INTRODUCTION

I

Sheppard Lee is an identity thief. When the rather feckless protagonist and narrator of this singular novel, written by Robert Montgomery Bird and first published 1836 as a work of Sheppard Lee himself, discovers, quite by accident, that he has a curious power to abstract himself from his proper body and transfer his spirit to any fresh corpse that is convenient to hand, and that he can do so again and again, he embarks upon a strange adventure that is both an allegory of social mobility and a meditation on personal identity as such. Sheppard Lee's stolen identities allow him to traverse quite magically a broad array of antebellum American social roles, from penniless fop to rich miser, from smug landowner to pious Quaker philanthropist. These thefts of personhood also dramatize what seems to be Bird's rather materialist conviction that identity is largely determined by embodiment (a belief that probably derived from his training and practice as a physician). Despite the eponymous narrator's protestation that he "will not trouble the reader with philosophizing," he does in fact meditate frequently upon the general question of personal identity, asking himself what the essence of the self might be if, when it relocates from one body to another, it takes on (as it does for Sheppard Lee) the habits, inclinations, feelings, opinions, and other characteristics belonging to its new bodily habitation. Metempsychosis, as Edgar

Allan Poe noted in his review of the book, is the traditional term for what Sheppard Lee experiences, and in considering Bird's unusual novel we need first to understand the peculiar conception of metempsychosis that underlies Sheppard Lee's successive disembodiments and re-embodiments.

Bird's particular theory of metempsychosis can be best summarized by reference to Poe's critique of it. Poe reviewed this novel upon its appearance in 1836, and his mainly laudatory response gave generous recognition to the novel's many merits. Poe found it to be "an original in *American* Belles Lettres," and that this originality boded well for America's "future literary prospects."[1] He rehearsed Bird's intricate plot developments in long and fascinated detail. Poe did take issue narrowly, however, with Bird's depiction of metempsychosis, which was different from Poe's use of the same device in various of his own tales like (most famously) "Ligeia." As Poe accurately wrote, Sheppard Lee "partially loses, and partially does not lose, his identity at each transmigration." It would have been better, Poe claimed, for Bird to have had as the focus of the narrative "a character *unchanging*—except as changed by the events themselves." That is, Poe would have preferred an essentially constant narrative focus, a consciousness continually and consistently present to itself (and to Bird's readers), from whose stable perspective the wide variety of social circumstances and events depicted in the novel would be perceived—circumstances and events that, it might be, would slowly have an impact upon that consciousness. Such a protagonist might look different (because he changed bodies), and therefore pass as someone else in the eyes of others, but would retain a secure sense of self-identity nevertheless.

Bird, however, dramatized another, quite different possibility: that identity would be nearly lost from one reincarnation to

1. "Robert M. Bird," *Essays and Reviews* (New York: The Library of America, 1984).

the next. Instead of depicting a consistent personality and point of view from which the succession of new circumstances would be observed and processed, Bird has the consciousness of Sheppard Lee (or his "ghost," "soul," "mind," "phantom," "spirit," "personage," "prototype," or "identity," as he variously named this essence) change fairly suddenly and dramatically at each re-embodiment. The weak essence of Sheppard Lee, that is, only faintly persists through the succession of bodies he inhabits: re-embodiment itself is an event that profoundly—and quite rapidly—alters his consciousness as it migrates from one body to the next. Sheppard Lee essentially becomes a new person at each incarnation, with only a faint (and fading) memory of his previous states. Sheppard Lee is not so much a person as an afterthought.

Poe, in other words, missed the point. He failed to recognize what Bird was aiming at. Bird absolutely did *not* want a stable consciousness at the center of his tale, for he thought that consciousness really was fundamentally weak and unstable, and was controlled to a large degree by its material embodiment (which Bird variously termed its "tenement," "natural dwelling," "fleshly casing," "corporation," "fleshly matrix," or "mould"). This physiognomic determinism, as I've said, must owe a good deal to Bird's experience as a medical doctor. It seems clear too from *Sheppard Lee* that Bird had been reading David Hume and that he shared that skeptical philosopher's counterintuitive account of personal identity, Hume's claim that our commonsense conviction of the continuity and identity of the self—one of our dearest beliefs—is a grave illusion, and the so-called "self" therefore a mere fiction. Thus Bird has Sheppard Lee reflect upon his strange and unexpected experience of extreme personal discontinuity and plurality, and discover for himself something like what Hume had argued for in his celebrated section "Of personal identity" in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). According to Hume, selfhood is "nothing but a

bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement."[2] This succession of distinct perceptions is wrought up into a fictive unity, Hume says, by our imaginations; we never actually *observe* the self in an uninterrupted and simple state, but *posit* it as "that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference."

Hume argues that the idea of a self that persists in time is nonsensical—there simply is no identity or sameness to individual persons. But we evidently have a natural propensity to ascribe identity to this succession of perceptions "and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives." Instead, however, of sticking with "the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation" that actually characterizes human existence, Hume urges us to face up to the fundamental interruptedness, nonidentity, and variability of ourselves.

Bird—in this whimsical book—takes Hume's unsettling argument quite seriously. After Sheppard Lee's first transition, into the body of the rich landowner Mr. John H. Higginson, he reports that he suddenly "had acquired all his distinctive peculiarities"—but "many of these were in a manner stupified within [him], and required to be renewed, or resuscitated, by processes of association." *Association* is the giveaway: that is the characteristic term Hume used to describe how a succession of distinct perceptions or sensations are put into a *relation* or *connection* with one another (which nevertheless are still distinct), but then are artificially *confounded* with one another due to our natural propensity to posit identity or sameness where it does not truly exist. *Association* was a common philosophical term in this period, of course, and didn't belong to Hume exclusively.

2. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985).

The teachings of "associationist psychology" derived from the Scottish Common Sense school were the dominant orthodoxy in American colleges in the early national period.[3] And along with the Common Sense climate of opinion that prevailed at the time, the influential epistemological theory of John Locke held that the originally empty human mind operated by collecting raw sensory impressions, bringing them into association with one another, and thereby building up general ideas. Nevertheless it seems a good bet that in this fiction of Bird's, which daringly approaches the edge of the skeptical abyss—imagining a self that has no core, but is a fragile illusion—he was tracking closely the more radical account of Hume, from which the less intrepid Common Sense philosophers demurred. At each of the transmigrations, Bird has Sheppard Lee give us an account of how one fiction of identity disassembles or decomposes and a new set of habits, propensities, sensations, and so forth is reassembled, by virtue of a new "fiction or imaginary principle of union" into a person. Again, when Lee becomes Mr. I. Dulmer Dawkins, the penniless dandy, his "associations acted but slowly and imperfectly" at first, and "a jumble of events and persons crowded together on [his] memory"; but in good time, and with a few hints from his new companions, the associations kicked in and the jumble was reduced to something approaching coherence—as Hume would expect.

Hume sees the self as an essentially mental phenomenon. Bird however sees it as physically determined, writing here that "the associations of the mind, as well as many of its other qualities, are more dependant upon causes in the body than metaphysicians are disposed to allow." The body, Bird might say, already assembles or associates within its boundaries a good

3. Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961).

deal of the self's diversity of sensation or perception, and thus gives a broad compositional hint to the mind or spirit that is lodged therein. It is well, therefore, when reading *Sheppard Lee*, to take note of the various ways Bird figures the relationship between soul and flesh, a question that obviously preoccupied him. "[O]rdinary spirits lie in their bodies like water in sponges, diffused through every part, affected by the part's affections, changed with its changes, and so intimately united with the fleshly matrix, that the mere cutting off of a leg, as I believe, will, in some cases, leave the spirit limping for life." Elsewhere: "a man's body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterwards." Most of these metaphors, and others like them, give the upper hand to the body's influence, conceiving of the spirit as a relatively passive occupant of the flesh, changed and affected by its physical container.

There is another important way in which Bird and Hume part company: Bird posits a faint continuity of self from incarnation to incarnation, perhaps merely the weak will of Sheppard Lee that propels him in desperation from one bodily station to another, retaining throughout a faint memory of his origin. *Something* minimally persists through all the bodily transmigrations traced in this novel. After all, Bird might have reasoned, if the apparent identity of self from moment to moment in a single body is already, as Hume argues, an illusion, why shouldn't such an illusion be transmitted not only from moment to moment but from body to body? But then Bird is a novelist, not a philosopher, and this may be nothing more than a novelist's necessary expedient. If there were no continuity at all, how would Sheppard Lee tell us the whole story afterward?

Sheppard Lee cautions us repeatedly that he "is not writing a dissertation on metaphysics, nor on morals either." But he—or rather Bird through him—is certainly writing a satire on politics, and a meditation on the bodily basis of political life. When

first he finds himself a disembodied spirit, floating in the air and looking back at the body he has departed, he contemplates in the abstract the possibility of seizing a new body that happens to have expired nearby:

> Why might I not, that is to say, my spirit—deprived by an unhappy accident of its natural dwelling,—take possession of a tenement which there remained no spirit to claim, and thus, uniting interests together, as two feeble factions unite together in the political world, become a body possessing life, strength, and usefulness?

The present edition, which reproduces the first edition of *Sheppard Lee* (published in New York by Harper & Brothers), reclaims the "tenement" of this nearly forgotten novel and gives it back to Robert Montgomery Bird. The original title page did not have Bird's name on it, but only read "Sheppard Lee. Written by Himself." Thus Bird carried out the pretense that this was actually Sheppard Lee's own narrative. (And he covered his tracks by publishing this book in New York with the Harpers, rather than in Philadelphia as usual with his regular publishers, Lea & Blanchard.) The present edition thus reembodies Bird, so to speak—somewhat at odds with his own enacted intentions—restoring him (or consigning him) to his proper authorial identity. The original publication ruse was not a full-blown hoax, obviously; no one would have taken Sheppard Lee's "authorship" at face value, certainly not after a few chapters and once the metempsychosis begins. But Bird probably wanted to keep his readers guessing at least for a little while, and it is recorded by one of the author's biographers that Bird's close friend John Frost wrote to him to say that a mutual friend had "taken up an absurd notion that you are the author of a book called *Sheppard Lee* published in New York last summer" and that Frost, knowing Bird "would be amazed at such an

imputation," had certainly not countenanced it.[4] The present edition makes one additional minor change, however, to the first edition. Originally printed in two volumes, this edition combines them into one. (The first volume of the original edition ended after chapter 3 in book IV.)

2

Robert Montgomery Bird's life was itself one of dramatic transformations.[5] Born on February 5, 1806, in New Castle, Delaware, into a prominent family, he lost his father (who had been a member of the state senate and filled other public offices) in 1810 and was thereafter brought up in somewhat straitened circumstances. As a teenager he attended New Castle Academy and then Germantown Academy to prepare for college, and he secured admission to the medical program at the University of Pennsylvania in 1824. While pursuing his medical studies he also began a career as a writer, composing verse, prose, and dramatic pieces. By the time he graduated from medical school in 1827 he had begun to publish in the *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*. Bird, not unlike Sheppard Lee, moved in different circles, lived different lives that overlapped or interpenetrated. He set up a medical practice in Philadelphia, on 13th Street near Pine, soon after graduating, but within a year he had become discouraged by the realities of clinical medicine (he

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4. See Clement E. Foust, *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919). Perhaps Frost was just sharing a joke with his friend and knew Bird was the author, but was assuring him that his secret had been kept.
5. Unfortunately there is no full-length modern biography of Bird. I have drawn information from a variety of sources, principally Curtis Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), and Foust (cited in note 4).

liked the pure science, but despaired when he couldn't cure a patient; he also regretted the necessity of charging fees, often forgiving them and giving drugs away without charge) and closed his office, never returning to active practice again—although his medical interests clearly thread through his literary work.

After leaving medical practice Bird devoted himself to literature. He wrote poetry and fiction, but was mainly interested in drama. In 1828 the celebrated actor Edwin Forrest had begun seeking suitable material for himself by offering prizes for American plays. Bird's play *Pelopidas, or the Fall of the Polemarchs* was accepted by Forrest and earned the author a prize of $1,000, but because it had no star part for the actor it was not produced. Bird soon wrote for Forrest another play, however, *The Gladiator*, in which Forrest could play the charismatic role of Spartacus, leader of a slave revolt in ancient Rome. *The Gladiator* was produced in the fall of 1831 in New York and Boston and enjoyed brilliant success, bringing Forrest and Bird widespread acclaim. In the ensuing years, Bird wrote several more plays tailored to Forrest's outsized talents, winning his prize three more times, and becoming a close personal friend and traveling companion of the actor. While writing plays for Forrest, Bird also began writing novels, and as his literary ambitions shifted toward prose fiction his relationship with Forrest deteriorated, ending acrimoniously in a dispute over money: Bird claimed that he and Forrest had an oral agreement to share the profits of the productions of his plays, but Forrest claimed that the manuscripts and the productions were his property alone and refused to pay. (Toward the end of his life Bird attempted to bring Forrest into court over the matter, but without witnesses to their oral agreement damages could not be assessed.)

Bird's novels began to appear in rapid succession: *Calavar;*

or, the Knight of the Conquest; a Romance of Mexico (1834), about the 1520 Cortez expedition, and a sequel set a year later, *The Infidel; or, the Fall of Mexico; a Romance* (1835); then a novel set toward the close of the American Revolution, *The Hawks of Hawk-Hollow; a Tradition of Pennsylvania* (1835); *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (1836); *Nick of the Woods; or, the Jibbenainosay; a Tale of Kentucky* (1837), perhaps his most popular novel, a frontier gothic featuring extraordinary violence; and *The Adventures of Robin Day* (1839), a picaresque novel that takes in Philadelphia, the Southwest, Florida, and the open seas. A collection of tales and sketches, *Peter Pilgrim; or, a Rambler's Recollections* appeared in 1838. Bird's biographers say that the intensity of these literary labors led to a breakdown of his health, possibly including mental disorder, and that he retired to a farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1840 to restore himself. One cannot help but think, however, that the question of mental disease had been present in his life earlier, given the portrait of Arthur Megrim in the latter section of *Sheppard Lee* and the meditations on madness in *Peter Pilgrim.* Although Bird left behind an uncompleted novel, *Ipsico Poe, the Long Hunter,*[6] and sketches and plans for many unwritten works of fiction, he was possessed by a deep unresolved restlessness, not unlike Sheppard Lee's, giving up writing novels after giving up plays after giving up medicine. In the last years of his life, Bird (who had always been an active sketcher) took up photography, and there are several hundred extant prints of his now in the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia. The majority of them are haunting cityscapes, taken from the windows of his Filbert Street home, up and down the street and over the nearby roofs. Each of them has careful chemical annotations, recording the details of his technical experimentation; at the

6. Published posthumously by his son Frederick Mayer Bird as *A Belated Revenge* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1889).

same time, they capture a melancholy sense of the ultimate inscrutability of the city around him.

Among Bird's other incarnations we would have to count his stints in journalism. In early 1837 he began as an associate editor of a new periodical called *The American Monthly Magazine*, but ill health led him to break his connection in November of that year. Bird's manuscripts contain detailed notes outlining ideas of several other magazines he imagined founding, none of which came to fruition. In 1847 he became literary editor of the Philadelphia *North American Magazine and United States Gazette*, in which he had purchased a one-third interest, and his connection to this journal continued until the end of his life in 1854. His off-and-on editorial engagements were interleaved, so to speak, with several pedagogical undertakings: in 1841 he returned for a while to his medical interests when he accepted a position in the newly founded Pennsylvania Medical College, where he taught until it disbanded in 1844. (Several of his lectures were published: *The Difficulties of Medical Science: An Inaugural Lecture Introductory to a Course of Lectures* in 1841 and *Valedictory Address Delivered Before the Graduates of Pennsylvania Medical College, 1842–3* in 1843.) He taught as well at the Philadelphia High School in 1844, and in 1846 his friend John Clayton, a Delaware politician, secured for him a bank directorship in that state. During these years of mixing several pursuits Bird also involved himself in Whig politics, led on by his friend Clayton: Bird undertook an abortive campaign for Congress in 1842, although he withdrew his name out of deference to his wife's reluctance, and in 1844 he stumped on behalf of Clayton, who was seeking the nomination to be Henry Clay's vice presidential running mate. In 1848 he published a campaign biography of Zachary Taylor, and that seems to have concluded his involvement in the kind of electoral politics he satirized so vehemently in the early parts of *Sheppard Lee* a decade earlier.

3

In the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library, among the Robert Montgomery Bird manuscripts that are kept there, several papers survive on which Bird apparently jotted down notes to himself in preparation for writing *Sheppard Lee.*[7] Most of these are mere scraps, although some are full sheets. These notes consist, in the main, of lists of character types or social roles that he was evidently considering as possible incarnations of his protagonist. Some of these are the types of persons that Sheppard Lee eventually did become in the published novel; other ideas were evidently discarded along the way. But it is instructive to see the range of possibilities that occurred to Bird's imagination, and then to compare them to the choices he finally made. In *Sheppard Lee* as we have it, the narrator successively occupies the bodies and identities of six different persons: first, John Hazlewood Higginson, a successful Philadelphia brewer whose wealth now enables him to live as a New Jersey squire; next, Isaac Dulmer Dawkins, a penniless dandy in Philadelphia; third, Abram Skinner, aka Old Goldfist, a miserly note shaver, mortgage lender, gambler, and stockjobber; fourth, Zachariah Longstraw, a naive Quaker philanthropist; then he becomes Tom, a contented Virginia slave; and finally Arthur Megrim, a wealthy and eccentric Virginia heir, afflicted with ennui.

One of Bird's preparatory lists contains, in addition to versions of most of the above, these additional possibilities: "The genteel forger, counterfeiter, and bank robber," "A fanatic—Mormonite, perhaps," "A Monmouth Wrecker—seized & carried to New York," "A Police officer," and "A soldier in black Hawk War, where the gen'ls get all the credit." On yet another

7. Robert Montgomery Bird Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Ms. Coll. 1108, Box 11, Folder 259.

scrap, Bird made notes to himself under the heading "Men who may be supposed happy." He listed there "The patriot—the ardent young virginian elected to Congress, where he finds nothing but miserable selfishness," "President—the reformer," and "The popular actor." One begins to see certain patterns among these ideas. Some of these identities would have doubled, so to speak, the basic premise of identity theft which remains constant throughout *Sheppard Lee.* Had Lee become a forger or counterfeiter, or especially had he become a popular actor, he would have been faking it as a faker, imposing as an impostor. This would extend also to the "Monmouth Wrecker": *wrecker* is an archaic term for someone who lures a vessel to destruction, perhaps by displaying a deceptive light on a dangerous coastline—like that near Monmouth, New Jersey—and then plunders the wreck. (At least this form of criminal imposture seems to have been destined, had Bird used it in his novel, to be justly punished.) One can't help but wish that Bird had at least had Sheppard Lee do a turn as an actor: after Bird's own falling-out with Forrest, he doubtless had a rich trove of reflections on what might be called professional metempsychosis.

In these jottings there are various public officers mentioned as possible way stations for Sheppard Lee: a policeman, a soldier, a congressman, even the president. In these cases, Bird apparently views public service with a jaundiced eye, as his soldier is gypped of credit for his accomplishments in battle, and his congressman is destined for terrible disillusionment; one imagines that his policeman would have been witness as well to corruption and hypocrisy, and his president's reforming intentions would have been unavailing. These various rueful takes on public office and American political life seem to have been condensed, in the novel, into the early episodes when Sheppard Lee, before undergoing his first transformation, becomes involved in local party politics only to discover that he has been cynically used by craftier politicos.

On yet another scrap, in addition to several of the same types who had appeared on other lists and in the eventual book, Bird identified "The Physician" as a possibility, and elsewhere "A philanthropist—or rather a physician." Again, although it is obviously fruitless to wish Bird had made choices other than those he did, one can't help but wonder how he would have drawn on his own professional experience as a medical doctor whose conscience could not make peace with the business end of medical practice. And on yet a fourth such list, several more possibilities appeared, including "A bigoted Christian," "a legislator from Maine, the maker of the law of 1835, for substituting life imprisonment, & civil death, for capital punishment," "Perhaps a travelling Englishman," "One of the 'Southern Chivalry,'" and "A parson—but a liberal one." We saw how on another list he had mentioned "A fanatic—Mormonite, perhaps," and here he gives an explicit negative charge to another religious figure ("bigoted Christian") and perhaps it was in order to broaden and balance his satire of blind religiosity or hypocritical sanctity that he meant to give equal time to a "liberal" minister too. Did Bird think that capital punishment was less cruel than life imprisonment, and was that why he wanted to take a shot at the supposed benevolence of Maine's 1835 moratorium on punishment by death? That would seem to be the implication, although Bird must have concluded that the issue was too local and time bound to serve his purposes adequately. Although the novel did, in the end, make some fairly specific references and allusions to recent political events, on the whole the types of persons Sheppard Lee successively occupied have a more generic quality than this specific Maine lawmaker would have done.

On several other scraps Bird noted that he might use characters such as "Little Tommy Tumble" or "Dionysius Murray"—the former to illustrate "a schoolboy's woes," the latter to exemplify "a schoolmaster's and author's [woes]." And elsewhere again, "An Editor," "A Critic," "An author," "A man of

Sentiment," or "a Yankee Pedlar's body." The Yankee peddler would presumably have been yet another dissembler, and the man of sentiment seems likely to have been a man of false or pretentious sentimentality. The possibility of Sheppard Lee entering the literary world, as an editor, critic, or author, is intriguing, again because it would compound the series of impostures that Bird himself was already compounding as he, the author of this book, impersonated Sheppard Lee, who in turn impersonated a series of others. Sheppard Lee does, after all, in the end become an author of this purported autobiography, retrospectively re-creating on the page the series of embodiments and re-embodiments he had undergone.

What is clear enough from these various possibilities that occurred to Bird's mind in the course of plotting out his novel is that he wanted to provide a map of the American society, and a taxonomy of American social types and roles, that would take in a wide range of social factors: religion, region, nation, age, condition, profession, moral constitution, race. He considered criminals and law enforcers, public servants and public miscreants, honest men and liars, and those especially who were self-deceived. He didn't quite use the idea for "One of the 'Southern Chivalry,'" although Arthur Megrim is an odd variation on that stereotype. In addition to those identities through which Sheppard Lee himself passes, the novel includes a whole gallery of other social types whom he or one of his avatars encounters in the course of the plot, even if Bird doesn't choose (or circumstances don't conspire) to translate the protagonist into their bodies.

4

The most daring choice Bird made in the final novel, which does not appear in his preparatory notes, was to have Sheppard

Lee become an African American slave. Perhaps it can be inferred that this was a late development in his planning of the novel, or even that as he wrote he was inspired to turn Sheppard Lee in this alarming direction. The most puzzling, and unsettling, part of the novel for a modern reader begins when Sheppard Lee (now occupying the person of Zachariah Longstraw, the Quaker do-gooder) is captured in Philadelphia by some slave catchers who cannot lay their hands on the runaway they are seeking and, so that their trip north won't have been a complete waste, decide to haul Longstraw down South, misrepresent him as an ardent abolitionist, and auction him off to be lynched. We seem to be invited, as readers, to sympathize with the plight of a man who doesn't really care very much about the injustice of slavery but who is being mortally jeopardized by the false ascription to him of abolitionist convictions. It would be easier on readers if Bird had simply made Longstraw a virtuous abolitionist so that we could have a clear conscience as we sympathized with his martyrdom. Instead, he asks us to feel for the peril of a man who is indifferent to what was arguably the paramount moral issue of the time in America, the persistence of racialized bondage. Longstraw rather foolishly imposes his philanthropy on all sorts of ungrateful recipients, but he has virtually no feeling for the suffering of slaves in the American South. And Bird did not stop there, with that rather provocative challenge to his reader's moral certainties. Once Longstraw reaches Virginia and is about to be lynched by an enraged mob, Bird arranges to have Sheppard Lee (as Longstraw) become instead a simple-minded slave named Tom, who is not only oblivious to his own degraded status but knows no better than to believe that his is the most delightful situation imaginable—as if being a living slave, no matter how degraded such a condition might be, was at least better than being a dead Quaker. The narrative has taken us, up to this point, through a series of transformations always motivated by Sheppard Lee's

repeated desire to escape the limitations and miseries of one life, and steal into what he believes to be the pleasures and privileges of some other life. In each of his incarnations, he soon becomes disillusioned and dissatisfied—until he becomes a slave, and he finds contentment complete. What are we to make of this seeming perversity? Each existence up to this point has eventually generated its own disillusionment; but the slave Tom is eternally contented—or would be, if his contentment were not disturbed by external influence in the form of an abolitionist pamphlet that makes its way into the slave quarters.

Was slavery, at least in its least harsh form, a morally indifferent institution? If slaves were happy, was there any reason to disturb the status quo? Could Bird really mean to ask such questions? It is probably not a good idea to try to elicit from Bird's fictional depiction of slavery a settled *position* on this momentous moral and political issue. As a satirist he is plainly more interested in exposing hypocrisy, moral self-importance, and dangerous naiveté—among abolitionists and slaveholders alike—than he is in offering his own opinions on the issue. If *Sheppard Lee* can seem complacent about slavery—as when, early on, Sheppard Lee inherits with his family farm the "negro-man Jim," decides that because he "had some scruples of conscience about holding a slave," and also because Jim was more trouble than he was worth, he would free Jim, only to find that Jim absolutely refuses to be set free—there is also the contrary evidence of Bird's play *The Gladiator* (1831), with its colorful depiction of heroic slave resistance. Walt Whitman wrote that *The Gladiator* was "as full of 'Abolitionism' as an egg is of meat." There is some evidence from Bird's diary that he at least took pleasure in disturbing the smugness of the slaveholding South: "If the *Gladiator* were produced in a slave state, the managers, players, and perhaps myself in the bargain, would be rewarded with the Penitentiary!" Then again, when Longstraw does become the "African's friend" and even briefly harbors a

fugitive slave, Bird arranges to have his kind intentions and real risks poorly rewarded after the fugitive makes off with silver, watches, and other valuables belonging to Longstraw. And when the thief is caught, and Longstraw gets his possessions back, he undeservedly incurs the wrath of the free black community, members of which form a mob and burn down Longstraw's house. All this, of course, is hard to decode since it is narrated in retrospect by a character, Sheppard Lee, who is habitually obtuse and possibly deranged. Again, we seem on firm ground only when we say that Bird is here being provocative and contrarian, refusing easy pieties and unrealistic hopes, offering us a rather unsparing satire, not a polemic for or against slavery.

Certainly much happened in the years immediately following *The Gladiator* that might have affected Bird's views on slavery. Nat Turner led an unsuccessful slave revolt in Virginia in 1831 that resulted in the deaths of about fifty-five white people, and Turner met his own death by hanging. Even those unsympathetic to the slaveholding culture of the South had their minds focused by this terrible event on the potentially horrendous violence that might be required to bring domestic slavery to an end. In that same year, William Lloyd Garrison founded the Abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, which was dedicated to the immediate and unconditional release of all slaves. Bird traveled with Forrest on tour through the South in 1832, taking a steamboat from New York to Charleston in April and arriving in the midst of the so-called Nullification controversy, when South Carolina boldly declared certain federal tariffs null and void, an early and decisive episode in the assertive formation of Southern states-rights ideology and sectional antagonism; President Jackson's threat of federal military force convinced South Carolina to rescind its Ordinance of Nullification the next year, but this rescension was a deep blow to Southern pride. The

American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833, signaling a new level of political organization behind antislavery sentiment; Southern proslavery ideologists (and Northern anti-abolitionists) now had to reckon with an active and determined movement on an enlarging scale. Anti-abolition riots broke out in New York and Philadelphia in 1835, and Bird's account of how Longstraw is dragged down South and lynched by a mob clearly refers to an incident that took place in Boston in late 1835. On September 10 of that year, a mob, in an attempt to intimidate Garrison, erected a macabre gallows in front of his house on Brighton Street. Then on October 21, Garrison barely escaped lynching by an enraged mob that laid siege to the antislavery office and threatened to tar and feather him, or ship him to Savannah. He was saved from destruction only by being lodged at the mayor's behest overnight in the jail in Leverett Street on charges (trumped up for the purpose) of disturbing the peace.[8] These were, of course, deadly serious events—out of which Bird made a sort of rueful comedy, cast like everything else in the novel in what Poe called "a jocular manner," and not calculated to flatter the moral self-assurance of those on any side of this issue.

Some additional perspective on Bird's depiction of slavery, and on his satirical approach to its fictional representation, can be found a little later in another of his writings, a sketch called "My Friends in the Madhouse" that appeared in 1838 in a book entitled *Peter Pilgrim; or, a Rambler's Recollections.* The narrator of this odd tale finds himself accompanying a physician on his rounds in an insane asylum, and coming upon a young man named John Jones who protests in a friendly way that he is not mad at all, but has been cunningly imprisoned on the pretext

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8. See Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

of madness by those who stand to lose from an invention he has patented. John explains to his sympathetic visitor that "he had been grieved by the quarrel betwixt the abolitionists and slave-owners, which appeared to him to threaten the very existence of the republic."[9] Although "somewhat of an abolitionist myself," John explains, he also understood quite well that liberating the slaves would ruin the agricultural economy of the South unless some substitute for slave labor could be found or devised. To this political impasse he brought his philanthropic sentiments and scientific ingenuity, and claims to have solved the problem

> by the invention of my patent niggers to be worked by horse-power—yes, sir, by the invention (and a grand one it was,) of patent niggers—men, sir, not of perishing and suffering flesh and blood, but of wood, iron, leather and canvass, so constructed as (by means of horse-power to put them in motion) to be a great deal better than the real niggers.

With this "glorious invention" John hoped to free the slaves and make his own fortune into the bargain. He first took his invention to the Abolition Society, but they rejected his technological solution out of hand—because they "could not bear that they should lose the honour, and glory, and profit of completing the great work of emancipation"—and so they destroyed his prototypes, charged him with madness, and brought him to the insane asylum in a straitjacket.

Bird's most unsettling invention in *Sheppard Lee* is Tom, the happy slave. Here Bird risks a compromise with his own theory of metempsychosis, for while he held that in every one of his successive existences Sheppard Lee retained a shadow of a

9. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1838.

memory of his previous incarnations—and therefore a thin thread of subjective continuity as Sheppard Lee—now he "ceased to remember all my previous states of existence." This was either, he explains, because as an African he naturally dwells always in the present and has no sense of the past—the allegation of dull-witted present-mindedness was then a common racialist slur—or because in his new condition his "mind was stupified." That is, he is mentally limited either because of an innate racial characteristic or because circumstances—his enslavement—had degraded him. Either way, this makes some trouble for narrative consistency, since if this one of Sheppard Lee's many incarnations truly breaks the thread of his faint ongoing existence, one might wonder how, in the end, he is able to remember and include the prior series of experiences when he later comes to tell the tale. And Bird flirts rather dangerously here with some ancient racist stereotypes—but he knows what he is doing. Between these two possible explanations for Tom's utter contentment (the racist account that has a black man naturally lacking in temporal consciousness, or the historicist account that blames slavery for ruining a slave's mind), Bird wickedly says the "reader may settle the difficulty for himself." This seems, finally, to be Bird's rather pointed agenda: to put his readers on notice that, in these fraught times of national struggle over slavery, and in the face of intractable political dilemmas, he could give no affordance for moralistic complacency of any sort.

If the politics of this novel resist paraphrase, as I think they insistently and frustratingly do, some perspective on Bird's purposes might be derived from recent research on the politics of bodies in the antebellum era. Scholars have recently examined what they have sometimes called the ideology of disembodiment in the early national period in the United States. The political common sense of the period, derived from classical republic theory, held that a good citizen put his personal interests

aside and devoted himself to the public weal. That is, he purposely bracketed the selfish desires that belonged to his own body (his wish for personal comfort and gratification), and tried to imagine what was best for the body politic as a whole. This kind of imaginary disembodiment was the fundamental exercise of civic-mindedness.[10] It would follow, then, that a lively tale of disembodiment and re-embodiment, such as *Sheppard Lee*, would have fundamental political implications.

If Sheppard Lee's disembodiments make reference to his society's politics of civic abstraction, however, they do so in devious ways. Lee's venture into electoral politics early in the novel, before his first bodily transmigration, is an abject failure, to be sure; the political public sphere as depicted in this tale is characterized by rampant self-interestedness (not civic-minded disinterestedness), and Sheppard Lee can't hack it. His own subsequent disembodiments are in fact driven not by selflessness but by self-interest. He sees another life that looks more enjoyable than his own, and seeks to steal into it. The simplest way to summarize this would be to say that every disembodiment herein is followed by re-embodiment; each social position through which Sheppard Lee passes is lodged ineluctably in a particular body, and true civic disembodiment is nowhere to be found. The transformations through which the novel takes us all lead back to the body. A concept like the "ideology of disembodiment" would not have been familiar to Bird or his contemporaries; it represents a critical attempt to discern, in historical retrospect, one of the governing tropes of political life in the period. But it is as if Bird discerned, presciently, that all

10. The political scientist Catherine A. Holland deftly reviews and critiques this argument in *The Body Politic: Foundings, Citizenship, and Difference in the American Political Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Much of her discussion bears pertinently upon *Sheppard Lee*, especially her attention to the ways in which the body (literally and figuratively) haunts republican ideology's tendency toward abstraction.

the talk of disinterested virtue (and its disappearance) that *was* common in his time finally came down to a question of embodiment: we have bodies, those bodies have needs and desires, democracy can't wish them away but must take account of them. The novel has Sheppard Lee experimentally inhabit a variety of bodies and discover what follows, in terms of moral and political outlook, from those different circumstances of embodiment. The supreme irony here is that certain bodies—female bodies, laboring-class bodies, slave bodies—were understood to incapacitate their inhabitants for disinterested self-abstraction. Although, curiously, Bird did not choose to have Sheppard Lee transition through a female body, the supreme irony of the novel is that in the slave's body he finds his nearest approach to inner contentment, and eventually (despite the racist mythology that would make this unthinkable) his fullest experience of political consciousness and revolutionary agency.

5

Notwithstanding the very trenchant social reflections and political provocations of *Sheppard Lee*, it is also an accomplished literary production. Though a powerfully original work, and an anomaly in antebellum American writing, it is one that is also indebted to a host of precursor texts. Sheppard Lee's adventures have a source as far back as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and all the tales of magical transformation that followed it, while Bird affects a jocular style that harks back distinctly to Laurence Sterne and other eighteenth-century satirists. *Sheppard Lee* is also a picaresque novel, its hero's daft perspective owing a good deal to the original picaresque hero Don Quixote, but perhaps owing even more to the Man of la Mancha's American avatar in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's once famous but now little-known serial satire *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1815). Brackenridge gives us

Captain John Farrago, whose political complacency is repeatedly comically disturbed as he tours the Pennsylvania backcountry with his trusty sidekick, the Irish "bog-trotter" Teague O'Regan. Teague's misadventures in the political arena presage Sheppard Lee's quite neatly. Sheppard Lee's baffledness and whimsicality resemble those of several of Washington Irving's narrators and protagonists, including the familiar Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane, but perhaps most recall Diedrich Knickerbocker of *A History of New York* (1809), a book whose studied datedness of style and guilefully straight face must have pleased Bird. One also can detect in *Sheppard Lee* echoes of the curious minor genre of the "it narrative," popular in the eighteenth century, with titles like *Adventures of a Hackney Coach*, *Adventures of a Guinea*, *Adventures of a Black Coat*, and *Adventures of a Corkscrew*, all purporting to be narratives authored by the objects in question, telling about their material origins, manufactured production, commercial travels, and so forth. James Fenimore Cooper diligently revived the genre with his *Autobiography of a Pocket-Handkerchief* in 1843, in which the hankie in question tells the involved story of his growth as a flax plant, harvesting, weaving, sale, attendance at fashionable balls, resale, and so on.

Closest in time and place to *Sheppard Lee* are the strikingly many American texts from the Revolutionary and early national period that can be construed together as an archive of identity transformation from a period when Americans were, in truth, morphing before each other's eyes quite dramatically—from British colonials to American nationals, from provincial simplicity to urbane sophistication, and from backward-looking republican citizens to forward-looking capitalist strivers. These texts form *Sheppard Lee*'s natural cohort, and I will mention just a few for purposes of illustration. Most famously, there is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, written at intervals from 1771 to 1789 (or 1790), and published haphazardly—in frag-

ments, in condensed form, in unauthorized French translation, in English retranslation from the French, and so forth—from 1790 onward, and in something approaching complete form only in 1818. Although Franklin's narrative purports to be a truthful account of a real life, offered as a practical model to be imitated by its readers, it is not hard to imagine Bird being impressed by the near unrecognizability of the final Franklin (worldly, scientifically enlightened, widely traveled) to the inexperienced boy from Puritan Boston who ran away to Philadelphia as a young man. Also there is J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), which is presented as the first-person narrative of an unsophisticated Pennsylvania farmer named James but was actually written by one of the most curious and unpredictable characters of his time. Crèvecoeur was a Frenchman who became Anglified as a young man because of a romantic attachment to a young Englishwoman, later emigrated (after a stint in the French military in Canada) to the British colonies, married into a Tory family in Westchester, came under political suspicion during the Revolution and fled to England, then escaped to France (where he more or less had to reacquire his native language). He eventually returned to America as the French king's representative. This book is famous for asking, in a chapter with this title, "What Is an American?"—a question *Sheppard Lee* was still turning over several decades later.

Alongside Franklin's and Crèvecoeur's well-known tales there are countless interesting and provocative early-American narratives of self-transformation that are equally bold in the claims they make for the radical possibilities of self-metamorphosis, among them the countless spiritual autobiographies detailing religious conversion, the many popular captivity narratives describing temporary or permanent assimilation to Native American culture, and even a few narratives of gender transgression. One of these was written by Herman Mann, and is called *The*

Female Review; or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady (1797), and comprises the story of Deborah Sampson, a young woman who cross-dressed so she could enlist and fight in the Revolutionary War. Here is a story that (unlike *Sheppard Lee*) does imagine crossing the gender boundary, and finds ample comic possibility therein (picture Deborah, passing as a handsome young soldier, fending off the interest of other young ladies who are beguiled by his/her military swagger). Making a claim for transformation that goes deeper than transvestism, the *Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824), written by James E. Seaver but cast in the voice of Jemison herself—an audacious and highly successful act of literary impersonation—follows the life of a young white woman who, as she understood it, actually became an Indian. Mary Jemison was a white Pennsylvania girl, kidnapped at fifteen by a Shawnee and French raiding party, adopted into a Seneca family, and later married into Iroquois society, where she remained by choice for the rest of her life. Seaver's testimony is that in her physical bearing—the way Jemison held herself, how she moved her eyes, the whole of her bodily demeanor—she had acquired "Indian" identity. And part of Jemison's own claim for self-transformation is that, as the mother of many children who were Indian under the definition of the law and certainly in the prejudicial view of other white people, she was an Indian herself. (At the end of Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* the narrator, James, discouraged by the encroachment of Revolutionary political upheaval and violence, makes plans to move with his family to the frontier and take up residence with Indians—thus projecting a collective familial project of metamorphosis.)

Another significant contribution to these American "metamorphosis tales" is *The Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs* (first published in 1798, then added onto by the author in succeeding editions in 1804, 1811, and thereafter), which gets revived and reprinted periodically—there is a 1924 edition with a preface by

Robert Frost—but seems to lapse back into neglect every time. Burroughs was a notorious con man, who dearly relished his notoriety; he posed without conscience as a schoolteacher and a preacher, worked as a counterfeiter of currency (and went to prison for it), among other impostures. Such was his fame as a scoundrel and poser that, in the course of time, he tells us, many others adopted his identity and passed themselves off as Stephen Burroughs, so that he (that is, the "real" Stephen Burroughs) would often find himself answering for crimes and misdeeds committed by others who were making convenient use of his identity—his identity, that is, as someone wonderfully adept at adopting other identities.

Stephen Burroughs is perhaps Sheppard Lee's nearest counterpart as an identity thief, although Burroughs lives the story Poe thought Bird should have written, taking his constant self through a series of masquerades without ever coming near to losing track of himself. It is Bird's weird accomplishment in *Sheppard Lee* to ask his readers—busy trying to figure out what it was to be an American—to stop and ask what it meant to "be" anything at all, to dare to entertain the possibility that the question made no sense, and to imagine what it would be like to come close to losing track of the precious thread of one's self.

It is this novel's metaphysical rigor and its consistent (albeit frustrating) refusal to point a simple lesson, while at the same staging a powerful political provocation, that demands our attention today. Much of the American literature of the early national and antebellum periods was explicitly didactic, endorsing one or another religious or social piety, aiming at its readers' moral improvement. Many novels worked to make people more devout, or to enlist them against slavery or another social ill, or to inculcate domestic virtues in them. These all may be respectable purposes, and interesting in their own terms. But *Sheppard Lee* is different, and rare: it bracingly refuses to accommodate what the critic Leo Bersani has called "redemptive"

reading (reading that expects literature to redeem, or compensate for, or somehow correct damaged experience or historical catastrophe).[11] It is a satire, not a sermon; it teases and baffles its readers, producing a tonic uncertainty and palpable frustration rather than a satisfying lesson. It is no wonder that Poe admired it, since it does something roughly like what Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), or Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), would do in the years to come; or something anticipating what such practitioners of the postmodern as John Barth and Paul Auster have more recently undertaken. This weird book remains an engrossing puzzle, as well as a genuine entertainment, putting into play (and deliberately not resolving) enigmatic philosophical, political, and literary questions. In one of his medical lectures on "the difficulties of medical science," Bird observed that the medical profession was frequently subject to jibes and satires because, as he said it was commonly alleged, "Medicine is an *imperfect* science."[12] Doctors don't know what causes disease, people complained, nor did they know certainly how to cure it. Bird readily conceded the point, but argued that this imperfection was inevitable, and to be expected of a profession always operating at the limits of knowledge and judgment. How could physicians confidently treat bodies when even philosophy must "confess ignorance of the . . . incomprehensibilities of animal life," he said; to the medical students he was addressing Bird observed that human disease was finally inscrutable, and that the "difficulties that oppose the progress of Medical science, are chiefly those that arise

11. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Bersani's argument that the "culture of redemption itself depends on even more fundamental assumptions about authoritative identities, about identity *as* authority" (p. 3) makes sense of Bird's combination in his novel of the dissolution of the self and satirical obscurity.
12. *The Difficulties of Medical Science: An Inaugural Lecture, Introductory to a Course of Lectures* (Philadelphia: [s.n.], 1841).

from the mysterious nature of the objects of study." Bird brought something of this humility to his task as a novelist. As a satirist he could readily identify certain social ills endemic in the early national period—pathological concentrations of wealth and the hard poverty of rootless city dwellers; noxious forms of snobbery and virulent strains of resentment; not to mention festering forms of social domination and human bondage, the dangerous ramifications of which could scarcely be calculated, or contained.

The critic Terry Eagleton has an apt term to be applied to this novel by a physician-turned-fictionist: the novel, Eagleton says, is a "forensic instrument," with which to explore, assimilate, and interpret social upheavals.[13] With this forensic instrument, this enigmatic novel, Bird walks us up to the forbidding face of antebellum American social confusion and intellectual distraction.

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13. *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).