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*The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum  
America* (review)

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*The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America.* By Leon Jackson. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. Index. \$60.

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It is a rare thing always to find a book in literary studies that explicitly sets out to critique and revise a major paradigm in the discipline. More rare to discover such an agenda in a first book, but Leon Jackson's *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* attempts precisely this. Jackson sets himself against the Charvatian paradigm that has dominated American literary scholarship, claiming that it has too single mindedly understood the production, distribution, and consumption of books in antebellum United States in terms of the commercial marketplace. According to Jackson, for a host of reasons (personal, ideological, institutional), Charvat established a model for American literary scholarship and book history that has occluded a more robust and ostensibly more accurate understanding of the various economies that pervaded American authorship in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Jackson uncouples himself from Charvat (and the Progressive historians with whom he links Charvat), he grabs the hand of the economist Karl Polyani and holds it tightly. That is, the fundamental theory on which Jackson's book derives is Polyani's conception of embedded economies and his claim that classical political economy has inaccurately characterized human exchange as premised on the commercial marketplace. Jackson essentially makes the same argument about the book trade: that American critics have wrongly assumed that authorship in the United States was primarily a commercial enterprise in which books were exchanged for money. Instead, he claims the book trade involved "embedded economies"—economical arrangements that involved the establishment of relations and connections that extended beyond concerns of financial profit. Jackson writes, "Borrowing, bartering, gifting, or selling a book an author had written created webs of connection that were no less important a part of transaction than any money that might have changed hands" (2).

Jackson explains that the chapters that follow his theoretical and polemical introduction will explicate the wide range of embedded economies in which American authors, publishers, editors and readers participated. Such economies include poetry writing as artisanship (in which authors wrote verses to individual paying customers), trading verses in albums and portfolios as gifts, the exchange of essays and articles between periodical editors, epistolary correspondence, subscription payments and debts, and literary prizes and contests. The book's detailed accounts of the different means and ways by which writers exchanged their work with readers is always interesting,

but there is a strange disconnect between Jackson's manifesto, in which he promises a major revision to the understanding of the "business of letters," and these subsequent chapters. Offering tremendously promising accounts of a variety of different writing practices, they do not overturn the Charvatian premise. It is certainly true that nineteenth-century authors and publishers engaged in embedded economic activities—they exchanged gifts and letters, they entered literary contests—but this recognition doesn't change the fact that the texts that constitute our canon are a product of print. Nor does it disprove that the authors who produced this print frequently did so in order to participate in the predominant economy of antebellum United States, which was a commercial one.

Likewise, just as Polyani's critics sometimes accuse him of conceiving of worlds that fantastically escape the avarice of commercial relations and failing to see the ways that pecuniary relations pervade even the most social of exchanges, it is precisely such a fault that I find with Jackson's work here. Thus, even as I am fully convinced by Jackson's claim that the binary between professionalism and amateurism is inadequate to describe authorship in the nineteenth century, I balk at his contention that these embedded economies were the predominant ones to describe American life in the antebellum period. Authors may have been paid in a range of different currencies—"in cash, credit, medals, and statuettes, along with clothes, kisses, and copyrights" (29)—but Jackson never makes the case that the desired remuneration was ever to be found in kisses or clothes. And when he claims that, "Authors write to raise charity, to receive charity, to compete for prizes, to pay ransoms, to raise bail, to leave legacies, and to please patrons" (29), he gives a range of different forms of compensation and social networks, but I am hard pressed to see how any of these "embedded economies" escape from the underlying economic system of the nineteenth-century United States. After all, authors needed to receive monies of some sort so as to purchase the goods necessary to sustenance. Despite Jackson's claim that he wants to offer "a nuanced taxonomy of economies" (40), his categories themselves ossify under the definitional requirement that they simply be opposed to the market.

It was perhaps in the second chapter of the book, a study of George Moses Horton, that the awkwardness of Jackson's desire to identify everything that is not associated with the commercial book trade (that is, with corporate publishers and their networks of book sellers) as distinct from market economy becomes most jarring. Although Jackson declares Horton "an ideal test case" for his larger argument, the claim that Horton, as chattel slave, is a perfect example of someone whose "economical activities [were] embedded deeply" (53) is a peculiar gambit. Once again, the chapter on Horton is fascinating, as Jackson offers a variety of ways to conceive of Horton's economical

practices—as artisanal (insofar as Horton is making a product, poetry, for which he is paid directly by his customers), as black market (insofar as he is himself a commodity and therefore cannot legally sell or buy goods), as patronage (insofar as Horton inserts himself into a southern fantasy of benevolent vassalage in which he writes for his social and economic betters). But, of course, each of these “embedded economies” are determined by the commercial marketplace that defines Horton as a commodity good. Nor is this the case simply because of Horton’s status as chattel slave. Jackson concludes the chapter suggesting that there are many other writers who engaged in an artisanal model of authorship and who, like Horton, saw their incorporation into print publication not as a validation of their authority, but a diminishing of it, since print “interpose[d] the monitory presence of others” (85). Jackson claims that authors who wrote on demand for customers, asking for their services as verse writers, engaged in “the freest authorial transactions.” While we can say this mode of authorial economy is more embedded (because it is certainly more intimate to write poetry at the request of the very same person who will pay you for it), it is also certainly commercial insofar as a product is manufactured for payment. For American authors, as for many American craftsmen of the time, the problem was that the autonomy offered by such transactions, even as they offered higher profit margins and more economic autonomy, were also relatively inefficient. Consequentially, authors, like many others, were paid for the labor of their output, not the goods they produced.

In some ways, then, my biggest critique of Jackson’s book is that despite his claim that one primary imperative for *The Business of Letters* was to historicize more accurately the economic world of antebellum United States, his dedication to the concept of “embedded economies” has the effect of romanticizing the economic conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century. While it is certainly true that American commerce and trade were chaotic and piecemeal (after all, in the first 4 decades the Bank of the United States was born and destroyed twice) and industrial capitalism was still a relatively nascent force (in the antebellum period only half of its citizens were wage laborers), it was nevertheless one dominated by national and international commercial capitalism. That said, Jackson offers a rich account of a host of authorial economies that will be of interest to many scholars. In so doing, *The Business of Letters* augments, but does not supersede, Charvat and his legacy in American literary scholarship.

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