

Biographies and the American Renaissance

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Introduction

There is a strong tradition and high popularity of biographies in the United States. The position of the biography can be situated in the middle ground between literature and history. In particular, there are numerous biographies of the Founding Fathers. The American Revolution needed to document its justification through the stories of the individuals who led the newly founded country to democracy. The American biography has greatly contributed to creating a national identity and culture. In the nineteenth century, Jared Sparks succeeded in editing a series of biographies of men and women who made the country into America, and his efforts correlated with the rise of an American national literature. Recall the mega-hit musical *Hamilton*, based on the biography of Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow. Needless to say, the reason the musical *Hamilton* was received so enthusiastically stems from Lyn-Manual Miranda's theme and music, which exhibit the strength of the United States in terms of its diversity and history of immigration. However, the musical also reminds us of the fact that the American biography demonstrates how the American people embrace the character of representative men and women due to their exploits.

According to Richard Hofstadter, the beginning of the writing of American history was supposedly carried out by local historians, who mainly wrote the stories of the heroes who were involved in the American Revolution.¹ Then, in the nineteenth century, there came the age of historians, who indefatigably researched original documents to write. History established itself a recognized academic discipline, and in 1839, Jared Sparks became the first professor of history at Harvard University. With this academic recognition, history became more scientific.² However, romantic history gained popularity among readers. To use Hofstadter's explanation, "for them

¹ Richard Hofstadter analyzed three progressive historians in 1920s and to make contrast to them, he explained how historians were in early America. (Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historian*.)

² I refer to Scott E. Casper and Ikuno Saiki on biography and Jared Sparks. (Scott E. Casper, *Construction American Lives*; Ikuno Saiki, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: The Politics of Biography and the Future of Capitalism").

the purpose of historical writing was to establish an imaginative relation with the past, not to analyze but to re-create it” (13). Moreover, he added that “foremost was the experience of major heroic characters. Character was best portrayed against the background of some sublime natural scene, some militant arena of strife and self-assertion—the forest, the sea, the field of battle—where animal energies and the hardy virtues are at a premium.” In due course, the stories of heroes were narrated by romantic historians, and the genre of biography was established.

The elements of biography could be found both in history and literature and biography was developed in line with the establishment of history as academic discipline and national literature. However, any consideration of biography was not included to a study of literature. It is due to reconsider how biography exerted its influence on American culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that character “is conceived as a certain undemonstrable force.” I will examine the trajectory of the American biography, which developed in multifaced efforts to create a national character for democracy, and I will reconsider its popularity in relation to the response of American Renaissance writers.

1. Literature in the Age of the Waking of the New Nation

As Scott E. Casper argues, the nineteenth century should be called “biographical mania.” He explains that “more than this, biographies and critics and readers alike believed that biography had the power to shape individuals’ lives and character and to help define America’s national character” (2). He investigated biographies and ideas about biography in the age of the waking of the new nation. His research shows that numerous kinds and volumes of biographies had been published since the late eighteenth century, most of which tried to connect “individual character and the broader meaning of America’s history” (4). In this regard, American biographies were designed to develop the ideal of the founding the United States and, therefore, biographies were characterized by didacticism and nationalism. However, we should be careful about the range of the reading public during the Revolutionary era. In early America, literacy was considered to be limited to educated people, and these educated people were supposed to be male. According to David D. Hall, “female literacy in New England, the region for which we have the most careful studies, had reached 80

percent or higher by 1790, after rising steadily throughout the century” (172).³ A recent study of the borrowing of books and the sharing of newspapers and periodicals revealed another dimension of the reading public. The influence of women should be taken into account when we consider the development of biographies. Research tells us that many women wrote about their own experiences using the American rhetoric of the republic and some of them made a success of writing the sentimental novel. While women’s writings were also didactic, the women of this time were stimulated by the social upheaval of the American Revolution, which contained within its rational political discourse an element of patriarchal subversion. Cathy Davidson, who recounts the reading public or interpretative community of the Revolutionary era, argues that the novel emerged in this time as a vehicle for expressing the subversive emotions that the Revolution inevitably involved.⁴ The popularity of biographies could be traced to the fact that sentimental novels by women writers were popular during the age of the founding of the nation. The plot of sentimental novels often showed the trajectory of unfortunate young ladies who were misled by immoral acts perpetrated by their male counterparts and who eventually lost their chastity. The sentimental novel was considered to emphasize the importance of virtue, which was also needed to nurture loyalty to the new nation. The didacticism in the sentimental novel eventually inculcated morality and patriotism, just as biographies depicted an exemplary American life. In that sense, the writings of women writers could be understood as being parallel to the emergence of biographies in terms of their cultural context.

The trend of sentimental novels by women writers peaked in the mid-nineteenth century, and there came the age of biographies. However, we cannot ignore the fact that early American novels often emphasized that they were based on real stories and that most sentimental novels depicted the life of a fallen woman for whom the reader could feel sympathy. Thus, the biographers of the next generation could have known the subversive narrative structure of the sentimental novel and might have experimented with every possible rhetorical voice of the sentimental novel. Moreover, the literature of the next century could have resulted from this reconstruction and intensification of the varied range of sentimental novels.

³ David Hall investigated the history of books and argued that historical research had long neglected the investigation of popular culture. (David D. Hall, *Culture of Print*).

⁴ Cathy Davidson argues that “early American novelists faced the special task of creating literature against the overwhelming impact of their nation’s residual Colonial mentality” (11). (Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*). I argued before that Hanna Foster’s *Coquette* contained subversive elements in its sentimental story. Mikayo Sakuma, “The Coquette: The Plight of an American Woman.”

2. History and Biography in the Nineteenth Century

To consider the relationship between history and biography, we should pay attention to the emergence of historical research. In 1839, Jared Sparks was appointed the first professor of history at Harvard University. He edited the *Library of American Biography* series, which included sixty men and women and whose total size reached 25 volumes. Sparks spent enormous time and money to collect genuine documents to write authentic biographies because he faced hardships with regard to conducting historical research on America. Richard Hofstadter illuminates the difficult conditions for historical research at the beginning of the nineteenth century. First, “at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were as yet no general historians of the United States, no established patterns for national historians” (9), because there were only local historians who endeavored to record local history during the Revolution with limited archival collections. Therefore, it was difficult to expect accuracy from general histories of the United States in the writings of such local historians. Second, Hofstadter points out the expectations of the American people, who wanted to legitimate American history because they felt that they “lacked in a sense of time” and could try “to make up by an enlarged sense of space” (6). This led people to mystify the origin of the country and resulted in a difficult starting point for historian, as he argues that “in the common American opinion, the heroic conduct that made the revolution and the wise statecraft that made the Constitution showed that the country was launched under the leadership of men who were virtual demigods and under institutions that were close to perfection” (7). In regard to this inclination toward regionalism and perfectionism, Hofstadter analyzes that “American historians in the nineteenth century were in the main a conservative class of men writing for a conservative public.” Sparks, who tried to establish historical research in a scientific way, started to write history in an objective manner to overcome this conservatism and endeavored to circumvent the poor conditions in the United States to write a general history of the United States.

To examine the trajectory of the relationship between history and biography, we can refer to the biographies of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin wrote his autobiography, and upon its publication, it became a perennial bestseller. Franklin started his autobiography by addressing it to his illegitimate son to provide guidance for life, and the work continued to the period during which Franklin negotiated in England for the American Independence. According to Toshio Watanabe, Franklin’s autobiography experienced a series of interruptions and transformations since he changed his motive

in writing his autobiography because of his relationship with his son, who became a royalist in the American Revolution. The second part of Franklin's autobiography was not for his son but for the general reader, and this change also transformed the style of the autobiography from a private to a public narrative. Franklin's autobiography ultimately proceeded to a fourth part, which contained only a few pages and was apparently written during his dying days (Watanabe 8).⁵ Such change from the private narrative to the public narrative is suggestive when we consider biography in relation to history and literature.

With the popularity of his autobiography, biographies of Franklin were also published by various writers. Indeed, Sparks wrote a biography of Franklin, but to meet the criteria of the discipline, his approach was particularly scientific. Sparks not only wrote a biography of Franklin but also edited the writings of Franklin.⁶ In doing so, on the one hand, he presented a biography as history, and on the other hand, he made it possible for the general public to examine the historical facts about the subject of the biography.

When Sparks became a professor of history and published the *Library of American Biography Series*, many authors published biographies of the Founding Fathers. Hofstadter argues that "those biographies gave testimony to the demand for such literature and the possible profits of writing it and served the double function of strengthening national feeling and defining character models for the young." Interestingly, those books were published in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the need for a national literature was discussed among New York journalists such as Evert A. Duyckinck.⁷ Duyckinck launched the *Library of American Books* and tried to establish American literature in line with the statement of his friend Joel Headley: "we should have an American Literature, an American school of art, as well as a peculiar form of self-government." This zeal might have been due to foreign criticism, such as that published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820, which they probably would have read:

The American are a brave, industrious and acute people; but they have hitherto given no indication of genius, and made no approaches to the heroic, either in their morality or *character*. They are but a recent offset indeed from England;

⁵ I refer to the introduction to *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* [フランクリン自伝] by Toshio Watanabe.

⁶ *Essays on General Politics, Commerce and Political Economy: The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, 2 vols. Edited by Jared Sparks, Hilliard, Gray & Company, 1836.

⁷ Edward L. Widmer investigated the political and cultural background of New York journalism mainly in New York. Edward L. Widmer, *Young America*.

and should make it their boast, for many generations to come, that they are sprung from the same race with Bacon and Shakespeare and Newton···(my emphasis).

Establishing an original culture would have been an urgent need not only for journalists but also for literary people. In this regard, it was possible to connect American biography and American literature and to expect synergistic effects. In this sense, we can consider the relationship between biographies and novels, which are often cross-referenced in terms of their subversive relationship with one another. Any consideration of the subversive nature of literature should refer to the study of popular culture and the reaction to it. As David Reynolds argues, “to study the cross-influences and dynamics between the major and minor writers is to participate in the democratic spirit of the major authors themselves, all of whom in various ways expressed their profound debt to lesser writers” (4).⁸ As he points out, the formation of American character in the nineteenth century consumes and advances the vein of lesser writings in the recognition of the age, as I argue in regard to the Revolutionary era. We should not dismiss the fact that in terms of popularity, lesser writers had often gained popularity among the general reading public and that major writers also sought different aims from such popularity. Thus, Reynolds argues as follows: “There is, however, an important distinction between sensational themes as they appear in popular literature and as they are transformed in America’s central literary texts. The major writers fully absorbed the paradoxes of sensational literature but mightily resisted the prevailing tendency toward vulgarization and inhumanity in popular culture” (225). It can be said that the women writers of the sentimental novels during the Revolutionary era and lesser writers Reynold mentioned could have shared the same position and latent nature of subversive influence to the dominant culture. Then in the age of biographical mania, what did American Renaissance writers think of such popular biographies in relation to the rise of American literature?

3. Biographies and The American Renaissance

Mid-nineteenth century America witnessed the establishment of American literature as a national literature, and the age was later called the American Renaissance.⁹

⁸ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*. All his subsequent citations are taken from this version.

⁹ F.O. Matthiessen argues that “[i]t may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*; but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America’s way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture” (vii).

The works of Washington Irving, who is said to have obtained the first commercial success as a professional writer, were indebted to his diverse reading of local history, resulting in his tales about the history of New York. Moreover, he published *The life of George Washington*. Motivated by Washington Irving, writers in the age of the American Renaissance experimented with historical stories of men and women whose lives were familiar to readers and were exemplars for readers. However, the stance of such literature was subversive in regard to the trend of history writing, in that literary works presented their own interpretation and tried to elaborate the biographies written by historians. *The History of New York* by Irving best expressed this motive, and Irving was able to assert his own imagination over historical accuracy. The background of such imaginative history was the new situation in which readers could gain access to historical documents and then acquire knowledge, meaning that when people read a story, they did so with historical knowledge and were well informed as to whether it presented historical facts or an imaginative story.

Interestingly, the nineteenth century is the age in which history and literature set out on their own paths. As mentioned above, the former sought a scientific basis to establish itself as an academic discipline, while the latter established an American national literature, creating memorable characters. Biographies were developed at the intersection of history and literature. As Casper argues, by eulogizing national heroes, biographies represented the implementation of morality and patriotism (10). Before this stage, however, there were tensions between British-oriented biographies and American nationalism. Even after achieving its political (the Revolutionary War) and economic (the War of 1812) independence, America was indebted to British culture and intellectuals. When Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the lecture titled “The American Scholar” (1837), Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. commemorated it as “the declaration of independence of American intellectual life.” In “The American Scholar,” Emerson presented an idea of biography, introducing it to present his idea for a new American, and the fact that he would do so perhaps reflects the popularity of biographies.

The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in *a new age*, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand year?

In this hope, I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day, —the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year, we come up hither to read one more chapter of *his biography*. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on *his character*, and his hope. (*CW* 1:52, Italics mine)¹⁰

Emerson delineated the features of “the American scholar” by following the way in which a biographer narrates the life of a person. He also used the word “character” as a key word. He explained his idea of character in “The American Scholar”: “character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source” (*CW* 1:63). Emerson maintained his stance that as a new nation, the United States should have its own character. Emerson also wrote an essay titled “Character,” in which he says that “The largest part of their power was latent. This is that which we call Character,—a reserved force which acts directly by presence, and without means” (*CW* 2:53). Emerson expected this character to be latent within the interior of a representative man who could lead life an American way. In doing so, he conceived Americanness as personified features rather than as a tradition or as conduct.

Emerson later published “Representative Men,” in which he did not include American heroes such as the Founding Fathers. Rather, he presented European literary men and war heroes. He chose Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe in his essay. However, he did not intend to worship their greatness; instead, he valued their “temporary and prospective” quality, as David Mikics argues. Mikics continues arguing that “Emerson in Representative Men agrees with Jacksonian America’s principle of ‘rotation’: the idea that no man, no matter how imposing, should be accorded permanent authority,” quoting Andrew Delbanco and Judith Shklar (326).¹¹ Emerson did not adulate the Founding Fathers in line with the age of biographical mania.

Melville was another author who wanted to demystify the great figures of the American national myth. Melville wrote a story about an obscure private during the Revolutionary War. *Israel Potter* was written based on a short autobiography by Israel Potter. Henry Trumbull first paid attention to Potter’s autobiographical narrative

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson’s citations are taken from *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Alfred R. Ferguson et al. The volume name and page number are written parenthetically.

¹¹ David Mikics edited *The Annotated Emerson* and he added the introduction to each part.

and then fictionalized the narrative into a story. Trumbull's book, *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel Potter*, was not considered to be accurate in terms of historical incidents, but Melville was probably intrigued by the trajectory of the life of this American exile. He expanded the narrative into a novel, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*. Melville opened the novel with a letter that pretended to be written for the Bunker Hill Monument, in which he states the intention of the story and his idea of biography: "Biography, in its purer form, confined to the ended lives of the true and brave, may be held the fairest meed of human virtue—one given and received in entire disinterestedness—since neither can the biographer hope for acknowledgement from the subject, nor the subject at all avail himself of the biographical distinction conferred" (vii).¹² Melville's criterion for the subject of biography is not decided based on heroism but by "the true and brave." In this sense, Melville argued that Israel Potter was a worthy subject for biography.

Melville had also well known the popularity of biography, adding as follows: "Such is the work, and such the man, that I have the honor to present to your Highness. That the name here noted should not have appeared in the volumes of Sparks, may or may not be a matter of astonishment; but Israel Potter seems purposely to have waited to make his popular advent under the present exalted patronage, seeing that your Highness [i.e., the Bunker Hill Monument], according to the definition above, may, in the loftiest sense, be deemed the Great Biographer..." (viii). By referring to Sparks, Melville showed his subversive intention with regard to the biographical writing of his age. He was critical of the trend of biographies, in which war heroes and political leaders in the Revolutionary War were praised as the embodiment of national virtue. Thus, he chose an obscure private to depict the upheaval of the Revolutionary War.

Israel Potter, who enrolled himself in the American regiment, was forced to go into exile during the war due to his misfortunes and tricks of fate, but he eventually worked again for the American navy on the west coast of England. However, due to further misfortune, he failed in his desire to return to his native land. When he finally returned to his hometown after fifty years of exile, he found that he had no house to live in and that he could not obtain a pension for his service. Melville revealed his last days: "shortly after his return in infirm old age to his native land, a little narrative of his adventures, forlornly published on sleazy gray paper, appeared among the ped-

¹² This and all subsequent citations from *Israel Potter* are taken from *The Writings of Herman Melville* vol 8, edited by Harrison Hayford et al.

dlers, written, probably, not by himself, but taken down from his lips by another” (vii). Potter’s story shows the ironic downside of the Revolutionary War.

Moreover, Melville elaborated a scene in which Potter met Benjamin Franklin in Paris and took stock of his character. The Franklin whom Melville depicts was not the man who received accolades in other biographies. Rather, Melville tried to demystify Franklin as one of the Founding Fathers. When Potter first met Franklin, he appeared in a gorgeous gown—“wrapped in a rich dressing-gown—a fanciful present from an admiring Marchesa—curiously embroidered with algebraic figures like a conjuror’s robe” (38). Potter’s first impression was not one of admiration but one of astonishment, as though he had encountered a conjuror. After a conversation with Franklin near his desk full of books, Melville depicted Franklin as Israel observed him: “Printer, post-master, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor-man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit—Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none—by type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet” (48). Most likely, Melville presented the image of Franklin that was circulated by his biographies. However, Potter’s candid instincts revealed that although Franklin could be called any title, he perhaps could not be said to be a master of anything. Melville let Potter continue his observation of Franklin and concluded that Franklin might be ungraspable within the ken of Potter’s understanding. Although Potter could not truly understand Franklin’s wisdom, he felt that Franklin oriented himself based on an industrial spirit. Melville was cynical enough to add Potter’s commentary on Franklin: “His wisdom seems a sort of sly, too. But all in honor, though. I rather think he’s one of those old gentlemen who say a vast deal of sense, but hint a world more. Depend upon it, he’s sly, sly, sly” (54).

The examples of Emerson’s “Representative Men” and Melville’s *Israel Potter* reveal that the authors of the American Renaissance subverted the trend of biographical mania, in which the achievements of the Founding Fathers were depicted in a laudatory way to show the heart and soul of the new nation. In the case of Emerson, he did not choose such a national hero when he presented an exemplary man; in the case of Melville, he portrayed a hero of the American Revolution but with condemning irony. In doing so, they questioned their era’s adulation of the Revolutionary heroes. One of the reasons they tried to demystify the heroes of the Revolutionary War is the fact that the age of the American Renaissance witnessed irrational aggression in terms of territorial expansion. The Mexican-American War marked a change in

American foreign policy, in which America did not seek monsters abroad, as Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had previously announced. The term manifest destiny, which is thought to have been coined by New York journalist James L. O'Sullivan, appeared in an attempt to connive America into seeking territorial expansion. Melville might question whether the heroic memory of the Founding Fathers could justify such expansion, and his bloody depiction of the Revolutionary War in *Israel Potter* conveys his subversive intention with regard to the worship of war. Emerson also opposed such expansionism, and he revised his essay "The Young American" to delete passages that he thought sounded too nationalistic.

Coda

Authors in the age of the American Renaissance faced a situation in which the reading public was enlarged as the new nation expanded. They created their own literature against the backdrop of the overwhelming impact of politics and social change. As I have delineated, biographical mania is one dimension of such cultural changes. As people in a newly established democratic country, Americans enhanced their way of life by producing exemplary cases and reflecting upon the Founding Fathers. Over the course of this period of change, historian Jared Sparks embarked upon historical projects that marked a scientific approach to writing biographies. Eventually, he became the first professor of history at the university, and the discipline of history was established in academia, making authentic historical documents accessible to the general public. Moreover, many biographies were published and gained popularity.

The idea of biography among the authors of the American Renaissance was culturally subversive and showed their aspiration to create new art. In the case of biographical novels, these authors did not engage in hero worship as in the period just after the Revolutionary War. Rather, they questioned such previous heroism because they knew that the imaginative interpretive community would be able to discern fiction from historical documents. The American character that they presented in biographical novels resisted the examples of their era, effectively exemplifying the subversive nature of literature.

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