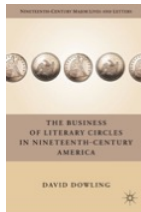




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## THE BUSINESS OF LITERARY CIRCLES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA



By **David Dowling**  
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) vi + 296 pp.  
Reviewed by **Paul Erickson** on 2011-11-03.

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A circle is one of the simplest shapes in Euclidian geometry. As a curve on which all points are equidistant from a center, a circle divides space into an interior and an exterior. Literary circles are often thought to work in much the same way, dividing those within a group from those who are most definitely out. Stressing the exclusiveness of literary circles in nineteenth-century America, David Dowling argues that its coteries "made every effort to assemble a unique collective identity to distinguish themselves from, and often in direct opposition to, others in the literary market" (Dowling, 2). As Dowling defines it, the literary circle of nineteenth-century America was not so much an island of culture in a sea of commerce as a collective trader in the marketplace. Instead of highlighting the impact of the circle on individual writers, therefore, Dowling treats it as "a social matrix of literary production and promotion and thus an aesthetic point of reference for its authors (contributing to its group identity) and [a] marketing tool" (231, n. 11). Building on his previous study of literary patronage (*Capital Letters: Authorship in the Antebellum Literary Market* [2009]), Dowling seeks to show how literary circles mixed "self-promotional free market capitalism and collaborative mutual aid with a socialistic bent borne out not only in their business practice, but also as major rhetorical tropes that informed their writings" (4). Surprisingly enough, Dowling later contends that literary circles were proto-socialist institutions. Unfortunately, however, he does not explore the alluring possibility that the structure and business practice of nineteenth-century literary circles may have wound themselves into the tropes of individual authors' works.

In both his brief introduction and a longer introductory first chapter, Dowling draws heavily on Leon Jackson's excellent study of literary production (*The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* [Stanford, 2008]) to set the stage for his argument that coteries helped authors succeed in the literary marketplace. "[I]nternal relationships among authors," Dowling writes, "impacted the external linking opportunities they sought in the broader market" (10). Drawing not only on Jackson's book but also on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of **social capital**, Chapter 1 perhaps overstates what coteries did to brand the works of their authors. Caught up in "the race for readers" and warily eyeing members of rival coteries at New York literary parties--Sharks and Jets in black frock coats, pens at the ready--coterie members are said to have flaunted their affiliation like a brand, with the name of a coterie "[becoming] a commodity itself circulating in the marketplace..." (16, 20). According to Dowling, then, literary circles sprang not merely from shared interests, or from a common desire to write for a sympathetic audience, but rather from the explicitly economic urge to find a market for particular kinds of writing. Even the Transcendentalists, we are told, closed ranks "out of resistance to capitalism" (23).

The body of the book is divided into three parts, with a pair of chapters in each. Part I, "Literary New Yorkers," juxtaposes Washington Irving's early-nineteenth-century Knickerbocker set with the staff writers (including Sylvanus Cobb, Fanny Fern, and E.D.E.N. Southworth) who wrote for Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger*--a weekly story paper--in the 1850s and 60s. Turning to New England, Part II ranges from Ralph Waldo Emerson's central place in the Transcendentalist literary circle of 1840s Concord and Boston to the work of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who belonged for a time to Emerson's circle, who ran a literary salon and bookstore in Boston in the 1830s and 40s, and who also edited various publications. (Having introduced the kindergarten to America, Peabody is better known as an educator as well as sister-in-law to famous men: her younger sisters Mary and Sophia married Horace Mann and Nathaniel Hawthorne, respectively.) In comparing Emerson and Peabody, Dowling contrasts Emerson's writing and lecturing with Peabody's editing and facilitating.

Part III contrasts North and South in terms of slavery. After first inspecting William Lloyd Garrison's stable of abolitionist writers, who worked with and fell away from his radical newspaper *The Liberator* (with an extended section on Lydia Maria Child), it then examines George Fitzhugh--an ardent apologist for slavery--and several other writers associated with *DeBow's Review*, a newspaper of commerce and politics published in New Orleans from 1846 until the 1880s. The book ends with a somewhat breathless conclusion. Leaping into the twentieth century, Dowling briefly applies his literary-circle approach to clubs seeded by the work of the utopian novelist Edward Bellamy, to the Objectivist circle formed by acolytes of Ayn Rand, and--coming home to his own institution, the University of Iowa-- to the graduate program in creative writing known as the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Several of the chapters glance at groups of writers or literary institutions that scholars have up to now largely ignored. Though little known today, Robert Bonner, editor of the *New York Ledger*, transformed the market for periodical writing in the antebellum United States, and his advertising practices were groundbreaking. Dowling offers valuable insights on Bonner as well as on Fitzhugh and *DeBow's Review*, the newspaper that published most of his writing. While Fitzhugh's

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strident defenses of slaveholding have earned him substantial infamy, the newspaper and its proprietor have been insufficiently studied, so Dowling's examination of them here is welcome.

The overall argument of the book, however, is weakened by a few conceptual problems that are never fully resolved. Perhaps most importantly, Dowling never clearly defines the phenomenon of the literary circle and applies the phrase to quite different kinds of writing groups.

On one hand, the Knickerbocker circle and its earlier incarnation, "The Lads of Kilkenny," each exemplify what literary scholars generally consider a literary circle. Washington Irving, his brother William, and their friends James Kirke Paulding, Henry Brevoort, Gouverneur Kemble, and Evert Duyckinck met each other socially, read one another's writing, co-authored works such as *Salmagundi*, promoted each other's careers, and formed a journal, the *Knickerbocker*, to offer a venue for their literary output. In thus collaborating, these groups of writers did what Dowling calls the "most primary work" of a literary circle, which is to find and hone materials, "using the circle as a testing and training ground to develop aesthetic technique." Its second function is to "provide a group name preparing the individual author's entry into the market," thereby branding not just a literary genre but a lifestyle, such as the leisured urbanity on display in Irving's *Sketch-Book* (25).

But unlike the informal collaborators of the Knickerbocker circle, the writers for the *New York Ledger* all worked for one man, Robert Bonner. There is little evidence that they met socially, read each other's work, or commented on it, and since they lived in different places, they may not even have known each other personally; Dowling offers no evidence that they did. Can a group of writers working for a single publisher who is the sole arbiter of what he prints count as a collaborative literary "circle"? This question applies not only to Bonner's staff, but also to the writers who worked for two other newspapers examined here: Garrison's *Liberator* and James DeBow's *Review*. It is one thing to consider how the Knickerbocker circle or the Transcendentalists addressed the literary market, and quite another to see how writers for a particular newspaper addressed its readers. If, as Dowling contends, authors found their audiences "through an attitude, often struck as a kind of theatrical performative pose, toward market conditions," was this equally true of independent authors and hired hands?

Dowling seems to finesse this question. Toward the end of the book, he radically redefines the notion of a literary circle by making it simply regional. While applying it to the "diverse range of authors" nominally influenced by "DeBow's circle," he really means writers influenced by just one member of it, George Fitzhugh. In light of this influence, he says, "the notion of a literary circle should be reconsidered in the case of the antebellum South" (200). "The South" then becomes a vast literary circle of writers from as far afield as Georgia and South Carolina (including Harrison Berry, the African-American author of a proslavery slave narrative), who most certainly never met James DeBow, George Holmes, or George Fitzhugh. While such a notion would have exemplified Fitzhugh's vision of an economically integrated South operating in mutual cooperation, it drains all explanatory power from the idea of a "literary circle."

On the whole, the book is better at describing than comparing. It is quite compelling and useful in its set-piece profiles, particularly those of the Knickerbockers' literary agent Henry Brevoort, the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, the publisher Robert Bonner, and Margaret Fuller in her less familiar roles of editor and saloniste. Yet many of Dowling's comparisons are simply ineffective. It is difficult to see what can be gleaned from examining the "market attitudes" of publications as different as Peabody's journal *Aesthetic Papers*, which lasted for only one issue; the Transcendentalist *Dial*, which had slightly more than 200 subscribers in 1842; the *Liberator*, which never had more than 3000 subscribers yet was distributed nationally and viewed as the mouthpiece of a movement; and the *New York Ledger*, which in the late 1860s had close to 400,000 subscribers. Dowling occasionally suggests that figures such as Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody, Bonner, and DeBow-- however different-- all served as intermediaries in the world of print; but his comparisons of them never become compelling. And at times his efforts to generalize about the workings of various literary "circles" become strained. Treating groups such as the Transcendentalists and the radical abolitionists as business organizations, for instance, he describes the "management style" of Emerson and Garrison (258 n14, 148). Sometimes, too, he lunges into overstatement. After saluting Bonner for his "editorial innovation, imagination, sympathy, and crusading capitalism"--the perfect boss--Dowling describes Elizabeth Palmer Peabody as "a titan of the New England literary marketplace" (70, 144).

The book is also marred by a surprising number of factual errors and misstatements, along with a good deal of prose that crosses the line of academic inelegance into obfuscation, trying a reader's patience. It is disappointing to find that a book on the mechanics of publishing and literary production seems not to have been proofread at all (though this may have been out of the author's hands). Proper names are frequently misspelled, financial figures are fuzzy, and many dates are unreliable. Robert Bonner, here described as an owner of "multimillion dollar horses" (65), paid \$35,000 for the record-setting trotter Dexter in 1867. Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* (1887) is said to have been first published in 1867 (183)--a difference that matters in the history of American socialism. If William Ellery Channing's arguments in his 1836 book *Slavery* had actually been "fueled by the elements of the Social Gospel forwarded by such figures as Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch," (132), it was a neat trick, since Rauschenbusch--who was indeed a Baptist minister--would not be born until 1861.

Dowling's conclusion adds more confusion. When he describes his employer, the University of Iowa, as "the first major university to award a doctoral degree to an African American in the United States" (216), he ignores the examples of Edward Bouchet (Ph.D., Yale, 1876) and W. E. B. DuBois (Ph.D., Harvard, 1895), among many others. (A footnote explains that Iowa was the first university to give a Ph.D. in political science to an African-American woman, in 1954--a noteworthy event, but not really the same thing.) More germane to the book's argument, Dowling writes, "Not only proslavery writers but also most literary circles in this book anticipate the Bellamy Club's Gilded Age antimaterialism that eventually took on potent political dimensions leading to the formation of the socialist party [sic] in 1901 under Eugene V. Debs" (206). In the few paragraphs that include this quite glaring misrepresentation of Gilded Age politics, Dowling conflates the "Populist Party" with Bellamy's Nationalist movement, the Socialist Party (208-9). Still more confusing is the notion that by its collaborative approach to the literary marketplace, the Knickerbocker circle somehow engendered the Socialist Party of America.

This book seems to have been rushed into print. While all of us know the pressure to publish exercised by the current academic job system, this book needed more time in the oven. More thoughtful consideration of its conceptual framework as well as more careful attention to its various details--especially its statements of facts-- would have made this book significantly more useful to scholars of nineteenth-century literature.

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## David Dowling responds (12-15-2011)

Thanks to Paul Erickson for this review. I appreciate his comments but would like to respond to some of them.

The contention that I have set up the literary circles as rivals like so many Jets and Sharks, "pens at the ready" (great image by the way!), flattens out into a ridiculous cartoon an extremely complex and nuanced argument based on research that began at the American Antiquarian Society, now directed by Erickson, in 1994 (the dissertation based on this research was completed the following year). He also claims that I describe literary circles simply in terms of geography and rivalry. But I take great pains to show that the work of Knickerbockers appeared in the pages of Bonner's *Ledger* and that along with competition there was mutual exchange and collaboration, as showcased in the Anne C. Lynch parties.

As for the allegation that I set up a lineage of literary circles in which "the Knickerbocker circle somehow engendered the Socialist Party of America," I was attempting no such thing, nor have many critics since Van Wyck Brooks. I argue rather that the literary circle manifested itself in many different varieties, each distinguishing itself by means of an aesthetic orientation usually inflected by, if not explicitly driven by, an economic perspective. The point of the concluding chapter was to show that while circles such as Rand's promoted free market capitalism, others-- such as Bellamy's-- endorsed its opposite. The "invisible universities" of the antebellum era would eventuate in the very powerful visible ones like the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The history I sketch has no single endpoint in either socialism or capitalism.

Beyond these objections, I must say again that I appreciate Erickson's review as well as the chance to comment on it. His praise for my chapter on the Knickerbocker circle is particularly validating, as the group has garnered little critical attention for the past few decades.

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