow becomes a pure example of a person being “puzzled” in both senses of the term: she is confused, but she is also desperate to be given some kind of stable value around which to frame her subject position. In a kind of dizzy despair, she reaches out to the Confidence-Man for reassurance, “At last, in desperation, she hurried out, ‘Tell me, sir, for what you want the twenty dollars?’” (53). As soon as he reveals himself to be an advocate for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, she gives him money and he proclaims that she has “confidence” (54). In other words, she has resolved the conditionals, the “ifs” of her state machine, into a steady singular output. By giving her a charity to which she can donate, the Confidence-Man allows her to actualize the interior she so intensely wants. Before his intervention, she could not be sure that her expressed character would correspond to this desire; however, much as adding a value to an equation allows one to plot a graphic point (an actuality that realizes the potential of the abstract function), so does the Confidence-Man’s willingness to go from a “stranger” to an agent of the Asylum allow the widow to plot *herself*. The singular legibility of her story, the small narrative plot of a woman giving to a charity, affirms the consistency of her interior and averts, for the moment, the shuttling anxiety that begins the chapter.

In a parallel scene that bookends this episode, the Confidence-Man takes advantage of a young “collegian” by playing on his interest in being seen wholly as a man and not a youth (54). Similar to the case with the charitable woman, the Confidence-Man, now under the guise of the Man with the Weed in His Hat (a symbol of his supposed mourning), begins his work upon the mark by seizing upon the youth’s “weak point”: his desire to avoid being seen as inexperienced. The Man with the Weed lectures the boy on reading the pessimistic Roman philosopher, Tacitus, each time addressing him with a reminder of his age, calling him alternately, “my young friend” (four times), “dear young sir,” “my dear young friend,” and “my dear young sir.” With this he reduces the young man to nothing but a stammer, just as with the puzzled widow: “‘sir, sir,’ stammered the other,” “Sir, sir, I—I—,” “Sir, I—, I—,” “Really, sir—I—,” and finally, “Upon my word, I—I—” (33-36). He closes this preparatory work upon the youth with a speech calling to mind the real-life story of the “original” confidence-man:

“Did you never observe how little, very little confidence, there is? I mean between man and man—more particularly between stranger and stranger. In a sad world it is the saddest fact. Confidence! I have sometimes almost thought that confidence is fled; that confidence is the New Astrea—emigrated—vanished—gone.” Then softly sliding nearer, with the softest air, quivering down and looking up, “could you now, my dear young sir, under such circumstances, by way of experiment, simply have confidence in *me*?” (36)

Hearing this, the youth silently flees the scene. Yet although the scheme does not yield a profit from the mark in this first instance, the Man with the Weed has largely set the stage for taking advantage of him later on. He has clearly “puzzled” the youth in such a way that the collegiate is desperate to prove that he is not defined by his young age—and he will take the first available opportunity to nail down his mental state to an outside

audience. Not coincidentally, his opportunity comes immediately after the Seminole Orphan advocate leaves the side of the charitable woman. The Black Coal Rapids stockholder (again, the Confidence-Man in disguise) re-enters in the chapter that follows, entitled, “Two Business Men Conduct a Little Business” (54). In this role, the Confidence-Man exclusively refers to the youth by mature terms: “Pray, *sir*, have you seen a gentleman with a weed hereabouts, rather saddish gentleman?” “Have you seen him, *sir*?” and “Really, you are quite a business *man*. Positively, I feel afraid of you” (54, emphasis added). When he reveals that he has stocks on him, the youth demands to see a statement of the condition of his company while the stockholder tries to deflect with talk of the Man with the Weed. But the young man will hear nothing of it: “‘Let the unfortunate man relieve himself. —Hand me the statement.’ ‘Well, you are such a business-man, I can hardly deny you. Here,’ handing a small, printed pamphlet. The youth turned it over sagely. ‘I hate a suspicious man,’ said the other, observing him, ‘but I must say I like to see a cautious one’” (55). In a wry comic turn, the stockholder begins to refer to the boy’s age *the moment* the business side of their transaction has finished: “‘Business transacted, the two came forth, and walked the deck. ‘Now tell me, sir,’ said he with the book, ‘how comes it that a young gentleman like you, a sedate student at the first appearance should dabble in stocks and that sort of thing?’” (58). Incidentally, the young man does not buy another stock.

In each of these instances “puzzling” is an opportunity for the Confidence-Man to play the *Fidèle* passengers as if they were a discrete game.¹⁷ When puzzled they are under the impression that, in order to be understood as what they desire to be, they must embody a kind of interior consistency that can only be *enacted* (and validated) by co-operating with the Confidence-Man. Whereas in the early episode of the deaf-mute the Confidence-Man figured himself as a structural variable to which passersby might attribute a value or meaning, here he insinuates himself as a variable in the interior equation produced by the passengers. This allows him to set his own value and to control the expressive outcome of the passenger such that it yields an income for himself. As the *Cosmopolitan* recalls in relating his encounter with the Missourian named Pitch, “I seized a chance, when, owing to indignation against some wrong, he laid himself a little open; I seized that lucky chance” (161). The ability to seize upon equivocal openings in an otherwise consistent state machine may be why it makes sense for the skeptical custom-house officer to refer to him as a “white operator” (21). In one regard, this designation is merely synonymous with the term “confidence-man,” later referred to as a “Mississippi operator” (198); but in another significant manner it links his activity once again to the mathematically-inflected terminology of the state machine figure.

An “operator” in a purely technical sense is a sign that designates some transformation that one quantity might perform on another, a shorthand for the “function”

¹⁷ To be discrete in this sense is to produce precisely one output state when given one input. This is why it is imperative that the Confidence-Man manage complete “confidence,” “no ifs” (81). When a program runs through its algorithms, if-then statements are resolved by the input into an output state; “ifs” are resolved into “thens.” Put another way, you cannot say $1+x=y$, give a value $x=3$, but say that “ x ” might still be “ z ”; alternatively, if the value *is* $x=3$ and I tell you $y=4$, you can’t say, “well, but it might be other things too.” Not if $x=3$.

discussed earlier. For instance, Boole writes, “+ [is] used to denote the positive operation of aggregating parts into a whole” (33). In the logistic terms Boole is trying to parse, “+” acts as “and” (or the inclusive “or”) performing the function of linking one term with another. Operators became the subject of a game called an “Arithmatelle” patented in 1868 and produced by the Milton Bradley Company (“Archives”). Analyzing the valences of the term in this game provides insight into the complexity of the word as applied to the Confidence-Man.

A variation on billiards and bagatelle, Arithmatelle features a board where players use a cue to strike a ball toward four laterally arranged circles with freely spinning “indexes” at their center. The index in each circle moves like the hand of a clock and is labeled with a circumference of numbers, one through twelve, that continues to evoke this comparison. However, unlike a clock (and more similar to modern pinball mechanisms), the loosely fitted indexes can only be moved by an impact from the player’s ball. Additionally, each of these four indexes corresponds to a different mathematical operator noted above it, “ADD,” “DIVIDE BY,” “MULTIPLY BY,” and “SUBTRACT,” from left to right, respectively (Emery 1). Starting “with twelve points as his capital,” a player shoots three times at each turn and determines his/her score in the following way:

When an index shall have been made to revolve by this means, the starting capital, 12, is to be affected by the figure nearest which the pointed end of the index stops, according to the word or words attached to the circle containing it. For instance, if the index in the circle marked “subtract” stops at figure 9, this, subtracted from the capital, 12, gives 3 as the result. (2)

The role of operators in this game is to create a stable relationship between two terms (the starting capital and the index number) that yields an output state (the player score). The main element of skill in the game, insofar as the revolution of the spinners cannot be controlled with any reliability, lies in being able to “select” a positive operator (“ADD” or “MULTIPLY BY”) through the deft use of the cue.

This selection process forms a productive parallel to the transition from *anxiety* to *anxiousness* outlined earlier in the case of the clergyman. There, I argued that the “puzzled” experience of the clergyman was twofold. First, a failure of consistency was experienced as Castiglia’s “shuttling” interiority: because the clergyman’s public performance was mismatched with his desire to embody a particular interior type, the result was an “uncomfortable” feeling (Melville 42). This stemmed from the loss of a clear rule for relating to someone like the beggar, Black Guinea. Without such a rule in place he was left unable to act or, in a key moment, to speak: “A change had come over that before impassioned intercessor. With an irresolute and troubled air, he mutely eyed the suppliant” (25). We might imagine this crisis of confidence as analogous to playing Arithmatelle without the mathematical operators that dictate the transformation to be performed on the two numbers involved in any turn (the player’s score and the number produced by the spinner). Despite the presence of other important rules and topographical features of the game board, the deletion of this one key feature would render its system of point accrual meaningless: a cue hits a ball, the ball hits an index, the index revolves and points to a number, but the player has no means for relating this number to his or her score. This is why the selection of a given operator (via good aim) is necessarily the first

step in determining the player's outcome. Only after an operator is chosen can the player become *anxious* about what number the index will land on, because it is only then that he or she has any sense of what that will mean (the transformative relationship it will have with the player's current score).¹⁸ Similarly, the clergyman cannot begin to renew his public character without a rule that guarantees the match-up between the regulated interior he desires and its public validation. And the "Mississippi operator" is only too happy to provide the means for this transition at the clergyman's prompting, "how shall I be sure?... how?" (Melville 42). Again, the insertion of a criterion for some measure of assurance between the interior and its expression is what gives the clergyman the confidence to move from a more vague anxiety at the loss of consistency to anxiousness for a renewed expression. This anxiousness is tellingly made possible by the presence of an operator.

On another level, the application of the term "operator" in the game of Arithmatelle, as in *The Confidence-Man*, is not limited to the functional operation involved—it could also refer to the person playing the game,¹⁹ providing inputs that enact its state machine. In his 1828 dictionary, Noah Webster simply defines an operator as "he or that which produces an effect" ("Operator"). In Arithmatelle, this effect was a function of interacting with the rules or operation of the game. Stephen Emery writes in his patent,

¹⁸ Melville's language after the Confidence-Man leaves the side of Pitch the Missourian is suggestive, "He revolves, but cannot comprehend, the operation, still less the operator" (135). Without the "operator" at hand, the capital the Missourian has given up – as well as the arguments he has made in favor of giving this money – cease to make sense.

¹⁹ A British Billiards manual from the 1830s confirms this usage: "In the choice of a cue, much will depend on the fancy of the operator: some prefer light, others heavy ones" (Kentfield 5).

“What I claim as my invention is—The arrangement, and construction, and mode of *operation*, as above described” (Emery 2, emphasis added). Separate from the physical arrangement or construction of the game, a consistent set of rules (a “mode of operation”) is the condition of possibility for an “operator” of the state machine to *interact*, to provide inputs that correspond to specific desired outputs. The rules of the game identify equivocal moments—like the start of an Arithmatelle turn or the substantive gaps in a game of *Peter Coddle*—where player intervention allows the production of an outcome. Similarly, in the later scene between the Confidence-Man and the Missourian, it is imperative that the Confidence-Man first identify a gap or equivocal space in the functional character of his mark: “[Pitch] laid himself a little open” (161) in the “general law of distrust he systematically applied to the race” (Melville 135). This is because, as Jesper Juul writes in discussing games and state machines, “If you cannot influence the game state in any way (as opposed to being unable to influence the game state in the *right* way), you are not playing a game” (Juul 60, emphasis original). In this moment, the form of the gap is a “conditional confidence” (132) that Pitch has in the stranger’s understanding of human nature. Pitch begs the Confidence-Man for input:

Do you think now, candidly, that—I say candidly—candidly—could I have some small, limited—some faint, conditional degree of confidence in that boy?... You have suggested some rather new views of boys, and men, too. Upon those views in the concrete I at present decline to determine. (133)

Here he seizes the opportunity that Pitch has given him in structuring his perspective as a conditional, an if-then statement requiring a “candid” input from the Confidence-Man.

The input (or answer to the question), unsurprisingly, is that yes, yes the Confidence-Man

does believe that “candidly, [Pitch] could” trust that the boy would be different from all the rest (133). By doing so, the outcome is secured, and the “ifs” of the Missourian’s conditional confidence are determined much as they were in the case of the widow and the young businessman. He says to Pitch, “Respected sir, never willingly do I handle money not with perfect willingness, nay, with a certain alacrity, paid. Either tell me that you have a perfect and unquestioning confidence in me... or permit me respectfully to return these bills” (133). The Confidence-Man eliminates the conditionals of interiority by acting as the value that enables their expression, echoing his earlier declaration to an old miser, “No ifs. Downright confidence, or none” (81). By playing on a character’s desire to become a self-consistent state machine, a game or puzzle, the Confidence-Man becomes the very embodiment of systematic variability—of the “lucky chance” he seizes in the Missourian. In a world where legible subjectivity is figured like a state machine, Melville’s “evil” protagonist may be part of a troubled utopian figure, a gesture of agency and invention in a world seemingly doomed to being played.

Conclusion

Louis Marin argues that the fundamental work of any utopia lies in its ability to act as a “neutral” to ideological structures, ironizing the differences or binaries of a given discourse: “The neutral must be grasped as the transitory and passing term that allows movement from one contrary to another” (Marin 14). By this definition, the “Mississippi operator” might be considered a “neutral” in his various marks’ utopic gestures toward consistency of character. Yet while all of his marks manage to change themselves according to their will, this change is rendered deeply ironic by the fact that this will is

enacted by an outside force, an avatar not their own. As a result, the character-positions they believe they have embodied lose credibility as self-determinations in the eyes of the reader. The Confidence-Man stands in for the ambiguity of personal reform in an ideological context that robs citizens of the very thing that would make such reform personal. Melville's novel indicates that if individual action is to be constrained by the emerging figure of the state machine, it becomes an imperative of agency that one avoid becoming so intently wrapped up in the management of the machine that he/she allows outside forces to dictate its function. An agent must become an operator at the risk of becoming a puzzle; a fully institutionalized interior leaves no room for direct social intervention. Marin goes on to argue that utopics tend to set the stage whereby previously unspeakable topics might become intelligible, "anticipating, but blindly" the transition from one mode of culture to another.²⁰ If this is the case in *The Confidence Man*, one might understand Melville's lead character as a study in the requirements of agency in the age of state machine-subjectivity.

In this way, the Confidence-Man represents a special type of utopic: that of the agent as inventor.²¹ To "invent" is to "devise first [or] originate" and derives from the Latin root "venire" meaning "to come" into or upon—as a thought enters one's mind or one's thought enters an opportune lacuna in the world of ideas ("Invent"). The

²⁰ Although it approaches Melville's text in the religious framework that dictated many early readings of the novel, Merlin Bowen's "Tactics of Indirection in Melville's 'The Confidence-Man'" seems to get at this blind anticipation when he notes that, "*The Confidence-Man* is not a sermon... but a gesture" (Bowen 418). Marin argues that utopic discourse always has this gestural quality as a consequence of its being a "schema in search of a concept" (163).

²¹ Early in the narrative, the Confidence-Man takes the specific guise of an inventor, claiming to have displayed and catalogued the "Protean easy-chair" at the London World's Fair.

Confidence-Man, as we have seen, uses the gaps in the interiority of his marks as opportunities to enter their imagined state machines, filling in the blanks as in a game of *Peter Coddle* and interacting with them to produce a legible public output. In his success, he represents the importance of the momentary and variable as an interactive (and critical) supplement to the structures of state and consistency that dominated US reform discourse of the mid-nineteenth century. As institutionalism sought to flatten time in a manner that would ensure a consistent (and ostensibly well-formed) future,²² *The Confidence-Man* reconfigures focus onto the differential moments when character is invented anew. If agency is effectively displaced in these moments, it is because the marks are unwilling to use the codes of consistency as a tool—recapitulating these codes becomes an end in itself. Because of this, they cede their originality and their capacity for invention to the Confidence-Man. Seizing on the phrase, “Quite an original,” Meville explains:

[W]hat is popularly held to entitle a character in fiction to being deemed original, is but something personal—confined to itself. The character sheds not its characteristic on its surroundings, whereas, the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet), so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things... to produce but one original character, he must have had much luck. (237-238)

²² Noting the propensity of reform to regulate contingency and change within culture, Castiglia writes, “Placing institutions at the center of America’s social, political, and territorial growth, these men purported to manage the sociality through which strangers left to their own resources, might engage in the *contingent* and *inventive* productions of what, following the Declaration of Independence, we might call happiness” (Castiglia 62).

For Melville, the truly original character must be willing to interface with the codes that surround and locate it. It is not separate from its contexts, but indeed uses its position to create subtle (or not so subtle) shifts of focus—turning on a light may not re-arrange the furniture, but it does change the kinds of things one might do in a room. To become this light, to be an inventor of “original character,” Melville insists that “luck” must be involved, and again this returns us to the importance of the momentary in the character of the Confidence-Man. One is not timelessly lucky, but instead must find luck in time. Melville’s equivocal protagonist, with his willingness to re-construct the world in local and contingent interventions, to seize and to make his own “lucky chance[s],” gestures toward a world where the shape-shifting Confidence-Man is more hero than villain. In the next chapter, we will examine the growth of this impulse through the infamously “original” personage of P.T. Barnum. Shining his blazing Drummond light atop the American Museum, he invited visitors to find their own inner spotlight, to make their own confident determinations of hoax and reality. In doing so, Barnum’s brazen example raises a question only hinted at in Melville’s novel: What’s so bad about a confidence-man?

CHAPTER FOUR

SKILLFUL, TIMELY, AND OPPORTUNE: CONFIGURATION CULTURE IN THE AGE OF BARNUM

I apprehend that there is no sort of object which men seek to attain, whether secular, moral or religious, in which humbug is not very often an instrumentality.

—P.T. Barnum, *Humbugs of the World* (1865)

A wooden square is dissected with surgical precision. A diagonal bisects the center and a cut parallel to this divides the upper remaining triangle into a smaller triangle and a long trapezoid. From the center of this trapezoid two cuts are made: one perpendicular, splitting the shape clean in half and persisting to bisect the lower triangle in two; another at a forty-five degree angle, creating a right triangle and leaving a small parallelogram as its remainder. A careful final cut severs the other side of the trapezoid in half, leaving a right triangle, the twin of the previous, and a smaller square, the child of the original untouched wooden piece. These seven “tans”—a square, a parallelogram, two small right triangles, one medium triangle, and two large triangles—become the instruments of a rich pictorial language. From seven come many: amoebas, plants, animals, human bodies in all kinds of activity, and human faces in a range of form and countenance. The player’s capacity to imagine small changes in the arrangement of these wooden bricks is the only limit to the figures he or she can create. And in trying to recreate the puzzles of others, one must be willing slowly and methodically to move the pieces into and out of a variety of different positions, touching, testing, pondering, and

evolving the mass of shapes from one figure to another until the desired effect is achieved. Success is a kind of communication: “Out of a set of raw materials, you made a shape I understood. Out of the same materials, I made many figures, but settled on yours.”

The mechanical configuration puzzle commonly known as a Tangram was a timeless Chinese invention passed down through generations, “at least four thousand years old” (Dudeney 531). Or so the story went.¹ In fact, Tangrams were not so antique. Drawing on a tradition of modular table sets called “Butterfly Wing” tables, the Tangram² was invented in late eighteenth-century China and brought to both America and Europe by maritime traders in 1816 (Slocum 16-19, 30). A short but intense fad for the game swept France and England in the period between 1817 and 1818, complete with cautionary tales of people driven to life-threatening distraction by “puzzle madness” (in French, “La Cassetete-omanie”). In one satirical caricature (cut with panels evoking the seven tans), a man ignores his wife’s advances, a lawyer misses a public hearing, a

¹ Henry E. Dudeney, an important early twentieth century puzzle-maker in the UK and contributor to *The Strand Magazine* (famous for both its puzzle section and serialization of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories), writes that the game is “a recreation that appears to be at least four thousand years old, that has apparently never been dormant, and that has not been altered or ‘improved upon’ since the Chinaman Tan first cut out the seven pieces [that constitute the puzzle]” (Dudeney 531). Dudeney’s mistaken (and widely-circulated) account is directly drawn from that of Sam Loyd, discussed below. Even after it was debunked in 1911, this account continued to circulate for many years.

² The name “Tangram” originated in the United States, though its history is obscure. Jerry Slocum notes that the first book of these puzzles published in the U.S. was James Coxe’s *Chinese Philosophical and Mathematical Trigram*, and that Coxe may have picked up the word “trigram” from a short-lived literary magazine called, *The Trigram; or Fashionable Trifler* (Slocum 24). This may a reasonable theory since games and puzzles in this period were often referred to as “trifles,” as was the case in the popular billiard game of “bagatelles,” which translates from the French as “little trifle.” Later, educator and Harvard Divinity School graduate, Thomas Hill was the first to coin the word “tangram” (without the “r”) in his 1848 *Geometrical Puzzles for the Young* (24). It seems likely that he removed the “r” from Coxe’s earlier formulation to make the name more accurately reflect the game’s lineage (“t’ang” referring in the Chinese language to “Chinese”).

mother neglects her child, and children set aside their school work—all to focus their efforts instead on the simple puzzle (38-39). While European fervor died down after 1818 (70, 76), interest smoldered in the United States, with pirated European editions supplementing consistent domestic showings throughout the middle part of the nineteenth century.³ Twenty-two years after the first American collection was copyrighted by James Coaxe, Winshang Punqua's *The Chinese Puzzler, Designed to Strengthen and Amuse the Mind* (which came with a set of carved ivory pieces) went into its second edition printing in 1839 "due to the rapid sale of the first edition;" and in 1844, C.C. Chapman published a boxed set of 329 Tangram problems with pieces under the title *Scientific Amusements; for the Old and Young, the Grave and the Gay*; it went through six editions due to high demand (88). By the mid-century, Tangrams, and configuration puzzles more generally, were seen as important educational guides, a popular training tool for a manner of abstract thinking and invention that was firmly of its moment (85). Indeed, the persistence of the Tangram was not a measure of its antiquity—it was a game very much *of and for* the culture that embraced it.⁴

³ In addition to the Coxe edition (1817), Wallis's *Fashionable Puzzle* was bootlegged by American A.T. Goodrich and was advertised in New York and Boston through 1822 (Slocum 32).

⁴ Knock-offs incorporating differently shaped pieces, like I.U. Mueller's "Puzzle Blocks" (Patent #37,763 dated February 24, 1863), show a continued demand for the type of configurative puzzle that the Tangram epitomized. Between 1865 and 1875 there was even "more public interest in Tangrams, due primarily to the use of Tangrams in education, and numerous books and boxed sets were produced by several companies" (Slocum 85). This is unsurprising due to the rise in interest in spatial and geometric toys fostered by the kindergarten movement in the U.S. The Froebel toys (cubes, pyramids, squares) advocated by this movement and mass-produced by Milton Bradley at the time weren't far off from the regular geometric shapes of Tangrams, and encouraged similar habits of mind. See for instance Thomas Hill's *Geometrical Puzzles for the Young*.

Where, then, did the romantic claims of Tangram timelessness originate? In a word, they were a humbug: a term the self-proclaimed “Prince of Humbugs,” P.T. Barnum defines as “putting on glittering appearances—outside show—novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear” (Barnum, *Humbugs* 15).⁵ In contrast to a swindle that cheats its audience by promising something and offering nothing in return, a Barnumesque humbug fulfills its promise of entertainment by creating a context for something of value—however literally disingenuous. The false history of Tangrams was devised by one of the foremost US puzzlists, a onetime civil engineer named Samuel Loyd. After publishing a small collection of Tangram figures in 1875, Loyd took it upon himself to revive interest in 1903 with a book called *The 8th Book of Tan*. Using Tangram forms to tell a story of human evolution, and claiming that his work was simply the transcription of an ancient Chinese creation narrative given to him by a fictional expert named “Professor Challenor,” Loyd spun a yarn in which the Tangram “out-Darwins Darwin, the progress of the human race being traced through seven stages of development up to a mysterious spiritual stage which is too lunatic for serious consideration” (qtd. in Slocum 55). Loyd’s hoax fueled public interest in the game by playing on techniques of humbuggery that would have made Barnum proud, combining entertaining novelty (Loyd introduced 438 newly invented figures in the book) and a vogue for both the exotic and the historical.

⁵ Barnum’s use of the phrase “outside show” refers to the inside/outside dynamic of nineteenth-century dime museums: “Generally the platform attractions [inside the museum] were described by the ‘lecturer’ or ‘inside talker’ (as opposed to the ‘outside talker’ who ground away at a prepared pitch on the sidewalk in front of the museum, drawing customers into the show)” (McNamara 224). For more on the history of the dime museum, see Brooks McNamara “‘A Congress of Wonders’: The Rise and Fall of the Dime Museum.”

In fact, Loyd owed some part of his later success to a partnership formed with the infamous showman early in his career. After turning away from engineering to start an editorial column on chess, Loyd devised a three-piece configuration puzzle called the “Trick Mules.” Here, players attempted to arrange two downtrodden mules, printed on thin strips of paper, in such a way that the addition of a third strip, with two mirrored riders printed on it, would give the appearance that the men were riding the mules. In 1871, Barnum noted public interest in the puzzle and offered Loyd a massive licensing fee of ten thousand dollars to begin calling them “Barnum’s Trick Donkeys.” Loyd accepted. Soon millions of copies were distributed around the country, making it one of the most recognized and beloved puzzles of the nineteenth century (“Trick Mules”). The “Prince of Puzzles,” as Loyd was once affectionately called,⁶ and the “Prince of Humbugs” thus formed a relationship based on a complex form of mutual association: Barnum’s name would help bring attention to Loyd’s puzzle and Loyd’s puzzle would ensure that players so engaged couldn’t help but associate its entertainment value with Barnum’s name.

In this chapter, I will suggest that the link between nineteenth-century configuration puzzles and Barnum’s success in business was not limited to the marketing partnership formed by Barnum and Loyd. Instead, the popularity and durability of configuration puzzles (with Tangrams being a pervasive example) can shed light on the modus operandi of Barnum’s career, as a result of a functional homology between these games and the emergent configurative agency of the era. The term *configuration* has wide

⁶ This moniker forms the title of a 1907 interview with Loyd in *Strand Magazine*.

application in games. Moving pieces according the rules of Bradley's *Life* can be considered a configuration of its algorithms, as can the placement of nouns in the gap-laden narrative of *Peter Coddle*.⁷ In Tangrams we see a simpler and more tangible definition of the term: to succeed in the game is to shape (-figure) together (con-) the seven pieces according to a given diagram.

Yet a secondary configuration was frequently necessary to drive interest in the game, to render these shapes legible and satisfying. Because the images created by Tangrams were so abstract, puzzle books often provided additional details that contextualized the underlying figures—similar shapes were sequenced near each other to draw attention to slight differences requiring difficult re-arrangements, figures were filled in with a face or clothing, and images were connected to ongoing narratives (of which each Tangram was a panel). To call back to Barnum's earlier definition, these extra materials were not a swindle, but a humbug or “outside show.” Ludic paratexts were crucial to the game's entertainment value, integral to the player's sense of purpose in playing because they forged a communicative connection between the player's arrangement of the pieces and the puzzle inventor's figural vision. In this way, the player of the Tangram engages with configuration on two levels, as both a shaping-together of the blocks and a mutual and communicative “together shaping”—becoming a part of the shaping process by trying to see as the inventor saw, letting a joint imagination create the legibility and corresponding enjoyment of the figure.

⁷ In the twenty-first century, configuration files set initial display and set-up parameters for various computer programs. Defining the experiential shape of the end-user's encounter with a program (whether it be game or word processor).

Set this alongside Barnum's 1842 exhibition of the Fejee Mermaid and there are interesting parallels. The mermaid itself is a re-configuration of known elements done in such a way that the artifice of the arrangement is obscured—determining how this combination might be accomplished was part of the game: “the monkey and fish were so nicely conjoined that no human eye could detect where the junction was formed... it was a most remarkable specimen of ingenuity and untiring patience” (Barnum, *Life* 234-35). Yet the “ingenuity” of this anatomical configuration was not enough to sell the public on the piece; indeed, the travelling sailor who supposedly brought the piece from the Asian seas in 1817 “did not realize his [monetary] expectations” (231). Relying on a secondary configuration that parallels that of the Tangram books, Barnum surrounds the exhibition of the mermaid (both in newspapers and on the exterior of the American Museum) with woodcuts and transparencies of attractive mermaids, meant to train the eye of the audience on what they were about to see and to allow them to bring their own desires into the imaginative play: desire for the fantastical made real, for the triumph of science, for an eroticized female form. And as in Tangrams, Barnum creates stories that situate the mermaid composition, displaying it “with other animals forming connecting links in the great chain of Animated Nature” (238). To fully realize the exhibitionary potential of the Fejee Mermaid, Barnum relies on paratexts, literally “texts alongside,”⁸ or again as he calls it in his definition of humbug, “outside show.”

⁸ My use of this term draws from that of Steven E. Jones in his recent work, *The Meaning of Video Games*, “The paratext is a multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception, from naming the genre (‘mystery’) or implied audience (‘trade paperback’ or ‘bestseller’), to advance reviews printed as blurbs, or the footnotes and index, even an author’s photo, all of which affect how the book is read and interpreted” (Jones 7). Here, I’m less interested in the concept as applied exclusively to books and

The simplified configurative protocols of Tangrams thus shed light on a set of practices that emerge throughout Barnum's first autobiography, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (1855), drawing attention to the emerging relationship between objects, communication, and agency that would come to define action in the new urban economy. As people from all walks of life came to the cities of the northeastern United States, the desire for personal and technological re-invention—both readily available democratic avenues to success—demanded a particular sort of strategic social engagement. This engagement was built on an understanding that a person's associations literally made the person. Though I have started at some distance from Barnum, in what follows I aim to see him differently by looking at his work as fundamentally configurative in this way. Doing so illuminates a continuity of method throughout the showman's career, yielding additional insight as to the unique species of social agency facilitated and expressed in both the textual space of his autobiography and the physical space of the American Museum.

Previously, critics have argued that Barnum's mode of exhibition (and related success) was characterized by its capacity to allow spectators a space where they could define themselves. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that Barnum's physical curiosities helped viewers confirm their own normality by making "the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer's

more interested in Jones's development of it as a way to think about the socio-cultural/material embeddedness of games and other objects of material culture. Jones moves away from Gerard Genette's focus on verbal texts to include "extra-textual and non-verbal features, such as the technologies and material means of printing, publishing, page design, illustration, but also, relatively seamlessly, the machinery of marketing, previews, and reception, the whole *social* realm in which texts are given meanings by the transactions between their producers and their readers and critics" (8).

indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will” (Thomson 10). The exhibition is not so much *used* as *used up* in the process of visualizing a neutral subject. Similarly, in his now classic work of Barnum scholarship, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, Neil Harris sees these displays as opportunities to amass information in the service of determining the reality or hoax of a given exhibition, reinforcing one’s own ingenuity: “Barnum’s elaborate hoaxes... trained Americans to absorb knowledge. This was an aesthetic of the operational, a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth... Barnum’s exhibitions concentrated on information and the problem of deception” (Harris 79). I want to expand on these views by showing that Barnum’s success is not only a measure of his dexterity in pandering to particular formations of “normality” (you are not a giant, you are not a miniature), nor is it solely in his ability to engage people’s appetite for procedural exposé. Both these views, though crucial to an understanding of spectacle in the moment, fail to take full consideration of the way that Barnum’s exhibits use “outside show” or paratexts to implicate and embed the viewer, configuring the spectator as a part of the exhibit rather than fundamentally distant.⁹ By tracing this theme, one can see how Barnum highlights an explorative agency that uses a *mélange* of identities and procedural protocols to define itself in the practice of creating public and intractably social stories.

⁹ The general view of spectacle as an exercise in distancing oneself from otherness, with the effect of reimagining a clear line between subject and “territory,” stems from Susan Stewart’s important work in *On Longing* (108-110). While I would not argue against this position on the whole, I believe, following recent work from Judith Pascoe on Romantic-era collecting, that there are other ways of understanding the social practices bound up in exhibitionary culture.

He accomplishes this by remaining close to the same configurative practices that made Tangrams a continued presence in households throughout the country.

The Power to Promote: P.T. Barnum's Life and the Configurative Work of Invention

Convincing his parents to let him ride along with a cattle dealer traveling through his hometown of Bethel, Connecticut, the adolescent Barnum makes his first trip to the bustling metropolis of New York City when he is eleven years old. Alone in the city, he spends the bulk of an allowance provided by his mother (one dollar)—as well as trade-credit from two handkerchiefs and a pair of stockings he “was sure [he] should never need”—to purchase molasses candy (Barnum 25). From this sugar-rushed bliss, Barnum accompanies another older youth to a local market on the docks where, among the incredible stores of meats, he witnesses a small act of vandalism that makes a lasting impression. He recalls:

I think I shall never forget an inscription which I saw painted on a small square piece of board and fastened to a post on the dock at the rear of the market. It was a corporation warning, and read here as presented.
 FIVE DOLLARS FINE FOR
 THROWING any kind of DAMD
 aged meat or fish into
 the Public Docks. (26)

Failing to scan the split second and third lines as “damaged” (and the “D” as a wry addition), Barnum “was astonished at the profanity of the public authorities, and wondered why they could not have said simply, ‘aged meat or fish,’ without prefixing the offensive adjective” (26). He laments the “deplorable state of public morals” until his friend explains that some “wicked wag... had interpolated the little ‘D,’ and thus made the word ‘damaged’ express its own true meaning” (26). The revised sign thus straddles the

line between the obscene and acceptable (a line Barnum himself would frequently trouble) and in so doing, at least in the eyes of Barnum's friend, the inscription comes closer to a truthful expression of public anger with the meat dealers. It solidifies an irony which may very well have been intended in the original scan of the sign (hinted at by the sporadic use of capital lettering), explicitly linking a punitive approach (the public fine) with the frustration that undoubtedly underwrote the punishment.

The story of the little "D," so indelible in Barnum's memory, evokes a theme with which I closed the previous chapter: the etymological parsing of invention as a "coming into" (from the Latin, *venire*). In Melville's novel, the Confidence-Man reconfigures the interior state machine of his marks by exploiting a perceived "gap" in the confident expression of their identity. Likewise, by "interpolat[ing] the little 'D'" at an opportune space on the corporate sign, the "wicked wag" reconfigures the physical significance of this sign (while leaving the pre-existing text intact)—intervening and reinventing, however slightly, its original meaning. Thought of in this way, it becomes highly suggestive that the episode would make such an impression on the mind of Barnum. Here was a man who would make his fortune artfully arranging and rearranging both curiosities and the stories that surrounded them, interpolating new details where it could increase the novelty or ambiguity of a given attraction. In his autobiographies he was constantly fine-tuning, re-writing, and even splicing new chapters into existing editions, "tacking them on" to add additional color or nuance to his public image (Fretz 99).

Moreover, in his most successful early showcase, the exhibition of the elderly slave woman, Joice Heth, Barnum uses both physical and narrative reconfigurations to

ensure the persistent interest of a fickle public. After purchasing Heth from her previous owner, Barnum first presents her as a bio-historical curiosity because of her advanced age and supposed connection to George Washington. He displays her at Niblo's Garden where, as an article in the *New York Evening Star* puts it, there is an atmosphere of unflinching "genius for the invention of novelty" (Cook, *Reader* 182). This atmosphere of invention permeates every aspect of Heth's presentation. "Rigg[ing] her up for a show" entails positioning her beside "a well-smoked and antique bill of sale," as well as placing two large backlit transparencies on either side of the exhibition alcove that announce "JOICE HETH 161 YEARS OLD" (*Reader* 183-184; Barnum 152). Physically nesting Heth within the confines of the story he wishes to tell, Barnum uses striking visual cues to secure a specific reading. (Interestingly, the inline text with which these transparencies are presented in *Life* mirrors that of the dock sign, which is the only other sign depicted this way in the text.) Later, when audiences begin to dwindle, he capitalizes on the popularity of Maelzel's chess-automaton, revising the public narrative of Heth (via anonymous newspaper letter) to suggest that the woman was not a biological anomaly, but a mechanism, "a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber and numberless springs" (157). Barnum, one might say, made a life and career out of "interpolat[ing] the little 'D;'" his dominant professional mode was always that of the businessman as inventor, happy as he was to tinker with a display to make it resonate with public interest.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is hinted at in Bluford Adams gloss on Barnum's decision not to salvage objects from the American Museum after the fire that burned it to the ground (discussed later): "In the aftermath of the 1865 fire, it

Born on July 5th, 1810, P.T. Barnum was undeniably a man of his time, coming of age in an era that placed particular emphasis on the role of inventors, both literal and figurative, in the social and economic life of the country. Between 1790 and 1809, the US government granted a total of 1,179 patents, averaging 59 new catalogued inventions a year. Contrasting this, by the time Barnum published his first autobiography in December of 1854, the United States Patent and Trademark Office had granted 1,759 patents in that year alone, averaging 466 patents annually in the intervening period between 1810 and 1854 (*USPTO.gov*, “U.S. Patent Activity”). And while patent statistics are not always a one-to-one measure of inventive activity,¹¹ these numbers gesture toward a general surge in people’s desire to archive and profit from “invention,”¹² as well as a growing capacity to interact with existing archives like the USPTO in order to make incremental

became clear that Barnum’s stories were far more important than the objects they supposedly contextualized. The *New York Herald* attributed the showman’s decision not to salvage any of his treasures from the Museum’s ruins to the fact that ‘it became rather a difficult matter to identify them or trace their history, as was so carefully marked out while on exhibition.’ Rather than rewrite narratives around his old curiosities, Barnum apparently found it easier to generate new stories around new objects” (Adams 86).

¹¹ For more on the difficulties of using existing patent documentation, see B. Zorina Khan’s useful digest in *The Democratization of Invention*: “The major problems with patent statistics as a measure of inventive activity and technological change are that not all inventions are patented or can be patented; the propensity to patent differs across time, industries and activities; patents vary in terms of intrinsic and commercial value; patents might not be directly comparable across countries or time because of differences in institutional features and enforcement; and patents are a better gauge of inputs than productivity or output” (Khan 27 n. 51).

¹² Christine MacLeod gestures at this economic momentum across the Atlantic as well, arguing: The late eighteenth century was keenly aware of the economic potentialities of technical change in a way that was unknown to earlier generations, and invention was encouraged by the offer of premiums and prizes. The outcome, perhaps, was not only a greater readiness to experiment and develop new processes and products but also a heightened self-consciousness and conceptualization of one’s activities as ‘invention’. Thus, on a personal level, people were more likely than before to categorize their activity as inventing. (MacLeod 145)

technological advances.¹³ Invention and novelty were a way of life in nineteenth-century America, and the aesthetics of configurative mechanics, often discussed by way of terms like “efficiency” (arrangements designed to increase productivities), “operationality” (structural arrangements that define use), and “comparativity” (hierarchical arrangement for the sake of progressive analysis) were applied equally to rhetorical and technological pursuits.¹⁴ Hinting at this, in the span of a sentence, Barnum’s recollection of the re-invented dock notice drifts into a reverie on how the shoe-makers of the State Prison move “as if they had been automatons all moved by a single wire,” and closes on a more concrete technology, “I also saw a large windmill that same day, which was the first time I had ever seen the like” (26).

Some of this cultural vogue for technology was supported by innovations in US patent law, a brief discussion of which provides an important backdrop to Barnum’s own activity.¹⁵ While Barnum’s genius was for promotion of a different kind, the Constitution

¹³ Khan argues that this process was accelerated in the United States because of its more “democratic” patent system:

Democratic objectives were achieved through innovations such as reserving patent rights to the first and true inventor in the world, efficient centralized processing and examination of application, fees that were set at a low level, and countervailing checks and balances in the legal system. The public had ready access to patent specifications, which promoted the diffusion of inventions, and the system also facilitated extensive trade in patented technologies. These provisions encouraged inventors to obtain property rights in *incremental inventions* and small improvements in design and technique that could be applied across many industries. (Khan 29-30, emphasis added).

¹⁴ For more on the cultural impact of these concepts see Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction” in *Freakery*; Neil Harris, “The Operational Aesthetic” in *Humbug*; and Frances Ferguson who, in *Pornography: The Theory*, argues that utilitarianism used disciplinary structures to exhibit “previously imperceptible kinds of action... to discern their value” via “constant comparisons of actions” (Ferguson 24, 30).

¹⁵ Christine MacLeod suggests that “It is... worth considering whether the rise in patent totals may bear witness less to an upsurge in inventive activity than to developments both in the patent system and in the

upheld the enlightenment values of rational humanistic progress that surrounded its composition by assigning to Congress the “Power... To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries” (US Constitution, art. 1, sec. 8). On the heels of this mandate, the Patent Act of 1790 institutionally materialized patent authority by establishing an independent examination tribunal (comprised initially of Thomas Jefferson, Henry Knox, and Edmund Randolph) to determine that the applicant was indeed “the first and true inventor” of a given invention and that the invention was “sufficiently useful and important” (Khan 51-54; “United States Statutes at Large”). This development alone put an inventor in the United States on more stable legal footing than in many contemporary European countries. Historian B. Zorina Khan notes that in both England and France there were no formal inquiries into the novelty of inventions submitted to the government; the French government went so far as to attach a legal absolution to all patent documents: “The government, in granting a patent without prior examination, does not in any manner guarantee either the priority, merit, or success of an invention” (Khan 31, 43). In the United States, careful and documented examination was legal security for lower-income inventors who could not afford to become embroiled in courtroom battles over inventions with no guarantee of state protection (and no means of properly assigning such protection).

economy at large that increased the propensity to patent” (MacLeod 144). Abraham Lincoln put it in pithier terms, reflecting that, “The patent system added the fuel of interest to the fire of genius” (qtd. in Khan 182).

The subsequent Patent Act of 1836 built upon the earlier law, setting the price for patents at an accessible thirty dollars and hiring an independent “Commissioner of Patents” to run the newly built central Patent Office.¹⁶ Specifications and models of inventions could be sent free of postage to satellite repositories, and upon arrival at the Patent Office would be “classified and arranged” in galleries, both for preservation and “public inspection” (Khan 59). The USPTO saw its counterparts throughout nineteenth-century culture in what Tony Bennett has called an “exhibitionary complex;” in addition to inventor’s fairs, dime museums, and magazines like *Scientific American*,¹⁷ recent commentator Les Harrison expands on Bennett to include “state and custom houses, department stores, parlors, inns, ships, quarterdecks, forecastles, theaters, capitols, and [local] patent offices” as practical companions to this complex (Harrison xiii). Paying oblique homage to the American Institute’s Inventors’ Fair that had driven so many customers to his Joice Heth exhibit (occupying a space across the Garden at Niblo’s), Barnum’s own American Museum was for a time dubbed the “American Museum and Perpetual Fair,” explicitly linking dime museum curiosity and engineering marvels.

¹⁶ In 1861, the cost of a US Patent was raised slightly to \$35; by contrast, the English system “reflected its origins in royal privilege,” ensuring that none but the most elite (and rich) could obtain a patent by maintaining a baroque cluster of entrenched institutions in London (each with their own related gatekeepers and fees) and incredibly high costs: “Patent fees for England... amounted to £100-£120 (\$585), or approximately four times per capita income in 1860” (Khan 31). In France, costs were not as high as in England, but a lack of central organization (and aforementioned lack of inspection), meant that it was exceedingly difficult to develop knowledgeable improvements to existing ideas: “At least until the law of April 7, 1902, specifications were only available in manuscript form in the [provincial] office in which they had originally been lodged, and printed information was limited to brief titles in patent indexes” (Khan 45).

¹⁷ *Scientific American*, begun in 1845, existed in its first years largely as a clearinghouse for disseminating information about new inventions lodged at the USPTO.

It is in light of such exhibitions that the saturation of configuration puzzles within nineteenth-century culture makes sense. In “The Smashed Up Locomotive” Milton Bradley drew upon his experience as a mechanical patent draftsman to create a puzzle exhibiting the operation and configurability of that most iconic nineteenth-century invention, the steam locomotive. Presented as a “grotesque” pile of dismembered mechanical parts, Bradley’s multi-shape puzzle pieces each label different aspects of the locomotive mechanism, such that solving the puzzle was also an exercise in learning the basic mechanics of the train (Shea 151). Yet unlike many jigsaw puzzles, certain pieces were of identical shape, fitting into each others’ native location as easily as the “correct” location.¹⁸ Geometrically solving the puzzle didn’t necessarily mean creating the blueprint for a working train; rather, this presentation linked a distinctly exhibitionary strain of the sort delineated by Neil Harris’s “operational aesthetic” with the notion that these parts might also be interchangeable, re-configured into new and better machines once one understood how they worked.¹⁹ By 1871, the Milton Bradley Company catalogue noted, “This puzzle has had, and is still having, a greater sale than any similar thing that we have ever known” (151–152).

¹⁸ A collector’s photo of this game can be found at <http://icollectpuzzles.com/Fun/724.htm> <Accessed July 22, 2010>.

¹⁹ Similarly, in 1870, an inventor named Benjamin Day received a patent for a “Grotesque Sectional Image” puzzle wherein the human face was broken into ten sections (nose, mouth, cheeks, etc.). Sets of blocks containing a range of facial features were arranged via a beveled mounting plate into a variety of physiognomically significant expressions. He argues in the patent that “by means of this invention from a very few complete sets of features, a vast number of different images may be produced, and a great diversity of expressions studied by varying single or several features” (Day 2). Even the human face was subject to the possibility of expressive reinvention by means of incremental study and reconfiguration.

The examination of configurative novelty was therefore a cultural discourse running alongside a specific legal structure designed to facilitate (and reward) a specific kind of imagination throughout the United States. For exhibitors, to discover a novel adjustment to publicly available text—as in the case of the “dam’d aged meat”—was a means to both material and social profit. So grew the acute American fascination with invention and novelty as democratized paths to the kind of power traditionally reserved for the propertied classes.²⁰ Winshang Punqua encapsulates this feeling in a lyric prefatory to his Tangram collection, “*Try Again, / That which other folks can do, / Why with patience, may not you? / Try again*” (qtd. in Slocum 88, emphasis original). Persistent and observant, inventors were “the intellectual heroes of the age” (Marx 199). Yet they were a distinctly practical variety of hero, a hero that did not approach invention as a spontaneous overflow of mechanical imagination (to paraphrase Wordsworth). James Cook argues, “As popular entertainment entered the age of mass production, novelty *and formula* became twin pillars of the same promotional philosophy” (*Reader* 156, emphasis added). Accordingly, this hero was defined by a driving attention to local problems—the hero as editor rather than poet, tinkerer rather than god. One would examine, or take inventory, of the formulations that allowed a particular text to function (whether it be a machine, a body, or an artifact) as a means to discovering ways that this text might be reconfigured, ways the inventor could *intervene*, to obtain different uses or significances. In a sense, it did not matter whether these novel uses were improvements in machine

²⁰ In 1876, *Scientific American* claimed that the United States stayed ahead of the innovation curve “not because we are by nature more inventive than other men—every nationality becomes inventive the moment it comes under our laws—but because the poorest man here can patent his devices” (qtd. in Khan 9).

efficiency or interesting re-imaginings of a social text—either way, value could be enhanced.

Barnum’s experience with the five-acre Connecticut plot dubbed “Ivy Island” again shows him grappling with this emerging ideology from an early age. As a youth, his grandfather explains to him that, by birthright, he is to inherit a large stretch of property called Ivy Island. The entire village gets in on the joke, regaling the naïve Barnum with the knowledge that his landownership effectively makes him “the richest child in town” (Barnum 30). At twelve years old, he finally convinces his family to let him trek out to see the expanse that will one day be the source of his fabulous wealth. He remembers “scarcely [sleeping] for three nights,”

[S]o great was my joy to think that, like Moses of old, I should be permitted to look upon the promised land. The visions of wealth which had so long haunted me in relation to that valuable locality now became intensified, and I not only felt that it must be a land flowing with milk and honey, but caverns of emeralds, diamonds, and other precious stones, as well as mines of silver and gold, opened vividly to my mind’s eye. (31)

Barnum’s vision is of a land filled not with abstract wealth, not with investment or collateral potential, but rather a kind of instantly gratifying wealth within the land itself. Like the molasses candy upon which he spent his allowance in New York, this “milk and honey” wealth would be immediately and individually consumable, an Eden requiring little outside assistance from the workaday world—aside from the occasional barter of “precious stones.” The Ivy Island of young Barnum’s fantasy would yield its owner value simply in its *possession* with no special finesse or decision-making necessary to render its

worth. Had such a utopian plot existed, history might remember Barnum quite differently than as the quintessential self-made American entrepreneur.

However, as he soon finds out, this inheritance is a hoax: the treasured Ivy Island of his dreams is realized as a nightmarish swampland with little “milk and honey” value. The island cannot be mined, plowed, or inhabited, nor will anyone comfortably survive on its native nectars. Ensconced in a watery birch bog, Barnum’s inheritance is covered in hornets and snakes, which chase him out almost as quickly as he makes landfall. The effect of his family’s practical joke is both to foreground the increasing detachment of profit from a traditional calculus of use-value and to blend the worth of the “commodity” with the worth of their joke. It is important to note that in this sense, the island is far from worthless, though from the perspective of the young Barnum it may seem that way. Its value lies almost solely in its proximity to a compelling social narrative, rather than in the more substantive personal use the child had imagined. Worth considering is the fact that, had Barnum’s grandfather explained the state of the land to him from the beginning, no one would have gained anything from it, amusement or otherwise; indeed, it would have been virtually without value. Instead of this outcome, the whole town takes pleasure in a real-life theatrical entertainment (in an Emperor’s-New-Clothes vein) that employs an arranged matrix of stories, ironic bon mots, and a real stretch of land. Ivy Island is not valuable in spite of its being a humbug, it is valuable *because* it is a humbug—a lesson Barnum seems never to have forgotten.

What Barnum’s family gives him here is an early education in the growing culture of invention and speculation. The only profit to be had from his grandfather’s “gift” will

be in using the land in an artful arrangement that, to a degree, does homage to this tough lesson in the power of re-invention and tactical value. The divide narrated by this episode, between young Barnum's sense of value as material use and his family's performance of value as configurative use, might be seen as a collision between a traditional economy of substance and place, and an emerging economy of tact and positionality. This economic transition meaningfully echoes the discursive formations of selfhood discussed in the first chapter by way of *The Mansion of Happiness* and *The Checkered Game of Life*. Within this framework, primary regard is given not to *what* one possesses, but rather to *how one uses* what one possesses at the right time and in the right way to produce an intractably social text.²¹ As a consequence, the practical joke becomes a model for just such a reimagining of "use;" jokes are only successful (/funny) insofar as they take into consideration both timing and social context.²²

²¹ Christine McLeod argues, "The roles of God and humanity were now [i.e. during and after the Enlightenment] strictly demarcated: He supplied the raw materials, which included laws of nature; humanity *utilized* them, combining and recombining them in an infinity of useful discoveries and inventions" (MacLeod 219, emphasis added).

²² See Ted Cohen in *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, who writes:

When I first wrote about jokes, I thought of dividing them into the pure ones and the conditional ones. A conditional joke is one that can work only with certain audiences, and typically is meant only for those audiences. The audience must supply something in order to either get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the *condition* on which the success of the joke depends... A pure joke would be universal, would get through to everyone, because it presupposed nothing in the audience. It now seems clear to me that there is no such thing as a pure joke. (Cohen 12, emphasis original)

To Cohen's articulation of audience conditionality, I would add that jokes are also (of course) temporally conditional. That is, the success of joke, in addition to requiring certain knowledge and assumptions on behalf of its audience, also depends on the timing of that joke. Even a suitably in-the-know audience may not laugh if the joke is, for instance, delivered to them upon abruptly awakening them from sleep or while they are fixated on a more serious matter. A joke's success may also be diminished if the audience feels that it was delivered too early to achieve maximum comic effect (shortchanging a later and bigger payoff).

This may provide an explanation for the role of the practical jokes presented en masse in the opening hundred pages of Barnum's biography—far from narrative filler, the socio-temporal dynamics of jokes are crucial to establishing the foundations of Barnum's success as a businessman. He writes, "Perhaps I should apologize for devoting so much space... to practical jokes... [However,] I feel myself entitled to record [them]... because they partly explain the causes which have made me what I am" (Barnum 105). Pages later, Barnum describes what he is/has become as a "speculative character... never content to engage in any business unless it is of such a nature that [his] profits may be greatly enhanced by an increase of energy, perseverance, attention to business, tact, etc" (107). While energy and perseverance may be traditional labor values, Barnum's inclusion of the more context-specific "tact" underscores his naturalization of the Ivy Island "joke"—it is not enough to be strong and persistent, one must also have a sense of how to finesse the details through savvy arrangements.

Accordingly, Barnum extends the idea as he grows older, directly translating his family's narrative configuration of Ivy Island into capital. He accomplishes this through a clever coup at the expense of Mr. Olmsted, an investor he hopes to court for the purpose of underwriting his purchase of the American Museum. Without un-mortgaged property to act as collateral, and despite his numerous glowing recommendations, Barnum at first finds Mr. Olmsted reluctant to finance his purchase of the old Scudder Museum at Broadway and Ann Street. Olmsted laments, "[I]f you only had a piece of unencumbered real estate that you could offer as additional security, I think I might venture to negotiate with you" (218). At this moment, Barnum's dexterity at constructing a sympathetic

narrative around Ivy Island becomes his greatest asset, as both timing and selective storytelling come into play:

This seemed the turning-point of my fortune. Thinks I to myself, "It is now or never," and memory rapidly ran over my small possessions in search of the coveted bit of land. *Ivy Island*, in all the beauty in which my youthful imagination had pictured it, came dancing to my relief... I saw no particular harm in it, and after a moment's hesitation I replied:

"I have five acres of land in Connecticut which is free from all lien or encumbrance."

"Indeed! what did you pay for it?"

"It was a present from my late grandfather, Phineas Taylor, given on account of my name."

"Was he rich?" inquired Mr. Olmsted.

"He was considered well off in those parts," I answered.

"Very kind in him to give you the land. It is doubtless valuable. But I suppose you would not like to part with it, considering it was a present."

"I shall not have to part with it, if I make my payments punctually."(218–219)

Barnum uses this information opportunistically, toward the end of the negotiations, when Olmsted is already conditionally confident in Barnum's capacities ("if only you had..."). Had he offered up Ivy Island as collateral earlier in the discussion, there may have been further questioning, but at this point Olmsted seems only to be looking for Barnum to say the thing that can allow him to make the decision he has already determined to make. Barnum seizes this opening not by lying outright, but by forging a collaborative text; instead of assigning direct value to the land, Barnum leaves the idea of its value variable by first distancing himself from the price ("It was a present") and then using relativistic rhetoric ("He was considered well off in those parts"). This places emphasis on the potentials of the land, arranging it such that Olmsted is free to imagine for himself what

the worth might be.²³ In doing so, Olmsted becomes a crucial and agential element of Barnum's narrative, stepping into the story (or, less charitably, the con game) that has emerged in the midst of their negotiation. As with a joke that plays on what its community can be assumed to know, this negotiation relies on Olmsted's assumptions about what a "well off" grandfather would give to his namesake. Barnum's tactfully delivered half-truths implicate the investor. Had the venture failed to succeed, Olmsted may have lamented his decision to finance the purchase, but there is no doubt that the decision was his to make, based, to a degree, on information *he himself had provided* (i.e. "It is doubtless valuable"). With this the final security in place, he makes the purchase for Barnum, and so one of the most popular and profitable institutions of the mid-nineteenth-century United States was born.

"Not in among the Burning Ruins—but out on Broadway": Barnum's Outside Show

I mentioned earlier that Barnum describes himself as a "speculative character... never content to engage in any business unless it is of such a nature that [his] profits may be greatly enhanced by an increase of energy, perseverance, attention to business, tact, etc" (107). Later he continues in this vein, stating a desire to find a business "opportunity where my faculties and energies could have full play, and where the amount of profits should depend entirely upon the amount of tact, perseverance and energy, which I contributed to the business" (143). In both of these reflections, "tact" plays a recurring role in Barnum's imagined success. Still later, what drives Barnum to the American

²³ Interestingly, it seems that part of Barnum's genius here, and throughout his career, is to arrange his texts such that the *audience* appears to take the role that the "Mississippi operator" took in Melville's novel. Rather than fixing the variable values himself, he allows the audience to act as the operator, filling in the blanks and so gaining a pleasurable sense of agency in the course of the "humbug."

Museum is his belief that “only energy, tact and liberality were needed, to give it life;” and in the same breath he is “entirely confident that [his] tact and experience... [will] enable [him] to make the payments when due” (216).

So what of this “tact” upon which Barnum relies so heavily? On the most basic level, “tact” has to do with both literal and figurative “touch,” which one sees in its connection to the word “tactile.” Yet tact, as Barnum uses it, clearly incorporates a temporal finesse to this “touch,” a kind of good timing or opportunism (i.e. “tactics” or a musical “tact,” the opening beat of a measure)—he notes that it was “now or never” in the midst of his negotiations with Olmstead right before unleashing his humbug collateral. The combination of these two elements yields the common contemporary use of tact as “skill or judgment in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations; the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time” (“Tact”). Tact is a specifically social finesse having to do not simply with an internal arrangement of words (the raw text of Barnum’s Ivy Island humbug), but rather with the skillful arrangement of those words at the right moment such that another person might see them as “making sense,” yielding a kind of localized empathy that can be used in a variety of ways: to diffuse tension, to begin a relationship, or, in Barnum’s case, to secure capital. All of these effects stem from an astute awareness of the complementary interrelationship of textual and contextual configurations, of exhibit and “outside show.”

Returning to Tangrams for a moment helps to parse this further. In Chinese, the puzzle is called “*Ch’i ch’iao t’u*,” which means, literally, “seven clever pieces” (Slocum 20). This middle character, “ch’iao,” might be stretched, via the above discussion, to be

understood as “tactful,” incorporating as it does certain elements of tact: “skillfulness,” “timeliness,” and “opportunity” (“ch’iao”).²⁴ Each piece must be moved in a step-wise temporal arrangement such that moving one tan to one position changes the geometric opportunities available for the eventual composite shape. The temporality of this may not be obvious, but it is there: in addition to dictating the placement of the six other tans, moving the large square to a central position means that it will not be used *later* in a different position. Tact here is both the player’s touch of the tan and the tan’s capacity to touch other tans in a given configuration. However, one might also add a social element of touch to the game as well, requiring as it does, a skill at producing images that either convey obvious meaning given the context of their viewing or at producing narrative around these images such that an external observer might give one credit for making a shape that communicates some abstract form. To succeed at the game you must not only touch the pieces, but “touch” other people’s imagination as well. Each level of configuration is as crucial as the others. And although communicative skill might be seen as external to the game, it is in fact what allows the game to function as such—to leave out this level is to render the game as simply a mathematical set of permutations, rather than a meaningful exercise in which many people throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond) took pleasure. Thinking of Tangrams in terms of tact helps to understand the ways in which text and context have unstable boundaries, feeding significance into each

²⁴ Though I hope I make it clear in the proceeding analysis, I should note that I do not mean to imply a direct synonymy between “tact” and “ch’iao.” “Ch’iao,” as I understand from conversations with native speakers of Chinese, has a more typically passive connotation, particularly in its adjectival form—although it does connote an active skillfulness with one’s hands and a seemingly *fated* way of *fitting* things together. My main intention here is to push our understanding of the English term “tact,” using the Chinese term, and game, like a kind of backbeat.

other at the porous threshold of their interaction. “Tact,” more than configuration alone, is a perspective on configuration that specifically makes use of this ludic threshold between its mechanical and social dimensions.

In Barnum, tact, though explicitly noted as integral to his business acumen, is often invisible, existing as it does on layered levels of narrative composition and style, rough-hewn associations where the reader, like Olmstead, must formulate his or her own notion of meaningful transition. We see the end results, but not the process. Nevertheless, on occasion Barnum gets at the operations of tact through a kind of inversion, offering up instances of configuration *without* tact. This happens most strikingly in the account of a conciliatory letter he writes for a man dubbed “John Mallett,” a significant alias because of its associations with pall-mall, a predecessor of the wildly popular nineteenth-century game of croquet. In these games, the “mallet” guides the ball by making contact, touching the player’s ball with its flat face and either sending it through an iron wicket or knocking other players’ balls to non-strategic positions on the field of play. By naming the lovelorn Mallett in this way, Barnum immediately draws attention to figures of touch, though, as we shall see, not necessarily tact—foregrounding the split textual and contextual implications of the term.

At the opening of Barnum’s anecdote, Mallett has himself been butted from the romantic field of play and is looking to regain the advantage. After a six month courtship, Lucretia has refused his arm at weekly church services, instead taking the hand of another young man (the unnamed son of Tom Beers). Mallett hopes to use a well-penned letter to “touch her feelings,” but also desires “an explanation of this unaccountable conduct,

and... at the same time, to give her a piece of his mind” (121–124). For a fee, Barnum is only too happy to oblige; however, while willing to provide the words of the correspondence, he relies on Mallett for their substantive arrangement.

The result is incongruous (to say the least), stringing together genuine curiosity, insult, poetry, threat, and sentimental appeal. It demonstrates that despite the all of the components of the letter-writing “puzzle” being used, the contextual arrangement is self-defeating and problematic. In a word, Mallett is tactless. Following his charge’s request, Barnum begins innocuously, “*Miss Lucretia*:—I write to ask an explanation of your conduct in giving me the mitten on Sunday night last,” and then immediately takes a forceful tone: “If you think, madam, that you can trifle with my affections, and turn me off for every little whipper-snapper that you can pick up, you will find yourself considerably mistaken” (121–122). Here Barnum pauses to narrate, in medias res as it were, Mallett’s approval of these first two lines, which he likes because he guesses that the distant-sounding “madam” will “hurt her feelings very much” and that calling the competition a “little whipper-snapper” will “make her feel cheap” (122). Barnum comments that he doubts that “little whipper-snapper” was the right phrase to use, considering that Tom Beers’s son was considerably taller than Mallett, but the realistic context of the situation matters less to him than the intensity of terminology used; Mallett is determined to “begin the letter in strong terms” regardless of how those terms might read to others, and how that reading might later affect his end goal (121).

Betraying this insular view of textual arrangement, the impassioned Mallett then instructs Barnum to “give her another dose” (“I can have the company of girls as much

above you as the sun is above the earth”) before “try[ing] to touch her feelings” (122). Dutifully following orders, Barnum contrasts the letter’s earlier distance (“madam”) with a personal appeal, “My dear Lucretia, when I think of the many pleasant hours we have spent together, it almost breaks my heart to think of last Sunday night” (122). Taking a cue from the mechanical aesthetics discussed earlier in this chapter, Mallett seems intent on reinventing Lucretia’s love by cobbling together a series of sentiments both formulaic and personal—a kind of “Smashed Up Locomotive” of a text. And as with Bradley’s puzzle, Mallett’s letter has moments where content is literally conceived as interchangeable. Rather than developing a sincere follow-up to his admission of heartbreak, he asks that Barnum “stick in some affecting poetry.” Far from the Romantic sensibility of poetry as spontaneous and personal, Mallett’s sensibility has a ramshackle procedurality to it that evokes the schematics of so many failed patent applications: the pieces that make up the writing are not organic in the Coleridgean sense, but mechanical, something to be “st[u]ck in” wherever they seem to fit. Unable to think of anything applicable off of the top of his head, Barnum makes up his own stand-alone verse: “Miserable fate, to lose you now, / And tear this bleeding heart asunder! / Will you forget your tender vow? / I can’t believe it—no, by thunder!” The poem continues, asking that Lucretia give other boys “the mitten,” and return to Mallett, closing: “Do this, Lucretia, and till death / I’ll love you to intense distraction; / I’ll spend for you my every breath, / And we will live in satisfaction” (123).

Perhaps had the letter ended on this note, it may have hit its target, softening an initial frustration with a sentimental recollection of the couple’s history and a look to the

future. But Mallett cannot resist dropping the hammer, asking Barnum to “blow her up a little more” before relenting: “I guess you had better touch her feelings once more, and wind up the letter” (124). These conflicting edicts lead to a truly schizophrenic textual pairing:

I shall despise you for ever if you don't change your conduct towards me, and send me a letter of apology on Monday next. I shall not go to meeting [church] to-morrow, for I would scorn to sit in the same meeting-house with you until I have an explanation... If you allow any young man to go home with you to-morrow night, I shall know it, for you will be watched.

This is followed immediately by,

My sweet girl... if you could but realize that I regard the world as less than nothing without you, I am certain you would pity me. A homely cot and a crust of bread with my adorable Lucretia would be a paradise, where a palace without you would be a hades. (123–124)

Completing the contradictions, a postscript is added to the letter: “On reflection I have concluded to go to meeting to-morrow. If all is well, hold your pocket handkerchief in your left hand as you stand up to sing with the choir” (124). Lucretia is seen holding “her handkerchief firmly in her right hand during all the church services” (124). Barnum only makes Mallett pay half price.

Of course, the problem from the perspective of the letter's capacity to entice Lucretia is that her erstwhile suitor has no sense of proportion or sequence, no awareness that each of these lines will be read in proximity to each other. As a result, he seemingly has no sense of how the arrangement will read as a whole, what picture he has created of their love, and whether it does indeed read as “love”—or altogether something else. Both the context of the individual elements (the poem, the pleas, the insults) and the social

context of its expected audience are ignored, with understandably smashed up results. Consequently, what Mallett has produced is analogous to a Tangram with no referent other than his own vengeful obsession, and no reasonable narrative in which to couch this obsession. The figure he has made has no outside show to carry its disjointed message of love, jealousy, and heartbreak; it is little more than an arranged mess. Why then would Barnum include the story of this letter's composition in his memoir?

The simple answer is that as entertainment, the letter is highly effective, and in contrast to Mallett's purposes, entertainment *is* Barnum's goal. More importantly, the failure of Mallett's configuration game can be recognized as such precisely because Barnum emphasizes what successful, that is, tactful, configuration *does* look like throughout the autobiography—engaging as it does with both local internal consistency and social empathy. The rhetorical function of this anecdote, then, is to allow the formation of such a local empathy with Barnum, offering to the reader Barnum's position as bewildered but resigned typesetter. While completely ineffective as it stands, the misguided letter's humorous pleasure arises from the friction between Barnum's/the reader's assumed tact and the tactlessness of Mallett. With all of the pieces delightfully dislocated, Barnum's presentation implicitly requires his readership to imagine an editorial role, creating an enjoyable, because agential, reading experience in the interplay of dissonant ideas, the contrast of what *should have been* versus what *was*. The modularity of Mallett's approach to language is both his weakness and Barnum's empathetic trump card. The fact that one can't imagine sending Mallett's letter turns the episode into a kind of provocation and a reason to imagine oneself a part of Barnum's

dialogue, re-arranging the pieces so that they might express their true meaning (as with the dock sign of Barnum's childhood)—to “interpolate the little D” as we see fit.

It was this kind of implication that Barnum played on throughout his career as a showman, layering paratextual elements around his exhibitions such that viewers were compelled to practice the protocols of an exhibit's textual world even before they had fully engaged with it as an object in itself. If Mallett's letter is an exhibition of sorts, then the whole surrounding biography becomes the context for viewing it in a specific (humorous, not serious or pathetic) way. Barnum need only supply a few cues, such as his wariness over Mallett's word choice, to remind the reader of how this exhibition should be conceived by association with the other “exhibitions” of the autobiography. Such associative cues were powerful mechanisms for creating an embedded sense of viewer/readership in the nineteenth century. Discussing romantic-era collections, Judith Pascoe notes that there was a rise in the popularity of “association objects” in the period—objects linked with famous personages, such as Napoleon, or historical events. But more than a one-to-one connection with history, these objects also operated in complex fields of association with regard to themselves and their viewers. Pieces were played off of each other in an exhibition, with more accepted collectables proving “the somewhat dubious authenticity of other[s]” (Pascoe 87); the presence of one object could become the “outside show” that drove interest in another. At the same time, the spectator engaged in an immersive association game. If the presence of other objects enhanced the feeling that any one object was closer to its purported history, being surrounded by these objects helped spectators feel a similar imaginative closeness. By interacting with these

objects, Pascoe writes, “Napoleon’s cloak helped [a] visitor imagine himself as the impresario of extraordinary acts, as Napoleon en route to his next conquest” (94).

Barnum undoubtedly played on similar vogues for historical connection in his own collector’s space, the spectacularly baroque American Museum. Yet at the American Museum, Barnum also seemed to understand that the desire for abstract kinship ran deeper than a simple affiliation with celebrity or history; it was a desire for connection to a broader social world. This social association may explain the success of “The Great Brick Advertisement” for the Museum. Here Barnum gives an eager laborer five bricks and explicit instructions for laying each of the first four, one at a time, on each of the four street corners surrounding the Museum, such that he had one remaining in his hand. Then, marching solemnly from corner to corner (“you must seem deaf as a post... answer no questions; pay no attention to anyone”), the “brick man” would pause, exchange the brick in his hand for the one on the sidewalk, and press on, repeating the exchange with each brick he passed. Every hour, on the hour, the brick man would finish his last replacement, enter the Museum, quietly examine the exhibits in every hall, and then exit... to begin the process all over again (Barnum, *Dollars*, 104). Barnum recalls that within a half an hour of beginning his work:

at least five hundred people were watching [the brick man’s] mysterious movements. He had assumed a military step and bearing, and, looking as sober as a judge, he made no response whatever to the constant inquiries as to the object of his singular conduct. At the end of the first hour, the sidewalks in the vicinity were packed with people, all anxious to solve the mystery. The man, as directed, then went into the Museum, devoting fifteen minutes to a solemn survey of the halls, and afterward returning to his round. This was repeated every hour till sundown, and whenever the man went into the Museum a dozen or more persons

would buy tickets and follow him, hoping to gratify their curiosity in regard to the purpose of his movements.

Barnum here again shows his mastery of both timing and associative configurations. The man's schedule is literally linked to the church bell at St. Paul's and follows a series of steps designed to allow the environment itself to create the scene. As individuals within the crowded city streets become fascinated by the brick man, they begin to form a crowd around him, questioning his activities, but simultaneously becoming a part of the mystery at hand. Certainly it is within the realm of possibility that some in this crowd began to enjoy their own implication within the inner circle of the brick man's activity; at each stop the accumulation of (non-)knowledge (perhaps it would be better to say *information*) from the previous stop became the basis of any "authoritative" answers newcomers may have demanded (since the brick man himself does not speak).²⁵

These behaviors then became a template for the cumulative experience of walking and discussion within the Museum: people become associates in unraveling the mystery and, following the man into the museum, bring that sense of mystery and exploration in with them. Why would his activity be connected to a certain exhibit? What are the links between these exhibits? Barnum piques their curiosity with his outside show and then encourages them to see the same connective links between the exhibits within the Museum walls—for a price, of course. While the Confidence-Man of Melville's novel generates income by acting as a surrogate for the agency of his marks, allowing them to

²⁵ One can see precisely this sort of audience-generated culture at work in the internet age on the message boards that surround serialized television mysteries such as those created in recent years by producers like J.J. Abrams (*Alias*, *Lost*, *Fringe*) and Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*).

attain a sense of consistency in the process, Barnum inverts this maneuver. Barnum's customers pay him for the opportunity to be agents of their own discursive amusement, safely bounded by the scenic and operational consistency between the Museum and its periphery.

To associate the mystery of the brick man, as well as the protocol of strolling and examining, with his own Museum was to embed the museum in the audience's world and to naturalize the protocols of associative focus that helped visitors get the most out of their Museum experience. Part of this experience was an implicit engagement with tact and configuration. In the brick man episode, as with the Museum in general, meaning was cumulative, rather than simply compositional: "when...?" "how many came before?" and "how are they related?" were questions central to understanding the significance of any stop along the way—even where there was a lack of substantive meaning. This was a mode of practice in some ways at odds with the protocols of museum-going that would come to dominate the late-nineteenth-century and beyond, engaging as they did with more systematic and classificatory styles of exhibition.²⁶ A critic of the Museum, writing for *The Nation* in 1865, exemplifies this later ideal:

The more truly one loves a good collection well arranged, the more he will be offended by a chaotic, dusty, dishonored collection... Without scientific arrangement, without a catalogue, without attendants, without even labels, in very

²⁶ See Les Harrison, *The Temple and the Forum: The American Museum and Cultural Authority in Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Whitman* (x-xv). In addition to the ongoing historical debate Harrison notes between the function of the museum as populist *forum* on one side and culturally legitimized *temple* on the other, critics often cite the nineteenth century as the transitional point between the unruly collections that comprised the "wonder cabinet" tradition with the controlled displays of later nineteenth-century museums. See Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Judith Pascoe provides a useful analysis of these views in *The Hummingbird Cabinet* (see especially pgs. 60–61).

many instances, the heterogeneous heap of ‘curiosities,’ valuable and worthless well mixed up together, could not attract our students very often or detain them long. (Cook, *Reader* 215)

Within this more modern tradition, one seldom reads of an exhibit as an explicitly nested object within the broader museum; a review of an exhibit understands that exhibit as somewhat insular, classified, distinct—and indeed is atmospherically encouraged to do so. History plays a role in making links between exhibits, but exploration is strictly guided by chronologies, genres, and other indicators of legitimized intellectual narrative. Agency is expressed by the curators, while movement becomes a passive, quasi-religious experience.²⁷

By contrast, accounts of Barnum’s Museum exhibitions couldn’t help but make their own heterogeneous associative lists, explicitly connecting any new exhibit with what surrounded it. Much of this was encouraged by Barnum’s proclivity to pack the space to the brim; other exhibits were literally unavoidable in the path to something one might want to see. A description of the Museum’s Third Room from *Barnum’s American Museum Illustrated* (1850) gives a sense of the diversity at play,

We commence with an American Flag, torn and discolored by age... Passing from it, we are shown a Brain Stone [coral], from Turk’s Island, a magnificent specimen, and quite equal to its far-famed fellow in the British Museum, London. The Sword Fish is distinguished by a long pointed beak... The lovers of antiquity and those who are curious in the customs of other countries, will be delighted

²⁷ See Donna Haraway’s “Teddy Bear Patriarchy, Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936.” Discussing ideology of the American Museum of Natural History, she writes, “One begins in the threatening chaos of the industrial city, part of a horde, but here one will come to belong, to find substance. No matter how many people crowd the Great Hall, the experience is of individual communion with nature. The sacrament will be enacted for each worshipper” (29). This communion is evoked through the realism of the exhibit, which is carefully controlled: “Unity must be *authored* in the Judeo-Christian myth system; just as nature has an Author, so does the organism or the realistic diorama” (40, emphasis original).

with the Roman Urns... The Common Seal, or Sea Calf, of North America... is in close vicinity with the hand and part of the arm of a man, who also had dealings with the ocean... a notorious pirate named Tom Trouble. (*Barnum's* 21)

Far from a discretely territorialized object, the American Museum was “a wilderness of wonderful, instructive, and amusing realities” (Barnum, *Life* 255). Barnum’s provocatively plural “realities” cues us into the epistemological promiscuity of the experience. In a variety of woodcuts that accompany the guidebook, every illustration of the interior includes some group of viewers looking in different directions from those nearby (*Barnum's* 3, 4, 6, 9, 15, 28). Reality in the Museum is not one thing, agreed upon in totality by a group of spectators, but instead a constellation of layered and interacting perspectives, each requiring a specific form of attention and affording a very localized kind of pleasure. Each reality is a Tangram composed on the fly, weighed against others, a possible ground for communication.

One gets an impressionistic view of these different realities in the selective catalogues various journalists made of the Museum’s artifacts during its lifetime. The anxious and sensational world of a *Democratic Review* writer who puts the exhibition of Tom Thumb beside a “five-legged calf [that] vies with the razor with which Thomas Nokes ‘slit his wife’s weasand [throat]’” (*Reader* 193) contrasts with a *New York Tribune* author’s naturalistic viewpoint in the context of Barnum’s “What Is It?” exhibition “a huge California Bear, weighing over 2,000 pounds, a Sea Lion, which on this occasion is not an ordinary Seal, and a nondescript, which has not as yet been named” (*Reader* 208). Where an author from the *New York Mercury* fixates on the human element (even in animals) recalling “the celebrated and mysterious Aztec Children... the waggish and

irrepressible specimen of dubious creation known as the ‘What Is It?’... [and] a number of rare animals, monster serpents, the ‘Happy Family,’ or cats, rats, dogs, rabbits, birds, monkeys, etc.; all living together in domestic bliss” (*Reader* 212), another takes a diminutive stance by emphasizing the sheer size of certain exhibits: “Gazing placidly down upon the coming visitor, stood the largest elephant that the civilization of the nineteenth century has yet known. A refreshment stand enticed us to the mammoth barrel-organ... In the centre of the room was an immense tank” (“Disastrous Fire”). Each of these renditions, whether consciously or not, culls a certain reality from the unruly mass of exhibitions, forming a provisional model of discourse. The worst thing to do in this place, according to Barnum, is “pass by [an exhibit] in *silent* contempt” (227). To engage with an artifact neither physically nor conversationally was to take it out of contention as an object of associative configuration, and thereby remove it from the pool of emergent socialities in play. It was to restrict invention and the accompanying potential for success. In a sense, Barnum aims to recreate for his visitors one of the fundamental elements of his own meteoric rise, a grasp of how to engage with pre-existing materials. Before owning the space, he recalls in *Life*, “My recent enterprises had not indeed been productive, and my funds were decidedly low... and so I repeatedly visited the Museum as a thoughtful looker-on. I saw, or believed I saw, that only energy, tact, and liberality were needed, to give it life and to put it on a profitable footing” (216). This belief could be equally applied to Barnum’s philosophy of civic engagement, as he aims to profit by allowing his visitors a space to be a “thoughtful looker-on” as well.

From a critical vantage, then, the Museum space must always be taken as a tactfully reconfigured object, re-imagined with each visit according to the specific social interests of a given audience. While the religious-inflected model of the museum as cultural temple may allow visitors to imagine what they *are*, defined by their exposure to the supposedly transcendental, Barnum's exposes a more slipshod, contingent version of agency. Without an authoritative story, traversing the collection might be better characterized as an exercise in imagining what one *could be*, constructing provisional alliances—using the same tact missing in Mallett's letter, but found in the canon of the period's successful inventors—to render one's character in a less transcendental fashion.²⁸ James Cook gets at this contingency with regard to audience credulity: “Because viewers suspected that Barnum might have embellished the physical and cultural anomalies of these curiosities, they rarely hesitated in picking and choosing which of the advertised features to accept, reject, or amend” (Cook 19). Yet I would take his argument even further: in choosing to accept, reject, or amend on the level of one exhibition, visitors accumulated perspectives and conversational protocols they transposed and experimented with throughout the Museum. They invented possible social selves even as they made connections between various technological and rhetorical inventions.

²⁸ The ephemerality of this kind agency is part of why I think this view of Barnum's is a useful supplement to the traditional discourse of spectacle in the Museum that sees only the conceptual reification of *self* in the dichotomy of subject (self) and object (freak, curiosity, artifact). Agency as it appears in a place like the American Museum is never complete, not because of an ever-receding engagement with *desire*, but instead because it takes pleasure in a progressive multiplication of realized and half-realized potentialities.

Through this process of selection, individual visitors became part of an audience as they had during the brick man episode, forming affinities with others as a way of testing, through a kind of play, different ways of looking, talking, and interacting with each other and the exhibits.²⁹ Much as Barnum could make a different exhibition out of Joice Heth by changing her physical and narrative surroundings—first highlighting her age, then highlighting her similarity to novel machines—Museum visitors made the museum-going experience different by configuring their own associative archive out of the “heterogeneous heap.” By the time a visitor reached the top of the Museum, the city itself could be seen against the cumulative conversational protocols begun in the brick man’s outside show:

[He] will then find himself on the roof of this immense establishment, where he can enjoy the refreshing breeze, and obtain a view of some of the most important places of business in the City, which will well repay him for his trouble. In the small room adjoining the parapet is exhibited the celebrated Drummond Light, which can be seen for more than a mile up Broadway, when illuminated in the evening. (*Barnum’s* 29)

While the streets of Broadway had originally been the site of Museum paratext, the Museum now becomes a kind of paratext to the city itself, shining a spotlight on the real show—a show that will “repay” Barnum’s paying customers. More than anything else damaged or destroyed in the spectacular fire that leveled the American Museum on July 13, 1865, it would seem that what was really lost was an opportunistic space in all senses of the term: an opportunity to profit, yes, but also to immerse oneself in a story, to choose

²⁹ Richard Butsch highlights the local and transitory nature of audiences, as opposed to crowds (spatial collections) and publics (discursive associations), in *The Citizen Audience*, writing “[A]udience is a situated role that people temporarily perform, and in their performance people produce representations of audiences” (Butsch 3).

and train one's configurative focus as part of a social unit. The blaze became its own public spectacle, and one last chance for some patrons to make identifying choices about the objects inside. In the midst of a giant crowd, small audiences formed around what appeared to be a kangaroo jumping from the roof (it was a pair of pants) or a desperate woman repelling down the building face (it was a wax model); a man trying to save a wax effigy of Jefferson Davis hoisted the likeness out a window, only to have the spectators below cart the figure down the street and hang it. Finally, the brick walls of the Museum itself crashed to the boardwalk below,

The section of the front wall facing Park-row, and at a slight deviation from the parallel of Broadway, still remained, and all eyes were turned in its direction. It was a very large, high portion, reaching to the uppermost story. About five minutes later this great façade careened gracefully over and slowly fell—not *in* among the burning ruins—but *out* on Broadway. (“Disastrous Fire,” emphasis original)

With a crash, the walls between inside and outside show were now permanently broken. In a sense, this had always been the case.

Conclusion

Designed through a collaboration of the American Social History Project and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, *The Lost Museum* website was launched in the early 2000s as an ambitious computerized re-creation of the interior of P.T. Barnum's American Museum (*The Lost Museum*). Incorporating elements that evoke the hit first-person mystery game *Myst* (1993) and its successors, *The Lost Museum* uses 3D imaging tools and a Flash presentation to allow its users to navigate an informed recreation of the space—either exploring the four available rooms on one's own

or participating in a short game called “Who Burned Down the Museum?” In the latter, players are implored by a virtual Barnum to search throughout the various Museum exhibits for clues as to who might have motive to set the archive aflame (an event destined to happen twelve hours from the start of the game). What is interesting about this amusement is that, despite the (realistic and admirable) educational goals of the site, the game renders the history and specificity of the Museum collection a kind of secondary text to the task at hand; while the idea of the exhibition is undoubtedly to use the youth-friendly protocols of computer games as a supplemental hook to drive students deeper into the history of the Museum, in practice, the opposite is also true. A player navigating the space *must* interact with the protocols of the program to advance the game (moving through rooms, clicking on items, selecting which suspect to assign clues to in a pop-up window “notebook”), but they need not necessarily engage with the *content* of the archival materials in order to do so.³⁰ The museum archive might be construed, drawing upon Genette’s useful coinage, as a paratext to the game, “a multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception” (Jones 7).

³⁰ The importance of paratext, though formally peripheral, is in the significance it gives to one’s actions in a gamespace like *The Lost Museum*. In a recent play-through, I meandered through the Museum, clicking objects at random (an active object is noted by changing your mouse-pointer into a “?”). I didn’t read the background materials provided. I waited until the word “clue” popped up below a scene, linked these clues in my notebook to a culprit (arbitrarily choosing “Abolitionist” from among the options provided), and then when I had three clues, following the indication in my notebook that “You need three clues to accuse a suspect,” I pressed the “Accuse” button at the bottom of the window. The endgame happened just the same. In the final determination, the central, inescapable text of *The Lost Museum* is its code. This text is the algorithm you must configure correctly in order to navigate the virtual space (a part of which is negotiating the program requirements of implied command-lines such as ‘IF three clues AND _Accuse_ selected, THEN play end-movie’). Still, the lack of interpretive significance to be made of my “accusation”—and the game’s acceptance of this nonsensical configuration—was admittedly unsatisfying. This lack of pleasure is worth lingering on.

Of course the configurative play's the thing in all games, but paratext provides the backdrop through which specific configurations become meaningful for the player; indeed the always-spiraling interplay of configuration and paratextually-inflected interpretation is precisely what allows a site such as *The Lost Museum* to function as an educational tool.³¹ Somewhat unexpectedly, this is also what makes the virtual *Lost Museum* an especially effective analogue for the historical American Museum. Barnum's diverse collection of attractions and novelty is perhaps best seen not as an insular text, a collection of ontologically distant objects against which visitors weighed themselves, but as a grand paratextual space. Herein those who paid a quarter were invited to play a social configuration game that intimately linked them to a number of histories and socialities in the process. In this chapter, I have argued that Barnum's success was a function of placing focus on these contexts of enactment and on the reciprocal and embedded interface of spectator and exhibit, rather than simply on the subject-object relationship between viewer and artifact. The exhibits in his American Museum were spectacles, yes, but not as unidirectionally as is sometimes suggested. This is because, more than a spectacle, Barnum's Ann Street collection was also a generative platform for any number of novel configurative texts; it was an inventor's space as much as a display case. To deny this critically is to proceed as if the central pleasure of Tangrams is in marveling over the shapes of the seven tans, rather than in the *use* of those tans to make a picture.

³¹ Building on the previous work of game studies theorists such as Espen Aarseth and Markku Eskelinen, Jones writes that there is a "complex interrelationship of play [i.e. configuration] and interpretation... You can configure to interpret (in literature), or interpret in order to continue configuring (in games). But in practice you usually interpret and configure in interlocked loops of attention" (119).

In the previous two chapters, I have tried to establish a framework through which the operational selfhood of the mid-nineteenth century can be understood as a kind of localizing and localized utopic; that is, a site through which one's action, while in one sense "determining" him or her, can also be seen as an interactive embedding—an assemblage in process, rather than a contained subject. This perspective is reflected in Barnum's autobiographical writings, as well as facilitated in the practiced space of his museum. Read alongside the growing use and significance of game-like configurative practices, Barnum's "original genius" (to return to Melville's term) is shown in the capacity he gives his patrons (and readers) to imagine a self in process, a self as a constellation, and an agency that is the means to an iterated and innovated configurative selfhood within a given social milieu. This view is important because it allows us to imagine the civic actors of the mid-nineteenth century, and perhaps our own, not as empty categorical subjects bound and determined by their context, but rather as embedded, active, and constitutive elements of that context. It allows us to imagine the self as a potentially inventive position in the cultural field; though to see this, we must be willing to understand how it was played at, and how inventive gaming became a central metaphor for inventive living. For Barnum, the ability to take on this inventor's agency is the result of tactful arrangements of existing materials, as he phrases it, seizing all that a "capital chance" has to offer (*Life* 144).

To understand both Barnum's and his audience's playful configurative practices may help us to better understand the value of these practices in our own moment. Yes, there are serious limitations to existing personal and political agency that will not be

solved by playing video games. But allowing games to inform both theory and practice opens us to the possibility that gaming is doing more than just creating ideology-laden distractions. Gaming can be a perspective on limitation as opportunity, on configurative spectatorship as social experimentation. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith argues that play may have a crucial role in preserving ways of behaving that might otherwise be lost to the exigencies of the everyday life and common sense:

We could say that just as the brain begins in a state of high potentiality, so does play. The brain has these connections, but unless they are actualized in behavior, most of them will die off. Likewise in play, even when novel connections are actualized, they are not, at first, the same as everyday reality. Actions do not become everyday reality until there is a rhetoric of practice that accounts for their use and value... In this case, [play's] function would be to save, in both brain and behavior, more of the variability that is potentially there than would otherwise be saved if there were no play. (Sutton-Smith 225)

In this way, Barnum's American Museum acts less as an historical archive (as many may have wished it to be) than as an archive of potential agencies, locally enacted and temporally volatile. Seeing this alongside the operational perspective provided by the games of the moment allows us to understand these possibilities not just as postscripts (fully articulated desires) but rather as they were experienced in time, as fundamentally ambivalent modes of enunciation. The pleasure is not in knowing, but in imagining what, and how, we might one day know.

CHAPTER FIVE

A LITTLE REMOVED FROM THE HIGHWAY: UTOPIAN ROMANCE AND TARGETING AS AGENCY IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE BLITHEDALE* *ROMANCE*

Often the given writer who first gave vigor to the equation did not, however, intend it as a “bridge” in this historical sense, as a way of abandoning one position and taking up its opposite. Rather he cherished it precisely because this midway quality itself was his position.

—Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1969)

Standing at a sturdy and handsome bagatelle table, a caricatured Abraham Lincoln leans into his shot, an intense but comfortable look of focus on his face. Bagatelle, a near-cousin of billiards, was played with a long cue that struck several solid colored balls (one red, the others white), sending them down the table into numbered divots awarding point values.¹ Lincoln's allegorically rendered table carries a placard along the side labeling it “THE UNION BOARD” and contains a larger number of divots than usual, with scores from one to twenty-one, corresponding somewhat imprecisely to the number of states he would stand to win in his landslide 1864 presidential reelection (Magee). He has already landed many shots with an even-handed dexterity, the double-valued red snugly resting in

¹ In fact, the terms “billiards” and “bagatelle” were sometimes interchangeable in the nineteenth century, as attested in an anonymously attributed line in appendix of *The Game of Billiards* (1858; a revised edition of *Billiards without a Master* discussed below): “Vive la bagatelle! which, in English, means three cheers for Billiards!” (Phelan, *GB* 267). With a simpler gaming mechanic than popular forms of 9-ball billiards and “pool,” bagatelle was more easily adapted to mechanical operation, as tracked in the US Patent archives. Enclosing the table and decreasing its size, inventors added spring loaded cues, automatic ball return systems, and dinging pin obstructions designed to dazzle and delight. These improvements yielded the games we know today as “pinball” and “pachinko” (the latter of which is still wildly popular in Japan).

the central thirteen spot (suggesting Lincoln's victory in aligning himself with the core values of the original thirteen colonies). With five balls left, he lines up his next target at the same time as he kicks over the "CHICAGO PLATFORM" upon which his opponent—an impish George McClellan—perches grasping an oversized cue. McClellan whines that his cue "is too heavy! and the 'Platform's' shakey!!" while a pipe-smoking Ulysses Grant advises him to "surrender UNCONDITIONALLY" and Copperhead Clement Vallandigham sits aloof in the corner chiding, "There is nothing the matter with the CUE or the PLATFORM, you had the first red and did'nt make anything, now he'l win the game." With "Nix" scrawled on the "Copper" side of a scorekeeping chalkboard, Vallandigham's prediction appears destined to become reality, and a smiling "Andy Johnson" cheers out, "go ahead Old Abe!" proudly adding, "O aint he bully on the bagatelle?"

Although satirically presented here, versions of the above scene were becoming more and more typical in urban centers throughout the mid-nineteenth-century United States—and, by 1864, had become common enough to merit the kind of breezy iconic reference required by political cartooning. This wave of interest in cued targeting games like billiards and bagatelles was tracked by Michael Phelan, an Irish immigrant considered the father of American billiards, in the 1850 book *Billiards without a Master*, the first major US publication on the subject. In this work, which drifts between history and rulebook, practical guide and cultural rationale, Phelan writes:

The rapidity with which Billiard rooms and players have increased in this [New York] and other cities of the Union, is extraordinary. Within the writer's memory, the number of rooms in New York, did not exceed seven or eight, and perhaps not

more than sixteen tables in all; now, there are from fifty to sixty rooms, with a number of tables, varying from one to sixteen in each, and amounting, on the whole, to something over four hundred; the number of players being, according to the author's computation, not less than twenty thousand, exclusive of strangers... the players of New York are highest on the American roll of players. New Orleans ranks next, as to the number of tables; though, perhaps, Philadelphia can boast of superior players. Boston, too, has a good number of tables. (Phelan, *BWM* 122)

With interest in billiards expanding from a small upper-class coterie (following French fashions) to a large middle-class populace seeking entertainment and social engagement in the city, Phelan's book sought to capitalize on a developing market that had a strong desire to be seen as "bully on the bagatelle." The widespread focus on creating and controlling legible character (discussed throughout the previous chapters of the current work) was a central issue in the United States as it entered an era of expanding technology, urbanity, and institutionalism, creating overlap between the goals expressed in the games of the period and general cultural desires.² The popularity of cued targeting games was no exception. Phelan writes, "[A] Billiard Room is a school where the study of human nature can be pursued to advantage," and a calm and focused demeanor reflected well on one's public character by demonstrating a mature physical self-control (8). Yet at the same time, this personal form of "outside show" also illustrated one's capacity for a style of strategic thinking within complex and proceduralized systems—

² For more on character see James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* and Christopher J. Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America*; on institutionalism, see Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*; on urban confidence, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870*; and on the relationship of technology and the human, see Rosemary Garland Thomson, who argues, "Machine culture created new somatic geographies... Rather than machines acting as prosthetics for the human body as they had in traditional cultures, the body under industrialization began to seem more like an extension of the machine" (11).

strategies of thought that were becoming recognized as crucial to success, from the presidential to the everyday.

Requiring dexterity and physical finesse to handle the cue with consistent force, billiards was (and remains), conceptually, a game largely about seeing a subset of the possible balls in play as an opportunity to create a discrete causal chain leading to a specific and controlled arrangement (e.g. sending one ball to the corner pocket, leaving another near the side, avoiding unnecessary contact, and returning the cue ball to a strategic position). Put another way, the game is about the related visual operations of scoping and targeting. The relationship between these two operations can be briefly conceived in the following terms: to limit your view, or *scope* out a scene, is to have indicated an object (whether it be of analysis, aesthetic appreciation, or the like); to *target* is to put this view into contact with another narrower register, a register intended to use the wider indication in some specifically directed manner. With the cue ball in one position, the initial scoping of potential shots has to do with the operator's vision of what object balls fall within its range—an essential skill in nineteenth-century variants of billiards because there was no strict division between the players' object balls (i.e. no numbers), only red and white balls with different values depending on the type of shot made. This is an important, but effectively neutral, type of gaming vision, perhaps symbolized best by the ivory cue ball itself (and the circumference of possible shots that lie around it). Closely associated with scope, targeting reduces the scene to just one of these possibilities with a purpose in mind, the action of the cue stick, choosing a shot

with a view toward changing the arrangement of the balls in a particular way.³ In the sense that I'm using it, targeting tracks an intentional vector between two levels of scope—the first a wide spread of possibility and the second a smaller motivated subset; critically this distinction allows us to ask compelling interpretative questions about the social thresholds at play in billiards, as well as those at play in novels (conveyed, as will be discussed, by way of point-of-view and framing devices).

As a result, the popularity of billiards in the nineteenth century might be seen to illustrate an emerging manner of conceptualizing action and change, in games as well as social life in general. The sympathetic depiction of Abraham Lincoln as a savvy operator in “A Little Game of Bagatelles” suggests a cultural respect for gamesmanship (however troubled), but also a more specific drive toward a variety of focused and delimited action forcefully represented in the figure of the billiards player. While this cartoon only explicitly addresses the wartime election, the ambivalence of the “Union Board” suggests a kind of utopic space wherein a coolly targeted gamesmanship may have the capacity to make the United States whole again. In this chapter, I will argue that the social trends tracked by the billiards metaphor may be the reason Nathaniel Hawthorne makes playing this game an important (though oblique) character trait of one of his most frustrating and fascinating characters, the first-person narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, Miles

³ My use of “targeting” in this chapter is indebted McKenzie Wark’s discussion of this as a videogame practice in *Gamer Theory* (2007). Discussing the cult-favorite “rail shooter,” *Rez*, he writes, “To target is to identify an object of an action with an aim toward a goal” and goes on to observe that “[t]he repetition of the act of targeting repeats the production of the gamer as fleetingly distinct and enhanced but permanently engaged and subsumed in the protocols of the network” (Wark 129, 148). Needless to say, I think the significance of such practices predates the invention of videogames and the digitalized “gamespace” of twentieth- and twenty-first-century life as Wark describes it.

Coverdale. The operative terms drawn from cued games in the nineteenth century, scope and targeting, can be productive when considering the relationship of utopian thinking and literary romanticism in the same period. More than a throwaway piece of character history or simple reality effect, Hawthorne's nod to Coverdale's fondness for billiards speaks to a range of figural qualities that have bearing on his function as a narrator, and comment more broadly on the uses to which the book romance could be put in the mid-nineteenth-century moment. Within the capitalistic ideologies of institutionalism and privatization, targeting was a mechanism of agency for dealing with what increasingly appeared to be a finitely limited or *reticulated* world—a world that required an embedded approach to social change. Analyzing Hawthorne's utopic-critical romance in parallel with billiards reveals both forms to be mutual conspirators in the activity, re-enforcement, and appropriation of targeting figures in the popular sphere.

Throughout this work, I have used games to develop various procedural logics having bearing on US culture and therefore on the literary productions that act as textual repositories of that culture. In the following chapter, I use billiards in this way;⁴ yet I begin with a system of figuration that is explicitly literary, employing theories of utopian literature (perhaps the most game-like and spatial of literary forms) to expand our view of

⁴ One might see my method evolving from Kenneth Burke's notion of the "representative anecdote" in *A Grammar of Motives*—with a replacement of operative gaming practices for Burke's more theatrically inspired "dramatism." Of the representative anecdote, he writes, "A given calculus must be supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject-matter it is designed to calculate. It must have scope. Yet it must also possess simplicity, in that it is broadly a reduction of the subject-matter" (Burke 60). As games provide models of human behavior and goals channeled through operative cultural rhetorics (yet simplified for iterative play), they provide a historically embedded vocabulary of "systematically interrelated structure[s]" that allows interpretative insight into the way that citizens of the nineteenth-century United States were dealing with the rise of capital, technology, and institutionalism—the growing operationalism of life itself (60).

Hawthorne's romanticism, and only then allowing the figural qualities of targeting and scope in billiards to further enrich this view. This also teases out a utopic quality present in contemporary nineteenth-century codifications of billiards, thought as it was to have positive "dispositional" side effects. Literature, in this sense, "reads" games, though not through a simple porting of literary-critical techniques into the analysis of game content. Instead, the cooperation of these two perspectives—the literary utopic and procedural ludic—continues the work of showing deep crossover between these two cultural forms while allowing us to consider frameworks of change, invention, and productive limitation that exist in culture, but are obscured by the often atemporal and private model of readership provided in many literary critical modes of analysis.⁵

However, like the utopian texts it follows, this argument must take place via a productively refracted reading of figural qualities not wholly narrated in the works themselves, utopian theorist Louis Marin's "schema in search of a concept." For Marin, the utopian work accomplishes its aims indirectly, arranging a world (or schema) such that readerly intervention is necessary to conceptualize the points of contact between the imagined world and the reader's reality; in this interactivity a set of real topics emerges that enables productive social theorizing. Approaching its politics in this indirect

⁵ For an excellent account of the importance and emergence of reading as mode of social encounter (specifically within cities), see David M. Henkin's, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*. Using public reading encounters to situate general reading practices in a manner similar to the way I have used games, Henkin comes to similar conclusions, writing:

The nineteenth-century urban public replaced the private reader with the promiscuous reader. By presupposing, inducing, and dramatizing countless rapid and disjointed acts of browsing, the street signs, placards, newspapers, and banknotes of everyday city life cultivated reading subjects whose sense of autonomy lay not in the ability to internalize and resolve exchanges among self-possessed speakers but rather in the ability to peruse, select, discard, and reassemble a range of messages and options. (12)

fashion—indeed, Hawthorne claims in the novel’s preface that he does not “put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory” (*BR* 1)—*The Blithedale Romance* (1852) signals an operative perspective on possibility invention that evokes a game-like and strategic view of life in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. A complex functional polemic for the power of targeting to configure personal and social agencies stems from what F.O. Matthiessen notes in *American Renaissance* as “one of [Hawthorne’s] most fertile resources, the device of multiple choice” (277). Though the nature of these choices is distinctly limited, I will propose that Hawthorne’s text gestures at the mechanisms through which a limited imagination, such as that of the protagonist Miles Coverdale, might be the basis for an unlimited approach to an increasingly codified and commodified world. Games teach us that *limitation* need not always take the negative valence it frequently attains in critical work.⁶

Previously, we followed Barnum as he enlarged the scope of both his museum and its individual exhibits in order to facilitate audience participation in “piecing together” a unique experience of the exhibitionary space. Both literary and communitarian utopic practices convey an oppositely telescoping motion—a contraction of context, though the effects are the same. A reduction of scope to a particular limited model of the world facilitates the local introduction of motivated political and social variability, testing choices and perspectives that are unobvious within a more mundane flow of experience. Although these implications appear microscopic on the level of

⁶ See for instance Sacvan Bercovitch, whose important work on “the rhetoric of consensus” as a politically stifling sort of ideological limitation will come into play later in this chapter (Bercovitch 47).

culture writ large, they have potentially significant repercussions. The possibility-spaces generated by utopian thought wedge themselves within the fissures or lacunae of institutionalism and give iterative significance to things that are “off the grid,” as it were. Given time, this accumulated significance seeps back in. As a result, utopian representations have the power to habitually and dispositionally do things like alter gender dynamics, re-imagine economic relations, and change the concept of family. In an apparent paradox, a reduction of scope allows agents to re-orient existing materials and re-port these structures into everyday life in inventive ways (recalling Milton Bradley’s portable avatar-characterization in *Life*).

Put differently, utopian practice mobilizes a tactical enclosure—or an artificially accepted set of limitations—as a practical laboratory for the everyday invention of new social modes and models, what Coverdale calls “an avenue between two existences; the low-arched and darksome doorway, through which [one] crept out of a life of old conventionalisms... and gained admittance into the freer region that lay beyond” (*BR* 61). In what follows, I link this focused re-orientation to the gaming trope of targeting via Phelan’s significant writings on billiards published on either side of Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* (1852). In Phelan, the links between figural arrangement, tactical intervention, and physical training are clear in a way that sheds light on Hawthorne’s novel. He writes, “It should always be borne in mind that the game will not be decided by the player’s capacity to perform any particular stroke; the most brilliant shot is a mistake, if it does not leave the balls in a position from which another count can be effected” (*GB* 244). For Phelan, it would be ridiculous to assume that one “brilliant shot” could win the

game; to become a successful player one must develop habits of constant re-positioning, re-visualizing, and re-imagining. Similarly for Hawthorne's Coverdale, to suspend the insistent business of targeting, to cease the interpretative activity of "ridiculing" for the sake of a single unambiguous meaning is to risk making oneself socially "ridiculous."⁷

The Nail in Sisera's Brain: Utopics and Limited Imagination

Miles Coverdale arrives in Blithedale with high spirits and millennial language, "[shaking] hands affectionately, all round," and regaling himself and his fellow associationists with the knowledge that a world-changing "blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood.... might fairly be dated from this moment" (*BR* 13). The central leads of the narrative are introduced to each other (and the reader), and notwithstanding a brief and eerie encounter with the wan Priscilla, the inhabitants of Blithedale gather pleasantly around the Silas family fire to discuss possible names for their commune. (Coverdale suggests "Utopia" and is "unanimously scouted down... the proposer very harshly

⁷ In "Female Eroticism, Confession, and Interpretation in Nathaniel Hawthorne," Jennifer Fleischner argues that "Coverdale is the author as reader," before going on to connect the practice of his reading with a fixation on "female eroticism" (Fleischner 524). Bracketing the question of eroticism, I develop her insight to argue that while Coverdale figures the reader as billiards player or targeting-agent, his final declaration of meaning (his confession of love for Priscilla in the last line of the novel), highlights the practice and necessity of the "second reading" discussed by Nina Baym in her analysis of antebellum readers (Baym 62). Impressing a sequential and iterative notion of targeting through style (and emphasized through the scuttling of this style in the frustrating last line), Hawthorne's romance thematizes an operational mode of re-reading (and re-targeting and, as we shall see in the close of the chapter, re-ridiculing) that thus invokes the utopic dispositional after-effects of such a practice (discussed in the section that follows). As Fleischner registers, "Indeed, *the* ethical question of much of Hawthorne's works is not the question of *finding* meaning, but rather of accepting responsibility for *creating* meaning in the very process of interpreting (Fleischner 525, emphasis original). Fleischner's split between *finding* and *creating* can be seen in parallel with my arguments about scoping (placing a boundary as the cue ball does) and targeting (fixating a particular motive force as the cue stick does; bringing something found into contact with a personal inclination). Yet my concern is with arranging a set of historical forms (like billiards) such that the vocabulary I am using is sensitive to the popular ideologies of the moment (rather than an ahistorical philosophical discussion of representational practices).

maltreated” [37].) Their conversation continues into the darker hours of the evening, and all seems off to an appropriately genial start when Coverdale suddenly falls sick. As he tosses and turns in his cold farmhouse bed, Coverdale’s consciousness becomes a tempestuous medium (a lingering thematic throughout the text):

The night proved a feverish one. During the greater part of it, I was in the vilest of states when a fixed idea remains in the mind, like the nail in Sisera’s brain, while innumerable other ideas go and come, and flutter to-and-fro, combining constant transition with intolerable sameness. Had I made a record of that night’s half-waking dreams, it is my belief that it would have anticipated several of the chief incidents of this narrative, including a dim shadow of its catastrophe. (38)

Here, a prophetic aspect arises from the fact that, within a structurally “fixed” set of ideas, iteration produces a prismatic range of possibilities, all yoked to some immutable social reality. In the biblical story, Sisera, a powerful captain of the Canaanites, flees his army’s defeat at the hands of Israel and stops to rest in the home of Jael. Seeming to offer hospitality, Jael waits until Sisera is fast asleep and drives a spike through his temple, killing him and ushering in forty years of peace (Judges 4:16-23).

While the tent spike driven into Sisera’s head was said, in the biblical story, to have effectively pinned him to the ground, Hawthorne’s image of the fever dream imagines a set of ideas revolving in a circumference as if chained to that very spike, innumerable and yet discretely bound.⁸ Although Coverdale’s ideas may not explicitly delineate the future for him—one would like to think that he might have prevented Zenobia’s suicide or, on the most selfish level, done a better job of wooing Priscilla—they do manage to show the *shape* or *shade* of things to come, the “dim shadow of

⁸ Or we might recall Coverdale’s own image, from much later in the text, of “a bird with a string about its leg, gyrating round a small circumference,” his “wanderings... confined within a very limited sphere” (Hawthorne 195).

[*Blithedale's*] catastrophe.” One can imagine a series of possible outcomes, linked decidedly to Coverdale’s “fixed idea,” forming a kind of spherical shell around the narrative, shading it according to the peculiar alchemy of individual circumstance and nearly gravitational necessity. The content of the fixed idea itself is less important in this moment than the figure of the shadow cast, a perspectival effect of the relationship between the fixed and the transitory—as the wind blowing across a forest canopy might create a dazzling cascade of light and darkness that changes the atmosphere of a walk beneath the trees. To be sure, reading *The Blithedale Romance* can often feel like trying to deduce the look of a forest scene using only the leafy pantomime projected on its floor.

Coverdale’s name—leaving aside the fact that he spends a substantial amount of time peering at characters from the tops of trees—suggests that his narration plays the role of this shadow for the reader. As the sole source of information, he provides the contours of the narrative, but generally avoids filling in certain specifics that would fully determine the story.⁹ Often when Coverdale does provide these significant details, he hangs a lantern on the artifice of his authorial license, highlighting his role in drawing together peculiar elements into a specific narrative system. Speculating that the headstrong Zenobia had been previously married, he hedges, “There was not, and I distinctly repeat it, the slightest foundation in my knowledge for any surmise of the kind”

⁹ In “Veiled Ladies: Toward a History of Antebellum Entertainment,” Richard Brodhead writes, “Did ever a book miss so much of the story it purports to tell? But this insistent *missing*, usually thought merely inept, is itself deeply interesting” (281, emphasis original). Brodhead goes on to claim that this missing-ness is a function of the novel’s desire to construct a story emulating the way that theatrical show business was premised on a mix of presentation and a deliberate “shut[ting] the public out from the detailed knowledge of its motives or arts of contrivance” (283). Yet, as I argue later in this chapter, the “arts of contrivance,” are exactly what Hawthorne emphasizes through the various *mise en abyme* of the romance (i.e. framed stories or stories in embedded registers of scope).

(46–47); recounting the foreboding dialogue of Zenobia and Westervelt with respect to Priscilla, he suspects that his memory “may have been patched together by [his] fancy” (104); relating Zenobia’s charged legend of the Veiled Lady, he “know[s] not whether the following version of her story will retain any portion of its pristine character” (107); and when he finally produces Old Moodie’s crucial backstory linking Zenobia and Priscilla as half-sisters, a fact that deeply threatens Zenobia’s financial wellbeing, he notes that “in writing it out, my pen has perhaps allowed itself a trifle of romantic and legendary license” (181). The end result is a pervasive narrative ambiguity that facilitates a certain interpretative circumlocution on the part of the reader, despite (or perhaps because of) the reader’s frustration with *Blithedale*’s central character. The utopian work of Coverdale’s unreliable and maddeningly incomplete narration is to produce a kind of social Rorschach test, an ambiguous Tangram, where the critical work arises from the reader’s desire to imagine what kind of object is being represented by Coverdale’s often unreliable textual configuration.¹⁰ Beautiful though Hawthorne’s prose may be in its attention to local scenic details, he uses Coverdale both to figure and to thematize the labor of discovery and readerly invention, the work of filling in the affective and interpretative blanks.

Louis Marin discusses this operation as one of the key elements of utopic practice (as opposed to utopian generic conventions):

¹⁰ The secret of utopia is that the answer is always one’s own society, but in a different light. And the change of lighting suggests a different use of the materials, or suggests that the materials are somehow *already* different than they were, despite no substantive change. The shirt that will never be the same because it is now the shirt you wore the day you went into the hospital. This residue has bearing, even if only comedic or memory-inducing, on the use of that item as it re-enters your everyday life. In Tangram terms, the small square might always seem like a head, once you’ve used it as such in a particularly suggestive figure. But at the same time, another particularly good figure might force you to always see that square as an eye or part of a larger composition. These things layer—they are additive, not exclusive.

That is the function of utopic practice: it is revealed by the play of 'epistemological spaces' of the various discourses it activates. It renders these theoretical constructions present. It does not present them in all its *theoretical* power, however (it cannot: the utopian thinker is not a historical prophet); utopic discourse offers them as *poetic figures*. In other words, utopic practice does not construct a theoretical concept through the play of its discursive topics. Rather, it offers the setting, the space of representation. It provides the place of figurability, which is the imaginary schema and sensuous framework for it... It is a schema in search of a concept, a model without a structure. (Marin 163)

Marin draws on Kant here to illustrate a split between two important aspects of imaginative thought: the figure and the concept. The latter term corresponds to a set of associated mental objects that are linked by a discrete and cognitively necessary logic, a structural presupposition that is either fulfilled or not fulfilled by this set. For example, the concept of "democracy" mandates certain civic features that must be met in order for a political system to be properly named by the term ("rule by the people"). A concept is supposed to have its own strict internal logic, such that various empirical incarnations might be compared and criticized against this logic to validate the application of a given conceptual term. With his "inflexible severity of purpose," Hollingsworth might be thought to characterize the *concept* in Hawthorne's *Blithedale*, single-mindedly devoted to a criminal reform institution that was "the material type, in which his philanthropic dream strove to embody itself" (Hawthorne 43, 56). A "man of iron," as the spiritualist Professor Westervelt describes him, Hollingsworth allows his dream to take the form of a binary adjudication: only his precise plan will do, and only through strict adherence to this plan can one be a part of it. His declaration to Coverdale, "Be with me... or be against me! There is no third choice for you," neatly encapsulates his character, as well as

providing a “conceptual” counterpoint to the largely “figural” qualities conveyed by the majority of the novel (94, 135).

On the other hand, a “figure” or “schema” is more merely incidental in its arrangement. A figure may have a historical bearing or repeat itself in ways that suggest a possible conceptualization, but its only logic is that of proximity and metonymy: one might think here of the “unsubstantial” characterization of Priscilla early in the novel. A ward of the community, Priscilla enters Blithedale as “a figure enveloped in a cloak,” attaining character situationally rather than as a matter of course, a “mist of uncertainty... [preventing her] from taking a very decided place among creatures of flesh and blood” (26, 49). Relating figurality to more spatial terms, Marin argues that utopic representation arranges a collection of objects from society in such a way as to inaugurate a figurally recognizable connection to the utopian writer’s world while wrenching these objects from their familiarizing context (which has the weight of a social concept). This is often accomplished by strategically transposing the role of these pieces—in More’s seminal *Utopia*, the conversion of gold into a kind of trash or waste—and this transposition suggests problems with the writer’s society without fully conceptualizing the reintegration of its solutions.¹¹ The “search for a concept” becomes the critical work that happens in the *play* between these defamiliarized social figures (the English subtitle of Marin’s book being “Spatial Play”). As the writer and reader are forced to imagine the negative space that links the various re-contextualized objects of the utopia (e.g. how

¹¹ This tends to be typified symbolically by the geographic or temporal distance between most generic utopias and their “home” societies.

might Priscilla belong in Blithedale in a way unrelated to her social belonging outside of Blithedale?), they are also imagining unspoken perspectives on their own culture, conceptual “neutrals” that are neither this place nor that place (e.g. what roles are available to women?). The utopian text creates a space for critical thinking-through, an exercise in social targeting.¹²

Consequently, the sociological utopia itself (as a blueprint) is a bit of a red herring, a heuristic that sets the terms through which a new set of possibilities can be thought. The text functions to re-orient affective sympathies and render conventional forms of language ironic such that terms might be re-coded. With this in mind, Hawthorne’s preface reads as an explicit declaration of critical utopic intent. He writes,

[The Author] does not put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism. In short, his present concern with the Socialist Community [i.e. Brook Farm] is merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives. (*BR* 1)

Like Coverdale, Hawthorne is loath to subject his romance to a direct experiential comparison; the use to which he puts Brook Farm merely parallels Coverdale’s “nail in Sisera’s brain” by “establish[ing] a theatre” (a fixed idea or schema) whereby transitory narrative images might be allowed a productive range of imaginary play while

¹² Marin uses Greimas squares to illustrate the role of this neutral idea-space: while in opposing quadrants you might have “black” and its spectrum opposite “white,” you must also take into consideration those things which are neither black, nor white. The remaining two quadrants, “not-black” and “not-white” analytically encompass the gray area, or neutral, between the two dialectic terms (Marin 3–28).

maintaining an embedded *feel* that refuses to alienate readers.¹³ By doing so, Hawthorne can figure the possibility space of a social theory in spite of his disavowal of theory—with such a disavowal being directly in line with Marin’s observation that the utopic is not a theory, but a staging.¹⁴

This critical figuration, and the various deflective maneuvers it requires, might instead be thought of as the very “theory” of romantic fiction that Hawthorne puts forth: to stoke the imagination (and therefore represent the world as it is and as it could be at the same time) is not necessarily to give all the details to a reader, but instead to suggest details in such a way as to invite theorizing as a cooperative tool-building, and to invite a

¹³ Following the theatrical tropes of the novel that Hawthorne invokes with this turn of phrase, Richard Brodhead argues that Priscilla’s stage appearances speak to “most essentially... an image of woman as public performer,” in a directly historical way (evoking the performances of Jenny Lind, Fanny Elssler, and other women of the antebellum stage) (Brodhead 276). While this is certainly true, I contend that it also speaks to the more cultural forms of performance I have been discussing throughout this project. These social and limited (that is, broadly gamelike) performances of character and agency, across genders, are indexed by the operational dynamics of pervasive games, such as billiards. I would argue that this is the “cultural situation a novelist would have had to address at this moment of American literary history,” a supplement Brodhead might agree with given his sense that “what lies behind *Blithedale* is a development specific to the history of entertainment quite as much as any development in general social life” (Brodhead 273, 277). Brodhead, however, sees this development as based on a somewhat passive spectatorial or “vicarious consumption,” while I, as throughout, want to reinvest this consumption with its more agential power, registered through the thematic of the targeting or ridiculing (286-289). This is in line with Jordan Alexander Stein’s observation that Coverdale’s narrational styles should be understood “less as ideologies and more as improvisations” (219), though I find it unnecessary to imply a fundamental split between these two terms.

¹⁴ In his recent essay, “Nobody’s Protest Novel: Art and Politics in *The Blithedale Romance*,” Michael Colacurcio argues the opposite, claiming that “the book reads nothing like a utopian tract” (2). However, while I entirely agree that *Blithedale* does not have the hopefulness of the utopian genre in its earlier forms (it is undoubtedly more dystopic), I would argue that many of the problems Colacurcio reads into the text are in fact elements of utopian literature highlighted by Marin. Colacurcio notes that, “Coverdale merely wanders, as it seems, in search of clues from the outside, finding some and missing many others, leaving us to make things out, little by little, the best we can” and registers that the reader or critical analyst has “to wonder, perhaps, why he has been put in the position of having to probe for the motives and to assemble the narrative of this tale of betrayal pretty much on his own” (7). As I argue here, being put in this position is precisely the point of the romance qua utopic as Hawthorne uses it. This is the text as platform-for-thinking and therefore, as Colacurcio himself understands, in a “fundamental sense, pre-political,” where the prefix here denotes not naïve absence, but staging (1).

social perspective on reading that might lead to a more active civic life. Hawthorne theorizes the romance as a kind of *utopic* in Marin's sense: a neutral space wherein the latent possibilities of the present are rendered uncanny enough to suggest critical re-arrangements, or affective re-codings. Marin argues that utopic texts tend to nest themselves in a network of references that

[anchor] the narrative in history. The narrative thus becomes the detached fragment of another silent narrative, exterior to the one we read. Its presence, however fragmentary in this text, grants it the authority of the pure and simple exposition of past facts... [T]his 'touch of the real,' this 'effect of reality,' here can also accomplish its opposite. It may 'de-realize' the scene... far from benefiting its authenticity, the one narrative may fictionalize the other, or at least... draw attention to its narrative qualities. (Marin 39)

Compare this to Hawthorne's clarification in the Preface of *The Blithedale Romance*, regarding its relationship to the historical Brook Farm, the famous Transcendentalist association where he spent the early years of the 1840s:

The Author does not wish to deny, that he had this Community in his mind, and that... he has occasionally availed himself of his actual reminiscences, in the hope of giving a more lifelike tint to the fancy-sketch in the following pages. [...] [T]he Author has ventured to make free with his old, and affectionately remembered home, at BROOK FARM, as being, certainly, the most romantic episode of his own life—essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact—and thus offering an available foothold between fiction and reality. (*BR* 3)

Hawthorne produces the “romantic” set piece of *Blithedale* by reconfiguring elements from his journals relating to the real-life Brook Farm, re-arranging the fragments of his experience into a fictional environment where these characters might play through their drama. Moreover, on the level of textual reception, his re-configured collage of entries from the *American Notebooks*, while providing a specificity of detail to the scenes of *Blithedale*, also evokes a kind of ambiguity already present in the reality being narrated

by the journal passages, guiding the reader into a suggestive (rather than prescriptive) engagement with the ambiguity of his or her own reality. By framing a limited array of “real life” objects as a stage for the narrative, Hawthorne reduces this reality to a few recognizable scenes, social protocols, and character-types—he creates a scopic vantage of which this narrative is the diameter. The ambiguities contained within this vantage become opportunities for productive imagination or what I referred to as “possibility-spaces” in the open of the chapter. Through the contact of the romance’s “reduced” scopic layer and the larger layer that encompasses their lived experience, readers develop attitudes and dispositions that are then smuggled into their broader view of social realities. Targeting parts of reality in the terms of the text “de-realizes” that reality such that it becomes more available to imaginative reconceptualization.

Coverdale notes that in the shadow of his memories of Blithedale (which have comprised his first-person narration), “I have never before experienced a mood that so robbed the actual world of its solidity. It nevertheless involved a charm, on which—a devoted epicure of my own emotions—I resolved to pause, and enjoy the moral sillabub until quite dissolved away” (*BR* 146). A frothy mixture of milk, sugar, and wine, a “sillabub” stands here as a symbol for both the airy quality of Coverdale’s reflections and for his “epicure[an]” taste for mixture and variety more generally. In fact, his desire for experiential sillabubs slowly withers his resolve to stay within community—above it is only the contact of Blithedale’s specifically limited world with the larger urban perspective of life back at his apartment that keeps his interest. Coverdale is, in many ways, the romantic narrator as utopian novel reader.

Yet while convalescing, days after his arrival at the farm, Coverdale expresses a deep yearning for the kind of variety that will eventually lead to his departure:

What, in the name of common-sense, had I to do with any better society than I had always lived in! It had satisfied me well enough. My pleasant bachelor-parlor, sunny and shadowy, curtained and carpeted, with the bed-chamber adjoining; ...my writing-desk, with a half-finished poem in a stanza of my own contrivance...; my dinner at the Albion, where I had a hundred dishes at command...; my evening at the billiard-club, the concert, the theatre, or at somebody's party, if I pleased:—what could be better than all this? (Hawthorne 40)

His mind is drawn to the playful possibility of multiple objects of attention (“all this”) and to the pleasure of constant re-arrangements of priority and activity that avoid the monotony of everyday life on the farm. He begins to resemble Walt Whitman's avatar-agent, an indicator of the general cultural move toward decision-making proceduralism; but at the same time, his affiliation with the “billiard-club” hints at the importance of scope and targeting within this mode, as a means to invoking a kind of fulfilling sidelong inventiveness. Unlike the static grid of *The Checkered Game of Life*, billiards requires that a player re-imagine the table and its dynamic arrangements at nearly every turn, improvisationally reevaluating the basis of one's strategy. While the former game highlights decision-making, billiards highlights the scoping operations by which one makes a decision about what to target in the first place, making a kind of metagame out of visualization and event-modeling. Because the targets move, and especially because they move in relation to previous decisions on the part of the players involved, each turn in billiards might be seen as a “schema in search of a concept,” a Priscilla-like figural mystery with any number of productive conceptualizations.

“A Ridiculous Piece of Romance, Undoubtedly”: Billiards, Targets, Ridicules

Coverdale indexes a more general fixation, as bagatelles and billiards swept through the mid-nineteenth-century United States.¹⁵ In fact, supporting Phelan’s anecdotal description of the increasing number of tables mentioned earlier, a healthy proportion of patents for innovation in game design in the period between 1836 and 1875 were incremental improvements in the design of billiard and bagatelle tables—not to mention croquet (another intensely popular and operationally analogous game) (*USPTO.gov*). New designs focused on re-arranging the elements of the game to make it more “fair”—largely through increased mechanization and miniaturization. Emphasizing targeting and social interaction, these games directed player attention to how the table arrangement might change, and therefore the targets change, once another player introduced his or her own outcomes. As a result, winning the game was a function of cumulative configuration, being able to adjust one’s interventions such that they might create a personally fulfilling harmony of individual target-achievement and opponent outcomes, of directed strategy and on-the-fly re-assessment. With typical billiard hall sessions measured by time at the table rather than by number of games played, winning was not necessarily an endpoint, but rather a moment to pause, reset, and begin anew.

¹⁵ In its early form, bagatelles were played much like billiards, on a long table with depressions corresponding to various point values; players used a cue to send a ball down the table to settle in these divots. This was briefly discussed in Chapter Three when talking about the Stephen Emery’s “Arithmatelle.”

Failure, similarly, was part of an agential continuum, the price paid for the opportunity to learn, decide, target, and arrange for oneself.¹⁶

Games highlight this theme generally, as they attune us to the power and capacity of *failure* within procedural environments. To clarify, I do not want to equate success directly with the conditions of “winning” in a game; in the same vein, by failure, I do not necessarily mean “losing” with all of the psychological and social baggage this term brings with it. Although this perspective is important, it often dominates discussions of the role that games play, and as we have seen throughout this project as a whole, the psychology of winning is only one of many important factors involved in gameplay. Consequently, it may be productive to talk in a supplemental way about success and failure, as I have above, within an agential continuum. Success is the deployment of a strategy that increases the value of the game as a local engagement between the actors involved; successful gameplay tactically reconfigures the text/paratext relationship across which the game takes place. To illustrate this, the manipulation of the in-game algorithms might be narrated as a second-person commentary relating the players to each other as a social unit delimited by the game rules, but also in excess of the rules: for example, ‘You *now* have more/less points *than you did*,’ ‘You *currently* play in a certain way that is *conveying* a certain kind of character,’ or ‘You won the last game/made me laugh

¹⁶ Game designer Jane McGonigal has recently highlighted this in her book, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Drawing on the findings of researchers in the psychophysiology of gaming, she writes,

[G]amers spend nearly all of their time failing. Roughly four times out of five, gamers don’t completely the mission, run out of time, don’t solve the puzzle, lost the fight, fail to improve their score, crash and burn, or die. Which makes you wonder: do gamers actually *enjoy* failing. As it turns out, yes... [F]ailure doesn’t disappoint us. It makes us happy in a very particular way: excited, interested, and most of all *optimistic*. (64, emphasis original)

earlier/are a frustrating opponent.’ Timing and situation have as much if not more relevance to a total gameplay situation than any purely operational result. Success, even in games that have a discrete “winner,” is the tactful navigation of a social system that includes the players (as social entities) as much as the rule algorithms. Beating a child at chess and beating a Grandmaster do not the same sort of success make (even if you beat them using the same moves).¹⁷

Failure, on the other hand, stems from the local inadequacy of a given strategy, but it is also an opportunity to adjust strategy, to see what worked and what did not. In this way all games are modeling devices on a number of levels. They reduce the scope of agency to a particular subset of actions and exaggerate the social importance of these actions. Playing a game of billiards is temporarily to entertain the fantasy that the only thing that matters *in the world* is the way you play your own ball at certain angles to knock the object balls into the pockets. Are you rich? It doesn’t matter. Does the earth revolve around the sun? It doesn’t matter. Is your leg broken? If you can still use the cue, it *doesn’t matter*. The world of billiards is a world of hands, arms, sounds, angles, felt, and a thin slice of spacetime. The object formed in the playing of the game proceeds as if nothing but the angle of one’s elbow and the firm crack of contact between the leather cue tip and the solid ivory ball mattered in terms of adjudicating the world. On a simplistic dismissal, this is what makes games “escapist,” but in fact, this is also what makes games *productive*. Because of this reduction, games provide a platform for the

¹⁷ Since games are inherently social, a victory that fails to consider the social paratexts surrounding gameplay is a particularly bad faith kind of solipsism. This is not to say that people don’t play this way—certainly many do. Yet when we understand games as a form of communication, we must concede that the community makes the winner.

exploration of mastery within a newly limited range of behaviors, much like Coverdale's Blithedale or Hawthorne's use of the historical Brook Farm. The characterizations developed within these artificial arrangements—ways of thinking, looking, or feeling—are transposed out of that environment, although not always in a one-to-one ratio with their utility within the game.

In addition to foregrounding these themes, the introduction of billiards as a historically specific game referenced in *Blithedale* further orients our attention to the tropes of directed focus and targeting. If the “fixed idea” to which our narrator makes reference can form a shell of possibility around the narrative, anticipating the “dim shadow” of things to come through the medium of Coverdale, then we might understand this idea as the cue ball of the text, a neutral term limiting the possible targets through its position on the table. Coverdale himself might then be considered as the cue stick (a metonymy for the operator), moving this ball from point to point with linear force, directing our attention from one view to another, taking a wide view and limiting it in specific intentionally-meaningful ways. The nature or significance of these intentions is left for us to interpret in the torque between different “targets” or from the accumulated tendencies of this targeting. From limited yet variegated views, we form a sense of the narrative through the comparison of individual textual objects at different levels of scope. At times Hollingsworth is narrated as one of a cluster of personalities all having bearing upon the total story (“Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla! These three had absorbed my life into themselves” [194]) and at others more directly “under our microscope... insulat[ed] from many of his true relations,” a target for individual interpretation that, as a result,

bleeds into our sense of the other characters and their motivations (69). Through all of this, Coverdale, as the first-person narrator, conducts our attention, not informing but *cueing* us to possible interpretative leaps that might be made in the juxtaposition of various narrative registers. Similarly, billiards itself was thought to act as a *cue* to ways of behaving that were taking place off of the table. Much of the power the game held on the popular imagination had to do with its capacity to foreground this transactional space between the social world and the game provisionally placed at its center.

The emphasis here was not so much on mastery as on the exploration of what worked and what did not work, or what specific varieties of agency might look like. On the one hand, billiards was thought to model basic physical and geometric interactions via a reduction enabled by the rules and materials of the game. Michael Phelan writes, “The game... may naturally assist the scientific man in the elucidation of his abstruse studies, and furnish him with some useful hints respecting the laws of motion, central gravity, etc” (*BWM* 8). On the other hand, the player uses these materials to model a given approach, thematizing his or her own agency in a social space, perhaps gaining insight, as Phelan suggests, into “the philosophical resignation to fate, the indifference of success, and all the multiplied and manifold passions of the human mind” (8). In *Billiards without a Master*, he makes physical control and decision-making style almost as central to his depiction of the game as the geometry of particular shots, writing, “To the physiognomist and the silent observer of human nature, there is no game that more thoroughly discloses the various dispositions of men than Billiards” (8). “Disposition” is read through a succession of individual movements accumulated over the course of a game, how one

holds the cue, what one targets, and how one strings together these targets to accumulate more points than one's opponent. A later 1858 edition of Phelan's book demonstrates this focus in the form of an anonymous bit of verse, claiming that "distinguishing traits are most forcibly shown / In a game, which of late, has most popular grown; / A very correct psychological steelyards / For character weighing—of course, we mean billiards" (*The Game of Billiards* 259). Committed to proving that one's "Attitude Is Everything" (the title of the lyric), the author uses depictions of various billiards operators in action to make assessments about the general character of these players, indeed using the game as a "steelyards" (a weighted scale on the principle of those used in medical offices today). With the game materiality providing a discrete and consistent environment, the human element is isolated as a core variable of the model in play, and therefore afforded a nearly quantitative interpretative value.

Developing the relationship between this and *Blithedale*, it may be useful first to think briefly about how *modeling* works, beginning with billiards and then folding this into an analysis of Hawthorne's editorial and authorial style in the early 1850s. As discussed, billiards operates via a reduction of the world to certain discrete elements: planar relationships, spherical masses subject to physics, muscle movements, clarity of movement, and the capacity to imagine a range of future outcomes based on a local targeting operation. The nature of this reduction is such that a new "whole" is created from a variety of previously available parts—where there was just a stick, a table, and some balls, now there is a social happening, a competition, an arena of motion and emotion. Emphasizing this (arguably phenomenological) wholeness, Phelan writes,

[I]f any professional *litterateur*—or professional player, for the matter of that—should take exception to any of the matters which he has here laid down... he can only say that he will be happy to meet them in his own, or any other billiard saloon where the tables are correct, and decide the question in dispute by a direct appeal to the balls... They might teach him ‘the whole duty of man,’ upon paper; but, on the tables, he could teach them the whole duty of a billiard-player. (Phelan, *GB* 246)

There is an unexpected *equality* in these “whole dut[ies],” as presented here, that is brought into sharper focus by Phelan’s feeling that becoming a good billiards player may have bearing on one’s moral and social temperament. (He argues that wives would do well to allow billiards tables at home—foregoing the fears of its connection to gambling and moral vice—because it will encourage mental, social, and physical activity in the household that will radiate into a good middle-class home-life.) As with Milton Bradley’s *Game of Life*, it is thought that a focus on navigation and tactical re-configurations will allow people not only to make peace with the importance of this kind of formalized decision-making in everyday life, but also to use these environments to workshop desired outcomes or behaviors in the broader world.¹⁸ The “whole duty of man” may be given nuance or reterritorialized by the “whole duty of a billiard-player,” with the fiction of ludic wholeness de-realizing the mundane wholeness of everyday character or disposition (to return to Marin’s term). By this reading, billiards wrenches sticks, tables, and human bodies out of their common use in order to stage a particular sort of character and social interaction that exceeds the abstract meaning of these objects in their more mundane contexts.

¹⁸ Also like Bradley, Phelan emphasizes an “acute and mature judgment” that will be developed in the course of becoming better at the game: “Two players, of equal skill and facility of execution, may play together, and if one be superior to the other in point of judgment, he is sure to win, at least, three-fourths of the games played” (Phelan 11).

This, at its core, is a utopic operation native to games, although seldom discussed as such; the utopia displays a model of the current reality wherein alternatives might be imagined—if not necessarily fully expressed in the utopic text itself. In this way, a stylized and selective model *of* reality becomes a threshold model *for* achieving a different reality, Coverdale's "avenue between two existences" (*BR* 61).¹⁹ This distinction between types of models, *of* and *for*, is discussed succinctly by William McCarty in his essay, "Knowing...: Modeling in Literary Studies":

A model *of* something is an exploratory device, a more or less "poor substitute" for the real thing... In contrast a model *for* something is a design, exemplary ideal, archetype or other guiding preconception. Thus we construct a model *of* an airplane in order to see how it works; we design a model *for* an airplane to guide its construction. (McCarty 2)

A model *of* imagines a solitary object as a self-enclosed whole, while a model *for* invests a schematic with a specific intentionality. I would contend that utopic modeling troubles this distinction, and that games offer insight into how that troubling occurs (perhaps not surprisingly considering that the utopian text is the most obviously game-like of the literary genres).²⁰ A model *of* an environment might be thought of as the cue ball that extends a radius of bounded possibility around it: it narrows the scope of the world to a unique register of possibilities. The model *for* directs a certain momentum into the model

¹⁹ Franco Moretti has made a similar argument about the utility of using mapping models to analyze literature in *Maps, Graphs, Trees*: "[Literary maps] are a good way to prepare a text for analysis. You choose a unit—walks, lawsuits, luxury goods, whatever—find its occurrences, place them in a space ... or in other words you *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object like the maps that I have been discussing. And with a little luck, these maps will be *more than the sum of their parts*: they will possess 'emerging' qualities, which were not visible at the lower level" (Moretti 53).

²⁰ I might argue that this distinction is *always* troubled to a certain degree in modeling, but certainly there are practical uses to understanding the term via these two categories, just as I think there is a useful critical friction to be exploited between scoping and targeting.

of, directs it as a cue stick via one specific, narrower internal register of scope—what I’ve been calling *targeting*. A solid crack of the stick and the scene changes: the relationship of object balls changes, as well as the perspective of the cue ball. While the cue ball provides a limited perspective on a given range of object balls, the cue stick puts this wider scope into contact with the player’s investments and vision, with his or her own narrower range of scope (literally represented by Phelan’s schematic views of particular shots). In the contact of these two scopic registers we learn something about the player, an interpretation emerges as a function of *targeting*, which is always a measure of lining up two or more registers of scope. Since the dominant theme in billiards is this type of *targeting* operation, the game highlights the productive elements of scopic contact in the insistent interplay between models *of* (the relational layout of the balls) and models *for* (the linear decision-making of the player). Because of this, Phelan’s contention that the game’s benefits might extend beyond the felt surface of the table feels more natural than it might otherwise (given the decidedly abstract nature of gameplay).

To wit, Phelan realizes that billiards itself (or its invention) is not necessarily social change: it is simply a reduction of the world to a simple set of terms, objects, and rules (a model *of*). Yet, on the other hand, he asserts that playing billiards can be a platform for certain types of changes: in play this model *of* a particular world becomes a model *for* a particular kind of mind, a particular kind of social interaction, and consequently a new kind of “world.” One of the victories of billiards, as a model, is a non-representational change of affective association (what Phelan calls “disposition”) that might, in turn, change behaviors and representational outcomes. Hawthorne observes

this as well, writing at one point in his notebooks (referring to an adolescent girl at Brook Farm who would later become his template for Priscilla in *Blithedale*), “It would be difficult to conceive, beforehand, how much can be added to the enjoyment of a household by mere sunniness of temper and smartness of disposition” (*The American Notebooks* 210). Note that this change (an addition of “enjoyment”) does not come about via some kind of escape from the currently existing system, but rather by using the existing system in a special way, inventing new objects, new models from within, by using the *ambiguity* of the existing system (the multiplicity of its perspectives or scopic registers) in sympathetic ways: “sunn[y] or “smart” perspectives in Hawthorne’s observation here.

From a reduction of the world to the specific locality of the game table, billiards in general—and Phelan’s view in particular—emphasizes the limitation of a potentially chaotic and enticing field of possible targets to a given methodical perspective on a sequence of strategic strikes, and within this to the singular act of a measured and precise contact between the player’s ball and the object ball. The precision of this interaction then expands to become a figure for a more general precision within the billiards hall producing players who understand the value of “combining the ‘*suaviter in modo* [gentleness in manner] with the *fortiter in re* [fortitude in execution],’ partaking largely of the former” (Phelan 12). The formal micro-materiality²¹ of interaction in a player’s

²¹ This term draws on the useful distinction Matthew Kirschenbaum has recently made in *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Here Kirschenbaum distinguishes between “forensic materiality,” or the specific structure of physical objects, no two of which “are ever exactly the same,” and “formal materiality,” which has to do with the formal structures imposed upon a set of objects—rules algorithms, and other “relational computational states” (10-12). In billiards, as in Kirschenbaum’s

turn sheds light, in Phelan's view, on the larger formal protocols (social materialities) of public interaction in a quasi-serial fashion—with each register of complexity introducing excesses not present at the smaller level and therefore creating productive critical friction.

This corresponds to the agential aesthetics of scope in the nineteenth-century United States, which to an extent has been traced throughout this project. In Barnum's American Museum, the arrangements of text and paratext that work on the level of a single exhibit (say Joice Heth) are expanded to allow complex interrelated arrangements among the artifacts within the Museum. On one level, the exhibit-creator takes the role of a configuring curator tactfully trying to prod the viewer's imagination; on the other, the audience arranges its view of artifacts as it meanders through the museum space, self-curating the experience. With the Brick Man advertisement, Barnum uses a further level of expansion, bringing the meta-protocols of the "thoughtful looker-on" into the streets of New York City. By doing so, he makes the case that the pedestrians surrounding the Museum are already a part of a kind of Museum-going game, all in order to promote attendance. In each case here, the legible action is a function of targeted differentials of scope, a focus on the changed arrangement of existing elements: the exhibit-creator controls the tenor and variety of outside themes that are brought into play with an exhibit, suggesting meaning in the interface of these two registers; the thoughtful looker-on habituates socialities by reducing the expanse of the Museum to a controlled collection of

discussion of the relationship between magnetic differentials (forensic) and programmatic bits (formal), the formal and the forensic have bearing on each other (as formal materiality must always rest upon a certain forensic materiality), but the exchange is not necessarily one of equivalence.

personally significant exhibitions along a targeted theme of interest, thereby expressing a general public character; and the Brick Man promotion exerts influence over an audience by expanding the scope of Museum contemplation into the surrounding streets. In all cases, the structuring of an environment, a paratext to an assumed text, constitutes the major act of invention at play.

A variation on this same aesthetic is why the general drive toward reform in the United States relied on what Steven Mintz calls an “Enlightenment faith in the shaping influence of environment” (Mintz 147). American reformers (of which game-designers might be considered a class) believed that selective navigation through the world created an experiential scene that would reciprocally produce a certain type of citizen—in this way, environment was the *ground* to the avatar *figure*. While imagining things from the perspective of an embedded avatar requires an emphasis on the procedural stylistics of decision and navigation, making the same point from the perspective of environment (the substance of the avatar’s embedding) requires an emphasis on the aesthetics of scope, how a series of choices reduces or expands the world wherein the avatar acts, and how those changes reflect upon the agent’s public character.

This environmental view of invention illustrates the way that a kind of *editorial* approach to the modularity of arranged objects was becoming the ground for various social agencies. Indeed Hawthorne—himself an editor of relatively technical writing in his early career at the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*—seems to take this approach to his duties as an author, both in the creative use of journal materials cited above and in the sequencing of his narratives. Discussing the textual

production of *A Wonder Book*, a collection of classic children's tales published in the same year as *The Blithedale Romance*, textual critic Fredson Bowers notes that Hawthorne wrote the tales of *A Wonder Book* separately and "allowed a blank leaf to stand at the end" in order to "keep each story as a unit, and thus movable in order" (*WB* 378-9). Bowers continues:

Each story is separately numbered, and there is no continuous numbering anywhere in the manuscript. Each story, moreover, begins on the recto of a leaf, even if the preceding verso was blank. Together, these facts suggest that Hawthorne wished to keep the final order of the stories fluid until the last moment. (377)

Though the publishing process required him to make final decisions regarding the placement of these discrete text-objects, Hawthorne formulates standalone pieces that can be arranged later to achieve a desired compositional effect; he then tellingly nests these pieces in a framing metanarrative that places each story in the voice of an authorial cue, an older friend and storyteller to the children of Tanglewood named Eustace. These interstitial segments, with Eustace setting up the stories and fielding questions from children, place the tales of *Wonder Book* in a wider environmental scene: the foggy vapors surrounding Monument Mountain, the babbling waters of Shadow Brook, and the changing seasons of Berkshire provide a kind of "outside show" that localizes the classical myths of the collection. This localization foregrounds the formal choices made in the arrangement of *A Wonder Book*'s stories, as a kind of targeting operation, by imagining that "we" are *watching* this formation happen naturally (in both the environmental and emergent senses). Phelan points out that "Good players often succeed admirably, and make very long runs, by what in Billiard parlance is called *nursing the*

balls [i.e. carefully arranging them through savvy play]” (Phelan 10-11, emphasis original). Similarly, readers observe Eustace as he develops a story order appropriate to the changing scene, nursing (in the sense of providing directed education to) the children of Tanglewood in the process of this arrangement. Watching the way that Eustace “nurses,” readers learn something about who he is and how they might make themselves similarly through a decision-making process that insistently frames one limited figure (or story) in terms of another (e.g., a broadly changing self).

Eustace himself draws attention to his role as a targeted inventor, lamenting an old guard less sympathetic to the transparent re-configurations that constitute the new grounds of authorship: “No man of fifty, who has read the classical myths in his youth, can possibly understand my merit as a re-inventor and improver of them” (Hawthorne, *WB* 88). Eustace re-invents these tales by locally arranging them in such a way as to emphasize a more “gothic” style; he expands the scope of the tales to include emotional valences not emphasized in the more austere classical narratives. By doing this, he suggests that such a re-scoping is an inherently productive activity (an “improve[ment]” of the story); yet he also sees authorship (again, as a type of agency) not as whole cloth creation, but rather as a navigation of existing terms. As such, his role in *Wonder Book* is to emphasize the critical work that happens in the movement between two registers of scope: the discrete story-object and the meta “telling” story, the figure and the interpretative process that is expressed through a kind of targeting or localization.

Hawthorne then takes this a step further by injecting himself into the text as an even more expansive narrative frame. Beginning with a preface that ties his authorial

voice to that of the narrator in the interstitial text, he draws attention to the fact that Eustace's story is, in fact, being related by another, different first-person storyteller, employing the narrative tactic of *metalepsis*.²² Before the opening of Eustace's tale of the "Miraculous Pitcher," Hawthorne writes, "As for the story, I was there to hear it, hidden behind a bush, and shall tell it over to you in the pages that come next" (117). Later, in the closing of the *Wonder Book*, the precocious Primrose asks Eustace about a peculiar author who lives near their Tanglewood home:

'Have we not an author for our next neighbor?' asked Primrose. 'That silent man, who lives in the old red house... I think I have heard of his having written a poem, or a romance, or an arithmetic, or a school-history, or some other kind of book.' 'Hush, Primrose, hush!' exclaimed Eustace, in a thrilling whisper, and putting his finger on his lip. 'Not a word about that man, even on a hill-top! If our babble were to reach his ears, and happen not to please him, he has but to fling a quire or two of paper into the stove; and you, Primrose, and I... would all turn to smoke, and go whisking up the funnel! ... [S]omething whispers me that he has a terrible power over ourselves, extending to nothing short of annihilation. (169–70)

In addition to playfully foregrounding the multiple story frames at play (and therefore the thematic of scope), Primrose seems here to link romance to arithmetic. Why? One relevant parallel between these genres of writing (and perhaps the other two mentioned,

²² Gerard Genette describes this technique as "a deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding" and defines it as "when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader" (88). Drawing on a parallel construction, Genette uses the term "metadiegetic" to describe narrations embedding themselves within the primary narration, such that Eustace's stories are metadiegetic to the frame diegesis (91–93). For more, see Genette *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. In what follows, I prefer to use the terminology of scope because it is not limited to Genette's "levels" of diegesis, but can also include registers of attention that are more finely or widely delimited—for example, local character descriptions in a given chapter (i.e. "A Visitor from Town") versus relational descriptions of multiple characters (i.e. "Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla"). Scopic unsettling is both technique and content in *The Blithedale Romance*: it is surely no accident that the stage scenes that bookend the central action feature Westervelt "looking like one of the enchanters of the Arabian Nights," a narrative that is itself a series of tales within tales (Hawthorne 199).

although more obliquely) is the way that they make the combination of figures central to the text. If arithmetic situates number-objects under the sway of operators in order to produce new objects (expanding their effective scope), then we might argue that the romance, at least as employed by Hawthorne, is a similar combination of known quantities under the sway of an operator (a narrator or avatar like Eustace, or as we shall see shortly, Coverdale) with the purpose of producing creative new outcomes.²³ I would contend that this view of the place and purpose of the romance is perhaps what sets the romanticism of this moment apart from late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century British and U.S. romanticisms (a point I will return to at the conclusion of the chapter).

Here I simply want to emphasize that the combined effect of these various framing devices is to direct attention to the nested nature of the various formal structures at play: the mythic classical tales deal with allegorical themes that are then re-coded as naturalistic moral and oral themes (via Eustace), and then further re-coded as ludic mental and written themes, as styles of thinking or habitual dispositions. We might imagine each scopic register a progressively larger cloth laid over a small pool of dyed water; the shape of the blot in the smallest cloth is absorbed by the next, yet the context changes as the spot gets proportionally smaller and the absorption more minute. Similarly, each layer (or scopic register) has its own native significances that bleed into the layers above it, much as Phelan's well-formed billiards player enables a seepage of significance between the smallest layer (the single turn) and the larger layers of play (the

²³ In her extensive study of Hawthorne in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*, Lauren Berlant notes this, writing, "Since [Hawthorne] sees the context of national identity as fundamental to his subjectivity, he is forced to identify and to devise spaces *within* the system, national "heterotopias," within which he might maintain a critical edge" (Berlant 34, emphasis original).

social activity of the hall or parlor). By drawing readers into and out of different scoped frames, Hawthorne asks them to inflect each frame with a trace of the previous frame, which has the effect of targeting a given narrative within the scope of another. He underscores this activity further by bringing the narration into a direct, and somewhat unsettling, contact with the reader that breaks with the indirect third-person style dominating the text. This motion creates a critically suggestive seepage between layers that echoes the effect of Coverdale's secondhand narration in *Blithedale*—a similarity not perhaps unexpected given that *Blithedale* was written in the immediate aftermath of *A Wonder Book*. One might even see the narrative style of this earlier work as a kind of simplified workshop for the mechanisms Hawthorne employs in the later text.

Blithedale's most ostentatious display of scoping mechanisms appears in the series of narrative frames that surround Zenobia's tale of The Veiled Lady (a character that we later learn is one and the same as the mysterious Priscilla). Here we are almost lost in the series of increasingly second-hand narrations. While Hawthorne has already prefaced the entire novel in order to establish distance between his own recollections of Brook Farm and the recollections of *Blithedale's* primary first-person narrator, now Coverdale prefaces Zenobia's tale with a similar disclaimer before presenting her words in first-person as well, "I know not whether the following version of her story will retain any portion of its pristine character. But, as Zenobia told it, wildly and rapidly, hesitating at no extravagance... we caught the freshest aroma of the thoughts... and thus heard, the legend seemed quite a remarkable affair" (Hawthorne, *BR* 108). The "pristine character" of the story matters less here than the "aroma of the thoughts," which convey the

“remarkable” (re-marked or remade) affair to the reader at one remove. Again this draws attention to the possibility of a relationship between the different narratives at play, with one acting as an ambiguous figure that draws attention to interpretative possibilities of the other. After a line break, we read the heading “THE SILVERY VEIL” and immediately jump into this new frame of narration:

You have heard, my dear friends, of the Veiled Lady, who grew suddenly so very famous, a few months ago... Now, listen to my simple little tale; and you shall hear the very latest incident in the known life... of this shadowy phenomenon. A party of young gentlemen, you are to understand, were enjoying themselves, one afternoon, as young gentlemen are sometimes fond of doing, over a bottle or two of champagne; and—among other ladies less mysterious—the subject of the Veiled Lady, as was very natural, happened to come up before them for discussion. She rose, as it were, with the sparkling effervescence of their wine, and appeared in a more airy and fantastic light, on account of the medium through which they saw her. They repeated to each other, between jest and earnest, all the wild stories that were in vogue; nor, I presume, did they hesitate to add any small circumstance that the inventive whim of the moment might suggest, to heighten the marvellousness of their theme. (108)

Bordering on diegetic ridiculousness, the men begin to tell each other the stories that *they* know of the Veiled Lady—stories that are narrated by Zenobia, as remediated by Coverdale, a character of Hawthorne’s novelistic “theatre” (1). These stories radiate like the effervescent bubbles of the champagne they drink, up through each layer, and at each layer imply something about the narrator who directs our attention to them: Zenobia’s interest in the veiled lady speaks to her frustrated relationship with Priscilla, Coverdale’s interest in Zenobia’s story indicates his continued interest in somehow linking the story of the Veiled Lady’s bondage to Zenobia’s character and sexual history.

Hawthorne presents each of these as inroads to the readers’ interpretations of the novel’s characters. At the same time, he foregrounds the fundamental operations of scope

that enable interpretative agency despite the limitations that bound each consecutive layer in turn. The story of the “Silvery Veil,” though framed within a deeply nested world, envelopes Priscilla in Zenobia’s final dramatic gesture:

Zenobia, all this while, had been holding the piece of gauze, and so managed it as greatly to increase the dramatic effect of the legend, at those points where the magic veil was to be described. Arriving at the catastrophe, and uttering the fatal words, she flung the gauze over Priscilla’s head... Her nerves being none of the strongest, Priscilla hardly recovered her equanimity during the rest of the evening. This, to be sure, was a great pity; but, nevertheless, we thought it a very bright idea of Zenobia’s, to bring her legend to so effective a conclusion. (116)

Zenobia’s action, callous in the total framework of *Blithedale*, brings together two locally independent registers of scope: that of “Theodore” tracking down the Veiled Lady and demanding to see her face, and that of the events that have come to pass until this point with Priscilla. By doing so, she explicitly puts these two registers into contact, directing attention to emergent themes of possession, aggressive discovery, and a cultural rejection of female ambiguity. Isolating Priscilla as the target of the story, its arrangements are propelled into our reading of her, the literary power of the veil here layered upon her body as a translucent presence shading one’s view of the young girl. Covered or bound by the myth that “The Silvery Veil” presents, Priscilla’s figural mystery is at least partially stolen away as she is linked with the sordid past of the Veiled Lady’s performances, a conceptualization that Zenobia seems to hope will drive Priscilla out of the community and away from Hollingsworth. As Coverdale notes in the preceding chapter, people care not for Priscilla’s figural “realities... but for the fancy work with which [they] have idly decked her out” (100).

From the comfort of his leafy “hermitage,” Coverdale offers similar sweeping conceptualizations of the Blithedale community in a manner that again evokes the meta-narrative device of targeting. Yearning for time alone to contemplate his various writing projects, he discovers a knot of trees woven together by a single resilient “wild grapevine.” Within this “inextricable knot of polygamy” he finds a “hollow chamber, of rare seclusion... formed by the decay of some of the pine-branches, which the vine had lovingly strangled with its embrace, burying them from the light of day in an aerial sepulcher of its own leaves” (98). Of course, this hermitage, a kind of woven purse of foliage, evokes the social situation of Blithedale, with Zenobia, Hollingsworth, Coverdale, and Westervelt all bound together by affiliation with the “wild” Priscilla, herself a purse-maker (59, 73). Yet it is from within this “natural turret” that Coverdale “open[s] loop-holes,” and “peep[ing], in turn, out of several of its small windows” gains perspective on the community and its players (99). This space becomes a natural symbol of the scopic layers that enable these interpretations, as Coverdale aims his view from person to person, bringing them into contact with his literally more expansive view of the situation and passing judgment on them as a result.²⁴ Zeroing in on Hollingsworth, he interprets the philanthropist’s opinion of mankind as “but another yoke of oxen” wondering why he and his companions should “waste our strength in dragging home the ponderous load of his philanthropic absurdities? At my height above the earth, the whole matter looks ridiculous!” (100). He then sets his sights on the community at large,

²⁴ This might also be connected to Coverdale’s name, as one definition of “cover” has to do with “present[ing] a gun or pistol at (something) so as to have it directly in the line of fire; to aim directly at” (“Cover,” v. def. 11). While in his hermitage, Hawthorne’s narrator literally covers, or targets, the Blithedale.

commenting on “the folly of attempting to benefit the world” before noting that “[o]ur especial scheme of reform, which, from my observatory, I could take in with the bodily eye, looked so ridiculous that it was impossible not to laugh aloud” (101). The “scheme” that from within held so much potential at the outset of Coverdale’s narrative, has here been defined, conceptualized as it were, as “folly,” on the same level as Hollingsworth’s “absurdities.” From Coverdale’s scopic vantage, everything attains the taint of the laughable or “ridiculous.”

This term, “ridiculous,” recurs throughout the text, such that it deserves its own singular attention. When Coverdale attributes to Zenobia “a destiny already accomplished” (i.e., a lack of virginity), he attempts to diminish this interpretation of her character as “a ridiculous piece of romance” (46). Later Zenobia observes, “What I find most singular in Priscilla... is her wildness... It is quite ridiculous” (59). Attributing a pervasive cynicism to Professor Westervelt, Coverdale claims that his “tone represented that of worldly society at large, where a cold scepticism smothers what it can of our spiritual aspirations, and makes the rest ridiculous” (101). *Ridiculousness*, in addition to the simple delineation of something as laughable, seems in the world of Blithedale to index a singular conceptualization or interpretative targeting of the object in question. Zenobia, defending Hollingsworth from Coverdale’s accusation that he is driven by only one idea, admits, “Blind enthusiasm, absorption in one idea, I grant, is generally ridiculous,” yet she contends that “a very high and powerful character [may] make it otherwise” (166). This may be because, typically, the “one idea” becomes an encompassing reading for the character in question, rendering them a permanent target;

but in the case of a sufficiently vast character (“high” or “powerful”), the self manages to remain unencompassed by the idea in question. While Coverdale understands that Zenobia’s lavish fashions and luxurious residence make her “gorgeous” and inscrutable, he adds that such things “would have been ridiculous in the poor, thin, weakly characters of other women” giving the lie to a deep insecurity beneath the outer vestiges (165). That which adds to Zenobia’s mystery or figurality (because of her character’s “gorgeousness”) would become a defining conceptual veil for other women. It would make them “ridiculous” or containable within the scopic register of empty worldly luxury, targeted as vain and commodified by their proximity to the wide world of monetary objects. That which has no ambiguity becomes, for Hawthorne, laughable in its almost mechanical scopic knowability or predictability (a predictability that might be linked to the “puzzling” of characters discussed in Chapter Three with regard to Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*).²⁵ Recanting her earlier view of Hollingsworth, Zenobia eventually cedes his “ridiculous” absorption within one idea, inveighing, “Are you a man? No; but a monster! A cold, heartless, self-beginning and self-ending piece of mechanism... You have embodied yourself in a project” (218).

²⁵ Philosopher Graham Harman deploys the thought of Henri Bergson to come to a similar point, writing: [C]omedy results when we witness what is human reduced to a mechanism. [...] What we laugh at is the way in which human transcendence and free decision-making power are undercut by his being delivered to the force of things, unable to master them... Here is the grain of truth in Aristotle’s view that comedy presents those who are *worse* than we are [i.e. in opposition to tragedy where characters are seen as better than we are]... What really makes comic figures worse than we are is that, at least for a passing instant, they expend their energy in taking things seriously that we ourselves would never bother to trifle with. All of us are capable of seeing this in all others at certain points in time. Even our hero can choose a ridiculous shirt for a key public appearance. (Harman 128–131)

For more on how these observations play into a deeper ontology of *things* (known as object-oriented ontology or OOO), see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* and *Tool-Being*.

This directed enveloping of character also happens in more local moments of active focus under the cognate terminology of *ridicule*. Coverdale alternately wants to avoid being “the butt of [Zenobia’s] endless ridicule” (94), resents Westervelt’s “ridicule of a friend” (95), and comments on the way the world “disbelieve[s] and ridicule[s, Hollingsworth], while hardly any do him justice, or acknowledge him for the wonderful man he is” (126). At the same time, seeing Coverdale smirk at her declaration that she plans to lobby for “women’s wider liberty,” Zenobia asks, “What matter of ridicule do you find in this, Miles Coverdale?” (120). Whereas the “ridiculous” object has become solely defined by one scopic association, “ridicule” here implies a circumstantial evaluation of a person in a certain unambiguous range, a local targeting operation or small act of modeling among an implied ambiguous multitude. Coverdale himself clarifies this when discussing his time at Blithedale with old friends in the city:

Meeting former acquaintances, who showed themselves inclined to ridicule my heroic devotion to the cause of human welfare, I spoke of the recent phase of my life as indeed fair matter for a jest. But, I also gave them to understand that it was, at most, only an experiment... [one which] had afforded me some grotesque specimens of artificial simplicity, and could not, therefore, so far as I was concerned, be reckoned a failure (195)

Drawing a range of affordances from his time at Blithedale, despite in one view being an object of ridicule, Coverdale holds on to the ambiguity of the experience as neither success nor failure. To be an object of ridicule was to become stripped of ambiguity for a moment on some level, to be, as Coverdale puts it in an early passage “insulate[d] from many of [our] true relations;” but becoming this kind of targeted object in brief moments could also be, as he notes, productive as long as one did not remain long enough to

become a ridiculous “failure” (69). The capacity for ridicule merely relates to a person’s momentary contact with a larger range of scope that, for a moment, appears to dictate behavior and therefore engross him or her. At this point of contact, the larger scopic register targets, or appears to give a singular motivation to the smaller, therefore making it an object of ridicule—here the world at large makes the activities of Blithedale look contrived, contained, mechanical, and therefore silly. This is nearly always the case in the world: there is always some imaginable view that, when put into contact with our current actions, might make them seem unnecessary, mechanically single-minded, or dull-headed (e.g., How can I throw away this last bit of oatmeal when there are people starving in this very city? How can we continue to drive automobiles when we know their production causes serious global strife? Scopically driven criticism is always possible).²⁶ However, *Blithedale* makes a distinction between being ridiculed and being ridiculous, with the latter being an almost institutionally permanent position, ideologically putting a character into contact with a single scopic register that envelopes him or her much like Coverdale’s grapevine hermitage or one of Priscilla’s purses.

This is significant as “ridicule” was also a punning term for a woman’s knitted purse, a fashion very much of the moment in which Hawthorne was writing (“Ridicule,” n. 2). Named after the netting technique used to weave them, “reticules” originated at the end of the eighteenth century as women’s dresses began to be designed in ways that

²⁶ It is also worth noting here that it is not the larger view *in itself* that creates this effect, but the contact of the two registers of scope, hence the difference I am arguing for here between the operations of *scoping* and *targeting*. Targeting always puts at least two scopically contained objects into contact and in this way might be understood via the phenomenological idea of the *intentional object*, an object which is always already invested with the subjectivity of the viewer (i.e., all objects as experienced).

stripped them of pockets. The term “reticule,” derived from the same root as “reticulated” (netted), could also refer to the gridded scope one used to aim a rifle or a telescope (now sometimes written “reticle”). Because the spoken similarity of the words, it is unclear whether the initial conflation of the terms “reticule” and “ridicule” was intentional, but it stuck nevertheless. With this in mind, we might recall that when we are first introduced to Priscilla, Coverdale observes, “She now produced, out of a work-bag that she had with her, some little wooden instruments, (what they are called, I never knew,) and proceeded to knit, or net, an article which ultimately took the shape of a silk purse” (35). Priscilla, come to find out, is a talented producer of ridicules/reticules. Indeed, Coverdale is uncharacteristically observant when he wonders if these purses “were not a symbol of Priscilla’s own mystery” (35).²⁷ Linking together all of the novel’s leads in varying ways, Priscilla not only makes purses of silk, but weaves through the text to make a kind of purse of all its characters.

At the center of this purse, as one might expect, is an awful lot of money. Old Moodie’s estranged fortune has been under the provisional care of Zenobia, unbeknownst

²⁷ Allan and Barbara Lefcowitz argue, in “Some Rents in the Veil: New Light on Priscilla and Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*,” that Priscilla’s purses “encompass at least two symbolic possibilities: covert sexuality and concealed guilt” and go on to say that these align with “her association with the narrow, the clandestine, and the limited” (Lefcowitz 266). While the implications of associating the limited/unlimited binary with domestic gender dynamics in the nineteenth century lie outside of the scope of this chapter, I find their observation that Priscilla’s purses are a symbol of “the limited” useful to my discussion of productive limitation. Priscilla’s purses reticulate (grid up) as they enclose, but Priscilla stresses to Coverdale that they are for “use,” contingent and sequential as in my discussion of ridicule, “not beauty,” a transcendental and perhaps ridiculous-making device (Hawthorne 51). For a deeper discussion of gender’s role in the representational practices of Hawthorne’s novel, see Lauren Berlant’s “Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*,” where the figure of the hymen acts as a threshold between knowledge of our implication in world-history or ideology and a utopically liberating ignorance: “[T]he veil is a powerful object because, as Zenobia’s story of Theodore and ‘The Silver Veil’ tells us, it hides that which we do not want to uncover, just as the hymen (a figure of history here) is a fetish because it signifies a mystery that, for all its attractions, is better off left mysterious” (Berlant 50).

to her, and stands to fall instead to his favorite daughter, Priscilla, if Moodie should find out that she has been mistreated in any way. It is this sum of money that draws Hollingsworth to Zenobia, as he plans to use it as capital to build the philanthropic institution at the center of his monomania. Understanding that she might otherwise lose her love, Zenobia plots to return her sister to the employ of Westervelt, a plan that Hollingsworth apparently supports. But when this action leads Moodie, in turn, to revoke Zenobia's inheritance, giving all to Priscilla, Hollingsworth abandons Zenobia, swooping in to "save" Priscilla and take advantage of her love for the purpose of his philanthropy. Like the mysterious mesmeric substance that the audience at Westervelt's show believes has the power to turn the human mind into a kind of controllable mechanism—"soft wax in [the spiritualist's] hands"—so does Moodie's purse threaten to make each of the core players at Blithedale *ridiculous*, defined by their possession (or lack) of it and by what they are willing to do to get it. Coverdale narrates the power of this money again in the rhetoric of spiritualism rather than economy: "It is unutterable, the horror and disgust with which I listened, and saw that, if these things were to be believed, the individual soul was virtually annihilated, and all that is sweet and pure in our present life debased, and that the idea of man's eternal responsibility was made ridiculous" (198).

Like Coverdale's forest hermitage, the vantage of which allows him to target all of Blithedale as ridiculous, the perspective of the purse also carries the deep social danger of providing a scopic register that engulfs (i.e. reticules or nets) and consequently defines all of the behaviors and relationships that have driven the action of the romance. It threatens to make all action unambiguous and directed by raw avarice, circumscribing

“all that is sweet and pure in our present life,” as money becomes the singular interpreter of all social value and success, the final cue of an abstract and operative social body.²⁸ From a number of ambiguous interpretative targets, one emerges both thematically and stylistically to steal away the readerly agency that has shaped our dispositional relationship with the text—a relationship that until the final chapters is built upon the variety of interpretations left open to analysis. In its last pages, the novel appears to succumb to this ridiculous master interpretation via Coverdale as he reveals that the object of his affection throughout, the “one secret, hidden beneath many a revelation” was Priscilla, a metonymy for the purse that demands we interpret all through its reticule: “I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!” (222, 247). As readers we rage, yet it is worth noting that we are dispositionally driven to rage at this moment in the text, in a sense trained by our experience of the romance to feel this way: our dopily absent narrator, our avatar throughout this otherwise ambivalent text, has made a singular choice without us. He has rendered the ambiguity of the narrative into a singular love story, a Hollingsworth of a romance.²⁹ How dare he? We pore back over the text with a renewed energy to make it about something, anything, other than Coverdale’s lamely revealed love, finding new points of “ridicule” in the service of staving off this interpretative

²⁸ Kenneth Burke provides an interesting account of this view, arguing that money replaces God as the abstract source of all motivations (i.e., a master interpretation) in modern secular societies, “For the incentive of monetary profit, like the One God, can be felt to prevail as a global source of action, over and above any motivations peculiar to the locale. And it serves the needs of empire precisely because it ‘transcends’ religious motives” (Burke 44).

²⁹ Hawthorne’s working title for the novel was, in fact, “Hollingsworth: a Romance” (Hawthorne xiv), ironically foregrounding the dichotomy of concept and figure. It may be significant that, in this earlier draft of the novel, Hawthorne omitted the final chapter, “Miles Coverdale’s Confession,” ending on a more ambivalent note that may have better justified the irony of the original title.

“ridiculousness.” And in this motion we reveal the strategic critical power of Hawthorne’s story-space.³⁰

To have one choice, to diminish the range of targeting in favor of a single target, thus diminishing the insistence of ambiguity to a single outcome is, given the ambiguity of our perspective throughout the novel, ridiculous. Zenobia, often the character equivalent of ephemerality and variability in the text, with her name itself evoking the Greek *xenos*, expresses the dominant theme of the novel in execution, “Why should we be content with our homely life of a few months past, to the exclusion of all other modes? It was good; but there are other lives as good, or better” (165). Spurred by Zenobia’s suicide, a death that signals the coming closure offered in Coverdale’s “confession,” we are thrust from this admission back into the book, looking for other targets, pouring over the schema in search of other concepts, “other lives as good or better.” If the catastrophe predicted by Coverdale’s dream early in the text is indeed Zenobia’s death, and this death is the direct outcome of an interpretative “pursing” or final conceptualization, then the “fixed idea” referenced in the dream passage might be construed as the event horizon of death-as-concept, with a fulfilled agential life being constituted by the conversation that radiates around this fixed point, a point meaningless in itself. Hawthorne evokes this

³⁰ Critical dialogue on the novel is, accordingly, filled with readings that index deep frustration with Coverdale’s unsatisfying conceptualization of the story (often attempting to find alternatives, other targets for interpretation): Donald Ross suggests instead that “the central plot of the novel [is] the discovery and subsequent repression of [Coverdale’s] sexual desire for Zenobia,” adding that a “sensitive reading of the novel reveals no evidence of Coverdale’s acting or speaking as if he loves Priscilla” (Ross 1014); Allan and Barbara Lefcowitz contend, “He chooses Priscilla not because she is better than Zenobia, but because he too is afraid of Zenobia’s power” (Lefcowitz 275); Fleischner notes that “[Coverdale’s] production is sporadic and not, perhaps, what he would wish it to be” (Fleischner 530); and reinventing Hawthorne’s final lines, Berlant claims, “Coverdale’s real ‘secret’... is that he—he himself—was in love—with—Hollingsworth” (Berlant 36). In a sense, readers appear “programmed” (or dispositionally habituated) to reject Coverdale’s final explanation.

image in the iterated scenes at Eliot's pulpit where, after giving a dramatic speech about his singular idea, Hollingsworth would "fling himself at full length on the ground, face downward" in a performance of death while Zenobia and Coverdale would "[talk] around him on such topics as were suggested by the discourse" (119).

This would appear to be the operative work of *The Blithedale Romance* as it leverages the romance genre to figure various shades of Hawthorne's moment in order to create interactively felt "topics" for discussion: the reduction of family to the purse (economic abstraction); the enclosure of female agency (gender domination); the danger of living by a single idea of any kind (institutionalism); and the troubled hopefulness of the social operator (limited imagination and configurative agency). These topics in turn map onto the central characters, Priscilla, Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Coverdale/Westervelt, respectively. Yet at the same time, Hawthorne's style gestures at the very mechanisms of gesturing—the kind of continually re-targeted billiards agency that we have been pursuing throughout—by revealing the "purse" as simply another interpretative frame, the reticulated veil surrounding an immanently "fixed idea." The point is to make local commitments, to understand that any object (or commitment or perspective) is potentially an object of situational ridicule; ridicule is indeed an always-present byproduct of making such an investment. The truly *ridiculous* thing is not to continue re-targeting and re-inventing, as it renders one mechanical, predictable, and therefore nearer to personal and civic "catastrophe." The world of *Blithedale* is one in which we must make our peace with ridicule, but we need not be ridiculous.

Conclusion

Having journeyed long from utopia and the billiards hall to the forests of New England and the spiritualist's theater, we might benefit from briefly summing up. I began by noting that Coverdale's role as a narrator was to circumlocute the events surrounding a certain shadowy "fixed idea" suggested but not represented in his early fever dream at Blithedale; via association with Coverdale's first-person perspective, Hawthorne's readers were encouraged to pursue similar interpretative circumlocutions. I linked this to the general aims of utopian literature, which presents a rearranged figure of real-world objects (repurposing its scenes, characters, and motivations) such that the interpretative search for a concept becomes the oblique critical work of the text. Drawing on hints of Coverdale's experience in "the billiard-club," I developed billiards as a historically significant model for understanding the way that a locally fixed scope of possibility (such as that represented by the cue ball) could attain directed significance when put into contact with another register of scope (represented by targeting with the cue stick). This action created emergent dispositional effects over time—despite the discrete limitations of the game model—as a result of the accretion of targeting choices and consequent interpretative seepage between various layers of scope. Establishing Hawthorne's meaningful use of scopic unsettling in the work that immediately preceded *The Blithedale Romance*, I suggested finally that *Blithedale* emphasized a persistent and continued interpretative targeting both through the stylistic use of metadiegetic narratives and through the thematic split between singular "ridiculousness" and tactical "ridicule."

While Hawthorne's romance appears to encourage temporary commitments and local engagements, on multiple levels it can be read as a cautionary tale against becoming singularly invested in one idea above all others (a possible commentary on the rise and domination of institutionalism in the nineteenth-century). As in billiards, a single decision does not make the player; rather, player character can be read through a continued procession of decisions, each engaging with but not wholly defined by situational limitations—moving the cue ball to new views all the while. In this way, both billiards and *Blithedale* speak to the growing significance of targeting operations (local scopical contacts) not as ends in themselves, but as persistent re-beginnings, re-imaginings, and re-inventions of a social scene increasingly discriminated by race, gender, class, occupation, and in the final determination, choice itself as consumerism. What Hawthorne's intervention makes clear is that the romance should not be solely an *indication* of some shared reality between the author and the reader, but instead *a tool for shaping that reality*—and a tool is defined by immediate use. *The Blithedale Romance*, as a tool, might be thought of as a kind of self-referential disposition machine, insistently pushing the reader into new ambiguities, but also demanding that local choices be made, much like Walt Whitman's avatar position in "Song of Myself."

Regarding this intervention, Sacvan Bercovitch has argued in *Rites of Assent* that Hawthorne's "device of multiple choice" (as Matthiessen dubbed it) must be recognized "as a device for enclosure and control" (207). Taking *The Scarlett Letter* as his case text, he argues:

The ambiguities of *The Scarlett Letter* lead us systematically forward... toward what we are meant to understand is a series of broader and ampler meanings. *Always* ampler, and there at any given point indefinite—a *progression* of ambiguities whose tendency to expand in scope and depth is all the more decisive for the fact that the process occurs incrementally and in unexpected ways. [...] [T]o interpret is willfully, in the interests of some larger truth, *not to choose*. Ambiguity is a function of prescriptiveness. To entertain plural possibilities is to eliminate possible divisions. We are forced to find meaning in the letter, but we cannot choose one meaning out of many: Chillingworth's fate cautions us against that self-destructive act of exclusion. (210–11, emphasis original)

Seeing Hawthorne's emphasis on interpretative ambiguity as a gesture that rhetorically limits one's action to the realm of pre-existing legibilities, Bercovitch contends that interpretation within this mode is not really a choice at all, but "a function of prescriptiveness." I would argue instead that interpretation, as we have seen throughout the preceding analysis, *is* a choice, if not the kind of cleaving choice that Bercovitch seems to imagine here—it is an embedded choice, yes, but it is hard to imagine any choice that would not be.³¹ And it is worth considering that both Chillingworth and Hollingsworth represent the decision to choose *only* one option and *once*, carrying it through to the bitter end. The imperative, such that one imperative can be derived, is a continued renewal of choosing, a choosing that it is always renewed from within a limited field: limited by previous choices and limited by the choices of others. In this view of romance, ambiguity and its "processual" sense of meaning—we might develop

³¹ Bercovitch himself recognizes this in the conclusion of *Rites of Assent*, writing that the critical challenge is in "finding a solution not to but *in* the problem of ideology" (376). Yet, when it comes to Hawthorne, he appears unsatisfied with this limited solution, and this dissatisfaction seems to be a result of the static manner in which he views Hawthorne's textual ambiguity. Dynamics require interactivity: certainly Hawthorne knew he had readers. To challenge the ambiguity of the text on the grounds of it not choosing *for* the reader is akin to arguing that algorithms cannot produce complexly emergent outcomes (despite delimiting the discrete range of those outcomes). Without interaction, of course, this is case; but that only tells half of the story.

on Bercovitch's term and instead say its *procedural* sense of meaning—form an atmosphere wherein the difficulty of continuous decision-making is highlighted (209). Here action and choice are not removed but made hyper-aggressive and difficult to manage. Hawthorne's novel draws attention to the friction between choice and ambiguity, making them mutually productive functions of each other in a manner that evokes a kind of literary engineering, appropriate to our discussions of nineteenth-century invention in the Chapter Four.

By way of comparison, British Romanticism was, for much of its history, associated with certain quasi-spiritual tropes, a domestication of religious sociality within the enclosed transcendental sphere of the secular individual. However, there has been an eventual critical consensus that these thematic tropes instead arose from a particular type of historical authorship situation and indeed an active and political idea of authorship's role in society, as an agent of change.³² U.S. writers developed these literary investments in their own way by reinventing utopian conventions, a remediation perhaps appropriate considering the way this genre defined "America" in its early incarnations. Touchstone texts in the U.S. romantic mode, such as I have traced in this project, demonstrated a fixation with symbolic space and the changes that came about as one moved through this space, as one accumulated and left residues of meaning *in time* and through social engagement. This engagement did not eliminate division, as Bercovitch claims, but

³² For excellent readings of British Romanticism that trace these critical tendencies, see Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*; Steven Jones, *Satire and Romanticism*; and James Chandler, *England in 1819*; for the critical idea of diffuse "romanticisms" in contrast to the monolithic view of spiritual period tropes see Arthur Lovejoy's important early-twentieth-century contribution, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms;" for a more recent view of how the ideology of a singular romanticism affects critical inquiry, see Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*.

tactically used it as one would in a game. For this reason, games have provided a historically embedded way to reintroduce the thematics of timing, engagement, and material encounter throughout this study. Explicitly developed as dispositional *tools* in the nineteenth century (and always beholden to the marketing angle of being “instructive” as well as “amusing”), games give us insight into the ways that literary-media were increasingly conceived of as something *used* and not simply *absorbed*.

Earlier, I employed Milton Bradley’s *Checkered Game of Life* to illustrate the shift from passive Lockean absorption to an ideology of use in procedural terms, exemplifying this split in the operational difference between Bradley’s freeform grid and previous single-track board games. Situated and sold in the same urban milieu (though Bradley’s game was undeniably more pervasive), Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* depicted agency via a literary representation of the same avatar-position present in *Life*, a structured “you” that was simultaneously a performed “I.” Like the public signs and handbills that both structured and empowered the independent movement of urban strangers in nineteenth-century New York, both *Life* and “Song of Myself” proved themselves to be invested in, as David Henkin writes, “facilitating forms of access and interaction that did not require personal acquaintance... or recognizable individual authority” (Henkin 14). Within this model, authority was socially dispersed and the individual was reconceived as the social nexus conveyed by the interaction of the I- and you-positions of Whitman’s poem—embodied by the avatar-marker of Bradley’s game. From where we stand now, this “interactivity” might be seen as an aesthetic of scopic contacts, with “I” represented as the iterative, accumulated experience of one social actor

(his or her social character) that must always be in contact with the wider scope of affordances and limitations conveyed by cultural norms (in order for that character to be comprehensible). The interactivity of the avatar is an attempt to imagine how something like individual agency might exist in a world that continually pushes back at any attempt to make its objects anything less than social, abstract, and textual. Bradley and Whitman provide models for how irreducibly social objects can nonetheless be captured in a description of private and individual proportions; for both the answer is iterative, algorithmic, and targeted.

As a result, both “Song of Myself” and *The Checkered Game of Life* anticipate Friedrich Nietzsche’s later observation that, “If one has character one also has one’s typical experience, which recurs repeatedly” (Nietzsche 80). Yet Melville, as we saw, troubles the issue. *The Confidence-Man* asks how *change* might occur in a world where “character” rules, where agential legibility is defined by a “typical experience, which recurs repeatedly.” At the end of Chapter Three, I argued that Melville’s engagement with this problem left us with a troubled utopic figure, that of the Confidence-Man who acts as a surrogate for the lost agency of state machine subjects, the operator filling in the blanks of their interior Peter Coddle game. Representing an unattainable, somewhat illegible, and in many ways undesirable mutability, Melville’s Confidence-Man nevertheless gestures at a solution by showing that, despite its seemingly *interior* machinations, character is driven (and thus change itself is driven) by the contact of the state machine subject with a register of scope *outside* of itself. Here an operator targets his marks both in the sense of making them a prey *and* in the sense of bringing their

interior layer of scope into contact with his own. The problem is that the Fidèle passengers do not see themselves as targets—but, of course, readers do. We see their mistakes and (perhaps) we ridicule them, yet we know that we are all constantly subject to (that is, potential targets for) a similar ridicule. Even as it cannot overcome its own narrative problematic (the book simply ends with the Confidence-Man ambiguously walking into the night), Melville’s novel represents an emerging world that may have to find comfort in the mechanisms of “ridicule” in order to avoid stagnation. P.T. Barnum, a figure on the leading edge of this emergent cultural shift, finds more than comfort, he finds profit.

Throughout *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, the infamous showman uses limited communicative agency, conveyed by the relationship of text and paratext in Tangrams, in order to make himself into a successful business man (embodying both the literal and literary terms of self-making). Like the Confidence-Man, he excels at bringing the objects of his exhibitions into contact with other existing objects in a way that imparts interest—changing them by changing their readings—and seems to imply a deeply causal or motivated connection between text and paratext.³³ The desire to decode the vector connecting the Brick Man with the American Museum or technological automation with the racialized history of Joice Heth brings people in the door, and correspondingly brings in cash. But in the process, as we saw, the social atmosphere of the American Museum

³³ Nina Baym notes an analogy in the early field of novel criticism, observing that, for literary reviewers of the mid-nineteenth century, there “seems to be a property of writers or texts that calls out a complementary response in readers, a response called ‘interest.’ The greater the power of the text, the greater the reader’s interest, which at its height becomes enchantment, absorption, or fascination. Power is thus experienced as power *over* the reader; but power works by creating interest *in* the reader, so that the reader too becomes strong” (Baym 42).

becomes its own paratext, and in the interplay of this scopic panoply, audience members seized the opportunity to test out new social characters and protocols through guided arrangements of focus—in short, to change as well as consolidate. Michael Phelan shows this opportunity to be central to his theory of billiards, as even the abstract physical operations of targeting are seen as occasions for vicariously adjusting one's "dispositions" and therefore changing one's (domestic or social or personal) world. Drawing this reading into *The Blithedale Romance*, I argued that Hawthorne aggressively thematizes the "targeted" approach to change within an abstractly limited world, through narrative style, but also through the symbol of "ridicule," both a purse (a container) and a "loophole" in Coverdale's organic netting through which he targets (a reticule).

While I would not suggest that Hawthorne explicitly modeled his novel on cued targeting (despite his references to Coverdale's interest in the game), reading his novel in conversation with this culturally pervasive amusement allows us to see elements of literary engagement in the text that echo the engagements pursued in billiards. Existing in a historical space of production, reception, and transmission shared with literature, the games discussed in this project reveal an interface between literary representations and the more bodily, social, and operational concerns of the period. These games highlight productive limitation as an opportunity for training habits that may have been "out of character" for the current moment; training the disposition as an accumulation of contingent moves became a mode of nearly vicarious social agency. As dispositions reinvented character, these reinventions could then be formalized as rhetorics that gave preexisting information a newly imagined shape: a trajectory or motive force.

Consequently, the operations of judgment and scopic targeting create contours that are then reflected by history and refracted through history. These contours ultimately become the new bounds of the present and the new limitations that must be played with in order to be advanced.

Although the culture of nineteenth-century U.S. institutionalism, mechanism, and interiority always appears to be ideologically contained, games gesture at ways that invention and motivated change were realized, and this gesture is mirrored by the literary media with which these games coexisted. In a wider discussion of twentieth-century new media technology, Lev Manovich writes, “The advantage of placing new media within a larger historical perspective is that we begin to see the long trajectories that lead to new media in its present state, and we can extrapolate these trajectories into the future” (Manovich 10). Similarly, seeing “old media” within a shared continuum of production and appropriation not only enriches our capacity to produce significant comparative insights, but gives us additional perspective on structures of thought and medial instantiation in the twenty-first century. As all forms of media are becoming increasingly driven by the goals of interactivity and social mark-up—by proceduralization and attention to operational aesthetics that go far beyond the truth or falsehood schematizations that Neil Harris saw at work in P.T. Barnum’s exhibits—we might find such a viewpoint instructive. Old cues might find new targets, holding the potential for directing us to “other lives as good, or better” (Hawthorne, *BR* 165). Yet these tools offer little without our intervention. For better or worse, we must maintain a perspective on the move.

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