The Public Turn: Two Books Approaching Nineteenth Century Literary Celebrity

Review by Eva Sage Gordon

Literary Celebrity and Public Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States by Bonnie Carr O’Neill; University of Georgia Press, 2017, 244 pp., $62.02

The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher by Debby Applegate; Doubleday, 2006, 503 pp., $27.95

In mid-nineteenth century America, some of the most influential celebrities were those who traveled the lecture circuit as public orators. Lectures at the time combined the experiences of church and theater, serving as entertainment without suffering theater’s taint of moral depravity. Lecture-goers could travel to the local Lyceum or church hall and listen, often for free, to hear talks on philosophy, politics, religion, science, literature and more, thriving on the festive atmosphere of fellow audience members and the visual and aural spectacle of the figure onstage. In an age before television, orators were matinée idols and spiritual guides, reacting to the culture and forming it at once. The magnitude of orators in mid-nineteenth century America is difficult for twenty-first century readers to imagine, but is fruitfully explored in both O’Neill and Applegate’s books; as Debby Applegate writes, “Boys with ambition long to join the ranks of the immortal orators, the way later boys might aspire to play professional baseball or become an astronaut.”

In their excellent first books, Bonnie Carr O’Neill and Debby Applegate deftly examine issues of publicity and privacy, religion and oratory, and the rise of the American literary celebrity in the mid-nineteenth century. Though approaching their topics from different genres (academic writing for O’Neill, trade press biography for Applegate) both display wide-ranging

1 Debby Applegate, The Most Famous Man in America, p. 65.
knowledge of the people and texts they write about, and the two read together provide a strong
sense of how a child in the nineteenth century might grow up to become a public figure, and then
how that figure might interact with the audience to create a well-known, though never fixed,
public identity. Both books take up literary and oratorial celebrity, Applegate’s focusing on a
single famous family, the Beechers, O’Neill’s moving by chapters from one figure to the next,
beginning with P.T. Barnum and ending with Fanny Fern.

In the Introduction to *Literary Celebrity and Public Life in the 19th Century*, Bonnie Carr
O’Neill establishes the differences between key terms at issue in her work. “Fame” is understood
in Henry James’ language as “an enduring reputation for greatness” which does not ebb and flow
with the latest trends, and does not depend on a particular generation to uphold. “Celebrity,” on
the other hand, is “a temporary appeal to a mass audience.” “Celebrity culture,” for O’Neill,
includes “the organization of a host of popular media—mechanisms for the production and
distribution of texts; lectures and other kinds of performance—that put authors and others before
a public audience, as well as the various responses to heightened publicity.” This notion
has to do with the attempt by audiences to personalize public figures, and the process by which
audience members and the celebrity they observe collaborate in constructing the persona of the
public figure. Drawing on reader-response theory, affect theory, the concept of the personal
public sphere, and questions of embodiment, O’Neill goes on to analyze a number of well-known
nineteenth century figures, looking at how they became popular, how, with audiences’ help,
they developed the reputations they did, and how in each case they struggled to control the

2 Bonnie Carr O’Neill, p. 1
3 Ibid, p. 3
4 In order: P.T. Barnum, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Fanny Fern
narrative surrounding them—a fight O’Neill presents as futile, considering the interpretive nature of celebrity culture.

Although O’Neill discusses a seemingly diffuse group of figures, the focus on certain core issues of nineteenth century celebrity hold the book together successfully. Preempting criticisms of the seemingly arbitrary selection of subjects in this volume, O’Neill explains early on that her five subject choices “demonstrate the ways that celebrity culture informs and shapes the debates over national identity and belonging that are particularly acute in this moment.” One could easily imagine a second volume with a different set of figures as its subjects, carrying on the work O’Neill has begun here. In fact, in the introduction to her book, O’Neill writes, “It is my hope that this book demonstrates methods that may be employed in other literary and cultural instances to make sense of mass publicity in the period.”

*Literary Celebrity and Public Life* emerges during a rising interest in celebrity studies among scholars, and among a spate of books, from both academic and commercial publishers, on the issues O’Neill examines here. O’Neill’s offering is unique in its strong focus on the importance of oratory in the visual and aural creation of the public personas of Emerson, Barnum, and Douglass, as well as for its use of literary analysis as a central focus of the discussion of celebrity culture (all of the above, plus Whitman and Fern). Another reviewer has pointed out that O’Neill’s focus on mid-19th century figures goes slightly against the title of the

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5 O’Neill, p. 15.
book, which suggests more broad-ranging coverage of the century. Despite this minor misstep, however, *Literary Celebrity* provides thoughtful analysis of the issues of privacy and the rising role of public figures as they evolved over several decades, from the 1830s to the 1860s.\(^7\)

O’Neill, an English professor at Mississippi State University, has published scholarly articles on fame and the rise of print culture. This fine first book draws on article-length studies she has previously published on privacy and publicity in regards to Whitman\(^8\) and celebrity and public space as they operated for Emerson\(^9\).

Whitman, for O’Neill, is both an individual who is part of celebrity culture (as when he writes of Lincoln, a public figure, as a personal love) and an emerging public figure, involved in efforts to place himself in the role of celebrity writer. In the section titled *Walt Whitman: Mediation, Affect, and Authority in Celebrity Culture*, O’Neill compares the poet’s early journalism (1840-42) with his later poetry, specifically the verses from the “Calamus” cluster in *Leaves of Grass* and the stand alone “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” his elegy for Lincoln. This unexpected pairing emphasizes Whitman’s understanding of the personal public sphere, where civic discourse was brought inside the house, and where authority could extend beyond the realm of the old money powerplayers to everyday people. Whitman wrote for a man who could sit in his kitchen eating breakfast and absorb a direct appeal from a journalist he had never met about a politician he is asked to vote for because of issues he feels strongly about. This traversing of the public discourse into the private sphere of home life, a result of the mass

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proliferation of penny newspapers in the 1830s and 40s, had the potential to liberate those people not usually considered members of the public, namely women and nonwhites, from the cut-off domestic zone of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whitman’s focus was more on working class men, the b’hoys he identified with in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan, than with women and nonwhite people, but his approach toward personalizing public discourse had the ability to reach all these previously ignored groups.

In his early editorials, Whitman wrote in first person (a common style at the time), addressing his readers as though he were an intimate acquaintance, establishing an imagined rapport wherein he (or his editorial persona) was known intimately by readers, though he didn’t know them individually. Whitman often walked the line between what O’Neill terms the “cultural authority and individual judgement that motivates antebellum public life.”¹⁰ In this personalized public sphere, every citizen becomes an equal judge of the merits of an argument being made in the public discourse—in other words, comment culture emerges. O’Neill writes that Whitman both encouraged this democratization of authority and sought to retain a certain amount of authorial control in his role as journalist and artist. In accepting popularity or commercial success as a marker of authority over more traditional indicators (like schooling and family connections) Whitman used celebrity culture as a vehicle from which to democratize authority and raise up and lowly artists and workingmen. O’Neill points out the ways in which Whitman as both a journalist and a poet places himself on intimate, affective terms with his audience, seeking to influence them, but ultimately, begrudgingly, requires their interpretations.

¹⁰ O’Neill, Literary Celebrity and Public Life, p. 52
of his work to form his public persona. O’Neill’s reading of Whitman places him in the center of a rising celebrity culture based on imagined private connections with distant figures.

Not all writers during this period had so many choices about the kinds of authority they would convey. In order to show some of the positive aspects of nineteenth century celebrity culture in opening up space for new voices, O’Neill discusses the careers of Fanny Fern and Frederick Douglass. Fern and Douglass did not fit nineteenth century ideas about authorship and authority. As a single white woman working successfully as a journalist and novelist, Fern was considered dangerous, a bad influence to the middle class women who read her work and might become influenced by her progressive ideals. When Frederick Douglass appeared onstage, a black man who spoke eloquently, and forcefully, of his life in slavery and of the need for immediate abolition, his firm, authoritative presence confounded widely held beliefs about black inferiority. At a time in America when black people were property to be bought and sold under the law, Frederick Douglass stood before mass audiences demonstrating his intelligence and humanity, using his skills of rhetoric and oratory to startle his audiences into reconsidering those beliefs. For both of these figures, celebrity status provided the benefits of respect and money that would otherwise have been out of reach, as well a certain ability to work within the confines of a heavily embodied public assessment that all women and men of color were made to endure at the time. Fern and Douglass were up against assumptions about their intelligence and morality that went far beyond those their white male colleagues regularly faced—while Emerson and other white male orators were also often described in terms of their physicality in newspaper accounts.
of their lectures\textsuperscript{11}, missing was the moral judgement, racism, and sexualizing of the speaker layered into descriptions of black and female writers and orators of the period.

O’Neill points out the contrast between Fern and Douglass’s approaches to the problem of being judged as physical bodies rather than based upon the ideal Emerson describes of the “abstract self,” demonstrating the possible ways for female and black public figures to navigate celebrity. Both writers clearly recognized the problem, and their opposing styles of managing it illustrate something of each figures’ personality, as well as the different shades of bigotry directed at women versus men of color. As O’Neill describes, Fern (née Sarah Willis Parton) chose to write under a pen name and refused to reveal her identity despite being, at one point in 1855, the highest paid newspaper writer in America\textsuperscript{12}. In the 1850s, even professional acclaim and her own paychecks could not protect a woman from the scorn she would inevitably receive for daring to question traditional gender roles, for stepping outside the private sphere of the household to enter the traditionally masculine zone of public discourse. Celebrity, in the form of a popular, anonymous newspaper column, had the power to remove Fern from the rigid social standards of her day and allow her, along with her fans, to construct a transgressive alternative identity for her, far away from the oppressive existence she otherwise faced as a widowed and divorced single mother of two.

Douglass, on the other hand, had the challenge of either being seen as a representative of his race or as exceptional, not to be understood in the context of other black men. Appearing before large audiences, Douglass faced the embodiment problem head on. As O’Neill writes, “For black public speakers, the physical self can never be forgotten or ignored.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Partly, in Emerson’s case, due to his insistence that the text of his lectures not be printed.
\textsuperscript{12} O’Neill, p. 156
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 119.
O’Neill traces the rise of Douglass’s public speaking career, as well as the evolving position he took in each of his three autobiographies. Maintaining a degree of privacy was essential to Douglass, who had earned his right to privacy through publicizing his story. As a slave, it would have been seen as impossible for him to need privacy—privacy was for people, not property—so as a free man, he shielded details of his personal life even as he used the podium and the page to narrate a version of his life for white audiences.

As O’Neill thoughtfully argues, the back and forth between celebrity figures and audience members who imagine a personal connection with them renders celebrity identity perpetually unstable. This instability could be seen as a sacrifice for some figures, who began life in the correct subject position (white and male) but for others, it allowed a way out of reliance on more powerful others to survive. As we see in the cases of Fern and Douglass, the identities of women and nonwhite men in the nineteenth century were inherently unsettled, always dependent on the judgement of an outside (white, male) observer. So while Emerson and Barnum gave up some measure of privacy to become public figures, for others, celebrity status afforded a previously unknown level of privacy. By displaying parts of themselves or their ideas publicly, they held onto a core of self-reliance, of private space to live their lives out of view.

Rather than analyzing a handful of public figures in order to demonstrate the function of celebrity in the nineteenth century as O’Neill does in Literary Celebrity and Public Life, Debby Applegate uses the notion of celebrity to frame and enliven the telling of a single life, that of revivalist preacher of the “Gospel of Love,” Henry Ward Beecher. In O’Neill’s book, any given chapter could have been switched out for a discussion of someone else—Thoreau, Melville,
Hawthorne, or Beecher himself could have subbed in for Emerson, for instance—without losing the character of the work overall. Applegate’s book, on the contrary, uses celebrity as an interesting, though not fully indispensable, concept with which to understand Beecher’s life.

The first two dozen pages of Applegate’s *The Most Famous Man in America* preempts readers’ questions about the title (was he the most famous man? How come he isn’t well known now?) by telling a story from the height of Henry Ward Beecher’s career, about the single event that would have—under normal circumstances—ensured his fame for decades to come. President Lincoln had selected Beecher, a well-known abolitionist preacher from Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York, to give the main address at the dedication of Fort Sumter, a symbolic showing of victory for the union army, and an event hundreds of people vied to attend. The momentous occasion grew more impactful still when, in a well-timed coincidence, (where Beecher’s celebrity was concerned) word came the morning of the dedication party’s arrival in South Carolina that Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, Virginia. What would have been a major celebration before took on an even-more-glorious dimension then, with firecrackers, bugles, and the ecstatic shouts of men and women filling the warm spring air.

The speech went well enough, despite heavy winds flapping his papers about on the podium, and Beecher’s part in the history of the final moments of the war seemed all but certain—until a few hours later, Lincoln and his wife left the White House for Ford’s Theater. Instead of becoming the story himself, Beecher immediately returns to his role as renderer of private, though often broadly felt, emotions. After hearing the news of Lincoln’s death, he told
the crowd aboard his ship that it was time to get home. Beecher recalled of that moment, “It was not grief, it was sickness that I felt.”14

By starting the book with this anecdote, Applegate points to the unpredictability of fame, pokes fun at her own title, and introduces one of the major themes of her book—public attention. The fact that Beecher is far from the most famous man in America today allowed Applegate a great deal of flexibility in what story she would tell—as opposed to a book on a more oft-discussed nineteenth century figure; Emily Dickinson, or Abraham Lincoln, for instance, which would have to take a stand on the most well-trodden perceptions and questions about the central figure (was Dickinson a mentally ill recluse? Did she want her poetry published? Was Lincoln a passionate abolitionist or a politically moderate politician for whom slavery was mainly a problem inasmuch as it caused a rift in the union?) a book on Henry Ward Beecher for commercial audiences in the twenty-first century has no major expectations to either confound or support. Considering this, a biographer approaching him has every option but one: a traditional, birth-to-death biography would never work—the subject simply isn’t popular enough to inspire a readership without some other draw. Applegate chooses celebrity as that draw.

In a clever move, Applegate writes the life of Beecher in the form of a nonfiction novel, combining suspense, strong story structure, and well-placed dialogue to bring Beecher’s harsh upbringing as the eighth (of an eventual thirteen) child of Calvinist fire-and-brimstone preacher Lyman Beecher to life for modern audiences, allowing readers to sit back and enjoy the wild story—at turns funny, sad, and sometimes truly shocking, all the more engaging because it’s true.

14 Applegate, pp. 1-17.
By following Beecher’s struggle as a neglected middle child who lost his mother as a toddler and grew up fearing intensely for his soul, readers get an up-close taste of the life of a New England child in the first half of the nineteenth century, with all the shared beds, physical labor, scholastic discipline\textsuperscript{15}, and hellfire doctrine that entailed. By the time Beecher becomes a successful preacher himself, readers are cheering for him heartily, even as he displays decidedly unchristian habits of spending lavishly and carrying on extramarital affairs. Without veering toward hagiography, Applegate tells Beecher’s story in such a way that readers cannot help but feel for him—to accomplish this, she makes frequent use of the preacher’s diaries and letters, in which he describes many of the most profound incidents of his young life. In describing his difficulty in relating emotionally to his stepmother, Applegate quotes Beecher as stating, “I was afraid of her. It would have been easier for me to lay my hand on a block and have it struck off than to open my thoughts to her.”\textsuperscript{16} Beecher’s genius in expressing his emotions in striking imagery and clarity retains its force all these years after his life. He was a man laid bare before his audiences, providing what must have been a thoroughly cleansing honesty in a time of weighty social pressure to maintain decorum. Readers develop alongside Beecher the objections to his father’s way of thinking, moving away from damnation toward acceptance, and coming to understand his eventual embrace of the Gospel of God’s Love as a plea for the attention and affection he missed growing up. Beecher preached the belief that, “It is far worse for one’s soul to be an uncharitable judge than to be a weak-willed sinner.”\textsuperscript{17}

The levity and brisk tone of the storytelling is perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book, considering the years of intense research required to write it. In an interview with the

\textsuperscript{15} Schools at the time relied chiefly on rote memorization (enforced by beatings) as the method of instruction.

\textsuperscript{16} Applegate, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p. 320.
Washington Independent Review of Books, Applegate describes the difficulty she had in turning her PhD dissertation on Beecher into The Most Famous Man, a book for commercial audiences. “It turned out I had mastered the style of academic writing, which I learned in graduate school, and I had mastered how to write a proposal...But I had oversold the book, I would say, because I had absolutely no idea how to write a book that people would want to read.” After studying the art of biography and the craft of fiction writing, Applegate revised her heavily-researched tome into a riveting historical tale with the ability to reach audiences with little prior knowledge of the subject, as well as those with a thorough grasp on nineteenth century history.

Some of the finest historical novels incorporate references (or even brief scenes with) real historical figures, which only adds to the reader’s interest in the central character’s story. Similar in musicality and historical accuracy to E.L. Doctorow’s historical novels, Applegate’s book also naturally includes scenes with other famous figures of Beecher’s day, including his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Abraham Lincoln, which has the double effect of engaging readers with compelling anecdotes of famous names and supporting Applegate’s title and implied thesis—we see, for instance, hopeful politician and Illinois lawyer Lincoln traveling to Brooklyn in 1858 to speak at Beecher’s church, an invitation Lincoln described later in a letter as a highlight of his career to that point: “No event in his life had given him more heartfelt pleasure.” Following the rise of these other celebrity figures in Beecher’s life provides a context within which readers can understand the rise of Beecher’s own star. The scene where Lincoln is invited to speak at Plymouth church in particular underscores the power of oratory in forming

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19 Such as Ragtime and The March.
20 Applegate, p. 322.
celebrities—as a result of his success in New York (the venue was upgraded to Cooper Union Institute at the last minute to provide for extra seating) Lincoln is invited to speak at nine more events in New England before returning home; this lecture series propels his political career and secures his nomination as the Republic candidate for President.\textsuperscript{21} Beecher’s involvement with Lincoln and his cause would only increase from there. Five years after his invitation for Lincoln to speak in his church, Beecher would help swing the British public for the union cause in a series of speaking engagements in England. Two years after that, having finally taken control in South Carolina, Lincoln would choose Beecher to speak at Fort Sumter—one of the President’s last political choices before being shot.

Even during his lifetime, Beecher was never quite the most famous man in America, though on April 14th, 1865, he might have attained that title, if only for a while. Ultimately, Beecher’s significance in the religious history of the U.S. is more long lasting than his celebrity—just as P.T. Barnum’s role in shaping advertising\textsuperscript{22} leaves more of a mark than his name today. Not only was Beecher’s pulpit style exciting for spectators (reports describe him waving his arms in the air as he spoke, raising and lowering his voice dramatically, and stamping his feet three times in succession to close an argument)—it also provided relief from the heavy tension of national conflict which finally erupted as the civil war. After two centuries of dread-inducing Calvinist preaching, Beecher’s positive message, use of vernacular language, and progressive social stances brought Protestantism into the modern age. His embrace of print culture, both as an editor of religious magazines, subject of articles in newspapers, and writing of

\textsuperscript{21} Lincoln was neck and neck with William Seward before his trip to New York. His performances and the press they garnered tipped the nomination his way. Applegate, 322-325.
\textsuperscript{22} Barnum used shocking images, bold headlines, and lies to promote his shows, preempting tabloid media and lowering the standards for honesty in media.
books elevated his stature from popular local preacher to national—and even international—celebrity figure\(^\text{23}\)—for a time. His impact on the direction of preaching continues to be felt, with the energetic, theatrical style and focus on social change that he made famous spreading from black churches to mega churches and across Protestant denominations.

Each of the major figures discussed in O’Neill and Applegate’s books played a role in shaping nineteenth century ideas of who and what constituted acceptable American life, and in doing so, each contributed something lasting (for better or worse) to American national identity. Emerson and Beecher broke out of the old Calvinist preaching style, shifting cultural norms about what a good person and a christian could think and see and do. Whitman, Douglass, and Fern broke down barriers to cultural authority previously bestowed only on the wealthy white (mostly male) elite. And Barnum, who made his living displaying non-normative bodies for jeering crowds, developed many techniques of modern publicity and advertising that rule American media to this day. Each entered into the public sphere through their work, and left it changed.

\(^{23}\) In 1863 Beecher undertook a speaking tour in England, during which he stirred up support for the union cause. *Ibid*, pp. 346-348.