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Beating the Devil: Life and Art in Peter Cartwright's Autobiography

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Living in semiretirement on his farm near Pleasant Plains, Illinois, Peter Cartwright finally sat still long enough to write his life story. The year was 1856: more than thirty years since his removal from Kentucky to Illinois and fully fifty-four years after he had received his license to preach and began an unparalleled career as a frontier circuit rider for the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. According to the Preface, Cartwright undertook the work of the *Autobiography* reluctantly, and only after long importuning on the part of his friends and colleagues. Much better, he maintained, that some "competent historiographer" should have done it, for Cartwright thought himself sorely unqualified: He had no formal education, there was no journal from early circuit days to provide a documentary base, and - worst of all - he believed that he suffered from a "failing and treacherous memory." Like Mark Twain (whose own *Autobiography* is similarly a vernacular classic), Cartwright could remember anything when he was young, whether it had happened or not. But by the age of seventy-one he was afraid he was remembering mainly what had not happened.

Thus was born, of duty and a desire to set the record straight, what Cartwright called "this imperfect sketch." The record in question was long and various, and over the years it had been subject to heroic inflation: As I well understand ... I have been considered constitutionally an eccentric minister, thousands of the thrilling incidents that have gained publicity, and have been attributed to me, when they are not found in my book will create disappointment. But I trust their place will be supplied by a true version; and though some of them may not be as marvelous, may nevertheless be quite as interesting.¹

By 1856 it was pointless for Cartwright to deny that he was a living legend. He was doubly canonized as a Methodist saint and western hero. No doubt some accounts of his exploits were wildly exaggerated; some were downright false, like the persistent tales of his frontier brawls with the notorious riverman Mike Fink.² Such stories were long on the marvelous and short on fact and would be replaced in the *Autobiography* with "true versions" that the author hoped would prove no less interesting. In other words, if there was going to be a lasting Cartwright myth - and all the signs seemed likely - Peter Cartwright himself wished to be its perpetrator.

The resulting volume, 525 octavo pages set in 8-point type, was published in 1856 by the firms of Hitchcock and Walden in Cincinnati and Nelson and Phillips in New York, and widely distributed by the Methodist Book Concern.³ It was a decided success, if not a best-seller: Within two years there were more than thirty thousand copies in print in the United States, and the book sold steadily in England after the first English edition appeared in 1859. Throughout the balance of the century - and well into the twentieth - the *Autobiography* continued to be popular, compelling to both the faithful (who saw in Cartwright a figure for emulation from Methodism's age of saints), and the merely curious (who sensed they were sharing the life of an American original whose time was fast passing even in 1856).⁴

While Cartwright's *Autobiography* is much less well known today, it is still alive in the culture. And what has sustained the book for nearly 130 years is its wealth of stories, all redounding to the glory of the "backwoods preacher." When Cartwright speaks casually of "thousands of thrilling incidents that have gained publicity," we may be inclined to dismiss the number as vain hyperbole- until we read the author's own versions of his manifold western adventures, and until we discover how many tales told about him - both before and after the *Autobiography*'s publication - were actually popular legends. Except for its vaguely chronological organization, the book is formless: "Picaresque" might be an appropriate literary description, so long as we do not insist on a strict application of the term. The episodic nature of the *Autobiography* has led some readers to judge it unselfconscious and subliterary. "Naively self-glorifying" is the way that Ernest S. Bates puts it in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, thus setting a critical tone that has lasted, while uncritically accepting Cartwright's view of himself as announced in the Preface.⁵ But in fact the *Autobiography*, though certainly self-glorifying, is by no means naive.

Cartwright was a supreme storyteller, as every generation of readers has recognized, but he was also an accomplished writer who polished his craft during more than fifty years of composing churchly prose, from administrative reports to formal theological tracts.⁶ What is more, he was a lifelong tire-less reader, having educated himself (even to the extent of learning Latin and Greek) during the uncountable hours on horseback between preaching appointments or on the way to some far-distant general conference.⁷ These are important characteristics to keep in mind when we approach the *Autobiography*. Cartwright deprecated literary and intellectual attainments because his audience - both his readers and the thousands who thronged to hear him preach - thought of him as something else: a recognized "man-of-words"⁸ in the American West who triumphed because his community valued oral performance, whether from a preacher or a politician or a frontier braggart (significantly, Cartwright was at times all three). In a retrospective work like the *Autobiography*, Cartwright in effect apologizes for having to write instead of talk, then proceeds to assume the mythic mask of the frontier humorist-

the rough-and-ready democrat who also happens to be a preacher. In so doing he joins an American literary tradition, loosely based on oral sources, that had reached its popular peak by the early 1850s and was already beginning to become an object of nostalgia. And a measure of the mask's effectiveness is that readers have so often accepted it at face value.

Perhaps *we* are the naive ones. Modern critics have often deemed the *Autobiography* "unsatisfactory as the record of a life,"⁹ yet at the same time, and inconsistently, we believe it to be transparently revealing of Cartwright's character, in a manner we would never allow with more obviously literary texts like *The Education of Henry Adams*, or even Ben Franklin's quaint eighteenth-century invention of the American success story. In short, Cartwright's *Autobiography* may be one of our most beguiling literary impersonations. Once again the comparison with Mark Twain is apt: the familiar picture of the old man in his white dressing gown, propped up in bed with his morning cigar, dictating his life story in an unceasing stream of perfect vernacular, never-to-be-revised prose. Likewise we can imagine the elderly Cartwright sitting at his desk and laboriously turning second-nature speech - yarns, prayers, preaching- into acceptably literate prose. But at that point the parallel diverges. In Twain's case we have not only an immense literary output with which to challenge the persona of the "natural" but also a long tradition of biography: We know that Mr. Clemens was (among other things) a dedicated artist, jealous of his craft, and a man who loved his honorary Oxford degree and its scarlet vestments because they signified highbrow success - no matter what Mark Twain's demotic voice might have claimed about being just folks.

Cartwright, too, had an honorary degree (a Doctor of Divinity from McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois, an institution he helped found), and we do not hear him rumbling his condemnation of those who, in later years, referred to him as "Dr. Cartwright." Yet in the *Autobiography* no one is ridiculed more often than the "downy doctors of divinity" from the East who have elevated theology over religion and do not know the proper way of preaching to the people. In Peter Cartwright's case, biography has hardly challenged - let alone displaced- the magnificent persona of the *Autobiography*. Indeed, more than a century after its publication, no definitive *biography* of Peter Cartwright has appeared, and we must wonder how many well-meaning attempts have been short-circuited by the high amperage of the man's overmastering voice.

Masking and voicing, of course, are both personal habits and literary devices - nothing more natural to a preacher with apparently unequalled dramatic and extemporaneous gifts. To say that Cartwright dresses in a persona for his *Autobiography* is in no sense to call him a hypocrite nor to call his book somehow less "true to life" because of his literary impersonation. For half a century he had first formed, then fulfilled, the expectations of his western audiences: yarn-spinning and powerful preaching, with the two becoming one on his greatest occasions. Surely he was right, looking back on his career

from the standpoint in 1856, to build the *Autobiography* around stories, especially since Cartwright knew how impossible it would be to recreate his kind of preaching in literature. (He despised nobody more than the seminary-trained minister who would stand before a frontier congregation and *read* a sermon - a fine example of his satirical powers on that subject is his account of a "fresh, green, live Yankee from down east" in Chapter 25.) He was staying with what had worked, namely a personal narrative in western American idiom. There had always been a calculated element to his performances: The point was to disguise calculation through masking. Why should the *Autobiography* be any different?

For a time at the beginning of his itinerancy - the first few years of the new century - Cartwright had kept a journal, following the fashion among circuit riders. He abandoned the practice when, as he says, "It seemed to me we were outdoing the thing." His youthful lucubrations he then committed "to the moles and bats," never to journalize again (page 7). Although in later years he was to regret that impulse, insisting that if he had his career to live over he would be a scrupulous journalist, the *Autobiography* itself may have benefitted. Many books based on journals never transcend the quotidian, but Cartwright's seems to gain energy from being largely free of day-to-day documentation. Cartwright refreshed his "failing and treacherous memory" with the published minutes of Methodist district and general conferences. He was twelve times elected a delegate to the quadrennial general conference and was on just about every occasion a voluble participant: fearless in debate and a respected opponent. Hence the minutes must have helped him reconstruct the growth of the church in the West and rehearse his part in the great national debates, especially over slavery, that were after 1820 so much a part of every Methodist general conference.¹⁰ District conference minutes, on the other hand, probably stimulated his recollection of particular camp meetings and preaching appointments over the years, crucial settings out of which his storytelling emerges. But beyond those documentary aids, Cartwright was on his own: The heart of the *Autobiography* would be a personal recreation from memory, abetted by reports of Cartwright stories published in the popular press or circulating orally among the people and sooner or later getting back to him for verification.

One of the most persistent of these tales was Cartwright's famous encounter with General Andrew Jackson, which occurred - if it occurred at all - in Nashville in October of 1818. The *Autobiography* accords the incident full-narrative treatment, with an expository introduction, fictionalized dramatization of the central confrontation between the men, and a neat ending that, as always, gives the preacher the last word (though not at General Jackson's expense). The story runs to six pages, making it one of the longest in the book, and it ought to be discussed as a whole. But a brief context must suffice to get us to the point of high drama. Peter Cartwright, at the height of his influence amongst the rural folk of Kentucky and Tennessee, travels to Nashville to attend a general conference. Once in the

city he feels somewhat excluded by the host preacher, a representative of "Young America" who is afraid Cartwright will embarrass him with a "break on slavery, dress, or dram-drinking" (pages 189-90). Thus the "city preacher" is anxious that Cartwright behave himself when he addresses the Monday night service:

[T]he church was filled to overflowing; every seat was crowded, and many had to stand. After singing and prayer ... I then read my text: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" After reading my text I paused. At that moment I saw General Jackson walking up the aisle; he came to the middle post, and very gracefully leaned against it, and stood, as there were no vacant seats. Just then I felt some one pull my coat in the stand, and turning my head, my fastidious preacher whispering a little loud, said: "General Jackson has come in; General Jackson has come in." I felt a flash of indignation run all over me like an electric shock, and facing about to my congregation, and purposely speaking out audibly, I said, "Who is General Jackson? If he don't get his soul converted, God will damn him as quick as he would a Guinea negro!" (page 192).

The predictable outcome is mortification for the "city preacher" - who is sure that General Jackson will call Cartwright out the next day - and the beginnings of friendship between the two great western democrats who understand each other perfectly. Cartwright later mentions dining at the Hermitage, while for his part Jackson, though not particularly religious himself, ends up vehemently defending the brand of Christianity espoused by the Methodist circuit riders (pages 192-94).

It is not surprising that the story has proved irresistible to generations of Jackson biographers, including some of the best like Marquis James and Robert V. Remini.¹¹ Indeed, the "General Jackson incident" seems to have become one of the most enduring of the Cartwright popular legends, repeated time and again in novels and biographical sketches.¹² But is it true? Ironically, in the final years of his life, Cartwright denied it: "[T]here was no truth in the story, as found in print," he declared, forgetting that it had been his own *Autobiography* that had given the incident lasting credence.¹³ Nearly every account of the story that names a source names Cartwright, and I have so far not discovered any version dating before the *Autobiography's* publication in 1856. If the story was current in the oral tradition before then, there is no way of demonstrating the fact.

In other words, Cartwright vouches for himself. We can take "General Jackson"* for truth, or we can leave it. Folklorists define a "legend" as a tale that is told as true and believed by the community.¹⁴ Particularly in America, folk legends have been reinforced by literary legends, with the result that a new form, the "popular legend," comes into being. The persistence of "General Jackson" suggests that it is a popular legend in that sense, and the historicity of the tale has become less important than its legendary status and impact. Consider this one final bit of information about Peter Cartwright and Andrew Jackson:

He was a chaplain in General Jackson's army, and was present at the Battle of New Orleans. . . . Before entering into the battle, the general called his chaplains together and exhorted them, "to preach to the soldiers the justice of their cause and assure them, if they died in battle, they would go straight to Heaven." Cartwright replied, "General, I can't quite go that far, but I can say I believe our cause is of God, and that if any of them should be killed, God in that last account would give them credit for their sacrifices."¹⁵

Now that may simply be another unattested Cartwright story. Certainly the *Autobiography* nowhere mentions service in the War of 1812, nor is there any known corroboration of this single source. Yet suppose that Peter Cartwright *was* one of Jackson's chaplains, and that something like the related conference actually took place. Would we not then be obliged to revise our understanding of the Nashville incident? For by the year 1818 Cartwright would have long known Jackson, and Jackson, Cartwright. They would have been through a momentous event together, having come face to face at New Orleans over the spiritual question of whose side God was going to be on in the imminent battle. Hence the meeting four years later in Nashville would not have been their first, as the narrative clearly implies, but a kind of reunion with dramatic com complicity between the principals. The scene would thus be ironic, with both Cartwright and Jackson imposing their little joke on the "city preacher" and his credulous congregation.

As it stands, this is a contorted act of reading. But if the New Orleans story were ever confirmed, biography would demand such a revision. We would need a new interpretive emphasis for the Nashville scene, shifting from Cartwright the "natural storyteller" and staunch defender of God's absolute equality, to Cartwright the contriver of fictions. His mythic garment would no longer appear so shining and seamless, but we would gain a sounder sense of the complex relationship between folk legends and their redactions in print - more instructive in this case because both the legend and the fiction were managed by the same person. But even if it turns out that the "Kentucky Boy" had never set eyes on the "Hero of New Orleans" before that October evening in 1818, we must take seriously any evidence that points to a reconsideration of stories in the *Autobiography*. What appears to weaken the hand of the biographer - Cartwright contriving events within what is conventionally thought of as a "truthful" format - strengthens that of the critic. For the more Cartwright fictionalizes, the more he is projecting his own cherished form of a lived life. And that, however problematic vis-à-vis historical events, is ultimately in the service of biography.

The *Autobiography* is a remarkably consistent and single-minded projection of a lived life. Edwin Booher has called Peter Cartwright a "frontier agonistes," and the only qualification I would suggest to that memorable phrase is that the legendary preacher

functions more often in the comic mode than the high heroic.¹⁶ In the characteristically expansive fashion of frontier humor, the *Autobiography* is full of animal spirit and jokes. Cartwright frequently comments on the "risibilities" of himself and his audience, and the incidents he relates are deftly structured to enhance the comedy - roughhousing, practical joking, disguises and mistaken identities, abrupt turns in the action, and a meting out of comic punishments that is often hilarious. And all is done in colloquial dialogue and with a wealth of mother wit on display. In the middle of the comedy is, of course, the consummate performer himself - the man who was in fifty years never overmastered, neither by the other living legends he happened to encounter (such as Mike Fink); neither by the termagant women who abuse him, nor the beautiful women who seduce him; nor by the "downy D.D.'s" from the East, Yankees all, who make the mistake of engaging him in theological argument.

Among the more than one hundred stories told in the *Autobiography*, from brief paragraphs to vignettes of several pages, there is only one in which Cartwright is *finally* defeated (though many of the episodes use temporary or ostensible defeats to heighten the drama), and that is a minor setback at the hands of nature, when, in the company of another traveling preacher, Cartwright unadvisedly attempts to cross a swollen river on horseback and gets a good dunking: "My books and clothes had all turned Campbellites, for there was much water; and I escaped, not by the skin of my teeth, but by the activity of my heels. . . . Brother Summers [his companion] could not maintain his usual gravity, but I assure you all his fun was at my expense" (pages 335-36). The remaining hundred-odd stories, however, are all various forms of Cartwright victories over adversity. The following scheme may suggest how the *Autobiography* structures its incidents according to dramatic oppositions:

CARTWRIGHT	OPPOSTITION
Southerner	Yankee
Westerner	Easterner
Rural	Urban
Man	Woman (Termagant or Seductress)
Methodist	Other

And the last pair may be further specified: Believer /Infidel; Arminian/Calvinist; Sprinkler/Baptist; Circuit Rider/Seminarian; Preacher /Theologian.

In any given story, Cartwright's adversary will manifest one and often more of those categories, such as the tale of the "fresh, green, live Yankee from down east" who was also a seminarian trained in New Light theology (page 372). And the thrust of the incidents is invariably "beating the devil," where, through a larger-than-life application of ready wit or main force or a combination of the two, Cartwright overmasters Satan's agents and thus

further Methodism's spiritual and temporal kingdoms in the American West. The end of "beating the devil" justifies some dubiously Christian means: Besides the brawling with rowdies and talking himself out of the tight corners for which he is famous, Cartwright will do whatever is necessary to gain the upper hand in a situation. He impersonates others, disguises himself to infiltrate the enemy's camp, prevaricates, plays tricks and practical jokes, threatens to use such deadly weapons as knives and guns, and even pretends to magical powers when nothing else will work:

"At one of my appointments in 1804 there was a very large congregation turned out to hear the Kentucky boy, as they called me. Among the rest there were two very finely-dressed, fashionable young ladies, attended by two brothers with loaded horsewhips I was a little unwell, and I had a phial of peppermint in my pocket. Before I commenced preaching I took out my phial and swallowed a little of the peppermint. While I was preaching the congregation was melted into tears and both the young ladies took the jerks, and they were greatly mortified about it. ...

As I dismissed the assembly a man stepped up to me, and warned me to be on my guard, for he had heard the two brothers swear they would horsewhip me ... for giving their sisters the jerks. "Well," said I, "I'll see to that."

I went out and said to the young men that I understood they intended to horsewhip me for giving their sisters the jerks. One replied that he did. I undertook to expostulate with him on the absurdity of the charge . . . but he swore I need not deny it; for he had seen me take out a phial, in which I carried some truck that gave his sisters the jerks. As quick as thought it came to my mind how I would get clear of my whipping, and jerking out the peppermint phial, said I, "Yes; if I gave your sisters the jerks I'll give them to you!" (pages 49-50)."

At which the brothers turn and run, and Cartwright has the last laugh, while completing the formula by telling us of their conversion - brothers and sisters alike brought safely into the church by the seemingly devilish agency of the "peppermint phial."

Indeed, conversion of the opposition is the usual form of the comic happy ending in the *Autobiography*. But occasionally the devil is too strongly in possession to let go so easily. Then Cartwright either reports an off-stage tragedy (as in the case of the unreconstructed Campbellite who, "in a paroxysm of insanity . . . shot himself" [page 357]), or heaps such ridicule on his antagonists that they lose face (as in the neat endings: "My Baptist friends blowed almost entirely out" [page 72]; or, "The young lawyer was struck dumb, and presently was found missing" [page 194]; or, the "New Light preacher" who "finally evaporated and left for parts unknown" [page 251]). Cartwright never wavers in his commitment to the Methodist doctrines of free and abounding grace; all his enemies and persecutors are eligible for salvation, and for those who eventually see the light he has an

abiding and pastoral love. As for the rest, they are either fools or knaves, and Cartwright's sarcasm is for them unbounded. If they go to judgment unconverted, he is quick to imply that they had their saving chance from the best of God's earthly instruments (himself!). Because they missed it, Peter Cartwright cannot be further concerned, save to turn their eternal plight into a "self-glorifying" funny story.

This element of the implacable trickster in Cartwright links him both to the frontier comic tradition and more generally to world folklore. In the same way, the rhetoric of the narrative is in the tradition of yarn-spinning. Stories for Cartwright's earliest experiences on the circuit speak of "blessed revivals of religion" breaking out after his preaching, with the "power of God falling powerfully upon the congregation" and inevitably producing "an awful shaking among the dry bones." And a half century later the same events happen in the same formulaic phrases. Cartwright is also fond of comic-epic military imagery: his "armor-bearers" - Elpenors all to his Odysseus - attend to the fallen after an inspired service that has swept the field like an "artillery barrage"; at other times his hearers are stricken "as if by a rifle ball through the heart," so piercing is Cartwright's message; and victory against the devil is proclaimed by "a shout running through the camp." Much of the language is familiar to camp meeting accounts, found frequently enough in diaries and eyewitness narratives to be called conventional. We might term such repetition mere lack of invention on Cartwright's part, or imitation of his contemporaries, but it honestly does not read that way. Instead, the *Autobiography* reflects its oral sources and Cartwright's astonishing ability to hold an audience for hours of extemporaneous storytelling and sermonizing. By the time we have read a few chapters into the book, we come to expect Cartwright's characteristic reiterations. As with *The Odyssey*, where after sufficient repetitions we begin to have a pleasant anticipation of the appearance of the "grave housekeeper, generous with her provisions," likewise in the *Autobiography*: When Cartwright, after several days' struggle to ignite a spiritless camp meeting, announces (as he does so often) that "on Sunday evening a tremendous power of God fell on the congregation," we know that both the narrative system and its referent cosmos are in good working order. To complete the analogy with *The Odyssey*, I might note that in both books the reiterative phrases serve a foreordained comic end, making us comfortable in the narratives, while in each case repetition is a mnemonic echo of distant oral sources.

One of the most striking of such devices is the "rule of three," which Cartwright uses time and again, perhaps without being aware of it. Whenever he is wrestling mightily with a worthy adversary, or is confronted with an especially vexing situation, the "frontier agonistes" needs three tries to triumph. Cartwright knows despair only once in the *Autobiography*, during the general conference in Pittsburgh in 1828, when he is supposed to billet with a "nominal ruffle-shirted Methodist" who is already hosting a bishop and two of those "downy doctors of divinity" ("D.D.s" or "Double Dunces," Cartwright calls them,

despite having one after his own name).¹⁷ He applies to the address and is coldly turned away on the excuse that the wife, "a stiff-starved Presbyterian," thinks three Methodists in the house are more than enough. Angry and mortified, Cartwright ends up staying in a nearby tavern. And, although during the next several days the "ruffle-shirted Methodist" makes three attempts to get him back to his house, Cartwright is too proud to return. But the incident nevertheless unsettles him. Throughout the week of the conference "the bishop seemed as cold as an icicle," and Cartwright's own spiritual fires were all but extinguished. Twice he is called upon to pray among the brethren, and twice he fails miserably. It is a time of "unutterable woe" for the "man-of-words" who has for years taken his inspiration almost for granted. Finally, as a last resort he attends (but significantly does not lead) an evening prayer meeting, at which "it pleased God to roll back the clouds that covered me in such thick darkness." And the very next night he is asked to pray with the very family that had snubbed him earlier (by narrative convenience he is at their house to confer with the "D.D.s" on conference business): "We talked, wept, and sung together, and I felt as independent of the devil and a stiff bishop as if there were no such beings in the world" (pages 295-300). The third time has indeed been the charm. Cartwright, knowingly or not, has structured his tale with one of the most ancient of storytelling devices.¹⁸

Sometime around 1830, as he recalls, Cartwright did battle with a termagant on the Sangamon circuit. She was the overbearing and quarrelsome wife of a "small, very easy, good-natured, pleasant man" who also happens to be a "good and useful preacher" who is unable to bring her into the church. The timid preacher begs Cartwright to come out to his cabin and "reason" with the shrewish wife ("He had insisted on my going home with him several times, but I frankly confess I was afraid to trust myself"). But at last Cartwright reluctantly agrees: "After we arrived I saw in a minute that she was mad, and the devil was in her as large as an alligator." Twice he asks her to keep a civil tongue, but she loudly refuses and heaps vituperation on him. Finally, losing all patience, he declares:

"[I]f you do not be still, and behave yourself, I'll put you out of doors." At this she clinched her fist, and swore she was one-half alligator, and the other half snapping-turtle, and that it would take a better man than I was to put her out. I caught her by the arm, and swinging her round in a circle, brought her right up to the door, and shoved her out. She jumped up, tore her hair, foamed; and such swearing as she uttered was seldom equaled, and never surpassed. ... I was determined to conquer, or die in the attempt. While she was raging and foaming in the yard and around the cabin, I started a spiritual song, and sung loud, to drown her voice as much as possible. . . .

I sang on, and she roared and thundered on outside, till she became perfectly exhausted, and panted for breath. At length, when she had spent her force, she became calm and still, and then knocked at the door, saying, "Mr. Cartwright, please let me in."

"Will you behave yourself if I let you in?" said I.

"O yes," said she, "I will;" and throwing myself on my guard, and perfectly self-possessed, I opened the door, took her by the hand, led her in, and seated her near the fireplace. She had roared and foamed till she was in a high perspiration, and looked pale as death. After she took her seat, "O," said she, "what a fool I am!" (pages 304-6)

On the surface, this is the mock-epic language of the frontier brag ("one-half alligator, and the other half snapping- turtle"), with which Cartwright and his audience were no doubt familiar. But the more interesting feature here is that the fight is with a woman, and apparently on equal terms. Cartwright's attitudes toward women are sufficiently unconventional - "*eccentric*" would be his own word - to set him a little apart both from his church and his society. In this incident, which we might call "The woman who was put out of her own house," Cartwright treats the wife as he would any potent adversary, and the narrative seems unconscious of anything unusual in using physical force to subdue an unruly woman. The root parallel is, of course, with Christ casting out devils ("I could see ... she was mad foaming and raging"), but in putting her out of her domestic sanctuary, Cartwright in fact casts out the demon of shrewishness. At the end of the story he indulges in a literary gesture that helps make comic what has been a real tussle: "And now, gentle reader, although this was one of the hardest cases I ever saw on this earth, I must record it to the glory of Divine grace, I lived to see, in less than six months after this frolic with the devil, this woman soundly converted to God" (page 307). Perhaps Cartwright has not exactly beaten the devil out of her, as he was apt to do with male bullies and recalcitrants, but at the same time he has not hesitated to strong-arm her in the name of the Lord. The devil in a woman was, after all, still the devil, and maybe more so.

Generally, however, Cartwright employs persuasion and charismatic authority to bring unbelieving and misbehaving women to the mourners' bench. "Charisma" is a word that has been ruined by contemporary misapplication. Yet in its old sense of a divine gift of personal magnetism, charisma is precisely what Peter Cartwright had in good measure and used effectively throughout his career. During one Tennessee camp meeting in 1814, he ran up against an irate father whose wife and two daughters he had earlier converted: "[A]nd, as is common, they felt greatly attached to me as the instrument . . . of their salvation. This enraged the husband and father of these interesting females very much," and he repaired to the meeting to catch Cartwright at his "devilment" and to "put a stop to the women all running mad after this bad preacher" (pages 144-45). As might be expected, the daughters

are more loyal to their spiritual than their biological father: They reveal the plan, and Cartwright is put on his guard.

Another time, Cartwright finds himself among strangers somewhere remote in the Cumberland Mountains. It is dusk, and the only inn in the neighborhood "keeps entertainment." As it would happen, there is to be a dance that very evening:

I quietly took my seat in one corner of the house, and the dance commenced. . . . [A] beautiful, ruddy young lady walked very gracefully up to me, dropped a handsome courtesy, and pleasantly, with winning smiles, invited me out to take a dance with her. I can hardly describe my thoughts or feelings on that occasion. However, in a moment I resolved on a desperate experiment. I rose as gracefully as I could; I will not say with some emotion, but with many emotions. The young lady moved to my right side; I grasped her right hand with my right hand, while she leaned her left arm on mine. In this position we walked on the floor. The whole company seemed pleased at this act of politeness in the young lady, shown to a stranger. The colored man, who was the fiddler, began to put his fiddle in the best order. I then spoke to the fiddler to hold a moment, and added that for several years I had not undertaken any matter of importance without first asking the blessing of God upon it, and I desired now to ask the blessing of God upon this beautiful young lady. . . .

Here I grasped the young lady's hand tightly . . . and then instantly dropped on my knees, and commenced praying with all the power of soul and body that I could command. The young lady tried to get loose from me, but I held her tight. Presently she fell on her knees. . . .

While I prayed some wept, and wept out loud, and some cried for mercy. I rose from my knees and commenced an exhortation, after which I sang a hymn. The young lady who invited me on the floor lay prostrate, crying earnestly for mercy (pages 207-8).

For once we do not hear the fate of the antagonist: Cartwright leaves her on the floor of the tavern common room, crying for mercy - whether she got it we are never to know. But the encounter with the "beautiful, ruddy young lady" moved him profoundly. He comments that "I recall this strange scene of my life with astonishment to this day. . . . I had, from some cause or other, a strong impression on my mind, from the beginning to the end of this affair - it is ended - that I should succeed by taking the devil at surprise." And he is convinced that there was that memorable evening "an immediate superintending agency of the divine Spirit of God" that allowed him to prevail. But to prevail over what? One of the reasons Methodism proscribed dancing was its licentiousness, and the combination of circumstances - thrown among strangers in a strange country, a festive Saturday night, provocative but polite advances from a very attractive woman - makes for a Cartwright-sized sexual temptation. And the oddly parenthetical - "it is ended" - implies that something more was going on than the narrative reveals (though perhaps nothing beyond "lust in the

heart"). Biography can speculate here, and speculation certainly seems to be in order. Cartwright had firsthand experience of "fallen women," both in his father's and later in his own family. There was a persistent tradition - good enough for the *Dictionary of American Biography* - of a wayward sister named Polly who "'took up' with a man named Pentecost [and] led a life of dissipation and debauchery."¹⁹ And years later Cartwright was to see one of his daughters elope with a notorious rowdy named Patten Harrison. The preacher gave chase, vowing to break up the arrangement if he had to follow them all the way to hell, but took the wrong turn and finally had to give up. "I have beat the devil," the daughter exclaimed. "I have headed off Old Peter and the devil never could."²⁰

Neither of these incidents makes it into the *Autobiography*, the one being a family skeleton and the other a decisive defeat. But we can wonder about the love Cartwright may have sustained over a long life for his lost sister Polly, and we can envision a reconciliation with the runaway daughter and her new husband. Cartwright recalls a camp meeting on the Jacksonville, Illinois, circuit in the 1830s in which he forcibly interceded for two women of "ill-fame" whom some of the "old, squeamish sisters" wanted to drive from the altar. He prayed with the women, then preached the lesson of Mary Magdalene. He also sternly rebuked the sisters, insisting that the "fallen women" had at least as much right to salvation as the men present, who were no doubt guilty of the same conduct but not held socially accountable for it. Cartwright was sensitive to the women's plight and refused to let the double standard for sexual behavior keep them from grace. We should not mistake this attitude for mid-century sentimentality or idealizing of women. He was compassionate because he knew the strength of the flesh, which was its weakness: He had brought the dancing Cumberland woman to her knees in prayer, winning that battle - against her, against himself, against the devil - by sublimating sexual passion into religious. But where passion was concerned, victory was far from certain. Looking back to the Kentucky and Tennessee days from the perspective of Illinois and old age, Cartwright was struck by the persistence of emotion. Did he think of his sister Polly and her Pentecost as he remembered the "beautiful, ruddy" Cumberland woman? I would guess that she had stayed on his mind, and thirty-six years after the fact he still knew her.

First and last, Peter Cartwright is a legend because of his preaching. The *Autobiography* naturally records hundreds of preaching occasions, while telling us little about the structure and substance of the sermons and virtually nothing about his manner of speaking. We have to go to other sources in order to see why people took him to heart as a preacher.²¹ Cartwright himself could not explain what he did before a congregation: On his best days, at least, the preaching was ineffable, spirit-inspired, and therefore untranslatable into literature. That is not to say, however, that he was humble about his successes. Cartwright made some extravagant claims in this regard, leaving us to imagine

just what it was that made him one of the very greatest of American preachers (or, we might say, orators). At a camp meeting near Roaring River circuit of Tennessee in 1821, Cartwright woos and wins a disorderly and inattentive audience by commencing with humorous "anecdotes" that were well-calculated to excite their risibilities. Right before me sat an old, gray-headed man, with straight-breasted coat; he did not like the laughter that my anecdotes produced, and he spoke out loudly to me and said, "Make us cry - make us cry; don't make us laugh."

As quick as thought I replied to him thus: "I don't hold the puckering strings of your mouths, and I want you to take the negro's eleventh commandment; that is, every man mind his own business."

"Yes, sir; yes, sir," said the old man, and sank down perfectly still (page 218).

Having caught their interest, Cartwright announces his text ("To the unknown God, whom ye worship, him declare I unto you") and commences a sermon on the heresy of Arianism that is to last fully two hours. What might have been from someone else's mouth a dry doctrinal harangue results in triumphant shouts of glory ascended by hundreds, and many sinners . . . with streaming eyes. . . . The vast multitude fell almost in every direction. . . . Mourners were found all through the crowd, to be numbered by the hundred. Many of the Arians recanted; and after the legions that had distracted them for years were cast out, came to their right minds . . . and once more esteemed it their highest honor to sit at the feet of Jesus Christ. There was no more preaching for that day and the next. The cries of the penitents, and shouts of the young converts and the old professors, went up without intermission, day and night (pages 219-20).

Two hours of Cartwright traffic on the stage sparks two days of sustained revival. And lest we miss the significance of this event for sacred history, the *Autobiography* points it up for us: "Perhaps there never was a more manifest display of God's saving mercy on a small scale than on the present occasion, since the confounding of tongues at the building of the tower of Babel" (page 221). Such hyperbole makes it easy to judge the *Autobiography* "naively self-glorifying," yet no matter how far Cartwright goes in praise of Cartwright, others outdistance him. One observer, for instance, after attending one of Cartwright's meetings on the Sangamon circuit in 1832, gives this report of its religious effect:

He then made a call for mourners into the altar, and five hundred, many of them till that night infidels, rushed forward and prostrated themselves on their knees. The meeting was continued for two weeks, and more than a thousand converts added to the Church. From that time the success of Mr. Peter Cartwright was unparalleled, and the fact is chiefly due to his inimitable wit and masterly eloquence that Methodism is now the prevailing religion in Illinois.²²

Granted, the source for the tribute is a friendly one from within the church. Yet the accomplishments are larger-than-life: a camp meeting protracted for two weeks on the basis of his preaching and a thousand converts. What more could any living legend do? The 1830s were Peter Cartwright's glory years. By the end of the decade he was indeed, as friend and foe alike admitted, a famous man - in Illinois and across the nation. Yet the 1840s were to bring a new kind of religion - a civil religion - whose prophet was a man named Abraham Lincoln. Cartwright would find that a coming legend could annihilate an old one. Having earlier served two terms in the Illinois legislature, and not having notably cleansed Springfield of its hypocrisy and infidelity, Cartwright decided to run for Congress in 1846, perhaps to see if he could do better on a national scale. He was, as always, a Democrat, and Lincoln was his Whig opponent.²³ The aging preacher tried to make the campaign turn on Lincoln's alleged godlessness, but the young lawyer proved a tough mark to hit. In the midst of the electioneering, Lincoln took a notion - no one knows why - to attend one of Cartwright's meetings, where he sat quietly in the back of the room while the service proceeded. In good time, Cartwright invited those of his congregation who wanted to remake their lives in Christ, and so go to heaven, to stand up. Many did. Then he invited those who simply did not want to go to hell. All the rest, save Lincoln, rose. Finally, Cartwright directly addressed his political adversary: "All of us have stood either because we want to go to heaven or avoid hell. Where are you going, Mr. Lincoln?" "To Congress," was all he said.²⁴

Cartwright was the butt of this delicious story, and a few days later he lost the election by a landslide. As might be surmised, neither the incident nor the name of Abraham Lincoln appears anywhere in the *Autobiography*. Potential biographers of Peter Cartwright, duly note.

Notes

¹ *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Back-woods Preacher*, ed. by W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1856; New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1856), p. 5. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the body of the essay.

² Cartwright claimed never to have met Mike Fink, but stories of their brawling encounters kept cropping up in newspapers and books from Georgia, to New York, to Illinois. The most popular of the stories has come to be known as "Peter Cartwright, the Jocose Preacher," and the earliest version found by this writer appeared in the Jan. 24, 1850, issue of the *Illinois State Journal* of Springfield (p. 2, cols. 3-4). According to the incident, Fink appears with his gang and attempts to disrupt one of Cartwright's meetings in Alton, Illinois, in 1833. Cartwright soon grows tired of the rowdies and descends the pulpit in order to "make the devil pray." He quickly fells the riverman with a "prodigious . . .

punch of his herculean fist," then pins him by the windpipe until Fink agrees to repeat the Lord's Prayer after Cartwright, line by line. Thereafter, the rowdies behave with "exemplary decorum" throughout the remainder of the meeting. The story was repeated by James B. Finley, another very gifted and famous Methodist itinerant, for his own *Autobiography* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1853), pp. 327-29.

Finley evidently accepted Cartwright's denial of the incident in the *Autobiography* (pp. 311-12), for in subsequent editions of his own popular life story he deleted it in favor of another and presumably more legitimate Cartwright anecdote. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine have kept the tale alive by including it in two books: *Mike Fink* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1933), pp. 12-16; and *Half-Horse and Half-Alligator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 216-19.

³F. A. Archibald, ed., *Methodism and Literature* (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1883), p. 109

⁴*The Methodist Union Catalogue* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976), pp. 328-29. From the time of the *Autobiography's* original publication, as the *Methodist Union Catalogue* shows, the book was almost continuously in print until 1912, when there was a lapse that lasted until Abingdon Press brought out its "Centennial Edition" in 1956. At present, unfortunately, only a library edition is available.

⁵"Cartwright, Peter," *Dictionary of American Biography* (hereafter cited as DAB).

⁶No one, to this writer's knowledge, has ever disputed Cartwright's authorship of an 1820 pamphlet known as the "Letter to the Devil," which is both a rousing polemic against Calvinism and a smoothly written belletristic essay. The purpose of the "Letter" is to respond to some Presbyterians in Kentucky who had been villifying Methodism and ridiculing Cartwright in particular. One of their assumptions in the original attack was that Cartwright did not know Latin. In answer, Cartwright headed his "Letter" with a witty Latin epigraph and then went quickly on the attack: "Tell me which is the more criminal - to be as ignorant of Latin as a goose is of grammar, or to make high pretensions to a knowledge of Latin, yea, to have learned it in hell, and yet to pen such stuff as you have done?" (*Fifty Years as a Presiding Elder* [Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1871], pp. 111-12). And, to give just one further instance of his formal rhetorical powers, note the sally against Calvin (admittedly an easy mark): "His crime is palliated by urging the darkness and ignorance of the times, the then ferocious manners of the people, the practice of the Papists, the conduct of Servetus, etc. All this is perfect smoke. Calvin had the Gospel in his hand, and to which part would he turn to justify persecution, or murder? but hold! he found persecution and murder in the Gospels, as you find predestination. Believe me, sir, when I hear a politician justifying the cruelties of Robespierre and Marat, I awfully fear, if he had power, he would be guilty of the like tragedies; and when I hear divines justify the barbarous conduct of

Calvin, or represent him as a Christian, I am induced to believe that if those grave D.D.'s had the power, they would torture and burn their opposers as they did in England during the Commonwealth, and in New England previous to the Revolution" (*ibid.*, p. 123)

⁷The *Autobiography* occasionally speaks of books and reading- as when Cartwright gives a volume of the poems of Caroline Mathilda Thayer to a recent convert - but in general does not begin to suggest the extent of Cartwright's reading. A hint of this comes from an account of an honorary dinner for Boston's "Father Taylor," held during the Buffalo General Conference of 1860. Responding to "a toast to himself as the 'lion of the forest,'" Cartwright recalls preaching before Father Taylor eight years previously in Boston, and ends by reminding his audience that Frederika Bremmer "had said that her two outstanding memories of America were of Niagra Falls and Father Taylor-two wonders of the world which had been brought together here and now" (Helen Hardie Grant, *Peter Cartwright: Pioneer* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1931], pp. 201-2). Cartwright is probably alluding to something he read in Bremmer's *Homes of the New World* (1853).

⁸The term is borrowed from Roger D. Abrahams's *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Though strictly appropriate only to West Indian culture, Abrahams's concept of the "man-of- words" is suggestive of the role of the preacher in frontier American society: "There are two kinds of men-of-words: good talkers and good arguers . . . one characterized by the use of long speeches suffused with 'fancy talk,' the other by strongly colloquial diction and the rapid thrust of invective. The good talker usually expresses himself in toasts, speeches, or recitations. The colloquial invective of the good arguer, however, usually occurs at the least solemn time, and it is this man-of- words who is capable of turning any conversation into a show. Both types of man-of-words use set pieces as part of their verbal arsenal. Some performances call for a greater amount of improvisation than others, but even then the patterns for improvising are traditional. For instance, while many toasts are set pieces, others are made up of traditional cliches in combinations appropriate to the occasion" (pp. xv-xvi). Change the oral form to the extemporaneous sermon, and the institution to the camp meeting, and this is a striking description of what Cartwright did for more than fifty years.

⁹Cartwright entry, DAB.

¹⁰The impression raised by this writer is that the *Autobiography* is a long and desultory procession of tales and anecdotes. Yet there is a good deal of very important material in it about the Methodist Episcopal church's forty-year debate over the issue of slavery; and Cartwright, as a perennial delegate to the general conferences, is right in the middle of the controversy. Some of the book's best history is to be found in the slavery chapters- 9, 27, and 28 in particular.

¹¹James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: 1860), II, 339-42; James, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1938); Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), II, 10-11.

¹²For a representative sampling, see William Henry Milburn, *Ten Years of Preacher Life* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1859), pp. 179-80; Francis Grierson, *The Valley of Shadows* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1909), p. 70; Don C. Seitz, *Uncommon Americans* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), pp. 79-80; and Harold Sinclair, *American Years* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1938), pp. 98-99. Helen Hardie Grant also uses the story in her biography, which is the only book-length study of Cartwright (for adults) ever published. Yet Grant, as all the others, uses the *Autobiography* as the source for the story, and we have no collaboration from any other document.

¹³William Epler, "Some Personal Recollections of Peter Cartwright," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 13 (1920-1921), 379.

¹⁴Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1968), p. 87; Richard Dorson, *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 158-60. Dorson developed the concept of the "popular legend," which was the result of the mutual reinforcement between folk and literary legends. A popular legend might be "a cycle of anecdotes about a strong or clever or comical hero," and what he says about the Davy Crockett legend is appropriate to Cartwright: "Heroic age epics grow through cross-fertilization between oral tradition and popular literature, and so the case of Crockett requires the perspective both of folklore and of American civilization" (pp. 32-33).

¹⁵M. H. Chamberlin, "Rev. Peter Cartwright, D.D.," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 7 (1902), 50. Chamberlin, who was president of McKendree College when he wrote this sketch of Cartwright, quotes Judge Charles S. Zane, a former neighbor of Cartwright's in Pleasant Plains, Illinois, as the source of this Battle of New Orleans story. The *Autobiography* mentions the War of 1812, but no formal involvement in it on Cartwright's part. And the war records of the state of Kentucky show a "Peter Cartright" as a member of "Captain Rober Scobie's Company of Kentucky Militia" for a period of one month between Feb. 8 and March 7, 1813 (*Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky* [1819; rpt. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1969], p. 270). So far, then, nothing has been found to corroborate Chamberlin's assertion, and I must conclude that the story is probably false- or at least true only in the mythic or legendary sense.

¹⁶Booher, "Frontier Agonistes: Peter Cartwright as Western Folk Hero," TS, delivered at "The Town and The Prairie" conference, April 14, 1984, Springfield, Ill.

¹⁷Cartwright's honorary Doctor of Divinity degree was from McKendree College, an institution he had helped found. Despite the invective attached to higher education and its professors in the *Autobiography*, Cartwright was indefatigable in the furtherance of Methodist women's schools and colleges, especially those planted and nurtured in Illinois between 1830 and 1860.

¹⁸Brunvand, p. 117, notes that the formula tale is a "very ancient type . . . based on a strict pattern of development, involving repetition."

¹⁹The source for this bit of gossip is Susannah Johnson, *Recollections of the Rev. John Johnson* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1869), p. 33. Johnson is decidedly critical of Cartwright throughout her book, making it one of the very few minority views on the subject of his greatness.

²⁰James Gray, *The Illinois* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1940), pp. 132-33. Gray cites no source for his story about Cartwright's daughter's successful elopement.

²¹William Henry Milburn, a fellow Methodist circuit rider who saw Cartwright frequently in the 1840s and claimed him as a friend, gives this description of the preaching: "A voice which, in his prime, was capable of almost every modulation, the earnest force of homely directness of his speech, and his power over the passions of the human heart, made him an orator to win and command the suffrages and sympathies of a western audience, and ever through the discourse, came, and went, and came again, a humor that was resistless, now broadening the features into a merry smile, and then softening the heart until tears stood in the eyes of all. His figures and illustrations were often grand, sometimes fantastical. Like all natives of a new country, he spoke much in metaphors, and his were borrowed from the magnificent realm in which he lived. All forms of nature, save those of sounding seas, were familiar to him. . . . You might hear, in a single discourse, the thunder tread of a frightened herd of buffalo as they rushed wildly across the prairie, the crash of the window as it fell smitten by the breath of the tempest, the piercing scream of the wild cat as it scared the midnight forest, the majestic Mississippi as it harmonized the distant East and West. . . . Thunder and lightning, fire and flood, seemed to be old acquaintances, and he spoke of them with the assured confidence of friendship. Another of the poet's attributes was his - the impulse and power to create his own language; and he was the best lexicon of western words, phrases, idioms, and proverbs, that I have ever met" (pp. 41-42). Milburn was an acknowledged authority on rhetoric in the nineteenth century, so that even after discounting for exaggeration and literary flourishes, this is quite a tribute, and from an expert, too.

²²Quotation from Finley, p. 325.

²³Grant, p. 151. Cartwright himself is much more reticent about his political life in the Illinois legislature than one might wish. The little he does say is in Chapter 19 of the *Autobiography*.

²⁴Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1926), pp. 216-17.