

Veiled Ladies: Toward a History of Antebellum Entertainment

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When she is not at Blithedale, the Priscilla of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* has a career. She makes public appearances as the Veiled Lady: clothed in a silvery white veil, which purportedly insulates her from terrestrial reality, she goes onstage as a human conduit to occult knowledge, giving sibylline answers to the questions her audience puts. Hawthorne, we know, felt a final dissatisfaction with this figure of his creation. When *Blithedale* was finished but unnamed he considered "The Veiled Lady" as a possible title for the book but ruled that "I do not wish to give prominence to that feature of the Romance."¹ But would he or no, prominence is just what *Blithedale* gives the Veiled Lady. The book begins with Miles Coverdale "returning to my bachelor-apartments" from "the wonderful exhibition of the Veiled Lady" (5). Its plot machinations—unusually intricate for a Hawthorne novel—all turn on moves to rescue Priscilla from or to re-imprison her in her onstage role. And if any figure in *Blithedale* might be said to be figurally belabored, it is the Veiled Lady, this book's prime site of symbolic overdevelopment. The question I want to put in this essay is what, historically, is on Hawthorne's mind when he writes *Blithedale* in 1851–52, and by extension, what cultural situation a novelist would have had to address at this moment of American literary history. If I begin with the Veiled Lady, it is on the assumption that she embodies answers to questions of this sort.

What cultural history could Hawthorne's Veiled Lady stand for? She is "a phenomenon in the mesmeric line" (5), and she has as her most obvious referent the "magnetized" subjects used by the importers of mesmeric lore—Charles Polen and his many imitators—to demonstrate theories of animal magnetism to American publics after 1836. (In her clairvoyance the Veiled Lady is meant specifically to demonstrate the supermagnetized state that Mesmer's follower the Marquis de Puysegur termed "extraordinary lucidity."²) More generally the Veiled Lady im-

ages, as a salience of contemporary life, the cultural attraction of what *Blithedale* calls "new science[s]" (5), that congeries of systems—Swedenborgianism, phrenology, utopian socialism, and Grahamite dietary lore are other examples—that developed into something between fad philosophies and surrogate religions in the American 1840s. Grouped as she is with Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and the Blithedalers, Priscilla shows such new sciences as literally living together with many other social movements of comparably recent birth: penal reform, the women's rights movement, communitarianism, and so on. In this sense, this exhibit of the "new truths" of mesmerism appears as one manifestation of the variously directed energy of social and intellectual reconstruction that touched almost all aspects of American culture in the 1840s, known by the generic label "reform."

But history teaches us that the hectic innovations of antebellum reform developed alongside the establishment of new forms of social normality in America, in particular the normalization of the nineteenth-century model of middle-class domestic life; and Hawthorne's *Veiled Lady* is figuratively implicated in this development quite as much as in the history of reform.³ Priscilla is a woman, but the *Veiled Lady* is a presentation or representation of a woman; and the representation that the *Veiled Lady* embodies intricately reflects the representation of "woman" in the domestic ideology of Hawthorne's time. The *Veiled Lady* is a lady, but in being *veiled* she is made into a lady who does not appear in public. As such she images woman being publicly created into a creature of private space, native of that separate nonpublic, nonproductive zone marked off in nineteenth-century ideology as the home or woman's sphere. Bred in a "little room," her existence has been circumscribed in such a way that extradomestic space has become terrifyingly alien to her: "The sense of vast, undefined space, pressing from the outside against the black panes of our uncurtained windows, was fearful to the poor girl, heretofore accustomed to the narrowness of human limits" (36), Hawthorne writes, in a perfect description of the agoraphobia that Gillian Brown has presented as the psychological equivalent of middle-class women's domestic enclosure.⁴

As it erases her as a public figure, the *Veiled Lady's* veil specifically puts her body out of sight, or paradoxically makes her appear without a body; and in this sense the *Veiled Lady* might be called a figure for the disembodiment of women in nineteenth-century domesticity, that is, for the construction of "woman" as something separate from or opposed to bodily life and force. "Wan, almost sickly" of complexion, her brown hair

falling “not in curls but with only a slight wave” (27), possessed (in the emphatically undisembodied Zenobia’s contemptuous term) of “hardly any physique” (34), Priscilla’s carefully noted body type minutely reflects the one that (as Lois Banner has shown) was normalized as a feminine ideal in America in the antebellum decades, that pallid, fragile-appearing, unvoluptuous, unrobust physical type that realized, at the bodily level, a social model of domestic leisure and feminine unproductiveness.⁵ In Priscilla’s “tremulous nerves”—a sensitivity so overdeveloped as to render her liable to regular collapses of spirits and strength—Hawthorne describes the neurasthenia that is the medical signature of this social type.

When she is veiled, this woman, already strongly repressed at the level of physical life, loses her physicality altogether and becomes what woman most essentially is in the nineteenth-century domestic conception: the embodiment of spiritual forces. Augustine St. Clare’s mother in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the ideal woman as the cult of domesticity dreams that ideal (Little Eva is her reincarnation), is so fully identified with spirit that St. Clare can say of her: “*She was divine!* She was a direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 333). Produced as she is, the Veiled Lady too can be said to be “in communion with the spiritual world,” indeed to “behold the Absolute!” (201). The “tremulous nerves” that are the sign of her physical devitalization confer on her at least the appearance of spiritual privilege, or in the book’s locution, “endow her with Sibylline attributes” (2). So too the veil that bounds her off from public and physical life is (or is at least said to be) what *creates* her as spiritual being: by “insulat[ing] her from the material world,” this mark of delimitation “endow[s] her with many of the privileges of a disembodied spirit” (6).

The figure of the Veiled Lady may originate in the history of American cult movements and pseudosciences, I am suggesting, but this figure is not readable wholly in terms of such movements. In the terms of her constitution she precisely reflects another development just as much a part of *Blithedale’s* historical moment as mesmeric exhibits or communitarian experiments: the cultural construction of a certain version of “woman,” and of the whole set of social arrangements built upon this figure of domestic life. This, much more than mesmerism or even reform, is the real subject of historical meditation in the Veiled Lady portions of *Blithedale*. Yet what is most interesting about the Veiled Lady is that this personification of woman domestically defined is in no sense domestic.

Produced as a creature of physical invisibility, the Veiled Lady nevertheless leads a life of pure exhibitionism. Rendered an insular or private spirit, her sphere is nevertheless always the public sphere, and her work is not to make a home but to "come before the public" on the most spectacular of terms. In this respect she challenges us to find a rather different historical meaning for her than any we have established thus far.

What the Veiled Lady is most essentially is an image of woman as public performer; and if we insisted on reading this image as historically based, she could help us to the realization that the same period already known to us as the decade of reform and of the establishment of a more privatized and leisured model of middle-class domesticity could also be described as the time of the emergence of some women—specifically women in the entertainment sector—to an exaggeratedly public life.⁶ Behind the Veiled Lady we could see arrayed the new female celebrities who, first in the 1840s, then more decisively around 1850, began to appear before audiences newly huge in scale, and to be *known* to publics much greater yet. Mesmerism did not produce a female celebrity of this order. But as a "name" attraction the Veiled Lady could find her likeness in Fanny Elssler, the Viennese dancer who made a triumphal tour of America in 1841. Or she could find her likeness in Jenny Lind, whose American tour exactly at *Blithedale's* moment—Lind concluded her eighteen months of concerts in May 1852, the month *Blithedale* was completed—consolidated enduring patterns of American mass-cultural stardom: the road tour with entourage, the mobbing of the star's vehicle and the surrounding of her hotel, the conversion of ticket acquisition into a high public drama (tickets to Jenny Lind's concerts were auctioned off at newsworthy prices), the exposure of the well-guarded star in carefully arranged public appearances. (When she came before the public Lind too was dressed in white.)⁷

Or the Veiled Lady could find her likeness in another group of entertainers who emerged into mass visibility at just the same time: the women novelists who attained to a new degree of popularity right at *The Blithedale Romance's* moment. The scale of the American market for literary goods, we know, expanded abruptly at this time. Where a "decided hit" might have sold five or six thousand copies in America heretofore, around 1850 books like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* began to sell tens (and in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* hundreds) of thousands of copies. Born together with this new scale of circulation was a new kind of publicity broadcasting such authors' wares as pop-

ular, indeed proclaiming them the object of insatiable and universal demand: the literary publicity campaign that seized on the mass medium of journalism to announce the staggering sales record of a newly published book was pioneered by the printer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Blithedale's* year, and became industry standard almost at once.⁸ As the focus of these developments, the new best-selling writers of the early 1850s found audiences and became names on terms quite similar to Jenny Lind's. Ruth Hall, the successful author-hero of Fanny Fern's book of that name (1855), has a steamship named after her, as a suitable tribute to (and advertisement of) her popular fame (176). Fanny Fern herself had a railroad parlor car named in her honor, among other trumpetings of her name. When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852 Stowe became, exactly, a celebrity. Visiting New York after completing the novel, Stowe got into one of Jenny Lind's last concerts—long since sold out—as a celebrity, by being recognized as the famous Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her English tour of 1853 recapitulated the Jenny Lind tour with a writer in the singer's place. Stowe drew her own dockside crowds, had her own travel plans publicly announced, packed her own halls, appeared before audience after audience as her celebrated self: found a career, like Lind or like the Veiled Lady, as a famous object of public attention.⁹

Such likenesses suggest that what lies behind *Blithedale* is a development specific to the history of entertainment quite as much as any development in general social life. What the Veiled Lady registers, we might say, is the historical emergence, at midcentury, of a more massively *publicized* order of entertainment in America. She images a remaking of the social organization of entertainment by which artistic performance (broadly understood) came to reach larger and more stabilized mass publics, and by which participation *in* performance came to yield enlarged public visibility, to women above all. Or, to draw the many sides of this figure together, we might say that the Veiled Lady registers the creation of a newly publicized world of popular entertainment taking place simultaneously with the creation of a newly privatized world of woman's domestic life. She embodies the suggestion that the same contemporary cultural processes that worked in one direction to delimit women to de-physicalized and deactivated domestic privacy also helped open up an enlarged publicity women could inhabit, in the entertainment field—a suggestion rich in historical implication.

After all, the steep escalation of literary sales figures around 1850 must be understood to have reflected not only improved production factors like cheaper printing technologies or more

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active marketing campaigns, but quite as essentially the historical creation of a new social *place* or *need* for literary entertainment to fill. The mass-market novels of the 1850s point to middle-class domesticity as the scene they address because it was above all the institution of this social formation that created literature its new mid-nineteenth-century place. As I have shown elsewhere, the canons of domestic instruction that defined the home as a private, leisured, nonmaterialistic, feminine space in the antebellum decades also and with almost comparable insistence defined reading as a preferred domestic activity ("Sparing" 88–92).¹⁰ In consequence of this linkage, the implementation of this social model in the decades after 1830 had the secondary effect of enlarging demand for reading for the home—and so too of creating public roles for literary producers and public attention for literary works.

The new, popular women novelists whom the Veiled Lady images in part are the figures who most fully seized the public life that domestic privacy helped construct. As Mary Kelley has shown, by using their own feminine domestic competences to address the domestic concerns that identified the new mass audience, these women were able to escape from domestic confinement and capture a new public role: the role of author. (But as Kelley also notes, winning a transdomestic social place did not help such authors escape from domestic self-conceptions. Among other manifestations of this entrapment, they typically attained to public identities without feeling entitled to assert themselves as public creatures: hence their regular use of pseudonyms, the literary equivalent of that highly public erasure of oneself in public embodied in the Veiled Lady's veil. "I have a perfect horror of appearing in print," Catharine Sedgwick wrote before the publication of her first novel, echoing the Veiled Lady's terror of the public or published domain. "We all concur in thinking that a lady should be veiled in her first appearance before the public" (qtd. in Kelley 129–30), Sedgwick's brother wrote at this time, a sentiment Professor Westervelt would share.¹¹). The historical situation that writers like Elizabeth Wetherell, Fanny Fern, and Marion Harland—behind the veil, Susan Warner, Sara Willis Eldridge Parton, and Mary Virginia Terhune—capitalized on was, we need to remember, not theirs alone. They were only the most successful exploiters of a cultural restructuring that affected the whole field of literary writing, and adjacent entertainment fields as well. Accordingly, if we find Hawthorne meditating on such public-private figures in the Veiled Lady of *Blithedale*, we need to understand that they embody for him not just new literary competition but the

new social conditions of literary production that he too finds himself working under at this time: a situation in which artistic creation has had a potentially massive new public life created for it on the condition that it align itself with a certain structure of private life.

At this point it is important to acknowledge that the historical situation of the literary that *Blithedale* addresses cannot be understood from *Blithedale* alone. Most glaringly, Hawthorne shows no grasp of the enabling side of the publicity that he knows as new at this time. The Veiled Lady is a victim of her display; in celebrity she is only exploited. Her real historical sisters-in-celebrity won wealth, power, prestige, and a measure of independence from their performers' careers. The saucy and independent-minded Fanny Fern—to cite the figure most antithetical to the droopy, dependent Priscilla—entered into a prenuptial contract giving her sole control of the property her royalties had amassed: a Priscilla who struck for such a deal would represent a revision indeed (Kelley 158).¹² The successful author's gloating over the bank stock she now owns at the end of *Ruth Hall* suggests a second possible attainment newly open to the woman-celebrity of this time: not just wealth but the pleasure wealth brings as a mark of achievement and entitlement. (A Priscilla who took pleasure in performance or its rewards would be someone else.) The Veiled Lady displays no talent, her "performance" is a hoax of someone else's devising. But Lind sang, Elssler danced, Southworth and Stowe and Warner wrote, Fanny Fern spoke her piece: the opening that brought them publicity also expanded their field of *expression*, certainly not the least of their gains. Hawthorne is in no position to see this side of the contemporary picture, which we must learn of from other accounts. But partial though it is, *Blithedale* makes its most interesting sense as a reading of the new literary situation of its moment; and *Blithedale* has things to teach about this newly emerging order not easily learned from other sources.

To name a first: *Blithedale* reflects a world in which artistic performers, and preferentially women, have won a new capacity to amass large audiences for themselves. But it also suggests that the development that puts performance in this new relation to popularity installs it in other relations at the same time. The Veiled Lady wins celebrity not by herself but through her bond to Professor Westervelt. This "attraction" is one half of an entertainment partnership the other member of which is her manager. As such this figure brings back to our attention the mid-nineteenth-century female celebrity's typical dependence on a male handler to achieve her public "life." P. T. Barnum

was Jenny Lind's Westervelt. Chevalier Wyckoff, who Barnum beat out for the right to manage Jenny Lind, was Fanny Elssler's manager, or in Barnum's phrase the "speculator" who had Elssler "in charge" (Barnum 173).¹³ Fanny Fern and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth found the eventual sustainer of their long-lived popular success in Robert Bonner, publicist-publisher of the *New York Ledger*. At the bittersweet close of *Ruth Hall* the popular author Ruth stands at her husband's grave with her daughter and the man in her new public/literary life, her publisher-agent John Walter.

More than a manager, Westervelt is in the full sense of the term the Veiled Lady's *producer*. Having contracted for the rights to Priscilla as an entertainment property, he has made her *into* the Veiled Lady, has created a public identity for her and created public attraction *to* this identity—and he has done so not disinterestedly but as a way to increase the take. In this respect *Blithedale* reminds us that the handlers newly prominent in the popular entertainment of its time are really the sign of such entertainment's entrance into new relations to market forces. The Jenny Lind chapter in P. T. Barnum's autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs*—which spells out the terms of the performer-manager contract that *Blithedale*'s "Fauntleroy" chapter left vague—is fitly called "The Jenny Lind Enterprise."¹⁴ In herself a woman, in Barnum's hands Jenny Lind became a business venture, a singer made *into* Jenny Lind the musical wonder by Barnum's incessant promotional activities, to the end of enriching them both. Similarly the literary-historical meaning of the new mass-market novels of the 1850s is not just that they were more popular than earlier books but that they mark a historical change in the meaning of the word "popular," a term that now comes to denote not just "well-liked" or "widely read" but specifically production *into* a certain market status through commercial management of a book's public life. The new promotional campaigns mounted by the publishers of such works to an altogether new extent *produced* public demand for them, demand which was then republicized as a way of creating further demand. Jewett's early ad for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "TEN THOUSAND COPIES SOLD IN TWO WEEKS!" or James Cephas Derby's hyping of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853) "FANNY FERN'S BOOK, 6,000 Copies Ordered in Advance of Publication!" promoted these books *as popular*, made their popularity the basis of their market identity (Geary 378, 382). And of course the publicity that made these books known to the public also made them wares

marketed to the public: it is not for nothing that we establish the popularity of such works by enumerating their sales.

In *Blithedale* the Veiled Lady's public life is managed toward commercial ends, but it is the particular nature of this management to be hard to see. A curious but persistent feature of narration in this book is that the many dramatically crucial scenes in which Priscilla's deployment as Veiled Lady is arranged or contested all take place off the narrative record. The Veiled Lady's performance thus opens the novel, except that it is finished just before Coverdale begins his tale. The scene in which Old Moodie then intercedes with Hollingsworth to take Priscilla to Blithedale occurs between chapters, so that we never learn what understanding he reached with Hollingsworth or what relation his act had to her career of display—though there is a later hint that her contract with Westervelt has just run out. The subsequent interview in which Westervelt by some means (blackmail?) talks Zenobia into returning Priscilla to his charge occurs before Coverdale's eyes, but out of his earshot. The scene of the Veiled Lady's recapture—the scene in which Zenobia lowers the veil back over Priscilla—is seen and heard but wholly misunderstood: “we thought it a very bright idea of Zenobia's, to bring her legend to so effective a conclusion” (116), Coverdale says of this revealing, with even greater than usual obtuseness. A presumably contemporaneous scene in which Hollingsworth agrees to the plan of turning Priscilla over to Westervelt (“he bade me come” [171], Priscilla later states—but in consideration of what? of Zenobia's offer of her fortune?) is missing altogether. Later, Coverdale sees Priscilla through his hotel window in the city, but he fails to see how she got there or where she is taken next. In “The Village-Hall” he sees her exhibited again, but she is again produced out of nowhere; when Hollingsworth now intervenes to rescue her from onstage life—for reasons we never see him arrive at—he too takes her we know not where. Finally, when Hollingsworth rejects Zenobia's schemes for Priscilla's and his life, our man on the scene arrives a little late, and so succeeds in missing this decisive exchange.

Did ever a book miss so much of the story it purports to tell? But this insistent narrative *missing*, usually thought merely inept, is itself deeply interesting in the context I am considering. In its narrative organization *Blithedale* constructs a zone in which highly interested arrangements are made and remade around the figure of a female entertainer, and it renders that zone at once controlling of the apparent action and yet imperfectly available to knowledge. In this respect the book might be

said to image not just the management of high-visibility performance as commercial attraction but the simultaneous effacement, in such entertainment, of the interests and deals through which its public life is contrived. The new popular entertainment of the mid-nineteenth-century works, in part, through just this cloaking of its business end. Barnum, an apparent exception to this statement, made no secret either of his role in Jenny Lind's tour or of the terms of their commercial engagement. But even this most exhibitionistic or least *veiled* of publicists erased a portion of his act. His publicity for Lind works by creating the fascinating sense that she both is and is not his creation, that she is both the object of his shameless exploitation and at the same time a self-directing agent beyond the reach of his consumeristic wiles. But through its apparent frankness about its own motives such publicity conceals the extent to which Barnum both manufactured the appearance of the "untouched" Jenny and exploited that appearance as a marketing resource. The divineness of "the divine Jenny" was essential to her appeal; but Barnum helped establish her appearance of divineness, for example by arranging for her to sing Handel oratorios. When Jenny Lind gave her concert proceeds to public charities, Barnum publicized her charitableness and so made her yet more commercially valuable; in other words, he arranged a commercial payoff by advertising her separation from commercial ends. Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* provides a much more overt instance of a popular entertainment that hides the commercial ground of its generation. *Ruth Hall* tells of a contentedly domestic woman left destitute by her husband's death and threatened with the loss of her child until, in her darkest hour, she finds her way to the work of writing. Against all odds, by dint of unforeseen talent and strength of maternal will, Ruth establishes herself as a best-selling author and literary celebrity (Fern prints sample fan mail), and is at last able to reconstitute her broken family with the proceeds of her literary success. This book tells one story of the relation of women to writing; but that story keeps us from suspecting another story quite different in character—the story of how Fern's own book came to be written. Susan Geary has recently established that the writing of *Ruth Hall* was first proposed not by Fern but a publisher—Mason Brothers—eager to add this profitable author to its fold; that so far from winning its way to popularity by its irresistible strengths, the book was made popular through a highly premeditated and unprecedentedly intricate advertising campaign; and that so far from merely earning, after publication, the reward her book deserved, Fern was moved to write

the book by the terms Mason Brothers offered “up front,” not least their pledging, in the language of their contract, “to use extraordinary exertions to promote the sale thereof, so as, if possible, to make it exceed the sale of any previous work” (Geary 383–89).

Performance with this backstage: a veiled zone of contrivance in which potential popular entertainments are dreamed up and contracted for with an eye to their commercial profit; a zone in which strategies are contrived to *make* the mass popularity no longer allowed to just happen; a zone that allows itself to be known to exist, indeed that shows its commercialism a little as part of the glamorization of its product; but a zone that shuts the public out from detailed knowledge of its motives or arts of contrivance: *this* is show business as show business begins to exist in America at *Blithedale*’s historical moment. This recognition would help us to the further perception that the entertainment industry that is one of the most decisive identifying marks of the modern cultural order has its inception in America not *in* modernity but in the age of the so-called cult of domesticity, taking the literature produced for domestic consumption as one of its first sites of industrial development. But if it helps bring this little-recognized fact into sharpened focus, *Blithedale*’s most interesting historical suggestion is that the same restructuring of entertainment that produced these arrangements in the sphere of cultural production around 1850 produced corresponding novelties in the sphere of consumption: changes figured, I would suggest, in Miles Coverdale.

Coverdale and Priscilla are incongruous as lovers, but they constitute a couple in several related senses. Coverdale is, the book repeatedly suggests, the “man” who corresponds to Priscilla’s version of the term “woman.” Imaged as Theodore in Zenobia’s tale “The Silvery Veil,” his prurient interests in yet insurmountable terror of female sexuality are read as the masculine by-products of the cultural construction that disacknowledges or requires the veiling of woman’s erotic embodiedness. But in no less important a sense Coverdale is also the spectator constituted by the Veiled Lady’s version of spectacle. Passive in person, Priscilla only acts when she goes onstage, into a separate zone of spectacle marked off from its seated audience. Such a construction of *acting* finds its complement in someone else’s passive, nonperforming *watching*, in short in the Coverdalean habit of mind. The language of *Blithedale* urges us to give the word “observer,” as a term for Coverdale, the intensified sense of he who exists only in and as a watcher. “As if such were the proper barrier to be interposed between a char-

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acter like hers, and a perceptive faculty like mine" (160), Coverdale huffs when Zenobia lowers the curtain on his peeping, his words baring his assumption that others are full persons and performers, but he a mental faculty only equipped to register their performances. "You are a poet—at least, as poets go, now-a-days—and must be allowed to make an opera-glass of your imagination, when you look at women" (170), Zenobia later mockingly retorts, correctly identifying Coverdale's relation as self or mind to the instrument used by spectators of nineteenth-century mass entertainments to enable them (just) to *see*.¹⁵

"Men of cold passions have quick eyes" Hawthorne writes in a remarkable notebook entry, by which I take him to mean: people who systematically deaden themselves at the level of primary drives arrange a surrogate life—contrive to be quick, not dead—in their sense of sight (*American Notebooks* 169). What makes Coverdale powerful as a description of the spectator is not just his self-delimitation to a visual self but the book's sense that eye-life has become his way of *having* life. In a moving passage Coverdale speaks of "that quality of the intellect and heart, that impelled me (often against my will, and to the detriment of my comfort) to live in other lives" (160), and these words well explain what makes watching a compulsive or compulsory activity for him. Life as Coverdale understands it is not what he has or does but something presumed to be lodged in someone else. Watching that someone, inhabiting that other through spectatorial self-projection and consuming it through visual appropriation, becomes accordingly a means to "live" *into his* life some part of that vitality that always first appears as "other life."

What the entertainments of the mid-nineteenth century *did* to the mass publics that consumed them, like all questions about the real history of literary reception, is something we cannot know without considerable aid from speculation. But there is good evidence to support *Blithedale's* surmise that the formation of entertainment new in America at its time sponsored a Coverdalean mode of participation. All of the spectacles we have considered strongly reinforce the habit of motionlessly seeing. When Jenny Lind was touring America, Barnum had another crew scouring Ceylon for elephants and other natural wonders which, reimported and publicly displayed, became his other great enterprise of 1851, Barnum's Great Asiatic Caravan, Museum, and Menagerie—a show that opened a wonderworld to audiences willing to experience wonders in the passive or spectatorial mode (Barnum 213–14). (Barnum arranged for Jen-

ny Lind to review the circus parade in New York City; in other words, to appear in public as an exemplary watcher.) The crowds that mobbed Stowe on her arrival in England were, in her words, “very much determined to look” at her: on this tour Stowe became at once a figure of fame and an object of visual consumption (qtd. in Wilson 345). And what could the proliferation of novel reading at this time reflect if not a mass extension of habits of bodily deactivation and of the reconcentration of self into sight? The reader of every nineteenth-century novel made him- or, more likely, herself a Coverdale to the extent that she conferred the status of “characters” on performatively generated others (Little Eva, Zenobia, Ruth Hall), while consigning herself to the category of perceptual faculty or *reader*, enterer into others through an action of the eye. Ellen Montgomery, the heroine of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1851), begins the novel Coverdale-fashion, looking out the window: shut into a world of enclosed domestic idleness, she scans the space across its boundary for something for her eye to inhabit. When she enters the ideally constructed domesticity of the Humphreys household she finds an object for this visual appetite in reading: in Warner’s account, novels offer the residents of immobilized private space adventure through the eye.

Quite as interestingly, there is abundant evidence that the form of mass entertainment new in America around 1850 held its audience in the position of audience by seeming to embody consumable “life.” N. P. Willis’s further-information-for-the-curious *Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind* (1851)—a book built on press releases supplied by Barnum, and so aimed to create the interest it pretended only to address—treats Lind as a public figure whose celebrity invites inescapable curiosity about her personal life. “The private life of Jenny Lind is a matter of universal inquisitiveness” (163), Willis informs the reader in a chapter on her “Private Habits and Manners” (166); then, instructing us in how such inquisitiveness might be mounted and targeted, he himself muses on the love life of this great singer: “One wonders, as one looks upon her soft eyes, and her affectionate profusion of sunny hair, what Jenny’s heart can be doing all this time. Is fame a substitute for the tender passion? She must have been desperately loved in her varied and bright path” (159).¹⁶ (The relation to Coverdale’s speculations on Zenobia’s sexual history or his urge to peep behind the petals of Priscilla’s erotic bud will be clear at once.) Through such promotion Lind is made into a public embodiment of a fascinating private life, and her audience is invited to try to get some fascination into

its own life by consuming the public spectacle of hers: no wonder interested spectators actually invade this female performer's private dressing room in a Willis incident uncannily like *Blithedale's* tale of Theodore (Willis 163–65).¹⁷ *Ruth Hall* is as personal a work as the 1850s produced. It tells Fern/Parton's personal history of struggles and triumphs with hot display of her personal loves and resentments (resentments above all against her brother N. P. Willis, the villain of the piece.) But this book's intimacy of record was inseparable from its public or market life. What *Ruth Hall* offered its readers was the chance to "live" a public figure's "hidden" private life by buying and reading a book—and lest the public not be in on the opportunity for vicariousness the book embodied, Mason Brothers publicized its "obscure" personalness, running ads that tantalizingly asked: "IS RUTH HALL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?"¹⁸ So it is that a buried, commercial publicity operation, by producing the sense that a rare "life" lies veiled inside the most public of performances, could further its audience's disposition to seek "life" through the consumption of such performances, and so convert private men and women into a huge paying public: in other parlance, a Westervelt creates a Veiled Lady and thereby produces a Coverdale, and by extension a literary mass market as well.

The strategies by which "life" is made to seem available in consumable objects and experiences and the appetite for "life" used to draw publics into stabilized bodies of consumer demand are as familiar as daily life itself in modern consumer culture. The products or productions that draw Coverdale by their apparent "surplus of vitality" (96) have their successors (to name no more) in the mass-circulation magazine that sold itself not as pictures to look at but as *Life*; or the soft drink that has offered not to quench our thirst but to help us "Come Alive"; or the car that, at this writing, is inviting us to buy it as a way to discharge our obligation (the ads quote James) to "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to."¹⁹ One historical use of *The Blithedale Romance* is to take us back, if not to the origins, then at least to the early history of a social system held together by the public simulation of "life" as a marketing art and a private imperative to remedy deficiencies of "life" in one's life—a system, *Blithedale* tells us, that has its first large-scale social manifestation in the 1840s and 1850s, and that begins its operations in the entertainment sphere. But if the hunger for a "life" felt as alienated into other lives drives the man or woman of this time into spectatorial dependence on

commercial entertainment, we might ask at this point, what gives rise to this driving sense of lack? *Blithedale's* answer, I take it, is privacy: that this need is a product *in* the self of a social-historical construction of privacy as the self's living "world."

Quite as much as he is an observer, Coverdale is a figure of private life. The spaces he seeks out are always strongly bound off from the public or collective realm: an apartment (the name itself equates dwelling space with separation); a hermitage; the single-family dwelling "just a little withdrawn" (80) that is this communitarian's dream of a utopian social space. At home in the private, Coverdale also carries the private within him as a structure of habitual understanding. The self, this character assumes, is "inviolable" only in the world of its "exclusive possession" (99): to live in the communal, by parallel assumption, is to have one's "individuality" (99) in continual danger of violation. Other characters claim the public—or the public *too*—as their proper theater of action; but when they do so Coverdale's privatizing mind instinctively reads back from their public assertion to the state of private or "individual affections" alleged to "cause" such assertion: "I could measure Zenobia's inward trouble, by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man" (121), is Coverdale's understanding of Zenobia's feminism. A privatized and privatizing mind, the privacy Coverdale embodies is defined not just through its cult of confinement within the "safe" private sphere but also through its attenuation of the erotic in private life—Coverdale's "apartment" is a "bachelor apartment"—and its exclusion of active, productive labor from the private world: Coverdale is the "idle" or "half-occupied" man (247, 133), his apartment the scene of "bewitching, enervating indolence" (19). This is to say that Coverdale represents a human self constructed upon the same social plan that we have seen imaged in the Veiled Lady: the nineteenth-century middle-class construction that locates the self's home or fulfilled state in the enclosed, physically attenuated, leisured, *private* world of domestic life.

But as the veil imprisons the lady condemned to wear it, so the social construction of the private that Coverdale embodies has the peculiarity of being at once desperately clung to and deeply self-impoverishing. Safe at home, his adventures in communitarianism now long behind him, Coverdale finds the private home a sheer emptiness: "Nothing, nothing, nothing" (245) is the weary tale his private life has been able to generate. And it would be easy to guess that what has established this

home as a space of deficiency are the very acts of exclusion that established it in the first place. Having shut out the collective world, Coverdalean privacy has *made* itself the place of “loneliness” (70); having sealed itself in from the public, the overtly erotic, the productive, and the active, it has made those modes of life into an “other life” apart from itself and has replaced them, within itself, with a positive sense of their lack. Life in certain of its primary and potent forms, *Blithedale* says, is what the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity insists on not having *in its life and what it therefore also* hungers to repossess. At least as *Blithedale* figures it, this is why the contemporary structure of privacy imaged in Coverdale at once closes in on itself and builds, at the heart of private space, means for a surrogate, spectatorial relation to the life it has put outside. Coverdale’s hermitage functions at once to protect a self that feels inviolate only in private and to make that self a watcher, a spectatorial participant in Zenobia and Westervelt’s richer intimacies. The private bedroom that shields Coverdale at *Blithedale* becomes, in its enclosure, an auditorium, a place to listen in on the “awful privacy” (39) of Hollingsworth’s adjacent intimacy. The city apartment that guards Coverdale’s privacy also drives him to seek entertainment by converting the world of others into a domestically viewable visual field—and so leads him to become, at the moment when he is most fully *at home* in the book, first a reader of novels, then a viewer of the Veiled Lady being readied for the stage.²⁰

The Veiled Lady, I began by saying, images the constructions of a certain version of private life and a certain version of public spectacle as two sides of a single process. We are now in a position to say what the logic is that holds these two historical developments together. We could now speculate that a more publicized and spectatorial entertainment order and a more leisured, privatized domestic model arose at the same time in America because it was the nature of that domestic model to create a *need for* such entertainment: a need for a now foregone life to be made repossessible in a form compatible with the deactivations this new order prescribed. By learning how to aim its products toward this life-hunger a new entertainment industry was able to mobilize domestic privacy as a mass entertainment market. But that industry could insert itself in the domestic realm because it met needs produced by that realm: chief among them the need to acquire extradomestic life in the spectatorially consumable form of *other* or *represented* life.²¹

What I have been speculatively reconstructing here—with *Blithedale*'s aid because this history has not proved fully knowable *without* its aid—is the situation of literature in antebellum America: a matter that includes the histories of literary production and consumption but that is not wholly external to literature itself. Literary works, it might be worth insisting, do not produce their own occasions. They are always produced within some cultural situation of the literary, within the particular set of relations in which literature's place is at any moment socially determined. Literature's situation in America in the late 1840s and early 1850s was that it was being resituated: placed into the entangled new relations to publicity, to domestic privacy, to the commercial and the promotional, and to vicarious consumption that I have described here. When this change took place, writers could exploit its new structure of literary opportunity in various ways. What they could not do was to ignore the cultural conjunction it produced: could not ignore it because it set the terms for their work's public life.

If we ask the long-postponed question why this set of relations should be so much on Hawthorne's mind in *Blithedale*, then, the most forcible answer would be that they preoccupy him at this time because they define his own new literary situation. Hawthorne himself, after all, found a newly enlarged public for his work around 1850, after more than twenty years of writing in obscurity. Hawthorne too acquired augmented public life at this time at least in part by being taken in charge by his own producer-promoter, the publisher James T. Fields. Hawthorne too began to have his "private life" advertised at this time as part of the creation of his allure: literary mythologizings of Hawthorne's "reclusive" personality and tours-in-print past Hawthorne's private home began in the early 1850s, with full cooperation from Hawthorne's promoters. And Hawthorne too entered into the predicaments of high visibility at this moment: how, in coming before a large, impersonal audience, still to keep "the inmost Me behind its veil" (SL 4) becomes this privacy-loving public figure's problem in 1850 just as much as it is Catharine Sedgwick's or *The Veiled Lady*'s.²²

The Blithedale Romance, accordingly, needs to be understood not just as a depiction of self-evident cultural realities but more specifically as an act of reconnaissance into an emerging cultural form. In writing this book Hawthorne uses his work to *work out* the shape of the field writing has now been placed in, and to measure the meaning of his work's new situation. But

the novelists of this time all face the same situation, which they explore in works of their own. *The Wide, Wide World* is in one aspect a fictional history of this same entertainment revolution. In a central scene Warner memorably contrasts the bee characteristic of an older social order—an entertainment in which the private is not split from the communal, pleasure not split from productive labor, and the performers not other people than the enjoyers—with the passive, leisured, privatized entertainment form (reading) characteristic of modern domesticity, the scene of its own consumption. Melville, who repositioned himself as an antipopular author in face of the same emerging situation that Hawthorne and Warner embraced on other terms, wrote his history of this development in *Pierre* (also 1852), a book that finds its threefold adversary in the cultural organization that encloses sympathy within domestic confinements; a literary market that hypes talent into literary celebrity; and a cultural ordering that sets the literary in opposition to unrepressed bodily life.²³ Fanny Fern, unlike Melville a courter of popularity and unlike Warner an enjoyer of fame, made a different accommodation to the literary situation she too found around her. She takes her more sanguine measure of the same ground in *Ruth Hall*, a book that plots the birth of the popular writer at the junction of a business of literary production and a domesticity in need of its wares. Ruth's fan mail—the proof of her celebrity status—makes clear that a home audience consumes her work to help satisfy cravings domestic life has not allayed.

Not long after this moment, American literature had other situations socially created for it. The Beadle's Dime Novels already in full commercial flower by 1860 embody a quite different world of popular writing, organizing a mass audience on other terms than a domestic one. By that year a nonpopular "serious" literary zone was successfully institutionalized as part of the establishment of a self-consciously high culture in America, a development that laid the ground for a quite different figure of the author to emerge later on. But those structures were not yet in place a decade before. The dominant world of writing in mid-nineteenth-century America was the highly vicarious, highly managed, privacy-addressing, mass-public one that came together around 1850; and the central fact of literary life then was that a writer who hoped to reach a significant public would have to engage a communication system structured on those terms. Small wonder that the author's *work* at this time is to figure out what this situation means: a work performed, among other ways, through the writing of the story of *The Veiled Lady*.

Notes

I would like to thank the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society and the Department of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara for spirited discussions of an earlier version of this essay. My thanks, too, to my colleague Lynn Wardley for sharing her extensive knowledge of this subject.

1. Hawthorne to E. P. Whipple, 2 May 1852 (*Letters* 536).
2. On the American history of mesmerism see Fuller, esp. 16–47. Puysegur and the concept of a clairvoyance-yielding “lucidity” are discussed on 10–11.
3. Among the many works on nineteenth-century domesticity as an ideological construct and social reality see particularly Douglas, Cott, Ryan, and my “Sparing the Rod.” The last two works deal extensively with the symbiotic relations between domestic enclosure and public reform movements.
4. See Brown. For another discussion of the cultural history of privacy and of the highly charged bounding off of public and private space in the antebellum decades, see Haltunnen, esp. 102–12.
5. Banner discusses the cultural authority of what she calls “the steel-engraving lady” (45–65).
6. To be fully understood, the quite spectacular emergence of women into public artistic celebrity around 1850 would have to be grasped together with the much more heavily obstructed movement of women into other forms of public life at the same time. Priscilla is partly defined in opposition to Zenobia, who contemplates a countercareer as a feminist political orator. Zenobia’s historical correlatives are the women who asserted themselves as speakers in the antislavery and women’s rights causes in the late 1830s and 1840s, who found their ways barred by the still strongly enforced social insistence that women not speak in public before mixed male-female audiences. O’Connor’s useful volume reminds us that women were enrolled as students at the coeducational Oberlin College, but were not allowed to perform the public-speaking exercises in oratory classes; and that many women publicly prominent in education had male spokesmen read their messages aloud when called on to speak in mixed company (22–40). Calvin Stowe read Harriet Beecher Stowe’s responses to the crowds she drew on her English tour (Wilson 349).
7. Banner discusses Fanny Elssler’s tour, 63–64. On Jenny Lind’s American concert tour see Barnum, esp. chapters 17–19, and Harris 111–42.
8. The most comprehensive treatment of 1850s literary promotion and the expansion of the American book market is Geary. See also the discussion of publication and promotion in Kelley’s comprehensive history of antebellum best-seller writers (3–27).
9. Kelley 3, Wilson 291 and 344–86. Stowe was assured of an English “reception as enthusiastic as that of Jenny Lind” (Wilson 334). An important related discussion of “the modelling of a highly visible identity under . . . new circumstances of conspicuous performance” (164) is Fisher’s. But Fisher locates in the 1890s the developments I see beginning in the late 1840s.

10. All discussions of the joint birth of mass-market fiction and middle-class privacy must acknowledge their debt to Ann Douglas, whose *Feminization of American Culture* first suggested the American version of this linkage, and to the still important chapter "Private Experience and the Novel" in Watt (174–207).

11. Kelley's discussion of female literary pseudonyms (124–37) is a crucial contribution to the historical meaning of women's veiling in the mid-nineteenth century.

12. Barnum's Jenny Lind chapters make clear that she profited from her performance career quite as much as he did.

13. On Bonner, see Kelley 3–6, 21–24, and 161–63. Kelley's evidence suggests how much generosity such a manager might be capable of, and what benefits a woman might gain through her dealings with him, facts that must not be underrated. (In *Ruth Hall* Ruth thinks of her manager as a real brother, unlike her miserable actual brother Hyacinth.) But it is a tendency of Kelley's argument to slip over the market relation that a bond to a publicist-promoter necessarily involved: Kelley thus treats this relation as background or introductory information, instead of as a relation that helps constitute the female literary "success."

14. In the same vein Barnum calls Lind's tour "an enterprise never before or since equalled in managerial annals" and gloats: "I had marked the 'divine Jenny' as a sure card," and so on (170–72).

15. On actor and spectator in nineteenth-century European culture see for instance Richard Sennett's discussion of Pagliaccian virtuosity and the new etiquette of audience silence (195–218).

16. Willis's reverie continues, in a locution truly astonishing: "To see such a heaven as her heart untenanted, one longs to write its advertisement of 'To Let'" (160). Readers of the Willis *Memoranda* will be struck by the close analogies to Priscilla in Lind's "white garb of purity" (132), her pallid and "insensuous" appearance (140–41), her upbringing as a "poor and plain little girl" locked "in a little room" (5), and so on.

17. "Your uninvited presence here is an intrusion," Lind tells the invaders of what *Blithedale* would call her "private withdrawing room" (110–11); but the celebrity privacy that brands public entrance intrusion in fact invites just such intrusion, as Willis virtually says.

18. See Geary, 388–89. As Geary notes, the really fascinating question this publicity raises—whether Fern wrote up her life in the knowledge that it would be marketed in this way—is impossible now to answer.

19. Rolls Royce ran this advertisement in the April 1988 issue of *Gourmet*.

20. Does my phrasing sufficiently suggest that I see *Blithedale* as prophetically describing the "living room" of the modern private home, focused on the sound system, television, and VCR? That the average American watches television seven or more hours a day in such enclosures is the social

fact *Blithedale* helps foresee. On the American tradition of opposition to privacy as a spatial and social construct see Hayden.

21. My understanding that mass-cultural instruments can build social groups into markets because they also meet those groups' socially created needs has been influenced by Ohmann. Like Fisher, Ohmann focuses these developments in the 1890s.

22. Further evidence that the issue of Hawthorne's writing around 1850 is the issue of enlarged publicity would be found in the 1851 preface to *Twice-Told Tales* and in his other novels of 1850–52, which both open with a crisis of public exposure: Hester's exposure on the Puritan scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* and the "going visible" that accompanies Hepzibah's opening of her shop in *The House of the Seven Gables*. On the promotion or public creation of Hawthorne in the 1850s and after, see my *School of Hawthorne*, 48–66.

23. For Melville's struggle to describe "life" and its alienation in contemporary writing see for instance this remarkable passage:

Pierre is young; heaven gave him the divinest, freshest form of a man; put light into his eye, and fire into his blood, and brawn into his arm, and a joyous, jubilant, overflowing, upbubbling, universal life in him everywhere. Now look around in that most miserable room, and at that most miserable pursuit of man, and say if here be the place, and this be the trade, that God intended for him. A rickety chair, two hollow barrels, a plank, paper, pens, and infernally black ink, four leprously dingy white walls, no carpet, a cup of water, and a dry biscuit or two. Oh, I hear the leap of the Texan Camanche, as at this moment he goes crashing like a wild deer through the green underbrush; I hear his glorious whoop of savage and untamable health; and then I look in at Pierre. If physical, practical unreason make the savage, which is he? (*Pierre* 302)

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