

The Arts of
DECEPTION



LAYING WITH FRAUD IN THE AGE OF BARNUM

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Introduction

Thinking with Tricks

Wonderful, because mysterious.
—P. T. Barnum, 1865



For Phineas Taylor Barnum, show business opportunity came knocking at the door of his grocery store in late July 1835. It arrived in the shape of Mr. Coley Bartram, a fellow Connecticut Yankee with some experience in the show trade, who directed Barnum's attention to an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*. Taking the newspaper from Bartram, the twenty-five-year-old grocer began to read:

CURIOSITY—The citizens of Philadelphia and its vicinity have an opportunity of witnessing at the Masonic Hall, one of the greatest natural curiosities ever witnessed, viz., JOICE HETH, a negress aged 161 years, who formerly belonged to the father of Gen. Washington. She has been a member of the Baptist Church one hundred and sixteen years, and can rehearse many hymns, and sing them according to former custom. She was born near the old Potomac River in Virginia, and has for ninety or one hundred years lived in Paris, Kentucky, with the Bowling family.

Young Barnum had spent much of the past year searching for a foothold in the exhibition business, so Bartram's news that Heth's current



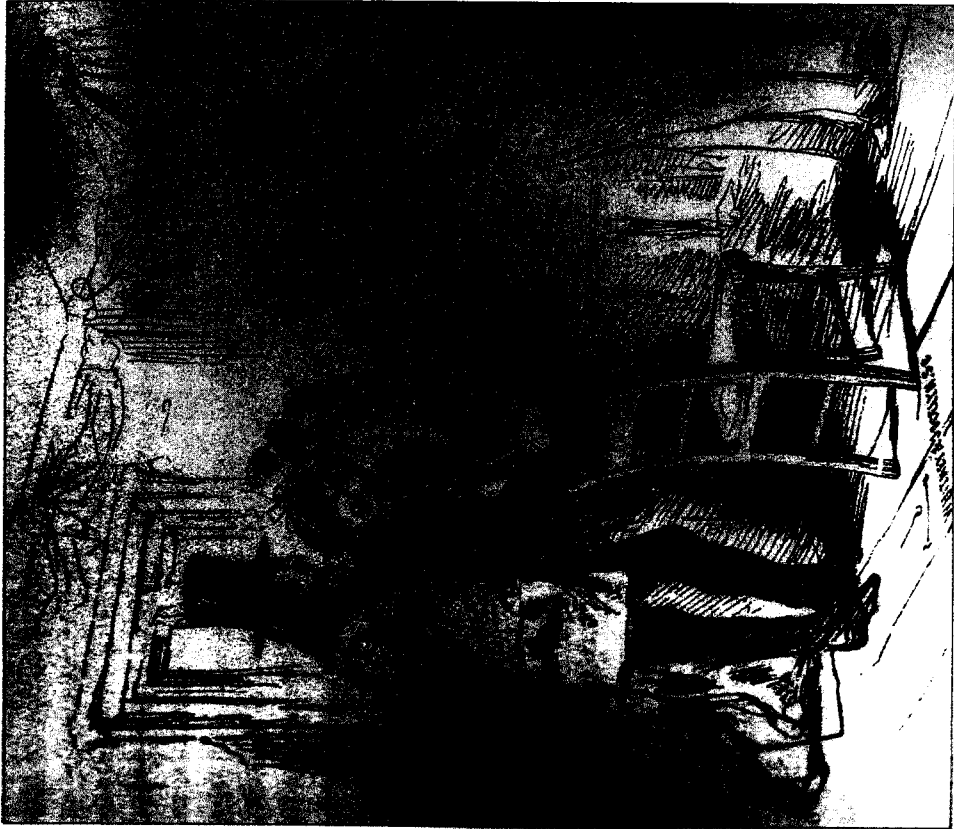
Portrait commissioned by P. T. Barnum for the 1855 edition of his autobiography. The engraving by E. Teel is from a daguerrotype by Root & Company.

managers were "anxious to sell out" struck a powerful and immediate chord. "The New York newspapers," Barnum later explained, "had already furnished descriptions of this wonderful personage, and becoming considerably excited upon the subject, I proceeded at once to Philadelphia and had an interview . . . at the Masonic Hall."¹

Traveling exhibitions such as the one Barnum discovered in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* were not especially rare. Years later Barnum

claimed that he had read about dozens of available curiosities for hire in the New York newspapers, but had decided not to pursue them—at least not in the same impulsive, drop-everything-and-go sort of way that Joice Heth inspired.² In this short paragraph from Philadelphia, however, Barnum sensed the makings of something remarkable: an exhibition which might appeal to a broad audience of consumers; a potentially lucrative exhibition which might liberate him from a series of dead-end jobs (traveling salesman, boarding house manager, grocer, etc.); an exhibition which, to Barnum's youthful eyes at least, looked so undeniably promising that it warranted the risky prospect of abandoning his partnership in the lower Manhattan grocery, draining his savings, taking out an additional loan, and traveling one hundred miles to cinch the deal. We know now that Barnum's gut instincts about Joice Heth and the American public proved to be right on target—more so, perhaps, than even he realized at the time. Indeed, if we were to pick a single moment to mark the birthdate of modern American popular culture, this just might be the one: on that fateful afternoon in July 1835, when an aspiring impresario from Bethel, Connecticut took off his grocer's apron and began to think seriously about how to market Joice Heth as a popular curiosity in New York City.³

By early August, Barnum signed a contract to exhibit Heth for ten months and booked a room in the fashionable entertainment center at Broadway and Prince Streets owned by William Niblo, one of Manhattan's leading cultural entrepreneurs at the time.⁴ The particular location of this booking linked Barnum and Heth to a major development in American cultural history: the massive expansion of commercial entertainment that was beginning to take shape on and around lower Broadway.⁵ It also connected Barnum to a particular mode of popular culture that would pervade this urban entertainment district (and others around the country like it) throughout the nineteenth century: what might be described, collectively, as *artful deception*. The large space Barnum secured for his 1835 debut, for example, had earlier been developed as a showplace for panorama paintings, a widely popular form of *trompe l'oeil* entertainment, in which material props



The Joice Heth exhibition at Boston's Concert Hall, 1835. The viewers on the left may be the "ex-congressman and his mother," from the anecdote in Barnum's autobiography. The man gesturing on the right is probably Levi Lyman.

and concealed lighting effects were positioned around minutely detailed murals to produce dazzling feats of verisimilitude. At the nearby American Museum on Broadway and Ann Streets (which Barnum would soon acquire and manage), viewers similarly paid their quarters to witness a "diorama of the dreadful fire in New York."

Appearing next door at Niblo's Gardens was the popular Monsieur Adrien, one of the first individuals to perform sleight of hand on a fashionable stage in this country. And at the recently built Masonic Hall a few doors down, there was Signor Antonio Blitz, antebellum America's most successful magician on the urban exhibition circuit, who—like Barnum—was making his New York show business debut at this very same moment.⁶

To compete for viewers within this burgeoning marketplace of playful frauds, Barnum initially chose the tried and true, adhering to the show business formula developed by Heth's former managers: a quintessentially antebellum American mixture of pseudo-scientific analysis, racist gawking, energetic patriotism, and pious musical entertainment. The show began with a brief lecture on Heth's age and physical condition delivered by Barnum's early assistant, Levi Lyman, during which viewers were encouraged to ask questions and personally examine Heth's diminutive, wrinkled body ("very much like an Egyptian mummy just escaped from the Sarcophagus," according to the *Evening Star*).⁷ Viewers also listened to detailed stories about Heth's close relationship to the nation's patriarch. "She was the slave of Augustine Washington (the father of George Washington)," Lyman explained to the crowds, "and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant"—a presentation which sought to establish Heth as the archetypal black "mammy" figure for the white Virginia boy who later became the "father of the country."⁸ To reinforce this caricature, Heth entertained viewers with anecdotes of her young master and spoke of the redcoats during the Revolutionary War, noting with proper patriotic fervor that she had not held the British forces in high esteem. And finally, as a kind of musical afterpiece, she sang numerous hymns according to eighteenth-century tradition, a performance that reportedly pleased New York's clergy and seemed to confirm Lyman's claim that Heth had been a member of the Baptist Church for over one hundred years.⁹

Barnum's New York script for the Joice Heth exhibition, in short, relied on a mutually reinforcing trio of promotional seductions: the "strangeness" of Heth's physical appearance in the eyes of Barnum's

white audiences; the presumed historical connection between Heth and the infant Washington; and the cultural credibility of Heth as a singer of Baptist hymns. Yet the effectiveness of these interwoven marketing ploys ultimately hinged upon one basic question of authenticity: was this elderly African-American woman sitting on the couch in Niblo's establishment the 161-year-old former slave promised by the showman's firestorm of advertising? Barnum pointed his New York viewers to a framed bill of sale carrying the names of both Heth and Augustine Washington. Each performance began with Lyman reading aloud from the document, to authenticate the age and the biographical details that followed.¹⁰ In his advertisements, Barnum spoke of the bill frequently:

Original, authentic and indisputable documents prove however astonishing the fact may appear, JOICE HETH is in every respect the person she is represented. The most eminent physicians and intelligent men in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York, Boston and many other places have examined this living skeleton and the documents accompanying her, and all invariably pronounce her to be as represented 161 years of age! Indeed it is impossible for any person, however incredulous, to visit her without astonishment and the most perfect satisfaction that she is as old as represented.¹¹

Within the next quarter century, Barnum would become one the most (in)famous trickster figures in Western cultural history, so it is worth noting his references here to Heth as a form of "representation"—a strangely precocious term which raised the possibility that this exhibition was simply an elaborate hoax. While the showman's advertisements asserted full public confidence in his promotional claims ("all invariably pronounce her to be as represented"), the very fact that they were described as claims (rather than as self-evident facts) suggests that Barnum may have been contemplating the possibility of transforming his debut into an overt game of popular cultural sleuthing. Or, at the very least, he may have been thinking about using the specter of fraud as yet another marketing tease to draw in additional customers.

At this very early moment in the exhibition's history, however, both the showman and his audiences seem to have been mostly content—and far more concerned—with Heth's marvelous appearance, stories, and singing. The *New York Courier and Enquirer*, for example, treated Barnum's central promotional claim for the exhibition as fascinating and unproblematic: "This old creature is said to be 161 years of age, and we see no reason to doubt it. Nobody indeed would dispute it if she claimed to be five centuries."¹² The editors at the *Spirit of the Times* seconded this pronouncement of wonder at Heth's ancient appearance, even as they declared the whole enterprise rather amusing: "The dear old lady, after carrying on a desperate flirtation with Death, has finally jilted him. In the future editions, we shall expect to see her represented as the impersonation of Time in the Primer, old Time having given her a season-ticket for life."¹³ Such wisecracks suggest a degree of awareness that the still anonymous impresario responsible for this exhibition was probably fudging the details of Heth's biography—at least a little. Most of the early New York press reviews, in fact, have a recurring tongue-in-cheek tone—a steady stream of literary nudges, winks, and nods—all of which seem to indicate that contemporary viewers understood quite well that promotional puffery was an integral part of the showman's craft. Yet no New York reviewer took serious issue with the basic tenets of Heth's biography. No earnest cry of humbug, no pointed accusation of promotional fraud surfaced in close to a dozen newspaper reviews.

Barnum's initial marketing formula—and the reception patterns it provoked—began to change, however, almost as soon as he, Lyman, and Heth hit the road. A couple of weeks later, in Providence, Rhode Island, for example, Barnum developed another facet of his star's biography. Heth, he asserted in a new round of newspaper advertisements and handbills, "has five great-grandchildren, now the slaves of Wm. Bowling, Esq. of Paris, Kentucky, to the purchase of whose freedom the proceeds of this exhibition are to be appropriated."¹⁴ How Providence's abolitionist community responded to this bogus appeal for charity remains uncertain. This was a brief marketing improvisation in a fast-moving tour, and within days Barnum's traveling show

was on the move again, heading further north to new venues and new promotional possibilities. After the exhibition had moved out of the Democratic districts of New York City into Whiggish New England and into ideological territory more supportive of manumission efforts, Barnum simply added an abolitionist drawing card to the promotional mix.

The next round of promotional tinkering came a few weeks later, when the show moved to Boston's Concert Hall. Here Lyman and Heth appeared in an exhibition room right next door to the most celebrated popular curiosity of the mid-1830s—Johann Maelzel's automaton chess-player—a wondrous mechanical figure clothed in Turkish attire, whose status as an authentic thinking machine remained a matter of intense public doubt, speculation, and debate. Heth did strong business despite this competition, so strong, in fact, that Maelzel and his automaton were soon induced to give up Concert Hall's large room to their less known rivals from Gotham.¹⁵ But when Heth's audiences finally began to decrease, Barnum decided to cultivate some tantalizing doubts of his own, surreptitiously planting newspaper stories which suggested that Maelzel's chess-playing wonder was not the only piece of mechanical *trompe l'oeil* in Boston. Joice Heth, an anonymous press notices suddenly announced, "is not a human being. What purports to be a remarkably old woman is simply a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together, and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator. The exhibitor is a ventriloquist, and all the conversations apparently held with the ancient lady are purely imaginary."¹⁶

What made Barnum's new (and seemingly counterproductive) marketing scheme innovative was its clever use of the press to play both sides of the authenticity question. In contrast to his previous assertions of public confidence in Heth, the Boston press notices now deliberately undermined the credibility of Heth's public persona, creating a new tale of managerial deceit to go along with Heth's fascinating tales about raising "dear little George." And as Barnum gleefully explained years later, the nagging uncertainty about Heth's public per-

sona—perhaps the ancient nurse of George Washington, perhaps nothing but an automaton—only added to the public's growing interest in the exhibition:

On one occasion, an ex-member of Congress, his wife, two children, and his aged mother, attended the exhibition. . . . [H]is old mother was closely scrutinizing Aunt Joice, under the immediate direction of my helpmate, Lyman.

Presently the old lady spoke up in an audible tone, and with much apparent satisfaction,

"There it is alive after all! . . ."

"Why do you think it is alive?" asked Lyman, quietly.

"Because its pulse beats as regularly as mine does," responded the old lady.

"Oh, that is the most simple portion of the machinery," said Lyman. "We make that operate on the principle of a pendulum to a clock."

"Is it possible?" said the old lady, who was now evidently satisfied that Joice was an automaton. Then turning to her son, she said: "George, this thing is not alive at all. It is all a machine."

"Why mother," said the son with evident embarrassment, "what are you talking about?"

A half-suppressed giggle ran through the room and the gentleman and his family soon withdrew.¹⁷

This passage from the first edition of Barnum's autobiography serves as a kind of primer on the nineteenth-century arts of deception. All of Barnum's early show business tricks are in play here: the deadpan denials from Lyman, which invited as much doubt as they dispelled; the suggestion that the deliberate act of promotional fraud was nothing more than good, clean Yankee fun; and the artful repositioning of the Boston audience from the role of observers to observed, looking and laughing here not only at Heth but at each other. Barnum's signature move, however, was the invitation to the Boston public to push beyond his contradictory claims in the papers, to inspect Heth themselves for evidence of imposture. With each self-directed accusation of fraud in the papers—each coy denial delivered by Lyman to the viewers—Barnum was beginning to transform the Joice Heth exhibition from a plausible work of realism into a far more slippery form of

illusionism, one which interwove seemingly **straight biographical** information with provocative public encouragements to inspect this very same information for evidence of artificial manufacture.

Over the next few months Barnum's exhibition continued in this ambiguous mode, moving through towns and cities in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, until its elderly star (no doubt weary from such strenuous touring!) became ill and eventually died in February 1836. Even at this juncture, though, the young showman-on-the-make saw further possibilities for "exciting curiosity" and quickly assembled the most morbid spectacle of his entire career: a public autopsy of Heth's corpse to determine her true age before an audience of New York's "physicians, students, and several clergymen and editors"—fifty cents' admission charged at the door. The verdict of the New York doctors, Barnum confessed later, was unequivocal: "there was surely some mistake in regard to the alleged age of Joice; that instead of being 161 years old, she was probably not over eighty."¹⁸

Yet for months after the public autopsy, the whirlwind of controversy surrounding the Joice Heth exhibition continued to blow; or rather, Barnum, Lyman, and the New York press refused to let it die down. Richard Adams Locke, author of the so-called Moon Hoax (which had falsely celebrated the telescopic discovery of lunar creatures on the front page of the *New York Sun*), initiated the post-mortem discussions by describing Barnum's show business debut as "one of the most precious humbugs that ever was imposed upon a credulous community."¹⁹ The Barnum camp, in turn, responded to Locke's accusations by leaking an entirely bogus exposé of the Heth autopsy to the unsuspecting editor of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, who took the manufactured bait hook, line, and sinker. "Joice Heth," Bennett excitedly wrote in February 1836,

is not dead. On Wednesday last, as we learn from the best authority, she was living at Hebron, in Connecticut. . . . The subject on which Doctor Rodgers and the Medical Faculty of Barclay street have been exercising

their knife and their ingenuity, is the remains of a respectable old negress called AUNT NELLY, who has lived many years in a small house by herself, in Harlem, belonging to Mr. Clarke. She is, as Dr. Rodgers sagely discovers, and Doctor Locke his colleague accurately records, only eighty years of age. Aunt Nelly before her death complained of old age and infirmity. She was otherwise in good spirits. The recent winter, however, has been very severe, and so she gave up the ghost a few days ago.²⁰

This remarkably effective confidence game at the expense of one of the nineteenth century's leading editors marked the end of the Joice Heth exhibition as a topic of current affairs. But it hardly represented the final word on the exhibition's broader historical legacy. Bennett, certainly, never forgave Barnum for his early victimization and took every opportunity to denounce the showman during his long tenure at the *Herald*. Barnum, on the other hand, began to claim that he had not known Heth's true age, even representing himself as an unwitting victim in the deceit. This 180-degree reversal (from virtuoso trickster to unsuspecting dupe) appeared first in the 1855 edition of Barnum's autobiography. "The question naturally arises," Barnum explained, that "if Joice Heth was an imposter, *who* taught her these things? and how happened it that she was so familiar, not only with ancient psalmody, but also with the minute details of the Washington family? To all this, I unhesitatingly answer, *I do not know*. I taught her none of these things. She was perfectly familiar with them all before I ever saw her, and she taught me many facts in relation to the Washington family with which I was not before acquainted."²¹

Whether or not these published claims were themselves promotional tricks designed to distance a middle-aged showman with aspirations for respectability from his youthful indiscretions remains a matter of speculation by Barnum's biographers. The surviving evidence cuts both ways.²² Joice Heth's role in the deception remains equally tangled, leaving us with a number of unanswered (and, given the paucity of testimony from Heth herself, perhaps unanswerable) questions. Should we read Heth's involvement in the humbug as a self-conscious choice made by a tough, elderly woman with shrewd

business instincts, one who, given the shortage of opportunities open to former slaves in the antebellum North, willingly allowed herself to become a "living curiosity" for the small economic advantages such a career offered? Or should we read the entire tour as a troubling case of popular cultural exploitation quite typical for its era, one in which white northern urbanites spent a great deal more time gazing at caricatures of blackness on stage than interacting with African Americans outside the exhibition hall?²³

Aesthetic Blueprints

The answer to both of these complex questions is probably "yes." And regardless of how we untangle the problems of human agency, show business exploitation, and social significance at stake in this story, one larger conclusion seems clear: there is perhaps no other exhibition which anticipated more of the main currents of nineteenth-century American popular culture. From the minstrel show to the magic show, from the freaks of the Midway Plaisance to the ethnographic displays of the White City—in all of these entertainments (and many others) we can see lingering traces of what Barnum was concocting in 1835. For better or worse, this was what Barnum did more effectively than anybody else. Even as a show business neophyte who knew more about groceries than exhibition halls, he seems to have had an almost instinctive sense of what America's very first mass audiences would find especially curious and pay to see.

Barnum's debut thus serves as a kind of prologue to the much broader history of nineteenth-century American popular culture. But it also serves as a useful starting point for analyzing one of the most pervasive currents within this culture—the countless forms of artful deception that so thoroughly excited, dazzled, teased, and even angered the crowds. As long as there have been books on Barnum, writers have pointed to deception as a fundamental component of the showman's cultural production: it is the single skill (along with circus management) for which he is best remembered today. And Barnum was hardly alone in producing playful frauds for public deliberation.

As we shall see, artful deception was one of the main currents in American popular culture during the Age of Barnum, both inside and outside of the Great Yankee Showman's exhibition rooms. Minstrelsy and melodrama are the only other nonliterary cultural currents even comparable in scale, durability, and diversity during the same time period.²⁴

Simply to point out the popularity of artful deception, however, is also to beg a number of aesthetic and historical questions. Much like the reaction of a perplexed viewer standing before one of Barnum's dubious curiosities, our first impulse is to place this current in some kind of familiar, fixed category, but it is a remarkably elusive subject. It flows easily through a wide variety of urban venues: rented rooms, museums, theaters, industrial expositions, art galleries, and middle-class parlors. It resists consistent placement in any of the aesthetic categories conventionally employed to describe such things (such as realism, illusionism, *trompe l'oeil*—or even popular culture, for that matter). And it does not simply begin and end during Barnum's six-decade career, although this period seems to represent a kind of high-water mark. For the most part, these cultural deceptions have been treated by historians as uncomplicated aesthetic phenomena—as if every dubious museum curiosity, stage magic performance, and *trompe l'oeil* painting tricked its audience in roughly the same way. Yet, as Barnum's debut demonstrates, even particular nineteenth-century exhibitions often relied on multiple, overlapping modes of trickery—modes for which we lack clear aesthetic blueprints and consistent names. We would probably do well, then, to think a bit more carefully about those first months of Barnum's career and ask what, exactly, he was doing in the fall of 1835.

Was this exhibition merely an exercise in fooling the public—a *trick* in the purely surreptitious sense, one whose representational status went largely undetected by the showman's audiences? If the first New York newspaper reports on the Heth exhibition are our measuring stick, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes: certainly, many of the elements of Barnum's elaborate fiction (Heth's wildly exaggerated age, bogus background, and trumped-up stories about

the past) were accepted, discussed, and applauded as plausible facts. Plausibility, however, is not the same thing as certainty, and it seems clear from the steady stream of sarcasm running through these reports that many contemporaries suspected that they were witnessing something less than what the showman promised in his ads. This distinction is a subtle but crucial one: while it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that Barnum's first audiences were fooled to one degree or another, they were hardly the unsuspecting suckers of show business folklore.

Even these careful qualifications, however, only get us about as far as the Boston stop on the Joice Heth tour. At that point, when Barnum deliberately poked holes in his own fictional claims with new, competing fictional claims ("what purports to be a remarkably old woman is simply a curiously constructed automaton"), the exhibition began to take on features of a perceptual contest played out between showman and viewer, in which the curiosity on display was approached by the public as dubious and evaluated according to competing claims of authenticity set out by the showman's advertisements.²⁵ This more self-conscious mode of sleuthing soon became one of the exhibition's primary draws: many Boston patrons were well aware of the possibility of fraud in the showman's promotional puffs—and they evaluated them as puffs. That was what made the Heth exhibition so provocative; so enticing as a potential source of public exposé; so intensely curious.

But Barnum usually remained one step ahead of his viewers in exposing his deceptions. Indeed, while his self-directed exposés deliberately drew attention to the artificiality of Heth's public persona, they also served as a calculated act of misdirection, a kind of red herring leading viewers down a road of inquiry that eventually proved to be a dead end (Joice Heth was not an automaton; that much, at least, we know with certainty). It is far more accurate, then, to say that Barnum often created the appearance of behind-the-scenes secrets and promotional deceptions for public evaluation, rather than simply disclosing the secrets/deceptions themselves. This final act of unmasking—the crucial moment when the trickster exposes his own fictional exposés—Barnum usually saved for his autobiographies, years or decades later,

and even then he rarely told the entire behind-the-scenes story. Following the practices of his colleagues in the prestidigitatorial arts, Barnum pulled back one representational curtain after another, drawing the audience deeper and deeper into the trick, but his most secret working methods remained hidden. Whether Barnum was truly aware of Heth's correct age during the fall of 1835, we will never know. That secret he probably told only to his closest co-conspirators, or perhaps to no one at all.

It is important to remember that Barnum's cultivation of public suspicion in Boston did not eclipse or cancel out public interest in the image of the 161-year-old nursemaid that he had cultivated in New York. In the conversation quoted above between the Boston ex-Congressman and his mother, for example, belief and skepticism intermingle from one line to the next, without any clear resolution. As the episode comes to a close, both of the showman's competing representations—Joice Heth as ancient house slave and Joice Heth as automaton—remain actively in play. One might argue, in fact, that it was this lingering perceptual uncertainty which lay at the heart of the "half-suppressed giggles." While the viewers projected their anxious laughter onto the ex-Congressman and his family, they were really laughing at themselves, too. At the core of the joke was a giddy rush of self-awareness—a collective recognition that the exhibition hall debates were producing plenty of contradictory theories, but very few convincing solutions.

This somewhat paradoxical reception pattern—a curiosity seen by contemporary viewers as both representation and substance, counterfeit and currency—brings us to what was perhaps Barnum's most important early observation about cultural fraud. We are all familiar, of course, with the apocryphal dictum attributed to Barnum at the end of his career: that "there is a sucker born every minute."²⁶ What Barnum did say (in his 1855 autobiography) about the public's responses to his early efforts as trickster was actually far more interesting. Between reminiscences of the Joice Heth tour and a bogus rivalry staged between two of his jugglers, Barnum paused to offer a broader conclusion (a "trick of the trade," as he put it) about the

behavioral patterns of his viewers in the context of half-exposed humbuggery. "The public," he noted after two decades in the business, "appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived."²⁷

What makes this observation so intriguing is its suggestion that artful deception was never a hard and fast choice between complete detection and total bewilderment, honest promotion and shifty misrepresentation, innocent amusement and social transgression. Rather, Barnum suggests, it was precisely the blurring of these aesthetic and moral categories that defined his brand of cultural fraud and generated much of its remarkable power to excite curiosity. This observation applies equally well to any of the other forms of deception with which Barnum came into contact in 1835. Maelzel's "automaton chess-player" also relied on multiple (if not logically consistent) public identities: it was admired as a worthy chess competitor as well as a possible hoax; a work of remarkable mechanical skill as well as an ingenious form of clandestine manipulation by a hidden assistant inside the cabinet. Its enormous popularity grew directly out of this capacity to be both things at once, an ambiguity that was never fully solved. It was just this sort of built-in perceptual fuzziness, too, that lay at the heart of the sleight-of-hand performances and *trompe l'oeil* paintings that pervaded lower Broadway at the time. Whether in the theater or the panorama building, what antebellum audiences witnessed was a deliberate juxtaposition of relatively obvious forms of representation (a stage magician producing doves out of thin air, or a panoramic depiction of an urban fire) with feats and images whose illusions were momentarily plausible—or even undetectable.

This is not to suggest that artful deception represented a specific nineteenth-century period style (such as Romanticism), nor even a historically distinct, cohesive movement (such as Impressionism). Like the much older Western traditions of carnivalesque entertainment and still life painting whose aesthetic roots it shares, artful deception is a cultural current far too eclectic and long-running to fit neatly within any one of the nineteenth century's many categorical boxes. Nevertheless, between about 1830 and 1900 this diverse collec-

tion of exhibitory tricks followed a number of relatively consistent, observable patterns.

First, it seems clear that artful deception in the Age of Barnum routinely involved a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief. Merely offering one or another of these things was not simply bad form; it also usually lowered the door receipts. Second, as Barnum often noted in his own self-defense, no producers of such entertainment who wanted to stay in business for long simply fooled their viewers without also drawing attention to the act of fooling—or at least the possibility thereof. There is little question that most contemporary consumers of artful deception entered the exhibition hall looking for fraud. And third, none of the tricksters in Barnum's milieu simply peddled deception as an end in itself. Whether presented in the context of Joice Heth's anecdotes about dear little George, the automaton chess-player's Turkish clothes, Signor Blitz's stage patter, or the landscape imagery in a panorama painting, the deception always involved at least a modicum of narrative—an entertaining story that delivered the trick.

Another useful way to bring coherence to this diverse assortment of popular deceptions is to consider them in relation to W. J. T. Mitchell's recent definition of "illusionism": the activity of "playing with illusions, the self-conscious exploitation of illusion as a cultural practice." As Mitchell reminds us, this subtle distinction between "illusion" and "illusionism" is crucial, but it is frequently collapsed in our conventional speech. "Illusion," as we generally use the term, refers to a "natural, universal phenomenon" built into the "very conditions of sentience" and conventionally associated with "error, delusion, or false belief." "Illusionism," by contrast, describes a recurring style or aesthetic mode in Western culture, one that inhabits a "dialectical realm . . . on the boundary between fact and fiction." Part of what makes the arts of deception so categorically slippery is the fact that illusion is almost always a product of illusionism. While illusionism describes what Barnum was selling in 1835 (a kind of popular cultural play, on the very boundary between fact and fiction), the latter—

illusion—refers to the moment of misperception **experienced** by many of the showman's patrons.²⁸

Artful deception in the Age of Barnum, however, routinely intermixed illusionism with a second distinctive aesthetic mode—realism. Once again, the Joice Heth exhibition is useful as an example. In the Boston audience's "half-suppressed giggle" at the indeterminacy of Barnum's representation, we have a first-hand account of the capacity Mitchell attributes to illusionistic images: their power "to deceive, delight, astonish, amaze, or otherwise take power over a beholder."²⁹ Yet to the extent that Boston viewers continued to maintain a "conviction in the extreme longevity of Joice"—and thus engaged the representation as plausible fact—illusionism merged seamlessly with what Mitchell describes as realism: a category of image which "doesn't take power over the observer's eye so much as . . . stands in for it, offering a transparent window onto reality, an embodiment of a socially authorized and credible 'eyewitness' perspective."³⁰

It is not very difficult to discern what sort of perspective Barnum was attempting to embody in 1835. His evolving promotions during this six-month campaign operated much like a magic lantern show of the racialist stereotypes common in the particular social milieu where Joice Heth performed. She was an African-American woman "pictured" by Barnum as physically strange, curious, and exotic; a faithful slave who spoke no ill of her former masters; a nurturing black nursemaid who helped raise a white Virginia patriarch; a deeply pious Christian, steadfast in her faith for over a century; and a gifted folk singer who pleased audiences with her ancient musical talents. Each one of these images of "blackness" had a broad circulation in the antebellum North.³¹ What made Barnum's caricature exceptional, then, was not so much its constituent parts as its comprehensiveness and flexibility. If this was realism, it was realism of a particularly omnivorous strain, a realism that ingested and re-presented the racialist assumptions of its public almost continuously, from week to week and place to place. And quite unlike the many other showmen in this milieu, Barnum was perhaps the only disseminator of racialist stereo-

types who deliberately tried to convince his audiences that the images they were viewing might be just that—artful deception rather than the real thing.

In the grand sweep of Barnum's career, this initial fusion of illusionism and realism served as the prototype for both of his most conventional exhibition modes over the next six decades. Whereas the showman's infamous "humbugs" (for example, the Feejee Mermaid) emphasized the illusionistic skills Barnum first developed with Heth in Boston, his diverse parade of "living curiosities" (for example, General Tom Thumb) relied on the same sort of caricatured realism he employed in Heth's New York debut. But this distinction in aesthetic modes was never absolute, never mutually exclusive. On the contrary, these two aesthetic impulses continued to work—as they had during the later months of the Joice Heth tour—in a mutually reinforcing, even synergistic way throughout the showman's career.

The effectiveness of his "humbugs" as targets of public exposure always required the opposite possibility: that they might in fact be genuine curiosities. Otherwise, why even bother to enter the exhibition room and join the public debates? Conversely, the possibility of deception that perpetually hovered over Barnum's entire exhibition catalog only fueled public excitement for discussing the perceived strangeness of his "living curiosities," represented as mostly authentic in the showman's promotional materials. Because viewers suspected that Barnum might have embellished the physical and cultural anomalies of these curiosities, they rarely hesitated in picking and choosing which of the advertised features to accept, reject, or amend. The precise combination of illusionism and realism varied from curiosity to curiosity as well as from audience to audience; and it was not uncommon for illusionism and realism to co-mingle in the comments of a single viewer. In the nineteenth-century arts of deception, then, illusionism and realism were always interconnected—at least as aesthetic antipodes.³² That was the discovery that first made Barnum famous. There was no need to *choose* between illusionism and realism. The public was amused even when it was conscious of being deceived.³³