

**rogues, rascals and scoundrels**

**the underworld literature  
of early america**

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In 1699 Cotton Mather published a narrative anthology titled *Pillars of Salt*, which he advertised as a “history of some criminals executed in this land for capital crimes with some of their dying speeches collected and published for the warning of such as live in destructive courses of ungodliness.” Among the dozen criminal histories included were the story of a young woman executed twice (the first time having failed to produce the desired effect); the story of a sixty-year-old man who was turned in and testified against by his own son for bestiality, a crime which he later confessed having regularly practiced for fifty years and for which both he and the “offending” animals were all executed; the story of two servants who murdered their master with an ax in order to prove whether he was really “flesh and blood” like themselves; and the story of a man who murdered his pregnant wife by cutting her throat with a pocket knife.<sup>1</sup>

Mather described these unfortunate individuals and their even more unfortunate crimes in order to edify and terrify his readers by illustrating the inevitability of stern judgment—first man’s, then God’s. Indeed, the executions and dying confessions became triumphs of holiness, proofs of God’s victory over Satan and of good over evil. Nevertheless, in case anyone missed the clear didactic message and accused Mather of exploiting sensational stories simply to further establish himself as Boston’s leading author, he carefully included the ultimate justification for publishing stories of lust, crime, violence and “ungodliness.” He wrote: “Tis possible, the author of the ensuing Discourse . . . may be asked a reason

for doing what he has done, in this publication: But his Reasonable Account of it is, Tis all done by the Command of Christ, and at the Desire of His People.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Christ did command Mather, but we can be sure he was also responding to the “Desire of *His* People.” *Pillars of Salt* is an example of an early American attempt to satisfy the imaginative hunger for sensation and story by exploiting mankind’s basic fascination with the criminal. Although for obvious didactic reasons, Mather attempted to satisfy this hunger of the imagination with tales of extraordinary experience. In order to put the fear of God in his readers, he used several narrative techniques, including dialogue and first person narration, and he dwelt upon subjects that today might better be found in *True Detective* magazines.

Mather’s narrative, and many like it from this period, represent the beginning of the development of criminal literature in America. This was a three-stage process in which hundreds of different narratives were published and in which a remarkable change in the perception of the criminal took place. The fascination with criminal behavior, as it is reflected in literature, was first evident in Puritan New England during the late seventeenth century and developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early narratives, such as “Final Confessions” and “Dying Speeches,” instead of describing the criminal’s life and crimes, concentrated more on his or her struggle for redemption and acceptance of punishment. Instead of describing the criminal’s defiance of authority, early narratives dramatized the criminal’s final submission to authority. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this had changed, and later narratives dramatized the criminal’s struggles to defy authority and to escape the limitations imposed by either Providence or society. Ultimately, even the doctrine of inevitable judgment, so apparent and significant in the early narratives, was challenged. After the Revolution, after the country had itself defied authority, descriptions of deviant and defiant individuals became especially popular in American literature, and the criminal, the clever rogue in particular, became both hero and anti-hero, both epitome and parody of the American character. As a literary figure, the criminal moved from Puritan condemnation to post-Revolutionary celebration.

The fascination with criminal behavior, of course, is timeless and universal, but in Puritan New England it developed a special urgency. The original Puritans intended to establish an exemplary community, what Winthrop called “a City upon a Hill.” They believed they were God’s special agents, carrying on the Protestant Reformation and combating evil. They were on a mission, an “errand into the wilderness,” and it was this sense of importance which led them to carefully watch over their experiment for signs of corruption.

This preoccupation was evident throughout Puritan society. Executions, for example, were attended by thousands. One historian estimated that as many as twelve thousand attended a single execution while other estimates vary between three to six thousand.<sup>3</sup> Considering the size and density of the early population, these crowds were remarkable. More

importantly, the execution sermons, delivered either on the preceding Sunday or on the day of execution (and often delivered on both) were some of the most popular and best attended sermons in early America. These sermons, “extreme examples of church drama” as one critic called them, attracted immense crowds of people eager to hear the minister’s final remarks to the condemned, who usually sat in front of the congregation, chained and guarded, as visible proof of God’s vengeance upon the wicked.<sup>4</sup> The crowds were so great, in fact, that they often caused problems. Once nearly five thousand people turned up to hear Increase Mather, Cotton Mather and Joshua Moody deliver execution sermons in the presence of a condemned murderer. So many crowded inside the church that the upper gallery cracked, and the church had to be evacuated. Another time Cotton Mather complained that so many people came to hear his sermon to a condemned criminal that he could only reach the pulpit by “climbing over pews and heads.”<sup>5</sup>

With such popularity, it was inevitable that execution sermons were published. Boston printers, not averse to making money and aware of the immense crowds who turned up to hear the sermons, were more than willing to help ministers reach larger audiences. In fact, hesitant ministers were often pestered with requests that they publish their sermons. In the preface to one of the first execution sermons ever published in America, Increase Mather stated: “Little did I think of Printing this sermon when I preached it; but that God . . . hath so ordered by his Providence as that many have so desired, that it might be thus exposed to the view of the world; and out of respect to whose Importunity, I have transcribed for them a Copy of what was spoken.” Two years later in another preface, Mather, somewhat resentfully, admitted to similar pressure: “The Sermons emitted herein . . . are Published to gratifie some who have been perhaps too importunately desirous to have it so.”<sup>6</sup>

Execution sermons were published in an attempt to recreate in print the dramatic spectacle of the condemned sinner confronting the certainty of death and the uncertainty of God’s final judgment. They have, therefore, both sacred and secular functions. By far the more important, at least during the early period, the sacred function attempted to emphasize the lessons of divine justice, lessons which the minister was able to illustrate by direct reference to the condemned. The doomed prisoner was “the most convincing example” that a wicked, godless life led to ruin, humiliation and damnation.<sup>7</sup> Ministers took advantage of every opportunity to remind their congregations to take warning and learn from the condemned prisoner’s misfortune. Referring to a woman executed for infanticide, one minister wrote that “in this Publication we do come to you with a message from the dead; Or, she herself does, as it were, come from the Dead to warn you.”<sup>8</sup>

But in order to accomplish the sacred function, ministers resorted to exploiting the secular function of satisfying the imaginative hunger for sensation and story. The sense of drama was particularly heightened through the use of sensational rhetoric and vivid imagery. Descriptions of

damnation and of filthy devils boiling in lakes of fire were not uncommon. One of Cotton Mather's execution sermons, *The Valley of Hinnom*, so effectively described "The Terrors of Hell" and "The Terrible Miseries of the Punishments of the Wicked there" that it sold nearly one thousand copies in five days.<sup>9</sup> The condemned was referred to as "miserable wretch," "poor creature," "polluted soul" and "child of death." Titillating adjectives and phrases were constantly used, such as "most horrid," "most horrible," "most unnatural," "most inhuman" and "most cruel." Certain key words were printed in bold type and repeated throughout the text, such as "MURDER," "SODOMY," "BEGOTTEN IN WHOREDOME," "PIRACY," "RAPE" and, of course, "DEATH." Title pages were often lurid and advertised the crime as much as the sermon. One of Cotton Mather's, for example, offered the following information:

Ministers further attempted to seize the imagination by stressing the immediacy of death. References to the coming executions were used throughout the sermons. One zealous—but callous—minister addressed a sixteen-year-old black guilty of murder as follows:

Poor unhappy Bristol! The day of your death is now come, and you have but a few hours more to live. The laws of the land and the laws of God, call for the destruction of your mortal life . . . nor have you the least ray of hope that you shall escape; for the sentence passed is not to be revoked—the day of execution is come—the Guard is about you—the instruments of death are made ready—your coffin and your grave are open.<sup>11</sup>

But the desire to attract larger audiences by stressing the spectacle was carried even further. In order to take greater advantage of the condemned, ministers often narrated their crimes as crude stories, creating a rough sort of realism. In *Pillars of Salt*, for example, Mather exploited the reader's fascination by describing both the crimes and the criminals. The most successful and the most realistic illustrations of divine justice, however, did not come from the ministers, but from the condemned themselves. The published execution sermon usually included an appendix containing the criminal's last confession and dying warning. Although it is highly unlikely that the words actually came from the condemned, and highly likely that they came from the minister, the direct, first person confession became a popular convention of the execution sermon, becoming so popular, in fact, that printers began to publish them separately as broadsides and chapbooks. Not only were confessions and dying warnings published, but life stories, accounts, execution descriptions and even last conferences between the condemned and the attending ministers were published. This use of dialogue has led one critic to refer to these texts as ". . . rudimentary playlets, even including stage directions."<sup>12</sup>

These criminal confessions and narratives combined characteristics from two older traditions: the religious confession and the criminal biography. Together with the execution sermons, they represented the first stage of narrative development of criminal literature in America. But what

*A Bibles*

*The Sad Effects of Sin.*

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A True Relation of the

**MURDER**

Committed by

**DAVID WALLIS,**

On his Companion

*Benjamin Stobwood :*

On Saturday Night, the first of August, 1713. With his Carriage after Condemnation; His Confession and Dying Speech at the Place of Execution, &c.

To which are added, The Sermons Preached at the Lecture in Boston, in his Hearing, after his Condemnation; And on the Day of his Execution, being Sept. 24. 1713.

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Boston, N. E. Printed by John Allen, for Nicholas Boone, at the Sign of the BIBLE in Cornhill. 1713.

(Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society)<sup>10</sup>

is curious about them is their lack of personality. "The Confession and Dying Warning of Hugh Henderson," for example, did not really say much about Hugh Henderson. Published in 1738 both separately and together with an execution sermon, Henderson's "Confession" revealed little of the actual man. Only in the first two paragraphs did Henderson refer to his misspent life, while the rest of the narrative was concerned with his religious conversion. The information he did provide about himself—those things to which he confessed—was described in general terms. His

sins, as he called his crimes, were listed without detail, merely as “Stealing,” “Lying,” “Cursing,” “Breaking the Sabbath,” “Gaming” and “Whoring.” The crime for which he was hanged was simply listed as “House-breaking.” In fact, Henderson appeared far more concerned with what was to happen to him in the future than with what happened to him in the past.<sup>13</sup>

In view of the time and place, this is not surprising. Henderson, after all, lived in a religious world where heaven and hell were realities and where divine retribution was inescapable. Confronted with the reality of his execution, he had only one chance to escape damnation; he must sincerely repent and seek a true conversion. He must therefore exemplify the religious pattern of fall, repentance, humiliation and redemption. Although it was believed that “Late Repentance was Seldom True,” criminals were continually reminded of the penitent thief who died with Christ and who, at the very last moment, was granted a miraculous salvation. Such miracles were possible but difficult, and only through the greatest struggle could the criminal achieve this state of penitence. Henderson’s lack of particular details about himself, such as his crimes and his motivations, enhanced his archetypal role as “the penitent thief.” Moreover, a necessary step in the conversion process was the total rejection of the criminal’s former life in sin and the expression of the desire for a new, purified self.<sup>14</sup>

It was indeed a role which was assigned to Henderson, a role which belonged to a ritual drama especially important to early New England. The ministers who attended Henderson before his execution assigned him the role. Like most criminals of early America, Henderson was illiterate, and his “Confession” was written for him by the ministers, who were far more interested in fitting him into the role of the penitent thief than with his individual character. Crime in Puritan society signified that the holy experiment was being corrupted; the execution of a criminal was a proof of Satan’s power. But by working a last minute conversion and by exhibiting the penitent sinner to the public, both in person and in print, ministers could turn the event into a triumph of Christ and the Puritan way, thereby reaffirming the same values the sinner had threatened in his godless pursuits.

There was no doubt that the ignorant and terrified Henderson was sincere. He not only expressed disgust at his former life and joy at his conversion, but even thanked the authorities about to execute him. Such sincerity and self-hatred were not unusual in published confessions. One young woman about to be executed for infanticide wrote:

And I think I can say, I have had more comfort and satisfaction within these Walls of this Prison, than ever I had in the ways of Sin among my vain Companions, and think I wou’d not for a World, nay for ten thousand Worlds have my liberty in Sin again, and be in the same Condition I was in before I came into this Place.<sup>15</sup>

But as Puritanism began to lose its grip on New England, and as New Englanders became more individualistic and more opportunistic, this

sincerity began to disappear. Criminals were less willing to express the same kind of self-hatred. Roughly between mid-century and Revolution, changes began to appear in the type, amount and content of criminal literature. These changes represented the second stage of narrative development in American criminal literature. More “Lives,” “Accounts,” “Dying Speeches,” “Final Warnings” and “Final Conferences” were published separately than before. The narratives were longer, more detailed, and more sensational. Both character and story began to take shape and appeared in rough outline. The criminal was no longer the archetypical sinner fallen from God, but now a distinct personality moving about in a recognizable world. Although most narratives of this type and time generally followed the fall, repentance, humiliation, redemption pattern, their interests were clearly upon more worldly matters, and the sacred and secular intentions were reversed in order of importance. The appeal to the imagination became more important than the appeal to the conscience. The lurid material ministers first appended to their sermons as illustrations of divine justice now became the primary text; the sacred justification and ritual framework were reduced to conventions. As if responding to the desires of readers, a new and greater use of realism emerged. For the first time criminals referred to the motivations behind their criminal pursuits and attempted to describe the forces and factors which shaped their characters.

For example, *A Brief Account of the Life and Abominable Thefts of the Notorious Isaac Frazier*, published in 1768, followed the basic ritual pattern. When Frazier was about to be launched into eternity, he confessed his sins, thanked the ministers and the judges for their “kindness,” warned others not to follow his example and died praying for salvation. But before coming to this abrupt end, Frazier was anything but devout, and whoever wrote the narrative did not spare any of the more sensational moments. Moreover, Frazier’s descriptions of his early life and later setbacks forced readers to sympathize with him as much as condemn him for his crimes.

Raised “in the most abject conditions,” Frazier was “often induced by hunger to take provisions to satisfy the cravings of this nature.” Furthermore, after having been sold into apprenticeship by his widowed mother, and then resold several times, theft became the only opportunity he had to exercise his right of self-determination. His one attempt to reform and “live by honest industry” ended in failure when his “intended wife” and friends learned of his disreputable past and refused to have anything to do with him. He stated:

. . . when, returning to my intended wife for protection, she utterly refused any further connection with me—which disappointment threw me almost into despair—now being destitute of the friends I had so lately made, I abandoned myself to my former course of wickedness, and having no restraints of character, I gave rein to my covetous disposition, being extremely desirous to be rich. I now resolved upon it at all adventures.<sup>16</sup>

Frazier attempted to substitute money for wife, friends and honest

reputation. He became a one-man crime wave. During the next five years he robbed hundreds of shops, sometimes as many as three or four in one night, and often returned to rob the same shop two or three more times. He was caught, jailed and escaped more than a dozen times, and even escaped several times from the same jail and jailer. Twice he was whipped, cropped and branded. His relentless pursuit of money became an obsession. After being caught and condemned, he escaped, but instead of seeking a newer, safer territory, he remained in the same area robbing the same shops all over again the very night he escaped. He was soon caught and executed. Moments before he was turned off, however, Frazier gave a final warning to the several thousand spectators. But this warning, far from revealing Frazier's last thoughts, reveals more of the printer's sense of melodrama and purple prose: ". . . the love of money, the ruling principle of my mind, has brought me to the grave in the flower of life, when my sun is scarce risen; at the age of 28, I am going down into the house of silence, to be numbered with the dead."<sup>17</sup>

An even more secularized example from the middle period was the narrative concerning the life of Owen Syllavan, one of New England's most successful counterfeiters. Published in 1756, the narrative detailed incidents from Syllavan's childhood and later notorious life, ultimately creating a sympathetic view of the counterfeiter. Speaking in the first person, Syllavan exhibited none of the usual self-loathing expressed in earlier narratives and, in fact, seemed more proud than ashamed of his curious profession. After deciding that counterfeiting ". . . was an easy way of getting Money" and an easy way of getting away from his wife's "aggravating Tongue," Syllavan copied nearly every form of New England currency and succeeded in flooding the entire region from Maine to New York with his homemade variety. In one day alone he passed twelve thousand pounds worth of counterfeit, and at one time he had four different gangs under him distributing his bogus money. Punishment and jail not only failed to reform him, but failed even to interfere with his productivity. He wrote that ". . . during my confinement, I engraved three sorts of Plates, two of New Hampshire Money, and one of Boston currency, and for want of a Rolling Press, struck it off by Hand, signed it in Gaol and gave it out by Quantities to my Accomplices."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the admirable qualities of courage and cleverness, Syllavan also personified the positive trait of loyalty. After the wife of one of his accomplices was arrested, he told her to save herself by turning him in and swearing she had unknowingly received the money from him. When the rest of his gang was arrested, he told them the same thing and even offered to trade his freedom for theirs. He stated, "I was brought to Examination and pleaded Guilty, and said those People [meaning his accomplices] that were in Gaol I had cheated in Trading, I had hid about four thousand Pounds which the Authority demanded of me; I told them I would not deliver the money till they would deliver, and Discharge the Innocent now Confined" (p. 10).

Syllavan did not fit the fall, repentance, humiliation and redemption



pattern. After escaping to New York and his final arrest there, he refused to fully confess and incriminate his accomplices. He wrote: "All my Accomplices deserved the Gallows, as well as myself; but I will not betray them, or be guilty of shedding their Blood." This defiance continued up to the last moment of his life. Although telling the spectators at his execution to ". . . take warning with me, and look out for the King of Terrors," he turned to the sheriff and stated ". . . that he was not willing to die." His final warning was not for children to obey their parents, but a warning for his accomplices to ". . . burn and destroy all the Money, Plates, and Accoutrements, that they have by them, and that they may not die on a tree as I do." Syllavan even referred to his execution as murder: ". . . don't pull the Rope so tight," he advised his executioner, "it is hard for a Man to die in Cold Blood" (p. 12).

The narratives of Frazier and Syllavan, as well as many from this middle period, exhibited an ambivalence towards criminals. They were ultimately executed, but not before sympathy was aroused for them. Consequently, they appeared neither completely despicable nor admirable. According to one critic, "the criminal's cardinal sin is individualism" and his "crucial act is to forget or defy those principles of external limitation and to insist on his right to what Providence has denied him."<sup>19</sup> Although the criminal's defiance of Providence and authority made his life a fascinating subject, such defiance threatened the very structure of society and could not be allowed. Throughout the first two stages of narrative development crime was punished, and the criminal's execution reaffirmed the values he first defied. Ultimately, "the criminal's individualism is declared an illusion, his triumph over Providence merely and ironically a capitulation to Satan."<sup>20</sup> This was especially apparent in the first stage of narrative development, when ministers manipulated the subject matter to fit traditional Christian patterns, but began to lessen in the second, resulting in the reversal of the sacred and secular functions and the ambivalence towards the criminals.

Individualism, in short, was becoming more popular. Refusing to accept the limitations placed upon them by either a Calvinist God or an English King, Americans exhibited a far greater willingness to pursue their own interests. Individuals worried more about material progress in this world rather than spiritual progress in the next. By the end of the eighteenth century, particularly after the Revolution, freedom, including personal freedom, took on greater importance. Self-determination, self-reliance and self-initiative became socially celebrated ideals. Defiance of authority became pervasive, almost institutionalized. The third stage of narrative development was characterized by the appearance of rogues who mirrored these ideals, sometimes as epitome, sometimes as parody, often as both.

The literary evolution was carried to its natural completion. Tendencies begun earlier were further developed. The use of sensational material, for example, became more common. America's first criminal magazine, *The American Bloody Register*, appeared in 1784, complete with illustrations

and advertisements for coming issues.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, single narratives achieved structural completeness, and consequently, a far greater realism than earlier narratives. Story and character were neither denied, as in the early confessions, nor given in rough outline, as in the narratives from the middle period. The first full length rogue narratives appeared by the end of the century in which both story and character were fully developed. There was a greater use of setting, detail and dialogue. Incidents were no longer isolated but described at length as episodes in a larger chain of events. The most obvious change, however, was that certain clever rogues escaped the noose, no longer providing the same kind of negative example as their more desperate predecessors. For the first time the doctrine of inevitable judgment was challenged. Instead of regretting their defiance, these rogues celebrated it.

The first full length rogue narrative, *The Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs*, published in 1798, was a huge success. During the next half century, this narrative was published nearly thirty times in fourteen different cities, becoming an early best seller. It became so popular, in fact, that it attracted a number of imitators. Part of the reason for this success was that Burroughs was indeed notorious throughout New England. The son of a respected clergyman, Burroughs preferred roguery to divinity as a youth, earning the reputation as “the worst boy in town.” Throughout his long life he was never able to escape his reputation, although at times he attempted to hide from it by posing as a preacher or a school teacher. In 1785 he was arrested and jailed for passing counterfeit money. After his release and after an attempt at respectability, he was again arrested in 1790 on three charges of rape, charges which later were reduced to “open, gross, lewd, and lascivious conduct.” After another attempt at respectability and a series of travels, Burroughs journeyed to Canada where he “commenced business” as a counterfeiter. Throughout the early nineteenth century both his money and his notorious reputation were still in circulation.<sup>22</sup>

The narrative differed from previous narratives not only because of its greater length and structural development, but also because Burroughs made little pretense of moral instruction. Supposedly responding to a friend’s request for his life story, he attempted verisimilitude through a series of autobiographical, episodic letters, incorporating techniques of earlier English writers of rogue narratives. Although admitting that his life “has been one continued course of tumult, revolution, and vexation,” he was unwilling to blame himself, fate or the will of God and was quick to accuse his enemies. In many ways the narrative can be read as the author’s attempt to vindicate himself. Burroughs claimed that so many distorted and unfair stories were told about him that he wrote his narrative in order to defend himself against slander and to tell the true facts of his life.<sup>23</sup>

The first section was the best from a literary standpoint and was filled with tales of his practical jokes and exploits, ranging from stealing bee hives to stealing a handful of sermons from his father. Some of the best stories included his year at Dartmouth, where his “thirst for amusement”

was greater than his thirst for knowledge, and his six-month tenure as a Presbyterian minister in a small town where he preached the stolen sermons. One of the most amusing scenes occurred when his congregation discovered that their pious Pastor Davis was neither Pastor nor Davis and in no way pious. They chased Burroughs through fields and towns until finally cornering him in the hayloft of a barn. There, armed with a pitchfork and an aroused sense of indignation, Burroughs held them off while he delivered his last, rather satiric sermon.<sup>24</sup>

In 1807 *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels and Sufferings of Henry Tufts* was published. Unlike Burroughs, Tufts neither attacked nor vindicated in his narrative. With the help of a ghost writer, he narrated a history of his life as a rogue—a life devoted to theft, burglary, horse stealing, swindling, jail breaking, counterfeiting and seducing women. Although he assumed the role of penitent rogue who offered his life as an example to help others avoid “those quicksands of vice, on which I have been so often wrecked,” his remorse was clearly more convention than conviction, and his role as a penitent merely another imposture in a long series of deceptions. In addition to posing as a penitent, Tufts had previously assumed the roles of a doctor, a preacher, a wizard, a gentleman, a soldier and even as Satan.<sup>25</sup> Tufts seemed actually fond of recounting the many incidents in which he took advantage of his fellow man and his fellow woman. The book was far too enjoyable (and often comic) to warn anyone, and Tufts was not particularly contrite in the end. Although he vowed never to steal again, his vow did not stop him from stealing away with a neighbor’s young but lusty daughter. And his final retirement appeared to come about more as the inevitable result of growing old than the result of a sincere change of heart.

Tufts began his career as a rogue at an early age. As a youth, he organized midnight raids on neighboring gardens, stole money from a neighbor’s house and seduced a girl by promising her marriage—a promise he had not the slightest intention of keeping. At the age of twenty-one he stole his father’s horse and ran away, beginning his long career. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an admirer of Tufts, stated that Tufts’ “system of living reached a singular perfection.”<sup>26</sup> Whenever Tufts needed something, food, clothing or luxury, he managed to steal it. Once, when he needed new underwear, he stole a pulpit cushion out of a church. After selling the feathers, he made a fine pair of underpants out of the soft green velvet. According to Higginson, his favorite pastime, horse stealing, “rose to the dignity of a fine art.”<sup>27</sup> His narrative contained over fifty separate incidents of horse theft, and Tufts seemed proud of them all. Once, after disguising a stolen horse with a little paint, he rode along with the owner looking for himself and the horse he was riding. Another time a man foolishly boasted that his prize horse was guarded and could not be stolen; Tufts could not resist the challenge and, with the help of a little rum and opium, soon rode away. But it was his ability to change roles that made Tufts more of an American rogue. Seizing every opportunity which came his way, and claiming the freedom to do as he pleased, he became whatever

he wanted to be. He changed identity as often as he did horses and wives. Medicine, religion, theft, seduction, counterfeiting, swindling and storytelling were all practiced with equal ease and equal success.

The popularity of Burroughs and Tufts attracted imitators. Although murderers, pirates and highwaymen continued to narrate their sensational tales, a new type of criminal character began to appear with greater frequency. Relying on cleverness more than force, and motivated more by profits than by passion, these rogues defied whatever law or authority which obstructed their pursuit of self-interest. In 1809 *The Life of John Southack* appeared, followed by *The Confession and Narrative of David Lewis* in 1820 and *The Journal of John Howe* in 1827. In 1837 *The Narrative of the Life of James Allen* was published, and in 1843 *The Life and Adventures of Seth Wyman* appeared. Soon after three more rogue narratives were published: *The Life of Appleton R. Bailey* in 1845, the *Life, Adventures, and Opinions of David Theodore Hine* in 1849 and the *Sketches of the Life of William Stuart* in 1854. Throughout all of these narratives the influence of Burroughs and Tufts was obvious. John Howe, for example, changed roles and loyalties as much as Tufts. In a short period he was a spy for the British army, a soldier in the American army, a fur trapper, an Indian preacher, a spy for the American army and finally a smuggler (a role which allowed him to invent further deceptions).<sup>28</sup> William Stuart, or rather his ghost writer, knew Burroughs and Tufts well enough to borrow specific scenes with only minor changes.<sup>29</sup>

These narratives shared further similarities. They all had certain characteristics of the English criminal biography and the European picaresque. All were full length, first person, episodic narratives depicting the underside of society in a realistic manner. The protagonists were all rogues, who, in spite of their unlawful adventures, aroused reader sympathy. They were outsiders, existing apart from the social structure, either by choice or by fate, and consequently were beyond the boundaries marked by laws and customs. Without being hypocritical, they were able to justify their deceptions and dishonesty. Tufts, for example, claimed that he was forced to become a thief because he received neither education, vocation, nor inheritance from his father. He was—as he would like us to believe—therefore justified in stealing his father's horse. In short, these rogues created their own set of values, their own sense of justice.

By nature restless and ambitious, they were unable to remain in either one role or in one place for very long. They were individualistic, opportunistic, self-reliant, defiant of authority and entirely free. Their radical freedom allowed them to wander throughout society, both vertically and horizontally, which in turn allowed them to discover that society itself was made up of false appearances. David Lewis, for example, after observing the corrupt activities of several New York state politicians, felt justified in continuing his own criminal pursuits. He exclaimed:

When I perceived that men in high stations HAD BEEN GUILTY OF DIVERS EVIL DOINGS, AND INSTEAD OF MEETING WITH PUNISHMENT, were loaded with "honors, and received rewards and applauses, and power and dominion, and office, and influence,

*and patronage,*” the reflection had an unhappy effect in extinguishing every remorse of conscience, and reconciling me more and more to the vicious course of life in which I was then engaged.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, William Stuart, after being cheated by a hypocritical parson, was led to believe that his roguery was merely a reflection of the general corruption in society. He wrote:

Wherefore then the iniquity of illegalized roguery? The race is corrupt, the heart is loathsome, then why not I make the most out of this world, in a way I choose to adopt? Why may not every man contrive his own plans, and execute them unmolested in his own way? What are human rights? What better is honesty than crime, so long as oppression is allowed to the few, to lord it over the many?<sup>31</sup>

Such discoveries led them to cultivate the art of deception, and, according to their own logic, they were ultimately more honest because they accepted their dishonesty. Their ability to change roles and identities was not only a response to the corruption of society, but also a sign of their freedom. In the pursuit of their own interests, all restrictions were cast aside.

Rogues were universal figures, but in post-Revolutionary America they became favorite subjects, appearing often in print. In a new nation in a New World, they represented new possibilities for the individual. Living in a competitive society where money had replaced the traditional bonds among people, they quickly embraced the profit motive and accepted the vision of the self-made man. While suspicious of society, they were confident in themselves, believing that their abilities were sufficient to overcome all obstacles they encountered. Overall, they did not attempt to change society, preferring merely to survive in it without either great restriction or exertion. But by itself survival was no challenge, and these rogues continually risked their cherished freedom in order to make their conflicts into contests. In playing themselves against society, they were adaptable, resourceful and, at times, creative.

But we should not admire them too much, else we fall victim to another one of their deceits. While they were not the sacred examples of divine retribution as their predecessors were, they were, nevertheless, secular examples of the excesses caused by radical and predatory individualism. They were indeed both epitome and parody of the free, self-reliant individual living in a democracy. In a new nation which itself had broken with the past, changed roles and defied authority, their exploits could be appreciated. In a new nation which itself feared the same freedom it celebrated, these rogues were simultaneously condemned and celebrated for the same actions, the same defiant values.

Although not chronologically exact, the evolution of the rogue narrative took place in three stages: the early execution sermons and final confessions, the incomplete narratives of life and, finally, the full-length rogue narrative. This was a movement from fact to fiction, from the possibility of a story, to a partial story, to a full story. And this was a

movement demanded by readers. The hunger of the imagination was irrepressible; the desire for tales of extraordinary experience had to be satisfied. The conflict between the individual and society, so central to the American imagination, quickly became a popular literary genre. What Puritan ministers began in order to strengthen their arguments soon escaped them. Instead of promoting obedience, they encouraged defiance.

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## notes

Early American criminal literature, and generally all of American criminal literature, has been long neglected by scholars as an area for serious study. No comprehensive study has been made of the origin and development of criminal narratives in America. Access to primary material is severely limited to the Early American Imprint Series (Readex) and to the rare book rooms of major libraries. Ola Elizabeth Winslow's *American Broadside Verse* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1930), however, includes a chapter on "Dying Confessions and Warnings Against Crime."

An invaluable study is Ronald A. Bosco's "Early American Gallows Literature: An Annotated Checklist" (*Resources for American Literary Study*, 8, 1978). Professor Bosco's study lists material from beginnings to 1800 and provides an excellent starting point for anyone interested in the area. Equally valuable are Louis Kaplan's *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1961), which indexes criminal autobiographies, and Thomas M. McDade's *The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961).

While no comprehensive study has been attempted, four articles must be mentioned. Concerning execution sermons, Professor Bosco's "Lectures at the Pillory: The Early American Execution Sermon" (*American Quarterly*, 30, 1978) provides an excellent survey of the significance and function of the execution sermon. Also concerning the execution sermon and equally valuable are Wayne C. Minnick's "The New England Execution Sermon" (*Speech Monographs*, 35, 1968) and Walter Lazenby's "Exhortation As Exorcism: Cotton Mather's Sermons to Murderers" (*Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57, 1971). Limited to narratives concerning Blacks, Richard Slotkin's "Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800" (*American Quarterly*, 25, 1973) offers a valuable analysis of the Puritan reaction to criminals.

Work in the nineteenth century is also incomplete. H. Bruce Franklin's *The Victim as Criminal and Artist, Literature from American Prisons* (New York, 1978) is the only systematic study which addresses progressive development. This valuable, although polemical, study treats a wide range of material and includes a helpful bibliography. Dealing with the taking of life, David Brion Davis's *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860* (Ithaca, New York, 1957) treats several narratives in addition to a wide range of sentimental novels and also includes a good bibliography. The most significant work to appear in the nineteenth century is Gary Lindberg's provocative *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York, 1982). Although limited to later, more sophisticated versions of the rogue, Professor Lindberg's study is an excellent examination of the American fascination with roguery.

Three regional studies should be mentioned. Edwin Power's *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts, 1620-1692: A Documentary History* (Boston, 1966) is an excellent analysis of the development of Puritan law and comments on several narratives. Douglas Greenberg's *Crime and Law Enforcement in the Colony of New York, 1691-1776* (Ithaca, New York, 1976) discusses several New York narratives and includes a helpful bibliography. Similarly, R. O. Bethke's "Chapbook 'Gallows Literature' in Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania" (*Pennsylvania Folklife*, 20, 1970) comments on several narratives.

1. Cotton Mather, *Pillars of Salt* (Boston, 1699).
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. Wayne C. Minnick, "The New England Execution Sermon," *Speech Monographs*, 35 (1968), 80.
4. Walter Lazenby, "Exhortation as Exorcism: Cotton Mather's Sermon to Murderers," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57 (1971), 51.
5. Cotton Mather, *Diary*, Volume 7, *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, Seventh Series (Boston, 1911-1912), 279.

6. Increase Mather, "To The Reader," *The Wicked Mans Portion* (Boston, 1675); Increase Mather, "To The Reader," *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder* (Boston, 1686).
7. Minnick, 83.
8. Thomas Foxcroft, *Lessons of Caution to Young Sinners* (Boston, 1733), ii.
9. Cotton Mather, *The Valley of Hinnom* (Boston, 1717). For Mather's comments, see *Diary*, VIII, 462.
10. Cotton Mather, *The Sad Effects of Sin* (Boston, 1713).
11. Sylvanus Conant, *The Blood of Abel and the Blood of Jesus Considered and Improved* (Boston, 1765), 20.
12. Lazenby, 51.
13. John Campbell, *After Souls by Death are Separated from Their Bodies* (Boston, 1738), 34.
14. Increase Mather, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder*, ii.
15. Foxcroft, 71.
16. Isaac Frazier, *A Brief Account of the Life and Abominable Thefts of the Notorious Isaac Frazier, Under Sentence of Death* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1768), 6.
17. *Ibid.*, 16.
18. Owen Syllavan, *Narrative of the Wicked Life and Surprising Adventures of that Notorious Money Maker and Cheat, Owen Syllavan* (Boston, 1756), 8.
19. John Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson* (Oxford, 1969), 34.
20. *Ibid.*, 53.
21. *The American Bloody Register, Containing the History of the Lives, Last Words and Dying Confessions of Three Most Noted Criminals* (Boston, 1783).
22. Stephen Burroughs, *Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs* (New York, 1924). This edition, accompanied by an introduction by Robert Frost, is a reprint of the 1811 Albany edition but includes prefaces, appendices and supplements from later editions. Burrough's narrative was published twenty-six times in the nineteenth century.
23. *Ibid.*, 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 23-29, 49-74.
25. Henry Tufts, *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels, and Sufferings of Henry Tufts* (Dover, New Hampshire, 1807).
26. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "A New England Vagabond," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 76 (1888), 606.
27. *Ibid.*, 606.
28. John Howe, *Journal Kept by Mr. John Howe* (Concord, New Hampshire, 1827).
29. William Stuart, *Sketches of the Life of William Stuart* (Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1854).
30. David Lewis, *The Confession and Narrative of David Lewis* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1820), 15.
31. Stuart, 18.