Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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Cultural Diet

Radway’s wish to separate reading from biology replicates a view of bodies and their relation to print culture that Michael Warner identifies with Benjamin Franklin: readers who “use and remake” popular romance achieve instrumental self-determination of the kind Franklin proposes in *The Autobiography*. Again, Radway’s approach alienates her from the very pleasures that readers seek in popular romance: titillation, sexual arousal, various affects enjoyed because they free us from the quotidian determinations of self. That women could speak objectively and articulately about their reading shows they were not mindless dupes of the culture industry. This logic resembles Franklin’s when he justifies breaking his pledge to eat no “animal Food” (29). Having “balanc’d some time between Principle and Inclination,” Franklin finally submits to the latter and dines “upon Cod very heartily,” but not before “Reason” excuses his behavior. Recalling that when the fish were gutted their stomachs held smaller fish, he decides that “if you eat one another, I don’t see why I mayn’t eat you.” Appetite gets its due, of course. Irony is as clear in Franklin’s story as it is missing from Radway’s. *Reading the Romance* locates agency in romance by abstracting from it “Reasons” not very romantic. This does more than validate women as, in Franklin’s words, “reasonable Creatures” (28). It reduces their practice to the instrumental calculation characteristic of the industry that produced it.\(^3\)

3. Radway validates the readers of popular romance novels by showing, like Tompkins, that they comply with recognized standards of value. In Tompkins, the standard is “work”; in Radway, it is a set of attributes widely ascribed to the proper liberal citizen, including individualism and self-determination.
Irony is missing in Warner too—at least about the body and its appetites. Irony that does concern him involves the citizen-self characterized as a composed, revised, and published text. Franklin’s self-publishing metaphor appears in *The Autobiography* most notably in his many “errata” of youth, which he remarks on retrospectively with self-deprecating humor of the kind we find in the fish-eating episode. Self-publishing transforms a series of cautionary anecdotes about youth into reflection on self-objectification as necessary to meet the needs of republican citizenship. By “self-splitting,” Franklin achieves “an internally privative relation to himself,” Warner says, one “negative and critical” insofar as his acting public self is manipulated by a thinking private one that is acknowledged only in the rhetorical pretense of self-denial. As a technology, publishing separates embodied speech from disembodied print, which has authority based on two things: its apparent disinterest (not linked to a speaker), and the power produced between impulse and publication in the space where editorial calculation occurs. Among Franklin’s calculations is how to increase his authority by increasing the appearance of disinterestedness. Of “great Advantage,” he remarks, is language that avoids aggression (“Certainly, undoubtedly”) through self-effacement (“I imagine it to be so, or it is so if I am not mistaken”) (14). This “gesture of self-negation repudiates personal authority in favor of general authority based on a negative relation to one’s own person.” The larger effect of this gesture was to abstract codes of rationality and citizenship removed from the personal and the particular. The personal and particular thus assumed a status threatening to reason and citizenship, with no particular more threatening than the personal body.

Warner never treats the “corruptive body” as more than an abstraction. Yet Franklin consistently identifies his “errata” in bodily terms. If Addison and Steele furnish Franklin’s model for writing and so the basis for his self-publishing trope, he then recalls another book “written by one Tryon” instructing him on the virtues of a “Vegetable Diet” (12). In both, Franklin seeks ideal public actions—eating and writing—based on codes abstracted from printed texts, *The Spectator* and William Tryon’s *Way to Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Franklin’s taste for fish defeats his dietary vow, but the tone of the episode suggests more at stake than reason corrupted by a hungry body. The triumph of inclination over principle causes him to sit and “eat with other People,” which he continues thereafter, “returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable Diet” (28). Eating together with others who have unprincipled

appetites resolves the problem for Franklin of republican sociability. Working in his brother’s print shop when he reads Tryon, Franklin profits from denying animal food; but he eats alone—a split with fellow workers that occurs again in London when he refuses to adopt local customs. Corruptive as it was, Franklin’s body resists negation, advancing him as a social as well as “reasonable Creature,” and tempering his wish to live according to abstract principles he either calculates himself or finds in books.

Yet eating “heartily” is not eating promiscuously, a distinction Franklin emphasizes. If abstract principles threaten sociability, Keimer warns against surrender to one’s appetites. Having himself grown tired of “the Doctrine of using no animal Food,” Keimer orders a pig to be roasted and invites guests to dinner. But the party is ruined when the pig arrives early and Keimer “could not resist the Temptation, and ate it all before we came” (29). Gluttony signals a larger problem in Keimer’s life, which is the lack of space between impulses and actions for calculation. This lack Franklin also generalizes in terms of publishing. Keimer breaks two rules that Franklin learned from his father about writing. One is to avoid poetry: “Verse-makers were generally Beggars” (10). The other is that “Manner in writing” is as essential as the validity of one’s claim, where revision enacts calculation between “Argument” and “expression.”

While Franklin learns to edit, Keimer, “Knave in his Composition,” “made Verses . . . but very indifferently. He could not be said to write them, for his Manner was to compose them in the Types directly out of his Head” (22). Self-splitting would seem to be needed, in diet and publishing.

I pursue this for two reasons. The first is that at key moments Radway and Warner convert the body to an abstraction. By Warner’s account, this abstraction is a “gesture of self-negation,” the stylistic pretense of objectivity that characterizes academic publication. This is not a problem of reducing bodies to language or to rationalizations like cultural work. Rather, it is the calculation whereby we seek authority the same way Franklin did, by effacing the personal as corruptive. The merits of academic objectivity are not my concern. Yet while Warner pursues the effects of self-denial on an abstract citizen, Franklin is aware that the “great Advantage” gained from this denial comes at a cost, which he negotiates by including in his Life not an abstract body, but a hungry one. The Autobiography is not verse; but it is not an instructional tract either. Franklin joins eating to the metaphor of publication through the poetic device of Tryon’s book. By linking eating to reading, where he obtained the doctrine

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6. Franklin adopts a vegetable diet as part of a scheme to save money and be more productive. But this set him apart from others: “My Brother and the rest going from the Printing House to their Meals, I remain’d there alone and dispatched presently my light repast” (The Autobiography, 12).
of good diet, Franklin locates it in the sphere of appetites, producing effects just as bodily and just as subject to corruption. If Tryon’s calculation set Franklin on a course to health and wealth, it also denied him food and society.

Again, we must not overstate. Keimer’s is a powerful example of where Franklin stood on the relative merits of principle and inclination. But his qualification is vital in that a poetics of sociability provides room to maneuver in an instructional grammar dominated by calculations of health and wealth. My second reason for pursuing a line through Radway and Warner is that this room helps us understand such maneuvering by workingmen, who in their reading and their bodily lives still plague critics even while in rising to new heights of self-negated citizenship we have rejected the biased formalism of the past and embraced a more inclusive critical practice. Like Franklin, whose irony covers the gap between appetite and diet, George Thompson derides himself, mocking not so much behavioral codes, which in most cases he accepts, but the rhetoric used to advance them—rhetoric that threatens America’s wider democratic commitments. For us, treating reading as an appetite lessens the chance that by indulging our own dietary idealism we negate the bodies that consumed it.

I turn now to two texts that resist the usual abstraction produced when we position reading in the history of ideas, politics, and so forth. One is Benjamin Baker’s *A Glance at New York,* which among other things suggests how workingmen felt about eating and about themselves as bodies. The other is *My Life; or The Adventures of George Thompson,* which caricatures Franklin’s autobiography, with Thompson, also a “Knave in his Composition,” representing Keimer’s point of view. *My Life* reads much like Thompson’s fiction, a series of vulgar, disconnected escapades punctuated by scenes of grotesque violence. This says less about the book’s factual reliability, than the recreational needs it served. Opposing the self-splitting moralism that dominated approved reading for men, Thompson begins his *Life* as a young runaway, printer’s boy, budding reader, writer, and would-be moral exemplar. “I’ll be a printer!” he declares his first day a free man in New York. “Franklin was one, and he, like myself, was fond of rolls.” He had just breakfasted on rolls, three in fact, which he ate with great relish. Thompson declares himself “somewhat of a gourmand,” referring to his size (“two hundred pounds and over”) and impulse to overindulge all appetites in what he calls “fast living” (6, 14) (figure 14). These he acquires early in life and in a variety of forms. Where Franklin arrives in Philadelphia and a Quaker shows him to respectable lodgings, Thompson falls in with a young delinquent named Jack Slack, and after an evening sampling brandy cocktails, the two retire for the night to a brothel.

Parody of *The Autobiography* begins an attack on an ethic of self-improvement that took as its model Franklin’s industry and self-denial. Thompson depicts Franklin-inspired standards of conduct as oppressive and a threat to American democracy. Such standards he identifies with his uncle who raised him and who, alarmed by his growing sensuality (and girth), locks up the food and beats him for resisting the “luxury of abstinence” (6). Thompson flees, but his master, Mr. Romaine, turns out to be just as repressive and, worse, a hypocrite. Despite also being involved in an adulterous affair, Romaine catches his wife with a lover and kills them both. “How prone are many people to lose sight of their own imperfections, while they censure and severely punish the failings
of those who are not a whit more guilty than themselves!” (29). Thompson blames the difference between appetites and principles for cruelty ranging from corporal punishment and vendetta justice to blacklisting and stigma attached to traditional working pleasures such as drink. Romaine accepts his guilt, but not the punishment of others. “The gallows,” he remarks, “no, no, I must avoid that!” (33). He then stabs himself with the very knife used to slay his wife, condemned to suffer the same punishment he inflicts on others, except that his is self-administered.

As we have seen, reading was widely regarded as a means of succeeding in the new economy. Some indication of where Franklin figured in this promise can be gathered from a banner born by members of the New York Apprentices’ Library in the parade celebrating the opening of Erie Canal. On it was painted two books, the Bible and “Life of Franklin.”8 Here Franklin figured both conduct expected of ambitious young men and the role reading played in getting ahead. However, crediting what Harvey Graff calls “the literacy myth” did not rule out ambivalence, toward behavioral codes themselves and toward reading as a way to realize them.9

Thompson understood this ambivalence, along with the recreational opportunities it presented. He understood, like Franklin, that health and wealth aside, reading like Tryon’s was not the way to happiness. It made men work harder and denied them pleasure, especially in their bodies. Its methods were also repressive, replacing corporal punishment with forms of coercion equally painful. Between impulse and action, emotions like shame and honor were inserted to make men behave. Franklin did this using reasonableness and dietary principles, which he ranges in scenes where appetites finally determine actions, mediating the gap with humor and sociability. Thompson does the same, except that he treats reading as embodying, not just a metaphor of consumption, but a practice that fed appetites whose embarrassments closed the split republican self. Thompson closes it himself when he joins reading and eating in the history of his disciplining. His uncle beat him for two reasons: wasting time with books, and stealing food from the house larder. This pairing of crimes reflects a joint complex of values associated with eating and reading that operated materially as well as analogically in the lives of workingmen. If Thompson’s fat marked his success in resisting the rhetoric of self-denial, it also indicates what happened to men when they read him.

Food itself is a good place to start. Among countless mundane facts Richard Stott turns up about working life in antebellum New York is one highly

9. Harvey J. Graff, The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City.
apropos any attempt to materialize the male working body: it was very well fed. Workingmen ate a lot of meat: two, often three times a day; beef and pork, mainly; not “stretched,” but fried in large pieces and choice cuts. The numbers are worth contemplating.

Estimated annual consumption per person in the 1850s and 1860s ranges from 152 to 187 pounds of beef and from 221 to 257 pounds of all meat. On a weekly basis, the figures are 2.9 to 3.6 pounds of beef and 4.2 to 4.9 pounds of meat. (The 1984 American totals are 106 pounds of beef and 176 pounds of meat yearly—2.0 pounds of beef and 3.4 pounds of meat per person per week.)

Meat rivaled grain as a staple. But even grain was excellent: mainly wheat, mainly in white bread. Vegetables, grains, and dairy products were cheap and high quality. Calorie intake astonished immigrants. English watchmaker John Harold recorded his boardinghouse fare: “Beef Steaks, fish, hash, ginger cakes, buckwheat cakes, etc [sic] such a profusion as I never saw before at the breakfast tables.” An unidentified proofreader provides a similar list: “hot beef-steaks (cut from the ribs), mutton chops, fish, fried potatoes, boiled potatoes, huckleberries and sugar [. . .] fresh butter, [and] new bread.”

The New York Shamrock Society warned arriving Irish to beware of the abundance they were soon to encounter, “animal food” in particular. Faced with such luxury, they often ate until they were sick.

In part, this was a result of the economics of American food production: large tracts of agricultural land in the Midwest coupled with moneyed, centralized urban markets. But these conditions serviced another economy in the producing bodies of men. Immigrants were also astonished by the intensity of American work and stamina of American workers. Both they linked to food. Far from considering his daily fare a luxury, one Irish worker commented, “we need it all, I can tell you, to do the work.” Indeed, some could not do the work, but here again food was the deciding factor. Cabinetmaker Henry Price attributes his demotion to varnisher in America to weakness caused by “Insufficient food dole’d out” in the English workhouse where he was raised. Others took time and

“comfortable feeding” before they could match the endurance of native workers. Stott carefully avoids claiming that diet caused the productivity of American workingmen. But he leaves little doubt that this productivity depended on working bodies charged with cheap, abundant, good-quality food.

Nor did food cause workingmen to require rowdy entertainment—any more than vitality did, or strength. Working bodies were not just well nourished; they were in peak physical condition from years of hard, fast-paced labor. And they were bored, a state that caused stress among the growing numbers of men who worked in the new manufacturing, where long hours were not the only problem. “Work, work, work” was repetitive, highly regulated, and dull; when the day ended, they looked for excitement. Yet boredom too fails to explain the productivity of U.S. workers or the kinds of recreation they enjoyed.

But we cannot ignore these factors, even when the usual explanations pertain, class struggle, for example. As hard as men worked, Stott finds little to indicate a work ethic that turned labor into anything more than a source of money they would rather have obtained in an easier way. Worse, most were men whose trades were being capitalized, a process that devalued skills, denied advancement, and commoditized labor. Apprentices, journeymen, even master craftsmen were denied traditional means to enact themselves as citizens and men. And whatever expectations were raised by reading, new means were frustrated by wages too unstable to advance all but a few. The result was bitterness, which conflicted with codes meant only to produce more labor. This did not stop men from laboring more, which they did to an extraordinary degree. But the reason was not competition for jobs. In labor men found recognition in an economy that took away other forms of positive identity. Working bodies become emphatically material. Strength and stamina were foundational virtues in a form of masculinity equally hostile and ironic—ironic in that it granted employers the labor they required, but in bodily terms that threatened the wider social order they ruled.

The exemplary figure was Mose, Bowery B’hoy paragon and hero of Glance at New York. Baker’s play consists of a series of comic vignettes in which Mose repeatedly saves a young greenhorn, George Parsells, from various shady characters who prey on inexperience. Like Thompson, Baker drew on the belief that one form or another of sharp-dealing robbed ordinary Americans of


republican prosperity. He also appealed to an audience that followed the same perilous path from country to city as George Parsells. Within months of his New York debut, Mose was playing to packed houses across the country. He also turned up in popular fiction, fighting and brawling, but always looking out for the unfortunate. As a volunteer fireman in Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Mysteries of New York*, he throws himself into a burning building to rescue an old woman and her daughter, Eliza, who later becomes his “g’hal.”

Tall, swaggering, powerfully built, Mose embodied male energy barely contained by the channeling structures of productive labor.

Mose was also a butcher. Again like Thompson, Baker joins food and culture, here in a protagonist that purveyed not just meat, but high protein entertainment to large numbers of disaffected urban workers. Mose did more than embody male energy; he animated it and gave it form. His effect on audiences was electric. As one commentator remarked, “Mose, instead of appearing on stage, was in the pit, the boxes, and the gallery.” He was also on the street in front of the Astor Place Theater in 1849 when Bowery B’hoys staged a riot in which the State militia killed twenty-two by way of containing overflowing male energy. Violence was not the only disciplinary action. In response to Mose’s role in constituting rowdy male bodies, post-riot writers, actors, and theater owners softened his character, reducing his aggression in particular. This softening appears in a passage from *Linda the Cigar Girl* (1856), where Mose speaks on a girl’s behalf after she is turned away from a wealthy home.

I thought when a poor girl was perishing in the streets, the proudest mansion in the land was a hospital to succour her. You call her a pauper; look well upon her, and then tell me if her form is not as fair as the proudest of you here; clasp on her arms the gems that glitter there on yours, and tell me if they lose their lustre. No! they fade in brightness only when worn by one whose heart-streams are so corrupted she cannot feel a throb of pity for one of her own sex who lies dying at her feet.

16. Ned Buntline [Edward Judson], *Three Years After; A Sequel to the Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 14–16. In a later play, Mose marries Liz, the quintessential Bowery G’hal.

17. William Northall, *Before and Behind the Curtain; or, Fifteen Years’ Observations among the Theatres of New York*, 92.

18. Bowery B’hoys were young men from the Bowery section of New York whose toughness and distinctive dress made them icons of an emerging working-class masculinity. Peter Buckley provides an extensive account of the cultural politics surrounding Mose, the B’hoys, and the Astor House Riot, a nativist debacle in which hundreds rioted because an English actor, William Macready, appeared at the Astor House Theater (“To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860,” 294–409).

19. Buckley, “To the Opera House,” 396. Of the many plays that Mose appeared in, only
This intervention in the culture men consumed continued to the point where Mose was, in Peter Buckley’s words, “little more than a walking conscience for the bourgeoisie,” his brawling defense of the weak now reduced to supplicating appeals for pity and charity.20

Eating and theater were not just alike. They were linked as correlative determinants of male conduct, simultaneously figurative and metabolic. Eating was a cultural act that enacted labor value in terms beyond exploitation. Food was essential to production, so it could not be cut. This explains the confrontational edge in the Irish worker’s defense of comfortable feeding: “we need it all, I can tell you, to do the work.” The disparity between wages and food appears when the same worker, reminded that he got “three times the Irish wages,” replied that he also “did six times the Irish work.”21 Pride in doing “the work” joined offense at the inequity between productivity and pay. Food challenged this inequity, giving bitterness agency by being tied to an activity in which men continued to have some degree of economic say.

And if eating was theater, it was also more. Reformers like William Alcott and Sylvester Graham condemned dietary license: late suppers, foreign foods, the “free use of fresh-meat . . . richly prepared dishes . . . tea and coffee and wine and . . . other stimulants with which civic life is unwisely cursed.”22 All excited young workers with a “civic diet” that produced bodies intimidating in their productivity and their strength. Baker links this intimidation directly to food. Midway through the play, a scene opens with Mose delivering meat to a wealthy home. “Say, look a-here you,” he says to a group of street cleaners, “if you kick up such a dust as that when I’m passin’, to spile my beef, I’ll lam you!”23 They stop, leaving the street unswept to accommodate Mose. He behaves similarly in a scene that concludes the play set in a restaurant, where he is now the consumer. “Look a-here you,” he says to the waiter using the same hostile idiom to order a plate of pork and beans, “a large piece of pork, and don’t stop to count de beans.” When the waiter asks if there is anything else, a legitimate appetite turns bad: “Yes—a brandy skin!” (33). Mose figures the mixed blessing of workers who in their bodily capacity to produce became a bodily threat to production, here depicted as a defiant appetite. He also suggests how men

Benjamin Baker’s *Glance at New York* survives. But there are fragments, such as this one from *Linda the Cigar Girl*, staged at the Louisville Theatre, 5 November 1856. See Buckley, “To the Opera House,” 396–99.

metabolized this threat by performing acts of literal embodiment, eating. For men reduced to bodily energy, eating fused calories and spite in a reiterated gesture of negative self-assertion.  

_A Glance at New York_ performed acts of like dietary fusion. Mose’s trade engaged feelings associated with meat as the publication of male bodily power. Of fifty-two men arrested at the Astor House Riot, butchers outnumbered other trades two to one. Buckley explains the disparity by pointing out that New York butchers escaped capitalization through city ordinances that restricted competition in their trade, leaving traditional work styles intact and giving butchers an air of invulnerability. He also suggests that visibility in the streets and markets enhanced these qualities, making butchers natural leaders.  

But butchers had a reputation beyond New York for causing trouble, from riots to random acts of street violence, including assaults on public authorities. Better to say, then, that butchers enacted something more visceral in terms of public identification, not only independence, but how independence was secured: strong, seemingly invincible male bodies that capital simultaneously needed and feared. Butchers staged this message in the violence of a craft that produced energy in its most productive, yet menacing form: as meat, abundant and empowering; as flesh, volatile and ungovernable. Butchers performed public violence with no thought to the material costs whereby bodies are subject to restraint. Beyond the streets and marketplaces, Mose staged this message, not in the spectacle of public slaughter, but in a performance that purveyed its material self-assurance.

In producing cheap reading, Thompson purveyed the same self-assurance. He did this in part by tapping, like Baker, the pleasures of eating as an activity in which he retained economic power. _My Life_ is mainly the life of Thompson’s appetites, which defied all efforts to contain them, including his own. This meant more than celebrating bodily license. Thompson exploited the power that reading shared with eating, which is that both were essential to production. Workers wanted reading and got it. It was cheap, abundant, and good quality. Much remained true to the aims of reformers bent on saving men from “degrading vice and ruinous crimes.” But much qualified as what Henry  

24. This is a difficult point to make when we typically treat eating as political only in combination with a cultural category like cuisine or an economic one like hunger. I mean the actions of consuming: biting, chewing, swallowing. The best case I can make that these actions metabolized both calories and spite comes from working for food. Farm laborers are often poorly paid, but they are fed on the job. Food acquires obligatory status when placed before men who do physical labor for no other reward. Only a shortsighted farmer underfeeds men who need an equal supply of calories and motivation to work under these conditions.


Ward Beecher called “black lettered.” Most fell somewhere in between as all reading became subject to market forces. Beginning in 1833 with the country’s first penny newspaper, *The New York Sun*, workingmen enjoyed a widening array of accessible reading designed to entertain: serial novels, urban exposés, police reports, criminal biographies, and more, including reform literature like Beecher’s, which was often itself so lurid it brought charges of salaciousness. Many saw such reading as the greatest danger of modern life. Its authority as reading blurred disciplinary boundaries. It fired the imagination and aroused evil desires. As productive as reading could be, it turned bad all too easily, providing, once again, an opportunity for negative self-assertion.

There are two points to make here. The first is to emphasize reading’s bodiliness, which Thompson signifies in his preoccupation with appetites and references to Franklin, whose *Autobiography* exemplified reading deemed good insofar as it objectified working bodies, instrumentalized them for productive ends. In its effects on conduct, reading was regarded as an act no less bodily than eating. Good reading produced reliable workers and orderly citizens; bad reading had a direct relation to fast living. All reading moved readers: good reading moved them productively; bad excited and enflamed, causing illness and insanity, by some accounts, and leading to other wrongs like masturbation and drink. Bad reading was in every sense a bad appetite.

The second point extends from the fact that whatever confidence they displayed, the power of workingmen had limits, as the New York militia made clear. These were inherent in eating and reading in that whatever defiance they enacted, they also transformed men into just what capital needed: remarkably productive workers. Again pertinent is Roger Lane’s conclusion that crime decreased in the period and men behaved better. This is the inverse irony of male bodily power and it turns up as the most significant recreational content of the culture men consumed.

In *A Glance at New York* this content involves food and the ambivalence of men for whom recognition depended on posing an ultimately self-immolating threat to public order. Observing Mose’s exchange with the waiter in the closing scene of the play is his girlfriend, Lize, who arrives with another girl she meets along the way.

JENNY. Say, Lizey, can't you wring me in?
LIZE. I suppose I can with hard squeezin’—but that Mose of mine is such a dear fellow—he don't care for expense—not he—he thinks there's no gal like me in this village. You ought see him in the market once, I tell you—

how killin’ he looks! De way he takes hold of de cleaver and fetches it down is sinful! Dere’s no mistake but he’s one of de b’hoys! (32)

Lize affirms our account of butchering as definitively masculine. It causes excitement, obviously eroticized, which extends to hostility in ordering their meal. Mose’s conduct is mainly show—for public consumption. That Lize is the main consumer (watching and eating) indicates the less repressive, yet still material limits placed on male bodies. He is “squeezed,” not by restaurant portions, but by Lize’s expectation. “A cup of coffee,” she says when asked for her order, “and nine doughnuts!” (33). A few minutes later, Mose is struck by her appetite: “Lize! Why don’t you come along? Don’t be eaten up all de man has in de house!” (34). They are not married; the domestic reference represents Mose’s tenuous hold on power. Workers were not just out-muscled by the state. As Stott points out, they typically remained well fed only while single. Add a family, and the conditions of working-class poverty ensued, including hunger—and disgrace for the expected provider.

Mose performs his role effortlessly, joining productivity and violence in the final moments when Lize leaves her pile of donuts and holds his coat so he can join in a brawl: “Bravo! Mose, go to it!” Later I address the power of femininity to direct the actions of men, including their violence. Important here is the fact that Lize uses it to require Mose’s self-sacrifice as a worker and provider. In so doing, and in assuming liability for the gap between self-assurance and the harsh reality of working life, Lize becomes Baker’s chief recreational object. The script gives no indication how her voracious appetite was staged. But we can assume that it was not very flattering.

Six years later, Thompson was no more flattering in using a gluttonous appetite to characterize his delinquent desires. That he targets himself rather than an external object (Lize) signals his interest in the irony of male bodily power. Caught stealing food from his uncle’s cupboard, Thompson recounts how as “rather a stout youth” he runs away “to do [and eat] as I please,” reducing rebellion from republican virtue to boyhood oral fantasy. “I’m going in,” he shouts (Mose’s battle cry), and despite being twelve years old and outnumbered, he wins his liberty, breaking his uncle’s leg in the bargain (My Life, 8). As I said, Thompson’s fat registers his success in resisting the official rhetoric of denial. But it also infers softening of the kind we see in Mose, in Henry Stuart, and in men generally as they adjusted to new conditions. In figuring this adjustment as fat, Thompson suggests ambivalence toward male disciplining and toward eating as a mixed performative signifier. If food was power, it was also the means of exploitation. Once fed, men worked; once they had families, they worked harder. Also lurking in Thompson’s fat is pacification: pleasures
gained, freedom won, but in a sphere clearly limited, where pretense distracts from battles already lost. He succeeds in trouncing his uncle, but heroism he claims only makes him look silly, like Mose threatening a waiter over a plate of beans.

Thompson’s appeal stemmed from his negotiating the opposed meanings connoted by his size: a fantasy of confidence metabolized in activities like eating and reading, and actual conditions to which workingmen submitted and increasingly approved. Thompson acknowledges this opposition by burlesquing Franklin rather than debating him. First he does this in his treatment of appetites, which, as we have seen, represent a domain in which men challenged the rising dominance of capital. But appetites were objects of ambivalence. If Thompson celebrates his escape from an oppressive upbringing, much of My Life recounts his struggle between “fast living” and a deeply internalized wish to reform. He allegorizes this struggle in his relation to Jack Slack, the young man he meets his first night in the city. Fleeing the brothel where they spend the night, Thompson rejects Jack as his “evil genius,” the personification of all his wayward impulses. He finally kills Jack in a barroom brawl, signaling alienation from appetites and male society. Moving from city to city, Thompson searches not for adventure, but escape from evil ways and bad company.

He fails. But defeat he treats with “philosophy,” thoughtful resignation toward social standards he either cannot attain or are not worth the sacrifices they entail. Moving to Boston, and following a meditative visit to the new Bunker Hill monument, Thompson joins the “Uncles and Nephews,” a club whose name reflects the reconciliation of disciplinary and bodily desire he failed to achieve with his real uncle. Brawling and debauch lead to atonement and regret among club members. Tolerance is based on humor and mutuality, as shared vices provide grounds for sociability of the kind Franklin obtains in others who share his errant appetites. The point assumes republican proportions when, dressed as Falstaff, Thompson marches in a July 4th parade and pens an “ode to liberty” praising “the sublime moral spectacle afforded by a people arising in their might to throw off the yoke of bondage and assert their independence” (My Life, 85). His costume suggests the less than utopian reality of the democratic sublime. But flawed or not, freedom is better than standards that threaten to renew oppression and destroy fellowship.

Thompson applied “philosophy” to his writing too, suggesting the more significant way he spoofs The Autobiography. If Thompson shared Franklin’s commitment to writing, like Keimer, he moved directly from impulse to action, calculating his compositions just as “fast” as his life. By his own account, he wrote two novels during a brief stay in jail. The Independence Day verse “of considerable length” he “dashed off” in forty-five minutes. Speed produced
narratives fragmented and erratic. Discrepancies abound, as do digressions like those in *My Life* on the Helen Jewett murder and advice for young drinkers. Printers too were careless, riddling the book with errors from typos and missing text to cropping in mid-page. Stray letters appear, a cluster at one point. *My Life* was also fast in its contents: lewd, vulgar, gross. Thompson had special talent for violence: blood spurting from Mrs. Romaine’s breast, a bullet piercing her lover’s brain, Jewett’s half-naked body lying across her “couch of sin.” He had a knack for sex too, which he approached with great creativity. Traveling to Pittsburgh with a woman disguised as a man, he is struck when the daughter of a farmer becomes infatuated with her: “The idea of a woman falling in love with one of her own sex is rather rich” (57).

Thompson’s books were trash, cheap in their quality of production and the pleasures they sought to provide. Whatever else it was—a critique of popular reform, a theory of republican community, a memoir—Thompson’s *Life* had a prurient surface as obvious as his less than philosophical motives in writing it. This surface indicates the defining form of enjoyment obtained from reading like *The House Breaker*. One way to put this is to say Thompson inverted the values of good reading, producing a counter-aesthetic in a culture bent on the productive rationalization of working life. But lost in such a formulation is the bodiliness of this aesthetic, which Thompson emphasizes in his shift in self-characterization as a writer from Franklin (who revised) to Falstaff (who “dashed off”). Bad books did more than pacify or “remake the expressive modes and codes forged initially by others.” They engaged workingmen bodily in an activity that re-formed them bodily. At issue is not compensations obtained from books, but adaptations metabolized in reading. Thompson incited these adaptations just as Falstaff did parading his fat obscenely down the street, closing the self-objectifying split that was key to the Franklin project and that was radicalized in the angry, hyperproductivity of workingmen. Consuming Thompson drew these men into bodily disclosures of what they were and were not. This opened them bodily to adjustments in their lived experience of disciplinary culture.