

# **The Cultural Work of Local Authorship: Political Rhetorics of Expression**

**Susan Miller**

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Studies Minor and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing*

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**THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING**  
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## **Preface**

In October of 1997, The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing and the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies (CLRS) brought Professor Susan Miller to campus as a guest lecturer for the CLRS speaker series. Professor Miller is a national expert in composition and rhetoric and a professor of English at the University of Utah. She is the author of *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition; The Written Word: Reading and Writing in Social Contexts; Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer; and Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing*.

Professor Miller's lecture, "The Cultural Work of Local Authorship: Political Rhetorics of expression," was based on her work examining commonplace books in the archives of the Virginia Historical Society. In this latest book, Miller looks at the ways that three nineteenth-century writers were able to use writing to alter the power structures in which they found themselves. As Miller notes, "Each exemplifies how local authorship took consequential actions to re-formulate power at a crucial social boundary ."

In addition to this published lecture, Miller met with students from several departments and answered questions in informal seminars. In particular, students interested in historical studies of literacy were invited to discuss their projects with her.

The Center's primary mission is to improve the quality of undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. This speaker series, along with colloquia, faculty development workshops, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the University community.

We are pleased to present Professor Miller's lecture as part of our ongoing conversations about writing across the University. We invite you to participate in these conversations, either by contacting us directly or by attending any of our programs. Descriptions of our activities, online registration forms for workshops, and calls for proposals for grants and conferences are available at the Center's website:  
<http://cisw.cla.umn.edu>.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor

Holly Littlefield, Editor  
October, 1998

## **The Cultural Work of Local Authorship: Political Rhetorics of Expression**

My first contacts with the idea of “history” always represented the past as an English teacher. We learned history, that is, because the past held people “just like us,” witnesses to the perjuring stable human spirit. But that universal spirit was also progressive: we traced it paradoxically, both up to where we are, and unfortunately down, to where we should not be.

As I began to write the history I want to discuss now, I found that it’s sad times for these assumptions in current historiography, which looks for difference rather than similarity and exposes how historians’ big, teleological, stories are always self-interested rhetorical explanations. It is now easier to find Egyptian mummies than Elgin marbles in the British Museum; stories of the American west are now thematized around escape, not an always only imagined frontier. Yet even though I began describing a history of writing practices in America with LaClau, Hayden White, and Lyotard in mind, I transcribed the 300 commonplace books in the Virginia Historical Society expecting both sameness and progress, up and down. Historical texts have had to teach me to see discursive difference, something other than either sameness or progress, so that I could also see how self-interested are progressive histories of authorship, rhetoric, and schooling in composing. The old common sense about early American writing, that is, is a story that these texts set aside.

Let’s begin with Charles Dabney. In a June, 1849 “Address ‘On the Value of Writing,’ to the Alumni of the University of Virginia, he genially argued that powerful

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This paper was presented as part of the Composition, Literacy, And Rhetorical Studies speaker series in October, 1997. It is an abbreviated version of Chapter 6, “Fundamentals of Authorship,” in *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Work of Ordinary Writing* (Carbondale, IL: SIUP, 1998). Pp. 254-91.

men should reform manly ambition at its hidden heart, sites of education. He proposes here that UVA students begin taking vernacular writing courses, not to “correct” their language, but to form what he calls “more quiet ways of forming and expressing public sentiment.” Like Edward Channing at Harvard, Dabney transfers the combative oratorical trope of “fame” to a solitary, yet equally entitled and active, written composition. He wants acts of writing to disseminate local values. Avoiding personal, domesticated, and public, universal, inspired authorship, his pre-war university composition will ensure a startling list of local advantages. “Writing,” he says, “will correct our tastes, to fix our habits, and change us from the roving, unsettled nation we now are, into a home-loving and home-improving population.” Shoddy construction, of language and Virginia homes, results, he says, from “the migratory spirit” of Americans who “expect to leave the home of childhood for some imaginary El Dorado.” “Writing,” he says, “keeps us at home, in seclusion, to cooperate with circumstances.”

I don’t know how you react to this manifesto, but I felt the vertigo David Brumble describes in *American Indian Autobiography*, after his Pittsburgh neighbor whispered that his mother just died on purpose, to get even with him, and that she had been a skin-walker--a witch. This was, as Brumble puts it, something different. Dabney says that from localized places, all must publish, to benefit “mankind”: “He who puts forth the simplest schoolbook” or “a tract which brings one soul from vice to virtue” may do the most good “in this land” and in “heathen regions opening to Christian civilization.” He concludes by praising UVA’s “young men” for “commencing a periodical, . . . the exponent of their views, and the stimulant of their powers in composition.” Well after the University “crumbles to dust,” he says, the writing of its students will remain.

Beyond his imagined heathen readers, his idea that student writing outlasts a university persuaded me to suspend regimes of truth I brought to historical texts as a critical, yet covertly anti-rhetorical, reader. I am well schooled, that is, to miss the confidence and the consequences of historical writing that is not canonized. Like Brumble's exemplary mother, it has powers that my culture does not see. Some do now point out that we have ignored both ordinary writers and the cultural implications of their texts. David Smith's *Writing and Rebellion*, for instance, demonstrates that medievalists have mistaken 5 peasant writers for one variant text because they believe peasants did not write at all, and Roger Chartier points out that Foucault's belief that the signed author-function occurs only in modern commodified publishing ignores the signatures of many medieval writers who took responsibility for their interpretations of scripture. Much recently demonstrated variability in what it has meant to write might prepare us but has not for Dabney's entitled local author. His and similar 19th-century manifestos for writing suggest a history of writing we do not see, and a differently nuanced rhetoric of expression.

So I want to describe three 19th century texts that were neither officially "authored" nor fearful about the sound of their own voices. They were written in a continuum that also suggests how changing cultural circumstances transmitted and eventually limited the writerly subject positions our profession can now see. They include an 1824 divorce petition to the Virginia Assembly, an 1844 memoir of a father's death, and an 1893 newspaper account of one family's Civil War. Each exemplifies how local authorship took consequential actions to reformulate power at a crucial social boundary. Each of these ordinary texts shifts a patriarchal arrangement, delicately modifying

simultaneously individual and social structures of power, with simultaneously personal and cultural results. Each renovates a specific relationship to The Fathers and to one male parent, enabling a child to be self-authorized, but through writing that is neither literary nor trivial.

Each of these texts thus undermines tacitly accepted histories of literacy, in which archives are object troves, occasionally well formed evidence of our prejudices about gender, education, and class. These two women and one youth exemplify many accomplished writers without benefit of composition classes or modern decisions to educate women. Yet each demonstrates enormous experience as a literary reader and virtuoso rhetorician. Each knows precisely how to influence readers by deploying moralized narratives of experience.

Of course only the barest outline of nineteenth-century Virginia history tells that entitled Virginians held slaves, established dynasties, and lost both in the Civil War. But these ordinary texts write a divergent discursive history of those circumstances. They write personally, but with no doubt that their experience comments on cultural arrangements. When I name a “rhetoric of expression”, that is, I am doubting the positivist belief that writing can exempt a text, or its writer, from socially constitutive discourses from the circulation of commonplaces that comprise Western opinion. These writers each adopt conventional rhetorical moves that join private, isolated experience to public readings of law, death, and war. They deploy emotion to win otherwise lost legal and memorial causes. In these texts, what we now call a “personal” voice is a powerful rhetorical stance, adopted by categorically or temporarily disabled identities females,

orphans, and those defeated in war. These writers knowingly use, that is, personal reasons that intervene in power discourses, to rearrange intimate and public histories.

The first example is Evelina Gregory Roane<sup>1</sup>. In 1824, at age 20, Evelina wrote a petition to the Virginia Assembly, asking for a divorce from Newman Roane. Hers was one of few petitions by early Virginia spouses, who in the absence of divorce legislation before 1836 could divorce only by an Assembly act, which was only rarely granted instead of a legal writ that separated spouses. Whatever may have been Evelina Roane's expectation of success as she inscribed this unusual suit, her motives for the attempt were compelling. Her husband Newman had beat and verbally abused her, and allowed his love for his longtime slave mistress to overturn the marital home. Identical offenses were commonly cited in divorce petitions, usually without effect. The Gregory and the Roane families were great friends. But Newman also punished Evelina for joining her family at a cousin's funeral, by beating her so badly she miscarried a child.

To understand how Evelina's petition enacts a rhetoric of expression, it is important to remember that legal wives have had many entitlements, if only scanty protection from personal damage. Explicit instruction from conduct traditions have taught how to manage this class-based social identity, specifically by absolute deference to a husband and to the larger society in which both a particular husband and legal union participate. As Jane Austen teaches, assuming the "character" of a wife advantageously anchors a female's sexuality and intellect in the service of male class privileges. It places females within acquisitive patriarchy, in much the same way as an identity in Mankind

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Evelina Roane's petition are taken from Thomas Buckey's article "Placed in the Power of Violence," in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*.

the white Western “human” has given individual male desires the authority of God and country.

In this context, Evelina wrote. The Assembly responded swiftly, and without qualification. It granted her a divorce, the only one given to the three of 16 petitioners whose petitions it read that year. It also gave her custody of her child, in one of the two such actions ever taken against both “natural” and “constitutional” rights of paternity. In the other case, over 100 men had protested, reminding the Assembly that the father is “the Guardian and protector of his own Children.” But the Assembly went further. It took the astounding step of erasing Newman Roane’s connubial access to universal Mankind. Its decision, a state law, specifically forbid him from remarrying, thus expelling him from entitled manhood. He died the next year; Evelina married 3 more times and died a wealthy businesswoman at 87.

The question, of course, is obvious: How did Evelina’s petition produce this absolute rescue? I cannot overemphasize how unusual this result was, or how unpersuasive were family wealth and connections, or especially Roane’s violence, adultery and instability. Many other abused women and their families pled in equally painful circumstances. But Evelina’s petition prevailed.

The local authorship that accomplishes this miracle of persuasion relies, as I’ve forecast, on a rhetoric of expression that connects the emotional persuasion of familiar personal “experience” to state decision-making. To make Evelina’s trials “count,” that is, the petition’s logic turns authority on itself, arguing that she must receive the Assembly’s authorization to shift from wifely identity if she is to remain within patriarchal rule. The petition itself manages this shift by relying on what it calls “internal evidence sufficient

to guide the judgment of this humane Assembly, she fondly hopes. “ She claims “the sensibilities of a mother, not as one discussing the influence of municipal law,” but she writes as a mother who reasons about law like a Talmudic scholar. Her argument first defers to its rule, then complicates, and finally re-writes it, giving otherwise exclusively male universal prerogatives to this one female.

To accomplish this, the petition represents Evelina as an impeccable wife, happily subservient to and dependent on “the more powerful Sex.” Despite her perfect fit to that stabilized identity, she, as “one of a Sex too feeble for resistance,” must now cast her fate as a citizen on the Assembly. Yet the petition also offers these “more powerful” readers the pleasure of discursive intimacy with this feeble character. It details Newman’s offenses, appealing to the prurient interests of a class accustomed to sexual congress with slave women. Yet in addition to that commonly discounted fact, Evelina’s argument stresses that early in his marriage, Newman attacked her father. This very uncommon disrespect, a rather abstractly portrayed but rhetorically significant “stern rebuke of threatening anger” and “strong and violent sentiments of hatred and censure,” are construed as antipatriarchal. They offer a taste, but a decisive one, of more juicy details that follow. Newman first threatens to bring the long-time mistress and her children home; then they arrive: “This negroe woman and two mulatto children were brought upon the plantation; He now acknowledged the children openly, and admitted the eldest to every act of familiar intercourse, of which its age was capable.” “Let it suffice,” she writes, “that her husband adopted this woman as the more eligible companion & wife.” Evelina “was now frequently ordered to bring tubs of water from the spring and sent into the kitchen to cook for his negroes who were at work in the field.” The petition offers

such gossip worthy scandal within the illusion of a credible, unified and coherent story, but like all such stories, this narrative is not innocent. Evelina's character strategically places the constant pressure of a supplicating knee on the well-maintained "powers" of the Assemblymen. It reports her violent battering after attending a family funeral months after Newman has denied her all family company and church attendance, using simultaneous docility and insistent logic to fulfill its readers' desires to witness climactic violence. It hereby makes it impossible for the Assembly to see Newman as one of their own:

*She returned, home unconscious of the severe destiny, which had been prepared for her; she was attended by . . . an old servant woman of her Father's ... observing her Father's woman, he furiously rushed upon the feeble old woman, and with an axe gave some dangerous blows over the head. The axe was gotten from him by a young woman [who] attempted to get away but he stopped her and stamped her body exclaiming . . .that he would kill her... he then commenced beating your Petitioner with the Stick from the earth and making an effort to save the life of her infant ... sought the mercy of her husband with affrighted humility implored him to spare her life, he replied that her fate was irrevocably sealed, ... [T]he most horrible scene of violence was now again renewed with furious blows & imprecations, and your unhappy and exhausted Petitioner did not conceive how she could save her life until prompted by Heavens preserving power, she sought safety by flight.*

This violence after a visit to a legitimate paternal home is an undeniable conundrum for its readers. If the Assembly denies her pleas for permanent "safety by flight," it must also tacitly deny the legal wife's entitlements in patriarchy, especially to the universal fatherly standards the petition skillfully separates from the rights of one, quite common, "cruel husband." The petition widens this rupture with: "The situation of your Petitioner under these circumstances, was not that of a wife who could leave her Father and Mother and cling unto her husband, on the contrary the conduct of that husband had made it a duty of self preservation, that his wife should seek the aid and

protection of her relatives & particularly her Father.” By punishing Evelina for seeing her father and causing her to lose a child because she fulfilled a family duty, Newman has denied the legitimacy, in all its senses, of his own class coded patriarchy. Her logic argues for return to valid patriarchal oversight, which Newman, who shuns legitimate fatherhood, denies. Only the Assembly can return her to a *legitimate* submission to authority, ironically by legislating her release from it. If she remains a wife of this man, she will be unprotected not because her individualism is *in* his legal power, but because it cannot access a valid *social* identity.

To appreciate this simultaneously personal and conventional rhetoric of expression, we can also note Evelina’s third-person *ethos*, not entirely unexpected in a supposedly objective legal document. But this Clarissa-like voice simultaneously imitates charged literary narrative and builds the legal dilemma that the legislators must resolve. Its blurred logical and emotional appeals, that is, give us a precise view of what “the personal is political” might mean, to a legislator reluctant to place a daughter-like-mine outside legitimate legal governance by either father or husband.

It is tempting to predict from Evelina’s emotional narrative that the second text, a journal account of a father’s death written 20 years later, would deploy the personal even more intimately, in ways we now judge by our culture’s standards of “normal” psychology. But Philip Claibourne Gooch’s 1844 self-initiation into manhood instead is written entirely as conventional theater.<sup>2</sup> His text, that is, both shows how Evelina’s strategic rhetoric of expression drew on literary conventions, and how such a rhetoric might equally deploy rhetorical conventions of elocution. Writing before post-revolutionary mass education would separate privilege from feeling in the name of

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<sup>2</sup> References are to Philip Gooch’s manuscript Diary in the Virginia Historical Society.

national unity, young Gooch summons not psychology, but traditional oratorical conventions to keep his dead father's memory inflated. Like Evelina's, his account suggests that materially productive lost Fathers have also been discursively productive, leaving symbolic ways to protect vulnerable children. Here, theatrical conventions transfer entitlements among men.

By my lights, at least, Philip Gooch had enormous promise as a writer. He enviously calculated the time that Thomas Jefferson spent on writing, and kept his own faithful 250-page journal. It includes a vivid Dickensian narrative titled 'Stealing a Subject,' about grave robbing a cadaver for dissection at UVA medical school, which he entered after his father died. Earlier, at Concord Academy, he had reviewed Washington Irving's "History of the Far West," in a sentence that recalls Dorothy Parker: "I would not advise anybody else to read it, who had anything else to do, or to read."

But five months later, on April 17, 1844, young Gooch was called home to his father's fatal illness. From this moment of being hailed into manhood, Gooch's father's death becomes a son's story, a framed realization of narrative strategies that unfold conventionally, in a precise classical five part structure of setting, point of entrance, crisis, climax, and denouement. In the past tense, not the historical present of his later journal, Gooch uses precise temporal markers to create the fiction that he did not yet know the immediate future, but made prescient guesses about it. All of these strategies construct an active memorial; both to Gooch's father and to discourse itself they inscribe awareness of a father's death.

From its outset, the narrative relies on familiar tropes, the tropes of being "called home," of marshaling hope, of last conversations and last wishes, of fatal visages, and of

confused “arrangements.” It begins, for instance, with the most commonplace “memory” of death, the premonition, in which Gooch wonders on the fateful day about precisely the event to follow: “I rode a colt & as I passed a signpost at the Bull’ch which said “To Richmond 50 ms” I made the remark, “I wonder if c’dnot get home tonight “ Not once dreaming of such a thing nor thinking about it again.” At this moment, he hears a voice, of a messenger of a fate to symbolically befall all Southern patriarchs twenty years later:

*“I was talking when I heard Ben’s voice (the academy negro) calling “Where is Mr Gooch”, I immediately hailed him, & he placed in my hand a mail package, which had endorsed on it, . . . “The P.M. at Guinea’s will please forward this to Concord by express mail, as Mr. Gooch’s father is ill, & he is desired to come home.” With trembling hands I opened the package, & was thunder struck when I perceived letters with black seals. After looking off for a few moments, to prepare myself for the worst trial, I coolly looked over the package, and found letters with black seals, and a small note without seal to myself.”*

We learn a great deal from this familiar language, as we do from the doctor’s “darkening countenance,” his own “I knew that a crisis was near,” father’s “great desire to be ‘out of the way’,” and the final “He looked perfectly happy & soon was.” All stylize an event that formally educated writers later articulate more “personally.” But Gooch tells his father’s death as his story, and honors these moments by constituting them conventionally, in commonplaces that give them the power of a rhetoric that he can bring to bear (on) this painful and evidently sudden abandonment by his parent.

At this narrative’s climax, father is transformed into a source of sententia. He utters precisely the wise saying a son needs at such a moment, thereby becoming a hero who dies as a universalized Man, “as it were,” pragmatically and symbolically holding up his head:

Then he proved that his words were not idle when he said, [“]He was tired of this world and was always ready to die[“] which he frequently said for years past. He

died without a struggle or motion, save raising his head as it w'd fall over on one side. *As it were He w'd hold up his head to die.*

This is not to say, of course that Gooch's father did not hold up his head at that moment. He too knew an expressive rhetoric of illness and death, in which intense private moments occupy available discursive practices. We do, however, wonder what Evelina or Mrs. Gooch might have written what discourse might have managed this memorable "experience" in a different emotional exigency. Here, a vulnerable younger son uses elocutionary conventions for showing feelings, to frame an especially painful event, the deathwatch. These rhetorical conventions are theatrical gestures, "expressions of grief," that later texts signify as a self-reflexive and decidedly classed psychology. But Gooch's rhetoric of expression remains on a border between psychological disclosure and commonplace conventions. Rhetoric, not consciousness, portrays one man's death as a universal propriety that dignifies a father and cheers a son. He writes as a descendant who is suddenly responsible, not economically, but for creating negotiable discursive property.

At that moment of transference, Gooch's physical care for his father becomes a conventional dramatic gesture. And father's universal Manhood is endowed to Gooch. The "scene" that follows makes him a "man of the family," with sufficient "energies and courage" to support his mother, to gallantly appreciate a lady, and to cope with confused arrangements and desultory attendance at the funeral. He takes on his father's gentility, entering the gestured code of chivalry that makes of death a discourse.

Of course a scene followed. I knew that all my energies and courage were in demand and they were sufficient to bear me out. My poor mother was for some days cheerless, comfortless & almost given out. Miss Elizabeth Daniel was perfection itself & Miss Lucy Ball showed what she was made of. Mr. Woodbridge performed the service and I was the only blood relation who

followed his body. Never having counted any body's favor or care none of the rascal grandees who when in life were so courteous to him came to see the body interred. It was done in the Poor house burying ground on 22 day of April about 6 1/2 o'clock PM about 30 hours after like silently and quietly, but those who stood around used no hypocrisy but really. . . .

This sudden ending to his theatrical conventions inscribes a "sense of self" that is absent from Evelina Roane's differently addressed petition. Gooch organizes his most important crisis in memory, the circulation of conventions that sustain manhood. We, following Hume, reject these gestures as "shallow," and "clichés." But that tradition persuades at least Gooch that he has survived a disaster. It entitles him to universalize his grief and adolescent uncertainty, over a father's dead body of wishes for him. His individual "character" is implicated in enduring rhetorical tropes. Nonetheless, in the final analysis, "Father" and personal uses of blurred Rhetorics of expression are lost with the subject positions that contained such exteriorized heroism.

Jennie Stephenson's simultaneously local and universal grief projects the discourse of consciousness I would first bring to a history of writing. Her 1893 memoir, "My Father's Household, Before, During, and After the War," absorbs the cultural productivity of Rhetorics of expression into that largely silent, privatized and individualized bourgeois discourse of isolated feeling.<sup>3</sup> This "final analysis" thus addresses how Stephenson's text displays a diminished, but now commonplace, isolation of disabled discursive identities. Unlike any of her predecessors in this collection, she begins with ambivalence about writing at all, self-conscious about her relation to the historically new restriction of authorship. Her 45-page news story, written to raise money for veterans of the Confederacy, begins with: "[Public writing] sounds appalling to some

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<sup>3</sup> References to this text are from a typescript copy of Stephenson's newspaper article of this title in the Virginia Historical Society.

of us, who are more used to wielding the broom than the pen, but the word reminiscence means a recalling to mind the things of the long ago, and yet vivid, so [undertaking] to rehearse them will not prove so arduous.”

This shy beginning, however, introduces her strategic substitution of one credible “universal” order for another. Her conventional rhetorical strategy is to thematize family unity and childhood associations. Like Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural, her sources of persuasion are organic tropes of biological unity. The account relies on their obvious force, in section headings like “The Home,” “Kinships,” “Management of the Children,” “My Father and the Children,” and “Plans for Education.” These sections narrate happiness, security, and especially unity in blood ties, in images that depict the urgency of raising monuments, like her text, to what is lost.

But Stephenson’s rhetorical acumen also resists precisely those blood relations. To rearticulate the South as the new Imaginary around it, as a memory, patriarchy’s new economy must account for more than domestic biology. It must create new subject positions for a brave female writer and for defeated men whose entitlements only her writing preserves. In defeat, the South will be entirely lost if it is inscribed only on a new course in general biology, the trope Lincoln used to “reestablish” the actually novelty of organic Union, an “America” never realized before the Civil War.

Stephenson’s text negotiates this preservation despite emergent nationalism in two specific post-colonial moves. First, it implies that its writer’s literary sensibility owes much to direct observation of slavery, a vision categorically excluded from the new national family. But it also endows Stephenson’s father, its “hero,” with a new burden his conquerors can avoid. He is given privatized psychology hidden feelings. Changed

discursive practices over his lifetime, 18181871, forecast this new introjected self. But his child's text shows how unspoken emotion becomes a modern trope. Both strategies thus expose a new difference within literate practices, a historic way of separating discursively educated Americans from powerful discourses, from a "voice," by suggesting they have (as it were) secrets. Stephenson's memoir instates a new "other" inside elite literacy, a writer whose ordinary texts can be written, but not author-ized.

I wish there were time to detail the vivid moments of this extraordinary text, which certainly forecast *Gone With the Wind*. But my story ends with Stephenson's memorial to her father, the patriarch whose disabled identity stands in for the silence of a new man's literally, and literarily, homegrown consciousness. Describing his demeanor after the war, Stephenson summarizes not only a lost culture's sorrow, but a change that was to estrange from politics those schooled by the war's course in nationalism. Father always had, she says, "a reserve that hid from sight his heart's deepest workings, which caused him to avoid partings, and at such times, possibly, to disappear, as if by magic, lest someone should see the trembling lip or the moistened eye." Stephenson makes this figure of hidden feeling laconic even in the most extraordinary circumstances, as when resentful slaves ask to be sold:

At the end of this week [of rationing as punishment] twelve men and one woman, all farm hands, came to the door to ask that they be sold. It was Saturday night. My Father told them to think over the matter the next day, and if they still wanted to change their Master, to meet him in town Monday morning. They met him. He left for the South that evening, where he sold them.

But Stephenson becomes more than the amanuensis of father's ellipses. She appropriates him as a lost actor, not into a history of the war he hated, but into a domestically characterized reluctance to speak. His demise as *The Father*, long before his

physical death, is a poignant premature boundary on his life, a sign of the destruction of a discursive culture: “It was not strange,” she says, “that some, like my Father always went about hereafter in a subdued, stunned softness, that made the hearts of those about him bleed to see. No murmuring only the quiet taking up of things so new to him, and all with a spirit so chastened as to make him say for the first time in his life, he felt thankful for the necessities of life.”

You of course notice my adjective, “poignant.” It is easy to feel Jenny Stephenson’s feminized sentiment, her appropriate sorrow for men whose greatest regret in defeat, she says, was losing the means to educate their children. Her skillful rhetoric of expression draws me, as it does us as a nation, into an always inauthentic romanticizing of a never civil war. We lose sight of this text’s rhetorical strategies, now believing as psychologized subjects ourselves that this memoir’s purposeful fund-raising trope of the silenced father’s is actually unmediated, and especially “normal,” feeling. Father’s silence, that is, represents the new interiority that would absorb confident and productive local authorship into monuments to unspoken, unwritten, desires.

So I do not hope that you will take Stephenson’s writing, or any of these texts, to exemplify flowers in a crannied wall, ordinary writing born to blush unseen. Each is instead a cultural activity that certainly continues in many indigenous literate practices, but slips unnoticed through categories that nationalist educators are schooled to impose on vernacular writing. Those of us who take reading and writing most seriously also, I fear, trivialize that writing’s productivity. We are persuaded with Stephenson’s prescient modern psychology, perhaps, that citizens are unlike Evelina, or without the resources of

a Gooch, but instead like her fatherfull of feeling but unhappily able to disappear from discourse” almost by magic.”

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