CHAPTER 2

The Art of Framing Lies

Of all existing novel types none provides an example of such perfect closure as the detective novel. Like a sentence, it is a hierarchical verbal structure that binds a subject to a predicate and ends with a highly visible period.

—DENNIS PORTER, THE PURSUIT OF CRIME

The America that Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne inhabited was on the move, deeply enmeshed in a process of self-creation and expansion restricted only by the plasticity of its populace. At the heart of this venture was the cultivation of republican virtue, an ambition succinctly outlined by the American Enlightenment thinker Dr. Benjamin Rush in his 1798 essay, “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic.” Rush proposed to “convert men into republican machines,” an essential measure “if we expect them to perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government of the state” (qtd. in Nelson 13). Rush’s aim, to forge a “manly civic ideal” from the rude material of the American man, demanded that the white male citizen “equalize the contradictory demands of self, family, market, and national interests in his own person” (Nelson 12). Pointing to the discipline and individualism of the agrarian, Thomas Jefferson promoted the yeoman farmer as the exemplary self-governing body (Rogin, Fathers 79). By the early nineteenth century, however, the contours of American society were already shifting. An industrial-corporate economy all but effaced farmer and artisan from the center of commerce, and the brutal evacuation of Native Americans from territories in the East made way for the expansion of black slave labor and the growth of the cotton export sector (Takaki 78–79). Marrying an industrial-corporate economy, bound labor, and Indian removal to liberal ideals of independence, civic equity, and hard work, however, entailed pragmatic acts of self-deception.

Both Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man That Was Used Up” (1839) and Na-
thananiel Hawthorne’s “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” (1834) negotiate these grave inconsistencies at the core of the national ethos. This chapter explores how Poe and Hawthorne develop narrative strategies to navigate economic and discursive conventions related to the exigencies of “black” chattel slavery (and contentious efforts to extend slavery into commandeered Indian lands), as well as the simultaneous advent of a “free” and “white” workforce resisting subjugation by an industrially oriented market economy. While these stories fall outside the designation of detective fiction, we might think of them as proto- or possibly metadetective fictions. They are texts that use the activity and the idea of narrative retroversion (the chronological sequencing of narrative fragments to reconstruct the past, also known as backward construction) to capture and theorize complex socioeconomic arrangements in the antebellum nation. In his essay “The Nineteenth Century as Chronotope,” Hayden White differentiates between analytic approaches that merely anatomize the logical inconsistencies in the social fabric, presenting history as the sum of a “set of contradictions,” and approaches that same history as paradox, seeking to determine “the modalities of the peculiar forms of illogic by which a society, an age, or a whole culture negotiates the distance between its manifest practices and self-representations and its systematically hidden, because psycho-dynamically repressed, thoughts, perceptions, and affects” (244). Along these lines, in representing present and past, Poe and Hawthorne do not merely unpack and parade the internal contradictions of antebellum society. Instead, they fashion narrative equipment that helps illuminate those modalities of illogic that sustained an economy struggling to manage internal discord and to regulate varieties of interracial sociability. In doing so, they formulate and explore the limits and possibilities of a narrative device, backward construction, that would routinely appear in classical detective fictions by the early twentieth century.

The narrator of Poe’s “The Man That Was Used Up” is a sort of flaneur who mingles with high society, soliciting a full account of the exploits of the celebrated and extraordinarily handsome war hero General John A. B. C. Smith, only to find Smith’s valet, Pompey, reconstructing the gentleman of mechanical bits and prosthetic pieces when he visits Smith’s apartment. By contrast, Hawthorne’s “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” follows tobacco peddler and pathological gossip Dominicus Pike as he struggles to make sense of misleading and irreconcilable tales of the murder of one Squire Higginbotham. Confounded by testimonies that call into question whether Higginbotham is dead at all, Pike makes his way to the squire’s Kimballton
estate and interrupts the man in Higginbotham’s employ (an “Irishman of doubtful character”) who is in the very process of perpetrating the assassination (87). While the investigation in “The Man That Was Used Up” (sub-titled “A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign”) is propelled by the alluring vitality of the enigmatic General John A. B. C. Smith, “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” is powered by the kind of morbid curiosity about murder that would animate Poe’s tales of ratiocination. Still, the principal activity of both tales is coordinating narrative fragments such that they coalesce into plausible historical accounts. What is more, these works generate discursive logics that grapple with interracial sociability. Managing narrative fragments doubles as racial management, since race differentiation forged in and fortified by the antebellum industrial order is formalized, coalescing in the activity of narrative retroversion. With a climactic illustrated act of assembly orchestrated by the Smith’s black valet Pompey, “The Man That Was Used Up” supplies fleeting images of interracial class consciousness and social upheaval that are subsequently eclipsed by the radiant, undifferentiated figure of General John A. B. C. Smith, an ideal of Jacksonian manhood that gentrifies the violent discord and multiple clashing forces in the body politic. “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe,” on the other hand, is punctuated by multiple distinct, if understated, signposts of interracial working-class collectivity. Yet its central riddle summons ideas of interracial solidarity and sociability simply to stratify them; the conditions for economic revolt the story documents, and the cooperative ventures it apparently conceives, are eroded by the ratiocinative acts it requires. As both stories play with backward construction to forge plausible accounts of causes and effects from narrative fragments, they call attention to the cultural function of a narrative device: parsing the social effects of racial differentiation that were part and parcel of an industrially oriented market economy.

“A PERFECT UNDERSTANDING OF THE STATE OF AFFAIRS”

The unnamed narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up” is in search of a complete report of the past of the celebrated Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith, hero of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indian campaigns. Though this protagonist’s ambulatory investigation into the past of the national hero is limited to a single city’s most prestigious cultural precincts: the
opera, the salon, and so on, “The Man That Was Used Up” authorizes several antebellum propositions rooted in the remote material base of these cultural fronts. Among these are the degraded status of bound labor enforced by the discursive operations of “Sambo-making” in the South; the unconditional differentiation between black and white labor in the North; and the violent requisition of Native Americans lands in service of King Cotton. Robert Beuka emphasizes that this work lampoons Jacksonian manhood, exposing a “body politic” dismembered rather than unified by its politics of race: “Poe quite literally deconstructs his hero, in the process figuratively deconstructing the mystique of rugged individualism central to the Jacksonian vision of the American citizenry” (32). But beyond dismantling the mystique of manly perfection that the general is thought to personify, Poe’s story employs narrative retroversion to dramatize the ideological process that sutures incommensurate parts of a political and socioeconomic landscape in the body and biography of General Smith.

In the person of Poe’s narrator, we find the pure passion of the detective. First, there is his phobia for the unexplained—he observes, for example, that “the slightest appearance of mystery—of any point I cannot exactly comprehend—puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation,” a morbid, unremitting curiosity that informs the biographical inquiry he undertakes (Poe 66). His dismal methods, however, only confound the investigation. The narrator yearns for a complete report of the “tremendous events” of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indian campaign, but his single strategy is to extract it from various interlocutors; he expects others to supply what he is unwilling to find by indirection (67). An irremediably dense socialite, he initiates interrogations at injudicious moments (whispering from the pew while the minister delivers his sermon, interrupting a tense game of whist at a soirée, and so on) only to meet each time with a familiar spiel: “Great wretches, those Bugaboos—savage and so on—but we live in a wonderfully inventive age!—Smith!—O yes! great man!—perfect desperado—immortal renown—prodigies of valor!” (68). This vague but suggestive patina of social chatter enshrouds General Smith, rendering the man’s exploits an enigma, though Smith’s magnificent body remains a spectacular marvel that invites further inquiry.

Both in the repetition of an irregular biographical spiel and in the narrator’s quest for a fully articulated account, Poe rehearses a method of assembling narrative that would become customary to classical detective fiction. Poe’s narrator must pluck details from a rhetorical composite before him to
build a historical account that fuses past events into a causal-chronological ordering bereft of snags or perforations. In detection fictions, such activity elucidates what was previously beyond the reader’s grasp, coordinating disparate events into something linear, sequential, and coherent. The detective’s process of reconstruction recuperates narrative fragments, including seemingly arbitrary and violent events, by incorporating them into a “meaning-conferring system,” a seamless and intelligible story of a crime (Porter 219). However, in detective fiction narrative assembly is typically obstructed by what Dorothy Sayers calls the art “of framing lies in the right ways”: detection texts can be labyrinthine, saturated with “collateral material” designed to confound readers or lead them astray (“Aristotle on Detective Fiction” 31).1 Poe’s narrator, by contrast, has almost all the critical details within his grasp, and what he repeatedly confronts is already a provisional ordering of events. Nevertheless, the discursive rehearsal of the general’s exploits remains unintelligible, just so many rhetorical fragments resisting resolution. Though he gapes at “the remarkable something” and the “odd air of Je ne sais quoi” that envelop General Smith, he cannot seem to get at that glue of causation which would lend something like narrative integrity to the general’s punctured past—and indeed, his efforts to eke out intelligence are inevitably indelicate (66).

Confronted with a syntactic imbroglio, the narrator is at wits’ end. His fellow socialites speak in a fragmented idiom that discretely invites the kind of collating that would register, for instance, that the general was assailed by “savage” Indians, his body salvaged only by the march of technological invention. The narrator is anything but inventive, however. He becomes an increasingly tactless raconteur, oblivious to the social niceties that check any explicit, exhaustive account of the general’s affairs. He fails entirely to fulfill the duties that would be assigned to a detective: to establish a “sequence and causality” from a jumbled chronology, to make meaning of the “effects without apparent causes” that envelope the unknown (Porter 29–30). For this reason, the narrator has no recourse but to descend upon the general himself, in order to “demand, in explicit terms, a solution of this abominable piece of mystery” (Poe 69).

Upon his arrival at the general’s apartment, the narrator is horrified to hear a squeak emerge from a “large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something” lying on the floor, which he has just kicked out of the way. Whistling, “Ahem! rather civil that, I should observe!,” the bundle demands, “I really believe you don’t know me at all” (69). The narrator, aghast, retreats
from the bundle and turns to confront Pompey, the “old negro valet” who has admitted him into the house:

“No—no—no!” said I, getting as close to the wall as possible, and holding up both hands in the way of expostulation; “don’t know you—know you—know you—don’t know you at all! Where’s your master?” here [sic] I gave an impatient squint towards the negro, still keeping a tight eye upon the bundle.

“He! he! he! he-aw! he-aw!” cachinnated that delectable specimen of the human family, with his mouth fairly extended from ear to ear, and with his forefinger held up close to his face, and levelled at the object of my apprehension, as if he was taking aim at it with a pistol. “He! he! he! he-aw! he-aw! he-aw!—what? you want Mass Smif? Why, dar’s him!” (Poe 69).

Though Pompey attaches various prosthetic devices to the “odd-looking bundle” to resurrect the recognizable figure of John A. B. C. Smith, the servant’s initial derisive gesture would seem to irreparably damage the general’s clout. The valet’s motion is mimed violence, insubordination hardly hidden in plain sight. Accordingly, the dynamic between the two men tilts in the direction of what James C. Scott calls an “infrapolitics of the powerless,” apparently dismantling a regime of domination that would “deny subordinates the ordinary luxury of negative reciprocity: trading a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult” (23). Beyond the narrator’s discomfiting discovery that the public image of the general is an exquisite “prosthetic construct” that requires “the repression of its organic basis” (Rosenheim 103), then, we are dealing with a scene that not only discloses the utter dependence of the master upon his “old negro servant,” without whom he is only an “odd-looking bundle of something” (Poe 69), but also effectively intimates the prospect of his violent dismantling by Pompey, who exposes the general’s broken-down bits with fingers forcibly poised, “as if taking aim at it with a pistol” (69).

But the idea that the narrative treats the parasitic dependence of whites on blacks as knowledge that must at any cost remain suppressed—what Richard Godden in his work on Faulkner has fittingly described as the generative “labor trauma” of the antebellum South—should be discounted in this case. Poe openly burlesques this degenerative state of dependence in “The Man That Was Used Up.” In his toilette, General Smith’s soliloquizing sounds somewhere “between a squeak and a whistle” and is peppered with
intermittent volleys to his servant: “Pompey, bring me that leg!” and “Now, you nigger, my teeth!”—shriiil decrees that hardly convey the impression of actual, enforceable power (69–70). Though Poe’s depiction of Pompey is all stock parts, grotesque enlarged features and mulish “cachinnations,” it is the servant who, as he assembles his caviling master, has “the knowing air of a horse-jockey” (70). Moreover, the general, who curtly captions his battle wounds and cites the shops where he purchases artificial parts, only attains “that rich melody and strength” in his voice for which he is renowned after his valet inserts a “somewhat singular-looking machine” into his mouth (70).

The manual task of attaching prosthetic contraptions to produce a republican gentleman is thus aligned with the narrative task of coordinating and uniting distinct events into a coherent biography of that gentleman. Pompey is the extraordinary mechanic-cosmetician who binds the general’s war-ravaged bits and artificial parts into that “singularly commanding” and much-revered personage, and as each injury is attached to an historical episode, his retrofitting the body participates in a process of narrativization that fuses discrete parts into a single, systematic chronicle (66). Moreover, the coordinates of this grisly tableau vivant capture an odd predicament of interracial dependency, one that, moreover, recruits the specter of the invented Bugaboo and actual Kickapoo Indians to illuminate the carnage inflicted upon the general’s person—even while showcasing the artificial anatomy engineered to replace those sundered bits.

The servant’s curt declamation (“Why, dar’s him!”) anticipates the grisly climax of Poe’s 1844 story, “Thou Art the Man,” a satirical rehash of Poe’s earlier detective tales in which the narrator rigs up a murdered body with a whalebone contraption so that the corpse, jolted out of its wooden coffin, can gaze into the eyes of its assassin and proclaim: “Thou art the man!” (306). The talented ventriloquist of that tale achieves the ultimate payoff by compressing the evidentiary or explanatory narrative of the crime into an iconic moment when the corpse identifies the perpetrator. Accordingly, what we get with “Thou Art the Man” is a structural analogy by which a detailed account of a crime is, by mechanical mastery, compressed into shocking talk from a rotted carcass. Similarly, Pompey’s exposé incontrovertibly signals the general’s debility, and in piecing together the general he meticulously parades the man’s corporeal defeat in the Indian wars. Pompey’s gesticulations penetrate the primary reality of Poe’s short story, surmounting Smith’s euphemistic chatter, and goading the reader to entertain a historical drama in two acts: the demolition of Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith’s
body in the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indian campaigns, and his subsequent restoration as synthetic subject when mechanics swapped machines for his damaged parts.

By prolonging our attention to the program of deception that disguises the disfigured body, and by participating in the particulars of its reassembly, Pompey helps supply a historical context for that magnificent “text” which heretofore has awed and stupefied Poe’s narrator. This scene does not merely locate the specific causes that yielded the general in his mostly prosthetic form. Rather, Pompey foregrounds the spectacular violence, the systems of production, and the regimes of sociality that bring this remarkable individual into being. While the general’s shrill directives emanate from the “bundle of something” on the floor, Pompey tethers together a material and discursive explication of the “abominable piece of mystery” before us.

For instance, Pompey’s activities direct our attention to how, as a preternatural industrial collaboration, the general literalizes the discourse antebellum labor activists adopted to deconstruct embodied capital. In an 1835 article printed in the Workingman’s Advocate, for instance, Theophilus Fisk called capital a desiccated carcass, dead flesh incarnate and ineffective unless buoyed by manual workers (1). While the politicos of the “slave school”—a cadre that included John C. Calhoun and Geo McDuffie—also maintained that the laborer “cannot be an active member of the body politic” (qtd. in Foner and Shapiro 72), workers insisted the mechanic was “the bone and sinew of this proud country” who created wealth by the toil of his hands (“Important Decision” 6). “If we could sit in our seats like dried mummies [sic], and by a single scratch of a pen could construct canals, bridges, and railroads,” Fisk remonstrated, “we might then talk about equality of rights and privileges with some degree of propriety” (1). Fisk dismissed the metaleptic logic that granted businessmen title to the products of workingmen’s labor. Lamenting workers consigned to civil insignificance and destitution in the newly industrialized trades—the “thousands living and dying mere cogs in the social machine” (1)—Fisk exalted the distinct productivity of the working classes, especially in the face of what the working-class leader Thomas Devyr described as “the overwhelming competition of this occult power”: the technology of the machine (qtd. in Foner, History 167). More machine than man, General Smith sops up this novel equipment with each genuine “cog” called to recoup his damaged body, the artisan or mechanic that made it vaporized by some variation on that oft-repeated expression: “We live in a wonderfully inventive age” (68). But the architects behind this anatomi-
cal catechism rematerialize in Pompey’s pantomime, whose maimed “Mass Smif” is the product of an assembly line and a prop of the settler state.

Moreover, this episode controversially conflates white and black work by way of a racial cross-(ad)dress that recruits Pompey, “that delectable specimen of the human family,” as understudy for the industrial workforce that keeps the general intact. Pointedly, it does so at a moment when labor called into question an individualistic work ethic that guaranteed remuneration to the hardworking and promised to penalize the idle. Though northern slavery had been extinguished in order to “reconcile workers, and bend the state to market ends by idealizing competition among free and juridically equal individuals,” by the 1830s and 1840s, urban craftsmen struggled to become independent in the new economy while visible profits accrued to idle capital and impersonal merchant managers (Sellers 126). As workers unionized to fight for a ten-hour working day, opportunities for self-education, and political rights, they distanced themselves from the plight of black slaves in the South, whose liberation they feared could only impinge on their opportunities for economic independence. “What they failed to comprehend,” as W. E. B. DuBois would point out in Black Reconstruction, “was that the black man enslaved was an even more formidable and fatal competitor than the black man free” (20). In the face of the market economy’s invariable “depreciation” of what the Mechanics’ Union of Trade Association called “the intrinsic value of human labor” (qtd. in Foner 102), however, some northern workers articulated the grievances of white wage labor by comparing its fate to that of bound labor. An 1836 article in the National Laborer explained: “He may change his master; but he is condemned to perpetual servitude; and his reward is the reward of every other slave—subsistence” (qtd. in Foner and Shapiro 34).

In “The Man That Was Used Up,” the reader’s flickering apprehension of Pompey’s affiliation with white northern industrial labor makes clear the fitful nature of the comparison, given that for white labor, “it was difficult not to compare themselves to slaves, almost unbearable to make such a comparison, and impossible to sustain the metaphor” (Roediger 55). Though protestations against white slavery took the harrowing example of chattel slavery as a crystallization of white northern workers’ worst anxieties regarding the excesses of industrial capitalism, the validity of this analogy remained suspect (86). In 1837, one northern worker leveled an attack at this rhetorical trend, emphatically cataloging the insurmountable “Difference Between a Free Laborer and a Slave” in The Liberator. In this article, the subject of free
labor is enunciated in opposition to the “perfect merchandise” that is the slave, who is “like a man dead and buried,” “a fixture of the soil” in the fixed economy of the South, and “a lump of clay” destined only to contribute “to the wants of another race of beings” (75). This white workingman’s insistence on the black slave’s autochthonous, agrarian disposition and on his status as a capricious article of commerce distinguishes the particular horror of slavery, to which free labor need never be subjected. Of course, black mechanics and industrial workers abounded in the southern states, since southern industries were almost wholly reliant on bonded labor to continue their operations. Yet severe discrimination essentially prohibited blacks who made their way north from exercising their industrial skills. While it was simply profitable to recruit slave labor for industrial schemes in the South—“one of the great advantages of black labour is, that you can attach it permanently to the establishment by purchase,” Charles Fisher reported in *The American Farmer* in 1828—the amicable coexistence of the races in the North depended on stratified occupational arrangements, with free blacks restricted to menial, low-paying, and sometimes dangerous work (qtd. in Foner and Lewis 85, 2). To the extent that white workers vehemently protested what they perceived as insidious subjugation and the requisition of their bodies, racial consciousness and republican pride intervened to curtail identification with black labor (Weinstein 21, Roediger 86). Nevertheless, Pompey, with his distinctly mechanical faculties, becomes visible as one of their own—and yet he also resembles that “formidable and fatal competitor” from the South whose bonded status presaged the bleakest prospects for white workingmen.

Though Poe’s story signals its recognition of the industrial nature of Pompey’s work, and intimates a certain sociability between a class of black “servants” and their counterparts, “free white labor,” this knowledge quickly capsizes, overshadowed by the attention bestowed on the imminent body of General A. B. C. Smith, whose stature has been salvaged by increments. What Peter Coviello has identified as Poe’s style of “phenomenological hypotaxis,” the practice of syntactical subordination that allows Poe to record the event of corporeal disintegration in miniscule steps, “anatomized down to its least tremors and tiniest operations” in tales like “The Premature Burial”—in short, his capacity to document death as an activity *as it unfolds* (881–84)—is here executed precisely in reverse, so that Pompey’s incorporation of the general’s various bits and pieces is tantamount to an act of human animation. The general closely captions this event, delineating the sequence
of man-made contraptions that constitute his body, and closing the logico-temporal gap created by the occluded record of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indian campaign. Crucially, the narrator’s peripheral attentions to “the manipulations of Pompey” and the “very dexterous manner” in which the servant assembles the general’s body parts—those details that evince Pompey’s mechanical bent—cease at the moment of Pompey’s final “alteration,” when the “whole expression of the countenance of the General was instantaneous and striking,” resembling again that figure that so impressed the narrator at the moment of their “original introduction” (Poe 70).

The materialization of General John A. B. C. Smith does not merely absorb the array of manufacturers who have supplied his corporeal parts. His incorporated presence eclipses these as he resumes his role as spokesman and representative for the new technologies, commenting, as is his wont, “upon the rapid march of mechanical invention” (67). That is to say, Poe’s delineation of the microprocesses that sustain the general and occlude the fissures and flaws in his physique parallels the processes by which the bloodshed and territorial acquisitions of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo campaigns and the toil of the mechanic are finally vanquished from the social psyche. This exorcism includes Pompey, whose narrative presence recedes in the wake of the general’s incorporation. What remains is an impeccable composite of a man, from “the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun” to a very “properly proportioned calf” (66)—a continuous array of eye-catching features for which the general is celebrated.4

In this way, we can begin to see General Smith’s repair as a general smoothing over that retroactively lays to rest the antagonisms in the ideological edifice, something like the Lacanian point de capiton (or quilting point) that totalizes the field of ideological meaning and for whom “the immanence of its own process of enunciation is experienced as a kind of transcendent Guarantee” (Žižek, Sublime 99). Or the “instantaneous and striking” reappearance of that distinguished countenance (Poe 70) signals a perverse variety of what Louis Mink terms configurational comprehension: what takes incongruent things for “elements in a single complex of concrete relationships” all fitted together in a “nice balance” (Mink 551). In other words, the narrativization of General Smith (the material and discursive restoration that takes place before the narrator eyes), and Poe’s use of narrative retroversion specifically, illustrate a style of ideological interpellation that suppresses a concatenation of human carnage and mechanical toil, and the racial differentiation that both produce.
“THERE IS REALLY NO END TO THE MARCH OF INVENTION”

But let us return again to the brief prospect of intimate violence that is conveyed by Poe’s positioning of the “negro servant” in relation to the general, fingers positioned as if “taking aim” with a pistol and preparing to execute the man. It is not simply that Pompey’s identification of the general (the disconcerting exclamation “Why, dar’s him!”) doubles as a proposition of assassination and exposure, thereby functioning as a kind of blackmail that draws attention to the convertibility of master-slave relations. Instead, Pompey’s rejoinder to the narrator, who turns an “impatient squint toward the negro” while maintaining “a tight eye upon the bundle” (Poe 69), initiates a moment of specular triangulation, an aggressive disinterpellative demand that forces the narrator to confront the disturbing, scattered parts and, most strikingly, that repulsive thing at the center of it all: an “exceedingly odd bundle,” a disgusting object that pipes up “one of the smallest, weakest, and altogether funniest little voices” and performs, “upon the floor, some inexplicable evolution, very analogous to the drawing on of a stocking” (Poe 69). This nauseating protrusion, a “single leg” performing a reverse striptease, is the general dishabille—the emperor without clothes, so to speak, which induces a repellent recognition. But Pompey’s traumatic pedagogy is diverted to preserve the consistency of the social order, whose ideological threads are resecured by the general’s materialization and the piecing together of his history in its familiar, enigmatic form.

Previously, when the narrator sought knowledge of the general at the theater, an acquaintance responded with a wholly deficient series of ostensibly unrelated fragments, utterances that nevertheless resembled a smooth chain, visually threaded together by Poe’s dramatic use of dashes:

Horrid affair that, wasn’t it?—great wretches, those Bugaboos—savage and so on—but we live in a wonderfully inventive age!—Smith?—O yes! great man!—perfect desperado—immortal renown—prodigies of valor! Never heard!! (This was given in a scream.) Bless my soul!—why he’s the man. (68)

Here the final phrase is interrupted by the performance of the “fine tragedian, Climax” (68). To conclude that for the narrator to utter the “up,” to
fill in the blank at the end of the sentence that has been heretofore excluded, to say in so many words that the general is “The Man That Was Used Up,” is a way of registering that the general is merely, as Jonathan Elmer suggests, “a string of consumer secrets,” whose aura relies on the smooth, incessant circulation of signifiers (55). But this conclusion misses the point by taking these signifiers as already sewn together, rather than fastidiously fused to flatten what is “up” of the general: a terrifying living member, the disturbing extremity that becomes invisible adhesive. Smith’s hideous erection is absorbed as a private secret, flattened into the kind of “smooth surface of euphemized power” by which the practice of ruling groups is homogenized (Scott 56). It is precisely through his utterance of the story’s title, by which the axiom of identity is secured and the general established as “The Man That Was Used Up,” that the narrator manages to repress knowledge of the irremediable excess of that shrill voice and protruding limb, and to leave “with a perfect understanding of the state of affairs” (70). In delivering the title’s sentence, the narrator responds to the call of that reagent that joins the antimonies of Jacksonian democracy at their joints. Indeed, with this totalizing rejoinder he finally speaks the lingua franca of his fellow socialites.

So the title of the story is reiterated as its final line, but what again of the “old negro valet, who remained in attendance during my visit” (Poe 69), whose intimate knowledge of the general’s fragmentation is a distasteful reminder of that glutinous mass whose shrill squeaks disrupted the “smooth surface of euphemism”? If the narrator’s tendencies to repress trauma are implicit in his distressed narrator’s chiasmic stammer, “don’t know you—know you—know you—don’t know you at all!,” Pompey’s performative exegesis unlocks the “abominable piece of mystery” regarding the renowned military hero, Brevet Brigadier Gen. John A. B. C. Smith. Nevertheless, the servant’s eye-opening announcement leads away from rather than toward the “perfect closure” that would become the hallmark of the detective genre. That Pompey’s voyeuristic disclosures and menacing gestures presented something of a stumbling block is sufficiently indicated by Poe’s decision to expurgate the three paragraphs in question from the story prior to its 1843 publication in his Prose Romances, even though they had already appeared in Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), and had been previously published in Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine (1839) and Phantasy-Pieces (1842) (Poe, Tales 377). Poe’s bowdlerization of his own story returned the servant to the text’s periphery, summoned only by the general’s commands. In the tale’s earlier appearance, however, Pompey’s interpretative acts calls into question the
stable social order retroactively instituted by the general’s erection. In this way, the disinterpellative demand instigated by a black servant is itself the climactic moment of a story whose subtitle proposes it is “A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign.” Then the function of the title “The Man That Was Used Up” is to occlude the subtitle that props it up and makes it possible: the violent contests between white settlers and American Indians. Moreover, this knowledge comes into view by way of a structural analogy, where the violent resistance of the “Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians” finds its point of entry as much in the threatening person of Pompey as the general’s bits and pieces.

Poe conjures a stark image of frontier violence in his choice of the quasi-sedentary Kickapoo, who among the Algonquian confederacy most emphatically eschewed acculturation over the course of several centuries. Having successfully resisted French, British and U.S. efforts at assimilation, during the War of 1812, the Kickapoo joined forces with the British to rout U.S. troops in battle. The Kickapoo became legend as premier “raiders” along the northwestern frontier and particularly in the Illinois Territory, where their extraordinary and “inventive brutality” was corroborated by reports of the O’Neal Massacre near Peoria, where Kickapoo looting and scalping of a settler homestead left ten persons “shockingly mangled,” according to congressional documents (qtd. in Gibson 64). Shortly afterward, the 1812 Pigeon Roost Massacre occurred: twenty-one scalps were taken, a relief column of militia found homes looted and burned, and the entire village presented “a mournful scene of desolation, carnage, and death” (Wallace Brice [1868] qtd. in Gibson 69). Echoes of this 1812 terror surface in the general’s abbreviated account of his much-butchered body.

At the moment Poe composed this tale, however, the Kickapoo were engaged in the Florida Indian wars, where the U.S. Army had enlisted about one hundred Kickapoo to fight the Seminole (White, *Kickapoo* xvi). Poe’s own recruitment of the Kickapoo is an ironic reminder of the perpetually unfinished work of war and the anarchic, side-shifting economy of mercenaries (in the Missouri River region, Kickapoo had also guarded Spanish settlements against encroachment from the Chickasaws and the Osages). Pairing this tribe with the fictitious Bugaboo in the title of his tale, Poe makes a jest of the bogeyman Kickapoo, who lurked in the social imaginary of Indian “savagery,” but more even than these discrete instances of carnage from the past, or the uneasy sociability of the present, the Kickapoo threat was that they frequently refused to entertain the Indian removal policies
the U.S. government designed. Even though the 1819 Treaty of Edwardsville with the Illinois Kickapoo and the Treaty of Fort Harrison with the Wabash Kickapoo contracted an exchange of tribal lands in Indiana and Illinois for territory on the Osage River in Missouri, “renegade bands” repudiated these treaties outright (Gibson 80). After 1835, many of these retired to the West, but others remained; Chief Mecina, who led one of these bands, “denied that his tribe or any other could unilaterally sign away tribal lands and the resting place of the bones of their ancestors” (78). Not to be reconciled to the prerogatives of the settler state, the Kickapoo persistently aspired to an overthrow of American rule and rejected the agrarian ethos paternalists like Governor Harrison tendered. Into the mid-nineteenth century they retained some ambition to overthrow the U.S. government. In “The Man That Was Used Up,” the general’s recollection of old Kickapoo-inflicted battle wounds opens up incongruities between the past and the moment of production of Poe’s tale: that Indian removal policies designed to end frontier violence by sequestering Indians elsewhere and insulating settlers from contact occluded the historically specific and perpetual violent process of Indian removal, not to mention ongoing, troubled alliances with Indians required to sustain the “march” of settlement and make the general whole.

Additionally, as Pompey’s threat mimes the attack of the absent (Bugaboo and) Kickapoo Indians, the text avails itself of a cultural logic that associates Native American revolt with black revolt. This logic was clearly at work, for instance, in the wake of the “Cataclysm” of August 21, 1831, when Nat Turner, joined by five other slaves, killed at least fifty-seven of the white residents of South Hampton, Virginia (Aptheker 298). Almost immediately after Nat Turner’s South Hampton revolt, the Richmond Enquirer stressed the “horrible ferocity” of “the banditti,” reconfiguring the shocking acts of intimate violence as administered from without by a troupe of marauding interlopers: on August 30, 1831, the Enquirer stated, “They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of the Indians upon the white settlements” (Tragle 43). By equating the way the two groups impinged on the interests and viability of white settlers, the Enquirer legitimizes the violent suppression of “foreign” elements. On the other hand, the peculiar effect of aligning the struggles of Indian “intruders” and Turner’s gang—at a moment when confusion reigned over Turner’s motivation and intent and the possibility of legitimate retaliatory violence was not yet dismissed—has the effect of retroactively undermining the strategy of Indian killing at the core of Manifest Destiny, and
sheding light on its “single dark premise” of settler culture: “that American culture is a successor culture that founds itself by extinguishing the culture already in place” (Fisher 30). Pompey’s mimed threat of violence reiterates the bloody genesis of the disintegrated general in the hands of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians, who, as we shortly discover, not only scalped and butchered the man but were also the damned “vagabonds” who “took the trouble to cut off at least seven-eighths of my tongue” (Poe 70). The general’s epithet—disgorged, no doubt, with the surviving bit of tongue as well as a “singular-looking machine” (70)—works to bind the Indians to disreputable itinerancy, erasing the possibility that their encounter took the form of a dispute over property rights, just as Turner’s revolt incited all manner of explanations but those that would acknowledge emancipation as the goal of his revolt.

Lesley Ginsberg has suggested that Turner’s motive, like Poe’s purloined letter, suffered from “the paradoxical invisibility of the obvious” (102), and indeed, many of the newspapers that described the carnage were strikingly oblivious to the demands for emancipation explicit in the revolt. This propensity to conceive of the black slave population as anything but violent threat to the existing social order belies the private terror of a society perpetually troubled by the prospect of slave rebellions in the wake of the gory slave revolts in the West Indies, Denmark Vesey’s barely suppressed conspiracy in 1822, and Nat Turner’s revolt less than a decade later (Takaki 121). Nevertheless, while the breathtaking scheme of slave management that Ronald Takaki has called the “Sambo-making machine” defended against the planter class’s anxieties about deceit and “savage” retribution at the hands of their slaves, the image of the Sambo (with happy, lazy, immature, and childish qualities) and the broader image of the black “child/savage” served another important purpose in a slaveholding society (116). It allowed white southerners to conceive of their system of subordination as vastly preferable to the free-labor society in the North, where the political rights of exploited white workers could lead only to clashes. By contrast, slaves’ lack of legal rights enabled slave masters to exercise complete control in curbing their workforce, even as the slaves’ status as “capital” necessitated that slaveholders be concerned about their well-being (124).

That Poe took the trouble to cut out Pompey’s gesture of insubordination indicates an interest in restricting the servant’s role, rather than allowing various sociopolitical resonances to proliferate in his performance. Or perhaps Pompey’s shocking pedagogy was simply not subtle enough for polite
company. Yet Poe’s initial positioning of Pompey’s threat—directly prior to the general’s degrading harassment of his servant, when Pompey performs as a grumbling but obedient Sambo—makes it seem as if Poe had extorted from that character a sufficient excuse for the general’s subsequent rhetorical policing and degrading harassment. Poe’s expulsion of that portion of the text in which Pompey appeared as an overly proximate, voluminous, threatening racial Other suppresses the full horror of the narrator’s traumatic confrontation with the gentleman stiff whose dissolution jeopardizes the social order, leaving a crude stereotype whose function is to immobilize any threat of black revolutionary violence.

To sum up, there are several cultural propositions that Poe’s story sets before us. First, the discursive and material operations that consolidate multiple strands of Jacksonian political culture under a single figurehead (or general icon, John A. B. C. Smith) entail an obscene surplus (the “exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something” with its high-pitched squeal) that must be repressed. That Poe’s story sufficiently executes the cover-up is suggested by the critical work on “The Man That Was Used Up,” which tends to locate the central premise of the tale in the general’s *exposure* as “empty signifier,” “a string of consumer secrets,” or in the man’s persistent acts of misrecognition: “he perceives no discrepancy between his continual description in society and the ‘nondescript’ bundle of flesh he has become,” rather than the narrator’s *interpellation* in the face of this secret (Elmer 53, 55, Rosenheim 103). Though Poe uses Pompey to deconstruct the fantasy that suspends the entrancing body of the general between the narrator and a traumatic confrontation (with the horrifying shrill squeak that emanates from the glutinous bundle and Pompey’s “cachinnating” voice), the black servant becomes that never-exhausted quantity through which we access both the possibilities for interracial sociability and revolutionary violence, at least until they are gentrified by the sight of the general, in all its blinding incandescence. The partial experience of Pompey’s rebellion (foreclosed by Poe’s expurgation of an image of black violence), his faint resemblance to northern industrial labor, and his structural affinity with the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians (both positioned as the fantasmatic support for Jacksonian political culture) are subjects for knowledge that are simultaneously extruded and suppressed. Moreover, Poe’s revisions intimate that the resemblance of white industrial labor to black slave labor must be warded off—not only in order to elide those degradations northern white workers associated with blackness, but also so that southern planters could insist that their “capital” investments (in
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contrast to the producers of “capital” parts that outfitted the general) were outfitted with a servile, Sambo-like nature that would preclude insurrection.

In the face of urban industrial transformation, expanding investments in land and slaves, and Andrew Jackson’s bellicose Indian removal policy, General A. B. C. Smith is made the explicit “representative” of democracy, the kind of “citizen qua individual” on whom “anxieties about political division and social disorder, along with counterphobic imperatives for ‘wholeness’ and ‘unity’ were transferred” (Nelson 182). Poe’s narrator, moreover, is an anonymous actor who enters into a fraternal contract with the general and other agents of white male hegemony, anticipating John Cawelti’s definition of the “detective-individual” as one devoted to “restoring the serenity of the middle-class social order” rather than “laying bare the hidden guilt of bourgeois society” (Adventure, Mystery, Romance 96). “The Man That Was Used Up” foregrounds the device of narrative reconstruction that would be central to Poe’s version of the detective story, but to the extent that Poe’s story tenders a critique of republican ideology through Pompey’s inspection and assembly of the general, this critique is retarded and Pompey’s inquiry is foiled by the peripatetic protraction of the investigation, the vacuity of the narrator’s various interlocutors, and the general’s unwillingness to acknowledge his fragmentation. Nevertheless, the narrator’s final affirmation and the effect of the tale seem to part ways. If the narrator manages to swallow his revulsion and to depart (albeit somewhat dazed by the encounter), returning his disquieting discovery to the realm of the unthinkable, the climactic horror of the dismembered body shakes the reader out of the imaginative interpellation associated with what Dennis Porter calls the “perfect closure” of the detective novel (Porter 219). Pompey, the agent capable of revelation, must be edited out of the text in order to secure the narrator’s ascendancy and cultural secret keeping.

“NO, I CANNOT PRONOUNCE IT”

One of the sources for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” might have been “Mr. Mark Higginbotham’s Case of Real Distress,” which first appeared in the London publication New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal in 1825. This anonymous but certainly fictional anecdote was reprinted that same year in the Salem Gazette, which Hawthorne, now returned to Salem from college, undoubtedly had oppor-
tunity to read. The substance of this short piece is the bellyaching of a man named Mark Somers, who has inherited the estate of a well-to-do brick-maker named Timothy Higginbotham (his wife's uncle) on the condition that he adopt the surname of the deceased as his own. Somers, who fancies himself debonair, revolts at becoming "the nominal representative of a vile Hodton dealer in argillaceous parallelograms," even when a fortune hangs in the balance (290). Having ever been "squeamish, fastidious, fantastical about names" (290), Somers cannot bear to dispose of his own and be branded a Higginbotham:

Give a dog an ill name, says the proverb, and hang him. Never dog had a worse than mine, and I feel already as if I were hung up aloft for the finger of score to be wagged at, and condemned to stand in the pillory of my own appellation as the wretch Hig—No, I cannot pronounce it. (291)

Somers likens the burden of this "degrading sobriquet" to a public execution and cannot even complete the sentence—yet his wife has coaxed him into compliance, and the "hideous appendage" becomes his own (290). His name swallowed by his wife's unpolished ancestor's, the narrator struggles to extricate himself from this difficulty while upholding his end of the bargain. That is, like General Smith, this gentleman of fashion tries to resurrect the old self used up by this least welcome of inheritances, to rescue "Somers" from the hangman that is "Higginbotham." He begins "writing letters and describing myself to tradesmen and others as the late Mark Somers" (291), but is the dupe of this new debacle, since undertakers, clergy, and sexton descend upon his home, jockeying for command of the funeral arrangements, "and were not to be persuaded, without considerable difficulty, that I was still alive as Mr. Higginbotham, though unfortunately extinct as Mr. Mark Somers" (291).

The "real distress" of this tale is class anxiety, since Mark Somers's many professions of gentility are endangered by his new, unsavory association with a mere merchant and maker of bricks, whose name incidentally is branded upon him. Though it entails death in name only, Mark Somers's predicament might have prompted Hawthorne to compose "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe," a tale that also speculates about what it might mean for a man to be made of some other person's money. But Hawthorne's story, an American production, connects the fates of merchants and manufacturers, a man of industry and a common peddler, and a bunch of working stiffness who very
briefly forge a murderous alliance. Tying together the vagaries of class and nerve-racking industrial developments in his presentation of the many men and women who populate a regional economy, Hawthorne mobilizes narrative retroversion to tell a story about race relations and economic mobility.

Eventually one of Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales* (1837), “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” first appeared in the December 1834 issue of *The New-England Magazine*, neatly framed by “The Storyteller. No. II. The Village Theatre,” the second (and, as it turned out, final) installment in what Hawthorne had hoped would be a serialized adventures of a tale-telling vagabond. Having been reared by one Parson Thumpcushion, who resolves to make the young man adopt some profession, and finding the entirety of New England loathe to admit “that any good thing may consist with what they call idleness” (353), Hawthorne’s narrator resolves in the first episode of the series to take up the itinerant life of a teller of tales. In “The Village Theatre,” he has his first professional engagement in a country-town tavern, and “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” constitutes the whole of his shtick, though he professes to have “manufactured a great variety of plots and skeletons of tales, and kept them ready for use” (358).

The tale in question features the tobacco peddler Dominicus Pike, who hears a piece of news there is no accounting for: Mr. Higginbotham, the Kimballton merchant, was murdered in cold blood only the previous night!—and yet somehow this news has reached Pike, who happens to be more than a day’s travel away from the scene of the crime. Accordingly, the story turns on the presentation of an “achrony”: what Mieke Bal defines as “a deviation of time that can’t be analysed any further,” for instance, when “an event which has yet to take place chronologically has already been presented” (96). But Pike, a storyteller himself, is obliged to resolve the narratological conundrum he confronts; not only does his reputation hinge on its unraveling, the life (or death) of a Mr. Higginbotham apparently depends on it. In divining that fine line between life and death, Pike tries his hand at the kind of temporal reconstruction that would be at the center of the puzzle mystery. In doing so, he sheds light on the potential for working-class alliances that cut across race, though these possibilities are suppressed in the interest of preserving Mr. Higginbotham.

Like “The Man That Was Used Up” and “Mr. Mark Higginbotham’s Case of Real Distress,” “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” is about the unlikely resurrection of an individual who commands a certain influence, but Hawthorne’s story pursues something less than a fatality; for almost the entire
story, it isn’t clear whether Mr. Higginbotham has actually died. And if the protagonist of “The Man That Was Used Up” departs relieved by his “perfect understanding of the state of affairs” once General Smith again stands before him, synthetic bits sutured into “that truly fine-looking fellow” (70, 66), Dominus Pike is of two minds as far the Kimballton merchant’s murder is concerned. A consummate salesman and storyteller, Pike turns a profit by chronicling the ghastly details of Higginbotham’s assassination while he peddles his wares. Nevertheless, he rushes to Higginbotham’s aid when he finally perceives the merchant in danger—and is well rewarded, even if he cannot “account for his valor on this awful emergency” (166). Finally, where Pompey’s pantomime provides a point of entry into the complex entanglements in the antebellum republic, Hawthorne’s storyteller fashions Higginbotham’s “Catastrophe” as a composite narrative, repeatedly reworked as Pike, a purveyor of gossip, consolidates intelligence gathered along the road to understand this unfortunate event.

The process of properly situating events in time and space is one Hawthorne places front and center, since between Morristown, where Dominicus Pike begins his journey, and Kimballton, where Mr. Higginbotham apparently met his “doleful fate,” any “little trifle of news” travels at an astonishing rate: “Kimballton was nearly sixty miles distant in a straight line; the murder had been perpetrated only at eight o’clock the preceding night; yet Dominicus had heard of it at seven in the morning, when, in all probability, poor Mr. Higginbotham’s own family had but just discovered his corpse, hanging on the St. Michael’s pear tree” (151–52). Pike, who broadcasts the news without the slightest reserve, accounts for the physical implausibility of this intelligence by “supposing that the narrator had made a mistake of one day in the date of the occurrence”—further revising the historical record by setting an event that has not (yet), it turns out, transpired in the more distant, rather than immediate, past (152). By contrast, the “ill-looking” traveler who has likely “footed it all night” and introduces Pike to this “horrible intelligence” in the morning does “hesitate a little, as if he were either searching his memory for news or weighing the expediency of telling it” (151).

Hawthorne’s storyteller attributes the impulse to hold back to two possible causes: on the one hand, the itinerant may be rummaging through his full stock of “intelligence” to locate that which might still constitute news, or, on the other hand, he is considering what might be the advantage (or “expediency”) of making his knowledge known. He weighs haste against delay, and in hindsight, we might conclude that the wanderer sees no better way
of distancing himself from the assassination of Squire Higginbotham than by putting himself at geographical and temporal remove. Consequently, he attempts to side-step self-incrimination by offering a full chronology that identifies victim and villain, time, place, and manner of death:

Old Mr. Higginbotham, of Kimballton, was murdered in his orchard at eight o’clock last night, by an Irishman and a nigger. They strung him up to the branch of a St. Michael’s pear tree, where nobody would find him till the morning. (151)

This calculated alibi profits from Pike’s conviction in the velocity of news (that it would outstrip the traveler who delivered it—“ill news flies fast,” the peddler observes [152]) and second, the peddler’s bearing of that news: ideally, Pike’s bulletins will distance themselves from the suspect, returning to their perceived point of origin (Kimballton), rather than tailing him as he hastens away from the scene of the supposed crime. Finally, with all his rumor-mongering and business-bartering, Dominicus Pike is considerably slower than the unrelenting traveler, so that the tale’s homecoming is much delayed with respect to its abrupt departure. But there is, all the same, a fatality that pursues Pike—or rather, that Pike pursues, since his arrival in Kimballton is synchronized with the crime in progress.

So this story is always at its (wit’s) end, its final event (save denouement) almost the sole subject of the text, and yet murder is never an event that is anticipated; on the contrary, what will take place in the narrative future seems from the outset to have taken place in the near past. In this way, the formal arrangement of “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” bears some relation to Tzvetan Todorov’s 1966 account of the detective story: it comprises two stories, “of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant” (46). And for Todorov, each of these stories has its particular utility; “The first—the story of the crime—tells ‘what really happened,’” Todorov explains, “whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains ‘how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it’” (45). Moreover, their occurrence is temporally distinct, since “the first story, that of the crime, ends before the second one begins” (44). Certainly, “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” proposes a different configuration for these stories. In this case, what we might call the story of the crime is handed over, intact, like an affidavit or theorem that we might dispute, but we soon discover the activity is meaningless, since it is a “tall tale”—a shadow that has yet to give rise
to substance, a text that lacks context. To state this rather differently: to hem and haw over the particular details surrounding Mr. Higginbotham’s assassination, to amend what might be considered, under other circumstances, a complete account of textual events or a master array (Charles Rzepka’s term for that set of occurrences which the reader “imaginatively constructed and reconstructed” until he or she arrives at something akin to a master narrative, a “single, coherent sequence in the projected time-frame of the world the story represents” [Detective Fiction 19]) is hardly worth the effort, since we are finally informed that Mr. Higginbotham is alive and well!

But if the story or stories of the crime are not the concern of this riddle, what does concern us is how not one, but two men come to deliver misleading reports to Dominicus Pike, and how it is their reports so closely resemble a crime that will not quite come to pass. To borrow Todorov’s terms, it is not the story of the crime but the story of the story of the crime that is “absent but real,” and the investigation of this matter is what brings Dominicus, at last, to Higginbotham’s orchard, where the crime itself (that is, the specific circumstances of the ongoing attack against Higginbotham) becomes “present but insignificant.” After Higginbotham is safe and sound, the enigma is unraveled:

If the riddle be not already guessed, a few words will explain the simple machinery, by which this “coming event” was made to “cast its shadow before.” Three men had plotted the robbery and murder of Mr. Higginbotham; two of them, successively, lost courage and flew, each delaying the crime one night by their disappearance; the third was in the act of perpetration, when a champion, blindly obeying the call of fate, like the heroes of old romance, appeared in the person of Dominicus Pike. (166–67)

But like “The Man That Was Used Up,” this story is about an industry of storytelling, a point the narrator promises to show and not simply tell when he notes that, “as will be seen in the course of my story, the pedler [sic] was inquisitive, and something of a tattler, always itching to hear the news, and anxious to tell it again” (150). Pike is a habitual tale-bearer, afflicted by an irresistible urge to spout gossip and regurgitate rumors, yet he sees his social function in rather a different light: “He found himself invariably the first bearer of the intelligence”—never mind that the news is already at one remove, the audience at every tavern is fresh—“and was so pestered with
questions that he could not avoid filling up the outline, till it became quite a respectable narrative” (152). In his loquacity, Pike resembles a nineteenth-century archetype. Itinerant peddlers who traveled from village to village were known for their sharp tongues and sharper trading, and considered something of a prototype for the New England Yankee: “not speechless but voluble, not despairing but ambitious” (Perry 174, 183). With a quick tongue, fashionable merchandise, and a “neat little cart, painted green,” Pike is primed to make a respectable living on the road. Still, Hawthorne’s reference to a painting of “an Indian chief, holding a pipe and a golden tobacco stalk, on the rear” invites us to consider the colonial project that delivered this product to the world; to understand, indeed, that Pike has superseded indigenous peoples on a trade route that likely long preceded his particular expeditions (450). And though he is an audacious colorist, Dominicus is relieved of the full burden of fibbing when he hears “one piece of corroborative evidence” from a former clerk who “manifested but little grief at Mr. Higginbotham’s catastrophe”: the gentleman in question did in fact frequent the locale where he is said to have met his end (152).

In fact, Pike continues to take liberties with the tale until a disagreeable interlocutor casts doubt upon his report. The peddler is content to freely dispense his report until he encounters a neighbor to Squire Higginbotham some miles short of Parker’s Falls, an old farmer who spoils his fun by insisting he had a drink that very morning with the man in question, during which Higginbotham “didn’t seem to know any more about his own murder than I did” (154). “I tell the story as I hear it, mister” Dominicus admits to his cross-examiner: “I don’t say that I saw the thing done” (153), which is to say that the facticity of the peddler’s account is dashed by direct evidence. The farmer’s testimony, spewed forth with the “vilest tobacco smoke the peddler [sic] had ever smelt,” trumps hearsay, annihilating the sanctity of whatever “gospel” Dominicus hoped to deliver to his eager audience—not to mention the perfume of the peddler’s sweet tobacco, since Dominicus discards “his half-burnt cigar” in the face of the farmer’s foul smoke and is left “quite down in the mouth” (153–54). This “sad resurrection” of the corpse leaves Pike irritable—“he so detested” the gall of this unfortunate witness “that his suspension would have pleased him better than Mr. Higginbotham’s” (154)—but also despondent to the extent that the peddler is plagued with dreams of hanging from that pear tree himself.

Pike’s utter deflation lays bare his business model: storytelling is essential to the peddler’s enterprise, and narrative has its value in ready money. And
when, the early following day, Dominicus cross-examines a stranger with “a deep tinge of negro blood,” just come from Kimballton, and discovers that, according to this rather startled stranger, “There was no colored man! It was an Irishman that hanged him last night, at eight o’clock,” the peddler throws himself back into the spirit of the thing, and proceeds to Parker’s Falls with the news ready on his tongue (155). Rather than “think of raising a hue and cry after him, as an accomplice in the murder,” though, Dominicus resolves to give his reluctant herald leave, since “I don’t want his black blood on my head; and hanging the nigger wouldn’t unhang Mr. Higginbotham”—and having Mr. Higginbotham unhanged is hardly in Pike’s interest, insofar as the story of Higginbotham’s death makes for stimulating conversation and stellar sales (156). This is the principal lesson, Thomas H. Pauly suggests, of a plot that is “neither complex nor profound” (171). Pike is “hawking local gossip to increase sales,” Pauly explains, and, upon hearing of Higginbotham’s gruesome death, assembles a full-blown narrative from this trifle of news—and profits from it (171).

If Pike cultivates his tales from the most rudimentary truths to promote sales, there is nevertheless something more to the equation here, where Pike leaves the dark-skinned stranger, very likely a would-be assassin, at liberty. The peddler’s level-headed notion, that “hanging the nigger wouldn’t unhang Mr. Higginbotham,” mixes run-of-the-mill racism with an appreciation of their interracial mutuality and interdependent mobility too, since Pike has found a coconspirator to resuscitate that thrilling chronicle of Higginbotham’s murder, and lay low the squire once again. The news of Higginbotham’s death offers unparalleled prospects for the tobacco salesman, so Pike takes the stranger for his Scheherazade, an anonymous source stool pigeon or no, for the fellow has traded him a toothsome tale for undisturbed flight—a real bargain where Pike is concerned. In this way, at least, his business ethic contrasts with that of the storyteller who invented him.

After his first public exhibition before “an audience of nine persons, seven of whom hissed me in a very disagreeable manner” the storyteller owns up to shortcomings as a performer (358). He admits that “it would have been mere swindling to retain the money which had been paid, on my implied contract to give its value of amusement; so I called in the door-keeper, bade him refund the whole receipts, a mighty sum, and was gratified with a round of applause, by way of offset to the hisses” (358). Pike, by contrast, disposes of “a whole bunch of Spanish wrappers among at least twenty horrified au-
diences” circulating hair-raising yarns about the destruction of one of the hoary pillars of New England business, not as entertainment but as truth (152). Once he gets the ball rolling, his profit promises to expand exponentially, if each in his audience is an envoy, and every telling of the tale is a new occasion for a smoke. But since Pike’s literary speculations lead him to witness a bona fide attempted murder and become Mr. Higginbotham’s rescuer and heir, his homicidal brainstorming is vindicated: “Fiction now becomes fact,” and his fortune is made (Pauly 172).

But the correlation between the peddler’s contrivances and cash in hand isn’t by any means fixed. Pike’s storytelling habits are a source of market fluctuations in each town he visits, and not merely because he interrupts the daily business to conduct his own. In stark contrast to the discrete chatter of socialites in “The Man That Was Used Up,” the peddler of “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” preys upon the grisly sensibilities of villagers so starved for entertainment they long to hear every violent detail and anatomical particular of the Higginbotham’s homicide, laying into Pike’s supply of tobacco all the while. There are great upheavals after Pike issues his reports and upheavals again when they are rescinded, particularly in Parker’s Falls, where Higginbotham is “part owner of the slitting mill and a considerable stockholder in the cotton factories,” sufficiently invested in the region that “the inhabitants felt their own prosperity interested in his fate” (157). We learn quick enough that the dead man’s repute extends about as far as his money does—that is, the purported execution of Squire Higginbotham is not incidentally a pecuniary drama. A special edition of the Parker’s Falls Gazette commemorates the occasion, and memorializes crimes against the squire. Under the immense headline “Horrid Murder of Mr. Higginbotham!” the report tells the story of Higginbotham’s death, and also announces “the number of thousand dollars of which he had been robbed” (157). The hysterics of Higginbotham’s niece are enthusiastically reiterated in the newspaper, which explains how the lady “had gone from one fainting fit to another, ever since her uncle was found hanging on the St. Michael’s pear tree, with his pockets inside out” (83)—her fits presumably but not necessarily attributed to the assassination of her closest kin and not only the discovery that he has been relieved of his fortune. And when Higginbotham’s lawyer arrives in Parker’s Falls, he sternly proposes that the false reports of his client’s end are “a willful falsehood, maliciously contrived to injure Mr. Higginbotham’s credit” (159).
What I am trying to stress is that while it would be imprecise to call this tale a work of detection, “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” is a metafiscal narrative. The narratological conundrum whose unraveling it pursues is set against a landscape of financial and industrial cataclysm, and its chronological puzzle takes intelligible shape only when this plot and its industrial subtext collide, and when a purported past event enters the present tense of the tale. In this moment, the “riddle” of the text turns into a theory of interracial sociability in an industrially oriented market economy, and the solution to “the story of the story” of the crime comes into relief only if this context sets the terms for the text.

In an antebellum economy beleaguered by unexpected downturns or “panics,” the news of Mr. Higginbotham’s death is a commercial event, a tremor in a series of bewildering market seizures that were variously construed as lawless attacks on clean-living peoples or chance shocks that escaped explanation (Larson 10). At the same time, the bewildering proliferation of money-issuing institutions was considered tantamount to a “free-for-all” (59). And after 1832, a multitude of banknotes, “originated with often distant corporations, entered into the streams of commerce, and floated far away from the legal abstractions that had issued them,” while their worth rose and fell “at a value relative to the perception that the bank could redeem its [paper] promises” with specie stored in its coffers (Mihm 12, 9). What is more, differentiating between notes issued by legitimate banks or state-chartered corporations and those generated by “wildcat” banks and counterfeiters was no easy task. To the layman’s eye, these may as well have been cut from the same cloth. Along similar lines, Pike’s dreadful intelligence gains currency though his claim is unsubstantiated. Like counterfeit currency, or like a note that circulates “below par,” it cannot meet its obligations, and yet his word passes for a genuine thing. Though he is not exactly crying wolf, on each occasion his tale is appraised, it is discounted, and yet no effort will suppress it; it is never entirely recanted. Indeed, even after the incensed citizens of Parker’s Falls oust Pike from the premises, pelting the peddler with clay munitions, he is amused to think “the paragraph in the Parker’s Falls Gazette would be reprinted from Maine to Florida, and perhaps form an item in the London newspapers,” with predictable effects: “Many a miser would trouble
for his money-bags and life” (Hawthorne 162). To say that Higginbotham’s condition is analogous to the solvency of some institution is not extravagance, then, and who would disallow that Hawthorne’s equal concern with “accounts” and the “teller” belongs to a system of elaborate puns?

But why is it a question of putting stock in Higginbotham’s death? That the picture of the murder is not susceptible to adjustment, such that another man might substitute himself for the squire, leads me to propose that in Hawthorne’s tale, the structuring absence (the subtext for the false text that lacks context) is a particular motive for the crime. Why, indeed, must Higginbotham be the casualty of this conspiracy in life and in yarn? Why is he, rather than any other man, the proprietor of this catastrophe? The explanation is to be found, I would argue, in the economic particulars of the narrative that Hawthorne advances. As Pike approaches Kimballton, all evidence conspires to show that Higginbotham belongs to an economy that has outpaced him. His estate once “stood beside the old highway,” but now it has “been left in the background by the Kimballton turnpike,” Pike discovers (165). The squire’s health is so poor he seems in person to substantiate reports of his “horrid murder,” or if not, Higginbotham is perhaps a picture of his pecuniary health. The toll gatherer confides to Pike that the squire is deathly “yellow and thin”; he is “more like a ghost or an old mummy than good flesh and blood” (164), and Dominicus follows not a man but a “grey old shadow” onto Higginbotham’s premises (165).

And what has transpired to make Higginbotham such an antiquated fixture of the economy? Higginbotham is part proprietor of the mill at Parker’s Falls, which seems to be one of those picturesque and semirural outfits that simply spun yarn by water power, according to an model of textile production pioneered by Samuel Slater at the end of the nineteenth century (Larson 72). Parker’s Falls comprises “shopkeepers, mistresses of boarding houses, factory girls, millmen, and schoolboys” (Hawthorne 157)—whose sheer presence is proof of how Slater-style operations frequently entangled entire districts in the business of textile production (Larson 33). And yet Hawthorne’s evasive observation that the town is, “as every body knows, as thriving as three cotton factories and a slitting mill can make it” is little proof of the residents’ prosperity, especially since “the machinery was not in motion, and but a few of the shop doors unbarred” when Pike drives into town in the early morning (156). By the 1820s or 1830s this kind of manufactory was strictly modest compared to the massive water-power facility, heaps of textile machinery, and legions of unmarried women operatives that Francis
Cabot Lowell installed along the Merrimack River in Massachusetts. Mammoth factories like Lowell’s brought economies of scale as well as integrated production to bear on the textile industry and all its lesser producers. Consequently, by the mid-1830s, market forces trimmed local profits to a narrow margin, and the expense of new technology ensured that any would-be industrialists had already divested themselves of any genuine concern for the worker’s welfare (Larson 73–74, 138).

In the case of “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe,” we might say that the “simple machinery” of the plot that allows a “coming event” to “cast its shadow before” is actual machinery: the apparatus of an early textile industry whose spinning mills were cushioned from British competition by the 1807 Embargo Act and the War of 1812 and whose market share was suddenly eclipsed by the expensive machine technology of a massive enterprise like Lowell’s (Sellers 28). Hawthorne’s Higginbotham seems to have plunged full tilt into the modern capitalist economy, managing somehow to keep himself afloat—very possibly by accommodating the markets at the expense of labor. A former clerk, who “manifested but little grief at Mr. Higginbotham’s catastrophe,” insinuates that the man is a “crusty old fellow, as close as a vise” (Hawthorne 152–53). The businessman’s passion for economizing is corroborated, moreover, by Pike’s discovery that the squire “had in his service an Irishman of doubtful character, whom he had hired without a recommendation, on the score of economy” (87). Hawthorne insinuates that Higginbotham belongs to those small-scale manufacturers who sought out immigrant workers at low wages with little concern for the welfare of those local inhabitants they replaced. What bitterness the residents of Parker’s Falls reserved for the squire is only half-hinted at, however, when the storyteller poses it as a counterfactual. “So excessive was the wrath of the inhabitants” on discovering Dominicus Pike’s intelligence is faulty, the storyteller observes, “a stranger would have supposed that Mr. Higginbotham was an object of abhorrence at Parker’s Falls and that a thanksgiving had been proclaimed for his murder” (85)—not quite implying that the opposite is false (that is, that Mr. Higginbotham is an object of adoration, and that his unexpected restoration would provide occasion to celebrate), but not not implying it either.

And what of those would-be assassins who might be held liable for this ascendency of misinformation, the men who “successively, lost courage and fled” from Kimballton, abandoning the orchard where Higginbotham was to meet his maker(s) and leaving an apparently unsavory Irishman alone to
eliminate the boss (167)? Teresa Goddu proposes that Hawthorne painstakingly depicted these marauders as racially Other. In saddling the first “ill looking” traveler Pike encounters with a bundle on a stick, Goddu points out, Hawthorne “deploys the conventional printer’s image of the slave used in runaway slave advertisements” (“Hawthorne” 134). Having “blackened” this villain and his coconspirators, Hawthorne swaps class hostilities for racial conflict (134). Goddu maintains, moreover, that the near-assassination Hawthorne depicts is based on an actual homicide: the 1830 murder of the East India merchant Captain Joseph White, whose contract killing was ultimately pinned on Richard and George Crowninshield, both constituents of Salem’s merchant class, and apparently commissioned by businessmen Joe and Frank Knapp, brothers who thought themselves likely to inherit a fortune if Captain White died without a will (134). The “real rivalry” of the event is displaced not once, but twice, Goddu argues, so that in “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” the internal antagonisms and aggressions of the merchant class are recast as a working-class menace, one that can be “blackened” and finally “contained” (134). By contrast, in “Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Concord Freeman, and the Irish ‘Other,”’ Monica Elbert alerts us to the “rampant xenophobia” manifest in the tale’s distinctly anti-Irish attitudes (63), an added insult to the story’s “average racism.”

But this troupe of would-be assassins is not uniformly “blackened,” even if Hawthorne likens their civic status to the slave’s, nor is the Irishman alone sullied by the scheme to hang Higginbotham. Instead their racial heterogeneity is critical. Of the first, we have not got much in the way of description, though the “ill-looking fellow” speaks “rather sullenly” and pulls “the broad brim of a gray hat over his eyes” (150); the second, by contrast, is distinguished by his “deep tinge of negro blood” (155); and these two accessories to the crime abandon their Irish coconspirator to undertake the deed himself. Pike’s individuated encounters with this trio and Hawthorne’s attention to racial and ethnic distinctions indirectly reflect an interracial sociability most likely cultivated in Mr. Higginbotham’s employ. The three men (the first “unvarnished,” presumably white, the second black, the third Irish) in sequence might correspond to consecutive waves of labor in the market revolution (each man having been crowded out of a job by his successor). That these racially and ethnically differentiated parties banded together against a common enemy only to disperse, leaving each man to fend for himself, hints at the way that conflict related to ethnic and racial differences might crush the very possibilities for class solidarities that industrialization put in
place. More importantly, Hawthorne leads us to understand that Mr. Higginbotham prevails because the racial divisions that prevented his unhappy workforce from uniting against him.

These signposts of an interracial working-class history are indisputably present, and yet so understated as to make a martyr of Higginbotham and sweep aside the question of motive. It might be said, however, that as laborer’s associations federated in the New England Associations of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other Workingmen in the 1830s, conducting as many as 172 successful strikes between 1833 and 1836 in the Northeast alone (Sellers 338), Hawthorne’s proposition that three workingmen united in opposition to Mr. Higginbotham is as likely as its conclusion is not. A. H. Wood, who piloted the strike for the ten-hour day in Boston, called the struggle “neither more nor less than a contest between Money and labor,” and admitted to “arraying the poor against the principles of the rich, and if this be arraying the poor against the rich, I say go on with tenfold fury” (qtd. in Sellers 338). Hawthorne’s workingmen amount to only three, but they are criminal conspirators and they have cold feet besides. Consequently, the “singular combination of incidents” (163) by which the announcements of Higginbotham’s death precede his attempted murder coalesce in something other than a cautionary tale. The “catastrophe” in question, that “sudden and violent change in the physical order of things” (OED) which places the “old, identical Higginbotham” in the orchard, “not indeed hanging on the St. Michael’s pear-tree, but trembling beneath it” with a “sturdy Irishman” looming above him (166), is a temporary disruption of the social order, nothing more; Hawthorne makes a puzzle of proprietorial fantasy and a plaything of cause and effect.

Along these lines, it is worth pointing out that Hawthorne’s storyteller indulges a rather trivial anachronism in relating the heroic rescue of Higginbotham by that peddler Dominicus Pike. The story of Pike’s ascendency to Higginbotham’s estate is not just that of a peddler rising to join the bourgeois elite. It is also a story in which tobacco production usurps the hold of textiles on the New England economy. And yet cotton superseded tobacco, not the other way around. It was cotton in the South, after all, that paired with the mechanical inventions in the North to produce a textile industry of international significance—and one that would neither have been launched nor sustained without the labor of slaves and the growth of that peculiar institution. In fact, the depressed market for tobacco in the 1780s and 1790s led planters in the Chesapeake to issue manumissions (Howe 53); and if
the market for cotton was largely indigenous in the late eighteenth century, industrial textile production in Britain ensured that by 1820, cotton would replace tobacco as the nation’s preeminent export and remain in demand at home (Howe 132, 158). Why, then, in the story’s denouement do we discover that, having married the squire’s niece and inherited Higginbotham’s property, Dominicus Pike has now ceased to reside in Kimballton and has “established a large tobacco manufactory” in the storyteller’s “native village”? (167). Hawthorne has imagined a world without that “simple machinery” which made slavery once again profitable: Eli Whitney’s cotton gin.

And why, moreover, is Dominicus Pike’s tobacco manufactory set before us in the very first issue of “The Story Teller” as an enterprise that, with the exception of its “splendid image of an Indian chief in front,” appears to the narrator in the early morning fog as “an affair of smoke” (354)? Pike’s success in “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” (which we might call an extension of Hawthorne’s storyteller’s “pipedream”) is overdetermined or at least resolved in advance, by the frame of Hawthorne’s “The Story Teller,” which makes a fossil and a trophy of the “splendid image” of an American Indian and a prosperous merchant of the itinerant peddler. If a program of backward construction in the detective-story plot leads inexorably to an absolute narrative coherence, encouraging “anticipation of retrospection” in its readers, who might “continually project a diagram of the totality it [the story of the crime] will eventually constitute” (Brooks qtd. in Pyrhönen, Mayhem 10, Pyrhönen 10), the bit of underhanded prolepsis that propels Hawthorne’s story goes one better. It cues the reader of the discontinued serial “The Story Teller,” in which the tale “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” initially appeared, to the ultimate end and effects that that tale contrives: to achieve an upward mobility for that wandering salesman and teller of tales, Dominicus Pike, albeit at the expense of the three men who contrived to murder Mr. Higginbotham. Indeed, this preemptive finale implies by example that the itinerant storyteller will make good on his project of bartering tales for a livelihood as well—an outcome that no doubt appealed to the young and not-yet-successful author of “The Story Teller,” Nathaniel Hawthorne. The riddle “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” purports to unravel leverages another end: a perfectly lucrative resolution for Dominicus Pike.

To ascribe genius to the perfect resolution of a mystery was misguided, Poe pointed out in an August 9, 1846, letter to Philip Pendleton Cooke. After all, “Where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web that you yourself (the author)
have woven for the express purpose of unraveling?” (328). Poe likely viewed
the ratiocinative tale as a “program of deception that is eventually explained”
rather than an act of “imaginative expression” or even “genuine analysis,”
Stephan Rachman asserts, pointing out that “the moral activity which disen-
tangles” in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) suggests Poe was at least as
interested in the act of unraveling narrative as in the agent who could accom-
plish it (Rachman 18, 21). “The Man That Was Used Up” and “Mr. Higgin-
botham’s Catastrophe” use narrative retroversion to disentangle a “program
deception” that configure the social experience of an industrial-oriented
economy and the frontier violence that both complements and sustains it.
It is by this use of narrative retroversion, moreover, Poe and Hawthorne
entertain processes of racial formation in the world of production, as well
as prospects for interracial sociability and collectivity in the realm of work.
Their self-reflexive use of backward construction foregrounds its ideologi-
cal power, its assimilatory and exclusionary effects—though Poe more than
Hawthorne seems to have been alarmed by the gentrifying potential of this
narrative device. In Poe’s grotesque general we have a picture of a puzzle
form that turns a problem into a pastime and, in its resolution, suggests a
system for “restoring rational order to a psyche threatened with disruption”
(Cawelti 101). Yet interventions on the part of the black servant Pompey
briefly unsettle the cultural intervention that coordinates the antimonies of
Jacksonian America. And in “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe,” Dominicus
Pike, like Pompey, offers access to an image of interracial sociability, showing
potential for a reversal in the order of things—even if Pike’s melodramatic
rescue of the squire, who escapes certain death by a hair’s breadth, proves in-
strumental to the peddler’s enrichment. In these texts, narrative retroversion
systematizes and rationalizes practices of racial differentiation and frontier
violence that support an industrially oriented market economy. In doing so,
they signpost the early cultural functions of a narrative device whose work
is far from simple: to affix prepositions to propositions, like sinew to bone,
and reconstruct the past.