HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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P.T. Barnum (1810-1891)

from *The Life of P.T. Barnum and Struggles and Triumphs*

P(hineas) T(aylor) Barnum is crucial to the history of American autobiography, both for what he wrote and for what he did to establish enduring popular attitudes towards truth and deception, self-advertisement and commerce, and other values surrounding it. One of the great national tricksters, he helped define appearance and reality in America.

On the simplest level, his life is a success story. Born in the little town of Bethel, Connecticut, in 1810, he rose from being a clerk in the country stores to being the owner of "Barnum's American Museum" in the New York City, to being the greatest impresario of his time (ushering Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale," on her famous 1850-52 tour), and to being co-owner of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. But where Benjamin Franklin somewhat deceptively attributed his success to virtue and industry, Barnum, in The Life of P.T. Barnum (1855) virtuously attributed his to deception. Half rogue that he was, he realized (as had Stephen Burroughs and as would later tricksters like Richard Nixon) that a rogue admitting his tricks is taken as a sinner repenting-he is believed. Or if he is not, he is still discussed, and as a great showman, Barnum watched the crowds come.

But there are still deeper levels to Barnum's understanding of the American psyche and the American public's responses to him. At a time when Americans were very eager to gain refinement and education, as expressed in appreciation of are and nature, Barnum still recognized their insecurities and their need for relaxation and fun. Thus he made his American Museum an attractive palace where wonders and curiosities of all kinds were assembled: in his words, "educated dogs, industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gipsies, Albinos, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, live "Yankees," pantomime…models of Niagara…fancy glass-blowing, knitting machines and other triumphs of the mechanical arts…" In such a collection, the popular issue, as Neil Harris has written, came to be "an aesthetic of the operational, a delight in observing process and examining for literal truch."[1] Visitors did not have to think about beauty or taste or spirituality, values with which they felt uncertain. Instead, they focused just on the facts and the problems of truth—where a freak came from, how a machine worked, whether something was fake or genuine.

The consequence in Barnum's autobiography is a similarly overwhelming flood of anecdotes, giving the story of each curiosity and wonder, and a confession of how it was found, authenticated (or not), and publicized. The Fejee Mermaid story is an example. But as the story of the great Hoboken Buffalo Hunt illustrates, audiences also came to like Barnum's tricks. Being able to shout that the hunt "was the biggest humbug you ever heard of!" was part of the pleasure. Barnum was likewise quite willing and proud to reveal several days later that he had made his money by chartering the ferry boats. It won him further respect (and publicity) and gave those who told the story the thrill of feeling in the know. All the while, as perhaps the first story of Ivy Island best demonstrates, there is an important moral lesson to be learned from having been deceived, or from having believed inflated promises, from having false hopes, and then seeing the modest truth. The boy-innocent finds he is not rich and privileged but like everyone else.

In 1869, Barnum published a second version of his autobiography, Struggles and Triumphs, which did not paint himself as quite such a confidence man- and interesting difference. Adding chapter after chapter, he republished it so many times that one scholar has estimated that after the Bible, Barnum's autobiography was the most widely read book in America. Copies were given away free with circus tickets, as if the book was a part of, or the background to, the circus. Thus did Barnum further contribute to the popular expectation (a mainstay of autobiography) that behind every appearance is a reality in the form of yet another personal story.

Copies of the 1855 Life are rare. This text is taken from the reprint, Barnum's Own Story, edited by Waldo R. Browne (New York: Dover Publications, 1961). Which also contains the material from Struggles and Triumphs. For biography and criticism, see G Thomas Couser, Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 52-69; and Neil Harris, Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973). 1…Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum (*Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 79.

Reading

The Life of P.T. Barnum
http://archive.org/details/lifeofptbarnum00barn