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## Reading Backwards: Reckoning with Context during the 1850s

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## Review Essay

### Reading Backwards: Reckoning with Context during the 1850s

*Frederick Douglass in Brooklyn*. By Frederick Douglass. Ed. Theodore Hamm. Brooklyn, NY: Akashic Books, 2017. 224 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper), \$9.99 (ebook).

*Herman Melville: Among the Magazines*. By Graham Thompson. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018. 249 pp. \$86.00 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper), \$25.99 (ebook).

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In *George Palmer Putnam: Representative American Publisher*, Ezra Greenspan was faced with the kind of problem that has long bedeviled students of nineteenth-century periodicals. Who was “the Putnam Public”? More specifically, who read *Putnam’s*, the ambitious literary monthly that arrived in green covers beginning in 1853? At a scholarly moment when context usually started with consumption, researchers were finding that subscription lists were often unavailable and always incomplete. After all, nineteenth-century subscribers generally shared issues, which were sent as well to libraries, reading rooms, and railway depots. Greenspan turned resourcefully to archived letters, magazine ads, comments in other periodicals, earlier biographies, papers deposited by the periodical’s several editors, and finally to “implied readership,” which took its cue from what *Putnam’s* dubbed “the model subscriber.”<sup>1</sup>

What he could not manage was turning to readers themselves, as Janice Radway had in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, an engaging 1984 study that traded “model subscribers” for actual subjects, and informed speculation for interviews, questionnaires, and case studies. Intrigued by what Radway later called “ethnographies of reading,”<sup>2</sup> scholars like Greenspan have found themselves awash in survey envy when first readers so long ago are too dead to poll.

Considering implied readership as narratologists have offers one form of reading backwards, from textual invitation to likely reception. It’s a way of gaug-

ing pitch to insinuate catch and, from it, the sway of a particular reading public with expectations. But there are other ways to read backwards and other contexts to reckon with besides consumption.

Theodore Hamm, for instance, has edited a collection of specific addresses by Frederick Douglass starting in 1859 to highlight his immediate reception in Brooklyn, New York, a priority that emphasizes performance and makes local newspaper accounts indispensable. By contrast, Graham Thompson has situated Herman Melville's magazine writing during the 1850s in the context of what was "magazinish"—that is, what kind of short fiction was readily sought, rewarded, and enlisted in settling the early contours of the American short story. Neither preoccupation is altogether new: the significance of site was already a mainstay for Frank Luther Mott's groundbreaking *History of American Magazines* when his first volume was published in 1930, while negotiations with periodical editors have been a cornerstone of author studies for even longer. Still, both of these volumes bend reading backwards in creative directions that bode well for innovative periodical research.

Hamm comes by his newspaper priorities honestly as the chair of journalism and new media studies at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn. It's no accident that his book has been published by a Brooklyn press and carries an endorsement from the Brooklyn borough president. Hamm includes only those speeches that Douglass delivered in Brooklyn, which remained independent of Manhattan until 1898. Following an extended introduction that portrays the city as both receptive to Douglass and inhospitable to his abolitionist aims, in part because of vigorous trade with the slave South, Hamm devotes each of his eight chapters to one of Douglass's speeches, from "Self-Made Men" (1859) and "The Black Man and the War" (1863) to "John Brown's Heroic Character" (1886) and "Lincoln's Godlike Nature" (1893). These appear as reprinted texts with a difference; instead of favoring Douglass's pristine paragraphs, this volume relies on partial newspaper transcriptions, combined excerpts, italicized summaries, and detailed reports that are quick to note the lines that drew cheers or laughter or applause, even laughter and applause at once. What emerges is less poised than participatory; it's easy to see what Hamm means when he writes that "Douglass struck up lively conversations with his audiences" (31). That keenly interactive sense is compounded when Hamm gathers his reports and summaries from sharply differing sources: the hostile *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the more sympathetic *Brooklyn Daily Times*, the righteous *New-York Times* and the reformist *Independent*. But with so much stir in the offing, Hamm keeps his chapter introductions to brief curtain raisers.

The result falls well short of a definitive volume of complete texts. "Self-Made Men" in particular, a lecture Douglass delivered and revised for decades, appears as a single short excerpt, after five paragraphs from the *Brooklyn Daily Times* about the "gist" of Douglass's remarks (36). While the book itself is small and portable, it will not serve teachers committed to examining Douglass's robust speeches, especially his most acclaimed. For those, teachers and their students need look no

further than *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass*, a trim edition recently culled from the massive five-volume full-text inventory published by Yale University Press (1979–92). The single paperback volume offers the “best text” of “Self-Made Men” in thirty-seven pages, with seventy-three updated notes and a generous editorial headnote, in this case commenting on the speech’s reception at the Carlisle Indian Industrial Institute during March 1893 and summarizing adaptations that Douglass made for the occasion.<sup>3</sup>

But in Hamm’s edition, Brooklyn comes alive, not only in the evening “conversations” that he reproduces but also in 144 notes and his postscript. Because he takes his texts from newspaper sources, chapters often begin with plenty of information. Hamm’s succinct overviews are generally followed by a good deal of reportage: crowd size and appearance, celebrities on hand, and the speaker’s arrival on the stage, plus a cordial and lengthy welcome before the anticipated address begins. This is not implied readership but eyewitness account, dipped in editorial agenda and “[*Prolonged cheering*]” (85).

Hamm’s venturesome reckoning with public performance and immediate reception is exactly what Graham Thompson is disinclined to pursue. His is a more academic method that prizes creativity, especially as he exchanges consumption for composition, reading communities for writerly calculation and what he describes as “the ante-consumption history of Melville’s magazine writing” (7). For Thompson, everything is a material object rather than a performative gesture, from the manuscript inscribed on fine paper to the manufactured text made from it, as well as the crowded pages and issues that haloed any periodical contribution. Melville thereby becomes an “embedded author” working within magazine genres and conventions that he subtly reconceived, one story at a time.

In chapter 1, paper is uppermost as the basic requisite of a working writer during the 1850s; “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” is then read as less allegorical than generative, since papermaking provides the seed of this story to a laboring author as well as envelopes to his seedsman narrator. Chapter 2 takes up the seeds of the American short story in the sketches, tales, articles, and personal essays that antebellum gift books and magazines circulated, hodgepodge genres that Melville tamed into “The Encantadas,” sketches that gained narrative momentum through island hopping. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on magazine editors and magazine pages, respectively, and therefore on the gatekeeping that renders “The Bell-Tower” picturesque rather than daunting and makes “The Lightning-Rod Man” less zealous than scientific, much like the recurring *Putnam’s* figure of Benjamin Franklin. Finally, chapter 5 reorients Melville’s periodical fiction when he began to “edit” prior texts in “Benito Cereno” and *Israel Potter*. Instead of seeking the customary entanglement of Melville’s writing in ambient culture or its ironic play with careless magazine readers, Thompson backs up to imagining short and serialized fiction saturated in magazine protocols that Melville buttressed and resisted, deployed and transformed.

The upshot is a profile of publishing success rather than spiraling failure, a profile that changes Melville's professional standing from "pitiable refusenik" (26) to embedded author responding with "defiance and innovation" (216). Concentrating on the stages of material construction, of texts as things made before readers and their appetites even twinkle, Thompson puts the "literary" back in literary history by reading backwards from consumption. Along the way, he overpromises a bit: where he sees Melville inventing the modern short story as well as the psychological thriller, others might be readier to credit Irving and Poe. He sometimes opts for an odd term or two—"pioneer readers," for example, though "first readers" or "magazine subscribers" would suggest fewer Conestoga wagons and felled trees. Absorbed by the intricacies of composition, in a writer's study as well as a periodical's composing room, he also confuses the title given to one of Melville's chief magazine patrons, which is alternately *Harper's*, or *Harper's Monthly*, or *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. But these are pesky quibbles about an enterprising book that reconceives Melville's magazine work as a career pivot rather than a temporary distraction. For Thompson, the context that matters is formal creation and the material processes of all those working in the magazine marketplace.

This is a long way from Brooklyn and echoing applause. While both Hamm and Thompson discover in American periodicals much more than display cases for original prose, they enlist their findings in remarkably different projects. Hamm aims to close the gap between delivery and reception through contemporary newspaper accounts, which are less given to the sanctity of words than to the idiosyncrasy of events. Italicized summaries and bracketed responses allow Hamm to put readers on the scene and to make locale an essential player in recovering public oratory. As a result, *Frederick Douglass in Brooklyn* backs up from definitive text to performative context, from timeless page to an evening's stage. Thompson resists the vortex of the "public," for *Putnam's* or any other midcentury magazine. Where his book's cover might have carried a photograph of Melville from the Berkshires, as Hamm's does of Douglass from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Herman Melville: Among the Magazines* is graced by an engraving of the Harpers' "Finishing-room"—peopled, industrious, but ante-consumption. What Thompson's own readers first see is a shared labor recalling the writer's quiet endeavor, which in this workplace image seems equally destined for success.

Taken together, these two books reveal the differing invitations of daily newspapers and monthly magazines. As Civil War dispatches were about to demonstrate, newspaper reporters were growing adept at expediting firsthand accounts, whose function was in part to capture up close a spectacle's unusual drama. Just as their near-crackle would reduce the distance from wartime outbreaks to wartime parlors and their kin, so Hamm's participatory model can offer a streamlined method for documenting other instances of public reception, especially on the shadowy lecture tours that abounded during the nineteenth century. Conversely, literary magazines were published less frequently and were tasked with rising above daily turmoil. Thompson's practice of reexamining an author's magazine

submissions, most fruitfully for signs of their embeddedness, promises instead a provocative return to heaping numbers of potentially uncloistered writers. Like Melville's short fiction that had yet to become *The Piazza Tales*, their work may soon disclose suggestive traces of the magazine channels through which so much nineteenth-century literature once passed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam: Representative American Publisher* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 304.

<sup>2</sup> Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>3</sup> John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman, eds., *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), xvi, 414–53. This accessible version of 20 important lectures relies on the texts of 273 speeches, with their editorial annotations and headnotes, that were gathered by the Frederick Douglass Papers (then at Yale University) and edited by John W. Blassingame. The extraordinary undertaking, all 273 speeches and their original scholarly apparatus, are freely accessible at the website of the Frederick Douglass Papers, now relocated to Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.