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A Study in the Humor of the Old Northeast

Joseph C. Neal's *Charcoal Sketches* and the Comic Urban Frontier

DAVID E. E. SLOANE

ABSTRACT: Joseph C. Neal pioneered the urban frontier of the Old Northeast in depicting what he called "hard cases" from the Philadelphia slums in his long-overlooked *Charcoal Sketches*, first published in book form in 1838. His characters' inability to change with the times, their false and vulnerable toughness, and their urban vernacular language look forward to the humor of Mark Twain, political commentators, and radio and TV sitcoms. In Neal's work, the cash economy, the lightly ironic euphuistic character study, and metaphors of the city are used to describe the new social and ethical paradoxes of the urban-industrial world already emerging in the urban Northeast in his time.

KEYWORDS: American humor, Joseph C. Neal, literary comedy, northeastern humor, urban humor, vulgar dialect, humor and social ethics, Mark Twain sources, city scenes, comic characters

The humor of the Old Southwest has long enjoyed its unique status as a subgenre of what Walter Blair initially called "native American humor," and though not identified as the only strand of "native" American humor, it is often understood as the natural origin of Mark Twain, America's greatest humorist.¹ The Old Northeast and its humor, unluckily, have not enjoyed the same status, nor the same scholarly attention.² The Old Northeast's regional characteristics, unique language, and peculiar settings have been compartmentalized in sobriquets such as *colonial*, *Yankee*, and *Knickerbocker* and in a larger and more inclusive category following the Civil War identified

by Blair and others, including myself, for better or worse as the Literary Comedians.³ A distinct problem occurs here, however, in terms of understanding how such a figure as Mark Twain came to be and how the TV sitcom and the sitcom's panorama of middle-class and lower-middle-class character types came to dominate national media. Briefly defining the humor of the Old Northeast might offer a different way of identifying the continuity of American humor as well as help clarify how Mark Twain is its chief representative and the modern television sitcom its structural descendent. Joseph C. Neal's writing can serve as an example of such humor, and it seems to presage the developing humor of the later nineteenth century and of our own time as well.⁴

In the Northeast, a variety of writers created stories with characters speaking the Yankee dialect, usually centered on the persona of a folksy speaker. Seba Smith's Jack Downing, from 1830, represents the native Yankee character: shrewd and articulate, he is aware not only of the speculative aspects of his own life but also of follies in the lives of politicians such as those in the Maine legislature. Most important, however, is his subdued combination of patriotic idealism and pragmatic skepticism. T. C. Haliburton's Sam Slick the "clock-maker," a self-identified Yankee clock peddler astute at exploiting "soft sawder and human nature," appeared in 1835 as another of the type, although the Canadian author was a Tory thinker and not enamored of the Yankee type. His hero is a philosopher of "human nature," however, and an often sympathetic observer of the human condition. The impact of Haliburton and his popularity in America already breaches the narrower critical concepts in conventional use by analysts of strictly US humor. B. P. Shillaber's Mrs. Partington and her plaguey boy Ike, appearing in the pages of the Boston-based *Carpet Bag*, were all Yankee but also new urban figures. When her Thanksgiving turkey is stolen, she muses that she would be grateful enough for sausage and beans.⁵ The sentiment of patience in adversity and compassion is anything but Old Southwestern in impulse. The urban setting and events also provide a background setting and themes. The description of the genre becomes even more complicated as time progresses. P. T. Barnum (1810–1891) belongs in this genre but is seldom even thought of as a purveyor of Yankee humor, and his competitor George Burnham, author of *The History of the Hen Fever: A Humorous Record* (1855), is completely unknown as a humorist.⁶ In their works, as in Haliburton's, the agrarian culture of the Northeast appears in a new fusion with the urban culture of city knavery, financial speculations, and

varied economic classes out of which emerge what Neal called "hard cases," exemplified by Ripton Rumsey, who drunkenly swims up the gutter outside a barroom and is arrested by a *charley* (corporation watchman) who takes him to the watchhouse and then sends him to Moyamensing Prison. Various American characters appear in the new urban setting, where classes mingle freely on the streets and in the democracy of the omnibus; the deal and the speculator, small or large, have a universal presence. The Knickerbocker humorists, in their turn, were not unlike the depictees of Yankee culture. Washington Irving's work provides the name for the school, but James Kirke Paulding's eclectic humor might be more representative of type. Paulding's "Jonathan Visits the Celestial Empire" (1831) is an appealing portrait of the traveling innocent from "away down east." A "cute" (i.e., acute) or sharp-trading Yankee, Jonathan ships out in a sloop crewed by himself, his cousins, and a great Newfoundland dog, laden with ginseng as a "speculation." A local vernacular speaker and a good-natured and curious pragmatist and opportunist, Jonathan reaches China, sees many strange things (which he reports back to his neighbors so they will not think he lacks gumption), and returns home to Salem with a fortune, "where he became a great man, even to the extent of being yclept honorable."⁸ The story is driven by social observation, the clash of customs between cultures and classes, the stability of coherent identity in the face of changing conditions, and even fantasy in the person of the great Newfoundland dog serving as part of his sloop's crew.

Oddly enough, Paulding, the New York Knickerbocker and partner of Washington Irving, is also the second author represented in Cohen and Dillingham's *The Humor of the Old Southwest*. The offering in this case is a scene from the 1831 play *The Lion of the West* in which Nimrod Wildfire represents Davy Crockett in caricature. The authorship of the play and its appearance in New York suggest that a far more ecumenical spirit was driving the humor of the Old Northeast than anyone has imagined. This inclusive conception of the humor of the Old Northeast can be broadened even further. Many of the key comic writers of the Old Northeast do not find a place in the Yankee or Knickerbocker categories, an omission that argues the need for a larger categorization of the genre. George Pope Morris (1802-1864) published stories describing the beginnings of American commercial culture in New York as a comic phenomenon; his works are forgotten. Francis Miriam Whitcher's *The Widow Bedott Papers* (1855) were roughly derived from her experience in the village of Whitestone, New York, outside



Figure 1 Ripton Rumsey, too drunk to stand, swims upstream in a gutter toward a waiting charley, who dispatches him to Moyamensing Prison as a vagrant (Neal's *Charcoal Sketches*, 3 vols. [Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1865], 1: 158).

the range of the Knickerbocker influence. Their first appearance in 1846 in *Neal's Saturday Gazette*, in Philadelphia, was encouraged by Joseph C. Neal; the introduction to their book publication was written by Alice B. Haven (Neal), Neal's widow. Other Old Northeastern humorists in the nineteenth century, such as Doesticks—Mortimer Thomson (1832–1875)—also occupy this unnamed middle space between conventional genres.

subsequently from eastern Europe. This new humor seemed amorphous and uncentered to the regionally oriented cultural critics who followed. The urbanizing Northeast and the writers who captured its comic qualities disappeared in the newsprint of popular papers and comic newspapers and magazines. Dialect was more subtle, colloquially rather than regionally vernacular or flatly objectionable, yielding the urban slang that could claim no national antecedents: the bastard child of a new American culture. Underneath it all lay a bedrock of moral responsibility as often as not disguised or submerged in comic badinage and reportorial exaggeration. Their sense of social ethics and moral responsibility explains why a Bohemian reporter like Doesticks would risk his life in 1859 to expose the "great slave auction" in Savannah, Georgia, to horrified northern readers and why in 1869 Mark Twain was driven to write and publish his unsigned "Only a Nigger" in the *Buffalo Express* to assail the lynching of an innocent black man in the South. The humor of the Old Northeast not only assimilated foreign cultures and urban scenery but also the social and moral conscience inherited from the older traditions; which had brought the Massachusetts Commonwealth, Pennsylvania, and the village culture of the Northeast and Midwest into being. The national literary culture derived from them would emerge after the Civil War and might help explain why *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*, published in 1888, registers as more of a pastiche than a regional or chronological collection.

Which brings us, at last, to Joseph C. Neal, called in various articles in his own time "the American Dickens," supposedly as a compliment. When the British pirate publisher Henry Colburn published a collection titled *The Pictorial Papers*, allegedly edited by Charles Dickens, Colburn included, without Dickens's knowledge, a volume of Neal's sketches as the middle volume of a three-decker set. Flattering though the Dickens association may have been, Neal did not earn a dime from the publication or the connection, which was unacknowledged, and it did not serve to guarantee his fame.

Joseph C. Neal was born in Greenland, New Hampshire, in 1807, where his father had taken up the position of Congregational minister after heading a female academy of note in Philadelphia. Neal, however, was raised a city boy, for at the age of two, following the unexpected death of his father, he returned to his parents' native Philadelphia with his newly widowed mother, Christiana Palmer Neal. Highly literate and very literary, Christiana appears in the Philadelphia city records for many years as the proprietress

The comedians of Philadelphia, now lost to sight, were active from early times. The *Philadelphia Bee*, founded in 1765, qualifies as America's first humor magazine, although its satire of British colonial governors stung for only three numbers. George Helmbold Jr.'s *Tickler* lasted considerably longer, from 1807 to 1813, and contained the seeds of the urban Northeastern humor to follow. Philadelphia's own active literary culture is largely forgotten, although William E. Burton, who published an important anthology of American humor—*Burton's Cyclopedia of Wit and Humor of America, Ireland, Scotland, and England* (1858)—claimed residence there. Charles G. Leland, originator of *Hans Breitmann's Ballads* (published in 1869, although the first poem appeared in 1857 in prose in *Graham's Magazine*), one of the earliest volumes of comic dialect ballads following James Russell Lowell's *Biglow Papers* (1848), not only enjoyed substantial appreciation in his own time but remained in print into the twentieth century. The Brahmin Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841–1835) and others like him are close to losing their place in the canon, with the exception of a poem or two. Why? Because we have come to see that their subjects were anomalous in the rapidly changing culture of northeastern and midwestern cities. As the urban North developed, literary and cultural elements were fused with rougher comedy; literary antecedents, parodies, and burlesques spread the humor through various social classes from the genteel to the popular readers of newspapers and journals. While the Old South remained the land of the horse swap and the bear hunt, the Old Northeast was assimilated into urban-industrial America. Northern culture encompassed the financial deal, the clever play on words, the masked irony of a cultured cynicism, and the pragmatism of reportorial exaggeration and burlesque vulgarity in writers like Doesticks and Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne, 1834–1867), forerunners of Mark Twain as comic newspaper voices. They could and did rebel against the corruption that flourished in an economy increasingly denominated in cash. Their language lost its regional markers and became the vulgarity of the streets and of the comic columns in the newspapers. Many of their puns, which traded in the often criticized use of cacography, contained literary and historical allusions that added layers of irony to otherwise slapstick comic situations.

Yankee and Knickerbocker culture began to disappear as early as the 1820s and 1830s in the culture shock of expanding cities, the factory system, and the waves of immigrants that arrived beginning in the 1820s from Ireland and later, in the 1840s, from Germany and Ireland again and

subsequently from eastern Europe. This new humor seemed amorphous and uncentered to the regionally oriented cultural critics who followed. The urbanizing Northeast and the writers who captured its comic qualities disappeared in the newsprint of popular papers and comic newspapers and magazines. Dialect was more subtle, colloquially rather than regionally vernacular or flatly objectionable, yielding the urban slang that could claim no national antecedents: the bastard child of a new American culture. Underneath it all lay a bedrock of moral responsibility as often as not disguised or submerged in comic badinage and reportorial exaggeration. Their sense of social ethics and moral responsibility explains why a Bohemian reporter like Doesticks would risk his life in 1859 to expose the "great slave auction" in Savannah, Georgia, to horrified northern readers and why in 1869 Mark Twain was driven to write and publish his unsigned "Only a Nigger" in the *Buffalo Express* to assail the lynching of an innocent black man in the South. The humor of the Old Northeast not only assimilated foreign cultures and urban scenery but also the social and moral conscience inherited from the older traditions; which had brought the Massachusetts Commonwealth, Pennsylvania, and the village culture of the Northeast and Midwest into being. The national literary culture derived from them would emerge after the Civil War and might help explain why *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*, published in 1888, registers as more of a pastiche than a regional or chronological collection.

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Figure 2 Joseph C. Neal portrayed for Morton M'Michael's "Joseph C. Neal" in *Graham's Magazine*, February 1844, 49-52. Facing page 49.

of a lending library, the Union Circulating Library. Young Joseph was raised by her, immersed in her literary culture and educated in genteel poverty. By the standards of more reportorial stylists, and despite his own employment as a newspaper writer and editor in the 1830s and 1840s, he might even seem to have been overeducated. His awareness of the writers of seventeenth and

eighteenth century British literature and his apparent immersion in the euphuistic style and the Theophrastan character sketch are on display in his short sketches to an extent that blunts the impact of the unique urban American characters he catalogues in his forty-six "Charcoal Sketches" and of the uncounted other "city worthies" who might turn up in a full search.⁹ The tongue-in-cheek quality of Neal's mock-philosophical introductions to his rogues' gallery of city types easily eludes readers honed on the curtness of post-Hemingway American prose fiction.

In 1847 Neal died an untimely death from tuberculosis, although his sketches outlived him for a considerable time, despite their elaborate rhetorical flourishes. In 1865, T. B. Peterson and Brothers of Philadelphia included his sketches—three books in one—in their extensive series of American humorists from the 1830 through 1860 period.

Neal's *Charcoal Sketches* captured, in the rough, the outlines of an entirely new culture revolving around the urban hub—the newly enfranchised lower classes. They move in and out of mediocrity as often as their betters, but possessing fewer resources, less sophistication, the dialect of the slums, and the habits of uncultured parvenus, they are a gorgeous garden of everything the critics of democracy most disdained—not feared, for they do not rise above their slapstick falls to become a threat, as Neal's tongue-in-cheek euphuistic rhetoric often points out. Alas, Neal wrote for newspapers that cried for copy in bulk, and his elaborate turnings of phrase, cleverness, and plentiful literary allusions make his format the polar opposite in style of the sketches of the Old Southwest. If we forgive him that, though, his sketches easily find their place at the base of a long tradition of comic misfits, almost fits, and even a few fits in the comic model that TV sitcoms still adhere to today.

Neal's Philadelphia was both a crossroads in time and in the development of urban culture in the 1830s. At that crossroads, the humor of the Old Northeast turned toward the urban, the local, and the financial and especially toward the social parody and the literary burlesque; the humor as often as not had an underlying motive if not a fully developed moral vision. These qualities differentiate the humor of the Old Northeast from that of the Southwest and lead forward to the humor of today. In Neal's work, these impulses manifested themselves in a series of portraits of urban misfits titled "City Worthies" and later "Charcoal Sketches," suggesting their nature as portraits of types rather than as plotted stories. The sketches typically start with generalizations to set up a concept and are expanded with

vignettes displaying the urban character in full feather. The central figure is usually ripe from the municipal police blotter, extravagant in the hooligan colloquialisms of the lower classes, and vulgar in understanding and expectations. Characters often reveal glimpses of literary culture picked up from the urban environment by chance or misdirected experience and education.

Because they are failures or slapstick victims in action, many of Neal's urban misfits become philosophers. Because their condition does not afford much scope for change, those who are capable of reflection attempt that art not with an end in view but simply as an outlet for their wonder at life, which, after all, supplies the motive for each of their sketches. Neal's occasional winners have the capacity to exploit the social expectations of others without providing much in return; they are urban parasites too venal to be evil or fearful. Possibly, this status is the reason that Edgar Allan Poe criticized Neal for writing sketches that taken individually are amusing but as a whole lack variety and importance; nevertheless, Poe seems to have taken the trouble to burlesque Neal's sketches with a burlesque of his own, "The Business Man" (1840). Leo Lemay proposes that this story might have been Poe's response to two of Neal's sketches that seem to have been aimed at him, especially "Undeveloped Genius: A Passage in the life of P. Pilgarlick Pigwiggin," which describes the would-be writer in Poe's typical dress.¹⁰ That unhappy and as yet undiscovered writer is eventually found on a street corner with "little sympathization and less cash" from his failed attempts at writing. The sketch comes to a close when he is hauled away by a constable to debtors' prison for unpaid room rent.¹¹

Neal's City Worthies are in much the same condition as the would-be poet Pigwiggin. Olympus Pump, featured on the frontispiece of *Charcoal Sketches*, is found by the charley in the midst of poetic conception reclining on a muton butcher's shambles. "The high price of coal affects him not. In the palace of his mind, fuel costs nothing" (1:10). Because he cannot string his ideas on a skewer like a catfish or find his drunken way, he is "tuck up," and the charley "tortles" him off to jail (1:14-15). Whatever their talents might be, the Worthies are little appreciated by the world and are not likely to make either friends to ease their solitude or cash to assist in their immediate need to pay landlords or get their socks darned.

The vanishing figure of the urban wood sawyer is a notable and representative accomplishment of the most impressive type of Neal's City Worthies. The sketch focuses on the new, emerging commercial reality that absorbs people and forces them to redefine their lives or fail in the



Figure 3 David Claypoole Johnston's frontispiece for Neal's *Charcoal Sketches; or, Scenes in the Metropolis*, which was published by E. L. Carey and A. Hart in Philadelphia in 1838 and in multiple reprintings thereafter until T. B. Peterson and Brothers published the final edition, titled *Neal's Charcoal Sketches*, in 1865. The frontispiece appears on facing page 12. Olympus Pump, a failed poet who holds first place among Neal's ironically named City Worthies, sits dejectedly on a feed bin as a charley approaches from the shadows. The gonfalon bearing the title is strung between street lamps. Two servants, candlesticks in hand, peer down on the urban confrontation between the would-be poet and the minion of the law. Two more charleys decorate the lower corners of the frame, "couchant," or sleeping, at any rate.

attempt, as many of them do. The sketch "Dilly Jones; or, The Progress of Improvement" (1: 93-99) is devoted to a figure who disappeared almost with a thunderclap in the 1830s when coal replaced wood as the primary urban heat source. The very fact that Jones is a purveyor of fuel identifies him as an urban figure, a service provider to the middle and upper classes, rather than as a yeoman hunter or farmer from the agrarian or wilderness setting. His frontier is the urban frontier and he hunts for something much more modern—cash. He is a new representation of social (im)mobility and instability and its inherent social consequences, for his identity is that of an individual whose fate is neither tragic nor heroic. Dilly Jones, wood sawyer, captures his world in his soliloquys; this character who is unchanging reflects on "change at work":

He wondered why fashions and customs should so continually change, and repined that he could not put a spoke in their wheel. . . . So complete was his abstraction that he unconsciously uttered his thoughts aloud: "Sawing wood's going all to smash," said he, "and that's where everything goes what I speculates in. This here coal is doing us up. Ever since these black stones was brought to town, the wood-sawyers and pilers, and them soap-fat and hickory ashes men, had been going down; and, for my part, I can't say as how I see what's to be the end of all their new-fangled contraptions." (1:95)

Over the next two pages, Dilly outlines his careers, first of selling oysters from a wheelbarrow, until oyster cellars, on the bar-restaurant model, came in and he had to eat up his capital. Then he tried merchandising other street foods, like "pepre pot smoking," but a crowd of competitors pushed his cats (yes, this effort seems to have something to do with cat stew) out of the market. Bean soup, also, apparently cat-based, failed him; "kittens wasn't good done that way," according to customers who would only "come in" "on tick" (1:95), the local insider's argot for buying on credit. After he "busted for the benefit of my creditors" in the "victualling line," he declares success. "But genius riz" when he "made a raise with horse and a saw" by becoming a wood piler's apprentice until he was free—until "here comes the coal to knock the business in the head." He refuses to take the ultimate downward course and become "Charcoal Jemmy," smashing black stones with a pickaxe (1:96), because "my people's decent people and I can't disgrace 'em" (1:96). Dilly's and Pilgarlick's world is defined by class and financial rising and

falling. The "cash nexus" and urban lifestyle emerge as a new representative American experience. Dos Passos will capture the kaleidoscope of the city in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), almost a century later, along with Damon Runyan and others, but Neal the comedian anticipates him. Neal, through Dilly, describes in intimate social detail a world awash in change and characters little suited to changing with the times. Their language is the comic language of the street. Their thinking is bound by the conventions of their peers and place. Their climactic exits, often on the way to night court or prison, are the comic pratfalls of the unfit.

The final action of the sketch is simple but characteristic of many of Neal's other sketches. Having wandered toward his dwelling with sawhorse over one shoulder and wood saw over the other, he fetches up in front of a dry-goods store and sits resignedly on his sawhorse in a deep study, exhausted by his many commercial reversals. At closing time, two shop boys emerge and chase him off with comic threats of beating him up, winking broadly to each other, and after a modest amount of repartee, he moves off to rejoin the stream of the city's flotsam and jetsam.

As a comic writer of the Old Northeast, Neal addresses a reality far different from the Old Southwest. At the same time that the writers of the Old Southwest were capturing the disappearing figures of the agrarian frontier, the American urban misfit was rising to prominence in northern cities in the form of pickpockets, shoulder hitters, speculators, shopkeepers, and a vast range of hangers-on up and down the social scale, varying colorful graduations in charcoal sketches by Philadelphia's own chronicler, Joseph C. Neal. Southwestern writers of frontier humor captured the imagery of the big bear and the horse swap, but the half-horse-half-alligator hunters of Kentucky were matched in the popular press of the 1830s and 1840s by the likes of iron-man "Orson Dabbs, the Hittite," "stub twisted and made of horse-shoe nails" (1:37), and the broken-down office seeker "Peter Brush, the Great Used Up," "out at elbows, out at knees, out of pocket, out of office," and out in the streets after the November elections (1:132). In place of the big bear, Neal offered an early notice of the unique urban artifact, the prison van in "The Black Maria," which accompanied a plate by D. C. Johnston. In place of the horse swap, Neal captured firefighters in "The Boys That Run with the Engine" and marked the beginnings of early street gangs in newsboys, among other urban vulgarians gone to seed. Even in the 1840s, however, the protagonist of "The Man That Danced the Polka" could dance

his impecunious way into the heart of an urban heiress and find happiness stretching out his long legs at her mercantile father's fireside. This range of northern urban comic reality was later transformed into the politics of the Gilded Age and finally became varied forms of domestic comedy in theatrical comedy and later radio and TV sketches; the eight editions of *Charcoal Sketches* that appeared between 1838 and 1841 and its eventual inclusion in T. B. Peterson and Brothers' series of American humorists in 1865 certainly indicate that Americans of the time were highly amused by the familiar city types in Neal's comic literary sketches treating the new urban frontier.

Orson Dabbs is an impressive example of the urban roughneck who rises like scum to the top of this urban stew and as rapidly sinks to the bottom to become its dregs. Violence, of course, is as American—and as urban American—as apple pie, and the most notable of Neal's misfits would appropriately be sketched in that mode. Dabbs is remarkable as an urban-industrial parallel to the half-horse, half-alligator frontiersman of the Mississippi. Perpetually scouring Philadelphia for a fight, he finds one night's challenge in a group that thinks a recent "aurora" was evidence of an absence of grease on the axle of the world. Dabbs thinks it a sign of war and declares, "'That's a lie!' . . . , 'my story's the true one, for I read it in an almanac; and to prove it true, I'll lick anybody here that don't believe it . . . , in two cracks of a cow's thumb. Yes,' added he, in reply to the looks bent upon him; 'I'll not only wallop them that don't believe it, but I'll wallop you all, whether you do or not!'" (1:36). Although this threat is not the product of the ignorance or uneducated pride of the greenhorn on the frontier, still, for Dabbs, a little education from the almanac is not a good thing. Predictably, the mob throws him out on the street; his bulldog tears a hole in his pants, and a charley comes along and batters his fisticuffs down with a truncheon before leading him off to jail and the morning ride in the Black Maria. He is the lowest product of urban life on the peeling underside of comic incompetence.

Nevertheless, Orson Dabbs has some characteristics that merit a place in literary history. Specifically, he represents the urban countertype to the boasting local huntsman of the Big Bear of Arkansas. His boastful speech draws out his region's most powerful metaphors, which describe aspects of the new American, traits that were fast becoming part of the national character:

The noise at last became so great that a watchman finally summoned up resolution enough to come near, and to take Dabbs by the arm.

"Let go, watchy!—let go, my cauliflower! Your cocoa is very near a sledge-hammer. If it isn't hard, it may get cracked."

"Pooh! Pooh! Don't be onasy, my darlint—my cocoa is a corporation cocoa—it belongs to the city and they'll get me a new one. Besides, my jewel, there's two cocoa's here, you know. Don't be onasy, it mayn't be mine that will get cracked."

"I ain't onasy," said Dabbs, bitterly, as he turned fiercely around. "I only want to caution you, or I'll upset your apple cart, and spill your peaches."

"I'm not in the vegetable way, my own-self, Mr. Horse-radish. You must make less noise."

"Now, look here—look at me well," said Dabbs, striking his fist hard upon his own bosom; "I'm a real nine foot breast of a fellow—stub twisted and made of horse-shoe nails—and the rest of me is cast iron with steel springs. I'll stave my fist tight through you, and carry you on my elbow, as easily as if you were an empty market basket—I will—bile me up for soap if I don't!"

"Ah, indeed! Why you must be a real Calcutta-from-Canting, warranted not to cut in the eye. Snakes is no touch to you; but I'm sorry to say you must knuckle down close. You must surrender; there's no help for it—none in the world."

"Square yourself then, for I'm coming! Don't you hear the clockworks!" exclaimed Dabbs, as he shook off the grip of the officer, and struck an attitude.

He stood beautifully; feet well set; guard well up, admirable science, yet fearful to look upon. Like the Adriatic, Dabbs was "lovelily dreadful" on this exciting occasion. But when "Greek meets Greek," fierce looks and appalling circumstances amount to nothing. The opponent of our hero, after regarding him coolly for a moment, whistled with great contempt, and with provoking composure, beat down his guard with a smart blow from a heavy mace, saying,—

"Taint no use no how—you're all used up for bait"

"Ouch!" shrieked Dabbs; "my eye how it hurts. Don't hit me again. Ah, good man, but you're a bruiser. One, two, three, from you would make a person believe any thing, even if he was sure it wasn't true."

"Very well," remarked the *macerator*, "all I want from you is to behave nice and genteel, and believe you're going to the watch'us, for it's true; and if you don't believe it yet, why (shaking his mace) I shall feel obligated to convince you again." (1:36–38, original emphasis)

Neal presents the ultimate type of the new Northeast, the denizen of the American city, complete with its vaguely Irish urban hooligan in a contest against a city cop. The setting for the piece is urban—a bar, the street at night, the watchhouse. The characters—urban hangers-on, a lower-class hooligan, and a night watchman—are as true to their city environment as are the characters of the backwoods village to theirs: Ransy Sniffle and the two local village rivals, Billy Stallings and Bob Durham, whom he provokes in "The Fight" in Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), for example. Neal's dialect is rich with the metaphors of the street and allusions to the industrial North, as in "stub twisted . . . cast iron with steel springs" and similar poetic language of the great boast. The action of the sketch is also important; it is not open ended. The watchman represents the urban hierarchy, and the fight is not between equals but serves rather as an example of the assertion of the rule of law over the ruffian: Dobbs has no chance. The social order is enforced by the mace, not the long rifle or a farmer's clever trickery.

An equally important and representative character appears in Neal's "Peter Brush, the Great Used Up" (1:130–41). The sketch is set in November, "soon after election time," when "orrid muggy weather" (1:131) leaves the city damp, gloomy, and inhospitable and pushes men toward suicide with the aid of pistols, cords, and chemicals, instruments of city culture to be used on this, "the worst of nights in the worst of seasons" (1:130). In a setting of gloomy gas lamps and damp hallways, we find Mr. Peter Brush, without a Portia to urge him to bed (alluding to *Julius Caesar*), braving miasma to sleep on a cellar door because he has no bed to go to, a state of affairs that leaves him "as melancholy as an unbraced drum, 'a gib-ed cat, or a lugged bear" (1:132). Contrasting elevated cultural allusions to Juliet and Hamlet make the hero all the more degraded, "out at elbows, out at knees, out of pocket, out of office, out of spirit, and out in the streets," a desolate urban "out and outer," an "outré" mortal (1:132). In this city world, cultured words and the language of all classes are part of the fabric of discourse and lead naturally to Brush's major soliloquy, based on his mother's teaching and the watchwords of democracy, echoing Holy Scripture:

A long time ago, my ma used to put on her specs and say, "Peter, my son, put not your trust in princes;" and from that day to this I haven't done any thing of the kind, because none on 'em ever wanted to borry nothing of me: and I never see a prince or a king,—but one or two, and they had been rotated

out of office,—to borry nothing of them. Princes! pooh!—Put not your trust in politicianers—them's my sentiments. You might jist as well try to hold an eel by the tail. I don't care which side they're on, for I've tried both, and I know. Put not your trust in politicianers, or you'll get a hyst. (1:132-33)

The vulgar "old showman" Artemus Ward, created by Charles Farrar Browne, could hardly have said it better, nor in more vulgarly colloquial language. Brush continues with a full indictment of the spoils system and a comic caricature of the American spoils seeker adrift in city politics:

Ten years ago it came into my head that things weren't going on right; so I pretty nearly gave myself up tee-totally to the good of the republic, and left the shop to look out for itself, I was brimfull of patriotism, and so uneasy in my mind for the salivation of freedom, I couldn't work. I tried to guess which side was going to win, and I stuck to it like wax;—sometimes I was a-one side, sometimes I was a-t'other, and sometimes I straddled till the election was over, and came up jist in time to jine the hurrah. It was good I was after; and what good could I do if I wasn't on the 'lected side? But, after all, it was never a bit of use. Whenever the battle was over, no matter what side was sharing out the loaves and the fishes, and I stepped up, I'll be hanged if they didn't cram all they could into their own mouths, put their arms over some, and grab at all the rest with their paws, and say, "Go away, white man, you ain't capable."—Capable! what's the reason I ain't capable? I've got as extensive a throat as any of 'em, and I could swallow the loaves and fishes without choking, if each loaf was as big as a grindstone and each fish as big as a sturgeon. Give Peter a chance, and leave him alone for that. Then, another time when I called—"I want some spoils," says I; "a small bucket full of spoils. Whichever side gets in, shares the spoils, don't they?" So they first grinned, and then they ups and tells me that virtue like mine was its own reward, and that spoils might spoil me. But it was *no* spoils that spoilt me, and *no* loaf and fish that starved me—I'm spoilt because I couldn't get either. Put not your trust in politicianers—I say it agin. Both sides used me jist alike. Here I've been serving my country, more or less, these ten years, like a patriot—going to town meetings, hurrahing my daylight's out, and getting as blue as blazes—blocking the windows, getting licked fifty times, and having more black eyes and bloody noses than you could shake a stick at, all for the common good, and for the purity of our illegal [*sic*] rights—and all for what? Why, for nix. If any good has come of it, the country has put it into her

own pocket, and swindled me out of my arnings. I can't get no office! Republics is ungrateful! It wasn't reward I was after. I scorns the base insinivation. I only wanted to be took care of, and have nothing to do but to take care of the public, and I've only got half—nothing to do! Being took care of was the main thing. Republics is ungrateful; I'm swaggered if they ain't. This is the way old sojers is served. (1:133-34)

Brush is a unique American original, like Orson Dabbs, but here purely democratic in personal expression, references, and even in the ever-present American issue of race—"Go away, white man." The sketch goes on from this soliloquy to depict a confrontation between Brush and a "gentleman," the homeowner whose row-house steps he is sleeping on. Brush thinks the gentleman may be one of the eaters of all the loaves and fishes that the spoils-men got and asks him for a "circular recommend," which will presumably cut him in. The issue of ward, city, and state politics as well as national expectations of how a democracy ought to function are not implied or put forth in abstruse images; rather, there is direct discussion on the ethics of American politics and those who manage the political experience for their own ends. Thus does Neal become an important link in a line of comedians from Hugh Henry Brackenridge to Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Steven Colbert.

Of more success, but with scarcely more ambition in business and finance, is Lankly Towers in "The Man Who Danced the Polka" (2:21-29). Neal notes the classic Napoleonic "nudity" of the bare phrase "He danced the polka!!!" (2:21) by way of introducing us to Towers in a wholly different "passport through the world of social life: . . . while many danced the polka in the thoughtlessness of mere muscular agitation, wiggling hither and wagging thither, without ulterior design, . . . Lankly Towers availed himself of the polka as an aid to enterprise. To him, the polka was a stratagem,—a conspiracy—a *coup d'état*. His polka had a purpose" (2:21-22). Broke, he is thrust by his uncle out on the street and told to trust to his legs. Since Texas is already annexed, and Oregon's parallels are longer than even his long legs, and, all the worse, no new lighthouses are needed, he gains his inspiration not by being knocked like Newton on his head by a pippin but rather by being brushed in the streets by the craze for the polka. His salvation will be the dance hall. He betakes himself to the next great polka ball and woos the divine Celestina Muscovedo, a roly-poly beauty who looked like the church beside his steeple. Bells began to ring in his head, and after several pages of

courtship through the night of the grand ball, the "oak and the violet"—the tall and the short of lovers—escape to a cab and land our long-legged hero in wedded bliss at his father-in-law's fireside. Thus we are offered the happier side of 1840s Philadelphia society.

Dubberly Doubtington in "Indecision" (1:79-92), on the other hand, has an heiress within his grasp but is so constituted as to be unable to commit. He approaches to the point of a match, then retreats to his quarters—and the blandishments of the future bride, the threats of her father to a lawsuit, and even a proposed duel by a male competitor cannot pry him out of his ambiguity and into action. His finances compromised by the lawsuit for breach of promise, he finally loses his money in a dubious stock transaction, and we leave him sopping wet. About to take a ferry ride to support a politician with spoils to award, he stands with one foot on the dock and one on the parting boat until his inevitable dunking. The slapstick comedy of his own fictional reality intervenes to complete the sketch, whether the character will or no. The sketch centers on a city problem in a city setting with city characters and the language of the city, and it features a comic type drawn from the ever-changing American scene in the 1830s.

My last example of another unique "rough" of the times is found in "The Boys That Run with the Engine," one of the earliest depictions of the Philadelphia firemen in the person of one Hickey Hammer, the hero of another of the "plate sketches" Neal illustrated in words. Hammer is as likely as not to go from firehouse to firehouse challenging any local champion who will fight him. Fighting is self-definition in his world, and the heroic becomes a mockery of fire equipage:

The glittering trumpet takes the place of the flashing sabre, and quick as lightning, cuts "six" upon the head and shoulders of the foe [other firemen from other companies], stretching him senseless in the kennel. The massive "spanner" makes short work of the stoutest tarpaulin, and though the combatants may long for the bullet... brickbats are likely to answer just as well. All the joy of conflict is called forth in such a field. (3:135)

Lacking a civil war or a revolution, Hickey must conjure up his own fights each day. He does so by running with the engines or rambling from one firehouse to another demanding, "where's the bully?" (3:138)—and thereby representing, the sketch concludes, "the choice and master-spirits of the



"In the group which forms the subject of our story, such a one will be seen in the person of Hickey Hammer—he who leans against the wall, with slab in hand and with a most majestic sterness in his countenance."

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Figure 4 Hickey Hammer, a slum bully, from "The Boys That Run with the Engine," lounges in front of three toadies while he waits for another chance to break heads and throw brickbats in another brawl (3:136).

time" (3:139). He is contemporary with his New York Irish counterparts, the Bowery Boys, and their equal in every way. Fisticuffs are his means of expression, dominance his mode, whether or not it is meaningful, and he is very likely the grown-up outcome of the abandoned street urchins, newsboys, and

crossing sweepers who became a notable part of New York and Philadelphia urban life in the 1830s. In 1848, Benjamin A. Baker brought "A Glance at New York" to the stage of the Olympic Theater, featuring Mose—one of the original Bowery Boys who runs with the engines in New York—and his girl, Lize; with this production, the urban misfit type whom Neal so nimbly sketches stands at the front of a long line reaching down to today in the Kramers and two broke girls of modern television.¹²

Two of Neal's most popular sketches fall in a category of *plate sketches*, the common name for writings that were written after the illustrations they were attached to. The artist was one of the leading comic illustrators of the day, David Claypool Johnston. The most notable was "The Black Maria," which is one of the first appearances of that term for the rolling transport vehicle that transferred criminals from city court to Moyamensing Prison on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The sketch opens with children ceasing to play and street bystanders falling quiet to the whisper "Hush! There she comes!" (3:24) when the awkward black box on wheels rumbles into sight carrying its load of fallen citizens, each with a story of bad luck or bad strategy. As the philosophical driver admonishes us, "There are, I guess, about two sorts of people in this world—them that's found out, and them that ain't found out—them that goes into the 'Black Mar'a,' and them that don't happen to be cotch'd. People that are cotch'd, has to ketch it, of cours,'" or how else would the "fishal folk—me and the judges and the lawyers—yes, and the chaps that make the laws and sell all the law books—make out to get a livin'?" (3:35–36). The soliloquy reflects backward on the new world reality where transactions are minor and comical.

"The Newsboy," the other of the more famous plate sketches of the day, however, took up the case of a new urban phenomenon, numbers of orphaned and abandoned street children in rising cities. Neal's sketch makes his newsboy Tom Tibbs into an early specimen of the lower middle class on the rise, particularly symbolic of the post-Napoleonic times, when the heroism of war gives way to commercial action; much as a Belgian peasant is found after the Battle of Waterloo boiling his potatoes in a knight's helmet: "Man, commercial man, speculating man, financial man—man, heedless of gory greatness, but eager for cash, must know all that is in agitation. Having ceased to kill his neighbor, he is anxious to know what his neighbor is about, that he may turn him and his doings to profitable account" (3:64). Thus framed, Neal's sketch of the figure on a pedestal represents this new

world in the raffish figure of Tibbs the newsboy. Tibbs, as it happens, has "already learned the one great lesson of success. He looks upon the community as a collective trout—a universal fish, which must nibble at his bait, lie in his basket, and fill his frying pan" (3:69). Melville's Ishmael may wonder in the future whether we readers are fast fish and loose fish, too, but Neal's newsboy has already worked out that calculus on his own in urban Philadelphia. Like the heroes of all great comic sketches, he is half comic fantasy and half comic reality, or as Neal has it, Tibbs has as much affection, sympathy, and twining tendrils of the heart as anyone else who must look at pennies as the downright facts of existence. Tibbs has run away from an erratic, ineffectual but brutal father. Thrown in with this new class of newsboys, he has perfected the model go-getter of the slums on his own. Tom philosophizes about cheating customers out of change: "This 'ere chiselling won't do, . . . and when you have chiseled everybody, why then they'll get a law passed, and chisel us all to chips" (3:72). As colorful in metaphor as in costume, he is both an individual comic figure and a representative of his times. The newsboy is the new man of American capitalist democracy, born of independence and the city in a world without the restrictions of by-gone chivalry and established social place. He claims our attention like the barflies of *Cheers* because, in a very real way, what makes him also makes us, whether we see it or not. Grown in our imagination to adulthood, he might be a model for Christopher Newman in Henry James's *The American* or Jay Gatz in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Transformed with a conscience and transported to another fictional place and time, he could as easily become Huck Finn.

The latter half of the sketch is given over to the torture of a gentleman of the old school who crosses the newsboy and becomes the object of his unrelenting harassment. Neal elaborates the horrible nightmare of this Mr. Sappington in which a giant Tibbs sits on his chest and force-feeds him immense sheets of the oversized comic paper *Double Brother Jonathan*. Complaining to an editor, Sappington is finally run out of the newspaper office, unfulfilled and unjustified in his suffering and wrath. At the end of the sketch, Tibbs is described as still at his trade, growing in means and ambition, seeing himself someday riding in a fancy carriage with *newsboy* engraved as the emblem on its doors. Thus, in emblem and artifact and behavior, the newly emerging reality of middle-class money-getting becomes the basis of life, and it is low comedy.

A range of figures and scenes is naturally comprised in the series of sketches Neal composed over several years and through various levels of society. The subject of "Tis Only My Husband" can be guessed from the title; in this case, a woman is the dominant figure. Leniter Salix of "The Best-Natured Man in the World" is naturally the victim of all. Always stuck with



Figure 5 Leniter Salix, the worthy depicted in "The Best-Natured Man in the World," attempts to hold a baby, an acquaintance's horse (while the acquaintance gets drunk in the "grocery" behind him), and three other small brats. He concludes he was made to be "chawed up" like "the mouse kind if people" despite his "eddication" (1:66).

the bill for every party and always selling on credit, he is "shelled out" of business, his lodgings, and finally nearly his clothes; he stands on the street, "a mere shell-fish—an oyster with the kivers off" (1:68). His lurch downward will be into vagrancy and the night court, for certain.

It seems almost inevitable that Neal's most interesting figures are figures from the police court and down-and-outers of various sorts. Goslyne Greene, for example, is a goosy young man, born to a fortune, whose financial advisor soon leaves for Texas, with his investments but without the victim . . . and so it goes in character sketch after character sketch (2:54). Their names betray them, but it is their world, for which they are maladapted, that makes them the targets of the low-level predators that roam in the newly formed urban environment. Like the man who danced the polka, these figures are comic because they set their ambitions low and fit their actions to their trivial design. The result is that their aspirations and ambition remain unsatisfied and the heroism they seek is denied. Not earthy enough to become Caliban, nor heroic enough to rise to either comic or tragic greatness, they remain preserved in amber like characters in the sitcoms of later times, perfect reminiscences of the daily concerns of the bourgeoisie in a world too wide for their shrunken ambitions.

Generations later, a host of radio shows followed in their tracks, tailored, however, for the market of mass merchandising to present a kinder world of skinflint Jack Bennys and rubes like Lum 'n' Abner, and still later Sergeant Bilkos, Gilligan's Islanders, and even German World War II stalag officers in the unlikely cast of *Hogan's Heroes*. These radio and TV shows are less violent than the sketches of the Old Southwest and much more simplistic than Neal's sketches, with their overly generous euphuistic style, and in all of them the aura of social predictability and inevitability remains a comic constant. The reduction of daily life to a series of comic events is their glory, insomuch as a comic, as opposed to a tragic, form may claim such an ideal.

The tradition of such comic figures, socialized and urbanized in an environment where wealth and class keep the lower figures in a frozen state, may even account for some notable anomalies in American comic fiction. For example, although Mark Twain's western friends protested at his writing a medieval novel in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), where Miles Hendon takes the philosophical pose of a modern journeyman rather than a medieval prince, one of the signature vignettes is the picture of the ruffian band,

made notable by the leader's advice to the prince to be king if he wishes but be not harmful in it. The pose is pure Mark Twain, but even more, it is the pose of social adaptability in an interdependent world, the urban world of Neal's sketches. Likewise, it is hard to account for the middle-class allusions to the anxiety and expense of raising children in Pap Finn's "call this a gov'ment" rant unless we consider that Mark Twain licensed himself to include the terminology of the middle class in the language of a vernacular speaker. Colloquial and vernacular blend to make a truly ugly figure believable both in the terms of 1845 and 1885 at one and the same time. The jury in *The Gilded Age* (1873) is cut from similar cloth. As urban types, they make comic sense, especially in the tradition of Neal's sketches. In Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel, they almost seem a distraction from the plight of the heroine. They are urban vignettes whose purpose is social criticism: they constitute the tradition of social and ethical satire in the urban Northeast that Neal and others pioneered.

Neal's sketches are a panorama of lower-caste American types. Each is capable of the specific actions of his type but lacks the capacity for growth and change. They are reassuring as much in their failures as in their successes and in that way, perhaps, set the pattern for the American sketch to follow in sitcoms and vaudeville alike, where Abbott and Costello's Who is always on first, where Dick Van Dyke's stool always trips him up, and where life inevitably goes on as the camera closes in on the little frame house on a block in Brooklyn or the Bronx. Narrator figures like Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley and solo comic representations like the Little Tramp of Charlie Chaplin and on to the TV sitcom with its wide range of types from Archie Bunker in *Those Were the Days* to *Two Broke Girls* to *Cheers* may all have some trace of a heritage from this tradition. Rethinking and further researching the humor of the Old Northeast may yield a far richer understanding of the social ethics driving American humor since that earlier time than we currently have.

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NOTES

1. Walter Blair's definitive compilation and categorization of comic writings in *Native American Humor* (1937; rev. ed. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1960) has well served scholars, including me, for generations. Southwestern humor is best represented simply by reference to Hennig Cohen and William Dillingham's comprehensive anthology *The Humor of the Old Southwest* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), long in print and now in its third heavily revised and expanded edition. M. Thomas Inge and Edward Piacentino's *The Humor of the Old South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) is a more recent collection of importance. Bernard De Voto aggressively argues the case for Mark Twain as a natural middle-American product in *Mark Twain's America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932), and Kenneth Lynn's *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960) pursues the idea fully. A broad review of the culture implicit in the humor of the Old Southwest can be found in James H. Justus, *Fetching the Old Southwest: Humorous Writing from Longstreet to Twain* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), which maintains a rational balance in placing Mark Twain in that tradition.

2. In *Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) and *The Literary Humor of the Urban Northeast, 1830-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), I attempt to provide a definition of the humor of the Old Northeast through the era of Literary Comedy with the suggestion of an appropriate canon. Rich sources of material pertinent to the study of comic writers in the Northeast can be found in Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *Traits of American Humor* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1852) and William E. Burton, *Burton's Cyclopedia of Wit and Humor* (New York: Appleton, 1858). The Peterson Brothers published a series of reprints of books by American comic writers of the 1830-60 period, which includes the greats of the Old Southwest but also works by urban and maritime humorous writers. Other sources include early essays in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Early National Literature*, pt. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), especially Will D. Howe, "Early Humorists," 148-59.

3. See chapters 1-3 in my *Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian* for a modern working definition of *Literary Comedy* as a genre in relation to social ethics and change in the 1850-1900 period. Blair's definition in *Native American Humor* is based on literary characteristics that are common enough among the named and unnamed authors but lacks a sociological or ethical dimension. See also "Literary Comedians, Literary Comedy, and

Mark Twain," special issue, *Studies in American Humor*, n.s. 3, no. 22 (2010), especially James E. Caron, "Why 'Literary Comedians' Mislabels Two Comic Writers, George Derby ('John Phoenix') and Sam Clemens ('Mark Twain')," 43-68, and my "Mark Twain and Literary Comedy," 7-10.

4. Critical attention to Joseph C. Neal has been limited in modern scholarship. He is unmentioned in Blair's *Native American Humor*, for example. See my "Joseph C. Neal," in *American Humorists, 1800-1950*, vol. 2: M-Z, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1982), 344-49, which cites other critical references, especially including the contemporary biography by Neal's friend and colleague Morton M'Michael. The latter's "Joseph C. Neal" in *Graham's Magazine*, (February 1844, 49-52), is the source of the engraving that is Neal's only known portrait. Edgar Allan Poe, "A Chapter on Autography," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 9 (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895), 206-7, provides a characteristically waspish description of Neal's work, suggesting that Poe did not recognize the underlying whimsical burlesque tone of Neal's lengthy euphuistic introductions of his urban hard cases.

5. Sloane, *Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian*, 16.

6. More information on Barnum and Burnham and their (in)famous Hen Fever war of 1854 can be found in my "The Humor of the Old Northeast: Barnum, Burnham, and the Hen Fever," *Studies in American Humor*, n.s. 2, no. 6 (1988): 154-62.

7. James Kirke Paulding, "Jonathan Visits the Celestial Empire," *New York (Weekly) Mirror*, June 18, 1831, reprinted in Sloane, *Literary Humor*, 50-62.

8. Sloane, *Literary Humor*, 62.

9. Among the books owned by William E. Burton was *Characters of Theophrastus*, illustrated by woodcuts (London, 1831), according to Sabin's 1860 catalogue of his library for auction after his death, so we can assume that the book was available in Philadelphia.

10. For more on this subject, see J. A. Leo Lemay, "Poe's 'The Business Man': Its Contexts and Satire of Franklin's *Autobiography*," *Poe Studies* 15, no. 2 (December 1982): 29-37.

11. Joseph C. Neal, *Neal's Charcoal Sketches*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1865), 1:56. Further citations to Neal's works are from this edition and are given parenthetically by volume and page number.

12. See Irving Lewis Allen, *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 210.