

Discursive Hosts: Hypertext and the Crisis in Literary Biography

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This essay, a version of which was presented at the 1999 convention of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, sets forth the central theoretical explanation for the *William Hone BioText*.

In the summer of 1994 I was lucky enough to participate in Paula Backscheider's NEH seminar held principally in the Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London. The purpose of the seminar was perhaps more pragmatic than theoretical—we seminarians were all engaged in various biographical or historical research projects, and we were learning to use the archives and other repositories of primary documents in the UK. My own project was to write a critical biography of William Hone, the Regency-period parodist, publisher, antiquarian, and champion of the free press. The seminar proved to be a wonderful experience in all the best ways—intellectually challenging, practically useful, collegial, congenial, and fun. It was also very nearly the end of my academic career.

The problem for me was not any failing in the organization, content, or practice of the seminar itself—if anything, my training in archival research was all too successful. Backscheider was exemplary in her scholarly generosity; my colleagues were affable, smart, and forgiving; and the archives themselves were rich with enormous quantities of provocative and suggestive primary materials. But this last point turned out to be rather a problem. I had hoped—in the historical naivete that now know I share with most of my English Professor colleagues—I had hoped (and half expected) to be able to locate a tidy stack of letters, all beautifully preserved and written in a wonderfully legible if somewhat antique hand, all in roughly chronological order (though perhaps interspersed

occasionally with the odd, heretofore undiscovered fair copy MS), and all emerging from a social and rhetorical context that would be very simple for a well-trained specialist to piece together. As a biographer, my easy task would be to knit these materials into a seamless, lucid, revealing, and no doubt absolutely riveting narrative about William Hone and the conditions of popular publishing in post-Waterloo London.

What I found was quite different. While I did happen upon a few letters and manuscripts of obvious significance, most of the materials proved far more cryptic. There were, for example, several odd little fragments in the boxes of court materials assembled for Hone's 1817 libel trials—depositions, a two-year-old lease for a Fleet Street retail space with attached house, suggestive but inconclusive notes from the prosecution lawyers about packing a favorable jury, a double-underlined fragment reading simply "To Ridicule the Trinity" which was tucked in with the Attorney General's courtroom notes, and so on. For the most part, these materials were simply tossed together into a dull grey box of Treasury Solicitor's Papers, TS 11/44. That these fragments had something to do with Hone's trials seemed clear enough, but many of the recorded details were and still remain inscrutable. This is a familiar situation to historians and biographers, and it is becoming more familiar to literary scholars. Anyone who has ferreted out a cache of primary documents from some relatively uncatalogued archive will recognize, first, just how unexpectedly difficult it is to see some clear historical or

biographical narrative emerge from the materials, and second, just how suspicious one should be about the "non-fictional" status of much historical and biographical writing.

It is this radical questioning of conventional historical and biographical writing that I invoke by the (perhaps overly dramatic) phrase in my title: the "Crisis in Literary Biography." The "crisis" might be summarized as follows: The condition of the archival records is often, paradoxically, both incomplete and too complete. In scouring the records for materials relevant to some biographical subject, for example, the scholar will typically discover periods marked by substantial gaps where few or no primary documents seem to have survived, other periods where there are many primary documents but where the significance of each and the relationships between the documents remain matter for historical conjecture, and still other periods where so many documents have survived that they tell several different and sometimes contradictory stories simultaneously. Despite these puzzles raised by the condition of the raw archival materials, the biography that eventually develops has traditionally answered to a kind of "biographical imperative"—that generic impulse that demands the biography to tell a coherent, usually chronological, sometimes causal narrative with the biographical subject functioning as the protagonist of the history. The rhetorical force of the resulting narrative, though founded more on speculation and hunch than most biographers would like to admit, takes on a truth value for readers who, of course, are not familiar with the fragmented and often polysemous condition of the archives and who thus have little foundation for critical reading. In other words, the biographer's "thesis" about the nature and significance of the subject's life is usually left unstated but implicit in the sheer coherence of the biographical narrative; such a thesis is too often passes for "historical truth" in the minds of inevitably less-informed readers. And this situation is made all the worse when, as is the case with Hone, the biographical subject is

relatively unknown, so that there are few, if any, competing biographical accounts.

When I first confronted the apparent mismatch between the mystery-provoking condition of the archives and the rhetorical coherence of biographical writing, I thought I had merely underestimated the complexity of the task at hand—that it would take a lot more effort to produce a good, reliable biography than I had anticipated, but that on both practical and theoretical levels the methodology was still clear enough. If I could only find more documents and see the historical contexts more clearly and comprehensively, I too would be able to tell a relatively true—or at least arguably valid—biographical narrative. I no longer think this is accurate, especially in the case of writing "literary biography." To explain I will need to take a brief detour through some critical and interpretive theory.

Recent movements within contemporary critical theory and literary history have exposed a troubling contradiction. On the one hand, following the profoundly influential suggestions of (among others) Roland Barthes¹ and Michel Foucault,² recent studies of literature and literary theory have tended to complicate, if not obliterate, the conventional notion of authorship. No longer can one naively assume that authors are—or ever were—the supreme romantic subjects whose inspired Imaginations are the fountains of the visionary Truths supposedly conveyed through their works. Instead, "authorship" becomes a more or less abstract, even arbitrary category by which always belated readers and scholars can lend some coherence and definition to an otherwise amorphous field of public (and private) discourse. Authors, as we know, are dead—but "authorship" as a cognitive, organizing principle endures. On the other hand, a concrete historicist thread of more recent critical endeavor has focused attention increasingly on the material conditions of peoples' lives. Scholars have with refreshed intensity attended to the work of recuperative bibliography, to archival records, to the material traces that reveal (or perhaps mask)

cultures, societies, and authors that are now irrevocably past. It is as though on the one hand actual, historical authors are dissolving into a theoretical ether and on the other they are pursued with an intensity unrivalled even in the pre-New critical historicism of the early 20th century. What is most problematic about this theoretical contradiction is that both sides are utterly compelling.

This quandary began to rattle the admittedly overly simplified conceptual basis of my work on Hone, as it does for other would-be biographers. In effect, biographers must face something like the mirror-image of the famous "laundry list problem" familiar to bibliographers. That is, suppose one is compiling a bibliography of all the works and manuscripts—both published and unpublished—known to have been written by, say, Charlotte Smith. In scouring through the notebooks and letters, the bibliographer discovers a laundry list tucked between the pages of some poetic manuscript. Does the laundry list count as a "work"? Should it be included in the proposed *Complete Works of Charlotte Smith*? For the biographer, of course, the laundry list may be of extreme interest—yielding perhaps some insight into the daily life of the writer. The case is less clear for the bibliographer who must posit some limiting definition of just what constitutes a "work" of Charlotte Smith. But now suppose we turn the tables. Is there *any* document preserved in the archives that is *not* relevant to the biographer? The simple answer, I suppose, would be that any document that sheds light on the biographer's subject's life might potentially find its way into the biography. But are there any limits on what might illuminate the subject's life? Probably not. And that leaves the biographer and the bibliographer in similar predicaments—while the bibliographer must arrive at some conception of just what constitutes a "work," the literary biographer must arrive at some conception of just what constitutes an "author." For me, this has been and continues to be a vexing issue. After all, it is precisely the assumed relationship between writer and text—between "Life and Works," to borrow

the title phrase from any of number of literary biographies—that lies at the heart of the genre. Unfortunately, though, the elusive "author" has become something akin to the vanishing point in a perspective drawing. That point is a kind of absence at the core—a dot in the center of the sketch that, though itself devoid of shape or form or dimension, nonetheless grants shape and form and coherence to all the surrounding objects.

The present essay suggests a potential escape from the quandary, an escape that lies in a recast conception of authorship itself: the author as "host." I intend the term to be multiply evocative. In a frequently used metaphor, authors function something like "hosts" or "masters of ceremonies" who, like Chaucer's innkeeper, take it upon themselves to facilitate the telling of stories, the exchange of language. But I also use the term in its biological sense as a "host organism" that harbors and provides nourishment for a parasite. The "parasite" in this case is nothing less than discourse itself—a virtual, linguistic entity that, like some creepy disembodied force from a sci-fi thriller, lives only in and through its various human "hosts." And finally, I use the term in its increasingly familiar electronic context where the "host" is purely technological: a server that, for a fee, maintains and then distributes symbolic discourse at unthinkable speeds to readerships dispersed over the globe. By conceiving of authors as "discursive hosts" one alters the fundamental assumptions about authorship, shifting away from the "author as originator" or the more Foucauldian "author function" and shifting toward the notion of author as a kind of node in a network: a being who is momentarily possessed by and functioning as the perhaps unwitting host of a non-personal, non-human discursive logic that, like some Shelleyan Necessity, is ultimately indifferent to human aims. And in making the conceptual shift signaled by the change from "author" to "host," one also makes possible a new kind of literary biography.

Of course I recognize that this "solution" to the problem—this proposal to use "host" instead of "author"—may appear to

be a mere shift of terminology, a metaphorical sidestep that doesn't really affect the fundamental theoretical issue. I think I can show that it is more than that. Consider the case of Hone's 1817 parodies:

I have alluded a couple of times to Hone's trials of 1817 during which Hone successfully defended himself against charges of seditious and blasphemous libel. The works in question were three parodies—*The Political Litany*, *The Sinecurist's Creed*, *The Late John Wilkes's Catechism*³—which were published probably in very late January of 1817. For two or three weeks, the parodies were very assiduously marketed, and we can get some sense of the scene of publication in the evidence of the depositions taken for Hone's trials. One deposition, for instance, records the statement of John Bewley, an agricultural machine maker from Essex who had been in London on the 11th of February when he stopped by Hone's Old Bailey shop. According to Bewley, there were "a great number of persons" crowded in and around Hone's shop looking at the publications which were "lying in large heaps or parcels in the window." When he asked the price, the shopman said "they were *eight pence* [for four] but added that if this Deponent would take eight he should have them for a *shilling*." Bewley's companion that day, Henry Webb a Chelmsford carrier, concurred with this account, adding only that "the Shop at No. 67 Old Bailey was on that Morning like a Fair from the number of persons resorting there" (PRO TS 11/44, ff.29). Obviously, the short parodies were very popular and Hone and his shopmen were diligent in their marketing—so diligent in fact that just one week later, the government agent Griffin Swanson purchased several copies for use as evidence by the prosecution in Hone's seditious and blasphemy trials.

What is especially important for present purposes is to consider just what is involved in ascribing authorship of these parodies to Hone. While it seems that Hone did draft the printer's copies, the works were published anonymously, signed only as "Printed by One of the Candidates for the

King's Printer." What is more, parody itself is clearly a dialogical genre; as such it certainly complicates any simple notion of author as sole originator. In the present case this generic complication is redoubled—*The Late John Wilkes's Catechism*, as a manuscript in the British Library shows, really was Hone's revision and updating of a parody by John Wilkes.⁴ Finally, and most significant in my view, the parodies themselves were short, immediately accessible, and very easy for any printer to set. Thanks to their anonymous publication, low cost, and rapid dissemination via the carriage trade, the parodies very rapidly found their way through most of the country, where local printers were quick to recognize the potential of such discourse. Many set their own versions—usually with slightly altered title pages or page formats—and thereby expanded and continued the circulation. As a consequence, just days after Hone's London publication alarmed letters began appearing in the Home Office as concerned royalists and local magistrates from all over England alerted Lord Sidmouth of the prevalence of these "seditious and blasphemous" effusions from the "infidel press." The correspondence makes it possible to follow the progress of the parodies' remarkable circulation. It is a complex, geographically dispersed narrative, but, to make a long and interesting story very short, within one month of the appearance of Hone's publications in London, Hone himself had ceased publication, but there were more than ten provincial printers—from Newcastle to Penzance, Sheffield to Boston—issuing their own editions of the works.⁵ The parodies were very widely known, becoming for a time quite popular as reading material for taverns and public houses. Hone's work touched off an informal but efficient, nationwide, decentralized, and highly responsive radical publishing network.

But, given this explosive circulation, to what degree does it even make sense to say that Hone was the author of these parodies? They didn't bear his name; one was (as its very title announces) a revision and reissue of a work by John Wilkes. The original idea for

the whole project of couching political commentary in the forms of English Church liturgy was probably not Hone's; instead, it likely began as an imitation of another parody—the *Political Catechism*—that Hone did not write but that was circulating in the months prior to Hone's parodies and that Hone himself reprinted. Clearly, the usual conceptions of "author" and "authorship" are rather strained by such a case. Then, if we add the additional problem that the work was being printed by local printers all over England, many of whom had no idea who Hone was and who were not necessarily even sympathetic with the parodies' comic radicalism, and the notion of authorship becomes even more challenged. In short, what a study of the archival record reveals is not so much a story about the life and/or works of William Hone as a story about the emergence and dissemination of a distinctive mode of parodic-satirical discourse, a mode that is especially remarkable for the speed with which it exploits the available networks for communication and publication. It makes sense only in the most widely metaphorical way to say that Hone is the "author" of the parodies, and this in turn complicates the traditional modes of writing literary biography.

But if instead of "author" we begin to think of Hone as the "host" of this parodic outburst, then some of the conceptual hurdles begin to shrink. Hone's role in the story no longer must answer to the biographical imperative that would place him as a kind of protagonist in a coherent historical narrative. Now he can be a temporary Master of Ceremonies, the figure who introduces this parodic mode into the public discourse of the day, who, for a couple of weeks at any rate, broadcasts the parodies from his shops in Fleet Street and the Old Bailey, but who then steps aside while the parodies are reprinted by other hands and begin their remarkable circulation through the various forums of public speech in England. To be sure, Hone is a central player in this process, but finally he is simply one host among many for the production and dissemination of parodic political discourse. A

biography that enforces a narrative, author-centered coherence—with its implicit reliance on a unified subject—will inevitably be misleading, if not utterly fictional.

There are, however, other possibilities. In effect, the conceptual shift from author to discursive host requires a concomitant shift in the structure and form of the literary biography. What is needed, of course, is a mode of biographical writing that can be more sensitive to the decentralized conditions of publication than a traditional life-story-of-the-author. What is needed is a mode of writing that implicitly recognizes the complex networks of communication within which the biographical subject finds his or her identity but whose operations are for the most part indifferent to that subject's actions, intentions, and personal history. What is needed is a mode of writing that can more accurately represent the cryptic incompleteness of the surviving archival records. What is needed is a mode of writing that melds together the tasks of biographer, bibliographer, and historian and thus facilitates a smoother interchange between the traditional categories of Life, and Works, and the broader Print Culture. Happily, such a mode of historical/biographical writing is just now beginning to emerge in the form of hypertext.

I have argued elsewhere that Hone's writing itself constitutes an early version of hypertext. After all, Hone exploited the technology available to him to facilitate the rapid production and dissemination of very brief texts; often—as in the case of the 1817 parodies—his works were published virtually simultaneously by several geographically remote presses; some of his works rely for their impact on an interchange between image and text; later in his career, Hone experimented with various modes of collective authorship; and so forth. In each case, the best contemporary analogue I can come up with to describe his activity is certainly not as some visionary author, nor is it as a publicist and radical pamphleteer—rather Hone's place in early nineteenth-century print culture is something akin to a contemporary electronic

file server or "web host." A biography of Hone, I would suggest, needs to function in the same way, and this is the founding logic of the present project, a hypertext biography (a "BioText") of William Hone. The BioText is an electronic publication that offers much of the same kind of information that one would find in a conventional "life-story" biography. But the BioText is designed so that this biographical information is linked together with a detailed bibliography of Hone's publications, many of which will be available in full-text electronic editions—many even with scanned facsimile pages. In addition, the BioText includes such resources as thorough descriptions (with excerpts) of the archival primary sources, an index of all the Hone correspondence I have been able to locate (again with excerpts), a listing of persons with whom Hone was somehow acquainted—complete with brief "who's who" character sketches and links to additional web-based information about them, a genealogical research section, and so on. The idea—dreamy and ambitious as technology-based projects

often are—is to produce a biography that presents the basic "story" of the subject's life, but that also places that life within a broad and expanding web of discursive connections. The idea, in short, is to try to produce a biography that, while sensitive to the material conditions of the subject's life and aware of the significance of the subject's contributions to his or her discursive moment, is also sensitive to the complexities, indeterminacies, and sheer undecidabilities that inevitably emerge from the incomplete but endlessly suggestive state of the archival sources. Such a biography is, in my view, only now becoming possible as modes of hypertextual publication are in the ascendancy and are providing a critical and historical vantage point from which we can begin to grasp the limitations of the traditional literary biography. We can now begin finally to move beyond the usually implicit reliance on a notion of the unified subject—or Romantic Artist, to borrow Raymond Williams's term—and move toward a more gregarious and humane "discursive host."

Notes:

1. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 142-48.
2. Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Josue V. Harari. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 101-20.
3. Complete electronic texts of the relevant parodies—complete with facsimile title pages—are available in the e-text area of the *BioText*. The *BioText* also offers full-text electronic editions of the individual parodies: "The Late John Wilkes's Catechism," "The Political Litany," and "The Sinecurist's Creed."
4. Wood, Marcus. *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. In an appendix to the book, Wood includes a full transcription of the MS of "The Late John Wilkes's Catechism" showing the original in Wilkes's hand and the alterations in Hone's.
5. An incomplete list of these publications (as documented in the Home Office correspondence) may help demonstrate the rapidity and breadth of the parodies' dissemination:
 - 21 January, a correspondent from Manchester encloses a "diabolical tract"—a Political Litany, title page slightly different from Hone's, published by J. Molineux in Manchester. (HO 42/158, f. 113)

- 27 January, a correspondent writes from Bath to inform the Home Secretary about a parodic Catechism and a Litany which are circulating in that city. The correspondent is also horrified that a local Hampden club is charging its members a penny per week fee explicitly for "distributing seditious publications!" (HO 42/158, f. 21)
- 30 January, a government infiltrator into a Spencean meeting at the Mulberry Tree public house reports that the attendees enjoyed a collective reading of Hone's Sinecurists' Creed. (Enclosed copies of Creed and Litany.) (HO 42/158, f. 13)
- An undated letter from very early February encloses a smaller format version of Hone's Political Litany printed by John Aston of Coventry, apparently set from the Molineux edition. (HO 42/159, f. 254)
- 3 February, letter from the Mayor of Newcastle-on-Tyne encloses a Political Litany identical to Hone's but printed in Newcastle by J. Marshall. (HO 42/159, f. 108)
- 8 February, a correspondent encloses a Political Litany printed by Joseph Arnold of Bristol. (Arnold also printed the Sinecurists' Creed.) (HO 42/159, f. 464)
- 10 February, George Allen from Durham encloses the Marshall publication. (HO 42/159, f. 300)
- 12 February, a letter from Litchfield encloses copies of both the Coventry and Newcastle printings. (HO 42/159, f. 554)
- 13 February, a "Loyal Subject" encloses copies of Hone's parodies apparently printed in Manchester. (Molineux's printing?) (HO 42/160, f. 10)
- 18 February, the Mayor of Weymouth writes to ask whether he should prosecute a bookseller named Groves (or Graves) of Wareham for printing and selling the Political Litany. (HO 42/160, f. 137)
- 25 February, letter encloses a version of the Political Litany printed by James Williams of Portsea. (HO 42/160, f. 475)
- 26 February, letter from the Attorney General's office notes that Shepherd intends to prosecute Hone. (HO 42/160, f. 275)
- 27 February letter from King's Lynn correspondent encloses the Political Litany printed by J. Jackson, Boston. (HO 42/160, f. 514)
- 28 February, letter from Leeds encloses an abbreviated version of the Political Litany printed by James Willan of Dewsbury and a Political Litany without a title page printed by Slater in Sheffield. (HO 42/160, f. 555)