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Founding Fathers and Parricidal Textuality

*Race and Authority in American Narrative*

The soul of the Union is dead, and now let its body be buried.
—New Orleans Daily Crescent, December 1861

THE WASHINGTON CORPUS
AND THE SLAVE BODY

When, in 1795, one of George Washington's slaves ran away, the president directed that his name not appear on the reward poster. Pursuit of a fugitive slave might simply have been an affair of Washington's private, domestic management, yet the incident threatened to breed an embarrassing public situation by coupling the name of a patriot who had secured freedom for an infant nation with the body of the black slave. Though Washington prevailed in this case and preserved his national figure from unsettling contradictions, he was inevitably powerless to determine the ideological uses the nation would make of his mythic legacy. The private individual may have been resolute that patriots do not associate with fugitive slaves in public, but the corpus of metaphoric associations that made up the public image of the founding father stumbled against disturbing and indeterminate associations that saw Washington providing directives both for and against slavery. As members of the post-Revolutionary generation confronted this inconsistency, they continually rewrote the biography of the founding father in an attempt to articulate a national history that still promised coherence and closure. And though corrections and changes of Washington's legacy seemingly assured the destiny of the nation in the face of increasing sectional division, these retellings, supplements, and prefaces to the narrative of the fathers undermined the coherent story of America by
insidiously suggesting that its founding narratives were in some way inadequate and incomplete.

The president steered clear of the slave question, but after his death, abolitionist as well as proslavery factions never hesitated to couple his name with the bound body of the slave. "Alas! thought I," wrote an abolitionist who ran across a gang of manacled slaves en route to a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon. "The land of Washington!—her soil worn out—her children led away captive—surely a curse has fallen upon her." E.M. Hudson experienced none of this anguish over pairing slaves and founding fathers. Washington provided this Confederate polemicist with a fatherly blessing for race slavery in *The Second War of Independence in America*: "When we reflect that the greatest statesmen of America—as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Calhoun, and others—were slaveholders, and that they were distinguished by their moderation and mildness, as well as an ardent attachment to freedom, we may well entertain a doubt that the influence of slavery upon the dominant race in America has been pernicious." For abolitionists and fugitive slaves, American history could not be articulated without voicing the contradictions of a freedom existing alongside the peculiar institution of race slavery. In the first African American novel, *Clotel*; or, *The President's Daughter* (1853), escaped slave and novelist William Wells Brown enforced sexual conjunction to act as national disjunction and dramatized the fractures in the American mythic narrative by placing the mulatto granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson upon the auction block. For Brown, remembering was hardly an exercise in patrilineal reverence; history was not a consolidated, indivisible domain. For slavery's apologists, however, figurative and even literal kinship between black slaves and founding fathers betrayed no lines of disintegration. Instead, the founding fathers became identified with biblical patriarchs, wisely overseeing their property, justified in sacrificing their children as Abraham did Isaac. George Washington's treatment of his "servants" instructed farmers in the proper management of their livestock, and slaves once owned by Thomas Jefferson were not a national embarrassment but a national resource capable of delivering valuable memories of the author of the Declaration of Independence. *The Memoirs of a Monticello Slave* easily sacrifices Isaac Jefferson's historical condition as slave to a higher mythic purpose: to remembering Washington's liberality ("He gave Isaac a guinea") or Jefferson's prodigious mind ("Isaac has often wondered how old master came to have such a mighty head."). Bound by the patriarchal institution, Isaac Jefferson remains teextually enslaved to the history of the fathers, his own biography laboring to illuminate a receding legacy. A moral need to reaffirm the Abramic authors of the American covenant through such rituals of memory took precedence over any potential critique that might appear in the unrecoupled voices and dissenting bodies—the cracks—of tradition.

Even though soliciting slave testimony might seem a risky historical enterprise, Isaac Jefferson's recollections affirmed new patterns of patriarchal authority that originated with the American experiment. In his study of American cultural consciousness from 1750 to 1800, Jay Fliegelman contends that the Revolution displaced traditional notions of patriarchal authority with more enlightened, more egalitarian relations between fathers and sons. Representations of Washington as a moral benefactor and citizen exemplar were consistent with liberal theories of education and child raising that began to be proposed in the eighteenth century. The young nation sought to devise a historical parentage that would not reinscribe Americans within the confines of a rigid patriarchal control. Antebellum biographies thus scripted a role of reformed, judicious authority for Washington by recording his adoption of Martha Custis's children—an action that found immediate extrapolation in the description of a national hero who, motivated by unselshness, adopted and cared for an orphan nation. Washington's own childlessness proved oddly fortuitous to the history of the nation: freed of the restrictive lines of kinship, he emerged as the father of his country. "Far from betraying the Revolutionary ideology, the mythologization of Washington as founding father enthroned the antipatriarchal values that make up that ideology," writes Fliegelman. "The point is not that he is described as America's father, but rather what kind of father he is described as being." The antipatriarchal Revolution toppled the stern, obdurate patriarch, replacing him with the benevolent father whose authority descended from his character and personal achievement. Washington met these requirements when he ushered America into its maturity, and then, as the classical comparison goes, like Cincinnatus, he returned to his plow, leaving the citizens an inheritance of independence. He seemed to embody
a pleasantly self-effacing authority who absented himself so the people could mature into their own rule. The problem arose, however, when Washington returned to his plow—and his plantation. The same kindly disposed father who watched over his citizens coincided with the apologists’ image of the patriarchal planter oversaw his “children.” The antipatriarchal ideology that Fliegelman describes also characterized the national father as slave owner. On the plantation, seeds of contradiction were sown that would disrupt the national narrative.

Such disruptive ambiguities did not plague the planter himself, as they did the legacy of the patriot that descended to the post-Revolutionary generation. His public silence on the slave question along with resilient yet dissimilar facts—that he led some human beings to freedom and independence, emancipated others, and owned as property still others—defied incorporation into a seamless story of America. Washington’s private correspondence stresses a need for emancipation and is marked by such unequivocal declarations as “I can only say, that there is not a man living, who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition” of slavery. In the same letter, however, he apologizes for a lack of authority to implement his will autocratically: “But there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by legislative authority.” Washington’s private resolution remains intact and unquestioned; at the national level, however, no closure extends to the corpus of representations that made up the icon of American patriarchal authority. Even when the owner of Mount Vernon made a decision in his will to emancipate his 317 slaves upon his wife’s death, nothing was settled with respect to this corpus of public representations. In fact, an interpretative struggle began in which American culture labored to remember Washington’s private life in a manner consistent with national policy. His Farewell Address’s avoidance of the subject of slavery obeys an overall theme of his public career: the interest in national harmony oversees any protest that the figure of the black slave could articulate. Rather than dissolve the story of America with a forced conclusion, Washington deemed it better to preserve the harmony and balance of the narrative itself, even if such a decision propagated ambiguity and inconsistency, keeping the nation’s narrative suspended, prevented from realizing its errand.

For 1850s America, this irresolution had grown paralyzing. Citizens who would employ the nation as Washington’s biography in order to tell stories of promise and coherence found their tellings betrayed by stutters and traumatic gaps. Textual contortions, apologies, and rationalizations mar any coherence C.M. Kirkland achieved in her “private and familiar” juvenile biography, Memoirs of Washington (1857). Recounting how the seclusion of a snowstorm at Mount Vernon finds the general playing whist, she anticipates her young readers’ delicate, impressionable sensibilities and quickly explains:

But need we apologize for this amusement, which though disproved in our day, was universally allowed in his time by the society in which he lived? Washington’s habits require no apologies or concealments. He is not amenable in these matters to standards set up since his day. . . . He would have been slow to believe, probably, that the day would ever come when good people could be found who would condemn dancing, yet refuse to condemn slavery; who would consider card-playing a sin, yet utter no fulminations against what Washington himself, born and bred in the midst of it, calls “a wicked, cruel and unnatural trade.”

Kirkland’s negotiation of the issue is apparent yet complex: on the one hand, she derides slavery, expressing disdain for those of her generation for whom moral outrage was a convenience; on the other hand, in deference to Washington, she trivializes slavery, mentioning it only by way of comparison to another “harmless” sin, an occasional fondness for cards. In similar fashion, Benson J. Lossing’s The Home of Washington (1859) details dinner parties at Mount Vernon to imagine the docility of slavery under a proper national authority: “The dishes and plates were removed and changed, with a silence and speed that seemed like enchantment.” Contained in silence and invisibility, slavery and its disturbing associations never risk impudence before company—whether it is dinner guests or a nation of readers. As with most other mid-century narratives of the founding father, Memoirs and The Home of Washington instill the belief that slavery was never problematic under Washington’s patriarchal care and management. Dutiful and industrious habits equip Washington to carry masterfully the nation’s share of the white man’s burden of providing for what Kirkland sees as “the dilatory, inefficient and irregular people he had to deal with.”
Only after she has Washington dead and buried does Kirkland return to the question of slavery. “On the whole, the testimony of Washington against slavery is clear and explicit enough,” she concludes, but the sense pervades the biography that slavery was not divisive while Washington lived. Her Memoirs of Washington turn to “Washington’s opinions on slavery” only after the biography’s plot has already effected closure, sealing the general in his tomb in the preceding chapter. This deferral and distancing of slavery in Washington’s life did not occur only in popular biography. Even Washington Irving’s Life of George Washington (1859), a more historically serious treatment, postpones the complication of slavery until the multivolume work has laid Washington to rest. In the final chapter of the work, once “the body was deposited in the vault,” Irving confronts the presidential planter and attempts to sort out the “insuperable difficulties” that prevented immediate emancipation of his slaves. The national narrative—ordered around the coherence of Washington’s life—displaces slavery until after the story is ended in the resolution of Washington’s burial. This return of the oppressed after the founder’s death expresses more than Kirkland’s or Irving’s trauma; insurgent reconsiderations of the founders’ story during the antebellum era mark the strained seams of faulty closure in a biography made national. Attempts to negotiate slavery involved a retreat to the past, a retreat to the storied coherence of Washington and his era that predated the affixing of any unsettling appendix. Yet text and culture suffered the same problematic: each sought to distance an uncertain present by retelling a narrative whose plot promises order and closure, but as juvenile biographies demonstrate, death failed to seal the nation’s fate in unity and innocence. A postscript emerges, attached to the original plot, supplemental to the father’s biography. This appended legacy describes much more than textual inconsistency within these 1850s biographies; for the antebellum sons, the present seemed a disjunctive appendix to the glorious era of the fathers.

Increasing numbers of citizens in the antebellum era returned to the memory of when Washington lived as a way to evade the threatened incoherence of comparing whist and slavery, of reconciling contemporary morality and founding exigency. The “problem of slavery impinging upon all others, producing a national ideology riddled with ambiguities and tensions, and year by year distorting the course of democracy,” writes Eric Sundquist. Beginning with the constitutional crisis of the 1850s, America sought to stave off disruption by rededicating itself to its original foundations. Bills were introduced for the completion of the Washington Monument and the restoration of Mount Vernon; first drafts of Washington’s Farewell Address, stressing the need for national unity, were discovered and purchased by Congress, which ordered that copies be circulated among the populace. Anxiety and indecision about the coherence of the nation fueled this zealous return to narratives of the founding fathers. Henry Clay, who introduced the Senate motion to purchase the Farewell Address, hoped that “amid the discordance and ungrateful sounds of disunion and discord which assail our ears in every part of this country,” Washington’s parting counsel to overcome sectional differences would placate citizens. As early as 1792, Thomas Jefferson had looked to his fellow Virginian to sustain the putative unity of national narrative and suggested that the infant sections of the nation would endure by being suspended bodily from the hands of their father. Urging Washington to a second presidency, Jefferson wrote, “North and South will hang together as long as they have you to hang on.” The metaphoric dimension of Jefferson’s plea stems from an understanding that nations are not solely defined by topographic contours. The nation arises from tropographic contours as well.

Much recent critical work has addressed the narratival aspects of the nation. The “National Symbolic,” “an apparatus of cultural fictions,” “the nation as narration,” and the “imagined community” all highlight intersections of literary criticism with cultural studies of nationalism. For instance, although important differences exist between Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the novelistic historical consciousness of the modern nation and Etienne Balibar’s description of the “whole system of translations” that produces for a nation a “fictive ethnicity,” these conceptions posit the nation in relation to techniques and strategies associated with fictional construction. Whether the nation emerges from a “new cartographic discourse,” as it does in part for Anderson, or whether critics privilege an account that is geographic, biographic, or tropographic, the key commonality is that the nation is graphic, a written space whose dimensions are set, confines illustrated, borders advanced, and citizens collected by linguistic imaginings.
American political thought, as Jefferson's utterance makes clear, has long been characterized by metaphoric configurations of community. Aboard the Arbella in 1630, John Winthrop theorized that the covenant binding a community needs be represented symbolically by a body. Winthrop sanctified the community by casting it as the New World inheritor of a covenant God had first made with Abraham. Members of the community, Winthrop suggested, do not so much cohere by devising a covenant among themselves, but rather are knit together in a civil body serving as a worldly incarnation of Christ's body. As "the body of Christ whereof we are members," the Puritan settlement established unity; through metaphor, this prototypical American community imaged itself as coherent. Through this imagined relation, the colonists could "mutually participate" in a shared symbolism that outlined the contours of the community and gave it order. Individual citizens might deem others "as disproportionate and as much disordering as so many contrary qualities or elements," but the metaphor of the body activated a symbolic image capable of organizing differences and contradictions into a single, homogeneous whole. E pluribus unum, indeed. Metaphor allowed the community to enter the symbolic realm of politics and accomplish a type of coherence that was unavailable in a context tainted with division and disarray. It was more than a case of representation by metaphor: fictive bodies do not simply mirror a desired national order; as John Beverley writes, literature also produces and constitutes political realities. Metaphor has the figurative power to regenerate sundered entities, for as Winthrop promised, a community founded upon love "gathers together the scattered bones of perfect old man Adam, and knits them together into one body again in Christ."

Although the Puritan experiment would eventually fail, its failure gave way to a much larger federation—America—still indebted to achieving consensus through another noncorporeal body, the narrativized body of the founding father. At this point, it is helpful to turn to another theorizer of the covenant, Thomas Hobbes, who contended that large, stable forms of political community must be mediated through the fictional representations of a body. Chapter 16 of Leviathan proposes that in the unity of the representative actor, people are made one as a civil body. The representative always contains a fictional component, configured as an "Artificial Person" who bears the symbolic manifestation of the community along with or in place of his or her natural body. This desubstantiation of historically and physically bounded bodies corresponds to what Michael Paul Rogen, working through Hobbesian distinctions between the sovereign's natural body and the mythical body of the king, has called "political demonology." With Washington's death in 1799, the bounded body vanished, only to find resurrection in the "Artificial Person" of the father of his country who represents and regenerates the American civil body. Winthrop's Christ returned as an American father; in one of the first biographies of Washington, Parson Weems imagines the "prophetic remark" of a farmer who, chancing upon Washington in prayer, muses, "I am greatly deceived—and still more shall I be deceived if God do not, through him, work out a great salvation for America."13

Race has infiltrated the political demonology of American politics. Discussing presidential figures including Lincoln, Nixon, and Reagan, Rogen demonstrates how the notion of the king's two bodies has permeated political imaging, creating situations such as occurred during the 1980s, when the president's real body had a tendency to project itself not only in the fictive framework of the Hobbesian representative, but within the cinematic space of the Hollywood movie. With the death of Washington, however, any tension between the hero's two bodies vanished with the interim of his corporeal form. A single body, a narrativized form preserved with the formaldehyde of myth, remained. Biographies effaced any lingering disjunctions by serving up the general's private life, detailing his domestic routine, making it national. But with this total inclusion, unassimilable elements—like the fugitive black slave Washington preferred not to acknowledge—posed serious discrepancies for a narrative affirming itself as single and unified. Providing messages of freedom as well as examples of proper domestic management of one's slaves, Washington defied the coherence so crucial to narrative closure by standing in two radically opposed positions at the same cultural moment. The father's confused identity could reveal only a narrative fraught with irresolvable contradiction; rather than solidifying an American identity, Washington functioned as a telling symptom of a national inconsistency, of an incoherent American body.14

As a figure of national narrative, Washington might act as a metaphor for the promise and unity of the American civil body, but
he could in no way support the ideological weight of the bound body of the black slave. He double-crossed the national narrative, signifying the inability to forge cohesion. As the sons returned to the figures of the fathers for solace and confirmation of their own political righteousness, they discovered that the fathers themselves were hardly coherent enough in their beliefs and practices to legitimate a stable mid-nineteenth-century America. Bred with a reverence for their political origins, members of the antebellum generation were shocked to learn of an illegitimate genealogy in which enslavement appeared as the undeniable twin of freedom. They uncovered a fundamental contradiction: ideas of freedom originating in the conditions of slavery. Edmund Morgan emphasizes this point in his study of colonial Virginia, which argues that so many planters spearheaded the cause for independence, not in spite of, but because slavish dependence to an oppressive patriarch was a daily sight. “Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like,” states Morgan. Harriet Beecher Stowe thus imagine a white child in 1776 rejecting the suggestion that his father obey the king with the scoffing exclamation, “Father a slave!” This portrait of “The Altar of Liberty, or 1776” is disrupted by the following view, “The Altar of ———, or 1850,” in which a fugitive slave is remanded to his master in Georgia. The absence, the missing political legacy in Stowe’s diptych, suggests how for the post-Revolutionary sons the contradictory kinship of freedom and slavery signaled a divisive rent in the narratives that articulated and preserved a nation. By the 1850s, territories acquired from the recent war with Mexico sparked heated debate when it came time to decide if those lands would enter the Union as either free or slave states. Which course did the narratives of the past advocate? What did the now ambivalent representative body of Washington advise?  

In the midst of this debate, abolitionist and antislavery factions took up positions along the tropographic contours of national narrative. While one Unionist called upon those flinging threats of dissolution to recall that “dismemberment” would trample “the spirit of Washington,” Senator John C. Calhoun prophesied that the South would follow the legacy of the same, yet another Washington, who rebelled against an oppressor nation without hesitating “to draw his sword, and head the great movement by which that union was forever severed.” Contrary to those who believed that the first president had left an enduring inheritance of union, Calhoun read Washington’s secession from England as “the great and crowning glory of his life,” a radical legacy to be remembered by his “latest posterity.” Outside the halls of Congress, E. Cecil’s The Life of George Washington, Written for Children (1859) called upon readers to remember how the national father “fought not for Virginia only, not that he himself might be free, but for all the States, for all his countrymen, and for us,” while south of the Mason-Dixon line, poets would soon sing the praises of Robert E. Lee via comparisons to the national father. The loyal referent for national union switched sides and became a banner for political rebellion: 

Rebel! ’tis our family name—
Our father, Washington,
Was the arch-rebel in the fight
And gave the name to us—a right
Of father unto son.

Even a year after Appomattox, Melville looked upon Lee’s appearance before the Reconstruction Committee and mused: “Who looks at Lee must think of Washington.”

Such contradictory appeals to Washington were not aberrations; instead, as George Forgie argues, recurrent scenes of guilt, ambivalence, and resentment typified the 1850s. In Patricide in the House Divided, Forgie scans antebellum magazines, congressional speeches, and electoral debates to diagnose the split consciousness of a filial generation that embraced the legacy of the founding fathers even as it staged an Oedipal rebellion against those same fathers. Under this rubric, Forgie offers insightful readings of such moments as Lincoln’s discomfort with the fathers in his debates with Stephen Douglas. As Fliegelman points out, however, Forgie’s “overreliance on the apparatus of psychohistory” skews his interpretation so that vital historical and political issues are subsumed by Freudian explanations. In addition to encountering the drawbacks of Freudian interpretation, Patricide in the House Divided, like Fliegelman’s study, underestimates the kinship between the founding fathers and American slaves. Although Forgie acknowledges that the founders failed to bequeath a coherent narrative for or against slavery, his discussion glosses the centrality of race slavery in antebellum culture. Concen-
trating on the recognizable heirs of the founding fathers, Forgie ignores those unacknowledged sons—America's slaves—who had received no inheritance of freedom. Whether slaves used patriotic discourse or were represented within it by others, they disrupted the legacies integral to coherent tellings of national tradition.

Frederick Douglass makes clear the necessity of foregrounding the racial underpinnings of antebellum discourse. In an 1852 Fourth of July address, Douglass excuses himself from singing the praises of the national narrative: "I leave, therefore, the great deeds of your fathers to other gentlemen whose claim to be regularly descended will be less likely disputed than mine!" Saying he has no authority to engage with the legacy of the founders, Douglass nevertheless implies that the incongruity of the slave's ironically spoken silence is a fundamental element in any rendition of national patriarchy. Invoking the fathers even as he refuses to discuss them, Douglass reconfigures his lack of authority and exclusion as critical commentary. His inability to pay tribute to the fathers acts as ironic authorization to juxtapose the figure of the muted slave with the verbose tradition of patriotism. Speaking by not speaking, Douglass argues for the centrality of race in any meditation on American nationalism. His formulation echoes in Toni Morrison's recent conclusion that "the metaphorical and metaphysical uses of race occupy definitive places in American literature, in the 'national' character, and ought to be a major concern." Biographies of the national father did not ignore the peculiar institution—in fact, in these volumes the master rebukes, gives instruction to, and punishes his plantation slaves—yet in virtually every instance, slavery as political referent keeps its place, standing in the background, the slave's presence a silent emblem of Washington's wealth, authority, or kindness. Douglass and Morrison, in contrast, argue that this presence may not be so secondary or docile, but rather is discursively unruly and historically recalcitrant, latent with insurrectionary potential.

With the increase in sectional tension, concerns over the body of the slave now coincided literally with the death of Washington. John Norton's Life of Washington (1860) recounts the general's fatal sickness in a manner consistent with other biographies in the prewar years. Under a section entitled "More thoughtful for a servant than himself," readers learn how Washington awoke cold and sick one winter night, but, like any self-sacrificing patriarch, refused to call the "col-

ored woman" to make a fire. Too considerate (or too guilty) to trouble a slave woman, Washington instead suffers bodily. The next day finds him being bled by none other than the plantation overseer and lapsing into death—not to mention into a good deal of historical irony. In the didactic tone of Washington biographies, as well as their tendency to rewrite biography as national allegory, readers learn that the heritage of Washington could be preserved and the Union made to cohere if the nation ignored the fuss over slaves.

America's inability to settle definitively such questions and reach consensus imperiled the destiny of the national narrative, forestalling any promise of closure. The sundering of Washington's narrative between plots of enslavement and plots of freedom told of a nation beleaguered by its own incoherent memory. The Puritan typology that inscribed the community within the Exodus framework of a chosen people destined to be delivered out of the wilderness into the promised land could scarcely be coherently or confidently articulated when the tellers themselves could not agree on the character of their own fathers, let alone on the political character of Kansas and Nebraska as free or slave. Wendell Phillips expressed this divisive ambiguity when he said of the founding fathers: "I love these men; I hate their work. I respect their memory; I reject their deeds. I trust their hearts; I distrust their heads." Even though Washington stood divided, even though authorizing cultural referents lacked stability, narratives of the American nation nevertheless appeared to achieve closure. By their very status as narrative, stories of America impel themselves to closure, wrapping up any loose discrepancies along the way to a promised ending. As Frank Kermode suggests in The Sense of an Ending, human actors who find themselves stranded in the midst of uncertain authority and "disquieting gaps" rush forward with "fictive concords" to suture hints of inconsonant experience. Such fictive concords—which readily compare to Hobbes's and Winthrop's uses of a symbolic, covenanted body—dispel the insecurity of an aimless present by affixing it to origins and ends invested with legality and legitimacy. In 1850s America, what Hayden White sees as a psychological "desire" to use narrative as a means of structuring "an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of fantasies of emptiness," led back to the fathers who, in the sons' eyes, had become woefully inadequate and sorely compromised. Fictive concords, like my-
thologized patriots, seem to reconfirm the nation by narrating stories and biographies of promised, seamless closure. But any narrative capable of representing American freedom alongside of American slavery that attained closure was too perfect to be true. Anxious insistence for narrative closure ended in national disarticulation. The fictive nature of the concord threatened to expose itself as fictive; the artificiality of the covenant became heightened by uncontrollable social actualities and difficult memories, calling into question the reliability of its authority. Although American national narratives may end, they find no resolution, falling short of the freedom, social harmony, or political legitimacy associated with closure.

To understand how the relentless demand for closure affects narrative, I would like to work through certain theoretical insights on the interrelationship of narrative and authority found in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1859). “True, it may be urged that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to . . . than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved,” writes Melville’s duplicitous narrator. Even as he makes this statement, the narrator eschews consistency, deeming it the mark of “untrueness.” The narrator thus declares that a fictional apparatus “incongruous in its parts” or “at variance with itself as the caterpillar is with the butterfly” offers a more accurate representation. But as *The Confidence-Man* amply illustrates, Americans, ever diligent in their search for seamless stories, experience “distaste” for narratives whose inconsistency precludes the promise of closure. They instead place confidence in characters as coherent as Hobbes’s “Artificial Person,” who can effect unity and resolution. Such confidence, however, is a tenuous fictive arrangement that always threatens to unravel into deceptive artifice and fraudulent representation. “Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges,” Melville later elaborated in *Billy Budd*. Whether it is the problematic representation of Captain Vere’s authority, which leads *Billy Budd* to attempt four endings, or the total lack of authentic authority in *The Confidence-Man*, which causes the narrative to trail off into scenes of ambiguous despair, Melville’s often inconsonant fictions contend that closure stands in opposition to “truth.” Narrative closure exists as the product of cultural confidence, the result of a fiction that privileges consistency, unity, and harmony above all else.

Aboard the ironically named *Fidèle*, where protean inconsistency in character as well as narrator flees passengers and confuses readers, closure is forever denied by *The Confidence-Man*’s final sentence: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade.” Likewise, in *Billy Budd*, where authority uneasily oscillates between unfeeling tyranny and judicious command, any sense of narrative closure needs to remain suspended. Only authority can cut the “ragged edges” and place the events aboard the *Fidèle* or the Bellipotent to rest. Interestingly, *Billy Budd* does contain a moment of closure when “News from the Mediterranean,” described as “an authorized weekly publication,” finds a tidy explanation, ending with the assertion that the “criminal paid the penalty of his crime.” Once a moral has been fixed, once the evil receive their comeuppance, the news story can gratify the demand for closure. Authority intercedes in the stalemate between “truth” and narrative closure; authority rescues narrative from the paralyzing effects of open-ended and ambiguous “truth,” providing and producing closure. The account given in “News from the Mediterranean” achieves closure because its concern is authority, not truth. In contrast, the “Counterfeit Detector” that appears at the end of *The Confidence-Man* has no authority, since it may itself be counterfeit. And the narrative ends—but does not find closure—as a nefarious character leads a confused old man into the dark. Melville reveals how within narrative, authority and closure exist in tautological relation to one another: authority ensures closure; yet without closure and with the persistence of ambiguity, there can be no authority. “Truth,” as Melville understood, enters nowhere into the equation. In nineteenth-century America, no equivalence between truth and authority existed; the two remained separate and unequal. As Carolyn Porter writes, “Melville found that the truth lacked authority, and that authority—the authorized discourses of his era—lacked truth.”

Narratives of America end not so much in a geographic destiny as in a moral landscape that grounds Americans’ sense of moral purpose and political legitimacy. Milk and honey are more than tokens of prosperity; they also symbolize essential virtues. Narrative is thus in itself a moral action; the closure inherent to narrative can only come laced with a meaning that validates its social context. As Hayden White asks, “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?” In Melville’s comments about “truth” we find the answer:
yes, we could certainly tell a story, indeed, even appeal to cultural authority to articulate coherent resolution, but finding closure that guarantees an unambiguous vision of equality, justice, or freedom is quite another matter. American narrative in the mid-nineteenth-century, written in the context of race slavery, did find endings, but endings without closure, as though it were cut adrift, out of sight of the terra firma of unambiguous moral principle.

**THE RECUPERATION OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY**

Narrative may lead to a moral landscape; a story may rededicate the American people to that primordial saga of Exodus whose ending promises a land of unlimited abundance and a harmonious civil society, shining as a city upon a hill. Narrative commands the authority to order events into a story and carry it along through its wanderings to an affirming conclusion. But from where does this authority to create and enact closure come? If we answer "the author," we hazard repeating a version of the intentional fallacy. It is impossible to consider an author, especially an American author in the era of slavery, apart from a social context. Even Thoreau, self-stranded at Walden, lived close enough to Concord to hear the Fourth of July celebrations. Fiction attains closure by means of cultural authority; how well the narratives of a culture cohere influences how securely fiction can rely on a smooth teleological progression from beginning to end. Fulfillment of a promised destiny—whether it is a narrative’s pledge to deliver a story to its ending or a nation’s design to settle a New Canaan—is dependent upon the coherence of cultural narratives (such as the covenant to read a fictive, biographic Washington as national representative) that contain and express the body politic. Neither narrative nor nation—as articulation—can be completed when nonrepresentative bodies whose silence and interruptions speak differently, "betwixt and between times and places," as Homi Bhabha puts it, and sidetrack the headlong rush for closure. Race denied redemption of the pledge to reach a satisfying end for mid-nineteenth-century America; the black slave stalled and redirected the narrative that the body politic would tell. If, as Toni Morrison argues, “the process of organizing American coherence” occurred “through distancing Africanism,” then, the return of that textually and politically repressed presence renders national narratives incongruent.29

National narratives are tenacious of coherence and order, however. In the face of unlooked-for ironies and inconsistencies, covenedant bodies remain committed to a fictional apparatus that ignores, silences, or renders docile disruptive agents. This disposition encouraged George Washington Parke Custis’s *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* (1859) to affirm the absence of any contradictions within the narrative corpus of the founding father: “As a master of slaves, General Washington was consistent, as in every other relation of his meritorious life.”30 Four years later, in the midst of civil war, Washington could hardly have been expected to provide unity with the same ease that the fictive representativeness of the Hobbesian sovereign melds an ordered community. Even so, 1863, which witnessed Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, saw the publication of Uncle Juvinnell’s *The Farmer Boy, and How He Became Commander-in-Chief* in Boston. Rather than thinking that either of these battles, which amassed tens of thousands of deaths, bolstered Northern confidence enough to reaffirm an American narrative, we should interpret this cultural artifact in another way: doubts over the preservation of the grand design gave rise to this volume of juvenile literature. Uncle Juvinnell conjured up the figurative body of Washington in attempt to efface gaps within the body politic. That is, following Fredric Jameson, who reads narrative as a socially symbolic act resolving tensions and conflicts within society, we need to read this document of popular culture as a narrative recklessly providing surety to a social network that is without firm backing or sure heading.31

A spokesman of God, the Reverend William M. Thayer, prefaced Uncle Juvinnell’s work by saying *The Farmer Boy* is “so well adapted to the exigencies of the times.”32 The narrative’s status as a biography written for adolescents and children preserves the coherence of *The Farmer Boy*, allowing its plot to overcome the rebellious intimations of Thayer’s preface and arrive at the promise of closure. Its author’s design for it comes to fruition, though not because Uncle Juvinnell, as “the blind bard of Kentucky,” could lay claim to the divine inspiration of sightlessness as did Homer and Milton. Conventions of genre come to the rescue of this potentially disrupted narrative, anchoring its teleological course. The farmer boy does grow up to