

CHAPTER 17

LITERATURE AND THE NEWS

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IN 1875 Henry James arranged to send correspondence from Paris to the *New York Tribune* but could not find anything to report. “I can think of nothing in life to put in the *Tribune*,” he writes to his brother William, and later complains to his father that, in Paris, “there has been a painful dearth of topics to write about” (quoted in Edel 238). Of course, to say that there was no news in Paris is only to suggest that the ideas and impressions that it inspired for James were not “the right sort of thing for a newspaper” (James, *Parisian Sketches* 220). So while his editor asks for letters that are more “‘newsy’ in character,” James keeps insisting that “subjects are woefully scarce,” and as his biographer Leon Edel puts it, “We thus have the spectacle of a man of James’s large imagination unable to imagine subjects for a newspaper—and in a city teeming with them” (James, *Parisian Sketches* 217; Edel 238). Years later, in *The American Scene*, James also fails to find anything newsworthy in Baltimore, which makes the “momentous proposition” that Baltimore is “interesting” hard for him to prove despite its atmosphere of “pleasant-playing reference and reflection” (James, *American Scene* 606–607). The more James likes the city, in other words, the more he realizes that the most telling evidence of how his “sensibility yielded so completely to Baltimore” is his surprising failure to have discovered any “features” or “items” in it worth reporting to his readers (James, *American Scene* 607–608). Like Paris, Baltimore’s sources of interest “were too closely of the texture” and character of the city “to be snipped off... by any mere sharp shears of journalism” and since, unlike Paris, Baltimore may not exactly be *teeming* with subjects, “it would be ‘no good’ to a journalist—for *he* is nowhere, ever, without his items; but it would be everything, always, to the mere restless analyst” (James, *American Scene* 607, 608). The journalist cuts experience down to size, but the “restless analyst” indulges a

more capacious and attentive model of perception than the expedience of the news requires. To the extent that James's writing, as critics suggest, turns on the cognitive and stylistic distinctions between information and more "nonconceptual" forms of knowledge, so does his sense that, by the end of the nineteenth century, literature was nowhere to be found amid the "'items' by the thousand" that journalists produce (Posnock 148; James, *American Scene* 608).

That James feels the need to distinguish between literature and the news is just one example of the extent to which authors asserted the prestige of their work as a function of its durability and complexity within an accelerating culture of print. "Men are divided broadly into journalists and eternalists," writes an author in the *Atlantic* in 1891 (Stillman 688). When Julian Hawthorne (son of Nathaniel Hawthorne) says in 1888 that authors did "not like the idea of appearing in newspapers" because "a copy of a newspaper is a thing of an hour," he insists that literary meaning is lost on readers who have come to expect the constant novelty of the daily news and the feeling of timeliness it delivers (quoted in Johanningsmeier 216). As *Harper's* observes in 1892, the sentiment toward books is "becoming like that towards newspapers—that they are to be rudely handled and cast aside when the news has been snatched out of them"; the newspaper thus comes to exemplify a rapidly modernizing culture of information, where journalistic prose is designed for obsolescence and where readers have no more patience for the form that content takes than "a hungry man for oysters, who scoops out the soft parts and chucks away the shells, perhaps with pearls in them" ("Editors" 966). The laments for literary value see the ephemerality of the news as a challenge not only to the material survival of the book, but also to the more layered and synthetic attitude toward time that literature sustains. Put differently, it is easy to imagine that James and others, faced with a distractible audience that had come to "love change for its own sake," would have approved of Ezra Pound's famous declaration that "literature is news that stays news" (Tocqueville 548; Pound 29).

James is making—at the expense of news—a familiar call for literature's own aesthetic and autonomy at a moment when increasingly impatient audiences seemed to demand that every text produce the same feeling of currency as the events that made the news. When James Gordon Bennett, founding editor of the *New York Herald*, calls the nineteenth century "the age of the Daily Press," he asserts the centrality of newspapers to the culture of his times, but also links the character of the times to a mode of writing whose significance endures no longer than the next edition (Pray 217). Thus the widespread popularity of newspapers reflects the growing demand for connection to a modern world in which the recency of knowledge is an essential index of its value: in America, writes Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, the "idea of the new is coupled...with the idea of the better" (Tocqueville 466). For James, producers of literature have little to gain in trying to keep up with an age that changes utterly on a daily basis, but his disregard for the contingency and topicality of the news is only one variety of nineteenth-century response to the timely aesthetic of the newspaper. Indeed, many writers of the period are more receptive than James to journalistic practices

and imperatives, and many in fact aspire to pattern their own texts on innovations derived from the forms of news itself.

If E. L. Godkin could write at the end of the century of the growing “segregation of the newspaper-reader from the book-reader,” he at once confirms the divide between literature and the news that James tried turning to his favor, but also testifies to the fact that this was not always the case (Godkin 203). Literature in the nineteenth century was often indistinguishable from the news, appearing on the pages of newspapers alongside reports of recent events, and assuming many of the stylistic features that structured the daily experience of a print culture for which the disposability of newspapers as texts was just another way of registering the currency of their information. Even writers who did not publish in newspapers had to address—or, like James, strategically reject—the imperatives of recency and progress that made the news and that also transformed the ritual of reading itself into a daily event. Understanding literature in the age of news—when newspapers were at once a dominant media technology and a powerful institution in the literary marketplace—means keeping track of how writers adapted their aesthetics to the priorities of a period that was now so preoccupied with being informed that it left audiences with little time to reflect on their own hierarchies of knowledge. Readers placed a premium on works that not only promised to be “a window onto” the realities of modern life, but more important, embraced the temporality of a particular and fleeting present as the most meaningful horizon of historical experience.

Thus to the extent that we continue to discover that past literary texts possess the power to change the way we understand our own contemporary situation, we participate in a mode of presentism inherited from nineteenth-century audiences and authors who had to find a place for literature within a high-speed economy of information that could see no difference between newsworthiness and other forms of value. The idea, then, that literature should speak to its times—that it must inescapably refer to the immediacy of its contexts—brings with it a set of expectations about our reading practices that still shape how we believe that works of poetry and fiction can register the history that makes them. Revisiting the period when the modern newspaper emerges helps us understand how literary practices that we have inherited owe their currency to the information age of the nineteenth century, when literature itself first takes the measure of the news.

In Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” the archaism of prerevolutionary society most reveals itself whenever the men of the village gather to debate an “old newspaper” (Irving 772). By the nineteenth century, old news had become a source of amusement that Thoreau, for example, can play on when he chooses to read the scraps of newspaper in which his “dinner of bread and butter” are wrapped; there are, as Thoreau says, things to “relish” in the fragments of the “Daily Times” that make their way to the woods but the absurdity of his “appetite” for them is also the sign of his distance from the world “in which the events that make the news transpire” (Thoreau, *Walden* 356; *A Week* 293, 251; “Life” 360). As media historians observe, the daily papers of the 1830s marked a turn away from the partisan and trade papers that provided weekly content to audiences of subscribers who shared

political and public interests and whose discussion of their interests formed the basis of the deliberative public sphere that Jürgen Habermas famously ascribes to the late eighteenth century (Nerone). Now the dailies competed for a mass readership that demanded its information at accelerating speeds and shared, if nothing else, an investment in the commodity of news itself which became central like never before to both the business and culture of newspapers. For the first time the news, instead of political or editorial comment, became the primary object of the newspaper, so when Charles A. Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*, writes that “a newspaper without news is no newspaper” it is not self-evident because the news is what was new (Dana 60). “Newspapers bear us along with them,” writes George Lunt in 1857, “abreast of the rapid flood of passing events” (Lunt 68). If in 1800 readers might find five to twenty items in a four-page paper—mostly long political essays that ran for more than a page and continued from one issue to the next—by midcentury, a typical four-page paper contained thirty-five to forty items about the day’s events (Dicken-Garcia). Editors devoted their resources to extensive newsgathering operations, employing carrier pigeons, boats, competing rail lines, the pony express, and, after 1846, the telegraph, while readers measured the efficiency of papers by “[counting] the number of items they contained” (where “the newspaper with the most items was the best paper”) (Park 108). Newspapers rivaled one another for timeliness with “extras” and “late editions”; the invention of the steam-powered cylinder press made multiple editions of daily papers cheaper and more profitable; and reporters specialized to provide comprehensive and expert coverage on a wide range of “beats” (Schudson; Blondheim). “There is,” writes the editor of the *Springfield Republican* in 1851, “a great deal more news nowadays than there used to be,” suggesting how the world itself seemed essentially more eventful as the horizon of what could be known expanded across networks of new transportation and communication technologies and as the telegraph and wire services especially intensified the timely transmission of news (quoted in Merriam 1:98).

As newspapers began to prioritize the coverage of events over the discussion of ideas, the competition for readers came to depend less on the deliberative public life that followed from their content, and more on the ability of the news itself to give shape and meaning to communities that emerged in response to the fact that something had happened somewhere and not very long ago. The cycles of such “simultaneous consumption,” as Benedict Anderson writes, impart to reading newspapers in the nineteenth century the character of a “mass ceremony”; by recognizing the regularity with which the news was always changing, readers were “continually reassured” that their modern world was visibly rooted in habits that they could learn and make their own (Anderson 35). The diminishing time lag between distant events and their appearance in the newspaper came to pattern daily rituals of urban culture especially as “extras,” hawked by newsboys on the streets, made it possible for crowds of readers to track unfolding stories with a sensation of real time while preserving the sequential flow of new developments (Henkin). Reading newspapers was a practice of historical engagement with the present moment as it emerged and then inevitably receded; thus what Anderson calls “the obsolescence of the

newspaper on the morrow of its printing” is a crucial aspect of its power to keep readers coming back for more news when the old became irrelevant (Anderson 35). As early news gave way to breaking news, newspapers encouraged the belief that time itself is dynamic and superseding, and that our reading is significant to the degree that it keeps pace with the progress of the current moment. What happens latest matters most since news as a form of knowledge is perishable and can only exist in the present. “Where there were no news-boys,” writes Thoreau, “I did not see what would they do for waste paper” (Thoreau, *Cape Cod* 946).

In America, Tocqueville says, where “everything seems to be in constant flux, and every change seems to mark an advance,” there is “only a very limited time to devote to literature”; “the only recognizably American authors I know,” he says, “are journalists. They are not great writers, but they speak the country’s language” (Tocqueville 466, 542, 539). It is not surprising that Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835) appeared the same year as the most successful of the early penny dailies, James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald*, since the “constant need for novelty” that the newspaper satisfies is also, for Tocqueville, the “greatest defect” of a restless, democratic society that “seems to live from day to day” (544, 718, 237). After all, he says, “no one is less given to reverie than the citizens of a democracy” and newspapers are, what Thoreau calls, “easy reading” or “little reading”: they yield up their contents to a commercial population whose “habitual inattention” (Tocqueville’s phrase)—whose habit, that is, for being unhabituated to reflection—was more conducive to consuming or digesting than to thinking (Tocqueville 702, 718; Thoreau, *Walden* 406). The modern dailies in the United States, with their belief in faithfully registering events as they happen, precede by decades comparable developments in Britain and France; even by the end of the nineteenth century Dana suggests that Britain put less value on the newsworthiness of a newspaper since “people were willing to wait a week there to find out the news”; “the world might be revolutionized,” he continues, but the English “would not know it until their weekly paper comes around” (Dana 9).

Dana may be overstating just how dramatically the number and scale of U.S. newspapers was a “feature of American civilization,” but, like Tocqueville, he suggests how the temporal logic of the news had become linked to American ideas of revolution and continuous change. Impatient readers want “all the news, and nothing but the news” because they believe “that humanity is advancing,” and that every day’s paper ratifies that “there is progress in human life and human affairs” (Dana 9, 19–20). Thus when Ralph Waldo Emerson writes earlier in the century that “newspapers,” are the proper literature of America,” he too sees the news as a correlative to American narratives of progress in which independence itself is figured as freedom from historical memory and continuity (Emerson 195). Newspapers, we might say, assume the revolutionary break between today and yesterday and a faith in the primacy of the present that Henry James attributes to the naive innocence of Americans for whose “candid minds newspapers and all they contained were part of . . . the recurrent freshness of the universe, coming out like the sun in the morning or the stars at night” (James, *Reverberator* 166). Or put differently, the newspaper is

the ideal medium for a culture of liberal individualism that depends on a pervasive disregard for precedent and prior attachments. If progress means abandoning the past, the newspaper offers an object lesson in, as Tocqueville calls it, the “universal movement” of democratic life and the American’s daily determination to move on (Tocqueville 466). So when a character in William Dean Howells’s *A Modern Instance* describes Americans who follow the news as never feeling “so prosperous as when [they] can’t remember what happened last Monday,” we hear a particularly mordant variation on a familiar sentiment: that Americans are most fully who they are when living in the self-sufficient present that the newspaper produces (Howells 552).

In James’s novel, *The Reverberator*, an American newspaper man, George Flack, publishes gossip about an established Parisian family as it was reported to him by an American girl; though the family is scandalized by the story, the novel insists on the “innocence” of the girl since Flack, in gaining the facts from her, simply claims that a newspaper will record everything that occurs: “he wants everything,” the girl says of Flack, “it’s a very fine paper” (James, *Reverberator* 56, 146). James suggests that her transgressions are just a function of her national character (“you might explain—,” she pleads, “I’m only an American girl”) which makes her susceptible to the way that newspapers try to naturalize their intrusions into privacy as just another aspect of their impulse to completeness and transparency (James, *Reverberator* 150). French society is shocked by the exposure because, unlike the Americans in the novel, they do not understand that newspapers are now part “of the general fatality of things” and that it is as impossible to keep scandal out of them as it is for the “perfectly simple” girl not to report every item she hears (James, *Reverberator* 166, 78). “The journalist recording . . . the thing that has come to pass,” writes the American critic James Parton in 1867, “is Providence addressing men” (Parton 265). The French aristocrats in James’s novel can neither understand the rhetoric of newsworthiness that Flack attaches with such fervor to their family secrets, nor find any comfort in the fact that even the most salacious story will only matter for a moment since its pressing interest to the reading public is just a sign of its impending obsolescence within the progress of daily events. When Flack calls the newspaper “the great institution of our time,” he means both that it is “the history of the age” and that it communicates the presence of an age that is now moving faster than any ancien régime can bear, so that refusing to keep up with the news is to resist being assimilated to the times the “Times” describes (James, *Reverberator* 124). This is why Lunt writes that “the newspapers bear us along with them”—“to resist,” he continues “may seem to some little better than rank heresy to the spirit of the age and its main instruments of thought” (Lunt 80).

By the nineteenth century, newspapers—often called “The Spirit of the Age” or “The Spirit of the Times”—claimed to represent the free and impartial flow of information that put readers in relation to their world: a newspaper, writes Henry Ward Beecher in 1864, “is a window through which men look out on all that is going on in the world” (quoted in Hudson, Lee, and Mott xviii). Only when reading the newspaper became a practice of daily life could it become a reflection of the moment

one was in, which is also to say that the nineteenth century saw its own progressive character reflected in the perpetual advance of the news. Newspapers increasingly allowed their readers to experience the events of future history—the events, that is, that would someday count as history—in the present moment as fully immanent to a contemporary world that could, for the first time, witness the results of all its collective energies and larger conflicts as they were happening. The newspaper, Parton says, “is that which connects each individual with the general life of mankind, and makes him part and parcel of the whole” (Parton 264). We might think of newspapers in the nineteenth century as the medium whose ambitions were most resonant with the period’s own impulses to modernity, and especially to the philosophies of progress that sustained them.

For Hegel, historical change is not simply a consequence of transformative events, but follows from the way they are recorded and narrated to the world; that “history” means both events that happen and the form they take in writing is a profound coincidence for Hegel, who sees the progress of his times as depending, at least in part, on a self-conscious understanding of progress. Change is a recursive process that is intensified by reading stories of change, and the nineteenth century had faith that its newspapers were the expression of the “world spirit” that emerges, as Hegel would say, when the “writing of history and the actual deeds or events of history make their appearance simultaneously” (quoted in Houlgate 19). Hegel himself worked as a reporter and editor, and remained a lifelong reader of the news, following current events with almost religious devotion (“Reading the morning paper,” he writes, “is the realist’s morning prayer”) (Pinkard 242). So perhaps he saw in newspapers—especially as their reporting of events became more direct and comprehensive—another means of communicating “the spirit of the age as the spirit of the present and aware of itself in thought” (quoted in Houlgate 9). Newspapers could now register the progress of the present for their readers, who could in turn understand their own acts of reading as “part and parcel” of, and relevant to, its progress. What nineteenth-century Americans learned from the newspaper, in other words, was that reading—indeed the act of reading it suggested as a daily practice—was nothing less (and perhaps nothing more) than a reflection of the moment they were in. To read was to keep up with the times, and to find their place within them.

The nineteenth-century newspaper, as John Nerone writes, “mark[s] the horizon at which the history of the book meets the enveloping history of communication,” suggesting that for much of the century literature and the news were not, as Henry James would wish, discrete domains but mutually constitutive ones (Nerone 230). Newspapers not only reviewed and advertised fiction, but published and serialized it; book publishers, such as Harper and Brothers, produced newspapers (*Harper’s Weekly*), while regional newspaper plants were often book printers too. At the same time, book publishers made efforts to market their fiction in the form of news. In the 1830s and 1840s, “mammoth newspapers” (up to ten feet long and over four feet wide) published pirated British novels in serial form that were hawked by newsboys on the streets for pennies or sent through the mail unbound and “subject to

Newspaper Postage only” (Lehuu 60). “Extra” editions, in which popular titles were reprinted in full and bound in paper covers, set a precedent for serialized novels in newspaper format and for cheap nickel-and-dime paperback books that were published weekly in parts long after the mammoth weeklies disappeared. Literary weeklies, or story papers, including Street and Smith’s *New York Weekly Dispatch* (revived in 1855), Robert Bonner’s *New York Ledger* (1856), Beadle and Adams’s *Saturday Journal* (1870), and Norman Munro’s *Family Story Paper* (1873), were also sold at newsstands and by subscription through the mails and reached a mass readership (the *Ledger* claimed a circulation of four hundred thousand per week in 1860). If, by 1889 the *Atlantic* hoped the time might arrive when “a work of art in literature” might be “quite independent of its mere mode of production,” then the mammoth papers, story papers, and their “extras” and “supplements” already suggested that literature might not have an ontological relationship to the book as an object, but be measured by the forms of currency and circulation on which the fact of a newspaper depends (quoted in Lund 61). “A newspaper,” writes Robert E. Park in “The Natural History of the Newspaper,” “is not merely printed. It is circulated and read. Otherwise it is not a newspaper” (Park 97).

When literature was published in the form of news, it took its place within a larger print ecology that challenged both the temporality and material culture of reading books; as just another kind of content that newspapers delivered, literature might be judged less by its durability than by the reach of its audience which expanded with the number of newspapers. When one critic imagines in 1831 a coming moment when “journalism will be the whole Press—the whole human thought,” his enthusiasm for a universal medium of communication that will let literature be written “with the rapidity of light” provocatively anticipates a contemporary rhetoric of information technologies and the practices of online reading that inform it; which is to say that the fantasy that all expression might be “*instantly conceived, instantly written, and instantly understood*” without the physical experience of books is as much a relic of the nineteenth century as newsboys on the street. Thought, the critic continues, will not have time to “accumulate in a book; the book will arrive too late. The only book possible from to-day is the newspaper” (quoted in Dicken-Garcia 116).

In the nineteenth-century United States, perhaps the greatest distributor of fiction, as Charles Johanningsmeier suggests, was the daily newspaper, a fact rarely discussed in literary histories of serialization that tend to focus on texts that appeared “in parts” (Charles Dickens’s 1836 *Pickwick Papers* set the precedent for works by George Lippard, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and others) or in elite monthly magazines, with limited circulation, such as *Putnam’s*, *Graham’s*, *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, and the *Atlantic*. After 1860, news syndicates supplied literary material to the rapidly increasing number of metropolitan dailies and rural weeklies through stereotype plates, galley proofs, or ready-print sheets (with literary material on one side, to be printed with local news on the other) so that serialized novels and short stories especially could be published alongside reports of current and local events. Through the syndicates, a single written work might appear simultaneously in twenty to one

thousand newspapers, all produced and read within the same region or else carried by special express trains from city centers to outlying regions, where the literature traveled at the rate, and with the expediency, of news. William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnutt, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and even Henry James published syndicated work, which is maybe why James has Flack say, in *The Reverberator*, that “some of the finest books have come out first in the papers” (James, *Reverberator* 124).

If magazines and story papers separated fiction from nonfiction texts, and relegated advertisements to their back pages, a work of fiction in a newspaper was often visually indistinguishable from all the latest news that finally had become the “great thing” in a newspaper, and even from the ads which, like news, were resubmitted daily so that their copy changed (Dana 60). The serialization of fiction encouraged attention to the dramatic momentum of plot, presenting long narratives as discrete stories that advanced for readers with the same periodicity as breaking news, and could be discontinued when public interest ran thin. Authors, like journalists, were compared to “day laborers” who wrote methodically on deadlines and adapted literary works to the standardized demands of the syndicates (Halsey 7); Jack London’s character Martin Eden, a syndicated author much as London had been, describes the formula as “fifteen hundred words maximum dose” (quoted in Johanningsmeier 108). Newspaper editors often controlled the visual form of literary texts, adding paragraph breaks and subtitles, like headlines, so that the content of novels might be as accessible as telegraphic dispatches. The editor of the syndicate that bought Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* asked Crane to cut the manuscript by two-thirds to fit the length requirements of newspaper editors and to make it a more plot-driven work for newspaper readers. Syndicates also tried to emulate the timeliness of the wire services on which they were modeled by soliciting fictions that were topical and resonant with contemporary events, though this meant that literary works could become irrelevant and dated along with the news they referenced. (The regular headline for one newspaper’s syndicated fiction section was “Fiction That Deals with Things That Are Up to Date.”) There was often little to differentiate fiction from nonfiction items in the newspaper, and as Johanningsmeier points out, not only was the word “story” applied to both categories, but advertisements also took the visual form of reported news and used headlines to attract readers’ attention to the products they promoted. Readers, then, were invited to understand the news and fiction as part of the same prolific flow of information about an eventful and changing world. But the integration of fiction within newspapers is peculiar to the nineteenth century since, by 1890, new and cheap mass-market magazines (*McClure’s*, *Collier’s*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*) began to pay authors more than the syndicates, and soon became far more profitable as forums for mixing fiction and nonfiction on the page; literature, when it appeared in newspapers at all, was relegated to special sections or the occasional Sunday edition, where it could be compartmentalized from current events.

In “the age of the Daily Press” when readers followed the events of daily life in print, and when literature became a part of daily life, books could also become the

events that made the news. Books were given notices and reviews in newspapers that worked to “keep up” with cultural trends and fashionable authors or to mine the contents of other publications for, in Dana’s words, the “sort of information which the people demand” (Dana 11). Newspapers digested recent books for impatient audiences and provided content for restless readers who, as one critic puts it, looked to notices “not so much for scholarly criticism as for information as to what books exist in current literature that can have any interest or value” (Halsey 54). Literary celebrity emerged in the nineteenth century (the term “celebrity” itself in the modern sense first appeared in 1829) through the publicity of newspapers that turned the personal lives of writers such as Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe into ongoing dramas for readers who may not have known their latest works but still wanted to watch the course of their careers as media events (Baker). Writers could now achieve unprecedented levels of fame by simply trading on their currency: to know about the period’s most celebrated authors was itself a way of responding to the newsworthiness of current tastes without needing to return to the literature at their source. Authors, in other words, became fashionable as the press inspired a second-order interest among a larger audience of readers who, approaching literature exclusively from the perspective of news, increasingly assumed the transience and contingency of literary value. Books, as one critic of the period says, “are in fact fast becoming what many newspapers and magazines have been—publications whose term of life is ephemeral. They exist as the favorites of a month, or possibly a year; then having had their brief summer-time of success, they silently go their destined way” (Halsey 5).

What did it mean to stay current with culture? In Howells’s novel about newspapers, *A Modern Instance*, Clara invites an author to a dinner party not because she had read and admired his book but because “it had made talk” (another guest is a “teacher of Italian, with whom she was pretending to read Dante”) (Howells 379). Her social performances of reading derive from an age of news in which literary knowledge, and the fluctuating value of literary merit, had become vogue information. Newspapers not only acquainted readers with new books but also gave them enough of the experience of having read them that they might be, as Lunt suggests, “a substitute” for them (Lunt 94). The press, in other words, allowed for a new kind of cultural literacy that blurred the distinction between knowing a book and knowing *of* it: one might not be well read so much as culturally informed. Even nonreaders of books could register their interest by following newspapers, so that gaining literary knowledge was not so much a private pursuit as a social act, suggesting that books are a way of primarily engaging with the life around them. Clifford Siskin, following communications theorists David Kaufer and Kathleen Carley, calls this phenomenon “reverse vicariousness”: if we usually think of reading literature as a vicarious experience for the world, here the reader finds in the newspaper—and all the communal forms of knowing and sharing the newspaper promotes—a way of experiencing literature vicariously (Siskin 216). The phenomenon allows for pretensions to literary knowledge that Lippard, for example, mocks when a dentist, and former bricklayer in *The Quaker City*, Jonas Pulp, asks his patient whether he

thinks “Dickens excels in the quiet touches” or whether “the beauties of Shelley are appreciated by the mass”; outside, a ragged newsboy sells an “extra” with sensational accounts of an accident and the juxtaposition suggests for us that, at a moment when accounts of Dickens and Shelley are just more items on the page, all literature belongs to “Pulp” (Lippard 196–197).

Reverse vicariousness may point to the loss of “inward life” that for Thoreau is also the beginning of the end of close, reflective reading in a democratic society, but for others “keeping up” with “literary news” was a welcome form of participation in the progressive nature of the times (Thoreau, *Life* 359). For Walt Whitman, as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the timely coverage of literature—which promotes, in turn, an understanding of literature as a timely source of information—is part of the responsibility of a newspaper to its readers. A newspaper, he writes, that does not provide literary notices is

“behind the age;” for brief as those notices generally are, they enable a man to keep up with what is doing in the literary world, and to see the gradual steps made in the advancement of every thing. . . . The custom alluded to has another good effect also—it enables *editors* to keep up, in some sort, with the foremost [developments] of the age. For though it cannot be expected that they will study from top to bottom every book they have—that skimming tact which an editor gets after some experience, enables him to take out at a dash the meaning of a book—and his paper and his readers are invariably the gainers by it. An editor thus surrounded by the current literature of the age . . . *cannot lag behind.*”
(Whitman, *Journalism* 2:112)

Of course, Whitman also capitalized on these notices by including advertisements and reviews for *Leaves of Grass* in its 1856 edition, as well as, famously, a letter from Emerson to the author, which “[greeted him] at the beginning of a great career,” but only after seeing his book “advertised in a newspaper” and verifying his identity there (quoted in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 637). In his reply to Emerson, Whitman describes his poem as part of a national literary movement that includes “the three thousand different newspapers, the nutriment of the imperfect ones coming in just as usefully as any—the story papers . . . the onecent and two-cent journals” and other forms of the “active ephemeral myriads” of print that, for him, link the urge toward currency in writing with the ceaseless democratic progress of America: “[A]ll are prophetic;” he writes, “all waft rapidly on. I see that they swell wide, for reasons. I am not troubled at the movement of them, but greatly pleased” (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 640). By the time Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* he had edited or coedited ten newspapers and contributed to over twenty, calling his early journalistic career the “gestation-years” on “which everything else rests” and “the period . . . out of which *Leaves of Grass* rose” (Whitman, *Journalism* 1: xxv–xxvi). The inventorial impulses of Whitman’s poems, with their ecumenical mingling of events—street fights, suicides, sudden illness, riots, criminal arrests—resemble a newspaper page, where the principle of organization is just all that manages to occur at a moment in time (Fishkin; Trachtenberg). Whitman’s inclusion of “these one and all” sounds, for example, much like Dana’s claim that the *New York Sun* was “not too proud to report . . . whatever the

Divine Providence permitted to occur” (Dana 12). The preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was set in columns like a newspaper, and one might say that Whitman’s famous decision to leave his name off the title page (leaving Emerson to confirm his authorship in the ads) was also in sympathy with the newspapers, which published largely without bylines. The cleaner title page, as Ed Folsom suggests, also speaks to Whitman’s training as a newspaper compositor who was deeply invested in visual design (Folsom 16); indeed, in its wide spacing and modern typeface, the title page visually recalls the changes Whitman made to simplify the look of the *Brooklyn Eagle* which appeared, as he puts it, with “a clean face” (“as clean and neat as a newly washed child”) soon after he began to edit it (Whitman, *Journalism* 1:402). If there was, in Whitman’s words, an “incisive directness” to the 1855 edition, we might say that the simplicity of a title page without an author’s name on it aspires to the kind of accessible and unmediated transparency of the poet who claimed to do nothing but “flood himself with the immediate age” or of the nineteenth-century newspaper that claimed to be, in Whitman’s words, “the mirror of the world” (quoted in Folsom 10; Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 633; quoted in Greenspan 24). Each of the eight editions of *Leaves of Grass* absorbs and builds on prior editions, like the “extras” and “supplements” Whitman says he bought throughout the Civil War and after (“we got every newspaper morning and evening, and the frequent extras of that period”), so that his poem grew and unfolded dynamically over time. It may be no surprise that Whitman, who saw the newspaper as a model of progress, also liked Hegel, for whom, in Whitman’s words, “the whole earth . . . with its infinite variety” was slowly becoming known to us through “the endless process of Creative thought, which, amid numberless apparent failures and contradictions, is held together by a central and never-broken unity—not contradictions or failures at all, but radiations of one consistent and eternal purpose; the whole mass of everything steadily, unerringly tending and flowing” (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 896). “Do I contradict myself?” writes Whitman in “Song of Myself” “Very well then I contradict myself” (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 77).

In *The Profession of Journalism* (1918), Willard Grosvenor Bleyer writes, “If from the point of view of successful democracy the value of news is determined by the extent to which it furnishes food for thought on current topics, we are at once given an important criterion for defining news and measuring news-values. Thus, news is anything timely which is significant to newspaper readers in their relation to the community, the state, and the nation” (quoted in Mott 477). As the news event became of paramount value, and timeliness became the measure of its worth, the nineteenth century would learn from newspapers to read for relevance. By the 1840s, newspapers not only made coverage of daily events their primary purpose, but also began the practice of organizing their events for readers within a visual hierarchy of information that suggested the most current items were the most significant to know. Headlines were new to journalism and announced the latest items by making them increasingly visible on the page (critics note that several papers in 1837 still had no headlines, but by 1847 almost all did). The division of news content into columns and digests grouped items together and prioritized some items over others within an expanded field of information that changed each day. All items were now

sorted for relevance and their respective force was due to the visual impact of their headlines and subjects heads (arranged in decks and banks that often diminished in size and heaviness from the top to bottom bank). And while newspapers often continued the tradition of placing the latest news on page two (with less timely material on the outside pages in case ink smudged in delivery), by the end of the century the “front page” had become the icon and expression of the news itself. The headline that announced the top story increased in size and width until it migrated across columns and finally the whole of the front page, with the first banner headline appearing in the *New York World* in 1898 (Mahin; Barnhurst and Nerone). The headline in the American newspapers, writes one historian in 1923, “is deemed by [foreign travelers] the most striking feature of the American press” (Salmon 51). Newspaper writing comes to adapt its own techniques for producing the effect of relevancy, with stories now employing the “inverted pyramid” of the news “lead” to standardize the packaging of facts in descending order of importance. Where earlier reports proceeded inductively—often withholding the most pertinent details of events while supplying their context—journalists began to condense the most pertinent facts of their accounts into the lead of the story so that, by the last decades of the century, readers could know everything they needed to know without completing a story (Mindich).

In his Civil War poem “Donelson,” Herman Melville tells the story of the Union victory at Fort Donelson through the “latest news” that appears as nothing but a succession of headlines and dispatches read to a crowd on the street; “events unfold” and each day’s reports and late editions press forward new developments in the battle (Melville 45, 46). As a narrative poem, Melville’s account about the news of war resembles a ballad and so makes a nod to the earliest form of news (before newspapers), which circulated as printed ballads. But “Donelson” is finally not a ballad so much as a series of modern headlines that keep pace with the progress of the news; ballads are organized around refrains and repetitions but Melville’s narrative, pursuing the “vicissitudes of the war” as they unfold (“LATER AND LAST. / THE FORT IS OURS”), never looks back (Melville 53, 55). Derived from actual newspaper accounts of the war, the poem does not simply refer to the topics that make the headlines, so much as communicate—and test the limits of—an aesthetic of contemporaneity that makes reading literature itself feel as relevant as the news.

The newsmanship of Melville’s “Donelson” helps us better appreciate the efforts of other writers in the period who tried to assert the currency of their work by insisting on its relevance. Whitman’s poems are filled with events from the daily papers; his 1865 “Year of Meteors” alone makes reference to the hanging of John Brown, the presidential race, the visit of the Prince of Wales, and the arrival of the British steamship, the *Great Eastern*. In his notebooks, poetic fragments share pages with news clips, and occasionally with drafts of his own reporting or editorials for the Brooklyn, New York, and New Jersey newspapers, and especially for the Brooklyn *Daily Times*, which he edited from 1857 to 1859 (Bowers 1955 xxvii–iii). Whitman was only one of many nineteenth-century authors, including George Lippard, Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, Frederick Douglass,

William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, and Ambrose Bierce who trained as journalists and whose work encouraged readers to think of fiction as another way of “[furnishing] food for thought on current topics” and of participating in a culture that had increasing faith in the promise of perpetual change it saw in the news (Fishkin; Robertson). Lippard, for example, who worked as a news reporter for a Philadelphia penny paper, the *Spirit of the Times*, saw his city novels—derived from accounts of crime, scandal, and corruption in the dailies and filled with references to them—as part of a larger project of social awareness and reform: “a literature,” he writes, “which does not work practically for the advancement of social reform, or which is too good or too dignified to picture the wrongs of the great mass of humanity, is just good for nothing at all” (Lippard viii). Lippard’s *The Quaker City* exposes the character and crimes of Philadelphia in a plot-driven novel, whose dizzying sequence of episodes and events, and nearly six hundred pages, nonetheless covers only three days of condensed action (since each day in the life of the news was essentially eventful). The final events of the novel, like the events in “Donelson,” are narrated through the newspaper that reports them; “we will glance at the contents of a newspaper,” says the narrator who also says that “we like to look at nature and the world, not only as they appear, but as they are!” (Lippard 305, 571).

“The newspaper,” writes Charles Dudley Warner in 1881, “is not a willful creation nor an isolated phenomenon but the legitimate outcome of our age” (Warner 32). The literature of reform that Lippard helped introduce to America was both derived from the news and also, perhaps, the “legitimate outcome” of the same moment and impulse that made the daily news a defining medium of the nineteenth century. The belief that literature could be timely and relevant by participating in the contemporary world informed not only the sensationalist urban fiction of Lippard, George Thompson, Henri Foster, Ned Buntline, and others (some fifty novels of city life appeared between 1844 and 1860) but also all novels that took up reformist subject matter and the language of social purpose in and out of the papers, including anti-slavery and temperance literature. In the first installment of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s serial novel, *My Wife and I*, the narrator suggests, “Hath anyone in our day, as in St. Paul’s, a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation—forthwith he wraps it up in a serial story, and presents it to the public. We have prison discipline, free-trade, labor and capital, women’s rights, the temperance question, in serial stories” (Stowe ix). At the same time as news became the subject of literature, the press began to increase its readership and visibility by making literature out of news. After the Civil War, the “new journalism”—a phrase coined by Matthew Arnold in connection with *New York World* editor Joseph Pulitzer—vividly presented the news as entertaining “stories” with central characters, dialogue, descriptive details, dramatic tension, and points of view. The new journalism developed alongside a model of the news as pure and impartial information, blurring the line between literature and the news and rewriting current events as narratives that borrowed from the style and techniques of urban fiction, detective fiction, mysteries, travel adventures, and romance, to name a few of the literary genres. The news read a lot like fiction,

but for Pulitzer, at least, the accessibility of the new journalism to an expanded and working-class readership was “truly democratic” for how the truth it delivered in literary form could promote social change while “[serving] . . . the people with earnest sincerity” (quoted in Roggenkamp 29). After all, as Stowe’s narrator continues in *My Wife and I*, “In our modern days . . . it is not so much the story, as the things it gives the author a chance to say” (Stowe xii).

There were of course those who disagreed, and for every claim that literature should be sympathetic to the news, Thoreau or James, or someone else, might make the case for the “story” itself over the things it could say to a public that was increasingly accustomed to the news. *Scribner’s Monthly*, which had argued for topical fiction in its “Topics of the Time” column, later laments novels that engage with “a question of the day” because contemporary relevance means future irrelevance and because “such novels are not likely to survive the discussion or disturbance that gave them birth” (quoted in Lund 96). In Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Auguste Dupin investigates a crime by following the comprehensive coverage of events as they appear in the daily newspapers and with “no other means of investigation than the newspapers afforded.” Though he “seek[s] truth,” as he says, in all the relevant “details” he transcribes for the reader from the press, it is not enough to solve the crime because the evidence he ultimately needs derives from a kind of “philosophical” truth and logic that resides outside the logic of the events: “I would divert,” Dupin says, from the “unfruitful ground of the event itself” (Poe 445, 493, 473). Poe’s detective reports the most “decisive information,” only to tell us that there are things we will never discover when we “[confine our] discussion to the bounds of apparent relevancy” and that, in the end, the most productive forms of knowledge are precisely what the “facts” of the newspapers leave out (Poe 473). Sometimes it is possible to resist an age of news even while being consumed by its own progress. Poe suggests, in other words, that one way to make literature out of news is to take all the information it delivers with such timeliness and speed and render it irrelevant to a story about how we imagine a modern world we largely know by our own readings of it.

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